



# Warrior's Purpose

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**Category:** Romance, Fantasy, Science Fiction

**Description:** Abby has fought long and hard against the undertow of grief trapping her family. Her sister, Providence, went missing nearly a year earlier, yet their father adamantly refuses to abandon the search. Abby struggles to maintain hope, but the loss hurts too much and life must go on, right? Finally beginning to accept her new normal, she's unprepared for the arrival of two strange men who claim to know her sister while spouting stories of alien invaders. Worse, the giants looked more like demons than aliens with their blood red skin, and their unbelievable tale is just as cruel.

Ashtoret was honored to be chosen for the mission that would save the human homeworld, although that wasn't his only reason for going to Earth. He made a solemn oath to his friend Providence that he would bring word to her family she was safe. Never in his wildest dreams did Ashtoret think he'd discover his singular purpose for being on the hostile blue planet.

Caught in the crossfire, Abby doesn't know what to think, but she can't stand by when all hell rains down upon their strange visitors. With threats closing in from all quarters, Ashtoret must fight to hold onto his sexy, brave human.

**Total Pages (Source):** 87

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1 Contact

Ashtoret de Origa

“I wish I was going to Earth with you.” Providence’s eyes filled with tears.

“I know, my fiery warrior.” Dagaa wrapped an arm around his mate, consoling her.

“If things were different.” Madhava nuzzled Providence’s red hair, as he affectionately cradled her belly.

It still amazed Ashtoret how well both her mates got along. He certainly couldn’t share his female, not that he had one.

“I’m so sorry, Providence. I know exactly how you feel, but it’s not a risk you want to take. Here, hold this little monkey, to remind you of what you have to look forward to,” Giselle sympathized as she passed her daughter, Graca, to Providence.

Tiny pink Graca wrapped her tail around Providence’s arm, cooed and reached for her face, making his despondent friend smile.

“I know. I’ve had nightmares since we started planning this mission.” Providence bounced Graca on her lap.

“You didn’t tell us that,” Madhava exclaimed, the scar over his eye deepening as he scowled in concern.

“I keep dreaming about being strapped down, while some masked doctor steals my baby and experiments on him.” Providence’s eyes welled up again.

“That’s not happening,” Dagaa rumbled.

“I know. Ashtoret, you have the letters I gave you, right?”

“I do. Please do not worry,” he reassured his friend. “I will make sure your family knows just how much you love them. I consider it just as important as our primary mission.”

Ashtoret gave Providence his most sincere pledge, slamming his fist to his chest and bowing low.

“And I have the other messages,” Vintor added.

Although it was of utmost importance that they guard Earth from a Jurou Biljana invasion, sending word to the human females’ families was just as vital. They were taken from their world without ever getting a chance to say goodbye. He knew it broke their hearts, and had to be terribly hard on the families left behind. He was one of the lucky few who never lost his sire or brothers in the war, so he couldn’t fathom what his human friends were suffering.

“Just remember to get them stamped,” Giselle reminded Vintor.

“I’m sure my dad can help. I hope he’s not too stubborn.” Providence frowned.

Providence’s sire would be their liaison. As a high-ranking member of the Earth military, he was their best option.

“Did you give Vintor your message?” Cyprian asked Riley.

“Are you going to keep asking me that?” Riley made an obnoxious face. She clearly didn’t care that her mate was the High General, feared by many.

“Keep it up, wily manx.” Cyprian threateningly stroked his belt.

Ashtoret recalled the shocking rumor about the general tying up his tiny purple-haired mate. Granted the conjugo bond made males aggressive, but surely he’d heard wrong.

“Hey, that’s my line! And if YOU keep it up, I’m going to shove this where the sun don’t shine.” Riley jabbed her finger into the air.

Kagan barked out a laugh at the way the unlikely pair antagonized each other.

“What are you laughing at, big guy?” Giselle pointedly asked, one brow arched.

Kagan sobered as he looked at his mate. Ashtoret’s eyes widened. It was apparent the Daimio had also been subjected to this finger treatment.

The band of human females burst into a fit of giggles. Unbelievably, the warriors present turned a shade darker in embarrassment, himself included. He was friends with all of the humans, and knew they tended to be rowdier than Cadi females, but hearing them openly talk about such subjects was still surprising after all this time. He shook his head in amusement.

“I think I better get my pet home before the vinum goes completely to her head, and she shames me in front of all my warriors.” Daimio Kagan smiled at his blonde mate.

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“I know we’ll see you guys before Aculus arrives tomorrow, still, be safe.” Giselle went around hugging all the warriors going on the mission.

“Don’t take any stupid risks. Just drop the cloaking array and come home if you have to,” Providence insisted with a yawn as the party broke up.

“We’ll do our best,” Vintor replied solemnly.

“Humans are even more suspicious of outsiders than the Cadi were. They don’t know they exist and tend to fear what they don’t know. That fear makes them dangerous. That includes my father. You remember the message I gave you? It’s important you use those exact words the moment you meet him,” Providence reiterated the warning.

“Understood.” Ashtoret nodded.

Providence snagged a lock of his hair and gave it a tug. “I’m glad you stopped dying it. It’s not a flaw,” she insisted. “I think the silver makes you stand out. Very handsome,” she crooned.

He smiled at the compliment. It had been hard making the change. Cadi could be incredibly judgmental of physical differences, but he’d found a group of friends who were very accepting.

“Come on now, you already have enough mates,” Dagaa chuckled as he scooped Providence up.

“The young has her hormones all riled up. You better run while you still can,

Ashtoret.” Madhava cast him a lopsided grin.

“We’re entering the human’s solar system,” Aculus reported, pulling Ashtoret from his thoughts of the farewell party on Cadi.

It was amazing to think how far they’d traveled in the span of mere days. He considered the bone-armored warrior, glad Aculus was an ally. It was only by Kali’s grace they were fortunate enough to meet while liberating Cadi citizens from a slave auction some months back. If it wasn’t for the Osivoire Nation’s advanced technology, passing through the rift in the cosmos would’ve never been possible. Aculus’ people kindly lent not only their vessel but donated the array that would hide defenseless Earth from the Jurou Biljana.

Damn flesh merchants!

Besides the handful of Osivoire manning the sleek silver vessel, the bulk of the team was from Cadi. It was only right since the Osivoire were already providing the metcor’s cache of resources.

He nodded to the Cadi warriors as they entered the control room.

“Where’s our Toufik brethren?” Vintor asked as they took their seats around the table at the rear of the control room.

“I believe our hairy friends are practicing setting up the cloaking array in the climate-controlled room,” Warrior Payim replied.

“Thank Kali they’re on this mission. Have you felt how bone-chilling cold it’s supposed to be at Earth’s polar regions? I stepped one foot in the room your engineer set up and my tail froze and nearly snapped off.” Another warrior shivered.

“You can thank the humans for that bit of advice,” Vintor chuckled.

“Cold, is it?” Aculus rumbled in amusement.

“What are you laughing about? You should be sympathetic. Isn’t your homeworld arid?” Payim asked the armored warrior, wearing a good-natured smirk.

“It is. And I’m laughing because I get to remain on my nice warm ship while you put on every piece of clothing you can find to go planet-side.” Aculus laughed harder, slamming his bony fist down on the table when the other warriors’ scowls deepened.

“I’m just piloting one of the cruisers that’ll get our pelted friends to the icy wasteland. The rest is up to them,” Payim declared.

Payim was as adept a pilot as himself. The warrior had also been on the mission to rescue the Toufik from their dying world. Ashtoret blanched at the memory. Piloting through that planet’s atmosphere had been a harrowing test of his endurance. It was a wonder any of them made it out alive.

“In your dreams,” Vintor countered, using the human’s favorite phrase.

Ashtoret smiled and shook his head at the bunch.

On cue, their Toufik brethren walked in. Shockingly, the frost still sticking to their fur formed misty clouds as it evaporated in the warm air.

“We’re here.” At least that’s what it looked like Fire gestured with his numb fingers.

Ashtoret had no doubt if the Toufik could speak, their teeth would be chattering, making it unintelligible anyway.

“I wish you’d wear the suits. You’re not invincible,” he chastised the two furry males.

“We will, on the planet,” Fire, so named for his ruddy pelt, gestured. “We’re getting used to what to expect.”



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“That’s probably wise,” he agreed.

Ashtoret had no doubt they were in capable hands with that Toufik. Fire was a jovial character. Evidenced by his broad, gregarious hand gestures and easy smiles. It probably came from being raised on a plantation where his former master was secretly married to a Toufik male from Fire’s clan. Despite his good nature, the furry male had proven a fierce warrior. He was a good male to have guarding your tail.

“We’ve gone over this, but let’s review it again,” Vintor addressed the gathered group. “Ashtoret and I will make contact with our human liaison. We’ll secure their cooperation, then the two teams will install the cloaking arrays at both poles.”

Ashtoret was pleased to have been selected for this mission. It wasn’t that he and Vintor were more skilled than the others sitting at the table. They were just closer to the humans and had subsequently learned more about the people they were now visiting. And it was their friendship with Providence that made them the best option to contact her sire.

“Don’t forget Providence’s briefing, there’s not just one governing authority on this planet,” Ashtoret reminded the teams. “Earth isn’t unified, like the Cadi, Toufik and Osivoire. And apparently, no one group owns the polar regions where you’ll be going. So even after we make our arrangements with the one faction, you will still need to avoid contact. But I’m assured habitation in these regions is minimal.”

“Blessed Kali, I hope so. Who could live in that cold?” one male declared.

“Their fractured state is yet another reason for being here.” Vintor nodded grimly.

“Not only are the humans not as technologically advanced, but their constant squabbling will make it impossible for them to organize in time to fend off the Jurou Biljana.”

That was a problem the Cadi also suffered not that long ago. They were divided into two warring nations, and nearly fell to the greedy reptiles because of it. Now both Scelus and Vidya Cadi sat at the same table making jokes with foreigners and former slaves. They’d come a long way.

“Regardless of this fact,” Vintor continued. “The faction we are contacting is a larger one with influence. We must make sure they understand the severity of the Jurou Biljana threat. Once we head back home, it will be up to them to convince the others to not muck with the cloaking array.”

“The beacon we place on the far side of their moon will notify my people if that happens. But if the Jurou Biljana are trolling this galaxy, a planet suddenly appearing will catch their attention,” Aculus noted.

“Your people have taken on the burden of sheltering many races, but the Cadi will not let you shoulder this alone,” Ashtoret assured Aculus.

Aculus nodded in appreciation.

“To confirm I understand correctly, this array won’t interfere with the humans’ equipment in orbit, correct?” he asked.

“Correct. The array will form a cloak that will extend beyond anything orbiting the planet, including the moon,” Aculus reiterated.

“Good. From what our human friends say, the loss of communication with their orbiting technology would be noticed and cause widespread panic.”

“Once you venture out in the cruisers, Aculus will act as our main point of contact, here on his vessel,” Vintor continued reviewing the plan.

“I still say I’m happy to go planet-side. To the warmer climate that is,” Aculus interjected.

“You’re just eager to make the acquaintance of another spunky female like Riley,” one male snickered.

“Am I really that transparent?” the bony warrior chuckled.

“Don’t feel too bad. We don’t even get to mix with the natives.” Payim slapped Aculus on the back.

“Sorry, males, it’s going to be hard enough for Ashtoret and me to blend in,” Vintor apologized. “Besides, my armored friend, you’re more familiar with your ship, so we need you here. As discussed, each team will check in at the arranged times. I don’t need to reiterate that you’ll report major moves, problems or completions. This is just like we all remember during the war.”

Expressions serious, everyone nodded. Yet Ashtoret could tell his companions were looking forward to this mission, even though they were only visiting uninhabited regions. Since the war ended, many of the warriors hadn’t seen much action and were chomping at the bit.

“We’re approaching Earth’s orbit now.” Aculus pointed to the large display screen at the front of the control room.

The planet that loomed onscreen was largely blue, its bodies of water bisecting the green continents, reminding him of a smaller version of Cadi. Too soon the view was obscured when Aculus’ vessel headed straight for the dark side of a barren pock-

marked moon. Unlike some moons, this body didn't have a habitable atmosphere. The agile X-class cruiser swooped in for a graceful landing.

"All right, we need to make our preparations," Vintor dismissed everyone.

Everything was a whirlwind as they made final inspections and checked off the necessary gear, examined the smaller planet-bound cruisers and everything else they could conceive of.

"It looks like that's everything. Thank you." Vintor nodded to Aculus.

"I've got my eyes on you." Aculus cracked a reassuring smile.

Ashtoret was still amazed Osivoire could smile at all, given their bony exoskeleton.

"We'll wait for confirmation before heading out. Go with Kali." Payim nodded to them.

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Fire thumped them on the back as they boarded the cruiser and headed for controls.

“You got this?” Vintor strapped in beside him.

“What’s this thing do again?”

“Torment,” Vintor barked when Ashtoret whipped the agile cruiser out of the loading bay.

He laughed at his friend, who was now wearing an incredulous smirk. While the others practiced setting up the cloaking array, he had been learning the ins and outs of the Osivoire cruiser. The vessel handled so smoothly, he was eager to take it through its paces, sadly this wasn’t the time. He set the coordinates and aimed the cruiser for the blue planet. The peninsula they were heading toward showed up onscreen, and he zoomed in further to assess the environment.

“I guess it’s a good thing it’s night out,” Vintor commented.

“I suppose, but look at how much artificial light they have blanketing everything.” That was the first difference he noticed between their otherwise similar worlds. There were strings of light connecting all the inhabited cities, like the woven strands of a succo nest. And the sprawling city they were heading toward extended for hectares along the coastline. “I don’t see how the humans can sleep at night.”

“The way Riley keeps Cyprian up, I don’t think they do sleep,” Vintor snorted, slapping his tail against the floor.

He shook his head, casting Vintor a sideways grin, then turned his attention back to the controls. He scanned the area and groaned when he located their best option for landing.

“What was that for?”

“Nothing,” he replied petulantly.

“Not looking forward to a water landing?” Vintor chuckled.

“It’s not the landing, it’s the trudging through foreign waters on a hostile planet.” But it couldn’t be helped. It was the most secure location in the heavily populated area. Skittish humans!

“True.” Vintor nodded and they both grew serious, mentally preparing themselves for the task at hand.

The small cruiser swiftly pierced the river’s surface and came to a halt on the murky bottom. He secured the controls, unstrapped his harness, and shrugged on his pack.

“Well, here we go.” Vintor sealed the loading bay hatch, so the water didn’t invade the rest of the cruiser, then opened the exit portal.

Ashtoret took a deep breath and dove headlong into the rush of water that came pouring into the bay. He fought past the slimy growth that entangled his feet and kicked till he broke the surface. Despite all the artificial light on shore, it was still too dark to see Vintor. He tread water in circles, desperately searching for his fellow warrior. Finally, he caught sight of Vintor silhouetted against the distant shore and breathed a sigh of relief. Ashtoret paddled toward his friend then burst into laughter.

“Not a word,” Vintor grumbled as he tugged the slimy, stringy plants off his head,

untangling them from his warrior's braids.

"I was just going to report that we need to head that way." He tried to keep a straight face.

"Uh huh," Vintor spat a bit of the foreign plant life out of his mouth, and they started swimming toward the shore.

The closer they got to land, the thicker the growth became, making it impossible to swim. With each step the muddy bottom attempted swallow up their boots.

"I don't have a good feeling about this," Vintor said as they waded neck deep in water.

"I agree. I feel eyes on me," Ashtoret replied as he pushed reedy grass out of his face.

"You are certain the nearby military stronghold didn't spot us entering their atmosphere?" Vintor asked.

"I can't make any promises. I'm still learning my way around Osivoire technology."

Vintor grunted and continued wading through the muck, toward the location programmed into his handheld. Ashtoret kept watch for any indication they'd been discovered. As he panned the dim bank several yards away, he spotted a pair of glowing, yellow eyes. The wet hair on the back of his neck stood up.

I knew it.

"There," Ashtoret whispered as he paused his watery trek.

Swift movement followed by a splash sounded, and Ashtoret braced himself. He

snarled in anger, when a large set of jaws clamped on his arm. He was aggravated with himself more than anything, since he'd known the attack was coming. He resisted the tug on his forearm, instead yanking the assailant out of the water. His first instinct from years of training was to pull one of the blades strapped to his chest, but he didn't want to fatally injure any of the planet's inhabitants if he didn't have to.

“Son of a metcor,” Vintor cursed low. “That thing is ugly. And it looks like it has a nasty bite.”



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Ashtoret looked at the creature attempting to wrench his arm out of the socket. It had a row of sharp teeth, currently embedded in his flesh, yellow beady eyes, a long snout, and scales from head to toe.

“Let go,” Ashtoret growled a feral sound, letting the beast know who the bigger predator was.

He smiled when the creature released his arm, then wisely swam off, with a parting defiant lash of its scaly tail.

“I think you found the mother of all Jurou Biljana,” Vintor chuckled.

“You might be right,” he agreed with a grin.

“How’s the arm?”

“Eh, it’ll heal.”

“We’re close enough to get out of this stream. It probably wouldn’t be wise to attract more of those things with you bleeding in the water,” Vintor suggested as he waded ashore.

They paused when they reached dry land. He pulled the watertight pack off his back and removed the clothes that would help them blend in.

“I’m not fond of these breeches,” Ashtoret grouched, holding up the pants and eyeing them critically.

“They’re constricting,” Vintor complained, after removing his vestment and stepping into the breeches.

Ashtoret tugged a hooded long-sleeve top over his head, then dealt with the dreaded pants. He had to coil his tail around his waist like a belt for them to fit properly.

“I think they’re strangling my shaft,” he groaned as he shifted in discomfort.

“I hope to Kali we don’t have to run in these things.”

Ashtoret and Vintor moved toward a series of artificial lights that lined a black road and illuminated the dwellings. He studied the two-story homes decorated in a range of vibrant colors. They kept to the shadows as they wove between the clustered buildings. The lights inside showed that many of the inhabitants were still awake.

“The dwelling we’re looking for is over there. We need to cross this picket barrier.” Vintor pointed to the third house.

Ashtoret nodded and vaulted over the knee-high wooden wall. He almost stumbled when his breeches cut him up the middle.

Damn restrictive clothing.

They were almost to the other side of the grassy enclosure when a noisy, small, four-legged, furry creature came charging up. A light flicked on in the nearby residence, and Ashtoret knew the yapping beastie had betrayed their presence.

“I guess we’re going to test how well we can run,” he hissed as they both took off, leaving the annoying creature behind.

“Great,” Vintor huffed.

They slowed when they reached the rear of their destination. Vintor looked around, gauging if they'd been sighted.

“It appears our contact isn't here yet.”

“We'll enter and wait. That will be safer than standing out in the open. I just hope the male doesn't have one of those yappy beasts,” Vintor smirked.

“We're supposed to look for a tiny metal key beneath a potted plant. If it's not there we'll have to find another way in.”

Ashtoret quickly reviewed what he knew about the male they would soon encounter. He hoped their liaison wasn't too shocked or put up a fight, before they could deliver their message.

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### 2 Summer Break

Abby

“I know an unknown vessel was sighted the same time Providence went down. I want answers, and don’t give me any of that bullshit about foreign training exercises in international waters, Frank. You and I both know it wasn’t the Russians or Chinese,” her father barked into the cell phone.

Abby’s heart ached as she stared out the car window, watching as they crossed the causeway, heading toward her parents’ home.

Maybe I should’ve stayed in my apartment on campus.

It was going to be rough spending the next few weeks at home. Providence had been missing for almost a year, and her father still searched tirelessly for what happened. He refused to believe Providence went down with the plane, or got tangled in her parachute. At first she had also been hopeful. If anyone could find her sister, it was their dad. Nothing occupied the skies around Cocoa Beach without him knowing about it. But as the months passed, her hope had waned, leaving behind a dull ache.

Her father hung up the phone with an exacerbated growl as they pulled onto Sunset Drive. Streetlights illuminated the neighborhood occupied mainly by Air Force personnel. It looked the same as when she’d left for school. It wasn’t as dull as some cookie-cutter ranch homes, but it still lacked the character of the neighborhoods around Gainesville.

I don't know why they paint the stucco in such lurid colors. The closer she got to the beach, the more fluorescent the homes became.

"I'm glad you're going to be home, but you could've visited your nana with Mom if you wanted to," her father said.

"I might, but I wanted to see you, too."

"I know you girls are worried about me, but I promise I'm not wallowing in misery."

Uh huh. She rolled her eyes as her dad parked in the driveway.

"Providence knew the risks."

"It doesn't add up, Peanut," he replied with a shake of his head.

Abby groaned at the nickname her family insisted on calling her.

"All right," she replied with a resigned sigh. There was no point arguing with the man.

"I'm going to gather the trash and haul it to the curb. Do you still have your key?"

"Yep."

She grabbed her backpack, which was stuffed full of clothes instead of books for once, then headed inside. She passed through the dim foyer into the living room and flipped on a lamp by the couch.

"Do not be frightened."

Abby paused as she was about to dump her backpack on the floor. Her gaze flew to the giant lurking in the shadows of her living room.

“We’re not here to harm you.”

She spun to see another of the behemoths blocking her exit from the room.

Her heart rate sped up, and her breath came out in gasping pants, as she looked from one giant intruder to the other. They both wore hooded sweatshirts obscuring their faces. She opened her mouth.

“Please do not scream, little female,” one of the intruders instructed.

She wouldn’t have been nearly as frightened if it weren’t for the growling sounds they made.

“Easy, female. I would never harm you,” the one by the door assured her.

The growling sound came from his mouth, but the words he spoke came from somewhere near his wrist. The man’s hands were hidden in the pocket of the sweatshirt, and she wondered if he had a gun. The man wouldn’t need it; he could subdue his victims with his size alone.

“This is not who we came here to see,” the man by the television said to the other giant.

“No, but she looks strikingly familiar to Providence. Look at her flame-colored hair,” the one by the door replied.

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Her eyes widened at the mention of her missing sister.

“What do you know about my sister?” she demanded, forgetting her fear.

Abby took a step toward the guy by the door, attempting to get a better look at his face.

“Peanut, you want me to make some popcorn? We can watch a movie,” her father called out as he entered the kitchen from the side door.

“Um, Dad,” she said hesitantly.

The man by the door moved toward her, forcing her to back up. She almost bumped into the other giant.

“Please don’t hurt him,” she begged the men.

“Peanut?” Her father paused as he entered the living room. “What are you doing in my home?” he demanded, using the military voice that made men quake.

“Brennan Murray,” the man who’d been by the door addressed her father. “We need your assistance.”

“This isn’t how to get it.”

“We mean you no harm. We bring a message from your daughter, Providence. She said you’d need some convincing. She wanted you to know that your angel found her

way to the stars and is happy.”

Abby gasped. Not only did the men know her sister’s name, but they knew her nickname. Abby’s jaw dropped further when the men lowered their hoods.

They’re demons!

That was the only thing she could compare the enormous intruders to. Their skin was a deep blood red. The one who just spoke had shoulder-length silver hair, and dark stubble dusting his strong chin. His high cheek bones led to a deep-set pair of obsidian eyes, and arched brows.

“You must have fouled the message,” the black-haired demon with braids said.

She swiveled her gaze toward him, hearing the words along with the deep rumbling growl that erupted from his mouth. Her eyes widened seeing the pair of fangs gleaming in his mouth.

Fuck!

“No, I got it correct.”

She swung back to the taller silver-haired demon. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion as she examined him.

“This isn’t a very funny joke,” she snarled. “Who put you up to this?” She waved at the men.

“What do you know about my daughter?” Brennan demanded. He shifted to the side table, yanked out the drawer and grabbed his handgun.



“Ashtoret, I believe that’s a weapon.”

“I can see that. Brennan, Providence was taken from your world and found herself on ours. Now we need your help to prevent a vile race from finding your Earth,” the silver-haired guy spoke very slowly, the words emerging from a smartphone strapped to his wrist.

She couldn’t figure out how they knew what replies to pre-record while they were doing the weird growly thing. It was a very clever trick.

“Dad, take it easy. I think one of your sick friends is playing a joke on you.”

Her father had been grilling all his contacts about the unidentified flying object sighted the night Providence disappeared. Now someone was doing a twisted job of trying to force him to move on. Although, why they thought two guys made up to look like demons somehow resembled UFOs, she didn’t know. With Kennedy Space Center and Patrick AFB nearby, there had to be hundreds of better alien impersonators.

While the silver-haired demon was staring warily at her dad’s gun, she reached up and swiped her thumb across his cheek. She frowned when the red make-up didn’t smudge. The man grabbed her wrist, and she noticed his incredibly large hands were also red. His black eyes studied her comparatively tiny hand, then looked at her wild, curly red hair with a tilt of his head. It was weird how he looked at her like she was an enigma. But that wasn’t the only bizarre thing about his gaze. His black eyes weren’t quite right. The iris was a little too large, and she couldn’t see a pupil. It was always possible they were contacts. Except when added to his sheer size, those fangs which obviously weren’t plastic, and the red skin, she started questioning what was really going on with these freaks.

It just isn’t possible. He’s gotta be one of those body mod freaks. She shoved down

her rising panic.

“Release my daughter,” her father roared and took a step forward, his gun trained on the silver-haired man.

“I mean no harm.” The guy instantly released her and backed up.

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Brennan grabbed her and pulled her across the room.

“I’m going to ask you one more time, what do you know about my daughter?”  
Brennan growled.

The red men sighed in unison.

“Providence did say her sire would be difficult.”

She snorted at the comment, or at least would have, if the situation wasn’t so freaking nuts.

“I doubt we’re going to find a liaison who will be more agreeable.”

“Ashtoret, get the message Providence wrote.”

“Hold it,” Brennan barked when the silver-haired demon reached for his unusual backpack.

“Here.” The man shoved his bag toward her father with his foot. “There’s a message in the outside compartment.”

Brennan took a few steps, grabbed the bag, then retreated again.

“Peanut, hold the gun on them. I’ll open this. I don’t want you finding any surprises.”  
Her father cast an accusatory glance at the pair.

She took the gun. Her father had taken her to the shooting range enough that she knew how to hit what she aimed for, especially at close range.

Brennan fiddled with the bag for a minute. She glanced over to see what the deal was and noticed there wasn't a buckle or zipper on the side pouch.

"May I?" The silver-haired guy kept his hands up, his eyes on her, as he hesitantly approached.

Don't get any bright ideas, buddy. She gave him a cynical smile, the business end of the gun aimed at his gut. Her eyes widened when a deep rumbling sound passed the silver-haired demon's lips. Is he laughing at me? Surely, he's not that ballsy.

The freaky giant pulled his disconcerting gaze away, swiped a finger along the seam of the bag, and the pocket slid open. He pulled out the letter with his long, graceful red fingers and handed it to her father.

"It's her handwriting," Brennan mumbled. Her gaze shifted to her father in surprise. "Here, you read it and hand me that."

She passed the gun and took the letter. The first thing she noticed was that the paper was strange, some fancy handmade stuff. But sure enough, it was Pro's handwriting. Reverently, she unfolded the note.

"Hey, Dad. I know this might be hard for you to believe, but everything my friends have to tell you is the truth," she read out loud. "I need you to look past their exterior and just trust me. Hopefully if you're reading this, you haven't tried to kick anyone's ass yet. In case you're still being stubborn, remember when I was eight and you held me on your shoulders as we looked at the stars? Remember how you told me one day I might get to visit them, and I said I'd take you with me. Well, I want you to know they're beautiful and you've been in my heart the whole time I've been here," Abby's

voice broke and tears started streaming down her cheeks. Her eyes were so blurry, she could hardly see the words on the page.

“Here, Peanut.” Brennan took the letter. His eyes misted as he skimmed the note to find where she left off. As he read, his gun lowered.

She’s not dead.

Providence was the toughest of her four sisters. There’s no way these weirdos could’ve forced her to write such a personal thing, it had to be real. Which meant these guys were actually aliens.

Oh my god. Dad was right, an unidentified flying object took Pro.

She should’ve been freaked out about that fact, but finding out Providence was alive was the only thing she could focus on.

“You’ve seen her.” She stepped toward the strange men as her father continued reading.

“She is our friend.” The shorter, dark-haired one nodded.

“Where is she? Why isn’t my sister here?” She frowned in confusion.

“Providence wanted to come, but she is with young,” the silver-haired guy replied.

“She’s what?” She was certain she misheard.

“They call young, babies.” The other man corrected his friend.

## Page 9

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“How?” she exclaimed.

“What?” Brennan barked.

“Providence mated after coming to our planet.”

“She’s married to one of you guys, and pregnant? Is that even possible?” She stood with her mouth agape as shock coursed through her.

“It is.” The silver-haired demon smiled, showing off his rather large fangs.

She shook off the odd sight as she tried to process what she was hearing.

“Peanut, this is going to have to wait. As much as I’d like to hear more, Providence has written some very disturbing things in this letter.” Her father had that look he got whenever shit hit the fan. Except this was the most serious she’d ever seen him.

“What’s going on?”

“Peanut, I want you to take the car and go get some coffee. I’ll call you in a few hours,” he urged.

“Wait, what? No!” Abby scowled as she looked from her dad to the strange alien dudes.

“Abigail, now!”

“Fine!”

She cast the giant red aliens and her father a final look as she grabbed her purse, then stormed out.

I’m a G.D. adult and the cat’s already out of the bag. I already saw the freaky demon aliens.

Ashtoret de Origa

Ashtoret watched Abby storm out of the room mumbling to herself. She looked so much like Providence it was uncanny. On second thought, it wasn’t the similarities to Providence that he found so striking, it was seeing another creature with such arresting features. Abby had the same unusual fiery hair as Providence, but hers was a mass of bobbing curls that shook as she left in a huff. The Cadi had one hair color, and that was generally black. Though in his case it turned out a pale color of gray.

He hadn’t expected Abby to boldly touch his face. He understood humans were very tactile, yet the personal gesture came as a surprise since they’d only just met. He could still feel the tingle on his cheek where she felt his skin with her delicate fingers. Her amazing blue-green eyes held such suspicion, then widened in awe when she realized his skin was naturally red.

Such variety in a species so similar to the Cadi was fascinating. Cadi were plain by comparison. Abby’s milky white skin made her hair and eyes seem all the more vibrant. He couldn’t help the grin that split his face recalling the way her pert button nose with its smattering of speckles scrunched up in frustration. It was a shame to see the bold, petite female go, but it was nice watching her leave. Her behind bounced in the tight blue pants. That was another thing about the humans that was so compelling. Their females possessed all those lovely curves.

His eyes widened when the door slammed.

She has Providence's temper, too, he chuckled to himself.

"How imminent is this threat?"

Brennan Murray's question captured his attention. This was the first human male he'd seen. All the humans on Cadi were female. The male was larger than Abby, but he wasn't nearly as tall as a Cadi warrior. The old male wasn't curvy like the females of his species. Brennan's face was rougher, like a male's should be, and his voice was an octave lower. It was interesting to see the comparison between the sexes. Somehow, he expected the human males to resemble their females more.

Brennan's brow furrowed, and he realized he was staring. It was a good thing Brennan now believed them after reading Providence's letter. But it was obvious the male still wasn't comfortable with them. It wasn't surprising the male sent his daughter away, with two strange warriors in the house. Although the thought of the petite female being out unescorted made him frown.

"We believe we have reached your planet in time to set up the cloaking array," Vintor replied. "It will shield Earth so the Jurou Biljana are unable to locate it, should they enter your quadrant. We require your people's cooperation. The array can't be messed with once it's set up in your polar regions. Providence stated you were the best person to talk to."

"Not for something like this." Brennan cracked his knuckles a few times. It looked like an agitated gesture. "This is way above my pay grade," he sighed.

"But, from what we were told, you are able to contact your leaders. This is very important. Unlike the Miran Sona, who are harvesting your people for benign reasons, the Jurou Biljana will strip you of your resources and sell your people across



the cosmos.” Ashtoret didn’t want to frighten Providence’s sire, but the male needed to understand the severity of what they were up against.

“Excuse me? The Mira who are doing what?” Brennan turned as red as a Cadi warrior, making no effort to disguise his anger.

Mother of Kali, I shouldn’t have said anything.

“Great,” Vintor groaned under his breath. “The Miran Sona are a benevolent race, who were once nearly wiped out. They’re collecting a small portion of your people and seeding another world. This is how Providence wound up on Cadi. One of the Miran Sona ships was ambushed and she valiantly sacrificed herself for others, killing several Jurou Biljana in the process. The reptiles thought they could sell her to my people but discovered they were wrong. Your daughter is quite the warrior. She is actually the Prime in her trio.”

Hearing this news would make any sire proud. Providence not only saved many people but was the first ever female Prime. It was quite a feat. However, Brennan didn’t look surprised or overly impressed. Instead, he just nodded as if he expected as much from his daughter, with only a slight smile tipping his lips.

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No wonder human females are so fierce.

A sharp, trilling sound interrupted the conversation. Brennan pulled a small handheld from his pocket. He glanced at it, hit the screen and set it on the nearby table.

“One problem at a time,” the male gave a resigned sigh. “So, this Juju Bilana want to enslave and pillage Earth, but you say this cloaking array will hide us.”

“Yes.” He nodded, not bothering to correct the male’s pronunciation.

“Will it hide us from these Mira people, too?”

“No. They are already aware of your location. They may find it odd that your planet is cloaked the next time they visit, but we doubt they’ll interfere with the device. They will understand its value.”

“I understand why Providence sent you to me of all people. If you were to attempt to reach out to a president or prime minister on your own, I don’t think things would go well for you. I can try to contact the Chief of Staff, except they’re just as likely to think I’ve lost my mind, unless you’re with me. But again, that puts you at risk.” Brennan cracked his knuckles again.

“Ah, yes.” Ashtoret nodded and frowned. “This is what your daughter feared. It is why she didn’t come. She worried your people would do something to her and take the young from her belly.”

They convinced Brennan of their mission, but now the difficulty was convincing his

superiors. This was aggravating. If a species came to Cadi to warn Daimio Kagan of an impending threat, their leader wouldn't react violently to the messenger. Of course, the Cadi had long known of other species, and now more than ever were open to forming alliances. The Jurou Biljana threat had taught them not to be so vain, and the humans needed to learn the same. Hopefully the lesson wouldn't be a painful one.

"Do you know how sad that makes me? My own daughter couldn't come home because she now fears her own damn people. Son of a bitch," Brennan snarled.

Ashtoret didn't know what a bitch was, but the Cadi had a similar phrase and he understood the sentiment.

Brennan's handheld trilled again, and the male picked it up.

"What?" Brennan barked into the small communicator. "What was that, Frank?" His expression darkened as he listened intently. "No. I haven't seen anything unusual." Brennan looked up at them. "Well, thanks for the heads up." The male pocketed his handheld. "You two need to..."

Brennan was cut off by the sound of breaking glass as several smoking canisters were hurled through the nearby window.

"Evacuate," Vintor bellowed, pointing toward the rear of the house.

