



His Fierce Fugitive (Earthly Possessions #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I'm on the run from half the aliens in this galaxy.

The last thing I need is a fated mate.

IRIS

Being abducted by aliens was bad enough. But getting sold to a twisted collector, tossed into a brutal prison, then forced to survive in a savage jungle wilderness? Even worse.

I swore I'd never let another man control me, but after a daring escape, I'm trapped yet again. This time with my rescuer... a towering, silver warrior who claims my best friend—now a queen!—sent him to save me.

He's fearless, protective, and annoyingly kind, which only makes it harder to keep my walls up.

But with danger lurking in every shadow, I'm left with no choice. If I want to live to see my friends again, I'll have to put my life—and maybe my heart—in his hands.

TAK

The moment I lay eyes on Iris, I know she's mine... even if she doesn't believe it.

She's ferocious, strong-willed, and hardened by betrayal. But beneath all that, I see the delicate heart she's trying so hard to protect.

Winning her trust won't be easy, but bringing her back to Ydris is my sole mission, and I'll destroy anyone who tries to hurt her.

Because no one takes what's mine.

His Fierce Fugitive is a short, steamy, fated mates romance and the second book in the Earthly Possessions series. It features a bitter heroine completely over men and love, and a golden retriever alien obsessed with showing her his love is exactly what she needs.

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:52 am

1

IRIS

The big silver alien is staring at me again.

To be fair, all of the aliens in the cell next to mine have stared at me at one time or another since I was thrown in here. I'm guessing because I'm the only female in this holding area, separated out from the rest of them, dressed in mere scraps of fabric. And I'm definitely the only human .

But that silver one—he can't keep his eyes off me.

It's a little unnerving.

Truthfully, my gaze drifts over to him more often than it should. There's something about him, and it's not just his towering height, chiseled muscles, or shimmering, metallic skin. It's those piercing electric green eyes—they stand out like a beacon in this wretched place.

Oh, and did I mention his hair? In that same metallic silver and down to the middle of his back. It's absolutely wild. All together he's like some buff intergalactic Tin Man combined with the lead singer of a 90s metal band...with tall elven ears.

So...yeah. Aliens .

They're real.

Being abducted by those slimy, lizard-like aliens that crashed my boss's wedding, then delivered to the 'collector' who'd purchased me was bad enough. But even then, my troubles were just beginning. My so-called 'master'—a crusty old multi-limbed being with a drooling problem and a sick fascination for exotic creatures, was the stuff of nightmares. This skimpy outfit I'm in (oddly quite similar to what Jabba the Hutt made Princess Leia wear) is a testament to his depravity. The things he planned to do to me...

I shiver.

No way was I going to let him touch me. I had to escape.

As soon as he got close, I kicked him square in his nasty face, then snapped three of the creep's arms before making a run for it. I'd left him howling in pain as I made my way through the maze of corridors in his house. But once I fled into the nearby forest, and out the other side, local law enforcement captured me.

Freedom had been fleeting, to say the least.

Now, here I am, on a prison planet, in some distant galaxy, waiting in this high-security dungeon for my fate to be decided.

By who? Fuck if I know.

I shake my head. It's all so ridiculous. Every damn bit of it.

I should be plotting my next move, formulating an escape plan. My two best friends, Gwen and Lacey, who'd been at the same wedding had to have been abducted along with me. I'm assuming we were just taken to different places.

Figures women can't catch a break from men. Even in space.

Regardless, I'll find my friends, if it's the last thing I do.

And that means getting out of here before I'm locked away for good.

Or worse...

The holding area of the prison is overseen by a couple of guards. I call them Brutal and Ruthless. They don't take shit from anyone. The big no no for us is talking. They rarely talk to us, unless to bark orders, but communication between prisoners—forget it. The punishment is severe. They carry these tasers that not only zap you into submission, but burn your flesh to a crisp if you disobey. And that's if they're in a good mood. If not, they chop off a limb and cauterize it with said tasers so you don't bleed everywhere.

I learned this watching an inmate lose his hand for a mere whisper. And the silver guy was responsible for it. He'd provoked the other alien. Why, I'm not sure. But I got a sense there was more to it than met the eye.

The stench of unwashed bodies from all over the universe hangs heavy in the air as I see the guards enter with the evening slop. We get fed twice a day, a bland porridge-like substance that I can barely keep down. God knows what it's made out of...but I figure most alien life requires similar nutrients, so I choke it down to stay alive.

Meal time is usually a hostile ritual; tensions run high. But today, as Ruthless saunters over to our cells, his smug expression met with glares from the hungry captives, something seems off. The prisoners, including Silver Guy, approach the gate to retrieve their food.

With lightning fast reflexes, the silver alien springs forward and grabs Ruthless from behind the bars, plunging what looks like a sharp bone into his eye.

Chaos erupts.

The guard screams in pain, as luminescent blood squirts from his eye socket. The prisoners grab hold of him, all of their arms and hands, reaching through the bars. They find the taser on his belt and tase him until he's flopping around on the floor. Burnt flesh wafts over the room as his body convulses.

Suddenly, Brutal rushes in and throws open their cell, tasing as many as he can.

I watch as Silver Guy uses the confusion to his advantage, snatching a bag from the guard's vest.

Brutal is slowly being overpowered, as prisoners tackle him to the ground and grab the taser out of his hands.

I look up and Silver Guy is tapping a code into the pad on my cell door.

What is happening?

The door pings and he kicks it open, those intense green eyes roving over me. Before I can react, he grabs me and throws me over his shoulder like a sack of grain.

"Hold on, sweet one," he grunts, his deep, husky voice somehow familiar, as if I've heard it in my dreams. "We're getting out of here."

I struggle, more out of confusion than fear, against his solid body. "Who are you?" I manage to croak, my voice hoarse from disuse. "Where are you taking me?"

He squeezes the back of my thigh with his large hand, where he's holding me firmly.

"I'll explain everything later. For now...hang on tight."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:52 am

2

TAK

With Iris secure over my shoulder, I charge through the chaos of the prison riot, using my bulk to clear a path.

My mission is clear—find a way out of here and return to King Ryz and Queen Gwen of Ydris.

Not just because it's my duty, but because...Iris is my fated mate.

I knew it the moment we locked eyes when I was brought into the cell next to hers. My whole body came alive as if I'd been asleep for ages. It was like being injected with ten rounds of Chom's energy serum.

And it makes our escape that much more crucial.

The smell of ozone and the cries of aliens ring out in the dungeon, as I try to keep my senses from being overwhelmed by the beauty in my arms.

It's difficult to think straight when she's finally in my grasp after watching her suffer in the cell next to me. I can't stand to think about what she must've gone through at the hands of that deviant collector that purchased her. If I ever get my hands on him, I'll rip all of his limbs clean off.

My team had picked up a broadcast from law enforcement on the collector's planet

that mentioned a human woman found near a forest. She'd told them she was enslaved and forced to do monstrous things.

It still makes my blood boil.

However, the collector wasn't punished—only Iris...for assaulting him. The deviant probably bought off the authorities before they sent her to Lyrica—a prison planet run by a crew of corrupt administrators. The most crooked being the Warden himself.

I'm sure that bastard took one look at Iris and realized she could make him rich. Humans, especially women, fetch a hefty sum on the dark market. In the meantime, he could use her for his own sick and twisted urges.

My grip tightens on her as I fight back a growl.

It would be easier if she could run along with me, but she's barely dressed and without shoes to protect her feet. It doesn't matter. I'd carry her forever if I had to.

I stop at a junction of corridors, watching guards pass by on the way to the dungeon without noticing us.

Perfect.

My team and I had researched the prison's layout and security system before I got myself thrown in here, pretending to be drunk and disorderly in front of one of the officers. I'd counted on being tossed in the holding cell next to Iris, and fate had been on my side.

Thanks to the uprising and chaos after I stabbed the guard, the security system went haywire. Whatever happened—It works to our advantage as I navigate the various hallways, scanning the walls for the door to a secret warehouse where ships and other

confiscated possessions of prisoners are stored.

Finally, I see the small alcove, a thin blue light illuminating the door in the shadows.

I put Iris down for a moment. “Don’t move, or they’ll see us,” I whisper.

She swallows, eyes wide, and nods.

I punch in the code my team provided and as the door slides open I pull Iris along with me through it before it closes again.

The warehouse is massive and I quickly scan the space. “Help me find anything we can use—food, weapons...you know?”

“Like I have any idea what those things might look like,” she says, as we both start rummaging through the piles of goods, trinkets, and devices. Some unfamiliar even to me.

“Use your best judgement,” I say, grabbing a few protein cubes, hydration packs, mouth beads, and a small tool kit, the contents of which I hope we won't need.

I want to find more suitable clothing for Iris, but I’m not seeing anything appropriate.

“How about this?” Iris lifts a huge serrated knife in the air from a nearby pile.

Weapons like this are usually kept in a separate room, but they must’ve not seen this one. “Quorr, you sure are a lucky charm,” I reply with a smile, and to my surprise, her cheeks go a little pink.

Hmm, I like that.

She hands the knife to me, and the touch of her fingers sends heat all over my body. I clear my throat as I sheath the knife in my belt. There's no time to dwell on those types of feelings now.

“To the ships,” I say, my voice lower than I expect.

She follows me as my gaze travels over the line of various spacecraft, some in better condition than others.

I'm looking for something specific—the crest on the alien's tunic who lost his hand because he spoke to me. I do feel kind of bad that I had to provoke him to talk, but it was all part of my escape plan.

“What are we looking for?” Iris asks, next to me, when I spot the gold and green crest on the hull of the ship in front of us.

“That,” I say, pointing to the small, agile vessel, its sleek lines promising speed and maneuverability.