Ashtoret coughed as he ran through the dense choking haze. Crashes came from every direction, followed by flashing red beams and thunderous booms. He ducked a beam as he sprinted down the hall. The wall beside his shoulder exploded in a cloud of dust. There was a crash, and he glanced back in time to see Vintor clutch his side, and stumble.

"Go," Vintor yelled, as three dark figures converged on him.

He wasn't about to leave his fellow warrior behind. He struck out and sent one male hurtling down the hall, before the human could aim his disrupter.

"Go! That's an order." Vintor struggled with the two remaining shrouded figures, while another three poured in from the kitchen.

Ashtoret growled in anger. They were physically stronger than the puny humans, but with their weapons drawn and their sheer numbers, the odds were evened. A blast followed by a twinge of pain lit up his arm, forcing him back.

"I'll come back for you," he yelled to Vintor.

He barely avoided another shot as he darted for the rear door. He threw his shoulder into it, taking the flimsy wood panel off its hinges. The door knocked down the pair directly on the other side, leveling them flat. Ashtoret ducked shots coming from a trio breaking through a nearby window as he leapt over the outdoor table. Every instinct said to use lethal force, but this was supposed to be a peaceful mission.

He ran across the yard, veering to avoid the blasts kicking up dirt around him. He ignored the biting sting that strafed across his thigh, focusing on the dark figure who leapt from the shadows. Ashtoret laid out the human warrior with a single punch, not even bothering to slow his stride. The sound of boots beating the earth followed, but he was faster on his feet, darting between the nearby dwellings.

### 3 Go Take a Drive

Abby

“This is the first lead we have after thinking Pro is dead, and I’m just supposed to leave. Such bullshit,” she snarled.

Abby pulled to a stop at the intersection and sat staring at nothing.

Her family had been a wreck for so long. Months ago, Mom wanted to have a funeral for Providence. She and her sister Bethany agreed. Losing Pro wasn’t something they’d ever get over, but they all needed to say goodbye and have a bit of closure. There was only so long you could search and grieve. But Dad refused to let Pro go. Hope and April sided with him. Now they just didn’t talk about it, and the tension was noticeable.

Then out of the blue, two strange characters, aliens, show up with a letter from Pro. The story they told was too good to believe. It dredged up feelings she’d done her best to bury, because they hurt too much to hold onto—hope. And yet somehow it was just crazy enough, it had to be true.

“And I’m just supposed leave!” She shook the steering wheel.

It was like a kick in the teeth. She had just as much right to know what the hell was going on.

“Screw it. Dad’ll just have to be pissed at me.” She smacked the dash, mind made up.

Abby turned around and started heading back home. She was a few blocks away when something large darted into the road.

“Fuck!” She threw on the brakes. Her eyes widened, recognizing the hooded figure. “What the hell is he doing running around the neighborhood?” She quickly rolled down the window and hollered. “Hey!”

The giant man paused and spun around. In the halo of the street lamp, she could just make out his ruddy complexion.

Jesus, he’s huge. She noticed it earlier, but it bore repeating.

The giant alien considered her for a second, glanced warily behind him, as if weighing his options, then hustled toward the car.

What am I doing? The bravado she was feeling a moment ago waned without her father around. Are you seriously letting a giant fanged demon alien into the car?

Her eyebrows hit her hairline, when a black clad soldier emerged from between two nearby houses, heading straight for the alien.

“Shit!” That’s who he’s running from. She didn’t think twice, leaned over and threw open the door. “Get in.”

The red behemoth swiftly dove into her car, and she slammed on the gas. In the rearview mirror, she watched the Spec-ops soldier stop short. She screamed and swerved when the back window exploded a second later.

“Fucking bastard!” She corrected, hunched low in the seat and drove faster, the tires screeching as she took the next turn. “I can’t believe he’s shooting at us.” Her hands trembled on the wheel.

Except she could believe it. It also drove home the reality of who she'd just let in her car.

"Thank you," the alien man rumbled.

"What is going on?"

"Your warriors attacked your house."

"Dad called in the troops! Unbelievable!" A frisson of disappointment struck her. Her dad was all about rules and order, but in this case, normal rules didn't apply. Anyone could see that.

"No, they just showed up, Peanut."

She nearly hit a parked car, hearing the alien call her by the nickname. Not only did it come out of his mouth, sounding rumbly and deep, but it also translated through the strange contraption on his arm. She glanced over, and a snort burst out before she could muffle it. The poor guy was folded up in the passenger seat, his knees in the dash, and his head tilted against the ceiling.

"Sorry about the cramped quarters. There's a button beside the seat to adjust it."

He adjusted the seat but didn't look any more comfortable. The car was just too small.

She turned at the next intersection. If she knew anything about how the government operated, they had to get out of the neighborhood before they were penned in.

"My name's Abby, not Peanut. What's yours?"

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“Ashtoret de Origa.”

The foreign rumbled words didn’t translate. The last part sounded more like a rolling series of growls that she’d never be able to recreate.

“I don’t think I can say that. Mind if I call you Ash?”

“That is fine, Peanut.”

She looked at Ash sideways. He can say Ash-whatever, I’m sure he can say Abby. She shook her head.

“So, what happened with my dad and your friend?” she hesitantly asked.

“Your warriors have them.”

She nodded grimly, already knowing the answer. This is insane. A bipolar dream where hope and horror play tug of war. She glanced over at the alien in her car, the one who looked like a demon. He was very real, even had a name. But he wasn’t the frightening part. If the aliens meant her harm, they could’ve hurt her already. And seeing Providence’s note helped assuage much of that fear. No, it was her own government that scared her. Dad and the other guy are probably being hauled to some clandestine facility. Oh, God. She started trembling.

“I need to get to my cruiser.” Ash looked at the tablet strapped to his thick wrist. “We are heading the wrong direction.”



His comment snapped her back to the moment. Just focus on getting this big guy to his goal.

“It’s going to be difficult going the other way. I’m sure the Spec-ops are looking for this car now.” She frowned. The Feds probably called it in already, and every cop in Cocoa Beach would be looking for them. With the broken back window, they’d stand out like a sore thumb. “We need to ditch the car.”

“Is the vehicle malfunctioning? Can’t you just bring it to a halt? Why do you need to pilot it into a ditch?” Ash’s thick dark brow furrowed in concern as he braced himself against the dash.

Despite the crazy circumstance, she burst out in laughter at Ash’s misinterpretation. He looked at her funny, his obsidian eyes going wide.

“That’s a good idea. I’ll just pull over,” she giggled.

Ash’s concerned expression shifted into a smile. The corners of his mouth tipped up, showing off the tips of his fangs, and she grew instantly quiet. The smile was compelling and frightening at the same time. His powerful build, dark features and fangs projected a sense of danger that made her shiver. But there was also something easygoing about Ash’s demeanor. Despite being alien, he wasn’t bad looking. In fact, Ash was rather sexy, looking a bit like Alexander Skarsgård. It wasn’t really surprising her sister cozied up to one of the demi-gods.

“You are laughing at me because you weren’t serious, were you?” He chuckled with a deep rumble, making her smile again.

“No. It’s just a saying. Where should I park?”

“Near the river.”

Abby returned her attention to the road, keeping an anxious eye out for patrol cars or military vehicles. Every blacked-out SUV made her nervous as she headed for a side street near the Banana River.

“I think this is as close as I can get.” The longer they stayed in the car, the riskier it was.

“This is fine.”

She stopped at the end of a cul-de-sac and cracked the door to get out. Her eyes widened in horror as the dome light lit up Ash.

“You’re hurt!” There was a large red stain on the thigh of his cargo pants. “You were shot.”

“It is nothing. The projectiles merely grazed me.”

“Projectiles? You were shot more than once?” She gaped at him.

“It’s not a concern at the moment.”

Ash studied the door then grabbed the handle and opened it. It took him a moment to maneuver his oversized body out of the car. She blinked in shock then quickly yanked off her belt and got out.

“Are you sure? Cause that looks bad.” She waved at his leg.

“I’ve suffered worse. A Cadi warrior heals quickly.” He shrugged, like being shot was nothing.

Okay. I guess if he’s not worried about it. She turned her attention back to the car. It

felt strange just leaving it. Dad will understand. What next? What next? She needed to get as far away from here as possible. If they hauled her dad in for questioning, they'd do the same with her. But what then? Fuck! I am so out of my league with this shit.

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“Come, Peanut. My vessel is this way,” Ash rumbled in his natural deep, growly voice which was translated a moment later. He pulled his hood low and headed toward the river beyond the houses at the end of the lane.

“You want me to go with you?” She stared at the giant alien man.

“Yes. It isn’t right for you to be out here alone, especially with those warriors on the hunt. I do not appreciate the way they fired their disrupters at a female. Dishonorable,” he snarled, surprising her with his vehemence.

Abby nibbled her lip as she considered Ash. Granted she helped him evade the military, but she wasn’t sure if going with him was the smartest option. Then again, Ash was her only link to Providence, and he was alone with an army of hostile men after him. She couldn’t just abandon him. As frightening as all this was, that would be a supremely shitty thing to do to him.

“Okay.” She nodded.

She double-checked to make sure she had her purse then noticed her phone.

Crap! She grabbed it, quickly yanked the battery and SIM card, and stuffed them into her purse. Hopefully she hadn’t jeopardized everything.

Abby glanced around, nervously looking for Spec-ops hiding in the shadows as she followed Ash. It was weird creeping between the houses. She’d been a teenager the last time she did something like this, sneaking into the neighbor’s pool with her girlfriends. They’d been caught.

“What’s the plan?” she hissed when they reached the shore.

“Follow the river.”

She cast Ash an incredulous sideways glance.

“How far? All these yards back up to the river, and some of them have fences.” She pointed several houses down.

“We get wet.”

“What?” Her hand flew to her mouth when she realized how loud she was.

Ash wasn’t joking. He waded into the water, then looked expectantly at her.

“Do you have any idea what’s swimming around in there? And you’re bleeding,” she pointed out.

“I do. I met your not so friendly scaly beasts on the way to your house. He wasn’t too pleased when I refused to relinquish my arm.”

“An alligator tried to take your arm?” She gaped at the giant man. “How the hell did you get away?”

“I’m the bigger predator.” Ash shrugged. “Come on. You can swim like your sister, yes?”

“No one can swim like Pro,” Abby laughed incredulously. Providence was damn near a fish, with her search and rescue prowess. “You really do know Providence.” She smiled.

“I do not lie. Now come. I will guard you against the curious reptiles.”

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” she mumbled.

She didn’t even like wallowing in the Banana River during the day. Ash watched keenly as she tied a knot in her purse strap and slung it around her neck to keep it dry, then waded in.

“Holy fuck, it’s cold.”

“I would carry you on my shoulders, but that would be conspicuous.” Ash looked toward the homes on shore. “We will get dry when we reach the cruiser.”

“I’ll be fine.”

She trudged along with the water lapping at her midriff, while Ash swam beside her in silence. It was rough going in the dark, especially once the mangroves got thicker. Her foot got tangled in a root, and she pitched headlong into the water. Large, strong arms encircled her, plucking her up before she took in a lungful of murky water.

“Dammit,” she sputtered.

“Are you all right, Peanut?” Ash pulled a bit of reedy grass from her hair.

“Yeah.” She wiped her face.

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“Will you be all right if we head deeper?”

“Yeah. My frickin’ cell’s probably a paperweight now,” she grumbled as she stared at her soaked purse. It was probably for the best. “Wait, how is your translator thingy not waterlogged?”

“Our technology is more advance than yours,” he said, matter-of-fact.

“Of course it is. Stupid me. You’ve got a space ship.”

“Your people aren’t stupid. Your communicator is very similar to our handheld. I’ve also noticed you use a variety of technology in everyday life. In your home I was amazed to see several display screens. Many homes on Cadi do not have such. And you do not heat with fire, like we do.”

“Really?” Abby knew there would be differences, but she assumed any alien to visit her planet in a space ship would have technology oozing out their pores.

“Our civil war made it so we did without all but the necessities.”

“You guys are at war with each other?” she asked, suddenly worried for her sister.

“No longer,” Ash said proudly. “And we’ve resumed our trade with other races. It is a time of great change on Cadi, and you humans have ushered it along. Come on.”

She wanted to ask what he meant, since it sounded like more humans than her sister were on his planet, but Ash swam into deeper water, effectively ending their

conversation.

We're looking for his spaceship, not socializing. Remember the men in black.

She paddled after Ash. Surprisingly she did feel safe as they tread through the lazy dark current. Granted the things brushing against her ankles were creepy as hell, but for some reason she trusted Ash when he said he'd keep the alligators at bay. He was built like a tank. If any man could wrangle a gator, he could.

They passed alongside one of the many Thousand Islands as they continued further into the open river. She was not a badass like her sister, who made Olympic swimmers look like fish out of water. Soon Abby found herself floundering. Ash kept casting concerned looks her way, one dark brow cocked up. She didn't dare complain, just pushed through, ignoring the cramp in her side. It was downright embarrassing how out of shape she was.

Please tell me we're not heading out to sea. Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming, she silently chanted in her most cheerful inner voice.

Ashtoret de Origa

I should've dropped her off at the last little island we passed. He dismissed the notion as soon as he remembered the reptiles. They would have no trouble making a snack out of her.

Ashtoret glanced again at Abby. Her breath was heaving out harder the farther they went. He slowed his strokes, so she could keep up.

"Almost there," he encouraged after glancing at the handheld strapped to his wrist.

He grimaced when Abby nodded and nearly sucked in a mouthful of water. There



was a sudden roar that came to life, and his head swung toward it. In the dark he saw the silhouette of a boat, speeding toward them. Another joined from the opposite side of where his vessel was hidden in the murky depths. He could just barely make out figures in the water where his cruiser should be.

“Son of a metcor,” he snarled.

He didn’t know how it was possible, but the Earth warriors located his cruiser. Ashtoret wanted to kick himself. His concern for Abby distracted him from his surroundings. He should’ve known the human warriors weren’t going to give up.

“What?”

“Wrap your arms around me now.” He grabbed Abby. There was no time to explain, the boat was rapidly closing in on them.

Abby did as he commanded, his authoritative growl making her move fast. Her delicate arms encircled his neck, her legs wrapping around his waist. Swiftly he dove and headed away from their pursuers, kicking his legs to get to the bottom of the river. He would’ve attempted to reach his cruiser underwater, but it looked like the dark-suited swimmers already located it. He headed down the river as fast as his limbs could take him.

Soon Abby’s grip loosened. He wrapped his arms around her, to hold her in place, and kicked his legs harder to compensate. She started thrashing and attempted to break free, her small hands gripping his arms. He groaned, knowing she was out of air. He couldn’t possibly surface yet; he could still hear the growl of the boat engines echoing through the water. Ashtoret grabbed the back of Abby’s head and brought her mouth to his, making a seal around her supple lips. He forced his tongue into her mouth, to get her to part her jaws. When she relented with a gasp, he breathed a lungful of air into her, then kept swimming. She sucked in hard, taking all that he had

to offer. Momentarily, he was distracted by the way her mouth tasted watery and sweet. His tongue lingered, testing the firmness of her full bottom lip. Abby pulled away bringing him back to their predicament, and he pushed himself faster.

When Abby again struggled, he surfaced for a brief moment. She sucked in several gasping breaths and made a dismayed sound, just before he went under again. He repeated this for several rounds, till he no longer heard the boats, and was certain they were far enough away.

“Please, not again,” Abby panted, looking paler than before, if that was possible.

“No, not again. I’m sorry, Peanut.”

Ashtoret looked toward the numerous islands with their branchy trees. They needed to find a place to take refuge. Abby physically didn’t look good. No female should be subjected to the harrowing events that occurred this evening. That she was taking this so well was further proof she was Providence’s sister.

He flipped onto his back, taking Abby with him. In this position her head was out of the water. Abby relaxed against his submerged chest, as he did the backstroke toward the islands. He too relaxed as her breathing eased. He never had to care for a female, much less one so small and delicate. The daunting honor and the way Abby embraced him had him entirely riled.

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They bypassed the first island, opting for one deeper inside the cluster. He found a twiggy mound and headed toward it.

“Oh, not here.” Abby shook her head, seeing where he planned to get out. “That’s a gator nest.”

“Ah. We best not agitate it.” Many species were downright feral when their young were at risk.

He swam further, finding a more promising location in the dark.

“Here?” He pointed.

“It’s hard to see, but if there’s no nests it should be fine.” Abby nodded. “I guess this little inlet is too small for boats to pass.” She shivered against his chest.

“Yes. That is my hope.” Ashtoret trudged ashore with Abby cradled in his arms.

“Are we waiting them out?”

“You need sleep and I could use some, too.”

“A flat spot to lie down is going to be hard to find with all the twisted mangrove roots, but beggars can’t be choosers.” Abby scrunched-up her face.

“No.” He laughed at her moue of distaste. “I like that saying.” Ashtoret picked his way through the growth, away from the shore.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll hear more before this sleigh ride from hell is over.” The distress in Abby’s voice was noticeable.

“I appreciate your aid. You are in this situation because of me. I will find a way to liberate Vintor and your sire,” he promised earnestly.

“Thank you, Ash. I couldn’t leave you back there. Believe it or not, I had a pretty good idea what I was getting into.” Abby attempted to smile. And though it was uncertain and tired, it still lit up her face. “You can put me down now.” She wiggled to get free, her hips grinding into his abs.

“No. Stay. I can tell you’re exhausted, and I don’t want you to trip. From what I know of your kind, my sight is better in the dark.” He also liked having her pressed against him. He was tempted to shift the arm beneath her lush behind, so he could cup one full cheek, but refrained.

Don’t get any smart ideas. Focus on the mission.

“Um, okay.” Abby sounded unsure, yet she didn’t release him, instead snuggling further into his grasp.

Ashtoret smiled. Despite his attempt to behave, his thoughts returned to the taste of her mouth when he breathed for her in the water. He stared down at her full lips, wanting another taste. His expression shifted to a frown when she shivered, and he realized just how cold she was. Abby’s hands were like ice where they inadvertently rubbed against his shoulders, attempting to suck up his body heat. And her otherwise ruby lips had a slightly blueish tinge.

She’s freezing. That’s why she’s humoring you. He instantly felt guilty for his wayward thoughts.

“Ash, why are you growling? Is your translator broken? It’s not translating.” Abby looked up at him in concern, her blue-green eyes going wide.

He instantly ceased the rumble churning in his chest. Don’t scare her, you dolt!

“That’s because I wasn’t saying anything. I’m frustrated with everything, and you are freezing.” He noticed a relatively clear area and came to a halt. “This will have to do. Now take off those wet clothes before you get sick.”

He put Abby down and started to strip off his own wet clothes.

Abby

“What?” Abby asked, her voice going up several octaves.

With only the moon above and distant city lights it was hard to see Ash as he pulled the soaked sweatshirt over his head, then began tugging off his cargo pants, but she saw enough.

Oh, holy bejezus, I don’t think he’s got anything on under there.

“Peanut, clothes off,” he insisted sternly, and she shivered hearing the deep rumble in his voice.

Ash reached up and hung his clothes over a nearby branch, so they could dry. He then got in her personal space.

“Do you need help?” he asked.

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“Um, no,” she squeaked. “Just turn around,” she insisted, recalling how he said he could see in the dark.

Of course he can see in the dark, she cursed her luck while nervously biting her lips. She wasn’t ashamed of her body, but she also knew she needed some work in that department. This evening just gets better and better, she bemoaned.

“Fine. You humans are funny with your issues about nudity. You are so bold in some ways, and timid in others,” he chuckled. “I will contact my main vessel while you take off those wet clothes.” Ash turned around and started fiddling with the translator on his wrist.

The sound of his laugh was pleasant, but she was too embarrassed to truly appreciate it. She turned and begrudgingly started tugging off her soaked jeans. The damn things refused to cooperate, but she finally got them off along with her squishy tennis shoes.

“Son of a metcor.”

“What’s wrong?” She glanced over her shoulder.

“I should be able to contact Aculus, but I’m not getting through,” he growled.

Ash sounded downright frightening when he was frustrated. She hoped to never be on his bad side. The man called himself a warrior and looked every bit the part.

Fucking government! Of all the stupid bullshit. What moronic suit thinks the best plan is to attack the people who clearly have tech that could kick our ass? They came

to help, and we started a war.

That was too much to contemplate right now. She shook her head and shoved aside the abysmal thoughts. There was nothing she could do about it. The only thing she could hope is that the few humans Ash knew, like herself and Pro, were enough to convince his people humans weren't all douche bags.

Abby pulled off her t-shirt, then looked down at her soaked bra and panties. These are staying on. She hung everything on a branch then screeched when the limb dropped out of the tree. The tail of the giant python instantly coiled around her legs and started squeezing. She tripped, stumbling to the ground.

Suddenly Ash was there, grappling with the overgrown snake. The python attempted to twist around his arm, but he captured its head. His other hand snared its tail, preventing the beast from gripping her legs tighter. She heard a crunch and felt the snake twitch then go still.

"Peanut, are you okay?" Ash unwound the dead python.

Abby nodded as she stared at the shadow of the thick beast. If she'd been alone it would've killed her. The massive snake was one of those aggressive species invading southern Florida. This one was probably responsible for several missing dogs, considering its sheer size.

"Peanut?" Ash asked again as he knelt in front of her.

"I'm fine," she stammered, drawing her knees up to her chest.

Ash wrapped his incredibly warm arms around her and pulled her against his bare chest. He was so large it took nothing at all to envelop her. And the man radiated heat like a furnace. She shivered as the heat soaked in to chilled skin. There was so much

adrenalin coursing through her, added to his sudden overwhelming warmth and she felt dizzy.

Hey, Abby, how was your summer break? Well, I met aliens, my father was abducted by our government, oh, and I ended up snuggling with a naked alien in the middle of a fucking swamp, she rambled at the insanity of it all.

She knew the intent was to warm up, but this was too disconcerting on top of everything else. Ash clutched her on his lap, her breasts pressed against his rock-hard chest, a leg tucked under each of his muscular arms, while his massive palms spanned her back. The most awkward part was how she was spread eagle atop his crotch.

Thank God, he is wearing something over his business. Although it wasn't much more than a scrap of fabric from what she could tell, and there was a very impressive bulge beneath it.

For the life of her, she couldn't find a safe place to put her hands or rest her cheek. His chest was a mass of muscles. It didn't seem right to cup his peck, like they were handles. And she wasn't about to tuck her hands beneath her breasts. That was perilously close to his junk.

The hang-up wasn't that she found herself in a compromising situation with an alien. She would've been equally rattled doing this with any strange man. Especially one built like a demi-god.

Boy is he built like a god. It was shocking just how similar they were. Of course, we're similar. Pro is pregnant. How do you think that happened?

She wanted to ask about that, but the subject of how her sister met and then did the beast with two backs with an alien seemed a little unwise given her current position.



“Try to go to sleep. I’ll watch over you,” Ash rumbled.

The idea of being squeezed to death in the night was disturbing, but it was Ash’s heroics as he rescued her from the python that now had her focus. The intense mental image mixed with the sensation of his massive hand rubbing her back in continuous circles, his yummy heat soaking in, made it hard to dispel the mounting fluttery sensation low in her belly. Sleep was the farthest thing from her mind.

“Um, Ash?” Abby resisted the urge to fidget while perched atop him.

“Yes, Peanut.”

She didn’t really know what she was going to ask, but now she had a different question.

“Why do you insist on calling me Peanut?”

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“Your sire said it so fondly.” His chest vibrated, making her nipples harden to little points.

“Oh.”

She didn’t have a response to that. Abby hoped making conversation would distract her from the awkward closeness, but the comment and the way Ash’s body flexed as he spoke only made things worse.

“I also find it amusing the way your nose scrunches up in agitation when I say it,” he chuckled.

She swiftly looked up at his face. She was close enough to see his impish smile, even though it was dark.

“Oh, now that’s just rotten,” she laughed at the alien’s ornery sense of humor.

His grin widened showing off his sharp canines. They were the kind of teeth you only found on predators. The sight of them should’ve scared the shit out of her but didn’t. Probably because Ash’s personality was so opposite to his savage appearance. Not to say he wasn’t savage, he was. The man single-handedly evaded Spec-ops with her acting like a weight around his neck. He could’ve ditched her to get away but didn’t.

“I’m sorry for the way my people have behaved,” she felt obligated to say. Her government’s fear was shameful and going to start some shit that everyone would end up paying for.

“I was warned to expect it. What I don’t understand is how your warriors located us so fast. I double-checked we were cloaked when I landed the cruiser. I also can’t figure out why I’m unable to contact Aculus or the others. I’m not even getting a read on Vintor’s tracker,” he growled in frustration.

“Well, you know what they say, no good deed goes unpunished.”

Ash huffed with a mix of amusement and disgust hearing the proverb.

“I wish I could help. I know where the Air Force base is and that’s about it. I don’t think it’s a good idea to go there, since it’s crawling with airmen.”

“Tonight, we rest. Then I will attempt to liberate my cruiser.”

They grew quiet. Only the sound of Ash’s heartbeat beneath her cheek and steady breath could be heard. Exhaustion finally caught up with her, and she lapsed into a fitful sleep.

### 4 Mangroves Islands

Abby

It was early dawn when Abby roused. She blinked at the light filtering through the tangled mangroves. It took a moment to remember where she was as she lifted her face from the pillow of hard red flesh. Embarrassment filled her when she realized she'd drooled all over Ash's pec.

Seriously, Abby!

She quickly swiped it away then studied the swirling tattoos that covered Ash's chest, which extended over his shoulders and down his arms. The intricate black design stood out on his blood red skin. She never really cared for tats, since most of them seemed cheesy. Except, on Ash they fit, adding to his formidable aura.

She felt bad. Poor Ash spent the entire night on the hard, bumpy ground. She was amazed she managed to stay perched on his chest. Then again, he was rather broad, and his corded arms were wrapped around her, keeping her securely in place.

Something by her leg moved, startling her. Abby screeched when it dawned on her what was coiled around her calf.

"There's a snake on my leg." She frantically reached for it.

Ash quickly flipped her onto her back and planted his mouth against hers. She instantly forgot the intruder. His tongue snaked out, demanding entrance. She was

stunned by how she automatically parted her lips, like she had in the water, as if it were a matter of life and death. His tongue slipped in, gliding over her smooth teeth. The tip teased her tongue as he explored. Ash tasted spicy, like candied ginger. She didn't remember him tasting so good last night, of course, she'd been frantic for air. Abby pulled in a deep shuttering breath. It was like his kiss was drugged with the way the spicy flavor worked its way into her, bringing every sense to attention. She was suddenly aware of his massive body caging her in, the hard planes of his chest pressing against her eager breasts, his hips wedged between her thighs. In the back of her mind she knew she should probably pull away, but deepened the kiss instead.

Just as she was about to grip his broad shoulders, Ash reared back. He tilted his head as he rolled his tongue around his mouth. The way he studied her with those intense dark eyes, his brow furrowed, had her instantly wondering if he was tasting her morning breath. It was like a cold bucket of water.

Just when I thought this whole scenario couldn't get any more embarrassing!

"I haven't brushed my teeth yet," she indignantly retorted. Abby scrambled back, pulled up her knees and wrapped her arms around herself to cover her lacy bra. "You kissed me first."

"You do not taste bad. I was just surprised by something unexpected." Ash shook his head. "I'm sure it was nothing," he mumbled with his growly voice, but it translated at full volume. Ash cast the translator on his wrist an annoyed look.

"Oh crap, the snake. Where'd it go?" She looked around frantically.

"It wasn't a snake." Ash's easy-going expression returned, amusement dancing in his dark eyes.

She wasn't sure what he found so funny.

“Well it wasn’t a branch wrapped around my leg. And by the way, why did you kiss me?”

“It seemed like a good way to silence you.”

Her mouth gaped at his audacity. Ash grinned, and she remembered he liked the faces she made.

“My people don’t kiss. I was curious. I find that I like it—a lot.”

His sardonic smile and candor had her flustered. Part of her was relieved he wasn’t put off, since apparently this was his first kiss. But that twinge of pride was tempered by the very large, underdressed red alien sitting in front of her. She couldn’t help glancing at the scrap of fabric covering his unmentionables.

Holy hell. Ash wasn’t standing at full attention, but the bulge was tenting the scrap of fabric.

“Why don’t you kiss?” she asked as her head popped up.

“These.” Ash tapped his canines. “It’s a custom your people introduced.”

“Oh. I see.”

Abby blushed and fidgeted under his scrutiny. His steely gaze followed her every move. She felt like a cornered bunny with a hungry tiger staring her down. Her tongue darted out to lick her suddenly dry and kiss-swollen lips. Ash’s dark eyes narrowed further, and he leaned in.

“Um, you said it wasn’t a snake,” she quickly interjected, before he could pounce.

Wherever this was going, it couldn't be good. Right?

“Ah, yes. It was dark, so you didn't notice last night.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open when a long tail snaked out from behind Ash.

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“Don’t scream or I’ll have the privilege of kissing you again,” he warned with a cocky smile.

Her cheeks heated further while she fixated on his tail which lazily flicked back and forth. It was as shocking as it was mesmerizing.

“You’re nearly as red as me,” Ash laughed.

“Because you’re being a flirt. And you’ve seen humans before, but I’ve never met a...” she paused, not recalling what his people were called.

“Cadi,” Ash supplied.

“Yes, well it’s a lot to take in all at once.” She scowled as she admonished the rowdy behemoth.

“That is true. I apologize for taking advantage.” Ash smacked one fist against his chest as he gallantly bowed his head while apologizing. His expression was serious rather than teasing.

“I wouldn’t go that far.” She shook her head at the man, the corners of her mouth tipping up.

She wasn’t offended, more surprised by it all. Granted they didn’t know each other very well, but something told her Ash would’ve stopped if she insisted. And the kiss had been very nice, although she wasn’t about to encourage the man.



Don't read too much into it. She had no clue about the Cadi. Maybe they were free spirited, and Ash was just curious, like he said.

"Do you feel well rested? We need to try to reach my cruiser this morning."

"Yeah. Although at this rate our clothes will never get dry." Abby grimaced at their damp clothes hanging over the mangrove branches. It didn't look like they'd dried one bit.

"I would go on my own, but you are not safe here. The thought of what one of those reptiles would do to you..." Ash finished his statement with an inarticulate growl.

She smiled at his concern. It was sweet.

"I don't like the idea of leaving our clothes here."

"No, I agree." He nodded.

Ash glanced around, assessing their surroundings. He stood and picked his way through the dense growth. She blinked, her mouth dropping open as she stared at his shapely red ass. The little breechcloth did nothing to hide his flexing cheeks. Not even the sight of his flicking tail could detract from the magnificent sight.

She was still gaping at the break in the trees when the silver-haired demi-god returned, dragging the dead python he'd tossed into the brush. This view was just as fine as the one of him retreating.

Dear lord, he's got a vee of muscles along his hips, pointing straight to his...

"What are you going to do with that?" she quickly asked before Ash noticed her staring at his washboard abs.

“We need a bag.”

“Uh, okay.”

Ash grabbed a knife from his cargo pants then hunkered down with the fat snake. She watched with a mix of awe and disgust as he proceeded to cut off the snake’s head and tail, then begin peeling the skin off. The snakeskin came free in one long, macabre tube. Ash washed it in the puddle nearby and tied one end into a knot.

“Can you hand me our clothes, please?”

“That is the coolest and grossest thing I’ve ever seen,” she commented and passed him their clothes.

“The beast has grown cold, but that happens when things die,” he replied, while stuffing their clothes into the snakeskin turned inside out.

“No, cool also means fascinating,” she laughed.

“Ah. So, you are disgusted and impressed. I think that’s the most interesting compliment I’ve ever received.” Ash grinned, puffing up his chest. “Do you want me to put your little bag inside the reptile?”

She shook her head both in response to his question and his pride at the unintended compliment. “You are an odd character, Ash.”

“You are the one with such amusing conflicting emotions, Peanut.” She could tell he was teasing her back, in his own foreign manner. “The serpent was already dead, we needed a waterproof carrier. I was being practical.” He tied another knot, sealing the tube shut.

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“I’m a girl, it’s my prerogative to be contrary.”

“Is that the secret to females?” Ash asked soberly, a cheeky grin splitting his face a moment later.

“Yes, but don’t tell anyone I told you.” She made a motion of zipping her lips.

“You have my solemn oath that I will not reveal the secret of all female kind.” He bowed low, still wearing the amused expression that made his dark eyes light up. It was truly captivating. “Come on.”

Ash hefted the creepy bag and slung her waterlogged, designer knock-off purse over his shoulder.

“I can carry that,” she offered, repressing a snort seeing the big man carrying her purse.

“I got it. It is a very convenient little bag.” He shrugged as they headed for the river.

I’ve started a trend, she giggled, imagining a race of giant alien men carrying purses.

Ashtoret de Origa

Ashtoret tried to keep the concern from his face as Abby swam beside him. He hated bringing her along, not knowing what likely awaited when they reached his cruiser. His mission was to protect the humans and get home safely. But now his purpose had shifted to include finding Vintor and protecting Abby. The way her own people were

so cavalier about mounting an attack on her home infuriated him.

She might also need protecting from you. He shook his head.

It was shameful the way he threw himself at her on the island. He hadn't given it a second thought when he silenced her with his lips. He should've known better than to act that way with a vulnerable female.

Dishonorable. What is your problem?

Something about Abby drew him in and he couldn't seem to help himself. The way she responded to his kiss, her lush body leaning into him was irresistible. Who knows how far he would've taken things if the sudden disturbing need to bite her hadn't struck him in the gut. It was almost like Abby was his...

No. Couldn't be. He dismissed the notion.

A large pod of creatures sluggishly swimming in the muddy water captured his attention. They had gray fat bodies, with two flippers instead of forelegs, and a single broad flipper for a tail. Their bulbous noses were whiskered, and they had two small solemn eyes. They didn't appear dangerous but looks could be deceiving.

"Peanut, what are those beasts?" He paused and pointed.

"Oh, they're manatees." Abby tread water beside him.

"Benign?"

"Yeah. We also call them sea cows. They're harmless. Fun fact; you'd think the gators would feed on the manatees since they're a slow-moving feast, but they usually leave the adults alone."

He watched as one of the sea cows lazily munched on a bit of river grass, glad to have his theory about their temperament confirmed. A large group of such massive beasts suddenly springing to attack would've been bad. They were getting close to their goal, and the disturbance would've undoubtedly drawn attention. A thought occurred to him as he processed what she said.

“Stay here with these sea cows. If what you say is true it will be safer than coming with me. Keep an eye out for a flicker in the sky, it'll be my vessel. I'll skim the water and pick you up.”

“Are you sure? What if the Spec-ops are still there?”

“If I'm not back by the time the sun reaches its zenith, you head for dry land. Hide if anyone else passes.”

Abby didn't like his plan, based on the way her brow furrowed. He didn't like it either, but this was the safest option he could conceive of. He passed Abby their bags. She used the snakeskin tube like a floatation device.

“Take my knife. Caution, it's very sharp.”

“I've seen.” Abby nodded to the snakeskin wearing a grimace as she took the blade.

He started swimming toward one of the sea cows at the edge of the pod to enact the second part of his plan.

“Ash,” Abby said, concern lacing her voice.

“Yes.”

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“Be safe.” Her chin quivered.

Abby’s concern pulled at him. He nodded then dove beneath the water before he changed his mind. He grasped the sea cow’s flippers. With gentle but firm insistence, he urged the manatee up river. He was grateful the gentle giant didn’t balk too much.

Thank you for being my cover. He chuckled to himself as he swam. The sea cow probably never moved so fast in its life. I’m sorry, my blubbery friend, but you would make a horrible manx. The mental image was amusing.

They were nowhere near the landing site, when he was forced to stop. There was a line of boats blocking the river. These weren’t like the few fishing vessels he avoided on his swim here. These were occupied with dark-uniformed human warriors.

Ashtoret rolled beneath his water steed, hiding himself from the human’s view, then urged the sea cow deeper, maneuvering her beneath the boats. When they surfaced on the other side, he let the beast drift closer to the shore and move at a more natural speed. Occasionally he ventured to peer out of the water as they passed boat after boat. He grimaced when he sighted several odd craft with whipping blades circling in the sky overhead.

This is not good. They’ve quarantined the area.

He reached the site of his cruiser and things were as grim as expected. Two large vessels were hauling a massive object out of the river. He didn’t need to see beneath the tarps to know it was his cruiser.

Son of a metcor! Aculus is going to be pissed.

There was no way he could get to the cruiser hatch without being seen. This was an utter failure. Dejected, he submerged with the manatee and slowly worked his way back down the river.

Abby

“Your whiskers tickle, you greedy fatso,” Abby wanly chuckled as the manatee took the bunch of grass from her hand and lazily chomped.

She started feeding the sea cows when they tried to meander off. Her ploy worked, and now she just had to keep from getting crushed by the floating behemoths.

Where are you, Ash? She again glanced nervously at the sun’s position in the sky, while absentmindedly feeding another gaping gray mouth. Ash said to get to dry land, but it seemed wrong to leave. And what exactly do you think you’re going to do if he’s captured? Waltz onto the base and demand to see your father and the aliens they apprehended? Yeah, that’ll go over well.

But what was she going to do? The government could easily make everyone disappear, like they never existed.

No, no, no, don’t think that way. Ash is fine. Everyone is going to be fine.

It was strange how quickly she connected with Ash. She was responsible for him, and dependent on him all at the same time. It felt like they were the only two sane people and the rest of the world was out to get them.

Please, Ash, don’t get captured. She blinked back the tears trying to form.

“Peanut, we need to get out of here.”

Abby almost screamed hearing Ash’s voice behind her. She spun around.

“Don’t do that!”

“I’m sorry.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when she tackled him with a giant relieved hug.

“I thought they caught you for sure.” Her heart raced a million miles a minute.

“No, but we need to leave this area.”

“What happened?” she asked as they waded away from their blubbery friends.

“Your warriors captured my cruiser. They were dragging it out of the water. There were a lot of boats and vessels in the sky. We need to find cover.”

“Oh, no.” Her heart sank. “Okay. The islands where we spent the night were pretty dense. But what then? We can’t hide forever.”

“I don’t know,” Ash growled. “You need to eat and get dry. This has turned into a disaster.”

Her eyes widened at his angry reply.

“I’m sorry about your friend and ship, and I’m sorry you’re now saddled with me.” She frowned.



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“You’re not a burden,” he insisted, looking remorseful for having lost his temper.

“It’s okay. I understand.” She tried to smile to let him know she truly meant what she said. Ash had every right to be frustrated, he was screwed.

Ash was just being kind when he said she wasn’t a burden. There was a long list that said otherwise. She’d been so worried about ditching him earlier. She thought because Ash was an alien on her planet, he might need her. But that was foolish. He was infinitely more capable than she was. He probably would’ve been able to get to his ship last night if she wasn’t hanging around his neck. Even something as simple as talking to her was a chore. Every time he spoke, he had to lift his wrist out of the water, just so she could hear the translated words.

She grew quiet as she swam beside him. Ash was twice as wary as before. Whenever he heard a boat or helicopter coming, he swiftly tugged her against him and ducked beneath the water. It wouldn’t have been that bad, if Ash’s sense of hearing wasn’t so much better than hers, and she had forewarning. But she wasn’t about to complain.

She was physically and mentally tired by the time they finally left the river.

“This looks like it connects to the main land,” he commented as they waded on ashore.

Abby looked around to get her bearings.

“I think you’re right. That looks like the causeway over there.” She pointed to the area half a mile downstream.

Ash held back branches as they hunted for a spot to settle in, making sure they didn't slap her. Except the undergrowth was so dense, a broken limb still managed to scrape across her bare thigh.

"Ow dammit," she mumbled.

Ash spun and looked down at the red swath across her leg. She was almost used to prancing around in her skivvies, but now wanted to cover herself with the way he stared at her. Ash's brow furrowed as he reached toward the welt.

"It's fine." She attempted a smile, and they continued hiking.

Abby felt silly for making a peep as she studied Ash's muscular back. Among the swirling black tattoos there were numerous scars. She doubted he even noticed when he earned half those marks, just like he shrugged off the wound on his bicep and thigh.

The man said he was in a war, for God's sake. He's a living, breathing gladiator.

"How about here?" she asked, after Ash bypassed a few places that looked good.

"No, we'd be visible from overhead." He looked up through the break in the trees.

"Oh, okay. You're right."

She clamped her mouth shut, trying not to become disenchanted as her feelings of being a giant helpless anchor magnified.

Ash paused, looked around, then nodded at a tiny clearing. Abby grabbed a large branch and started tugging it out of their way.

“I’ll get that.” Ash took hold of the limb, like it was a mere twig, and tossed it into the undergrowth.

“Okay. I’ll hang up our clothes, so they’ll finish drying.” She picked up the snakeskin bag and started tugging at the knot. “Dammit.” It refused to give.

“Here.” Ash held out his hand.

“No! I got this,” she snapped.

She fought with the knot some more, wanting to scream in frustration. It was the stupid straw that broke the camel’s back. It didn’t help Ash was staring at her. Abby threw the snakeskin onto the ground, as angry tears started to leak from her eyes. She spun, facing away, so Ash didn’t see her cry.

“Peanut?” he said in confusion and concern.

She shook her head frantically. If Ash did or said one more sweet, considerate thing for the damsel in distress, she was going to lose it entirely. She swiped at the tears streaming from her eyes, but they kept coming.

“Peanut,” Ash said softer. He put a large palm on her shoulder and gently urged her to turn.

“I can’t, Ash.” She shrugged him off. “I’m having a little moment here, but I’ll get over it.”

“I am sorry I was curt with you,” he rumbled deeply and the words translated where his hand hovered by her shoulder.

“Don’t apologize. Please!” Abby spun and looked up at his face framed by his

disheveled silver hair. His expression was remorseful, making her feel even worse. “I’m not upset with you. I’m upset at me. My people are a bunch of assholes. They took your friend. They’ve got my dad. They stole your ship, and shot at us.” She weepily gestured with fluttering hands at the injuries he sustained. “And now we’re hiding out naked, and I can barely stay alive, let alone help you with a damn thing. You have enough to worry about. I know you said I’m not a burden, but that’s bullshit, I am. All of this is.” She waved at the world at large.

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She couldn't evade Ash when he ensnared her in his steely arms and pulled her against his chest, but she didn't fight either. He hunkered down on the ground, cradling her in his lap.

"Much has happened, Peanut," he crooned, his chest vibrating.

"The last thing you need is me being a wreck," she hiccupped, while snuggling into his warm, comforting body.

"I have only met a few human females, but one thing that amazes me is your strength."

"Ha!"

"It is true," he sternly insisted. "I sometimes wish Cadi could cry and get things out."

Ash tilted her chin up, forcing her to look at him, when she just wanted to hide. His ebony eyes were filled with sincerity. He cupped her cheeks and wiped away her tears with his thumbs.

"Ash." The gesture made her tear up more.

"I have witnessed many horrors and lost many friends. As a young warrior I learned to harden myself to it and go on to fight another day. But now that we have peace, it angers me how we all were. Perhaps if we allowed ourselves to feel the depth of our loss, let it wash over us, maybe we wouldn't have been so cavalier about going into battle, and the war would've ended sooner. You human females, as fragile as you are,

have strengths that astound me. How such a dichotomy can dwell in the same place, I will never understand.”

“I’m sorry for everything you went through.” She couldn’t begin to imagine what Ash suffered and didn’t blame him for hardening his heart just to cope. She reached up and caressed Ash’s jaw, feeling the way the stubble tickled her palm. “I will be okay, I promise. Everything is just finally settling in. This is all so crazy, Ash. I’m totally out of my element and freaked out. I wish I was calm and numb and able to help you.”

“You helped us get away last night. Your warriors were so numerous, they would’ve caught me if you didn’t rescue me.” Ash hugged her tighter against his chest.

“That was a coincidence,” she snorted.

“Much in life is, and it’s only those who think fast who succeed and survive. You are the only one I know here. There is no one who will trust and understand I mean no ill will like you. You know this place and the people better than I ever will. Do not underestimate yourself. I am honored to have such a partner.”

“Thanks. You’re really good at giving pep talks.” Abby smiled up at him, and Ash grinned back.

“Let’s hang up our clothes so they dry by nightfall.” Ash snagged the snakeskin bag and untied the knot. “Now, female, go make yourself useful.” He nudged her off his lap with playful wink.

“Do you think you could reach in and pull them out? That bag is kind of gross.” She fluttered her lashes innocently.

“Of course.” Ash grabbed for the bag.

“Just kidding. Sucker!” Abby snatched it back with a giggle. She might have been squeamish about the makeshift bag at first but had gotten over it.

“This is that contrary part, eh?”

She nodded emphatically and chuckled as she rose on her tiptoes to hang his cargo pants on a branch. She bent and fished her jeans out of the snake, glad the scales were on the inside rather than the fleshy bit. Her clothes already reeked of river water without adding snake guts.

Talking with Ash really had helped pull her back from the edge. Now that she had her melt down, it was time to discuss their next move.

Dust yourself off and get back on that horse, Peanut, she heard her father say.

Ash silently sat, likely debating what they needed to do. Abby glanced over her shoulder and a blush instantly heated her cheeks seeing what Ash was preoccupied with. His dark gaze was riveted to her lacy panties. No doubt she’d been giving him quite a show bending over and stretching upward. She wanted to groan. Next to Ash, with his ripped abs, corded arms, and an ass she could bounce quarters off of, she was a bunch of pudge.

I sooo need to start working out.

“So,” she cleared her throat, before turning around. “I was thinking our priorities are to find food and better shelter, like you said.” Her stomach growled at the thought of food. Thankfully she’d accidentally sucked down enough river water to keep from being dehydrated. “Then if I can reach my mom, she has the number for my dad’s good friend on the force, Frank. Too bad my damn cell got wet,” she grumbled.

“Frank!” Ash perked up. “I believe that was the person Brennan was talking to before

the warriors ambushed us.”

“Seriously? Did you hear what they said?”

“No. But I got the impression this Frank warned your sire that something was going on, because Brennan told us we needed to leave right afterward. Unfortunately, the warning came too late.” Ash scowled as he recalled the event.

“Then I’d say he’s our best man on the inside.” Of course, that still didn’t guarantee Ash’s safety. “Have you tried to contact your people again?”

“While we were walking here.” He nodded. “Something must be interfering with the signal.”



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“That’s not good.” She worried her lip.

“Come here, Peanut, your skin has those little bumps you get when you are cold.”

Ash tugged her down onto his lap and wrapped his warm arms around her. She instantly relaxed into his warm embrace.

“Thanks, Ash. Your name fits, cause you are hot.” She had to keep from snickering at her innuendo.

Ash leaned in and placed his lips next to her ear. “I have heard this word before from you human females,” he informed her.

Her eyes widened. Although the translator didn’t convey every subtle intonation in his voice, the sultry way he growled into her ear spoke volumes. She hadn’t expected Ash to understand what she’d been implying.

Ash exhaled, letting out a subtle growl. His breath skated across the crook of her neck, his warm lips ghosting over her skin. A shiver worked all the way down her spine, and her nipples tingled, beading up to tight points that scraped against her lacy bra. Ash’s large palm spanned her entire stomach and she felt positively small in his embrace. One long finger leisurely traced her ribs, coming perilously close the underside of her breast. His other hand cupped her bent knees. Images of Ash urging her legs apart and running his capable fingers down the inside of her thighs, mixed with the tantalizing memory of his intoxicating kiss. Her breath sped up as she silently willed Ash to do more, foolish as it was.

Ashtoret de Origa

The swell of Abby's creamy breasts tempted him as he stared over her shoulder. He liked the way her pale skin contrasted with his own. She was also softer. So smooth. His gaze traveled lower to the scrap of fabric covering her lush hips. The sheer material barely hid the mound at the junction of her thighs. He fixated on the patch of ruddy hair covering her sex. The hair on a Cadi female wasn't nearly as thick, so they let it go. But Abby obviously tamed the little curly tuft into a neat stripe. It took everything in his power to keep his shaft from standing at attention as he imagined where the strip led. Abby would surely notice that while he held her to keep away the chill.

Act like you have some honor.

But despite his best intentions, his fingers moved of their own accord over her soft skin. She smelled so good. He salivated as his mouth parted, instinct demanding he sink his teeth into her neck.

Ashtoret's eyes widened and he paused. He tasted the conjugo serum filling his mouth, lacing his saliva with its spicy pheromone. There was no ignoring it, not this time. He knew he was attracted to Abby, but this meant more than that. If he acted on the things he was feeling, Abby would be his. As much as the notion appealed to him, she was vulnerable. Too much had happened to her. He wouldn't thrust this onto her on top of everything else. Not here in the woods, while the human warriors pursued them. Abby deserved better.

"What do you have in here?" He grabbed Abby's little shoulder bag to distract himself.

"Oh, um, a variety of things."

He ignored how breathy her voice sounded, unzipped the toothy metal clasp and peered inside the bag. There were half a dozen confusing little trinkets inside.

“What’s this?” He pulled out a black shiny tube.

“A word of advice, never go digging around in a woman’s purse.”

“Is this another one of your pieces of sage wisdom about human females?”

“Yep. That’s lipstick. It’s for decorating my lips.”

Abby pulled off the cap and applied a smear of red to her lips. He liked her lips just fine as they were, but now they did have an enticing glossy appearance, bringing his thoughts back around to other undoubtedly glossy pink lips.

“And these?” He quickly pulled out two green metallic packages, while beating back wayward salacious thoughts.

“Oh, I forgot the granola bars I shoved in there.” She snagged one, tore it open and shoved the brown square toward his mouth.

“Mmmm.” He nodded in appreciation after taking a bite of the crunchy sweet wafer.

“Eat the rest,” Abby insisted as she opened the other package and nibbled on it.

“See, you provided food,” he encouraged, alluding to their earlier conversation.

“It’s not much. But beggars can’t be choosers.” She smiled.

“Indeed. If I wasn’t worried about attracting attention with a fire, I’d hunt something.”

“And if I knew anything about plants I could probably find us some wild munchies. Oh well, this will have to tide us over.” She offered the other half of her snack to him.

“No, you finish it, Peanut.”

“This is a peanut.” Abby pointed to an oval nut in the bar with a giggle.

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“Looks about right. It’s tiny just like you, so eat it up.” He grinned at her.

“You’re huge, you need the calories. Meanwhile, I’ve got a nice layer stored up. I could live out here for weeks.” Abby squeezed her thigh.

“I have heard you human females complain about this,” he scoffed. “A Cadi warrior likes a curvy female. Our females have them, but yours are exceptional.”

“That’s a nice way of putting it.” She glanced back at him, her eyes making an exaggerated roll.

His brow rose in censure at Abby’s self-deprecating response. How was it possible she didn’t know how gorgeous and exotic she was?

“It is very attractive and supremely feminine,” he husked near her ear. “Add your small size, and it’s enough to incite a warrior’s need to protect.” And do other things that such luscious curves would allow for, but he didn’t mention that.

“Oh.”

Abby’s cheeks flushed a lovely pink color before she turned her face away. He could see over her shoulder that the color extended down her chest. It drew his attention to her stiff nipples, barely hidden by the sheer garment that cupped her breasts.

“What’s this colorful packet?” He changed the subject before he dwelt too long on mounting her.

“Oh my god.” She grabbed the wrapped tube and shoved it back into her little bag. “That’s something just for ladies and I’m not explaining it,” Abby snorted, turning redder than she already was.

“Fine,” he chuckled at her embarrassed response. “What’s this little carrier, or is it also private?” he teased as he held up a squat leather cube with a silver clasp.

“No, smart Alec. That’s my wallet. The cards inside access money and identify me. There may even be some cash in there.”

“Ah yes. Credits are good to have.”

He pulled a slip of paper out of the wallet and studied it. The water had smeared some of the colors, but it was clearly an image of Abby, Providence and their sisters. There were two little young standing in front of the females, and a triangular tree with lights in the background. He grinned seeing the happy smiles they all wore, each holding a toy.

“I forgot about that.” Abby took the picture and smiled wistfully. Pain filled Ashtoret’s chest as he watched tears well up in her eyes and spill onto her long lashes. She quickly dashed away her tears and her smile returned. “You recognize Pro. Well that’s my sister Hope, the brat, April, the nerd, and Beth with her two boys. Jake and Jonathan decided since we were girls we needed princess dolls for Christmas. They were so excited to find ones that matched us. See how mine has frizzy red hair,” she snorted while tugging at one of her curly locks.

“The little males look very proud.”

“Yeah. They’re good little guys. How Hope ended up blonde, I’ll never know. Pro thinks I was adopted, but clearly that was Hope.” Abby caressed the image with her thumb. “Tell me, Ash, is Pro doing all right?”

“She is. I think her only concern is for her family. Would you like to hear the whole story?”

He might not succeed at anything else on this mission, but this was one thing he could accomplish, and they had more than enough time for him to relay everything that would hopefully mend Abby’s heart.

“Yes, please.”

“Just after our Daimio, Kagan quo Rordan, defeated Vigdis, unifying our world, the Jurou Biljana merchants returned. We learned those reptiles were the ones who sold Vigdis a weapon that killed a whole city.”

“Holy shit!”

“Yes, it was...” He shook his head at the terrible memory. “They are also slavers, and the reason we are here to protect your planet. They returned to Cadi to sell us Toufik slaves and other goods, but we were on to their ways. They were just waiting for the right time to pluck us like they will Earth.”

“Thank you for trying to come help us.” Abby placed her hand on his and squeezed.

“You are welcome.” He smiled back.

“Sorry to interrupt again, but who are the Toofeeek?”

“They are a hairy race who speak with their hands. They used to be slaves on Cadi. In the final battle, another human, Gisselle, Kagan’s mate, convinced the Toufik to fight. Up to that point we assumed they were a gentle species. We were so very wrong. They can be vicious, but never fought because being enslaved on Cadi was better than returning to their dying world.”

Abby sat listening with her mouth agape.

“On one of the Jurou Biljana ships, Dagaa found more than just Toufik.”

“He found Pro.”



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He nodded. “She’d was taken from your world by the Miran Sona. They are the benign species who are trying to save other species at risk.”

“That’s all well and good, but that sucks balls.” Abby scowled, wrinkling up her nose.

He burst into laughter at her colorful retort.

“It does suck balls,” he agreed when he calmed. “Even some of the Miran Sona aren’t amused with their people’s methods. Their ship was attacked, and your sister sacrificed herself to save the other humans, before they were discovered.”

“That sounds like Pro, too brave for her own damn good.” Abby shook her head. He decided not to mention Providence was found with stun burns all over her body.

“Providence killed a few of the reptiles, but they still captured her. And we found her along with the Toufik brought to Cadi. We then banned the Jurou Biljana from our planet but have been plagued by them ever since.”

“Good riddance to bad rubbish. You said Pro is married and has a baby coming?” Abby excitedly asked.

“Yes. That was an amusing event. Two warriors, Dagaa and Madhava, stepped forward to be Providence’s protectors. But our Daimio failed to name who would be Prime or Second. Your sister refused to choose who she wanted as her Prime and the males fought over the right.”

“Wait! You forced my sister to marry someone?” Abby’s cheeks suddenly turned red, and she looked livid.

“No, no, no. Let me explain.” He held up his hand to halt the impending tirade. “A Cadi female has her family until she chooses a mate, who becomes her Prime. Because of the war, it became tradition for a warrior to choose a Second who would take care of his family, should he die, which sadly happened a lot. If a female loses her family she takes a Prime and a Second, but not necessarily as her mate, but as a protector.”

“Okay.” Abby calmed. “But that still sounds odd. I’m sure Pro rebelled against the notion she needed a protector. She’s pretty independent and a badass.”

“Oh, she wasn’t pleased at all. Rather than accept it, Providence and Giselle found a crack in our laws. When Dagaa and Madhava challenged each other in a formal competition, she entered as well. Since no Cadi female has ever wanted to compete, we didn’t have a rule that said she couldn’t.” He laughed at the memory. “You human females are so precocious. Providence and Giselle manipulated Kagan into choosing events she was good at, knowing the Daimio wouldn’t want his friends to fight hand to hand combat.”

“Oh yeah, that’s Pro, challenging the status quo,” Abby snickered.

“Well, Providence won the position of Prime, another first on Cadi.”

“I’m not surprised. Pro has always been competitive.”

“That is true, but your sister didn’t compete to win. She didn’t want Dagaa and Madhava to ruin their friendship because of her.”

“She never feared a battle, but she’s always been a good peacemaker. Pro was really

good at separating Hope and I when we were young.” Abby nodded, her eyes tearing up again. “So, who did she marry?”

“She mated both her Seconds.”

Abby’s eyes flew open. “She what?”

“It is not entirely common, we warriors can be rather jealous where our females are concerned, but it happens.”

“Way to go Pro. My sister has a harem,” Abby chanted with an ornery giddy giggle. “I sooo can’t wait to tell my sisters, and Dad’s going to shit himself.”

Ashtoret laughed at how Abby vibrated with excitement as they shared stories, passing the time till it grew dark. There was a time when he worried he’d never have anything in common with a female, being a warrior and pilot. But the human females were far from shy and reserved. Abby’s candid responses, unusual phrases, and questions kept him amused.

### 5 Dry Land

Abby

“It’s so good to put on dry clothes.” Abby pulled her stiff t-shirt over her head, giving it a sniff in the process. Not too dank.

“With how warm it is, I’m surprised they took so long to dry,” Ash commented as he wrapped his wayward tail around his waist and pulled on his cargo pants.

“The humidity’s to blame. You can tell how much moisture is in the air by how curly my hair is. It’s like a living barometer.” She shook the mass of tangled ringlets atop her head. She wasn’t shocked when a twig and several leaves came tumbling out.

“I like how much variety your people possess. Most Cadi have black straight hair. Anything else is considered a flaw.”

“So, did you dye your hair silver?” She gestured to Ash’s shoulder-length locks.

“No, this is my natural color. I used to get ridiculed when I was young, so I dyed it black. But with you humans and your variety coming to our world, I decided it was time to stop hiding it.”

“Good for you. Fitting in is overrated. Besides, it looks great with your red skin, and gives you an ethereal quality.” She admired Ash. It was a real shame he felt the need to change it.

I guess every culture has their critical assholes.

“Acceptance is the new cool thing. Did I say that right?”

“Yeah,” she laughed, and Ash grinned at her.

“Let’s get going.”

She walked behind Ash as they made their way toward the mainland. Clothed or mostly nude, the man had some savage finesse. She admired the swagger of his tight ass, and the way his broad shoulders pushed through the brush.

Yes, I will have seconds and thirds. She grinned then shook her head at her crazy thoughts. The man was an alien. She refused to date guys if they got lit all the time or didn’t take things seriously. Yet here she was swooning over a foreign guy. Real foreign.

But the view was nice, and she was in a far better mood than when they trekked into the dense brush. Chatting with Ash put her at ease, although now that they were heading toward civilization again, she was becoming nervous. Hiding out like Jane and Tarzan was almost preferable to what they were about to face.

The pair stuck to the brush for as long as possible, following the causeway. Eventually, though, they were forced to emerge. It had to be past eight, but it was still light enough to see.

“Just a minute. Ash, look at me.”

Ash stopped and bent over so she could reach him. She adjusted the hood of his sweatshirt, pulling some of his bangs down to obscure his face.

“Better?” he asked.

“It’ll have to work. Try to keep your head down and hide your hands in the front pocket. Let me do the talking.”

“Agreed.”

“There’s gotta be a pharmacy or something a few blocks up this way. I’ll get us some supplies and try to reach my mom.”

Ash nodded, and they headed down the sidewalk. The closer they got to the main strip, the more people they passed. She couldn’t help tensing up each time someone gaped at Ash’s immense height. He played his part well, pretending to admire something in the opposite direction, so no one saw his face. Abby felt a hand on her shoulder after passing yet another group.

“What’s up?”

“I did not realize that your people also come in very dark skin tones. June is light brown, but I assumed that was the extent of your variations.” He glanced back at the people continuing down the sidewalk.

“June’s the engineer you mentioned.”

“Yes.”

“We range from pasty white like me to very dark. It depends on where your ancestors are from. But you won’t find vibrant colors like blue and green. If someone’s as red as you, it’s probably a sun burn.”

“Ah.”

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His curiosity satisfied, they moved on, till a gas station came into view. She glanced up and down the block, but nothing else stood out that was close. If they were further north, there'd be more options. Then again, there'd also be more people. She studied the cars in the lot. None of them were obviously cops or military, so they ventured forward.

“How about you wait around back, while I grab us a few things.”

Ash nodded and headed around the side of the building, avoiding the security lights. There was an ATM inside, so she pulled out as much cash as she could, then walked the aisles, grabbing anything that captured her attention. She would've liked to go to a fast food joint, but there weren't any nearby.

As large as Ash is, I better get several packets of beef jerky. That man probably eats meat by the truckload.

She frowned as she stared at the shitty selection of electronics. They had chargers, cards for minutes, but no cheap phones. Apparently, that was too much to ask for.

What do you expect? It's a damn gas station. Argh, she grumbled and headed toward the register, grabbing a couple bananas on the way.

I really hope Ash isn't allergic to anything. She looked down at all the items spilling from her arms; pretzels, popcorn, water, beef jerky and bruised fruit. She really wanted a pizza, or maybe a steak, salad and baked potato with all the fixings. Holy Jesus, I'm hungry!

“You want a bag?” the cashier asked, while smacking her gum.

As apathetic as the chick acted, Abby was surprised she bothered to ask. But she wasn’t surprised when the six bottles of water were dropped in on top of the pretzels.

Fuck it, crumbs eat the same.

“Hey, do you think I could possibly use the phone?” She pointed at the one behind the counter.

“Not allowed. Next.” The chick turned to the next customer in line.

“Awesome. Thanks,” she retorted under her breath on the way out the door.

Abby rounded the corner of the store and instantly started to panic. Ash was gone.

Shit! I knew this was going to happen.

“What the fuck’s your problem?” a guy down the alley barked.

She looked up in time to see Ash shove past the guy and through the rear door of a neighboring building.

“Fuck!” Abby raced down the alley. She stopped abruptly when she got close enough to see the disgruntled guy was wearing a gold banana hammock. She shook herself loose of the horrific sight and looked up at his pissed face. “Sorry. My friend’s not from around here.”

“The main entrance is up front.” The guy flicked his cigarette.

“I’m just going to retrieve him.”



Abby brushed past the disturbingly oily guy, before he could object and slam the door in her face. She took two steps inside and came to a halt.

“Honest to Pete,” she quoted her nana with a snort when she saw what was happening onstage in the middle of the club.

Some guy in a G-string was jiggling his ass, while throngs of women giggled and squealed. His pelvic thrusts flopped his junk around, and she was certain she was about to get more of a show than she really desired.

It looks like ladies’ night at the strip club.

Thankfully, Ash stood frozen several feet in front of her. She grabbed his arm and Ash looked down at her with the most perplexed expression she’d ever seen. She burst into laughter as she tugged him to a dark corner near the back door.

“Why’d you take off?” She had a hard time talking over “Hot in Here” which was blaring through the sound system.

Ash put his wrist closer to her ear. “I heard several females screaming when that naked male exited the building.”

Aw, he thought he was going to help.

“That was sweet, Ash, but no one’s in trouble here.”

“Cadi females don’t do this,” he commented while still staring at the spectacle.

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“See that chick with the white thing on her head? She’s getting married soon.”

“To the male dancing?”

“No,” she giggled.

Ash’s eyes swung toward her. “No warrior would let his bonded be seduced like this.”

“Well, I guess some women are turned on by this, but mostly it’s just a funny way to embarrass the bride.”

Abby didn’t need a translation for Ash’s sanctimonious grunt. She had to agree, this wasn’t her idea of a good time either, but as she looked around, the strip club started to look better and better. She quickly maneuvered Ash to the nearby dimly lit booth and tucked her shopping bag between them.

“Why are we staying here?” Ash scowled, glancing from her to the stripper on stage, then back again.

She shook her head at the implication she wanted to watch the show.

“No one’s going to pay attention to us here. And I never got a chance to use the phone at the gas station, so I’m hoping someone here will let me.”

Abruptly, Ash leaned back in the seat, obscuring himself in the shadow. All she could really make out was the reflection of the stage lights in his dark eyes.

“My name’s Natalie. Can I get you two something?” a waitress asked.

She turned to see a short brunette in a skimpy outfit carrying a tray. Her breasts were pushed up high in a bustier, and her make-up was layered on thick, but she had a genuine smile.

“Two waters, and two jack and Cokes,” Abby spoke over the music. “Do you have any food here?”

“Mostly appetizers, like loaded fries. You want a menu?”

“Yes, I’m starving, but go ahead and bring us two orders of those fries.” Abby smiled when Ash’s stomach rumbled. She had a feeling she could order the entire menu and he’d still be hungry.

“You got it.” Natalie took off, then quickly returned with a menu and the drinks.

Ash sucked down half the glass of water in one gulp then reached for the cocktail. She put her hand on his thick wrist, halting him.

“It has alcohol in it. Do you know what that is?”

Ash nodded, lifted the glass and took a hesitant sip. She saw a brief flash of his fangy smile before he took a larger drink. Apparently, it passed inspection. Abby took a big swig of her drink and sighed as she slumped into the seat. It was strong and good. She really needed a drink, or several, after all the crap they’d been through. She leaned into Ash.

“Can you eat most anything?” She flipped open her menu, and his too for appearances.

Ash nodded again.

The waitress came back around with two plates of fries, and she could barely concentrate to order. The plate of cheesy goodness was calling her name.

“We’ll take two orders of wings, sliders, nachos, and two more of these.” She tapped her glass.

Natalie’s eyes widened.

“He can eat a lot,” she quickly supplied, nodding toward Ash.

The waitress looked at how Ash filled the booth and gave her an exaggerated nod. “Were you planning on opening a tab?”

“Sure.” Abby fished the credit card she usually saved for emergencies from her purse and handed it to Natalie.

“Coming right up.” The brunette smiled, mollified she wasn’t going get stiffed on the bill.

“Oh, hey, Natalie,” she said before the waitress walked off. “Is there a phone I can use? Mine got wet and he forgot his.”

“Not really.”

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Abby noticed the cell sticking out of the pocket of the chick's short shorts.

"You think I can borrow yours? I know it's a lot to ask, but you have my credit card, so you know I'm not going to take off with it." She crossed her fingers and held her breath, while the waitress seemed to debate it."

"Yeah, sure. Here. I'll go get your drinks and come back for it." Natalie unlocked her cell and handed it over.

"Thank you so much. You are a life saver." Abby slid out of the booth. "I'm going to head toward that back hall, so I can hear. Eat, but don't run off again," she admonished Ash.

Abby dialed her mother while heading toward the back of the club.

"Dammit," she cursed when it went straight to voicemail.

She forgot how early her mom went to bed and wasn't about to leave what she had to say in a message. Before she got locked out of the waitress's phone she dialed her sister.

"Come on, Hope, I know it's a weird number but pick up."

"Hello?" Hope answered.

"Thank God! Hey, it's me. My phone got wet and I'm borrowing a stranger's."

“Hey, Peanut, are you coming to visit Nana with us?”

“No, listen up, Hope. We had some visitors yesterday. They had info about Providence. Dad sent me out of the house, but I was like screw that and came back around. Anyway, men in black took Dad and one of the visitors.” She glossed over who the visitors were, not wanting freak Hope out.

“What the hell are you talking about? It sounds like you’re in a bar. Are you drunk?”

“I’m not drunk, Hope,” she hissed into the phone. “I saw the Spec-ops. They shot out Dad’s window when I was driving away with one of the visitors. Dad has been taken and I think Frank is the only one who can help us. Providence is alive, and I need you to stop asking questions and get your ass up here to pick us up.”

“Abby, this isn’t funny. You’re really freaking me out.” There was a tremor in Hope’s voice.

“I know, but please, I’m not joking. I really need you.”

“Okay, I’ll go through Mom’s phone and get Frank’s number. Are you still at the beach?”

“Yeah.”

“It’ll take me a few hours to drive up there.”

“All right. Thank you.” She gave her sister the location of the club then hung up.

Ashtoret de Origa

Ashtoret kept an eye on the corridor Abby disappeared down. He hated not having

eyes on her, particularly with the nude males prancing about attempting to seduce females. He glanced toward the stage and growled under his breath.

What male would let his female take part in this rite?

The human male was currently upside-down gripping the legs of a chair some poor female was sitting in. He was jiggling his tail at the crowd of inebriated females, while shaking his shaft in the seated female's face. Abby insisted the females were fine, and most of them appeared amused, but the one in the chair looked like she wanted to crawl in a hole somewhere.

This was not something he wanted Abby witnessing, however, she was right, it was dark in the pub, and they had food. He repressed another frustrated growl by shoving a handful of the fried sticks into his mouth. By themselves they weren't very flavorful and kind of pasty. But the gooey orange covering, bits of meat, and tangy red sauce added good flavor. It was a welcome relief after going so long without food.

He smiled and relaxed when Abby exited the back hall.

"Did that even make a dent in it?" she asked with an amused snort as she stared at the plates.

He glanced down and realized one platter of the fried sticks was empty. He grinned sheepishly at her from beneath the hood and nodded.

"Sorry." He pushed the other plate toward Abby, glad he hadn't inconsiderately consumed that, too.

"Thanks. My sister is on her way. It'll probably be midnight before she gets here. She'll get us out of town till we can reach Frank and figure a way to get Dad and your friend out of lock-up."

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Abby dug into the fried sticks, drowning them in the red sauce. She moaned and closed her eyes in appreciation. He sat back and watched her eat. It was so silly, but the simple act filled him with satisfaction. When she had a few, she pushed the plate back toward him.

“No, you need to eat more, Peanut,” he rumbled. Abby was way too small to go without food for so long, despite what nonsense she spouted.