“Why this one?” she asks, as we rush towards the ship.

I stop in front of the hatch, and unzip the pouch attached to my belt. Then I pull out the severed hand from the alien in the cell.

She stumbles back, her mouth agape.

“Because it would be a shame if this guy lost his hand for nothing,” I say, placing it on the craft's exterior panel.

It chimes and the hatch door opens, the rest of the vessel's locks disengaging with a satisfying hiss, granting us access.

She's still not moving, as I put the hand back in the pouch and toss it aside.

"Come on, Iris. We have to keep going," I say, helping her to board and guiding her to the co-pilot seat, as I activate the cockpit controls, the ship's console coming to life with a soft hum.

Her eyes are wide as she takes in the ship around us. It's not terribly new. We have more advanced ships on Ydris. But it'll do for our purposes.

The engines ignite with a surge of energy.

"Secure yourself in," I say, demonstrating how to engage the seat harness. She does so and I smile at her. "Prepare for take-off." I almost add 'mate', but hold off...for now.

The ship roars to life, responding to my touch, as if it somehow understands the urgency of our escape. I bring up the screens and input the coordinates to Ydris, then add the code to open the prison warehouse panels.

They begin to part and I push the craft to full speed.

"Oh my god!" Iris yells, then laughs, as we soar through the stars.

I chuckle at her reaction along with her...until the screen next to me shows multiple ships in pursuit.

"Hold on, Iris," I command, my voice steady, even as my muscles tense in preparation for the oncoming assault. "We've got company."

A chase ship doggedly pursues us and a barrage of missiles fills the sky, their explosions rocking our craft. I twist and dive, relying on my reflexes to keep us

airborne. They fire relentlessly, their weaponry designed to cripple even the most robust spacecraft. My attempts to outmaneuver them are successful at first, but soon, it becomes clear our getaway will not be without sacrifice.

"Brace yourself," I grunt as a direct hit slams into our vessel. The ship sputters, and I fight to regain control as alarms blare.

"Are we going to make it?" Iris cries, looking over at me, her eyes pleading for answers.

I grit my teeth, throwing all of my energy into keeping us aloft. "Yes, we are," I reply. Though I'm trying my best to convince myself.

With a final rebellious spurt, the ship dives, plunging us into the atmosphere of an unknown planet. I do my best to control our descent, but the jungle below offers no flat landings. I grab Iris's hand just before we crash, smashing us into the dense canopy of a lush jungle.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:52 am

3

IRIS

Everything goes black.

Then there's the horrendous sound of metals crunching and popping, wood splintering, and foliage snapping underneath us.

And finally an eerie silence.

I don't know how I'm still conscious, but from the look of the cockpit, it remained mostly intact, barring a few cracks in the front windshield.

I hear a groan beside me and look to my left.

Silver Guy is blinking wildly, shaking out his silver locks. Our hands are clasped together.

When did that happen? And I actually let him ?

There's a strange flutter in my belly and I pull my hand away.

He turns toward me and his electric green eyes soften. "Are you hurt?"

"I think I'm okay," I reply, checking all my appendages and running my hands over my body. "But where are we?"

He undoes his harness and tries to bring up the spacecraft screens, but only sparks of color come up and then fizzle out.

He grunts and taps his arm, but the same thing happens. “I don’t know,” he says, blowing out a breath. “But you need not worry. No matter what we face here, I will protect you at any cost.”

I shake my head, trying to understand. “But...why?” I throw up my hands. “Tell me who you are and why you must protect me. Do you want to sell me or something, too?”

His eyes go wide. “No, no...that’s not?—”

“Then why should I trust you?”

“Iris,” he says, kneeling before me.

“How do you know my name?”

“Please,” he takes my hand and looks into my eyes. My heartbeat speeds up.

Why am I not pulling away? What is wrong with me?

“I am Takizet Afrajem. But everyone calls me Tak. I was sent by King Ryzordiek and Queen Gwen to bring you to Ydris.”

Did he just say...?

“Gwen? As in Gwen MacKinley, my best friend?” My voice trembles. “She’s alive? And a queen?”

He nods. “She crash landed on the outskirts of the Royal grounds. The marriage was strategic to aid Ydris in a power struggle between other forces in our galaxy and for Gwen to secure the resources to find you and your other friend.”

“Lacey? Gwen found her, too?” A tendril of hope winds its way into my chest. Could my two best friends have made it through this whole shit show?

He shakes his head. “Unfortunately, we haven’t found her yet.”

Disappointment hits me, but I’m still trying to comprehend Gwen’s fate. Married and a queen ?

She was so against marriage. And to do it for...me and Lacey? She’s a saint.

“I’m sorry about your friend. But know that Gwen and Ryz are very much in love.”

I scoff. “Right.”

“You don’t believe me?” he smiles.

“If you knew Gwen, you wouldn’t believe it either.”