“I will.”

Abby held a bite up to his mouth, tempting him. He opened and took the offering. Before her hand could retreat, his tongue swiped at the tangy red sauce on her fingertip. He couldn't help himself.

Her eyelids drifted to half mast, her long lashes fluttering slightly, as a partial smile tipped her lips. The way Abby looked at him roused the primal side he was struggling to hold at bay. It was hard shoving down the growl building in his chest. The food wasn't the only thing that looked good enough to eat. And it certainly didn't help the place reeked of pheromones, the sounds of female gasps and squeals filling the air.

“Here you go.” The server set several platters down on the table.

The rest of their food came at a very opportune moment. He'd been debating doing something very foolish. He sat back and took a giant swig of his beverage, subtly reaching below the table to adjust his painfully hard shaft.

“Thank you, Natalie.” Abby passed the communicator back to the server.



They ate, and people-watched to pass the time. Ashtoret was amused and pleased every time Abby giggled at the foolish gyrating males. She certainly hadn't laughed when she witnessed him in a similar state of undress.

Although she probably would have if you shook your shaft like that. That male should have more self-respect.

He glanced toward another stage to see a female dancing underneath the bright lights, while eager males surrounded the platform. Vintor had supposedly witnessed such a spectacle at the vile auction house, Distraho. But hearing and seeing were two very different things. To say the female was scantily dressed was kind. Her breasts were fully exposed, and the scrap of fabric around her hips was little more than a few-well tied strings. She wore more on her feet than anywhere else. He couldn't fathom how the female could possibly dance wearing the spiky shoes. His eyes widened when she gripped a pole, spun upside-down and splayed her legs.

"Son of a metcor," he murmured in disbelief.

"You thinking what it would be like to practice kissing with her?" Abby asked as she leaned against him.

He let out an incredulous laugh.

"Uh huh. Sure," she replied in disbelief and took another drink of her beverage.

Ashtoret noticed she'd had a few but seemed to be handling them well. He was grateful to have a little alcohol. It helped them both relax. But he was conscious not to drink too much, considering their circumstances.

"Hey, what time is it, Natalie?" Abby asked when their server passed.

“A little after eleven. Can I get you another round?”

“Not at the moment, thanks.”

Abby stiffened as she looked past the brunette’s shoulder. He followed her gaze and saw two males in dark uniform. They reminded him of the human warriors hunting them. The pair walked over to the counter and showed a piece of paper to the server.

“How? The credit card! Oh fuck, you’re an idiot, Abby,” she mumbled. “Ash, we gotta go.”

Abby casually stood and headed for the rear door. He covered her back, casting an occasional glance toward the uniformed males, as she cracked the metal door. Flashing red and blue lights had her instantly closing it.

“We’re surrounded. Shit, shit, shit.”

“You go, and I will make sure they don’t follow you,” he rumbled.

“No.” She shook her head. “If anything, I’m the expendable one.”

He growled at the comment. Ashtoret glanced down the rear hall, wondering if there was another exit. Their waitress Natalie exited a back room, so he urged Abby that way. Quickly but calmly they approached their server.

“I know you don’t know me, but I have a little problem.” Abby crowded into Natalie’s personal space forcing her back into a room.

“Excuse me?” Natalie exclaimed.

He closed the door behind them and glanced around. It looked like a changing room,

with metal cubicles, seats, reflecting glass and racks of bright clothing. There was an exit, but it led to the same road the other one did. Thankfully no one else was in the room.

“Um, Natalie, I need your help,” Abby nervously said.

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Suspicion filled Natalie's eyes as she looked at Abby. It turned to fear as she glanced toward him. He couldn't blame the tiny female, he was a very large male by comparison, and it didn't help he was blocking the door.

"We're not going to hurt you. I promise," Abby quickly added. "I'm trying to keep people from getting hurt. Particularly him."

He couldn't help but smile at the statement. It was endearing that she felt the need to protect him.

No, little peanut, it is my duty to protect you.

"What are you talking about?" Natalie looked very confused. She angled her head trying to get a better glimpse at him. He turned his head so she couldn't see his face.

"We need a way out of here or a place to hide till the cops leave. They're up front and in the alley."

"Crap. You're hiding from the cops. Is that credit card stolen or something?" The waitress scowled at them.

"No, it's fine. There's been a huge misunderstanding. Is there someplace we can hide?" Abby pressed.

"Look, I don't want any trouble." Natalie warily looked at them. She was growing noticeably more agitated by the moment.

He could see Abby was also getting frustrated. He wasn't quite sure how to help her secure the human's assistance. If a fight came knocking on the door he knew how to act, but dealing with frightened human females was not in his repertoire, despite how he attempted to prepare for this mission.

Abby casually walked behind Natalie. His eyes widened when she suddenly grabbed the server. Abby used one hand to muffle Natalie while the other restrained her arms. It was an impressive move.

"Don't fight. I'm not going to hurt you, I just don't want you to scream," Abby said as Natalie struggled to get free. "Ash, take off your sweatshirt."

He tilted his head, questioning if this was wise.

"I know. I know. But I'm betting Natalie, like most our generation, is accepting of the idea that foreigners exist."

If this doesn't convince the female that we're desperate for assistance, nothing will.

He pulled off the hooded sweatshirt, exposing his bare chest, then let his tail uncoil from his waist and drop to the floor, where it flicked back and forth. Natalie instantly went still in Abby's arms. Her eyes were so wide he thought they might fall out of her head.

"Yeah, it's the tail that clenches it, huh?" Abby commented with an amused snort.

Natalie subtly nodded.

"I mean your people no harm," he attempted to reassure Natalie, who was now trembling.

Natalie jumped hearing him growl, as his translated words came from the handheld strapped to his wrist.

“A year ago, my sister was abducted by some bad dudes from the plane she was flying,” Abby spoke into Natalie’s ear. “She was rescued by these guys and is now married to one.” She altered the details a bit, but he wasn’t about to correct her. “Ash came here to protect us from the bad aliens, except our stupid government wants to attack first and ask questions later. Men in black took my dad, Ash’s friend, and shot up my car while chasing us. He’s my only connection to my sister, and our only hope of keeping Earth safe. Do you understand?”

Natalie nodded as she mumbled against Abby’s hand.

“If I let go, promise not to scream.”

Natalie nodded again. Abby slowly lifted her hand, as if ready to replace it if Natalie acted irrationally. The waitress wobbled on her heels as she gaped at him. Abby kindly helped her to a chair before she fell. Natalie stared, opening her mouth several times only to close it again.

“I know it’s a lot to take in and I don’t mean to rush you, but we need a way past those cops,” Abby urged the stunned server.

“This is, um, wow.” Natalie gestured at him.

He kept his distance and his mouth shut to keep from startling her any further.

“Fuck me! The cops probably found my credit card already and are going to search the place any minute.” Abby banged her head on the wall.

“No, I’ll help you.” Natalie got to her feet and slowly approached him, curiously

looking him up and down.

Ashtoret sighed in relief. He smiled at the small female but was careful to keep his fangs hidden, since that unnerved Abby when she first saw them. It was almost like he was taming a skittish manx.

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“I might be able to disguise myself with one of these wigs,” Abby mused out loud.

The door rattled, and the females stilled, horror twisting their faces. He quickly put his shoulder against the door, preventing it from opening.

“Natalie, are you in there? Joe’s looking for you,” another female spoke through the door.

“Don’t come in. I got horribly sick. Stacy, please tell Joe I need to go home,” Natalie hollered.

“Uh, there’s some cops who want to ask about some customers of yours. Some redhead named Abigail Murray and a guy in khakis and a navy hoodie,” Stacy said.

“Doesn’t sound familiar. There was this couple that ordered a bunch of stuff then skipped before I could bring the bill,” Natalie lied. “I was going to tell Joe, then this mess.” Natalie gagged convincingly.

“Thank you,” Abby mouthed the words to Natalie, who nodded.

“Okay, I’ll cover for you.”

“Thanks, Stacy. I’m gonna try to clean the floor in here, then skip.” Natalie turned toward them. “We gotta be quick. Dress in anything that will fit. My car’s parked around the corner, I’ll give you a ride.”

“What about him?” Abby frowned at him, while grabbing a black wig.



Ashtoret wondered the same thing. They could disguise Abby's appearance, but he was going to be a little difficult.

"I have an idea." Natalie's eyes lit up. "Carl's going to be pissed, but he'll get over it." Natalie walked to a locker and pulled out the largest sparkly red gown he'd ever seen.

"That'll probably fit him, but it's sleeveless," Abby giggled.

"Are you laughing at my misfortune?" He cocked one brow at her.

"No. I'm sorry. You'll look lovely in the dress."

Both Abby and Natalie giggled. He smiled back, glad they weren't panicking under the stress. That was the worst thing you could do in a situation like this.

No, my peanut's calm under pressure. He looked at Abby with pride.

"Oh. Here." Natalie pulled out a long-sleeve spotted robe, with furry cuffs and collar. "I can do Ash's make-up while you change."

Ashtoret dutifully grabbed the sparkly red dress, pulled it over his head, then tugged off his boots and breeches. If he understood correctly the oversized dress was worn by a male. Why, he wasn't sure. He was getting his tail situated beneath the sparkly outfit when he glanced up to see Abby in her new outfit. He'd seen her wear next to nothing, but somehow the sleeveless top with ties down the back was very appealing. It pushed her breasts up, making him salivate. And the way the tiny cut-off pants cupped her bottom, had him jealous. He would've loved nothing more than to palm those two creamy globes.

"Ugh, you're a big dude," Natalie declared, capturing his attention as she tried to zip

up the closure at his back. “Forget it, the robe will cover it. Here, Ash.”

He put on the robe, and Natalie ushered him to a chair in front of a reflecting glass.

“Thank you so much. You have no idea how much this means to me,” Abby said as she applied some skin tone to cover the speckles on her nose and cheeks.

“I do. I’m not going to be responsible for letting our people down, because we locked up the ones willing to help us.”

“There are many benign races, and many who aren’t. Until your people are more advanced it’s best to hide you from detection,” he replied.

“Thank you. That translator is crazy.” Natalie admired his handheld. “It really is a shame our government just wants to lump you all together. Now stop fidgeting so I can do your make-up,” she insisted.

Natalie started slathering the cream Abby just used on his face and neck. It felt a lot like when he applied camouflage before battle, but looked much different. He watched as his red skin slowly disappeared. He wasn’t quite sure of its purpose, since it looked just like their skin.

Must be another human female thing.

Abby stepped in front of him, and he was slightly stunned to see the change in her face. The charcoal around her eyes made her blue-green irises more vibrant. And she again wore the red glossy stuff on her full lips. For some reason he wanted to lick it off.

She joined Natalie coating the visible parts of his skin. With the serious expression Abby wore as she concentrated on her work, he couldn’t help making the occasional

silly face. He smiled when she muffled a laugh.

“Stop grinning at me. It’s making your eyes crinkle up.” Abby attempted to put some shimmery charcoal on his eyelids.

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“And now the wig.” Natalie placed a straight blonde wig on his head and adjusted it.

Both females studied their handiwork wearing mixed expressions.

“Ash, you make a horrible drag queen.” Abby shook her head.

He glanced at his reflection and cringed. I do look different. That was the main point.

“What are we going to do about his legs? That robe only comes to his knees. This isn’t going to work,” she lamented, nibbling her lip.

“Yes, it will. From a distance, it’ll look like he’s wearing tinted pantyhose that match the dress.” Natalie grabbed their things and stuffed them into her bag. “My gray Toyota is on the street to the left. We go out and walk straight for it. The cops are looking for a redhead and a guy in a hoodie, not three employees getting off their shift.” Natalie headed for the door.

The female had a point. This was really their best chance.

“All right.” Abby took a deep breath.

“There’s cops to the right,” Natalie whispered as she ventured into the street.

They followed, and he kept his shoulders relaxed while walking slowly.

“Hey!” one of the uniformed warriors hollered and approached them.

He stiffened up, ready to grab Abby and bolt.

“Just hang back,” Natalie said under her breath as she took a few steps toward the male.

They stood just at the edge of the light above the door, so hopefully the male didn’t get a good view of them.

“Have you seen this girl or man in here tonight?” The uniformed male looked toward him and grimaced.

What? You don’t find me beautiful? He repressed the desire to laugh when the male quickly turned his attention back to Natalie. That was an obvious no.

“Nope.” Natalie took the paper and showed it to Abby. “What about you, Stacy?”

“No, sorry,” Abby replied after studying it for a moment.

He also shook his head, and Natalie handed the image back to the male.

“All right. Thanks.”

Before the uniformed male changed his mind, they headed toward Natalie’s vehicle and piled in. He didn’t breathe until the pub was retreating from view.

“We made it,” Natalie trilled.

“Thank God they sent the cops and not Spec-ops,” Abby sighed, warily watching their surroundings from the rear seat.

“Sorry my car is so small,” Natalie commented to him.

“Do not apologize. We appreciate your aid.” He was cramped in the small front seat, but that was hardly a concern.

“Where to? I live in Cocoa West, but can take you anywhere,” Natalie inquired while piloting the vehicle onto a road that stretched over the river.

“Maybe a hotel along 95,” Abby suggested. “I think we need to regroup and figure out what we’re going to do next.” Abby squeezed his shoulder.

He could feel she was shaking. He took Abby’s small hand in his own, hoping to calm her down.

“Agreed.” He nodded. They hadn’t expected the Earth authorities to show up at the pub.

“I think I know of one that doesn’t ask a lot of questions.”

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“Good.” Abby sounded relieved. “I’m pretty sure the Feds found us because I used my credit card. Now I’m glad I had sense enough to pull a bunch of cash out of the ATM.”

“Sorry, that was my fault. I ran the card when your bill reached fifty bucks.” Natalie looked remorseful.

“Don’t. How could you have known big brother was watching me? I didn’t even think they’d go this far. Bastards!” Abby growled.

Ashtoret scowled. Abby was in danger because of him. The reminder soured his stomach and filled him with intense anger not only at himself but at her own authorities.

“Tell me the truth, are we about to be invaded?” Natalie looked at him, wearing a serious expression. He could see the weight of everything was dawning on her.

“Oh, fuck! Natalie, watch the road,” Abby screamed when Natalie accidentally veered toward the oncoming vehicles, their lights blinding him.

Torment, he cursed as he pictured himself dying in the precarious little metal box.

“I’m sorry! This is so fucked up!” Natalie’s voice broke as she veered back into their lane.

“No. You’re not about to be invaded,” he insisted, breathing a sigh of relief when they were out of danger.

“Okay, okay,” Natalie panted, her hands trembling on the wheel that directed the vehicle. “That’s good.” Natalie cast him an unconvincing smile.

Please watch the road, female. He gripped the side of his seat.

“Do you kind of feel like somebody said, ‘Just kidding, the Easter Bunny and Santa are real’?” Abby asked.

“Yeah,” Natalie replied shakily.

“Sorry to pull the rug out from under you.”

“No. It’s better to know.” Natalie nodded resolutely.

“Yeah,” Abby replied with just about as much conviction, which was none, clearly sympathizing with her fellow human.

The trio were silent for the rest of the trip. Natalie pulled up to a long two-story building, with door after door running the length of it.

“Here you are. I will wait till you get a room.”

“Thank you, Natalie. Let me pull our clothes out of your backpack.”

“No, take it, it’s older.”

He watched from the shadows by the vehicle while Abby ran into the building and talked with a male at the counter. It wasn’t long before she came back out wearing a smile, waving a little key.

“Good. You guys be safe,” Natalie said with a hesitant smile.



“My sister’s number is in your phone. You get in a bind, call.”

“All right,” Natalie said as she pulled away.

“It’s not the greatest motel, but I like that we don’t have to go through the lobby,” Abby commented as she led him down the long row of doors, to an unoccupied area near the rear of the inn. “I didn’t see any cameras, paid cash, and signed someone else’s name, so I’m hoping we won’t be located.”

“Smart.” He kept a wary eye out for others, while Abby unlocked the door. “Wait.” He walked in first and swiftly checked the room. Finding no one, he waved Abby in.

“How about you go change out of that god-awful outfit and wash up. Natalie was kind enough to pack more make-up if we need it.” Abby gave him a tired smile, which worried him. She wasn’t used to this high level of persistent stress.

“All right,” he agreed. “You should rest.”

He grabbed the bag, then headed into the small washroom. Before he shut the door, he cast Abby another concerned glance. She stood in the middle of the room looking lost.

### 6 Highway Haven

Abby

Abby nibbled her lip while staring at the hotel phone, debating if it was safe to call Hope. No doubt the Feds located them using her credit card. Who was to say they hadn't tapped her sister's phone, or the whole damn family for that matter?

"Nope, nope." She threw her hands up. "Sorry, Hope. I know you're going to freak out, but I can't risk it." She backed away from the phone like it was going jump out and bite her. "Shit! I hope they don't detain her when she gets to the club. Maybe the cops will be gone already. Please, Hope, just keep driving if you see things are sketchy."

Abby squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated real hard, attempting to send a mental message to Hope. It was incredibly foolish, but aliens were real, why not a little telepathy between sisters?

Her eyes went wide as saucers when the bathroom door flew open and Ash stormed into the room, like a soaking wet rampaging bull. His lips were curled back exposing sharp fangs as a fearsome growl vibrated out. Ash turned left, then right, then stopped dead in his tracks.

"Who were you talking to?" Confusion morphed his face.

She relaxed, realizing what happened. For a moment, she thought they were in danger.

“I was just talking to myself. There’s no one else here.” She put her hand to her chest, willing her heart to stop beating a million miles a minute.

“Oh. Sorry I frightened you.”

Water dripped from Ash’s disheveled silver hair, running down his bare chest. She followed the rivulets over and between his pecs, down to the stacked muscles of his abs, then gaped.

“Um, Ash?”

He was naked as the day he was born. His cock hung heavy between his corded thighs. The man was thick and long, with a broad crown. He was built just like she was familiar with, except his shaft was studded like a tricked-out sex toy. She knew she should look away but couldn’t. She couldn’t even lift her jaw from the floor. Ash’s cock grew stiffer the longer she stared, and her breath burst out in an audible shocked gasp. How could he possibly get any bigger?

“Abigail,” Ash husked her name.

She jerked her gaze to his face. This was the first time he’d said her real name. Despite the sensual velvety deep tone, she also heard the warning in his voice. She was frozen by his penetrating dark eyes. A frisson of nervous desire coursed through her as she realized she was tempting a barely leashed beast by staring.

“Sorry.” She licked her dry lips.

Ash stared at her breasts heaving in the bustier. Her nipples stiffened to hard points under his heated gaze. A subtle growl vibrated in Ash’s throat, growing deeper by the moment. She couldn’t catch her breath. The room felt like it was closing in on them. Ash was so damn imposing and tall. She backed up, attempting to get a grasp on her

wayward emotions.

The slight move broke their feverish standoff. Ash swiftly captured her, his steely arms banding around her as his mouth found hers. The tension that had been building between them exploded. She opened up, reveling in the spicy sweet flavor that burst in her mouth. She shoved her tongue into Ash's mouth, wanting more of the intoxicating treat. Their tongues collided, desperate and hungry.

Her knees gave out and she collapsed onto the edge of the bed. Ash followed her down, their mouths still connected. His hands tangled in her hair as he consumed her lips. For being new to kissing, he learned fast. She reeled at the euphoric tingling sensation that rapidly spread from where their lips meshed, wreaking havoc on all her senses. Her nipples ached and her clit throbbed, all from just one heated kiss. She gripped Ash's broad shoulders, attempting to hold onto a shred of sanity.

Ash released her mouth. "Tell me, no," he growled into her ear.

His mouth enveloped her earlobe and laved it, before moving lower. She took in rapid breaths as he placed open mouth kisses along the curve of her neck. The sensation of his fangs grazing her skin made her shiver. Ash reached the swell of her breasts and paused. He looked up at her with those fathomless ebony eyes, and the desire she saw swimming in their depths promised ecstasy.

"Tell me no," Ash insisted again as he hovered over her breasts.

That would've been the smart thing to do, but she was way past that point. Her back arched, pressing her breast against Ash's waiting mouth. He released a deep rumble of satisfaction as he gripped the bustier and ripped it down the middle. She gasped at the intensity of the impatient act.

Ash wrapped his lips around one turgid peak, his large hand palming the other. Abby

kneaded his muscular shoulders as he laved her nipple. With each pull she felt a responding tug on her clit and her pussy flooded with more moisture. She rubbed her legs together to relieve the building ache. Abby whimpered when Ash released her nipple. He took in several deep huffing breaths as he moved lower, his nose tracing the swell of her stomach, till he reached the waistband of her shorts.

“I want to taste you.” His voice was deep and guttural.

Abby shivered as she reached for the button on her fly. Her fingers fumbled, and Ash had to help her. He quickly had her shorts undone, tugging them down along with her panties. Ash hastily pulled them off her ankles, leaving the strappy borrowed heels she wore. He sat at the end of the bed staring at the view of her naked body. A twinge of embarrassment filled her. She’d never had someone study her with such intensity. She attempted to close her legs, wondering if Ash was reconsidering this or found her lacking in some way.

“No.” Ash pushed her knees wider. She relaxed, realizing he was curious.

Ash grabbed her foot, lifted it to his mouth and kissed the inside of her ankle, then worked his way up her body. She bit her lip when he reached her thighs, knowing how wet she was. He extended one long finger and traced the seam of her pussy.

“You are so pink here.” He teased her moist lips, splaying them to see her hidden flesh. “Look at how wet you are,” Ash groaned in appreciation, as his fingertip rimmed the mouth of her vagina. “What is this little bead of flesh?” Ash asked, his finger grazing her swollen clit.

“My clit.” Abby pulled in a sudden breath, stunned by how sensitive she was.

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“So, it’s true you have a pleasure center outside your body.” He gently rolled her slick clit.

“Yes,” she panted, pleasure arcing up her spine.

It felt like slow motion as Ash leaned forward, his tongue peeked out and circled her swollen nub while he intently watched her reaction. Her hands flew to his head and gripped his silver hair. Ash growled and attacked her clit with increased fervor, licking and sucking. His fingers found her quivering slit and slid in, stretching her inner walls. He pressed deeper, his knuckles grazing her nerve-laden flesh. She shoved her pelvis against Ash’s mouth and questing fingers as the pleasure mounted.

“Ash,” she panted as she started writhing.

He growled in response, sending vibrations through her clit. She cried out and bucked, attempting to flee the chaotic pleasure lashing her. Ash snarled and threw one arm over her waist, pinning her where he wanted her. His fingers thrust and twist, while his tongue rapidly flicked across her heated flesh. Abby mewled, tremors coursing through her, and then she broke. A flood of moisture and spasms erupted in her channel as the orgasm stole over her.

“Abby,” Ash rasped, his voice deep and filled with desire.

She opened her eyes to see him prowling up her body. He was painfully sexy. Oh, those strong arms, broad tattooed shoulders, muscular chest and abs. She bit her lip as she stared at his ribbed cock where it brushed against her thigh. Trepidation and want worked through her at the impressive girth and length aimed for her trembling pussy.

“If I take you, I’m going to make you mine,” Ash rumbled.

He came down on top of Abby, meeting her face to face, his arms braced on either side of her. She could only nod, seeing the savage need swirling in his dark eyes. Ash’s mouth claimed hers in a searing kiss, and she could taste herself on him. He nudged her legs wide, making room for his hips in the cradle of her thighs. Abby wrapped her legs around him, her heels coming to rest on the swell of his tight ass.

The engorged head of Ash’s cock pressed against her entrance, sliding in her moisture, as he attempted to penetrate her. The stretching sensation intensified the more he worked his thick crown into her body. Her pussy spasmed as she tried to accommodate his girth. She gasped into Ash’s mouth and gripped his straining shoulders with clamoring hands when the bulbous tip finally breached her.

A sheen of sweat erupted on her body as Ash pushed deeper. The knots ringing his shaft abraded her sensitive flesh. She tore her mouth from his and released whimpering pants. It was such sweet agony.

“I’m hurting you,” he groaned, his lips nuzzling her ear, while he pulled out slightly.

“No.” She tightened her legs around Ash’s hips, halting his retreat.

Ash kissed her shoulder before attempting to bury any more of his obscene length inside her. She stroked his muscular back, loving the way he trembled beneath her palms. He was just as affected as she was. Ash licked the crook of her neck and she tilted her head, giving him free reign to kiss the sensitive spot that made her shiver.

Her hips shifted, needing Ash to move. That kicked off a series of tremors in her pussy. Ash released a feral sound when she clamped down on the head of his cock. He bit down on her shoulder, his sharp fangs sinking deep, and she cried out. The piercing pain was quickly replaced by a delirious heat that suffused through her body.

Abby arched her back as intense, unadulterated pleasure seized her. Ash's mouth worked on her shoulder and she felt more of the liquid nirvana pump into her. His drugged kiss sent her pussy into uncontrolled spasms.

The beast of a man snarled into her shoulder and thrust hard, his cock impaling her to the hilt. She keened with pleasure and pain, her nails digging into his shoulders. More of the salacious chemical inundated her bloodstream as he began stroking in and out of her slick channel. The knots on his cock lit up her nerve-laden walls.

"Ash," Abby moaned and bucked as the pleasure careened through her.

Each time his crown struck her G-spot, her muscles seized. Over and over, faster and faster he hammered. Her moans, pants and cries mixed with Ash's strained grunts and the sound of slapping flesh. Her fingers and toes curled as the ecstasy swirled and built upon itself. The orgasm struck hard, sending a hailstorm of convulsions ripping through her pussy. Her back bowed off the bed, a broken cry piercing her lips. Ash impaled her deep, erupting with an echoing snarl. Jets of hot seed made her channel clench even tighter, milking his cock.

"You are mine, Abby." Ash collapsed atop her, then rolled to the side, tugging her onto his chest along with the blankets.

Abby smiled blissfully, reveling in his rapid heartbeat, as she drifted into a peaceful deep sleep.

Ashtoret de Origa

Ashtoret awoke feeling the bed move. He smiled seeing Abby's lush creamy body saunter toward the washroom. He loved the way her full hips swayed and her ass bounced as she wandered into the other room.



My mate is gorgeous, he grinned wider as he rolled onto his back, folding his hands beneath his head.

He was glad it wasn't quite light out yet. He was eager to languish in bed with Abby for a few more hours. Last night was better than he ever imagined it would be.

"What are you smiling about?" Abby asked as she emerged from the washroom and climbed onto the bed.

"I think you know." He threw back the covers for her to join him.

Abby glanced at his stiff shaft and grinned. "Oh, I think I can see."

He chuckled at her response and the way she wagged her brows.

Abby crawled toward the pillow. The erotic sight forced a groan past his lips as his inner beast stirred to life. He rose, knelt behind her, and began massaging her creamy ass. She wiggled her butt at him.

"Are you sore?" he asked as he attempted to tamp down on the rising need. He hadn't been as gentle as he should've been with his bonded.

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“No, not really. That bite of yours packs quite a punch.” Abby pushed her bottom back against his squeezing hands.

“That’s because you respond to my conjugo bite, just like I imagined you would,” he replied, pride and lust lacing his voice.

He splayed Abby’s cheeks to reveal her pink center. Ashtoret was amazed to find her glistening and slick with desire again. He always assumed his fellow warriors were exaggerating when they spoke about being able to mount their human mates all night long. But unlike a Cadi female, after just a short rest Abby was ready for him again.

Unbelievable!

He gently ran his finger through the moisture slickening Abby’s cleft. She moaned and rocked back against him when he circled her clit. She not only had the pleasure center on the inside of her tight slick channel, like Cadi females, but also this one on the outside. The bead of flesh was an unexpected treat. It peeked from her pink folds, eager for his attention. Such an easily accessible erogenous zone offered a host of salacious possibilities. He could feast on Abby’s body for hours listening to her moans and cries of pleasure. Just the thought of it had him hard enough he could burst.

“Roll over, female, I’m going to mount your sexy body again,” he rasped.

“No.” Abby glanced over her shoulder at him.

“You deny me?” His brows furrowed, wondering if perhaps he was wrong, and she

wasn't ready for him again. Abby certainly seemed slick enough, and the little mewls she made as he played with her body indicated she was willing.

"No, I'm not denying you." She wiggled her behind, teasing him.

"Then roll over, Abby."

"I want you like this." Abby smiled at him, while she knelt on all fours.

Ashtoret tilted his head as he considered her position. This wasn't one he was familiar with.

"Don't tell me you've never had sex doggy style," Abby giggled as she swayed her ass temptingly.

"It is not something the Cadi do." Perhaps it was their tail that made it difficult, although animals seemed to figure it out. And animalistic certainly described the desire rising in him. "But I'm seeing the potential," he rumbled eagerly.

He gripped Abby's hips, lined up his shaft and shoved forward. She was still tight as a glove, squeezing him with her quivering wet sheath, but this time it was easier to breach her.

"Fuck," Abby shouted the sexy groan as he burrowed deep into her body.

Ashtoret snarled as bliss gripped him. He could go so much deeper like this. He pulled back and thrust again, his hips meeting her full ass.

"Yes, Ash," she called out while tossing her head.

Abby reached back and started playing with her clit as he started pumping his hips in

a steady rhythm. Her channel quaked and spasmed harder around his shaft, making his pace become erratic. He tried to temper his passion for fear of hurting his little human mate, but it was hard; she was so sexy writhing in front of him, her spine arching.

“Harder. Faster, Ash,” Abby panted.

“Mother of Kali,” he groaned in disbelief as he hammered into her.

Abby’s arms gave way and she collapsed on the mattress. He followed her down. His hips curled faster and harder like she demanded. His tight balls slapped against her cleft with every glorious lunge. Abby cried in pleasure, her fingers gripping the covers. Her slick channel convulsed hard around his arousal and he nearly exploded but wanted more.

Ashtoret wedged his hand beneath Abby and found her swollen, pulsing clit. He vigorously rubbed it, eliciting a sweet keening cry from her lips as her body clamped down on his shuttling length. He pushed past her impossibly tight ring of quivering muscles, chasing a glory unlike anything he’d ever experienced.

He salivated, the conjugo serum meant just for her filling his mouth. Ashtoret struck, sinking his fangs into Abby’s shoulder, adding a second claim beside the first. She bucked and shuddered beneath him, chanting his name with ragged delirious cries. Amazingly, the spasms wracking Abby’s sheath deepened as she flooded with more nectar. The far recesses of her channel contracted in pulsing waves, insistently massaging his crown. He roared out his ecstasy as he thrust home. His seed erupted in jets, bathing her quaking womb. Abby’s entire body seized in a paroxysm of pleasure when the chemical in his release hit her bloodstream.

Ashtoret almost collapsed in exhaustion on top of his little mate but caught himself. She got him so worked up he didn’t know which way his tail pointed. He rolled to the

side, taking her with him, his pulsing shaft still buried in her body. As he closed his eyes, the thought of Abby swelling with his young made him smile.

### 7 Truckstop

Abby

A ping awoke her. She blinked and roused as Ash sat up. He grabbed the communicator off the side table and swiped at the screen. An odd deep voice spoke rapidly. Ash's face instantly lit up. For a moment she got excited, thinking it was Vintor, but the speaker sounded nothing like Ash, there were too many odd guttural clicks and rolled R's.

"Aculus, I've been trying to reach you. We've got a problem. Vintor and your cruiser were taken by the human authorities."

The character with the odd voice spoke and Ash's face twisted into a scowl.

"I knew I had the cloaking shield up, but I was starting to doubt. I guess it's a minor relief to know I didn't cause this," Ash sighed. She rubbed his back, feeling some of the tension dissipate. He had been carrying around a terrible burden. "The humans must have a technology we are unaware of surrounding their base. Our tracking signal went offline shortly after we landed," he commented to her then returned his attention back to his fancy phone. "We must be far enough away from their stronghold now, if you're reading me."

Ash listened as his friend spoke and Abby tried to follow along, but it was a little difficult only understanding half the conversation.

"No, it was best the other teams stayed on your cruiser. It was a good call." Ash

nodded. “I need a pick-up. I’ve been evading the human warriors with Providence’s sister. Her father, our contact, was also apprehended.”

What Ash said suddenly struck her. He’s leaving. You knew this was coming. But she didn’t expect it to hurt so much.

“Later, my friend.” Ash smiled at whatever his friend said. “Right now, we need to find a way to retrieve Vintor, wherever the humans have hidden him,” he sobered speaking about his friend. “I’ll find an isolated spot and hail you.”

“I know of a place your friend might be able to land. There’s a campground not far from here, on Lake Poinsett. We can probably hitch a ride at the truck stop,” she offered.

“Did you hear that?” Ash asked his friend. “Good. Once you see my signal, come in and get me.” Ash nodded at whatever Aculus said as the communication cut off.

“I guess we better get ready,” she sighed.

This was a good thing. Ash was going to be safe soon. So why was she so miserable?

Cause you like him—a lot. She frowned. I never should have slept with him. Theirs was an impossible relationship. The amazing night they spent together just made the inevitable all that much harder to face.

Ash picked her up and carried her into the bathroom. She adjusted the shower and they both stepped in. She leaned against Ash’s back as he washed, kissing his tattooed shoulder blade. Her chest was incredibly tight as she fought back the threatening tears.

“You are quiet. Are you feeling okay?” Ash turned around and helped soap up her

body.

“Yeah.”

“That was hardly convincing. Aculus will help. He’s a good male.”

Abby nodded. She smiled as Ash’s tail joined his hands, wrapping around her waist. The tip tickled at the seam of her pussy.

“Ash!” she exclaimed, unable to repress the giggle.

“What? I don’t control what it does.” He held up his hands in mock innocence.

“Uh huh. Rotten beast.” She batted his wayward tail away from her nether region.

He chuckled. The sound made her incredibly happy. Ash had the uncanny ability to turn her mood around in an instant.

So just enjoy this. It’s not goodbye, not yet. Don’t ruin what time you do have.

She committed to memory the way Ash’s hands felt on her body, and the texture of his skin as they finished bathing. It was amusing watching him wrangle his tail, forcing it into his pants. Maybe there was a grain of truth to him not being able to control it. She wondered what he usually wore, doubting it was a pair of khaki fatigues. He made silly faces while she covered his face with foundation to help him blend in. It seemed such a shame to cover his red skin. There was nothing wrong with it. Too soon they had their stuff gathered and were ready to go.

They were about to walk out the door when she glanced at the phone. After Ash’s friend picked him up, she’d need a ride. But that wasn’t the only thing that occurred to her as she considered calling Hope.



“I’m going to call my sister. She can meet us at the campground. Even though your friend is helping you, I still think contacting Frank is a good idea. I bet he has an idea where Vintor and my dad are, since his tracker isn’t working.”

She bit her lip, hoping Ash would agree to let her help him further. This way they’d still be working together. Although she wasn’t sure how she’d reach out to him with the information.

One thing at a time.

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“All right.”

Abby gave him a broad smile, picked up the motel phone and dialed Hope.