He glances down at our hands for a moment, and licks his lips. Firm, rugged, and nicely shaped lips. “There’s more I need to tell you.”

I wait. I have to admit, his hands are warm and comforting.

God, I must be losing it.

“You can trust me, Iris, because...I am yours . We are fated mates.”

What?

Fated mates?

He looks serious. As in, he's not even blinking. Why am I still staring into his stupidly mesmerizing eyes?!

He squeezes my hand. "And know this, sweet one. I will not rest until you are safe, until your heart is mended, and until you are ready to accept the love that is yours to take."

Is he for real , right now?

"Fated mates? Are you freaking kidding me?" I snap. "Don't get me wrong, I appreciate the rescue, but that doesn't mean I'm buying into some cosmic soulmate nonsense." That's just a little too far-fetched, even for this impossibly insane adventure I've been forced into.

Tak's expression remains unwavering, though his chin dips slightly. "Many Kraetians believe in the deep bond of fated mates. I've felt the connection since I laid eyes on you in your cell."

He is serious.

Sure, there's something about him that's different. Probably because he's an alien! But fated mates? Spare me.

"You must think I'm pretty naive," I say. The way he's looking at me, with those piercing green eyes, makes my heart flutter despite my skepticism. I snort, feeling the all-too-familiar weight of my past relationships pressing down on me. "I've had my heart broken enough times to know better than to trust fate."

I finally pull out of his grasp and undo my harness.

“I know,” he says, helping me despite my sudden irritation.

“Excuse me?” I cross my arms over my chest. “How do you know ?”

“I can feel it,” he says, like it’s nothing, as he fiddles with the craft hatch. “Your pain is my pain.”

“Are you sure you didn’t hit your head when we crashed?” I ask.

“I am sure,” he says, pounding a bit on the hatch now, flexing all of his muscles in the process. The spandex-like material that covers his torso and legs does little to hide his...bulk. Neither does it hide that significant bulge at his groin. “You know, Gwen and Ryz didn’t believe in fated mates either...but Ryz’s sister, the Ydris oracle, was correct when she divined it. They fought it at first, but eventually, they succumbed. It’s almost sickening to watch them together.”

I huff. No way. Gwen hated PDA. “I’ll have to see that to believe it.”

“And you will.” He gives the hatch one final kick with one of his long legs and it gives way to the jungle outside.

“Stay behind me,” he says, helping me climb out of the wreckage.

We emerge into the jungle under a canopy of long-vined trees.

I feel like I just stepped into Jurassic Park... in space .

It smells moist and rich. Almost too pure. Exotic flora glows around us under the fading light of the twin suns in the sky. Everything is so much different than I’m used

to. Leaves are muted, bark is vibrant, and flowers are a wide range of colors from green to blue to black. Nothing makes much sense, but I've already learned to let go of my preconceived notions.

Tak pulls some booties from the pack he grabbed in the warehouse. "Put these on."

I take them and slide them on, thankful for the protection against who knows what on the ground here.

"Thanks," I grumble.

He smiles and gives me a small bow.

This guy is ridiculous.

But what choice do I have. He's my only hope to get back to Gwen.

As we trek through the alien jungle, the sheer danger of our surroundings forces me to rely on Tak. His knowledge of this strange world is impressive, and he guides us through eerie primordial landscapes with ease. Despite my better judgment, I find myself beginning to trust his lead.

But it's not fate .

After we eat a couple of protein cubes, I hear a soft buzzing... that's getting louder.

"Tak, what is that?"

He stops and listens, then grabs my hand.

"Run!" he says, pulling me along with him.

I stupidly look behind us and see a swarm of giant...insects—that look more like horses with huge wings—beating in a thunderous rhythm.

Jesus Christ!

Tak's powerful strides keep us ahead, and his skill with the blade I found in the warehouse, clearing a path for us is admirable. I can't help but appreciate the graceful way he moves, a fearsome fighter with a dancer's precision.

When I don't think I can run any more, he pulls me hard off to the side and we slam up against a massive pink tree. He holds me tight against him as the giant horse-flies fly past us.

“Shhhh,” he whispers, as our bodies heave, our breath wild from the chase. I close my eyes and curl into his broad chest.

I'm panting as he covers my head with his palm.

Soon, all I hear is our breathing—the buzzing long gone.

“It's safe now,” Tak says, and I tilt my head back to look up at him. Damn, that jaw is chiseled.

He gazes down at me, those eyes becoming a deep forest green. I feel something hard and thick against my belly and I hold back a moan.

Is that?—?

“We better keep moving,” he says, interrupting my thoughts. His voice is husky. I've got goosebumps. But it's probably just the air getting colder as the suns get lower. Totally.

"This planet is pure madness," I mutter, as we get back to walking. "Where are we going?"

He points forward. "That way..."

I roll my eyes. "Okay, why that way?"

"Instincts."

"I feel like I'm missing something."

"I'm a born tracker. I come from a long line of royal trackers and I'm good at what I do."