“Abby!” Hope picked up on the first ring.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Bloody hell, there were a lot of cops at the club. I looked around for you, but you were gone.”

“Shit, Hope, did anyone harass you?”

“No, I kept my distance. The house is trashed. What the fuck is going on?”

“I already told you. Listen up, I have to make this quick. Meet me where Dad used to drag us kicking and screaming every spring break.”

“Where?” Hope sounded frazzled. She could sympathize.

“You remember. He used to try to convince us it was a suitable vacation spot, but even Mom agreed it wasn’t.”

“Do you mean...”

“Yes. Shut up. Someone might be listening in. Watch your back. I gotta go.” She quickly hung up and turned to Ash. “She’ll be there. Let’s go.”

They walked beside the road, heading toward the truck stop. They made a side trip to a golden arches and she got them breakfast, while Ash waited outside near the dumpster. The kid behind the counter looked at her funny when she ordered half the menu. They ate as they continued toward the truck stop.

“I’ll talk to the truckers, while you hide. Once someone agrees, follow us, and climb into the back of the trailer.” She pointed to the big-rigs.

Ash nodded as they approached the long line of trucks. He ducked between the vehicles while she stood out front, waiting for one of the drivers to leave the building.

“Hey.” She approached a middle-aged guy in a ball cap. “I’m looking for a ride to a campground at Poinsett Lake, but anywhere nearby will do.”

“Sorry, honey, heading the other way.” The guy walked on.

Abby shook her head at Ash, who was waiting in the shadows. She tried a few more times and was turned down. Finally, someone agreed.

“Sure, sweet thing. My rig is over here.”

Of course, the guy who looks like Grizzly Adams agrees. Oh well.

She slowly followed the man, so Ash could follow them to Grizzly Adams’ truck.

“It must be kinda difficult driving such a big vehicle.” She captured the man’s attention, so he faced away from the rear of the trailer. She stood at the front bumper and patted the truck, watching to make sure Ash got in all right.

“I’m used to handling big loads,” the man chuckled as he eyed her up and down.

Oh great. Yeah, real subtle. She repressed an eye roll at the comment. This was the last place she'd be if they weren't desperate.

Abby watched Ash gently shut the door, then gave the trucker her most convincing smile.

“Well, I won't waste your time asking silly questions. I appreciate your help.”

“It's my pleasure.”

It took a bit of effort climbing up into the cab, but she finally managed it. Grizzly Adams started up the truck with a rumble and pulled out on the open road. The lake and campground weren't that far down Ninety-five, but still too far to walk.

“So, what's your name, doll?”

“Rachel,” she lied.

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“Jeff. So, why you heading to the lake?”

“Meeting my family. We like to camp once a year.”

She complained earlier about their camping trips, but as she and her sisters grew up and life got busy, cavorting around the lake with her family were some of her fondest memories.

“That’s real nice.” Grizzly Jeff nodded, as he took the highway off-ramp.

Abby watched the passing scenery. She noticed the sign and recalled the road her Dad usually took.

“Oh, I think that was our turn.” She tapped on the window.

“I know a shortcut.”

She eyed the trucker warily. Grizzly Jeff was still smiling as he stared at the road ahead, but it was definitely creepier than it was moments ago. She knew she was in trouble, when he turned off onto a deserted access road among the trees.

Fuck!

Ashtoret de Origa

The large vehicle stopped, but Ashtoret could still hear the engine rumbling. He waited to make sure they weren’t just halting at an intersection. He heard Abby’s

murmured voice as a door shut. It was faint but there was something about her tone that captured his attention. Every hair on his body stood on end, and an instinctual growl vibrated from his throat. He grabbed his knife and jumped from the storage bay.

“Let go of my hair. Ash!”

Abby’s scream seared through him like a hot brand to bare flesh. He’d been through war and never experienced a seething rage like what boiled in his veins as he raced around the corner. The scene that greeted him was his worst nightmare come to life. The vile male had his mate by the hair and was forcing her to the ground. The look of terror on Abby’s face stilled his blood. He reached her in an instant and grabbed the male by the nape of his neck.

“You dare touch her,” he roared as he ripped the puny piece of shit off Abby and held him aloft, while brandishing his knife.

The male futilely punched him in the face.

“She is not yours to touch.” He bared his fangs and snarled in rage.

The male’s eyes widened with horror as he focused on Ashtoret’s face. The offensive human started to babble incoherent pleading sounds, and a pungent odor rose up. Ashtoret growled again in disgust. The male was brave enough to attack a female, but cowardly soiled himself when his crime was discovered.

“You are the worst kind of filth.” He raised his blade to end the pathetic bastard.

“No, Ash.” Abby gripped his arm.

“He hurt you and has assuredly done this before. The male has earned a swift trip to

Vrag for such a dishonor.”

“Just let him go. We can’t kill somebody,” she pleaded.

He huffed, taking in several breaths as his rational mind returned. Abby was right, ending this male would probably make things more difficult.

“Please,” the bastard choked out, his face bright red and eyes bulging.

Ashtoret snarled in his face, giving the male a rough shake.

“Shut up, asshole. You’re lucky I stopped him from gutting you. Remember that the next time you think about being a raping bastard,” Abby screamed at the male, then headed toward the vehicle cockpit.

“What are you doing?” he asked, wearing an amused smile at how she lit into the pile of filth.

“I’m getting his keys.” Abby climbed into the vehicle and shut it off. “Got’em. Let him go.”

“Run.” He tossed the male and snarled.

The human wisely did as he was told. Ashtoret shook his head in disgust seeing the stain on the retreating male’s breeches as the vile bastard ran down the dirt road. The moment Abby was within reach, he tugged her against him.

“Are you all right? I’m so sorry.” He examined her bare arms, snarling as he noticed the scrapes on her elbows.

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“I’m fine.” Abby wrapped her arms around him.

But she wasn’t fine. Abby trembled, making him want to race after the disgusting male and finish what he started. Instead he picked her up and kissed her full red lips.

Goddess, thank you, he sent up an earnest prayer while clutching her close. He hated thinking what could’ve happened if he hadn’t heard the faint sound of distress. They always said a bonded male’s senses were heightened, but he never fathomed how intense it would be. Everything in him was keenly focused on her.

“Get rid of these.” Abby handed him the jangling metal keys when they finally parted.

“Good riddance to bad rubbish,” he repeated a phrase Abby used and threw the keys as far as he could into the brush. It wasn’t nearly as satisfying as force feeding them to the bastard.

“Which way do we go?”

“Back out on the road, or if we go toward the lake we can follow it to the campground.” She pointed into the trees.

“All right. Hold on.” He shifted Abby to his back. She grasped his neck, her legs encircling his waist, and he started to run.

“Thank you,” Abby repeated as she jostled on his back.



“Always,” he replied past the lump in his throat.

He still wanted to shred something. It infuriated him this happened. It never would’ve if he wasn’t forced to hide instead of sticking by her side. That was no way to guarantee his mate’s safety. If Abby’s sister wasn’t meeting them, he’d stop in the nearest clearing and hail Aculus now.

“You’re growling, handsome. I’m much better now. I was freaked out more than anything.” Abby kissed his neck. “How about I let you kill the next guy that touches me?”

“That is never happening,” he snarled.

“That’s super sweet, and really hot,” Abby purred in a sultry voice, her tongue following the shell of his ear.

He stumbled and came to a stop.

“Abby, unless you want me to mount you here in the forest, you better behave,” he warned over his shoulder.

They needed to get to the campground, but the thought of bending Abby over was beyond tempting. He desperately wanted to eradicate the scent of that bastard that lingered on her. He started running again before he gave in to the notion.

“We get to safety and I’ll lick more than your ear.”

He faltered again and snarled as he recovered. Abby giggled wickedly. She was unrepentant with her teasing.

“I will hold you to that, female.” Ashtoret reached back and gripped her ass while he

ran.

A smile tipped his lips. If she was taunting him, she wasn't too upset. That helped soothe the angry beast inside.

They hit the lake and headed north around the perimeter. He pressed on till they reached the campground with a slew of tents and long boxy vehicles.

"The parking lot is that way."

He kept to the trees as he followed her directions.

"I think that's Hope at the picnic table." Abby pointed to a blonde female, and he let her down.

She was about to leave the brush when a dark vehicle captured his attention.

"Wait." He gestured toward the lot, then noticed another black vehicle parked amidst other colorful vessels.

"Dammit, she was followed," Abby cursed.

"We need to capture her attention without going out in the open."

It was time to get the females away from here and fast. He scanned the campground, trying to determine if there were warriors already hiding in the trees, then sent a one-word message to Aculus, 'now.'

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Abby whistled loud enough for her sister to hear. Hope turned toward the sound. Her head tilted to one side and started walking their direction. He stepped away from Abby, so he didn't scare her sister. He halted when the doors on the black vehicles opened and several uniformed males emerged.

"Come on, Hope," Abby hissed.

Hope peered into the tree line. She looked up at him and her green eyes widened. He really wished he could introduce himself properly, or at least not terrify Abby's sister, but sadly that wasn't possible. Ashtoret gripped Hope's wrist and pulled her into the brush. He wrangled her onto one hip and grabbed Abby with his other arm.

"Hold on," he rumbled and started running.

Hope screeched as she flailed, but he kept a tight grip on her.

"Relax, Hope. Hold onto Ash." Abby gripped Hope's arms on either side of his neck.

He darted between the trees to throw the human warriors off his track, while keeping a steady course toward the clearing he passed a while back. That was the best and most secluded spot for Aculus to land.

"What's going on?" Hope cried. Her knees dug into his sides in a frantic attempt to stay seated on his hip.

"You were followed. We're in danger," Abby informed her. "Shit, Ash, hurry," she urged after glancing behind him.

“Tuck your face against me,” he barked and ran faster.

Either Hope didn’t hear him or was too shocked to comply like Abby did. She cried out when a limb whipped her in the face, making him cringe as he barreled through the growth. Abby stiffened when a twiggy branch also grazed her. It killed him he couldn’t stop to check her over.

He heard the distinct sound of a vessel coming in fast and glanced up. All that was visible of the cloaked cruiser was a slight distortion in the otherwise cloudy blue sky, as Aculus zeroed in on their location.

“Thank Kali.” He ran faster toward the clearing.

“Shit, Ash, they’re still following us,” Abby panicked.

He kept to the tree line and circled the meadow. They were prime targets if they went out in the open.

“Come on,” he growled in frustration, urging Aculus to move faster.

“Abby, please. What’s going on?” Hope cried in terror.

Aculus’ vessel kicked up a long swath of dirt as it skidded to a halt. The human warriors emerged into the field. They aimed their primitive disrupters at the vessel and fired. The metal projectiles ricocheted dangerously in every direction.

How dare they risk my bonded and her sister, Ashtoret snarled in anger as he was forced behind a large tree trunk with his precious burden.

Two males advanced on them, while another two approached the cruiser. They were trying to cut them off from the ship.

“I will distract them. You get to the cruiser,” he told Abby.

“No, they’ll shoot you. You’re pretty fucking awesome, but I know you’re not bulletproof,” she countered.

“What are you talking about? I’m not getting on that thing.” Hope struggled, and he was forced to grip her tighter.

“Stop it, Hope. It’s not like we planned for this shit,” Abby snapped at her frightened sibling.

“I’m going to talk to Vintor about his insistence we not bring disrupters,” Ashtoret rumbled in frustration as the sisters argued while saddled on his hips.

He surveyed the woods around the field, looking for a way to reach the vessel without going through the advancing humans. Things got worse when he heard the recognizable sound of rotary air vehicles approaching.

Hope suddenly screamed in his ear and he cringed. He glanced back at the clearing to see two of the humans laying in the grass. Frantic blasts echoed as the remaining males fired their weapons toward the cruiser. A series of responding flashes came from the cruiser.

“Yes,” Ashtoret bellowed in triumph when the last humans dropped to the ground.

Aculus stepped into view. “What are you waiting for?” he hollered, looking rather proud of himself.

Ashtoret didn’t waste any time racing toward the hatch, clutching both females.

Abby

Almost there. Almost there, Abby chanted as Ash ran toward the teardrop-shaped spaceship. The helicopters were nearly overhead.

“You’ve got impeccable timing, Aculus,” Ash grunted as he pounded up the ramp of the silver craft.

She sighed in relief when they crossed the threshold. The doors instantly slid shut behind them.

“I do, indeed. It looks like you have one female too many, Ashtoret,” Aculus chuckled as he tapped a panel on the wall.

The man had a communicator similar to Ash’s, making it possible for her to understand him, except that wasn’t what drew her attention. Aculus wasn’t Cadi at all. He was a daunting new species, covered from head to toe in armored plates, forming an exoskeleton. Knotty ridges flanked his forearms and calves. They were also in place of eyebrows, haloing shocking red eyes, extending over his bony head.

Her eyes widened when the armored man reached for her.

“I don’t think so,” Ash growled and turned away.

“Very well, I’ll assist the other ivory beauty.” Aculus extricated Hope from Ash’s grasp.

“Abby!” Hope screeched as the bony giant cradled her.

“Hey! What are you doing with my sister? Ash?”

“Slow down, Aculus. Abby’s sister just learned about us. She’s scared and injured. Relax, Peanut. Everything is all right now. I promise.”

“Ah. I see. This must be very disturbing for you. I am very sorry. There is no need to tremble. I would never dare harm such a fine-boned creature. Show me where you’re hurt.” Aculus put one armored finger under Hope’s chin and gently lifted her frightened, pale face. “Your tiny nose is bleeding. Come, I will fix you up.”

It was strange hearing such a harsh looking man croon at her sister.

“Abby?” Hope frantically looked at her.

“It’s okay. Aculus is Ash’s friend,” she encouraged. How good a friend he is, I have no idea, but he just saved our asses.

“Who is Ash?” Hope’s head swiveled toward Ash, her eyes wide as saucers.

“We be the cavalry, ma’am,” Aculus interjected.

Abby gawked at the bony behemoth.

“Providence and my dad say that!” Hope declared then grimaced as her nose started bleeding again.

“We’re friends with your sister, and by the way, you have the same lovely eyes,” Aculus complemented Hope.

“You really do know my sister.” Hope gaped at the armored man. Her chin quivered, and tears started streaming down her cheeks.

“Yes, and she is well. Please don’t do that, ivory beauty. It pains me. We will explain everything while I fix your little nose.” Aculus walked off carrying her sister.

“Uh, Ash. Is he okay?”

“He won’t hurt her, he likes females...all sorts of females.”

“Ash!” She slapped his chest, but the rotten beast just grinned. “You know what I promised earlier, you’re about to lose your privileges. That bony gladiator better not get handsy with my sister.” Aculus was more of a flirt than Ash was.

“That’s terribly disappointing. I guess I’ll have to settle for this tongue-lashing instead,” Ash chuckled as he followed the others.

“I heard that. What the hell have you two been doing?” Hope declared as Aculus set her in a bucket seat.

“Yes, explain slowly and in detail,” Aculus gave a hearty laugh as he fetched a box from a panel in the wall.

Hope snorted at the comment. “Ow.” She cringed again and held her nose.



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“It was funny, but not enough to hurt yourself. Let me see.” Aculus pried Hope’s hand away and dabbed at the injury with some bandages then applied a salve of some sort.

“Mind your own business, Hope.” Abby rolled her eyes. She wasn’t about discuss her sex life with her sister.

She took a moment to look around. They were in an overgrown cockpit with a half-dozen seats, a wide console, and a large screen up front. There were sensors and blinking lights not unlike the aircraft her dad had shown her, but entirely different at the same time. Even the smell was different from what she was familiar with. It all combined to create a surreal experience.

“Show me where the branch scratched you.” Ash helped her into the seat next to Hope.

“I am not lifting my shirt with Don Juan over there,” she informed him.

“Oh, I’m sure Aculus is not paying attention to you.”

He was right. The bony guy was preoccupied showing Hope how the seat harness worked. Abby grinned and lifted her shirt, exposing the minor abrasion. Ash applied some of the salve to her scratch and the redness instantly diminished.

“Thanks, handsome.” She smiled. “That stuff is pretty miraculous. I guess you’re forgiven.”

“I appreciate your help, but what is going on?” Hope asked the guys.

“What is your name?” Aculus inquired.

“Nadzia, but everyone calls her Hope, since that’s what it means,” Abby chimed in.

“Nadzia.” Aculus rolled the name with his unusual voice. “We were saving you from your soldiers.”

“Okay, okay.” Hope’s hand fluttered. “I got that, but how do you know Pro, and why are you here?”

“Calm down and listen up,” Abby began. “Pro was taken by some well-meaning aliens who are making a doomsday colony. Then while she saved other humans, some really bad aliens abducted her again. She was rescued by the Cadi.” She pointed to Ash. “And now she’s married to—wait for it—two hot red dudes.”

“Abigail Murray, you can’t just blurt all that!” Hope screeched.

“It gets better. These guys are here to hide our planet from the real bad aliens. Oh, and Pro is preggers.” She turned to Ash. “You just gotta rip it off like a Band-Aid.”

A twinge of remorse filled her as Hope paled after hearing everything. Her sister closed her eyes and started breathing slowly in through her nose and out her mouth.

“We are docking with my vessel now,” Aculus announced.

“Wow, that was fast.” She stared in shock at the view of space.

“Is that the moon? Are we landing on the moon? I can’t handle this,” Hope said in a panic.

“Shhh, shhh, ivory beauty,” Aculus attempted to soothe Hope as he knelt in front of her. “Would you like to speak to your sister?”

Hope and Abby’s eyes both swung away from the moon and the spaceship they were docking with.

“Pro is on that ship?” Hope asked eagerly, her demeanor brightening.

“No, but I can reach her.”

“I thought that was going to be difficult?” Ash retorted, sounding surprised.

“I have the resources of the Osivoire Nation at my disposal, nothing is too hard.” Aculus shrugged.

“Please.” Hope’s eyes again filled with tears as she nodded.

“Thank you.” Abby started tearing up, too.

“Don’t cry, Peanut.” Ash pulled her out of the seat and swung her into his strong arms.

“It’s just, well, I’d given up hope of ever talking to her again,” Abby hiccupped. “It was nice just knowing she was alive. I never thought I’d actually get to talk to her.”

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“You will talk to her. You will even get to see her.” Ash nuzzled her hair.

“I can walk,” Hope declared when the bony giant also picked her up.

“Nonsense, Nadzia, you were hurt,” the armored man rumbled.

“Oh, do whatever, if I get to talk to Pro,” Hope huffed.

“Whatever?” Aculus’ bony brow rose.

“You know what I meant.” Hope pointed an accusing finger in Aculus’ face.

“Yeah, I think Aculus is smitten with Hope,” she whispered to Ash with a giggle. It was kind of funny how it agitated her sister. At least it got Hope’s mind off how crazy things were.

### 8 Dark Side of the Moon

Abby

“This is so wild.”

Abby held onto Ash and stared out the window as they descended toward the moon’s craggy surface and slipped into the large spaceship. They stepped off the cruiser into a bay the size of a football field, filled with several other similar ships. She stared at the strange equipment, seamless blue walls and radiant light illuminating everything with a soft glow. Never in her wildest dreams did she expect to find herself on the freaking moon in a spaceship.

Or with a horde of aliens!

She gaped at the group of aliens waiting in the loading bay. There were a handful of red, bare-chested Cadi wearing leather kilts, and bony characters, like Aculus. They all were so tall; they made the average human look downright puny. Her gaze swung toward two creatures covered in fur, like Chewbacca the Wookiee. At least that’s what she assumed since they wore long shorts. One Wookiee’s hair was nearly as red as hers and the other was blond.

“There’s so many different people.” She couldn’t help the high pitch of her voice.

“I don’t think I can handle much more,” Hope voiced a similar sentiment, and hid her face in Aculus’ shoulder.

The rogue had the audacity to smile.

“It’ll be all right. These people are my friends,” Ash encouraged them.

“I get that, but a few days ago humans were all I knew. I was just getting used to you and now this.” Abby waved at the menagerie. She prided herself on being accepting of others, but this adventure was stretching even her tolerance to its limit.

“We’re going to get Vintor back,” one Cadi said and it was instantly translated through Ash’s communicator. Hearing the voice she associated with her big guy added another bizarre layer to the situation. The man eyed her critically, then slammed his fist against his chest and bowed to Ash. “What are your orders?”

“Let me get Providence’s sisters settled, Payim. This is Abby and that is Hope.”

“Welcome.” Payim bowed to her. He then stared, his eyes going wide. “Ashtoret, does she bear your conjugo mark?”

“She does,” Ash replied proudly and pulled her close.

“Congratulations.” Payim grinned.

“Uh, thanks,” she replied, confused by what they were talking about, her eyes ping-ponging between the two giant red men. With everything going on she was having a hard time following the conversation.

“Peanut, this here is Payim, and that’s Cerdic, Faktil and Terentius.” Ash pointed to the other Cadi. “Those hairy warriors are our Toufik brethren.” She instantly recalled the story about them being slaves. “Fire and Thunder.” He gestured to the red then the blond-haired Toufik.

Both Toufik made a gesture she assumed was hello.

She overheard Aculus making similar introductions to her frazzled sister as they exited the large bay and headed down a corridor. They entered another cockpit straight out of a sci-fi movie. Aculus set Hope in one of the seats near the large screen at the front of the room, then started fiddling with the console. Ash set Abby in the next chair. He kissed her forehead then stood to his towering height.

“I’m connecting us to Cadi now,” Aculus said.

“We need to report what’s happened, then you can talk to Providence.”

She nodded to Ash and eagerly watched the flickering image on the wide screen. Even though Ash alluded to other humans living on Cadi besides her sister, it was still a shock when a woman of Indian descent appeared.

“Ashtoret, Aculus, we didn’t expect you to contact us.” The dark-haired woman then focused on her. “Wow, you look a lot like Providence.”

Abby nodded, her eyes misting again.

“You’re correct, June. These are her sisters, Abby and Hope,” Ash introduced them. “We need to speak with the Daimio. It’s urgent.”

“Crap, okay. Let me hail him and connect you to the manor living room. Tytus is actually there now. It was nice to meet you.” June waved before the image shifted to a blank flickering screen again.

It seemed like forever before a giant, rugged Cadi man appeared.

“Ashtoret.” The man nodded.

“Daimio, we’ve hit a snare,” Ash reported. “Vintor and Providence’s sire were captured by the Earth authorities.”



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The man onscreen growled, his face twisting with a grim frown. “What are your plans to liberate them?” The large man briefly glanced at Abby and Hope then focused again on Ash.

“His tracker has gone off line. These are Providence’s sisters and they have a contact who may be able to aid us.”

“I’m also working to boost the signal to get past whatever the humans have that’s blocking the tracker,” Aculus added.

“We can’t cause undue stress among the humans, but I want you to do what you can to get our brother back and complete the mission.” The man ran a hand through his long black hair in frustration. “I wish I had better advice.”

“Understood. Can you reach out to Providence, please?”

“She’s with Giselle and Graca upstairs. I’ll go get her.”

Abby anxiously glanced at Hope. “This is too good to be true,” she mouthed and pinched her arm. This all had to be a dream, it just had to be.

“You’re kidding me, Kagan. You better not be messing with me.” Abby heard Pro before she saw her. She leaned forward in her seat, tears blurring her eyes. She scrubbed them away as the recognizable silhouette appeared onscreen. “Peanut! Hope!” Providence screamed and rushed the image.

“Pro,” Hope sobbed.

“Hey, sis,” Abby choked.

“You talk with your sister. We’re going to discuss plans back here,” Ash said and walked away.

“I’ve missed you so much,” Pro cried.

“We have, too. Dad never gave up looking for you,” she said past the lump in her throat.

“God, we love you, sis,” Hope rasped. “What’s this business about you being married to an alien and knocked up? Is that even possible?”

“Yeah, it is.” Providence smiled and cupped her belly. She wasn’t far along, but there was a bit of a pooch. “You wanna see what my baby might look like?”

“Yes!” Abby and Hope said at once.

A blonde human who was also crying passed a pink baby off to Providence. Abby was floored by how cute the little girl was. She had the sweetest little tail that wrapped around Pro’s arm.

“This is Graca.” Pro rubbed the cooing bundle’s little head. The baby had the oddest dark hair with frosted blonde tips. “Say hello to my sisters, Graca.” She bounced the baby. Graca had the most amazing dark blue eyes.

“Wow, she’s gorgeous. Do you know if you’re having a boy or girl?” Hope beamed.

“Nope. Madhava, Dagaa and I want to be surprised.”

“Wait. You weren’t kidding when you said she was married to two guys?” Hope eyed

Abby.

“Nope.” Although hearing it from Pro was still surprising.

“Are you humping the whole planet, you dirty whore?” Hope barked out a laugh.

“No! I’m just married to two men, bitch.”

“Just two,” Hope giggled.

Abby snorted, happy to see her sisters carrying on like old times. Hope and Providence were really close, and Hope had taken Pro’s loss very hard.

“You’re just jealous cause they keep me more than satisfied,” Providence countered with a snotty wag of her head.

Abby choked. She had an inkling just how satisfied Pro was.

“What are you turning bright red about, Peanut?” Pro demanded.

“Our baby sister’s got something going on with one of the red guys. I think Ash is his name.”

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“Oh, you rotten tattletale.” Abby scowled at Hope.

“Abigail Murray, what have you been doing?” Providence eyed her.

“We are not alone, thank you very much.” She stuck her tongue out at her sisters.

“Ashtoret,” Providence hollered, her voice echoing through the speaker, making Abby cringe.

“What?” Ash stepped forward.

She couldn’t believe Pro dragged him away from important business to get to the bottom of her sex life.

“What are you doing with my sister?”

“Oh my gawd,” Abby groaned under her breath. She was hardly a baby, but her family still treated her like one.

“Your sister is my bonded,” Ash replied without batting an eye.

She turned to him, wondering what he meant.

“You mated my sister! He bit you!” Providence screeched.

Abby’s eyes widened. “Wait. What?” Her hand rose to the bite marks on her neck.

Ash's head swung toward her, a look of horror transforming his face. "Abby, I said I would make you mine and you agreed."

She replayed their evening together. She'd been so turned on she would've agreed to anything. His declaration hadn't and still didn't strike her as a binding proposal.

"I didn't realize you meant you were marrying me. I thought it was a figure of speech, like you were gonna own it," she explained but it sounded so stupid coming out of her mouth. Her heart broke seeing the devastation on Ash's face. "I'm sorry, I didn't understand." She teared up.

"Did you use protection?" Hope demanded, adding insult to injury.

"We were naked in a swamp for a day, running from Spec-ops, then holed up in a motel room. No, we didn't use protection."

"I am sorry for the misunderstanding. I will assure you are not carrying my young and return you along with Hope." Ash bowed stiffly to her and walked back the rear of the room. "Let's give them some privacy," he growled to the others.

"Ash?" she called out, but Ash refused to look back at her as he left the control room. Abby bit her fist to repress a sob as the tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Abby, I'm sorry." Hope was stricken.

"Peanut, do you like Ashtoret?" Pro asked.

Abby nodded. She liked him a lot. Up to this point she'd been dreading when they said goodbye, but never imagined their night of passion equated being married. It was so hard to wrap her head around, and not only because Ash came from another planet. They just met, and she had plans for herself; to go to graduate school, visit Europe...

She didn't picture herself being married till years from now.

"He's a good guy. You could come live here with me," Providence offered. "I'd love that." Her sister smiled.

"I can't think." She shook her head. Ash was a good guy. Actually, he was a great guy. Funny. Intelligent. Sexy. And now she'd broken his heart. "He wouldn't even look at me," she mumbled past her tears.

She sat numbly listening as Hope and Providence discussed a myriad of things. She hadn't heard from Pro in nearly a year. Her sister was miraculously alive yet she couldn't get it together enough to participate in the conversation, and it added to her misery.

"Peanut," Pro pulled her from her thoughts. "Think about what I said. I love you guys so much." Providence broke down in tears as she said goodbye.

"I love you, too." Hope reached out to the screen.

"Love you, sis," Abby choked. The screen went black and she lost it completely.

"Abby!" Hope rushed over and wrapped her arms around her.

"Please. I just want to be alone and lay down." Abby felt numb. She didn't mean to shrug Hope off, but she couldn't handle anymore. The last few days had been too much, and now this.

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“I can have one of my crew show you to a room.” Aculus gestured to a bony crewman.

“I, um, I guess I’ll stay here,” Hope said with a worried frown.

Abby nodded then followed the crewman out of the room, through the winding passages to a room with a bunk.

“Thank you.”

She didn’t understand the armor-plated guy’s reply, but he didn’t seem to mind and left her alone. Abby flopped onto the bed and curled into a ball.

Her thoughts swirled around the drastic shift her life had taken. There was no going back in time, and she wouldn’t want to unmeet Ash if she could. The thought of never seeing him or Pro again was crippling. But that meant leaving everything and everyone she knew behind. Fate was so cruel. It felt like her world was being ripped apart all over again.

“What am I going to do?”

Ashtoret de Origa

Creating a plan of action took longer than expected. Hope proved helpful, giving them the communicator code to contact Frank. After talking with Providence, she was coping better with her surroundings. Hope even got the language implant so she could understand everyone more easily.

He laughed bitterly as he recalled Aculus eagerly jumping to soothe Hope's headache after she received the implant. It wasn't long ago he foolishly chuckled at the Osivoire for refusing to be daunted by Hope's rebuff. He thought himself so much luckier than his bony friend.

Now I'm the one who has been cast aside.

He stood outside the room where Abby was resting, debating if going in was wise considering how frustrated he was. He berated himself for falling prey to the intense situation they found themselves in while running, but he also couldn't dismiss the connection he discovered with Abby. He thought he made his intentions clear, but obviously he was wrong, dead wrong. Ashtoret rubbed the spot on his chest where he felt a very real ache.

He summoned his courage and entered the room. Abby roused and looked up at him. He frowned, seeing her eyes were red and puffy from crying.

"What is that?" She pointed to the language implant injector he brought in case she was amenable.

"It's an injector," he started to explain.

"To make me abort if I'm pregnant," Abby interrupted.

"No," he snarled as shock and horror filled him. "Is that what you want? Is the thought of carrying my young so abhorrent you wish to kill it?" I shouldn't have come. He turned to leave.

"No! That's not what I want," Abby screamed. She got up and ran in front of him, blocking his path.



“Well, what do you want?” he countered, tossing his hands up.

“I don’t want to leave my home.”

Ashtoret nodded and hung his head. He’d convinced himself Abby was okay with going back to Cadi since Providence was there, except that was never her plan. They were from worlds apart, and some rifts were too wide to span, no matter how much he wanted it.

Abby peered up at him. “But I don’t want to lose you either, Ash. I don’t know what to do. Please, I’m scared,” she pleaded with him.

He studied Abby as her words sank in. She looked as devastated as he felt. He assumed she thought of their bond as a passing tryst, but that wasn’t the case. Abby cared for him, like he cared for her. And just like him, she was blindsided by all of this. He swung her into his arms and sat on the bed.

“I know.” He rocked Abby back and forth while kissing the top of her head. “I never expected to find you, Peanut. I came on this mission to help your people and let you know Providence was safe, but my purpose changed the instant I met you. The thought of losing you scares me. If I could stay on your planet I would.” And he would, even as hard as it would be to leave his home.

“But you can’t, my people would kill you,” Abby choked, her hands fluttering over his bare chest. “I could never let that happen. What are we going to do?”

She quietly cried as he held her. The despondent sound shattered his heart. It pained him not being able to control or fix this.

Eventually, Abby stopped trembling. He thought she’d fallen asleep, till she glanced up at him.

“Ash,” she said quietly. Her blue-green eyes weren’t as turbulent. She’d come to a decision.

“Yes.”

“I guess my purpose has changed, too.” Her soft hands cupped his cheeks. “Can you lie to me and tell me we’ll come back to visit often?” She cast him a watery smile.

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Ashtoret let out the breath he was holding as elation filled him. He crushed Abby to his chest.

“Ash,” Abby laughed against his neck. “You’re smothering me.”

“I’m sorry, Peanut.” He released his tight hold. “Are you sure? I don’t want you to resent me.” He frowned, worry creasing his brow.

“I wanted to tour Europe. I guess touring another planet is a pretty outstanding substitute. Not a lot of people get to say that.”

“I’ll show you where I grew up and introduce you to my siblings and parents. They’ll adore you.”

“Do you live near Pro?”

“Yes. You can see her every day if you want.” He had a hard time holding in his happiness as he squeezed her. He kept having to remind himself not to hold on too tight.

Abby started shaking and he worried she was crying again. He pulled her back and was instantly relieved to see her laughing. She saw the look on his face and giggled harder.

“What?” he asked with a grin.

“Well, I guess this counts as our first fight.”

“I don’t understand.” Ashtoret frowned, not knowing why that would be so funny. He hated feeling the rift between them.

“Are you telling me Cadi don’t know about make-up sex?” she asked in a sultry voice, her bright eyes drifting to half-mast. He was instantly hard.

“No,” he husked.

“If I recall, I made a promise, something about licking a certain big, brave man all over.” Abby straddled his lap. She placed one small palm on his bare chest and shoved him back on the bunk. “I like this shirtless kilt ensemble. You’ve got the sexy gladiator thing nailed,” she purred.

Abby attacked his mouth with a fierceness that took his breath away. One hand tangled in her long curly hair, while the other gripped her hip. He groaned into Abby’s mouth as she ground atop his stomach. He could feel the heat of her through her blue pants.

“Mmm,” Abby moaned, her tongue stroking one fang. Ashtoret was shocked by how sensitive his canines were.

Her teeth locked gently on his lip, giving it a tug as she pulled away. She traced his jaw with little kisses, making a path to his ear. He sucked in a breath as Abby licked the shell of his ear. Her hot, wet mouth nibbled and sucked his earlobe before moving to the side of his neck. She bit down harder, her blunt teeth stinging slightly.

“Abby,” Ashtoret groaned, his hips flexing of their own free will.

He’d never had a female mount him or bite him like this. For such a petite female, his bonded was subjecting him to a very dominant act. The contradiction made it all that more erotic, igniting a flame that was quickly burning out of control. Ashtoret felt a

deep primal stirring. He wanted to toss Abby onto the bed, tear her clothes off and mount her till she screamed his name. The only thing that kept him from acting out his prurient need was the equally driving desire to see what she'd do next.

Abby licked a slow, agonizing path down his chest. Her tongue laved the lines of his warrior's ink as she traveled ever lower. Her hands massaged his tense muscles, teasing the skin at the waistband of his vestments. His stomach trembled from her alternating gentle and insistent caresses. His head was spinning by the time her hot mouth kissed the muscles flanking his pelvis where they disappeared beneath his vestment.

Abby paused and looked up at him. Her pupils were dilated with desire, nearly drowning out the blue-green. She was just as turned on as he was. It was hard for him to fathom, since it was a male's job to pleasure his female. He was so focused on the lustful expression transforming Abby's gorgeous face that her next move took him by surprise. He jumped when her hand grazed the inside of his thigh. Her long, delicate fingers wrapped around his turgid shaft, gripping him hard.