"Are you now," I say, scanning the area for more dangers. I eye a menacing-looking patch of colossal mushrooms as we pass.

"I found you." He smirks over at me.

His confidence both irritates and reassures me. I sigh, accepting that, for now, my safety lies in his hands. "Just keep those big bugs away from me," I grumble, my annoyance coming more from the fact that I'm having these... feelings ...around him. I really don't want to believe in fated mates. It's much to woo woo for me.

"While I'm alive, nothing will harm you ever again, Iris," he says. How easily he lets those huge declarations roll off his tongue.

And now I'm thinking about his tongue.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:52 am

4

TAK

As the sun sets, we seek shelter in a mossy cave, a temporary haven from the dangers of the night. Iris made me reassure her that this cave was not inhabited by a mutant beast before I built a small fire for heat and protection.

We eat more protein cubes, and some ripe jnera fruit I found growing near a fallen tree. It's a welcome treat after that gruel from Lyrica.

"I'm so full," Iris says, with a yawn and a hand on her belly. "That fruit is delicious. It tastes like a honeydew melon crossed with a peach back on Earth."

"I'm glad you liked it," I reply, then hand her a hydration pack. "Drink this."

She turns over the capsule to inspect it.

"It dissolves when you put it in your mouth," I say, putting one in my own mouth.

She watches me intently, and I suspect she's not terribly interested in the pack, but the movements of my mouth.

I try not to blush.

I fish around for the mouth beads and hold one up. "These clean your teeth and freshen your breath."

“Oh my god, yes,” she groans, opening her palm. “My mouth feels disgusting. I can’t remember the last time I brushed my teeth.”

I dump one into her hand and she eagerly pops it in her mouth.

She sighs. “It’s the little things that seem like luxuries sometimes, ya know?” She closes her eyes and lets the bead go to work.

I chuckle. “I do.”

The fire's crackle fills the cave, and I find myself transfixed by this woman. The dance of the flames illuminates her exquisite features—the high cheekbones, the delicate eyelashes, and her lips, so full and dewy.

Gwen had shown me images of Iris on the device she called her phone. But they don’t do her justice. She’s striking—the most beautiful being I’ve ever seen—and not just physically. She's a storm of emotion, a vibrant combination of determination and vulnerability, and I'm drawn to her like nothing I’ve ever known.

When we traveled along the jungle path, I watched her with a quiet fascination as she took in the world around her. Her keen eyes noticed details I'd missed, and her questions about the alien flora and fauna kept me on my toes.

She’s fearless, marching through the underbrush, her lithe body gracefully avoiding the hazards as she follows my lead. Yet, underneath her strong exterior, there’s a fragility that calls to my protective instincts. I long to shield her from the darkness of her past, to show her that not all bonds bring pain.

The night's chill seeps into our shelter, and Iris shivers. She shifts closer to the fire, but due to the size of the cave, I couldn’t make it too big for fear of smoking us out.

“You’re cold,” I say. “Allow me to hold you to keep you warm.”

She rubs her arms, considering me. “Just holding. Nothing else, right?”

“I have no intention of doing anything against your will, Iris.”

She swallows and crawls over to me, sitting in my lap and curling into my arms. I pull her close. She stiffens briefly, then slowly her body relaxes against mine. Maybe this was a mistake. The feel of her soft golden hair on my cheek and her steady breath on my neck send a shudder through me. I want to kiss her temple, but I hold back, reminding myself that her comfort comes first.

“Tell me about Gwen and Ryz,” she whispers, as she rests her head on my shoulder.

“She’s a fiery one,” I start. “Now Ryz won’t like that I’m telling you this, but when they first met, Gwen put up quite the fight. Before she knew Ryz meant her no harm, she brought him down with a kick to the groin, and then a knee to his face.”

Iris chuckles. “That’s my girl!”

I then relay the story of how Gwen was captured by the Ocrevv, including her heroism as she jumped in front of a laser meant for Ryz.

“Oh my god! And she’s okay?” Iris looks up at me, her blue-gray eyes shining.

“She’s fine now. But it was uncertain there for a while. Luckily, the King has some amazing physicians.”

She lays back down on my shoulder and puts a hand to her heart. “Phew. You scared me for a moment.”

“I’m sorry, my m—” I begin, then rein myself in. “Iris.”

We sit like that, our bodies intertwined for warmth and comfort, for a long while. She asks me about Ydris and I tell her stories of my youth, and my time as a tracker. But soon, I feel her relax even more, her breath slowing, her body going limp in slumber.

I stay awake, my mind racing.

I'm acutely aware of every place her body touches mine, and I ache with an intense longing to claim her. I fight the temptation to stroke her hair or caress her cheek. My restraint nearly breaks me, but I hold fast to my commitment, to myself, and to her.

Earning her trust will take time.

Just as exhaustion finally claims me, she shifts closer, her head sliding down to my chest. I breathe in the sweet scent of her, like the jnera fruit we ate earlier, and she makes a sound that scrambles my brain.