"Do you know how good you feel sliding inside of me with these knots? It makes me wet just thinking about you thrusting between my thighs." Abby licked her lips.

Ashtoret groaned. He couldn't believe the things he was hearing fall from her full red lips, as she leisurely stroked his shaft. Her hands felt so damn good as she explored his arousal. He cupped Abby's flushed cheeks, his thumb grazing her swollen lips. She smiled as she pulled back from his grasp. His brow furrowed. He wanted to tug her up his chest, roll over and cage her beneath him.

He gaped in shock when Abby ducked beneath his vestment. Her soft cheek grazed his stiff arousal, making his shaft kick. A choking breath heaved out when a warm puff of air hit his sensitive flesh. She couldn't possibly...

“Abby!” he barked when her wet mouth enveloped his crown.

His hands flew to her head and he started panting as his scandalous mate licked the ridge circling his crown. She sucked him in deep and a growl burst from his chest. The pleasure was unimaginable. His hips bucked uncontrollably, his shaft pulsing with each strong pull.

Her tongue...goddess, her tongue, Ashtoret reeled.

He now understood what Abby was alluding to when she said make-up sex. Being with her was always intense, emotionally and physically. He'd felt lower than low when he walked into the room, but now she'd catapulted him to the height of ecstasy doing the most salacious, unspeakable thing he'd ever experienced.

She moaned around his stiff member. The vibrations sent a spike of sweet agony coursing up his spine. Ashtoret's stomach muscles quaked uncontrollably. His fingers flexed in her hair. Abby sucked him harder, faster and deeper, her hot body grinding on his outstretched legs. The torrent of ecstasy swirled, gripping him tighter. The bliss was all-consuming.

Abby released the hold she had on his flexing thighs. With one hand she cupped his tight balls, massaging gently. The other rapidly stroked the base of his shaft, now slick with her saliva. Combined with the maddening things her mouth did, he could no longer hold it together.

Abby

There was something obscenely erotic about the way Ash shook all over as he came undone. The knots ringing Ash's silky smooth cock slid across her stroking palms and questing tongue. The contrast of velvety skin over hardened steel made her shiver. The sensation of his pulsing cock and his heady masculine scent had her pussy cramping with need. Pleasuring Ash and seeing the way he responded to her touch almost turned her on more than when he lavished her with attention.

"Abby," Ash roared as his back arched and the orgasm shot through him in crippling waves.

He bucked, gagging her, but she held on.

"Mmm," she moaned, lapping at him as his seed erupted in halting spurts.

"Goddess, Abby." Ash shuddered. He pulled her off his trembling shaft and drew in several ragged breaths.

"You taste very good." She licked her lips, and gave him a wicked grin. He was surprisingly candy sweet. It made the whole experience twice as nice. She could see herself cornering Ash any time she got a chance to subject him to this delicious torment.

"Apparently," Aculus chuckled.

"Abigail Murray," Hope gasped as she stood in the doorway with the bony warrior.

Her gaze flew to the door in shock. “What the fuck are you doing there?” she squealed, quickly shielding Ash’s crotch from view.

“I was worried. I was checking on you,” Hope declared, her cheeks bright red.

“We are fine. You can go,” she informed Hope, equally embarrassed.

She’d been so overwhelmed she never heard the door open. Being caught with Ash didn’t bother her as much as the fact he was exposed.

I’m the only one who gets the privilege of seeing his hot as hell body.

“Fine. Unbelievable,” Hope huffed as she turned to leave.

Worry and censure filled Hope’s eyes as she backed out of the room. Considering the way they parted hours ago, it was understandable. Guilt flooded her for snapping at her sister. They had a lot they needed to discuss.

“Are you hungry, Nadzia? I’ll make us both something, and you can tell me about the tantalizing human custom we just walked in on.” Aculus winked at them before he followed Hope.

“I’m not explaining a blow job to you, you randy bonehead,” Hope grumbled as the door slid shut.

“Christ on a cracker,” Abby snorted in agitation and disbelief at what just happened.

Ash stroked her back and the tension instantly melted.

“Despite that little incident, that was...” Ash finished with a sexy growl.



“You liked that, did you?” She grinned at him.

“Yes,” he husked. “I never imagined you’d do that. The warriors with human mates hinted at such a thing, but I never...” Ash shook his head.

“So, you’ve never...? Like the kissing.”

“No,” he rumbled.

That was a shock to learn, but considering how Ash responded to having his cock sucked she shouldn’t have been surprised.

“Mmm, well, I think we’ll have to do that again real soon then,” she purred.

Ash rumbled again, and his cock jumped. His recovery time was impressive. She wanted nothing more than to take advantage of that but...

“I should go talk to Hope,” she whined.

“Wait.” Ash grabbed her wrist when she tried to roll off his lap.

“What did you have in mind?” Abby perked up.

He could suggest anything at the moment and she’d eagerly agree. She didn’t relish the conversation she was about to have with Hope. It was going to be beyond hard telling her sister she was leaving home.

9 Bonded

Ashtoret de Origa

“Fuck me, Ash,” Abby moaned. “Take it out. I changed my mind.”

“I’m sorry it hurts so bad, Peanut.” Ashtoret grimaced.

“Shhh, shhh, shhh,” she panted, holding her head.

He wasn’t sure why the language implant hurt so bad when assimilated as an adult. Jorg their medic explained it, but he still couldn’t fathom why they couldn’t solve the issue.

Every one of his senses was heightened and focused on Abby since he gave her the conjugo mark. It wasn’t just that he hated seeing his bonded in pain, he could feel it. It radiated from her with every tremor. The acrid scent of it burned his nose.

I should’ve waited. It would be good having Abby understand him without his handheld doing the translating, but this was not the glorious aftermath to their reunion he desired.

“It’ll pass soon.” He gently rocked Abby while rubbing her back, helpless to do anything else.

Abby’s head popped up, her eyes impossibly wide.

“What is wrong?” Fear suddenly filled him.

She traced his lips then squeezed his cheeks. He sighed in relief when a smile cracked her mouth. Abby’s expression was still pained, but there was also awe in her eyes.

“Say something else,” she insisted.

“What would you like me to say, my beautiful bonded?” He smiled at the happy wonder replacing the pain in Abby’s eyes. He wanted the first words she heard from his lips to be memorable. “I could tell you how unbelievably sexy you are. That the hot way you writhe impaled on my shaft is unlike anything I could’ve ever imagined.”

Abby straddled his lap, her eyes drifting to a seductive half-lidded stare as she leaned in close to his mouth.

“Yeah, that’s just as sexy as those delicious growls.” She brushed her lips against his and he wrapped his arms around her.

“Or I could tell you how unbelievably lucky I am to have found you. I never imagined bonding with someone who is not only gorgeous, but funny, resilient, and brave. I am humbled and overjoyed you’ve agreed to be mine and will come home with me.”

“Oh, Ash. I’ve fallen pretty hard for you, too.” The catch in Abby’s voice spoke volumes.

Ashtoret gripped Abby tight as their lips met. Their kiss was passionate and sweet, conveying the emotions they couldn’t begin to express in words.

“I’m going to mount you if we continue this,” he groaned, loving the way Abby felt

in his arms.

“You are a sweet talker,” she laughed.

“Are you hungry?”

“I think I could eat.” Abby nodded.

He picked Abby up and carried her out of the room. They reached the mess hall to find a few Cadi, Hope and Aculus still relaxing after the evening meal. Abby’s sister was busy scrolling through human music being transmitted by the Earth satellites. The cacophony blared through the sound system.

“Is this going to be okay?” he asked, worried it would aggravate Abby’s lingering headache.

“Yeah, the headache’s mostly gone. Hey, stop here, I like this one,” Abby declared to Hope as he set her down.

“The Rolling Stones are pretty classic.” Hope nodded. “I think this is a German station.”

Abby did a little twirl as she shimmied toward her sister. He admired the way his bonded moved to the music. Her hips swayed seductively, hypnotizing him. She lacked a tail, but that didn’t make her ass any less sexy. The way it bounced in those tight blue pants made him salivate with the desire to bite it. Hope laughed and did her own dance, meeting Abby in the center of the room. He wasn’t the only one who was smitten, the females had the attention of every male there.

“Hey. I’m sorry I snapped at you earlier.” Abby gave Hope a big hug.

“Christ, Abby, you’ve got just fucked hair.” Hope thought she spoke quietly enough only Abby could hear, but she forgot the rest of them had better hearing than a human.

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“I do not!” Abby retorted.

“You sound jealous, Nadzia,” Aculus barked with a hearty laugh. “I would be happy to remedy that.” The male cocked one bony brow as he opened his arms in a welcoming gesture.

“Shut it, bonehead, or I’ll find a way to shove my size seven tennis shoe up your ass. Those kinds of come-ons might work on an oversexed girl with five boobs from Rigel Nine, but not me. I’m not interested in some space playboy.” Hope cast Aculus a huffy stare. The armored warrior just grinned back.

Abby gripped Hope’s shoulders, capturing her attention.

“I’m going with Ash when all this is over. We’re really good together.”

“But, Abby...” Hope’s chin trembled.

“I know. I love you.” Abby hugged her sister tight.

Ashtoret grabbed food from the galley, letting Abby have a moment with her sister. He was happy to have Abby, but that also meant her family would be losing her, and Abby would miss them in return. The only thing that kept him from feeling like a total bastard was that Providence waited on Cadi. He returned and set two platters on the table. Abby was sitting next to Hope, and they were both trying valiantly not to cry. Aculus handed the females some napkins.

“Thanks,” Hope sniffed and mopped her eyes.

“My pleasure.” Aculus placed a gentle hand on Hope’s shoulder, casting her a concerned look before stepping back. The bony warrior was as considerate as he was antagonistic.

Abby smiled sadly at him when he pushed a plate her way.

“Those are good,” Hope sniffled, pointing to the Osivoire dried legume.

Hope leaned against Abby as she ate in silence, both soaking up their time together.

“Did you want to attempt to contact the male you spoke of?” Aculus eventually broke the silence.

Hope nodded.

“Do you feel all right about this?” Ashtoret asked Abby. They’d barely had time to rest from their ordeal.

“Yes, of course. We need to find Dad and Vintor as soon as possible.”

Once they were done eating, they followed Aculus to a small meeting room.

“After we connect, just speak and he’ll be able to hear you,” Aculus instructed.

“All right, let’s do this.” Abby nodded and sat at the oval table.

One of Aculus’ crewman tapped on the console. A staticky sound was followed by a repetitive tone.

“Hello,” a male answered.

“Frank, it’s Abby and Hope,” Abby replied.

“Abby! Where are you girls?” Frank sounded concerned, almost frantic, which pleased Ashtoret. Although the females knew Frank well, he couldn’t say the same.

“We’re safe. Did you know Ops trashed our house and took Dad?”

“I learned. Girls, I’m catching wind of some real disturbing intel and you’ve stepped right into the thick of it.”

“That’s an understatement. Frank, do you know where they’re keeping Dad?” Hope inquired, cutting to the chase.

“I have my suspicions. Look, girls, I’m worried about you. Where can I come get you?”

He watched Aculus bring up a map of the coastline on the screen. The bony warrior silently pointed to a few areas where they could land. Abby gestured to a spot and Hope nodded.

“We can meet at the zoo,” Abby suggested.



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“I would feel better if I came and got you. You’re not safe,” Frank insisted.

“We’ll call you, noon tomorrow, and tell you where to find us at the zoo,” Abby reiterated.

“Fine,” Frank sighed unhappily. “That’s a good place. If you can make it there, it will be hard for the DOD to get to you without creating a scene.”

“Tomorrow then.” Hope nodded even though Frank couldn’t see her, and the transmission went silent.

“Now to get you females ready,” Aculus announced. “Let’s go to medical.”

Ashtoret tilted his head in confusion as they followed the bony warrior to the ship’s clinic. Aculus pulled an injector out and turned toward the females.

“Fuck.” “Not again,” Hope and Abby declared at once.

“This won’t hurt. It’s a tracker.” Aculus approached Hope. “If something happens, we’ll be able to locate you.”

“Except Vintor had a tracker and we’re unable to locate him,” Ashtoret countered.

“Your trackers have limited capabilities. This is Osivoire technology.” Aculus waved the injector.

“Don’t ever let Tytus hear you say that, he’d weep.” The Cadi engineer coveted and

hoarded every bit of tech he could get his hands on in an attempt to make up for lost time. It was depressing to think how much Cadi sacrificed warring with themselves.

“Oh, I know,” Aculus chuckled. “I’ll help get the Cadi up to speed.” He then sobered. “I’m sorry I didn’t think to do this before you went planet-side. I assumed we wouldn’t have these problems given how undeveloped the humans are.”

“Hey!” Hope grouched, not appreciating the comment.

“I meant no offense, ivory beauty.”

“Whatever.” Hope rolled her eyes. “Since I don’t want to be ghosted, where do you need to put this tracker thing?”

“In the flesh of your perfectly round backside,” Aculus replied, his gaze roaming over Hope.

“Ha! You’ve been trying to get me out of my pants from the moment I stepped onto this ship,” Hope retorted, her eyes narrowing on the bony warrior.

“This is becoming entertaining. Who do you think is going to give in first?” Abby asked him.

“Your sister seems adamant, but Aculus is also rather persistent,” he chuckled.

Hope glared at them while Aculus grinned and nodded in confirmation.

“Hope, just get over it and drop-trou.” Abby unbuttoned her jeans and exposed herself to Ashtoret.

He was so distracted by the sight he almost didn’t catch the injector Aculus tossed.

He cupped the shelf of Abby's creamy rear, enjoying the slight weight in his hands. She glanced back at him with one brow raised in amusement. He winked, squeezed a fleshy spot and injected the tracker.

"Not so bad, right? Nothing to be afraid of," Aculus commented.

"I'm not afraid." Hope scowled at the Osivoire. "Fine, just do it and get it over with." Hope pulled down her pants and stuck her ass out at Aculus. "Get a good look, bonehead, cuz it'll be your last."

He repressed the laugh bubbling in his throat at the expression on Aculus' face. The male stared at Hope's behind like he was seeing the Promised Land.

"You have two seconds," Hope informed Aculus when the bony warrior's hand lingered on her rear a little too long.

Aculus grunted and injected her. Hope immediately pulled her pants up.

"Now it's your turn," Abby informed Ashtoret.

He grabbed the injector off the table, lifted his vestment and injected himself.

"Are you happy now?" he asked.

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“Very.” Her hand snaked up his vestment and squeezed his ass with a smile. “Although a little make-up like we used the other day might also help.”

“I bet Aculus can produce something.”

“Ooh yeah, make-up is a good idea. We’ll need a truckload to cover Ash.” Hope considered Aculus. “Make that two truckloads if bonehead is coming along.”

“Yes, Nadzia, I’ll be coming, and I’m sure one of my techs can fabricate whatever we need,” Aculus replied, letting Hope’s snide nickname roll off his back like it was a term of endearment.

“Well, since that’s the case, where do I shove this thing?” Hope snagged the injector and jabbed it toward the bony warrior.

“Follow me to my quarters for the evening and I’ll happily show you,” Aculus rumbled, his red eyes flashing with amusement.

“Seriously, you two need to get a room,” Abby laughed. “Come on, Ash.” She grabbed his hand and headed out of the clinic.

“You’re not leaving me all night with this man-sized hard-on,” Hope hollered after them.

“I think you’ve got it handled, sis,” Abby retorted with a giggle. The sound lit up his world.

Abby

The most divine dream swirled through Abby's mind. Her gaze languidly drifted down her nude body. Her legs were splayed, wrapped around the head of a silver-haired demon. Her heels dug into the flexing blood red, muscular back hunched at the foot of the bed. She arched off the mattress, shoving her pussy into the demi-god's face as pleasure coiled up her spine.

"Mmm," Ash groaned, his tongue working deep into her pussy for another taste, then retreating to flick her swollen clit.

Her eyes opened wide, a gasp parting her lips as she roused further. This was quite a wake-up call. Her hands flew to Ash's head, grasping fingers tugged at his hair. She reflexively closed her thighs, but his broad shoulders kept them spread wide. She was at his wicked mercy.

Two thick fingers delved into her slick pussy. She spasmed when they grazed the bundle of nerves on the roof of her channel. Ash applied suction to her clit while fluttering his tongue ever faster.

"Ash!" she called out as the orgasm struck.

Ash crawled up her body with the lithe grace of a predator. He hovered over her wearing a sardonic smile, his dark eyes gleaming with cocky amusement.

"Is this how you plan on waking me every morning?" Abby breathily asked.

She stroked Ash's arms, testing the firmness of his impressive biceps. Her legs wrapped around his waist, urging Ash down. She loved feeling him stretched along the length of her body, his chest pressed against her breasts, his hips cradled between her thighs.

“That’s...my...goal,” Ash husked between kisses. Her tongue darted into his mouth, tasting the spicy flavor that was uniquely him.

“Mmm, Ash. What is it about your kisses?” She tilted her head, shivering as Ash placed heated kisses on her neck.

“Do you like them?” He nibbled at her ear, catching the lobe gently with his fangs.

“You know I do,” she panted.

“A Cadi male only releases conjugo serum when he’s found his mate, and it’s specially designed to drive you and only you wild. It’s in my saliva and my seed.” Ash rotated his hips, grinding his arousal against her pelvis. “It means I’m yours in every way.”

“Oh. I had no idea.”

The concept was so foreign. She thought they were mated because Ash bit her in the heat of passion, never realizing it was really the chemical in his bite that sealed the deal. Ash hadn’t just fallen head over heels, like she had. No, this ran so much deeper. If she had any lingering doubts, they vanished.

He’s mine, mind, body and soul. Abby smiled wistfully.

Ash sank the tips of his fangs into her neck, dosing her with the illicit drug. She arched against him as the euphoric chemical hit her bloodstream. The lustful sensation wrapped around all her most intimate parts, intensifying the desire that already overwhelmed her.

“Fuck me, Ash,” she begged, rocking her hips against his thick cock, rubbing her clit along his length.

Ash pulled back and thrust, the head of his cock driving deep. The knots on his engorged shaft lit up the nerves in her trembling pussy. She clamped down on him as he retreated, reveling in the instantaneous ecstasy. The man was a god, skilled in driving her to the brink of sanity in nothing flat, then throwing her over the precipice, only to ratchet her even higher again. Abby tossed her head back and forth, her hair sticking to the sheen of sweat that broke out all over her body. Every muscle quaked as he hammered faster and harder, grunting out his punishing rhythm. Bless him for holding on till she peaked before he found his own release. Unafraid of his satisfied snarl, she gripped Ash against her breasts, while his cock kicked and pulsed inside her. It was no surprise she orgasmed again when his heated seed bathed her trembling channel, but now she knew why her response was so intense.

Ash hugged her tight as they caught their breath. He was oddly quiet.

“You doing okay?”

“Just thinking about the meeting today.” He stroked her back.

“I know,” she replied quietly at the reminder.

The thought of returning to Earth filled her with paralyzing fear. Her government could imprison her, but the things they’d do to Ash were too horrific to dwell on.

“I guess we better get ready.” Before I lose my nerve.

She kissed his stubbled chin and dragged herself out of bed. They bathed in the bathroom connected to their quarters then dressed. Abby smirked noticing the Seminole logo on the giant maroon hoodie Ash slipped over his head.

“What?” he asked, seeing her expression.

“This is Hope’s doing. It was a nice addition making you look like a center on a basketball team, but my sister picked this logo just to screw with me.” She tapped the logo on his chest.

“How so?” Ash tilted his head.

“They’re a rival sports team of the university I go to.”

“Ah,” he chuckled. “Perhaps she’s getting back at you for leaving her with Aculus last night.”



“No doubt. Ornery bitch.”

“Here’s the salve one of the crewman delivered.” Ash held up a jar containing the creamy foundation.

“All right. Have a seat and I’ll put it on you.”

“Thank you, Peanut.”

Ash sat, but he was still obscenely tall, putting her face to face with him. She concentrated as she dabbed make-up to the bridge on his nose. Ash crinkled and wiggled his nose, making her job impossible. It was becoming a habit.

“You are rotten. Stop making faces at me,” she laughed and gently swatted his cheek. The man had a way of getting her mind off things.

“All right, I’ll behave,” he said while chuckling.

Once done with Ash’s disguise, they found everyone going planet side in the ship’s dining room, all dressed in hooded sweatshirts and slathered in make-up. They looked pretty good unless you stared too long. It was closer to lunch than breakfast, so she and Ash had to eat quickly so they could get going.

“You remember Payim.” Ash pointed to another Cadi man as they headed toward the loading bay. “He’s on our team.”

“Nice to meet you again.” She nodded to the man.

The two teams loaded onto the smaller ships. She held Ash’s hand and followed Aculus, Hope and Payim to the bridge. Ash squeezed her hand then attempted to release it, so they could get strapped into their seats. She realized she was tense when

she had to consciously tell her fingers to release him. He smiled encouragement. She smiled back, but doubted it was convincing.

“A once in a life time view,” Hope declared as Payim maneuvered the ship out of the hangar.

It certainly was, and an amazing distraction. Millions of stars twinkled beyond the massive cratered moon. Space was so vast, but it wasn’t empty like she always thought. Her sister, Ash’s people and countless others lived out there. It was exciting and frightening to think she was going to experience such wonders. Earth emerged with its soothing blue oceans and green land masses as they circled the moon. Wispy clouds swirled in the atmosphere, lighting up with electric borealis along the North Pole. It was absolutely breathtaking.

Abby glanced at her sister and noticed Hope wasn’t just staring at the sight. Hope was looking at her silhouetted against their home. It was a poignant reminder.

“I know.” She reached over and gripped her sister’s hand. “I’ll miss you, too.”

Hope nodded quietly.

“Be ready to depart quickly. We’ll touch down in the field, then Payim, you wait in the nearby lake,” Aculus instructed as they hit the atmosphere and picked up speed.

“Jesus,” Hope hissed, staring wide-eyed at the screen.

“Fucking hell! This is the worst roller coaster ever.”

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She held her breath as they rocketed toward Earth at an ungodly speed, passing through clouds, the ground getting ever closer. If they were in a normal airplane they'd slam into the earth and die on impact. Thank God that wasn't the case. She felt none of the G forces. The cruiser didn't shake or rattle, although the view onscreen was intense enough. She held down her lunch as the cruiser pulled up fast and came to the stop.

Oh thank Jesus!

"Come on."

Ash helped her out of the harness and Aculus did the same for Hope, then they hustled to the exit. As the door split open, Ash swung her up in his arms.

"Nadzia, climb onto my back."

"You're going to carry us?" Hope asked while gripping the bony alien's arm.

"Yeah. We need to move fast in case we attracted attention like last time," Aculus replied while situating Hope on his back.

"I still would like to know how the humans managed that," Ash rumbled as Abby gripped him around the neck and they descended the ramp.

She glanced at the Cadi and Osivoire descending from the other ship while trying to get her bearings in the nature preserve.

“The zoo’s that way.” She pointed in the opposite direction of Lake Winder.

The seven of them started running along the trails winding through the preserve, heading east. Soon the trails gave way to access roads, the occasional home and businesses. It was a blessing the traffic was sparse, though no one seemed to pay them much attention. The group veered off the main route once they hit a more populated area near the highway.

She knew Ash was fast, but it still amazed her how swift he could move while saddled by her. She attempted to hold onto Ash’s neck without strangling him, her legs locked around his waist. The piggyback ride wasn’t as bumpy as she expected; Ash’s feet hardly touched the ground long enough to jar her. They just had sex, so she should’ve been satiated, and yet she couldn’t help the way her mind strayed, feeling his muscles bunch and flex.

10 Alliance

Ashtoret de Origa

“Jesus, Ash, you ran here in like twenty minutes. The zoo’s just up this way.”

Ashtoret grinned feeling a sense of pride hearing how impressed Abby was. He grunted and patted her clasped hands at his throat to acknowledge he heard. They slowed to a walk as they entered a tarmac filled with the boxy metal vehicles, and he set Abby down. He was instantly on guard, scanning all the humans moving toward the squat building flanked by gates. Instead of males in black uniforms there were multitudes of families. He couldn’t help smiling at all the excited young. Some ran and jumped up and down, unable to contain themselves. Others were too small to walk, being pushed around in curious little carts. They were all incredibly sweet looking. It reminded him of the new park built in the center of Sargon back home.

“Um, guys, I don’t know how we’re all going to get in. I have enough cash for a few of us, but not everyone,” Abby commented as she looked at the line of humans in front of the main building.

“I’ve got my credit card.” Hope pulled her communicator and a plastic card from her pocket.

“No,” Abby blurted, capturing the attention of a passing family. She pointed to some trees and led them out of earshot of the public. “That’s how we were found in the club. You shouldn’t even have your phone. Crap.” Abby ran a nervous hand through her curly red hair.

“Do you mean this thing?” Aculus snatched the communicator from Hope’s hand.

“Yeah.” Abby nodded. “Shit, shit, shit.”

Ashtoret took another look around, studying the crowd a second time. The human warriors could easily change clothes, so he critically eyed any male who appeared to be alone. Except there weren’t any lone males. They either were toting young or escorting females.

“Dammit, bonehead, give that back,” Hope demanded.

“Sorry, Nadzia, this is compromising our mission.” Aculus crushed the communicator, then for good measure dropped it and ground it under his boot.

“Son of a bitch.” Hope punched Aculus in the chest. “Ow. Dammit!” She recoiled and held her fist.

“Now, ivory beauty, you went and injured yourself,” Aculus tsked as he grabbed Hope’s fist and placed a kiss on her knuckles.

“How was I supposed to know? It’s not like I run from Feds every day,” Hope growled and pulled her hand away. “If I’ve botched everything, we might as well use my credit card to get in.”

“We don’t know for sure that they’re following your phone,” Abby countered.

“I give up. How are we getting in?” Hope threw her hands up in defeat.

“Let’s go over the fence,” Terentius suggested as he surveyed the slat wall.

“Good idea,” Faktil agreed.

“Not here. There’s cameras.” Abby pointed to the surveillance unit mounted atop the squat building.

They followed the fence into the trees, then one by one scaled the wall. Ashtoret balanced at the top of the fence and Aculus tossed Hope up. He caught her and passed her down to Terentius, who stood on a bin of rubbish. Next was Abby. Then he and Aculus joined the others on solid ground.

“Ew. We certainly picked a spot,” Hope commented with a scrunched-up nose as she looked at the collection of trash bins.

Besides the rank trash there were a host of other unusual scents. Some of the smells came from sweet and fried foods, others came from the odd assortment of beasts housed in the park. He paused, seeing a pair of brown boots outside the gate concealing their group and the garbage bins. He held up his hand, motioning for silence till the human passed.

“We spread out. I’ll escort Abby and Hope,” he instructed everyone.

“I’ll be with you,” Aculus insisted with a keen eye on Hope.

There was no point arguing with the smitten bony warrior, and Aculus was more than capable. It would be good to have him close by.

“I assume you have a way to contact Frank to arrange where we’ll meet, since you obliterated my phone.” Hope’s brow rose as she eyed the armored warrior.

“Of course.” Aculus tapped the handheld strapped to his bony forearm.

“Here’s a map.” Abby picked a stained scrap of paper off the ground. “So, where should we meet Frank?” She unfolded the colorful map.

“This area looks like it has several ways in and out. What are these long-necked beasts?” He studied the drawing of the curious speckled creature.



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“Giraffes. They’re from the African continent,” Abby replied.

“Sounds good, let’s contact Frank.” Hope nodded.

He listened as Aculus contacted Frank and the sisters arranged the meeting. Once it was clear outside, he eased open the gate and they emerged from their smelly hideout. The group spread out, so they didn’t draw attention while heading to the long-necked beast’s enclosure.

“I want a snow cone,” Abby declared when they passed a café stand.

“Seriously? We just ate.” Hope quirked a brow at her.

“Humor me. We have time.” Abby sidled up to her sister. “And this will make us look normal.” Abby glanced from him to Aculus.

Even in disguise they still stood out in the human crowd, with the way they towered over everyone. Though he wasn’t sure how grabbing a snack would help that.

“Fine, get me a cherry flavored one. Ooh and some popcorn.”

“Oh no, we just ate,” Abby mocked her sister, making him chuckle.

He kept one eye on the humans moving about while Abby fetched the food. She returned with two red conical-shaped items and a bag of yellow bits he assumed was the popcorn.

“Here, have a taste.” Abby handed him one cone while passing the other snacks to Hope.

He took the red snow cone and noticed it was cold. It looked like shredded ice covered in some sort of syrup. He took a bite and smiled. It was sweet.

“Not too bad, huh?” She took the icy sweet and nibbled on it. “Reminds me of when we were kids.” She smiled wide.

He wanted to laugh at the way her lips and tongue instantly turned bright red, but kept quiet so he didn’t attract attention.

“Hope’s not the badass she thinks she is.” Abby pointed toward her sister. “She’s got a mean sweet tooth, but look at how she’s sharing with Aculus.”

He nodded in amusement and they continued on. They passed a large habitat and he halted in his tracks, his eyes going wide seeing the hairy creatures within.

They’ve imprisoned Toufik.

Ashtoret took two steps toward the tall fence. The black-haired male turned, and he noticed its arms were a little too long, its body overly rotund. As he studied the creature he saw the face wasn’t to a Toufik at all, except for all the hair. This distant cousin’s nose was much too broad and flat, the forehead sloped. Ashtoret relaxed. For a moment he’d worried they had a far larger problem than he expected to find when coming to Earth. This beast was intelligent enough, but it was content to gamble about, munch leaves, and eye its female companion.

“This way, Ash.” Abby tugged his arm.

He surreptitiously captured an image of the creature with his handheld then let Abby

lead the way. They reached the tawny long-necked beasts with the giant brown spots and he couldn't help gape at them. It was curious how they could even hold their heads up with such a spindly neck. He felt like one of the human young with the way he stared in awe at the creatures. There was nothing like this zoo on Cadi.

"Should we just sit and wait?" Hope asked.

"I guess so," Abby replied with a shrug. "I suppose you better go so you don't spook Frank."

Ashtoret nodded and kissed Abby on top of her head. He glanced around, noting where the others sat or stood attempting to blend in while keeping watch for human warriors who might try to hide amidst the families. He chose a spot where he could easily watch over Abby and Hope as they waited.

The young humans didn't pay him any attention as they jostled around him to get a better look at the long-necked creatures inside the enclosure. An older male approached Abby and Hope, and Ashtoret was instantly on alert. He took a step forward then stopped when Abby stood wearing an easy smile as she gave the male a hug.

This must be Frank.

He eased into his original position against the tree and pretended to watch the tall spotted creatures, while observing the trio in his periphery. The crowd grew loud and chaotic as several dozen lively youth arrived, inundating the path. They all wore matching uniforms and appeared to be part of an academy. The adults in the group struggled to corral the young while discussing the animals. He shifted out of their way, attempting to get a better view of Abby, Hope and Frank, then froze.

Abby! They were gone.

Overwhelming panic gripped him as he looked both ways. He pushed through the crowd as fast as he could without knocking any of the young down.

“Abby!” he yelled, not caring about the frightened looks directed his way.

Abby

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“I don’t understand what’s going on,” Abby exclaimed as Frank hustled her and Hope toward the staff entrance of the giraffe exhibit.

“You’ve got a tail,” Frank replied brusquely.

She hadn’t see anything odd, unless Spec-ops was recruiting school children now.

Maybe he saw the guys.

“No. Wait. We had a couple friends bring us.” She tried to pull away, but Frank held her tight.

Her eyes widened when half a dozen soldiers greeted them upon entering the animal care building. Her gaze swung toward Frank, eyes narrowing.

“You called the Feds,” Hope leveled the accusation before Abby could get the words out.

“The vehicle is waiting out back on the access road,” one of the soldiers in fatigues reported.

“What the fuck, Frank?!” Abby screeched and started struggling harder to get away.

“We’ve got five incoming,” another grim-faced asshole announced.

“Good! Ash. Ash!” she screamed.

“Shut up.” One of the Spec-ops grabbed her arm and started running through the building.

She tried to resist but the guy was wrenching her arm, forcing her to keep up.

“Ow, dammit, asshole!” Hope yelled at another soldier giving her the same treatment.

Abby was shocked the prick didn’t use her to shove open the back door. There was a feral snarl unlike anything she’d ever heard. It sounded like one of the lions had gotten loose. Her head swung to see two hooded figures jump over the twenty-foot fence.

“Ash!” she screamed again as the soldier shoved her into a black SUV.

Ash let out another enraged roar while he raced toward her. The car door slammed, locking her and Hope inside, just as the soldiers started firing at Ash and Aculus.

“No!” she cried in horror, pounding on the window as the nightmare unfolded.

“Oh my god. Oh, fucking god,” Hope screamed.

Before the SUV peeled out, spraying gravel in its wake, she watched Aculus and Ash dive to avoid gunfire.

“Please be okay. Please be okay,” Abby chanted with her hand on the glass, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“What is your problem, Frank? We trusted you!” Hope bellowed.

“You girls have no idea what you’ve gotten yourselves involved in,” Frank retorted from the passenger seat.

Immense anger filled her. She never expected this kind of betrayal.

“What have you done? Dad is your friend,” she snarled.

“Dad better be all right.” Hope glared at Frank.

“I was told you two were abducted, but I have a feeling that wasn’t the case,” Frank barked. “Do you have any idea what these things are capable of?”

“People, not things,” she countered, undaunted by Frank’s surly attitude.

“Are you trying to start a war Earth can’t possibly deal with?” Hope pointed out.

“You have no understanding of what’s going on.” Frank then clamped his mouth shut and didn’t say another word as they drove.

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Hope took her hand and held it tight. It was probably a good thing, since she was entertaining thoughts of strangling the people in the front seat. It was a futile notion. They'd wreck, then another blacked-out SUV would scoop them up and they'd be back at square one. Still the violent impulse was riding her hard, making her tremble all over.

Ash, please be okay.

She stared out the window to distract herself, and recognized they were heading back to the Air Force base.

“Why did I assume we'd be going to some lone building in the middle of nowhere?” Hope snarked.

Abby snorted at the flippant comment and squeezed Hope's hand tighter. Despite the wit, she could tell her sister was scared shitless. The feeling was mutual.

The SUV pulled in front of a nondescript building on base and a pair of soldiers unceremoniously pulled them out of the car. She tried to catch a glimpse of who was in the other SUV pulling up but they were swiftly ushered inside. The soldiers marched them past a bevy of stiff sober-faced guards and into an elevator. She could feel it descending into the bowels of God only knew what kind of hell.

“Are you taking us to see Dad?” she asked but Frank didn't reply as they exited the cubicle.

The warren of halls beneath the base was daunting, but she tried to hold it together.



They reached a long hall with several ominous doors and her tremors got worse, making it hard to walk.

“No!” Abby struggled as they tugged her one direction while Hope was taken another.

“Abby!” Hope cried.

“Frank, please,” she begged, but he just gave a stern shake of his head as he turned his back.