"I...I don't know what this is," she whispers, her breath tickling my skin. "But with you, Tak, I feel...safe."

The words ‘my mate’ again are on the tip of my tongue, but I fear it's too soon, so I simply nod, my heart thundering in my chest. As I lie awake, holding her, I realize I'd do anything for this woman.

As the first rays of dewlight breach the cave's mouth, Iris stirs. Her eyes flutter open, and she smiles, a sight that could make even the most formidable warrior stumble.

Her hand reaches up to touch my face, her fingertips tracing my skin with gentle curiosity. Her other hand caresses my chest, her touch sending ripples of pleasure through me. I suppress a shudder, as she continues her gentle, tentative exploration,

as if she's unsure of my response.

“Iris,” I whisper, closing my eyes.

Her hand slides behind my head and pulls me down...until I feel her soft lips brushing against my own.

My lips part on a quick inhale and she kisses my top lip, then the bottom one, slightly sucking them into her mouth.

I can't help it, I groan long and deep. My heartbeat quickens, and I'm trembling from the storm of desire in my veins. With great restraint, I lean into the kiss, keeping it tender, wanting to respect her boundaries. Her lips are warm and yielding, and I savor the moment, drinking in the sweetness of her breath.

But when her hand fists in my hair, I growl with need.

Just as my restraint begins to crumble, a different kind of growl reverberates through the cave—menacing and deep—snapping us back to reality.

I move in front of Iris, as an enormous, four-legged beast with gleaming fur and dagger-like teeth emerges from the shadows, its beady red eyes fixed on us.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:52 am

5

IRIS

"Stay behind me," Tak instructs, his voice low and steady. "I won't let it hurt you."

I nod, because...words. I mean, it's early, I'm groggy, and kissing Tak has me turned me completely upside down.

And now there's this thing at the mouth of the cave.

A mega bull? A hyena on steroids?

Whatever it is, it's not happy.

If I find out it lives in this cave, I'm going to kill Tak.

If this beast doesn't kill him first.

No, I won't think like that. He's got this. He already has that big knife in his hand.

I back away as he's yelling at it, and look for something I can throw. A rock, maybe? He lunges, the weapon slicing through the air with precision.

The beast snarls and steps back, but jumps forward again. It's quick for such an enormous animal. And that's scary.

But as I watch Tak skillfully land blow after blow, my fears ease.

This creature is no match him, and after a final thrust of the blade into its face, the beast's lifeless body crumples before us.

Tak pulls the carcass to the side of the cave and flips his long silver hair back like it was all in a day's work.

He barely even broke a sweat.

"What's wrong?" he asks, as he catches me staring. His eyes search mine. There's concern there, but also something else I can't quite decipher.

I realize I'm trembling and not just from the adrenaline that surged through me as Tak fought off the alien beast. I'm achy between my legs. Watching him in pure strength and fearlessness has done something to me. His unwavering dedication to my safety in the face of danger stirs something deep within—a softness that, until now, I had forced into a forgotten corner of my heart.

"I...I'm fine," I stammer. "That was incredible."

My breath catches in my throat when he comes close and brushes a strand of hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering against my cheek. "I told you you never have anything to fear when you're with me."

Except maybe losing my heart.

I thought I was done with trusting men after my ex-husband. But here I am, feeling vulnerable, yet safe in Tak's presence.

And wetter than I've ever been.

He smiles. "We should go," he says, cleaning off the blade in the gritty dirt, and packing up our things.

As we get back out into the jungle, my mind drifts back to our kiss. I'm not sure what made me kiss him. I'm more surprised than anyone that I did it. Just...being warm and safe in his arms made me remember how good it feels to be wanted and cherished. I let go for one teeny second.

I think of the pain, Gil, my asshole ex-husband, caused. Having an affair with a woman from his office, then blaming me for driving him to it...was devastating. The memories are a festering wound, reminding me why I erected these walls around me in the first place. But Tak's unflinching loyalty and devotion, despite my reticence, continues to chip away at my defenses.

As we walk, I'm suddenly overwhelmingly aware of my own pungent smell. Days of being cooped up in a nasty jail cell and then trekking through this jungle haven't been kind to my personal hygiene. I don't know how Tak is able to stand it. Somehow he doesn't smell nearly as bad as me.

"I stink," I announce, unable to contain it any longer.

"You do not," he says.

I glare at him. "Don't patronize me."

An amused glint appears in his electric green eyes. "I can sense we're near water. We'll stop and bathe."

"How can you tell?"

"Listen," he says, cupping his tall, elven ear.

I strain, but all I hear is the rustle of foliage and maybe a few creatures—hopefully, harmless birds.

I shake my head. “Your ears are like five times the size of mine.”

He smiles. “Forgot about that.”

He leads me through some six feet tall brush—a wall of pink and white—that opens to a small secluded waterfall spilling into a serene purple lagoon. As I get closer I see the water is crystal clear and easy to spot anything within it.