The soldier shoved her into a small room and slammed the metal door with a clang.

“Let me out. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

She tugged the knob and pounded on the door, but it was pointless. She turned slowly and eyed the room. It was a scene straight out of every horrible action movie; pale bland walls with a wide one-way mirror, bright lights, and a lone metal chair sitting in the center.

“Sit down, Miss Murray,” the voice barked through the speaker.

“I can hear you just fine,” she countered a bit more bravely than she honestly felt.

Abby knew it was wiser to cooperate, but all the emotions coursing through her were making it hard to think straight. Bile rose in her throat as she pictured Ash laying bloody on the ground or captured and dragged to another non-descript room. The notion of never seeing him again was crippling. Thoughts of her dad and sister made the nausea worse. The least of her fears was being forgotten in a place like this, but it flirted at the edge of her mind, taunting her. There was no way she could sit. Abby paced, otherwise she’d collapse and curl into a ball.

“Tell us everything from the beginning,” the voice demanded.

She glanced toward the speaker and tried to focus.

Pull your shit together.

She had to be smart and figure out what to do here. She could say nothing and not implicate herself any further in whatever they suspected.

I think this is a bit past that. They obviously saw you escape in a damn spaceship.

That was the trick; how much did they know? She didn't want to risk Ash's safety or the rest of her family. She closed her eyes, desperately trying to figure this out.

I'm not cutout for this shit. Oh, God. She repressed the threatening tears.

Her eyes opened slowly as something dawned on her. She was being very selfish. Her family never asked for any of this bullshit, but there was so much more at risk. Ash came to Earth to help protect her people. He risked his life for them. She had to stop fearing for herself, her family and even Ash.

“You are the Department of Defense, Advance Aerospace Threat Identification Division, aren't you?” Abby squared her shoulders as she stared at the mirror.

“We will ask the questions.”

She smiled wanly at whoever was on the other side of the mirror. This was how they did things. Their fear made them insist on controlling the situation no matter how deplorable the means. She had to work around that if anything was going to be accomplished here.

“I’ll assume that’s a yes considering everything that’s happened, Frank and my father’s connections,” she countered. “Well, every conversation begins somewhere, though you really take the cake with initiating these discussions,” she huffed, gathering her thoughts. “Unexpectedly, I find myself an ambassador.” Abby paused, thinking she heard the subtle release of air by whoever was on the other side of the microphone. “I’ve been made aware of a threat to our people and planet. Although that threat isn’t coming from the people you are currently hounding.”

“I fail to believe this. Several people have been injured in an attempt to make contact with these individuals.”

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“Ha!” she barked out. “Please. I’m not an idiot and neither are you. You trashed my house, took my father by force as well as one of the Cadi, and so on. Your first response was offense, rash and stupid. Did you expect the Cadi to just let you attack them?”

“Conceded. But you, little girl, are too quick to trust. Do you think the devil plays nice when he comes knocking on your door?” the voice scoffed.

“True.” She nodded. “Regardless, you incited a negative response with your behavior. And since I’ve spent time with the Cadi, where I wasn’t threatening them, I’ve learned a few things you probably haven’t.” She thought about poor Vintor and what they might be doing to him to get information. “So, if you want to stop insulting me, I’ll share what I know, since I don’t want any of us to come to harm.”

“Very well, we’re listening.”

“The people I met are here to hide our planet from a race of reptilian people who are basically slaving space pirates.”

“Reptiles.” The voice was even rather than mocking.

“Yes, they’re called Juru Bilja something. Sorry I can’t really recall the name.”

“And why would these Cadi bother to help us? If that is indeed the case.”

“Suspicious as ever. If you’re not going to trust my perceptions and what I tell you, we can stop right now.”

“Continue,” the voice demanded in agitation.

“Well, my sister, who went missing a year ago, was rescued by them, and is now happily living among the Cadi.”

“So, these Cadi plucked your sister out of the sky?”

“No. She was rescued by the Cadi from the reptiles. The point is, I’ve spoken with the Cadi and Providence, so I know and trust what I’ve learned. The Cadi are enemies of these reptiles. From what I’ve learned, the reptiles are bad news. And because the Cadi are decent people, they don’t want Earth to be raped and pillaged. They want to protect us and needed our help to hide our planet, but you shot first rather than hearing what they had to say.”

“If your sister was supposedly rescued from these reptiles, then it would seem the reptiles already know where Earth is. Hiding it seems pointless.”

“I never said the reptiles took Providence. There’s a different race of people doing that.”

“Another race?” The voice sounded intrigued but not surprised.

This was getting convoluted. Telling them about the people harvesting humans to start a doomsday colony wasn’t going to help Ash. It would probably hurt him, since the Feds weren’t inclined to trust.

“Yes, MS something. I can’t tell you much about them, except the Cadi didn’t seem threatened by them, not like the reptiles.” That was the best she could offer.

Abby did her best to speak truthfully without causing more strife, as they asked her questions, often repeating the same ones. It was maddening, but she tried to remain

patient. Eventually the questions ceased, then a guard entered and led her down the hall.

“You don’t have to hold my arm so tight. Where am I really going to go?” she groused at the guy, who merely grunted and kept walking.

She held down her trepidation as they approached another stark metal door. It opened to reveal Hope and her father.

“Oh my god.”

Abby shrugged off the soldier’s grasp and raced into the room. She hugged her father tight. He looked haggard, like he hadn’t slept in days. But besides a fading bruise on his cheek, he appeared uninjured.

“Oh, Peanut, I’m so sorry about all of this.” Brennan caressed her cheek.

“It’s hardly your fault.” She sat beside her dad on the bench.

“I say we blame Pro,” Hope snorted morosely from his other side.

“Angel,” Brennan husked wistfully as he was reminded of Providence.

“We got to see and talk to her, Dad,” Abby encouraged.

“And she looks good.” Hope grinned as she squeezed Brennan’s hand.

“Happy, too,” she added.

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“Really?” Brennan looked from one daughter to the other, hope sparking in his eyes. It made her smile.

“Yeah, Dad. The Cadi are legit, and good people.” She nodded and leaned into him.

It was such a relief to see him.

“What did you tell them?” Brennan asked.

“Nothing,” Hope sighed. “I’m still not sure this isn’t some crazy dream.”

“I told them they’ve got their panties in a bunch over the wrong people,” she huffed. “I figured we were way past denying their existence.”

“True. I may have made some progress. We might be able to get some people who don’t have their heads up their asses to listen to the Cadi’s plan, but it’s still a long shot,” Brennan spoke soberly.

“Do you really think they’re just going to let us waltz out of here with the other guy they took once this is over?” She worried her bottom lip with her teeth.

“I’m working on it, girls,” Brennan encouraged, while hugging them close.

“What about the trackers?” Hope asked.

Abby perked up at the thought, then her shoulders dropped.

“That’s assuming the guys aren’t trapped in here somewhere.”



11 Mine

Ashtoret de Origa

Ashtoret ran, fueled by his fury.

They took my bonded! he silently roared.

Fear for her had him in an unrelenting grip. Providence talked about the horrific experiments her own people would do to her if she ever returned. Now these vile people had Abby.

I shouldn't have put her in this position.

"The cruisers are landing this way." Aculus tugged his arm, bringing him to a halt.

"My bonded is going that way," he roared.

"We can't catch the vehicles on foot and we're not equipped to evade the warriors pursuing us," Aculus rumbled, his red eyes flashing.

Every instinct in him rebelled, telling him they needed to follow the black vehicles. It was hard fighting the driving need as Abby's scream replayed in his mind. He was so close to her when the humans opened fire, forcing them to retreat. But Aculus was right.

Ashtoret ran faster toward the flickering streaks of the landing cloaked cruisers,

ignoring the pain in his muscles. It was nothing compared to the pain of loss gripping his chest. They swiftly boarded and were off the ground again, not bothering to strap in.

“Bring up the location of the trackers,” Aculus barked to the cruiser as they stormed into the control room. “There. That’s where they were taken.”

“I know the Daimio ordered us to avoid conflict, but I’m getting my mate back. Kagan will just have to understand. You can drop me off if you disagree,” he snarled to Aculus and Payim.

“My ass you’re going in alone,” Aculus countered, menace filling his voice. He marched over to a panel on the wall and punched it. The wall slid open to reveal an array of weapons and armor. “Shell up.”

He cast the male a wicked grin. Aculus was full of surprises. The bony warrior stripped then clapped a spiky vambrace on each arm, and similarly rugged greaves on his legs. It seemed a bit like overkill for the naturally armored male, but the Osivoire wasn’t invincible. There were two cracks in the bony plate on Aculus’ chest where the humans shot him with their projectile weapons.

“Thank you for being my shield.” He clapped a hand on Aculus’ shoulder.

“Don’t mention it.” Aculus nodded and passed him pieces of armor.

He stripped off his vestments and slapped the armor in place just as Aculus did. Ashtoret’s eyes widened at the strange tingling in his skin when the armor adhered to his body. Aculus touched a spot on his wrist and things got weirder. The armor expanded, forming an exoskeleton. It was hard holding his composure as it slid over his skin like a living thing. He looked in awe at his arms and legs. The spiky armor concealed him from head to toe. The creepiest part was the shield over his eyes which

tinted his vision red.

“You look like an Osivoire merc. All except that tail,” Aculus chuckled as he engaged his own armor.

The male was right. His tail was the only thing that gave him away, but even that was covered in a spiked bony sheath. Ashtoret flexed his fist, then bent his knees. He flicked his tail and it smashed against the hull with an impressive thud. He had full range of motion, no restrictions. The Osivoire shell was amazing.

“Here.” Aculus passed him a weapon much like a disrupter. “It’s set to stun, but this sensor will adjust the strength to a fatal level.”

“They never should’ve threatened my female,” Ashtoret snarled. He would use deadly force without regret.

“Agreed,” Aculus growled.

He tilted his head toward Payim.

“We might as well go in with everything we’ve got.” Aculus nodded.

“You heard our friend, Payim, shell up.”

Payim growled in agreement and grabbed some gear.

Aculus set the autopilot then they headed to the belly of the cruiser, where the bony warrior flung open the hatch. The pull of the whipping wind was intense as he stared down at the earth far below. Ashtoret tilted his head in question.

“We jump,” Aculus replied to his incredulous expression.

This is the craziest thing I've ever done. But he would do anything to get Abby.

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“Follow me feet first. When you hit, tuck your knees, and roll. The shell will absorb the shock,” Aculus instructed, then launched himself out of the cruiser.

Once the male was clear, he took a deep breath and followed.

“By Kali,” Ashtoret bellowed as he plummeted toward the ground. This was nothing like he imagined, daunting and thrilling at the same time.

He glanced up and noticed the rest of Aculus’ vessels and crew had joined them. A small army was rocketing through the sky, descending on the dishonorable humans’ stronghold. He smiled at his bony friend. The humans raised their ire and now they were going to learn what it meant to tangle with the Cadi and Osivoire.

The ground came up fast. He tucked and rolled. Ashtoret was surprised when he came to a halt and all his parts were intact. But there was no time for that. He grabbed the disrupter from his chest and took off with Aculus, the others following close behind.

“You’ve been holding out on us,” he hollered to the bony warrior as they approached the building holding his female.

Aculus laughed then grew grim. A contingent of human warriors were advancing in their boxy green vehicles, weapons aimed. Ashtoret braced himself for the steady spray of projectiles the humans fired, but there was no need. He roared a demented laugh as the bullets ricocheted off his bony armor.

A metal ball bounced at their feet then exploded with a blinding flash. He was knocked back, a spray of black turf raining all around. Ashtoret leapt to his feet and

grinned, seeing he was unharmed.

“Brace yourself,” he bellowed when another of the exploding balls launched into their midst.

He and Aculus hunkered down, leaning into the blast so it didn’t blow them back. He remembered to close his eyes as it detonated. The inconsequential heat of the blast and pressure subsided, and they continued toward their goal. The humans’ eyes were wide with fear as he leapt over the hood of their vehicle. Some shot but most just gaped.

Ashtoret opened fire on the uniformed human warriors as he broke through their ranks. He couldn’t have them following. He wasn’t killing them, but it was still satisfying.

Aculus fired on the humans spilling from the building, dropping them instantly. They stormed into the building to find another squadron hunkered down behind a thick clear barrier.

“Who is your commander?” he demanded over the blaring alarms, his words translating through his communicator.

“I am.” A brave looking male stepped forward. The slight tremor in his hand betrayed his true emotions. Ashtoret recognized him from the zoo.

“Remove the barrier and lead us to the females you abducted,” he barked, making the human warrior jump.

“You were the ones who abducted those women.”

“Then why did Abby scream my name when you took her? If you value your life, you

won't stand between me and my female."

"Many will die if you force us to blow this shield," Aculus snarled.

"Then we die. We all knew what we were signing up for," the human countered with more bravado than was wise.

"No need. I'm sure I can get this barrier open," Scala, Aculus' second in command, interjected as he stuck his handheld up to a sensor on the wall. "There's numerous corridors and sublevels to this structure."

"If we take them all out it's going to be more difficult to find our females," Aculus huffed in frustration as the barrier rose.

"So, we take the commander," Ashtoret growled and lunged forward.

He ignored the blasts as the humans opened fire. A stupidly brave human came straight for him. Ashtoret knocked him back. His tail lashed out at another sneaking up on his back. He grabbed the commander by the neck as the bastard fired directly at his chest. It stung at such close range, but he ignored it and wrenched the weapon from the male's grasp.

"Where is she?" he snarled in the commander's face.

The human wasn't so brave anymore, but he still refused to speak.

"I will ask you one more time. Where is my mate?" Ashtoret lifted the commander off the floor by his neck.

The puny human futilely grasped his arm while choking out incoherent sounds. The commander's gaze inadvertently darted toward a door as his face turned red. Self-

preservation made him slip-up.

“That’s where we need to go,” Aculus barked.

As Ashtoret dropped the commander, he glanced around at all the unconscious humans. Those who were still awake had their hands up and were huddling against the wall.

“Maintain our exit.” He pointed to a handful of their crew. “You’re coming with us.” He grabbed the human commander and tugged him toward the door at the far end of the vestibule.



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The blaring alarms and flashing lights in the narrow stairwell added to his foul mood. Ashtoret wasn't very kind as he hauled the human down the stairs. He knew they were getting close when human warriors opened fire from below.

"Unless you want to be killed by your own people, call them off," Aculus informed the captive commander.

"As you can see, your weapons have little effect on us," he added.

"Hold your fire!" the male bellowed as they continued downward.

The human warriors didn't listen to their comrade and kept firing. Ashtoret wasn't cruel, despite how incensed he was. He shoved the poor fool behind him as they descended. Sadly, it wasn't enough. Several ricocheting bullets struck the male and he dropped. Aculus shook his head as he stepped over the body.

It took little effort knocking out the other humans as they reached the lower level. Frustratingly, the metal door that greeted them didn't have an electronic lock.

"Get these humans out of blast range," Aculus commanded as he placed a charge on the door.

They each grabbed two unconscious human warriors and hauled them up to the next level, then descended again. The metal portal blew off its hinges, flying into the corridor, crushing the stone wall beyond. They stormed into the hall before the dust could settle. He growled in annoyance seeing more of the stubborn humans.

“Give up. You’re not keeping me from my mate.”

Beyond the squadron, people were fleeing down the corridor in both directions. His team fired on the human warriors, ignoring the ones who were unarmed and not in uniform.

“The females are this way.” Aculus looked at his handheld and pointed down the hall.

As they stepped over the unconscious humans, a faint but recognizable roar captured his attention and his head swiveled around.

“Vintor!”

“We’ll go get him. You find your bonded,” Terentius said, then he and Cerdic ran toward the barely discernible sound.

The rest of them continued forward, taking a left down an intersecting passage. No sooner had he turned the corner when an undeniable scent gripped him.

Abby!

He raced down the hall with Aculus and three others hot on his tail. He no longer needed the locator to tell him where his mate was, the conjugo bond led the way.

Abby

Abby jumped when the alarm started blaring.

“What’s going on?” she asked her father.

“I don’t know, Peanut.” Brennan pounded on the door, but there was no answer.

“Dammit, someone let us out!”

None of the people they heard running past the locked door bothered to stop and help them. Her father cracked his knuckles several times and she knew this was bad.

“Abby!”

Her head shot up hearing the muffled roar.

“Nadzia.”

“They really came for us.” Hope jumped up.

“We’re in here!” Abby pounded on the door.

“Stand back!” Ash bellowed.

“The cavalry’s here, Dad.” Hope tugged their father away from the door.

“We are, but it’s a small room,” she yelled.

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There were several blasts that deformed the doorframe, then the door swung open.

“Abby!” Ash rumbled as he stormed into the room.

She rushed forward then stopped when the smoke cleared.

“Ash?” She tilted her head as she eyed the bone-armored behemoth. That was his voice, but the figure looked more like Aculus.

He engulfed her, careful not to jab her with the spiky ridges on his forearms. She relaxed seeing his tail flicking behind him.

“What the hell?” Her father tried to tug her back.

Ash snarled menacingly at Brennan, and her eyes widened at the frightening sound.

“Ash, are you okay?” She stared up at his armor-covered face, wishing she could see his expression. His eyes were a creepy red, like Aculus’.

Ash nodded curtly as he swung her into his arms and possessively squared off against her father. She wasn’t sure what was going on with him; he knew her Dad.

“Nadzia.” Aculus made a grab for Hope.

“Whoa there, bonehead. You guys are freaking my dad out.”

“I am freaked out,” Aculus mimicked with a rumble. “You were abducted.” He

snatched Hope in his big bony arms.

“It’s all right, Dad,” Hope sighed. “Meet Aculus.” Hope rapped her knuckles on Aculus’ armored chest.

“And you remember Ash.” Abby patted her Cadi hero.

Brennan looked dubiously at the two men holding his daughters, then to the door where more armored aliens waited.

“We need to leave now,” Ash insisted. He didn’t sound like himself. His voice was more gruff and snarly. “Wrap around me.”

She was so elated to see him, she forgot what it took for Ash to get to her. The terrifying realization that he just fought his way through an entire army stabbed deep, making her heart cry out. No wonder he was acting weird, he’d just done the impossible. She frantically looked him over for injuries. Finding, thankfully, the armor kept him whole. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and gripped tight.

“No argument here.” Abby gave him a watery but eager smile.

Brennan didn’t argue further as they fled the cell. The corridor was disturbingly empty as they raced past the unmarked doors and hallways.

“This is a new look for you. You’re a two-ply bonehead now,” Hope tapped Aculus’ forehead.

“Your sibling is rather disrespectful,” an Osivoire commented to Abby.

“She does that when she’s scared,” or all the time. But she wasn’t about to admit that her sister was irreverent and caustic on her good days. Hope deserved a pass for

everything they'd been through.

The bony man nodded and continued down the corridor.

Brennan eyed her sideways.

“What?” she mouthed with a shrug and a sheepish smile.

Her dad shook his head then turned his attention back to the hallway ahead.

“Ashtoret.” Two bony armored Cadi approached from an intersecting passage.

“We attempted to follow Vintor, but he was taken through another exit before we could reach him. We were unable to break through it with blast rounds.”

Ash snarled.

“We need to leave. The females and their sire are vulnerable,” Aculus rumbled.

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Ash gave Aculus a curt nod and they started running again. Sadness filled her that they were forced to leave Vintor behind.

The guys took the stairs three at a time. Her eyes widened when they emerged on the ground level. There were bodies lying everywhere. She didn't know what she expected, but somehow the sight was more horrific than she imagined. Abby hid her face in Ash's armored chest.

"What the fuck?" Brennan bellowed. "You massacred all these people just to get us?!"

"The majority of them are stunned. We did not use lethal force. Your people are the ones responsible for the dead you see," Aculus replied, sounding disgusted.

"Sorry," Brennan apologized to their rescuers with a shake of his head.

"I think the humans have brought their entire force, but we have an extraction plan," Scala reported.

"We'll wait for your signal, Captain." Aculus nodded to his Osivoire friend.

They hung back against a wall. She couldn't see around Ash's large body, but it sounded like pandemonium outside. The chaos grew then oddly became quiet.

"Hold on tight," Ash rumbled to her.

She glanced out the window before tucking her head into his shoulder. Five silver

spaceships had landed in a tight semicircle around the entrance, forcing the Air Force to retreat to a safe distance. One was positioned with its ramp close to the door.

“Go,” Scala instructed.

Ash guarded her back and head as they made a break for the cruiser. She didn’t breathe till they were finally up the ramp.

Abby screamed when a blast rocked the ship, knocking her and Ash to the floor. He shielded her body, but she still felt the searing heat rushing through the entrance. The flash was blinding, and her ears rang from the explosion. He swiftly picked her up and continued running.

“Are you okay?” Ash bellowed as he set her down, his hands turning her head left and right to check for injuries.

“Yeah,” she murmured and blinked in shock.

Before the stars in her vision cleared, he’d disappeared. She found herself sitting against the cruiser hull with her stunned sister nearby. Hope’s clothes were crumpled, her hair in disarray.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Hope stammered.

Abby staggered to her feet and entered the small loading bay. The door on the cruiser was already sealed, so she couldn’t see what was going on outside. There were several armored men standing over something on the floor.

“Get her out of here,” Ash roared.



“Wait. What happened?”

“I’ve got the females.” Aculus quickly approached her.

She caught a glimpse of blood and pale charred skin.

“Dad!” The agonizing scream ripped free as Aculus scooped her up and rushed out of the bay. “Let me see him! What happened?” She batted at the bony man’s chest.

“Abby, it’s not a good idea. We’re going to get him back to the ship and into the sanative capsule.”

“Where’s Dad? What’s going on?” Hope asked when they reentered the short corridor leading to the control room.

The horrific sight of her injured father lying on the floor kept replaying in her mind as Aculus set her down.

“No. No!” Hope cried, seeing the expression on her face.

“We will do everything we can,” Aculus replied softly as he led them to the control room and helped them into their seats.

“Why are you saying it like that?” Hope demanded. “Somebody tell me what happened!”

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“Hope! Please stop.” She teared up.

Hope’s eyes widened further, and she gripped Aculus’ hand. “Tell me he’s going to be all right. Tell me!”

Aculus knelt in front of Hope. “Nadzia, I will do everything in my power to make sure your sire is fine. Cartil is tending him now.” He was sincere, but the grim expression on his face said it all.

“Oh God,” Hope sobbed and reached for her.

It’s bad, really bad.

Ashtoret de Origa

“Hold on, sire,” Ashtoret prayed as he stayed by Brennan’s side.

Brennan was barely holding onto life. If it wasn’t for Aculus’ medic, Cartil, the male would be dead already. Brennan’s left side was badly charred, and he was missing his leg below the knee.

May Kali rain torment down on you, he cursed the human warriors responsible for this horrific act. He couldn’t believe the dishonorable bastards launched munitions at the building, disregarding everyone’s lives. Providence and Giselle spoke of how their people were warmongers, but he never imagined they’d so cavalierly sacrifice their own.

They reached Aculus' vessel on the moon and docked. He quickly moved Brennan out of the cruiser before the females could see their sire.

"Thank you," he said grimly to Scala and Cartil.

"No need," Scala replied as they moved Brennan through the large ship to the clinic.

"Place him here in the sanative capsule." Cartil pointed to the sterile pod, then began tapping on the console.

Scala aided him in placing Brennan in the capsule then it sealed shut.

"The humans are similar enough. We should be able to save his life." Cartil patted Ashtoret on the back.

"Thanks." He nodded in appreciation as he stared at the poor male.

Abby's going to be devastated. His heart ached as the machine worked to stabilize Brennan.

"The females are getting anxious to see their sire," Aculus commented. He hadn't even heard the armored warrior enter the clinic.

"The capsule is still stabilizing the human and assessing his vitals, although it might help the male to hear his offspring nearby," the Osivoire medic replied.

"What's your honest outlook, Cartil?"

"The damage is too extensive to repair with what we have here. If we were home he'd have a chance."

“Will he make it that far?”

“If we keep him in stasis inside the capsule,” Cartil replied.

“We need to let Abby and Hope know.” Ashtoret dreaded this conversation.

“Let’s go get them,” Aculus sighed with just as much enthusiasm.

It was a long walk to the lounge. Payim and Thunder sat with the females, keeping them company and distracting them with conversation.

“I remember your sister’s arrival on our dying world. She was fearless,” Payim translated Thunder’s hand gestures.

“Pro is pretty fearless.” Hope smiled wanly.

“She guaranteed our safety when we were sucked into the pale one’s ship with her mate, Dagaa. If it wasn’t for her help, I never would’ve seen my own sister again.”

“I’m so glad she could be there for you, Thunder.” Abby patted Thunder’s furry arm. She glanced up and saw him. “Ash!”

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Abby was instantly by his side, squeezing him tight. It was hard seeing her like this, with her eyes red from crying. She'd suffered so much these last few days.

"We've come to take you to your sire," he husked past the lump in his throat.

"Okay." Abby twined her fingers with his as they left the lounge.

Aculus stopped before they reached the clinic, turned to Hope and gripped her shoulders.

"Your sire was severely injured when the incendiary struck. Before you see him, I wanted you to be prepared."

Hope nodded, tears streaming down her cheeks. She tried to speak but no words came out.

"But he's alive?" Abby asked, her voice wavering.

"He is alive, but just barely. If he is to survive, we will need to take him back with us."

"Oh God." Hope's hand flew to her mouth.

"I will do everything I can, and will bring him back here once he's healed," Aculus reassured Hope as he wrapped her in his arms.

"I'm sorry." Ashtoret gripped Abby tight against him.

“We need to find Mom,” Abby sobbed. “She has to know what’s going on.”

“We will get her. You all can come back with us. I wouldn’t think of separating you,” the bony warrior promised.

“Thank you,” Hope whispered.

They stepped into the clinic and the females were instantly at their sire’s side, peering into the capsule.

“Oh, Dad,” Abby cried as horror transformed her face.

“He-he looks...” Hope’s chin trembled.

“He’s in stasis,” Cartil assured the females.

“How can you fix this? His leg is gone. His face is...” Abby wailed. The mournful sound was crushing.

“His injuries are extensive, but we have the ability to fix this.”

“We need to leave soon if Brennan is to survive. What do you want to do about Vintor and the cloaking array?” Aculus asked him quietly as the females hovered by their sire.

Ashtoret closed his eyes, the reminder adding to the burden he already felt.

“I’ll lead one team to set up the array, then pick up Abby’s mother at first light,” he bit out.

I’m sorry, Vintor. The thought of leaving his friend behind was indescribable.

“No, I’ll head up one team and Terentius will lead the other. You need to stay here with your bonded. We’ll leave immediately,” Payim insisted.

“Agreed,” Thunder gestured.

“Vintor is not entirely lost, my friend. I will be returning again.” Aculus gripped his shoulder.

Ashtoret watched his bonded hug the capsule as devastation sent tremors through her body. He wanted to console her but couldn’t bring himself to approach. It felt like a lie, when he was to blame for putting her and her family at risk from the moment he landed on Earth. And this time Abby nearly died.

### 12 Second Thoughts

Abby

Abby roused with a groan and stretched to work the kink out of her neck. She'd spent an uncomfortable, long night in the chair by her father's bed.

No, not a bed.

Her hand drifted over the lid of the strange see-through coffin. As frightening as it looked, it was the only thing keeping him alive. She'd memorized the pattern of lights and symbols on the console and was relieved to see they hadn't changed while she slept.

She glanced over to find Ash wide awake in the nearby chair. He looked grim and had been very quiet since the rescue.

"Thank you for staying with us. Are you hungry? I'll go get you something to eat," she offered as she approached him.

"No. I need to go get your mother. I wanted to be sure you were fine first." He abruptly stood.

She tried to give him a hug but he sidestepped her and headed for the door.

"Ash?" Abby grabbed his hand, confused by his demeanor.



“I’ve been thinking, maybe it would be best if you returned to Earth with Hope and your parents once Brennan has been healed,” Ash said gruffly as he pulled away.

“Wait. What?” Abby’s eyes widened. The comment completely blindsided her.

“I must go get ready.” His tone was curt.

“Not before you tell me what that was about,” she insisted.

“It’s for the best,” he rumbled with a bitter shake of his head then stormed out the door, leaving her behind in shock.

She was still standing there with confused tears running down her cheeks when Aculus entered the clinic carrying several plates of food.

“Mmm, that smells good.” Hope roused in her chair.

“It’s for you. What is wrong, Abby?” Aculus asked as he handed Hope a platter.

“Is something wrong with Dad?” Hope looked at their father in panic.

“No, Dad’s the same.” Abby shook her head. “Ash just broke up with me,” she sobbed.

“I don’t understand?” Hope swiftly enveloped her in a hug.

“I don’t either.”

“Where is that male?” Aculus asked, looking perturbed on her behalf.

“He’s going to get my mom.”

“I’ll go talk to him, Abby.”

“You do that, and give him a piece of my mind,” Hope snarled as Aculus left.

“I don’t understand what I did, or what changed. He was so upset when he thought I was refusing him. This is a complete about face.” She collapsed into a chair.

Abby replayed everything since Ash rescued her. They spent the night in the clinic with her father, and though Ash barely said two words, she assumed it was because of the somber situation they were facing.

I bet you’d have some profound advice. She looked down at her dad.

Then again, he would probably just want to knock sense into Ash. He was, after all, a military man through and through. When she was little and afraid of the dark, her tough as nails father would make a big deal of scoping out her closet and under the bed, frightening away the monsters. He was her hero.

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But laying here still as death, her dad looked so vulnerable—so human, and there were some things in life you couldn't battle with your fists. In fact, in the last year, since Pro went missing, she'd seen how truly vulnerable he was. She watched him struggle with the devastating realization he couldn't hold back the dark. That almost killed her more than losing her sister.

Abby barked out an incredulous laugh as things clicked in place. Ash and her dad weren't that different.

"Are you okay?" Hope asked with a concerned frown.

"Yep." She stood and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To knock some sense into my husband."

"Good and he could probably use help retrieving Mom. If Ash thinks we're a handful, he hasn't met Carol Murray."

"No doubt. Who else could put up with our stubborn SOB of a father?" And I learned from the best.

She jogged to the loading bay to catch Ash before he could take off.

"This discussion is done, Aculus. I need to leave," Ash growled.

Abby stepped around the back of the cruiser to see her husband squaring off against Aculus. She didn't need to see his face to know he was agitated. Ash's shoulders were stiff, his tail flicking rapidly. The state he was in he wouldn't hear a word she had to say, let alone permit her to tag along.

Stowaway, party of one. She tiptoed toward the cruiser ramp.

Aculus glanced past Ash's shoulder. She put a finger to her lips and shook her head, hoping the bony warrior would keep silent.

"Fine. It's your life to ruin, Ashtoret. Here." Aculus tossed Ash a package. "Cartil thought you might need a tranquilizer once you locate their mother."

"I'm not tranquilizing their mother. That's reprehensible," Ash snarled.

Aw, isn't he sweet. Abby smiled as she ducked into the cruiser then hid.

Ash stomped up the ramp and entered the cruiser. She held her breath when he paused in the loading bay, then let it out when he moved on to the control room. The cruiser takeoff was so smooth she almost didn't notice. It took less than ten minutes to reach Earth, so she counted it off. If she emerged too soon the stubborn man would probably just turn around.

Four hundred and ninety-eight, four hundred and ninety-nine, five hundred. Ready or not here I come.

Abby stood and made her way to the bridge. Ash swung around the instant the door slid open.

"I thought your scent was too strong," he rumbled.

“Well, you shouldn’t have been so stubborn,” she countered and sat down.

“You are the stubborn one. You will stay on the cruiser. It’s not safe for you.”

“Funny, cause you were just saying I should come back home when Dad gets patched up. Which is it, Ash? Is or isn’t my home safe enough?”

“You’re staying on the ship,” Ash growled as he walked over to the wall and opened a hidden panel.

“And how do you plan to make me once we land?”

“We’re not landing.” He cast her a smug smile then peeled off his kilt and clapped on the weird bony armor. It was freaky watching it grow and slide over his skin when he squeezed his wrist.

Two can play at this game.

Abby got up and stalked over to the recessed closet and began stripping off her clothes.

“What are you doing?” Ash’s eyes widened as she placed the armored plates on her arms and legs. The pieces were a bit large but she made them work.

“What does it look like?”

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She cast him a saccharine sweet smile, though she really wanted to shake off the weird armor that adhered to her skin. Abby took a deep breath and pressed the knotty ridge on her wrist.

Oh, mother of hell, she cursed as the armor came alive and climbed up her arms and legs, like she was being overtaken by the blob. Don't freak or Ash will leave your ass behind, she told herself when the bony shell crept over her mouth and eyes. Thank heaven she discovered she could breathe easily. This gives a new meaning to seeing red, she blinked, adjusting to the creepy lenses.

Ash huffed and stalked off. She quickly followed him to the belly of the ship. It was odd how the armor moved with her, making her steps feel lighter than normal. It was actually kind of cool.

"Go back to the control room." Ash opened the hatch.

Fuck me. Abby gaped at the opening and the ground far below. Well, if Pro can jump out of a plane, I can, too. Of course, she usually had a parachute.

"Nope. After you." She gestured to the opening.

"Abby," he snarled vehemently.

She cringed. Somehow the man made her hate her actual name. She far preferred it when he called her Peanut.

"Ash," she growled back with just as much frustration.

“When you land, tuck and roll,” he grumbled and leapt out of the cruiser.

“I need to have my head examined.” Abby moved to the edge of the hatch, took a deep breath then stepped off the edge.

The wind whipped past her as the ground came up fast. It was quite a rush. Surprisingly she was able to identify her Nana’s house before she had to concentrate on landing in the park below.

This is so fucking crazy. Abby bent her knees as she hit the grass. She straightened up rather than roll, and the momentum sent her leaping into the air. It was shocking at first, but she giggled as she vaulted over the top of the palms and came back down on the opposite side of the small park. She stopped laughing when she saw a stunned little old man walking his yorkie. He clutched his chest like he was about to have a heart attack.

“We’re filming for a movie.” Abby pointed to nonexistent cameras in the bushes. “Aren’t the special effects great?”

The bald guy nodded and hustled off, dragging his micro mutt.

“What was that?” Ash stormed up to her. “I knew you should’ve stayed on the cruiser.” He took her hand and headed out of the park.

“It’s a good thing I came. Nana’s house is that way.” She pointed the opposite direction.

Ash spun and started jogging with her. Abby ran beside him. The bony suit made it easier. It was early enough that not too many people were up and about, but it wouldn’t be long before the retirement community would fill with seniors cruising in their golf carts. Abby tugged Ash into the tall fountain grass as they reached Nana’s

house.

“That’s my mom,” she pointed to Carol drinking coffee on the lanai. “Give me a minute. Hey, Mom,” she hollered.

“Peanut?” Her mom glanced toward the stand of grass. “What are you doing over there?”

“Where’s Nana?”

“At breakfast with the blue-hairs from bingo.” Carol stood and approached.

“Don’t come any further. Just go inside, Mom, and I’ll follow you.”

“All right, Peanut.” Carol frowned but went inside and she followed her into the kitchen. “What’s this all about?” Her mother paused.

“Don’t turn around just yet.” Abby pressed the spot on her wrist and the armor receded.

“Abby, I had no idea you were coming today. I’ve been trying to reach you, Hope and your dad.” Carol turned, and her eyes widened. “What the hell are you doing naked?”

“I don’t have time to explain. Get a small bag with your contacts and meds.”

“You don’t have time to tell me why you’re running around wearing nothing but some weird shin and wrist guards? I’m just supposed to pack.”

“Yes, please,” she replied, exasperated.



“Fine!” Carol threw up her hands and stalked off.

Ashtoret de Origa

His handheld pinged and Ashtoret swiped it.

“Get the females’ mother and get back here fast. We picked up a trio of X class vessels entering the solar system. They look like battle cruisers and are closing in fast despite the cloaking array,” Aculus growled.

“Jurou Biljana?”

“Could be, but I don’t recognize the ships.”

“Torment,” Ashtoret cursed and hustled into the house. “We need to go now.” He paused, seeing Abby standing by the counter nude, then shook it off

“Mom’s getting a few things and I’m just finishing a note to Nana. Go back outside and hide, please. I still don’t know how we’re going to manage getting her on the cruiser.”

“There are three unknown vessels approaching. I’ve directed the cruiser to land in the park we were just in.”

“Sweet Jesus,” a woman screeched.

He turned to see an older version of Abby frozen in the doorway. Carol rushed to her daughter and tugged her away from him. If he wasn’t in such a foul mood he would’ve been impressed with Carol’s bravery.

“Mom, stop!”

“Run, Peanut. Please, run!” Carol grabbed a pan and wielded it like a mace. “Don’t come any closer!” she bellowed.

He had to dodge left to avoid her swing.

“Calm down, Mom. Stop!”

“I told you to run!” Carol yelled again.

“Just tranq her before she rouses the whole neighborhood, Ash.”

“I can’t do that to a female.” His eyes widened at Abby’s callous suggestion.

“It’s growling.” Carol’s eyes widened, and her terror grew.

“Fine!” Abby sidestepped her mother and grabbed the injector off his chest plate.

“Sorry, Mom.”

“Sorry for what?” Carol looked panicked.

Abby pressed the injector against her mother’s arm and Carol went lax. He swiftly grabbed the female before she could hit the floor.

“Thanks for catching her. Let me grab her bag and let’s get going.” Abby walked out of the room and returned carrying a small bag and her armor back in place.

He situated Carol in his arms and headed out the door with Abby at his side.

“It’s clear.”

“That is always so weird to see.” Abby nodded toward the cloaked cruiser descending in the park at the end of the street.

Osivoire tech was amazing. Anyone who glanced out their window would only see a slight wavering flicker.

“Um, Ash, we need to hurry.” She pointed down the street to a fleet of black vehicles closing in.

“Son of a metcor. Run, Abby!”

They stuck between the dwellings as they ran, but the human warriors were closer to the park than they were. Despite the cruiser being cloaked, the humans now knew what to look for.

“Fucking hell. They’ve surrounded the park,” Abby snapped as they crouched behind a vehicle.

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There were a dozen dark-uniformed males stalking around the park and the nearby homes, weapons drawn.

“Get to the cruiser. I’ve got your mother.” He shielded Carol in case the oncoming warriors began firing their primitive disrupters.

“No, Ash. That won’t be enough. I’ll cover you.”

Before he could object, Abby snatched the disrupter strapped to his chest and burst from their hiding place behind the parked vehicle. Despite the bony shell she wore, he was still horrified watching her face off against the armed males.

“Aw torment,” he growled and sprinted after Abby.

She didn’t give the warriors any quarter as she started firing, dropping the humans left and right, clearing a path to the cruiser. His eyes widened when Abby spun and aimed the disrupter at him. The blast arced past his shoulder, taking out the male attempting to sneak up on his back. He was so focused on the diminutive Goddess of Vengeance he hadn’t noticed the warrior approaching.

Abby leapt onto the cruiser ramp and sprinted inside with him right behind her. She hunkered down at the entrance and kept firing till he made it into the loading bay with Carol.

“Come on. Come on,” Abby chanted at the closing hull door, while the uniformed humans kept coming.

He placed Carol out of harm's way, grabbed another disrupter and spun to face the opening.

"Don't be stupid," Abby snarled at the male trying rush through the narrowing gap.

"Don't drop him. He'll block the opening." Ashtoret fired a warning shot just above the male's head.

The surprised human stumbled backward, and the hull sealed.

"Oh sweet mother of God, thank you! I was worried they'd send an air strike," Abby declared with a sigh as he tapped on the nearby console to get the cruiser up in the air.

"You did good, unfortunately that was the least of our worries," he rumbled, grabbed Carol and took her to the control room.

"Fuck! How could I forget? Shit, shit, shit. What do you think the aliens want?" Abby helped him strap her mother into a seat.

"I don't know, but we're getting out of here. Leave the shell on," he insisted when she started to reach for her wrist.

He didn't have time to dwell on the disturbing notion that their presence led some unknown species directly to Earth, making the cloaking array they just installed useless. He could add this to his long list of offenses later.

"Okay." Abby sat and adjusted her harness.

"Damn." The wedge-shaped foreign cruisers were hovering in the exosphere separating them from the main ship. "Aculus, we have a problem!" he bellowed over

the open channel.

“I’m well aware. We were just given a warning to clear out,” the bony warrior growled.

“They hailed you? Who is it?”

“Hailed us. Not exactly. There’s a fresh set of blast marks on the surface of the moon. I’m well-armed, but not against three X class ships.” Aculus sounded harried which was saying something.

“Stay at a safe distance and we’ll follow you,” he snarled in frustration.

“Oh shit.” Abby gripped the armrest.

Ashtoret skimmed Earth’s surface, heading for the opposite side of the globe. One of the damnable cruisers broke off from the others and tracked his moves.

“Damn you to Vrag,” he cursed.

He dodged toward the southern pole, but the cruiser followed.

“Blessed Kali!” He slowed his ascent and the foreign vessel also halted just outside the atmosphere. “They’ll intercept us wherever we emerge,” he rumbled.

“Shit. What are we going to do?” Abby worried her lip.

“I’m working on that. This is why I wanted you to stay on the main ship.”

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“Concentrate on that battleship and yell at me later.”

She has a point, he huffed and turned his attention back to the cruiser hounding them.

His cruiser was smaller. That meant agility was on their side. But given the news from Aculus, the foreign vessels were armed to the teeth.

“If they want us so bad why are they just hovering out there?” Abby tilted her head as she stared at the screen.

Ashtoret’s gaze swung to the control panel. She was right. The foreign vessel was maintaining its altitude just outside the atmosphere.

“No,” he whispered incredulously.

“What?”

“I was just thinking these might be Miran Sona vessels, except I’ve never seen ones that look like this. Then again, I’ve only ever seen their collection vessels. But it would certainly explain why they arrived so fast and are keeping their distance.”

“So, let’s assume it’s them and they’re trying to protect Earth. Maybe we can just wait them out.”

“Not with Aculus’ vessel out there. The Miran Sona will go after them if they stay in your system.”



“What if we try to talk to them? You said you guys are friends,” she asked.

“We’re friends with a few of the Miran Sona. It’s a tenuous relationship with the others in our quadrant. We keep an eye on the human colony, but we’ve also absconded with a few of their colonists.”

“Oh. Well, shit.” She tapped her fingers on the armrest. Her head popped up. “Do you think their desire to avoid detection extends to our satellites?”

“It would garner unwanted attention if they damaged your orbiting equipment.”

“What if we use the satellites like shields?”

“That might actually work,” he replied as he stood.

“What are you doing?” Abby tilted her head.

“Since they don’t seem eager to come and get us, I’m going to take the opportunity to make sure your mother has all the protection available.” He grabbed another shell of armor from the recessed panel.

“I can put that on her.”

“No. Stay strapped in.” He wasn’t about have Abby take that harness off with the enemy out there.

He raised Carol’s sleeves and applied the armor, then did the same on her legs. He depressed the knot on the wrist plate and watched the armor expand, shredding her clothes with the spiky ridges to cover her completely.

“Thank you.” Abby smiled gratefully at him.

Ashtoret nodded and strapped back into his seat.

### 13 Leap Frog

Abby

Ash's fingers flew over the console, kicking the cruiser into high gear. He was a brilliant pilot, and she'd seen a flyboy or two in action. She was in awe as he darted from satellite to satellite, playing hide and seek with the battleship. Just like they hoped, the giant cruiser didn't fire on them for fear of hitting the satellites and betraying their presence to the world at large. The game of cat and mouse clearly wasn't as easy as he made it look. Even in the bony armor she could see how tense his jaw and shoulders were. She kept her mouth shut so she didn't distract him.

"We can't do this forever. We need to get to Aculus' vessel. He's hiding near this planet beyond the asteroid belt."

"Jupiter." She nodded.

"The asteroids should slow a ship of that size down. But I need to time this just right." Ash grit his jaw, the muscle flexing.

"You've got this." She smiled, reached over and patted his arm.

Ash nodded grimly, circled the satellite acting as their shield one more time, then made a break for the moon. A barely noticeable beam of light was followed by a shockwave.

"Fuck," Abby cried out then bit her lip. They're firing at us. We're leaving already,

you bastards!

Ash snarled, his fingers moving faster over the controls. He didn't travel in a straight line, instead veering about to avoid the laser blasts. The sound he made was positively feral when the one vessel was joined by the other two. They whipped past the moon, putting it between them and the pursuing spaceships, but the assholes just kept following. Her heart beat a million miles a minute as they rocketed toward the distant asteroid belt.

"I'm coming for you," Aculus suddenly growled, making her jump.

"No! That will just piss them off further," Ash bit out.

There was another blast and the cruiser shook, setting off a dozen strident alarms.

"Son of a metcor. We've been hit," Ash bellowed.

"I'm coming. If these bastards want a fight," Aculus barked and cut-off the transmission before Ash could argue.

"Dammit," Ash growled.

"Is there some way we can try to talk to them and tell them we're leaving?"

"It can't hurt. I'm hailing them now."

She screamed when another blast shook them, and their cruiser veered sharply to the right, throwing her hard against the seat. Abby glanced in concern at her mother, but she was still out cold.

"The propulsion system is compromised. I'm going to try to reach that red planet.

Maybe we can hide in one of the storm clouds on the surface.”

The cruiser shook violently from another blast. This wasn't how she imagined dying. Their ship continued to rattle as Ash attempted to guide it toward Mars. They were hobbling along and still the three battleships pursued, hell bent on making an example out of them. The pulsing light on the bow of one of the enemy ships began to glow brighter. They were gearing up to fire again.

“Talk to me, dammit. I know you answered our hail, so say something,” Ash snarled to whoever was listening in the attacking ships.

“Please,” she begged the unseen enemy. “We’re trying to leave. You don’t need to do this. If you’re good people, don’t do this, please. We’re not a threat.”

Abby held her breath and prayed as she stared at the ominous light on the opposing ship. With the damage they sustained there was no way they’d avoid this shot.

I can’t watch. She squeezed her eyes shut.

No shot came, and she opened her eyes.

“Fuck yeah!” she burst, seeing the three ships had broken off the chase. Maybe their theory about this being the Miran Sona was right after all.

“Hold on!” Ash bellowed as they careened toward the looming red planet.

They were no longer being chased but were hardly out of danger. They hit Mars’ atmosphere and the tremors grew violent. She gripped the armrests tight. Her poor mother rattled about in her seat like a rag doll, despite the armor.

“If systems weren’t compromised this wouldn’t be a problem,” Ash rumbled.

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This is it. We're going to die on Mars, and I haven't even told him...

"Ash, I..."

"Abby, please, I need to concentrate." His gaze met hers for a brief intense second before he turned back to the planet.

Stubborn to the very end.

"If we're about to die in a fiery crash, I refuse to end it with us being at odds. I..."

"Brace!" Ash yelled, cutting her off again.

Her eyes swung to the display screen in horror as they struck the surface of Mars.

Ashtoret de Origa

Ashtoret blinked again to clear his head. The settling cloud of dust made it hard to see, but he could just make out the wreckage of the torn hull. He scrambled to his feet and frantically looked around the barren landscape littered with mangled pieces of the cruiser.

"Abby!" he bellowed, his voice coming out deeper than normal because of the thin atmosphere.

He shoved the daunting revelation that they'd crashed on a totally inhospitable planet to the back of his mind and started sprinting toward a large section of wreckage. With

every step the low gravity sent him jaunting through the air. Ashtoret tore back a shattered section of the hull and it flew nearly a hectare. He tossed another scrap aside, but Abby wasn't here. He moved to the next pile in the long crater left by the crash. Ashtoret skidded to a halt when he saw a bony-plated arm sticking out from beneath the carnage. He tugged back the mangled aft to find Abby's unmoving body. Ashtoret dropped to his knees in the rocky dirt.

"Abby!" He picked up her body and cradled her against his chest. "Abby! Wakeup, beautiful, please," he begged as he shook her, but she didn't rouse. "No!" he tipped back his head and screamed, anguish ripping through his soul.

His head dropped forward when his voice finally grew hoarse.

"Abby, I'm so sorry I failed you," he rasped and nuzzled her cheek. Ashtoret desperately wished the armor wasn't in the way so he could feel her one last time before all the warmth fled her body.

"Ash."

He felt a hand on his shoulder and swung around.

"Ash, is Mom all right?"

He glanced from the small figure in his arms to the one standing beside him. Cloaked in the bony armor, he couldn't tell them apart.

"I don't know," he choked as he set Carol down and clutched Abby to him. It was a good thing she was wearing the armor because he couldn't control how tight he held her.

"How are we even alive?" She rubbed his back.

“I think the Osivoire shells saved us. I guess your mother is still unconscious from the tranquilizer. Does anything hurt?” He pulled back and looked for damage to her armor.

“I feel a bit like I just rode on a cracked-out merry-go-round, but I think I’m fine.”

“Thank Kali,” he rasped, unable to repress the emotion in his voice.

“Do you think those bastards will let Aculus come get us?”

He couldn’t say. The foreign vessels barely let them live. They weren’t going to react well to Aculus attempting to approach Earth again. If it was just him, he’d tell the warrior to hold back and not risk the others. But he wasn’t alone stranded on the desolate rock. And he had no clue how long the bony shell would protect them from the harsh environment.

Torment, I don’t even know how the shell is keeping us alive to begin with. The gravity of the situation overwhelmed him as he looked at the barren landscape and hazy sky.

“I’m sorry, Abby. You weren’t supposed to be involved in any of this, let alone crash here on this goddess forsaken wasteland of a planet.”

“You can’t blame yourself. I snuck onto the cruiser.”

“No.” He shook his head in frustration and anger. “This was my duty, not yours. I came here to keep your people from harm, to keep you from harm. I made an oath to my friend, your sister. And not only did I fail you all, I selfishly bound you to me and stole you from your family, which has already suffered enough. You deserve a better male than that.” His shoulders slumped in defeat.



Abby wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tight.

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“No, Ash, you did not fail me. I’m so sorry about what my people did to Vintor, but you did not cause that. Despite what you think, you’re an honorable and brave man. If anything, you brought my family back together. There’s no way you can be perfect or predict what the future will hold. Hell, Ash, you’re not a freaking god. Don’t do that to yourself. Don’t do that to us.”

Abby

Abby frowned. She hoped her words reached Ash, but he didn’t seem convinced. A sound captured her attention and she looked over his shoulder.

“It’s them,” she squealed, seeing the vessel landing on the rocky Martian plain.

“Go. I’ve got Carol.” Ash scooped her mother up and they started running toward the giant silver cruiser.

Running on Mars was unreal. She practically flew with every footfall. She’d dwell on how cool it was later, when she wasn’t so freaked out. For now, all she wanted to do was get the hell off Mars. It was awkward coordinating her steps in the lower gravity, but once she got the hang of it, it took no time at all to reach the spaceship. She stopped outside the large hatch that was opening like the gates to heaven.

They stepped into the ship and could see everyone waiting on the other side of the clear barrier. Hope stood clutching Aculus with tears streaming down her face. It took forever for the chamber to pressurize, but once the barrier lifted, Hope was instantly by her side.

“Abby! Mom!” Hope cried as she looked from her to their mother cradled in Ash’s arms.

“It’s me.” Abby hugged her sister, careful to not gouge Hope with the spiky knots on the armor.

“We need to check your mother.” Ash gently set Carol on the hull floor and depressed her wrist.

She didn’t even care her mother was naked as a jaybird as Cartil checked her over.

“She appears fine, just unconscious.”

“I had to tranq her on Earth.”

“That would explain it then.” Cartil nodded.

Abby breathed a giant sigh of relief.

“Let’s get her to a bed where she can rest near her mate.” Aculus kindly covered her mother with a blanket and lifted her up. “You don’t understand how relieved I am to find you all shelled. That was good thinking, Ashtoret.”

“It really was.” She smiled at Ash as they walked toward the clinic.

“I can’t thank the Osivoire enough for this.” Ash pointed to bony armor covering her from head to toe.

“When you crashed after those fucking ships fired on you...” Hope sobbed as she hung onto her arm.

“Believe me, I was shocked as shit to wake up alive on Mars,” Abby barked a tired, incredulous laugh.

“Did the foreign vessels give you any trouble?” Ash asked.

“They started to, but Nadzia’s quite the diplomat.” Aculus cast Hope a sideways glance.

“Really?” Her eyes widened.

“No. Aculus was trying to calmly reason with them so we could come get you, and I started screaming obscenities.”

That sounds about right.

“She has quite a colorful vocabulary. She made my crew blush and that’s not something the Osivoire do. What was it you threatened—something about shoving this cruiser so far up their asses they tasted metal?” Aculus chuckled.

“Well, I thought they killed my family,” Hope huffed.

“I think your lack of fear had quite an effect.” Aculus smiled.

“Place her here.” Cartil pointed to a gurney in the clinic.

“Thank you.” Abby smiled in gratitude as Aculus set her mother down but didn’t know if it reflected since she was still wearing the bony armor.

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She glanced at her father and had to look away. Cartil assured he'd be fine. She had to trust that.

"I'll stay with Mom while you go clean up." Hope took a seat near their mom.

"It may be a while. I'm a little frazzled."

"It's okay." Hope nodded.

"Are you sure? She's not going to react well."

"Peanut, I got this. You guys got her here safely. I can handle this part. Now go." Hope patted her arm.

"Okay."

She was turning to leave when Hope grabbed her in another big hug.

"I'm so glad you guys are okay," Hope choked.

"Me, too, sis," Abby rasped.

### 14 Purpose

Abby

Ash was quiet again as they walked to their quarters on the ship. Her chest ached wondering if he listened to a word she said. She couldn't force Ash to see reason if he was determined to close himself off for fear of getting hurt and suffering loss.

The moment the door shut, Ash shoved her against the wall. She clasped his wrist and watched the bony armor melt away to reveal his stunningly handsome face. Abby realized her own shell had receded when Ash's mouth crashed against hers in a bruising and desperate kiss. Her hands tangled in his silver hair as she poured every bit of love, anguish, and relief into her kiss. When he finally released her, she was sobbing. Everything that happened flooded forth. There was so much—too much to convey.

“Abby,” he rasped in a pained voice. “I don't deserve you.”

Ash burrowed his head between her breasts. He was shaking all over as he held onto her. He was such a strong man and yet so vulnerable. In no way did that detract from how she saw him. If anything, it bound him tighter to her heart.

“Ash, you're everything I need, just the way you are. I love you,” she whispered as she kissed the top of his head.

Ash reared back, his gaze filled with poignant emotions that leveled her. It broke her heart he was so surprised by her admission.

“And I love you,” he husked.

Ash caressed her cheeks, his thumbs brushing her tears away. He kissed her eyelids, cheeks and the tip of her nose. His mouth met hers again. This kiss was tender instead of fervent, but it made her knees quake all the same. Abby reveled in it, her hands traveling over his bare shoulders.

“I need you. Now,” he growled.

Ash stripped off the armored plates one by one, leaving them entirely nude. Her gaze travelled from his broad shoulders, impressive pecs, all the way down to his stacked abs. She pulled in a ragged breath seeing his thick cock. Ash was so engorged his erection pulsed, the crown nearly purple. Every one of the knots stood out along his shaft. The man was temptation incarnate. The intense way he studied her made Abby as nervous as she was eager. This reunion was going to be explosive. She bit her lip in anticipation.

He spun her around then gripped her wrists in one hand as he pinned her against the suede textured wall. His massive hard body pressed against the length of hers.

“You think I’m an honorable male, but I’m not thinking very honorable thoughts.” The seductive deep timbre of his voice and his hard cock grinding into her back sent a shiver up her spine.

“Oh,” she gasped, growing slick with desire.

He sniffed the air and growled into her neck. “You smell so delicious.”

Ash gripped the full globe of one ass cheek, his fingers kneading the ample flesh as he methodically thrust, mimicking the act to come. She pulled in a ragged breath. Her ardor was amplified by his rough impatience. Having Ash restrain her hands while

cornering her against the wall was a stark contradiction to the other times they made love.

She jumped when his tail snaked up her leg and the tip tickled the seam of her pussy. It was so unexpected since his hands were elsewhere. It worked between her slick folds, the tip flicking her already swollen clit.

“Ash,” she moaned, rolling her forehead against the wall.

“I’ve heard human females like to have their tail played with. Do you like that, little mate?” Ash growled into the crook of her neck.

“I don’t know,” Abby squeaked nervously. This was something she’d never let anyone do, but Ash wanted to explore her body and she wasn’t about to deny him.

“Keep your hands on the wall.”

Abby planted her palms on the wall upon hearing the uncharacteristic brusque command. Ash tugged her hips back, forcing her to bend forward. With one hand, he reached around and took over for his naughty tail, lightly stroking her clit. She bit her lip when his other hand caressed her ass, then delved between her cheeks.

His long fingers gathered the moisture leaking down the inside of her thigh, following it to the source. Ash dipped into her pussy and her muscles spasmed involuntarily, attempting to hold onto his thick fingers. Abby groaned in disappointment when he pulled out again.

Ash slowly ran his slick fingers up to her puckered rear. She held her breath as he circled the sensitive tight opening. Her breath burst out when he started worrying her clit again, and another flood of moisture spilled forth. At the same time his fingertip pressed into her ass. Slowly he thrust in, burrowing deeper with each advance, and



her muscles spasmed from the unexpected pleasure assailing her.

“With how you’re trembling and the sounds you’re making, I think you do like this,” Ash rumbled against her shoulder in between kisses.

Abby banged her head against the wall. The way he tormented her clit was enough to drive her over the edge, but this new taboo act catapulted things to a whole new level. Her legs began to shake from the churning sensations. Ash’s tail coiled around her waist, the tip flicking against her rear as it held her in place. She mewled and panted faster.

So close. Oh God.

Abruptly, Ash pulled his fingers from her ass and clit, retreating entirely and leaving her back cold. She looked over her shoulder and scowled at the rotten man.

“Go lay on the bed,” he rumbled.

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Abby staggered to the bed on unsteady legs. She turned to find him appraising her wearing a cocky grin. He knew exactly how he affected her. The swagger of his hips and agitated flick of his tail were predatorial as he stalked toward her. Her heart beat staccato at the dangerously erotic sight.

“Touch yourself.” He grabbed her ankles and splayed her legs wide.

Abby smoothed her hands down her body. One stopped to play with her breast while the other found her clit. Ash’s gaze followed her. His mouth parted, showing off the sharp canines that delivered so much pleasure with just a twinge of delicious pain. She licked her lips as her finger circled her clit. It usually took longer for her to get worked up playing with herself, but there was something naughty and incredibly erotic about being watched like this.

“I adore how wet you get for me.” Ash fisted his cock and slowly began stroking himself.

His other hand caressed her thigh, his fingers inching toward her pussy. He traced the slick lips of her aching vagina without dipping in. She squirmed, urging him on, but Ash just teased her opening. Abby worked her clit faster while pinching her stiff nipple.

“Ash,” she begged, while reaching for his cock, needing, wanting more.

“Hmmm,” he rumbled, knowing full well what he was doing as he swatted her hand away from his cock.

“Ash! You’re torturing me,” she whined.

Ash grinned evilly, baring his fangs. He ran his finger over the tip of his canine, collecting a bead of liquid that eked from the sharp tip. She followed his finger as it descended. Heat exploded the instant he touched her swollen clit, and a shocked gasp burst from her lips. Abby gripped his wrist, but she wasn’t strong enough to force his hand away. She arched off the bed as the concentrated serum soaked into her skin. The burning pleasure made her pussy spasm rhythmically.

“Hands above your head,” he barked.

She had to grip the headboard to keep from grabbing his hands again. That obscene chemical and his stroking fingers were too much.

Ash dipped a single finger into her aching channel, it brought some relief but wasn’t nearly enough.

“You are gripping me so tight,” he groaned.

“Ash, stop screwing around and fuck me. Now,” she whined impatiently.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, her heels jabbing into his tight ass, attempting to force him forward. Ash refused to budge.

“Patience, little mate.” His eyes flashed with amusement.

“Dammit!” She released the headboard and grabbed for him. The need was maddening in its intensity but refused to tip her over the edge. Her body craved his possession. There was nothing quite like the feeling of Ash buried in her body. He was a terrible addiction.

Ash untangled her legs from around his waist, then dropped down and pinned her hands above her head, holding them there.

“Such language,” he husked into her ear, his hot breath ghosting over her sensitive skin.

“If you don’t fuck me with that fat cock, my language is going to get a lot worse.”

Ash’s eyes widened, and his mouth twisted in a sardonic smile.

“This cock?”

He curled his hips, rubbing his cock between the slick lips of her pussy. The knots on his shaft lit her up as they abraded her clit. She panted, feeling the branding heat of his dick nudge at her pussy.

“Yes, you animal. Stick it in me.” She wiggled her hips, trying to thrust onto his pulsing arousal.

“I will...eventually.”

“Arghh!”

He kissed his way to the pulse point on her neck and licked the fluttering spot.

“Yes. Bite me.”

“Not yet,” he murmured against her heated skin.

Ash rolled them to the side, so she faced him. He slid his free hand beneath her knee and lifted her leg high. His tail snaked up to his mouth and ran along the tip of his

canines before disappearing again. Her eyes widened when she felt his tail ease along the crack of her ass. She trembled as the chemical-laced tip approached her tight opening. She knew what the serum would do, much less the salacious thing Ash was about to subject her to, and it sent the butterflies in her stomach into a frenzy.

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“Ash, I don’t know if I can...” Her voice wavered nervously.

“Oh yes you can,” he husked with wicked intent.

She drew in a ragged breath as the tip of his tail pushed against her restricted opening. The erotic burn from the illicit drug was instantaneous. Abby began panting as he breached the ring of muscles with an undulating motion. There was something so very wrong about this kind of pleasure, yet she couldn’t resist the pull.

Ash draped her leg over his side, freeing up his hand. He wedged it between them and found her swollen clit. She writhed as he leisurely circled her nub while slowly thrusting his tail ever deeper into her ass. Her painfully stiff nipples rubbed against his bare muscular chest, desperately seeking relief. Ash gripped her wrists tighter, keeping her from evading the madness that had her ensnared.

Abby gasped when he struck, burying his sharp fangs in her neck, injecting her with more of the illicit drug. Its effect was twice as intense as when he massaged it into her skin. Abby thrashed from the mounting ecstasy and exquisite torment that coiled around and round, yet he refused to let her find release.

“Tell me more about how you want my cock,” he teased when he released her neck.

“No. I hate you,” Abby snarled. Her fingers clawed at his hands as she fought him.

“No, you love me.”

She lunged forward and bit Ash’s shoulder just enough to let him know she meant

business. Her hips bucked, attempting to maneuver onto his cock, except the bastard was so long she couldn't get him positioned just right. He slid through the moisture of her cleft, adding to her sweet torment. She wanted to screech in frustration.

"Say it again. Tell me you love me," Ash insisted.

"No." She tossed her head. He was being such a bastard.

"Come on, beautiful, tell me you love me." He wiggled his hips, teasing her with his length.

She opened her mouth to tell him no again, when Ash abruptly thrust his thick cock into her aching pussy. She threw her head back and keened. Her ardent cry echoed in their small room. Ash ground his hips till his pelvis met hers. She could feel every knot on his turgid cock as he forced her to take him in one fell thrust. She was clenched so tight that his sudden total possession was a shock to her system.

The illicit pleasure multiplied when his tail stoked into her ass. She was full, so full, and stretched to the breaking point, yet she wanted more.

Ash pulled slowly back and the knots on his engorged shaft raked over her sensitive slick walls. Her mouth opened wider when his broad head grazed her g-spot.

"Tell me you love me," Ash groaned as she spasmed around him.

She mouthed something incoherent.

"What?" he husked.

"I-I l-love," she panted.

“I love you, too,” he said with a satisfied growl.

Ash impaled her hard, tilting his hips so he hit the bundle of nerves deep inside.

“Oh fuck—Ash,” she cried out her ecstasy when he began furiously thrusting his massive cock into her body with punishing strokes, his tail penetrating her ass with equal intensity.

“Abby,” he snarled.

Abby threw her head back as his powerful thrusts shoved her up the bed. She clawed the headboard, her head tossing back and forth. Ash was killing her with his savage possession. She wanted this, but now she didn’t know if she could take it. Her pussy spasmed rhythmically as one orgasm hit only to be forced higher. Her channel tightened and quaked as she neared yet another pinnacle. Ash released her wrists and reared back on his knees.

“Ash, please,” she mewled in desperation, her body feeling suddenly empty. She didn’t know if she wanted him to stop or continue.

He shifted her legs, bringing her ankles up to his ears. Ash banded her thighs with his arms, trapping them against his abs, and resumed swinging his hips at a frantic pace. The new position sent her reeling.

“Fuck,” Abby groaned.

His cock shoved at the recesses of her pussy, hitting spots no man ever had. The orgasm that ripped through her was unlike anything she believed possible. It deepened when he reached down and rapidly rubbed her clit. Abby screamed as the ecstasy multiplied. Her back arched, her pussy convulsed, her toes flexed.



Ash kept up his maddening pace, forcing his way past her spasming muscles. He was a lust-driven animal. She gasped and cried out, uncertain she'd survive his unquenchable desire. The feral expression on Ash's face and savage sounds he made added to the intensity. His cock kicked as he erupted. His seed coated her spasming walls, touching off another hailstorm of stomach-clenching convulsions. Abby sighed and went limp.

"No, no, beautiful. I'm not done with you," Ash rumbled.

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Her eyes widened when he flipped her over and crammed his still erect cock into her well-used pussy. Ash's slick fingers teased her ass and Abby jumped. She gasped when he worked one then another thick digit into her tight hole. His knuckles hit nerves that weren't used to receiving attention. Abby panted, feeling incredibly full. The deeper he worked his fingers into her ass, the more pressure his cock put on her g-spot. When Ash began thrusting, Abby bit the blanket to hold in the wild sounds boiling in her throat.

Ash's cock swelled larger inside her slick quaking channel, pushing her limits with each punishing thrust. Tears leaked from her eyes as the pleasure lashed her in unforgiving waves. She couldn't possibly orgasm one more time, yet Ash refused to relent, shoving her toward that dark miasma.

"I can't. I can't," she keened while thrashing her head, her hands clawing at the blanket.

Ash dropped onto her sweaty back, his hips still pumping furiously.

"Yes, you can," he snarled into her ear then bit down on the crook of her neck.

Abby wailed and convulsed, her pussy clamping down on the glorious invader as the liquid euphoria inundated her. She gave into the blinding euphoria, muttering incoherent praises to the demi-god pounding out his lust. Ash roared and jerked, his cock pulsing as he orgasmed. His whole body quaked from the force of it.

"Ash!" she screamed his name.

As Abby shattered again she smiled. She found her family, her warrior, and her purpose for being.

### Epilogue

Ashtoret de Origa

“Mom, we’re going to enter the wormhole soon. You sure you don’t want to watch? I’ve heard it’s beyond amazing,” Hope asked Carol.

“No, girls, I think I’ll stay here with Dad.” Carol smiled at her daughters as she ran her hand over the capsule keeping Brennan alive.

“Then we’ll stay with you,” Abby replied.

“I am sorry again for the way we retrieved you yesterday. I hope you aren’t sore.” Ashtoret felt incredibly guilty for frightening his new mother. He’d been raised to treat females better.

“Oh, honey, you can stop apologizing.” Carol gave him a genuine smile.

“You’re taking all of this really well, Mom,” Abby said as she shifted on his lap.

“Are you kidding me?” Carol snorted. “Believe me, I’m freaking out inside. But you don’t live to be my age without having a few what the fuck moments.”

“Mom said the f-word,” Hope snickered.

“And she flipped off her rotten daughter, too.” Carol stuck up her middle finger, then they all laughed.

“Seriously, Mom, are you good?” Hope asked.

“Yeah. I wish this hadn’t happened to Dad.” Carol patted the capsule. “And I wish I got a chance to talk to April and Bethany before we left. But I just learned my little girl’s alive, and Cartil has assured me a billion times that my sweet husband is going to be better than new in no time. Everything else is gravy.”

“What about our news?” Abby pointed to Ash.

As much as he wanted Abby to introduce him as her mate, given the circumstances he’d suggested she wait. But Carol is a wise female and had instantly guessed.

“That’s going to be hard, but Aculus guaranteed he would make sure we stay in contact. And more than anything I want my girls to be happy.”

“Remind me to thank him for that,” he whispered into Abby’s ear.

“I don’t think it was a totally selfless act,” she whispered back, making him snort.

“You know I’m sitting right here, right?” Hope scowled at them. “Bonehead knows the score.”

“Thou doth protest too much,” Abby giggled.

“Don’t fight, girls. Besides, you know Shakespeare was never Nadzia’s thing,” Carol chuckled.

“Hey!” Hope snapped, then smiled.

It was good hearing them banter back and forth. If Cartil was right and Brennan could hear this, undoubtedly he’d be smiling.

“I’m going to bring us some food. What would you like, Peanut?” Ashtoret asked as he set Abby in the chair next to him.

“You call her Peanut, too.” Carol grinned.

“I know. Isn’t it funny?” Hope chuckled.

“Ash heard Dad call me that. He does it just to antagonize me.” Abby smirked at him then winked.

“Would you like to hear how she got the nickname?” Carol asked.

“Of course.” He nodded.

“Fucking hell,” Abby groaned.

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“When we brought home the first ultrasound, Bethany insisted I was having a peanut instead of a baby, and it just stuck.”

“Cause that’s what she looked like, and still does. Look at that head,” Hope insisted.

“Enough from you two,” Abby groused, making him grin.

“Ashtoret,” Aculus’ voice broadcast through the ship’s comm capturing his attention.

“Yes,” he replied.

“We’ve just been hailed.”

“By who?”

“Vintor.”