"This place is breathtaking," I whisper in awe, taking in the lush foliage and the strange mist that dances in the air. “Is it safe?”

Tak's gaze travels around the perimeter. He nods. "It should be fine. But keep your shoes on, just in case."

“God,” I say, staring into the water, wondering what creature will pop up from the lagoon floor. Still, I haven't felt truly clean since I was abducted, and at this point, I'd risk almost anything to wash away the grime.

“You won’t be able to see whatever might be there,” he says, with a smirk, removing his shirt.

“Not help...ing...” I trail off as my eyes take in Tak’s body. Pecs, biceps, shoulders, and a washboard of delicious abs. I gulp. He goes to pull down his pants. He’s not going to drop trou right in front of?—

Ho, my lord!

I spin around to face the other way.

Yes, yes he is.

I pick up my jaw from the ground. “Tak, you can’t just get naked in front of me.”

“I’m going to bathe.”

“I know, but it’s not...appropriate.”

He sighs, and I can tell by his tone he truly didn’t know. “Sorry, Iris. Should I put my clothing back on?”

“No, just...get in the water enough so I can’t see everything. ”

I hear him wade into the water.

I turn back around and the water is about rib high on him.

“Is this acceptable?” he asks.

I nod. “Now, look away for a moment. I need to undress.”

He does and I quickly rip off my top and bottoms, and slide into the lagoon.

It feels amazing—so cool and fresh on my skin.

“Can I turn back around now?” Tak asks.

“Yes,” I reply.

He dips under the water, wetting his hair.

“You don’t happen to have any soap, do you?” I ask.

He shakes his head, then looks to one of the rock-covered banks. I watch as he swims over and scrapes what looks like a blue moss off one of the rocks and then moves back over to me. I try not to look down into the water, because it really does nothing to hide what’s in it.

“This moss acts like a cleanser. It has moisturizing properties, too.”

“Perfect.” I open my palms for him to give me some of it, but he just smiles.

“May I wash your hair?”

Normally, I’d only allow a man to wash my hair if he was my hair stylist. But nothing about where I am or who I’m with is normal .

I duck down under the water and come up, running my hands through my tangled nest of knots. “You may.”

He begins massaging the moss onto the top of my head. "Your hair..." His tone is soft, almost reverent. "It flows like spun gold." He works the lather into my locks with slow, deliberate motions. His fingers are strong yet gentle, and I can feel the hardened spots unraveling under his palms.

A soft moan escapes my lips, and I sink deeper into the water, closing my eyes as his hands knead my scalp, sending shivers down my back.

A knot of longing forms in my belly.

Okay, that’s enough of that. I pull away. “Thank you.”

His eyes are that dark, dark green again, but he merely nods. "Of course."

We get more moss and wash ourselves until we're as clean as possible. It's blissful as the water laps at my skin, washing away the dirt and sweat of the last few days.

Finally, I emerge from the water, stepping through some foliage to reach for my clothes.

But suddenly I notice the vines have wrapped around my ankles.

Then they tug me down.

"Tak!" I yell, as the plant pulls me lower, then starts snaking around my wrists. I struggle, kicking and fighting, panicking, as Tak kneels down and grabs my arm.

"Don't fight it, Iris. This plant has a unique method of attracting insects to pollinate it. It uses other animals as bait. The Strangle Vine, as we call it, reacts to tension. Relax your muscles, and it will release you."

Strangle Vine? "What? How am I supposed to relax when it wants to use me to lure in those gigantic insects?" I try to do as he says, but it's easier said than done, especially with my heart racing.

Tak's hands rest gently on my shoulders, and I realize I'm still naked and his dark eyes are roving over me as slowly as possible. I should be scolding him. Yelling at him to help me, not eye-fuck me. But dammit, all it's doing is turning me on.

He kneads my shoulder and inhales, his eyes closing briefly. My entire body flushes with heat. Can he smell my arousal?

"I promise I won't let anything hurt you," he says, his eyes so dark.

“Then get me out of this thing,” I whisper.

“Do you trust me?” he asks, lifting my chin to look at him.

“What?”

“Do you trust me?” he says slower this time. “I need you to say it.”

This is getting weird, but the hunger in his eyes won’t let me do anything but nod.

“Say it, Iris. Please.”

“I trust you, Tak,” I finally say, as he leans in, his lips brushing mine in a soft, tentative kiss. My body buzzes with electricity, and I respond, kissing him back as the vines hold my wrists up and apart.

His kiss deepens, and unlike before when I kissed him, his tongue strokes over mine. I moan, the suede-like texture so strange and exciting. I think of how it might feel on other parts of my body as his hands begin to roam. Pleasure sparks at each point where he touches, my nerves coming alive under his exploring fingers.

His mouth moves down my neck, tongue trailing over my collar bone, its path hot and wet. His cheek rubs against my breasts, and my breath catches. And when he sucks my nipple into his mouth I arch into him, a desperate noise emerging from my throat.

“You’re so beautiful,” he groans, when his fingers slip between my legs, finding the soaked evidence of my desire.

I shudder.

"Let me take care of you. I can show you how you deserve to be treated," he whispers against my belly, as his fingers slide against my wet folds, making me tremble.

"Yes," I sigh, as I relax my thighs outward.

His kisses travel down to my hips, and I'm already rocking them up to meet his mouth.

"Patience, sweet one," he says.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:52 am

6

TAK

I stop to inhale the intoxicating scent of Iris's cunt.

It's magnificent and I could drown in her slick flesh.

I want to take my time and savor every sound she makes, every tremble of her hips, and every delicious flavor of her body's pleasure.

But my need is so strong.

I could explode at any moment.

Pulling her lower half closer to me, I press feather-light kisses along her seam, her cunt swollen with want.

"Tak..." she whines, as I begin to add my tongue, letting it dance along her folds, reveling in her taste.

I move back to her wet opening and then slither up to her crest, licking and sucking her sensitive bud.

She's writhing now, undulating under my mouth—shaking—as she whispers words of pleasure.

I'm in utter heaven, watching her take the pleasure I'm giving.

I could tease her like this, edging her until she's an exhausted mess, but I worry we could be interrupted at any moment.

I descend on her plump, juicy cunt, devouring her sweetness—licking at her, sucking her flesh, feasting on her.

“Oh fuck! That's so good...” she moans, and I reach up to massage her breast.

I continue to eat her like a starved beast, and I can feel my hard length rustling in the vines. I have a brief thought of encouraging the vine to wrap around—no, bad idea.

Iris's body is beginning to tighten up, and I know she's about to climax.

“Oh god...Tak, I'm going to?—”

“Yes,” I growl into her cunt, and her body suddenly bows, her hips convulsing. I grip her thighs tight, drinking up her orgasm.

“I'm coming! I'm coming!” she yells, and it's like she's possessed by the spirit of pleasure himself, her body wracked with tremors.

“Quorr , yes, my mate,” I say. Too bad if she doesn't believe it. I do.

I lick her until her trembling subsides, getting my fill.

Finally, I lift up, watching her naked and panting, like a tree nymph.

As her head lolls to the side, the vines begin to release her and slither away. Before they can do anything else, I gather her up and lift her into my arms. She wraps her

legs around my waist and holds onto my shoulders. I lean down to grab our clothes and carry her away from the banks.

“Are you okay?” I ask, peering into her hooded blue eyes.

“More than okay,” she replies, with a smile. “But...”

“But what?”

“I want more,” she says, and my cock jumps.

“More?” I choke out.

She nods. “I need you inside me, filling me up, and making me come again.”

I almost drop her in surprise, as I register what she’s asking. “Are you sure you’re okay? You are Iris Alexander, correct?”

She smirks. “Do you not want this?”

Yes, it’s definitely her. “You know I’d do anything for you, Iris.”

“I know,” she smiles. “And I want you to fuck me.”

My chest rumbles. Fuck is an English word the translator has so many meanings for. But Gwen had enlightened me on their use. And I’m positive in this context, she means what I think she means.

Fuck, indeed.

I scan the area and haul her over to a mingoa tree, pinning her up against it. Mingoa

bark is soft, like feathers.

“Then I will fuck you,” I growl, crushing my mouth to hers, taking her kiss. She thrusts her hands into my hair, our tongues clashing, my cock pulsing against her hot, moist skin.

Her nails scratch my scalp and drag down the backs of my ears and I moan loud.

I’m frantic for her, wanting to be everywhere, in everything of hers.

Just as I’m about to lift her higher to fit onto my raging cock, she breaks from our kiss.

“What about birth control?” she asks.

“What about it?” I reply, my brow furrowing.

“I don’t want to get pregnant right now, Tak. And who knows what kinds of diseases we could pass between us and not even know it.”

“There’s no chance of you getting pregnant. The people of Ydris are implanted with a device that stops reproductive genes from being passed to a partner. The couple interested in pregnancy must follow certain protocols. If that is done, the implant is removed until the parents have a child.”

“Wow,” she says. “That’s so...responsible.”

He grins. “And sexually transmitted diseases were eradicated long ago with the advancement of medical knowledge.”

“I was tested right after I found out my ex-husband was fooling around, and I’ve only

been with vibrators since.”

“What are those?” I ask.

“Umm...sex toys that vibrate,” she replies, and I smile.

“Well, get ready for the real thing.” I lift her up. “Right.” Then guide her down onto my aching cock. “Now,” I grunt.

We both let out a long, deep, groan.

“Soooo...much better,” she sighs, and I grip her hips.

She rocks into me, and my head flies back at her tight, wet heat.

It’s almost too much for me to bear.

“Ahh, Iris...”

“Tak,” she whispers. “I need...”

“What do you need, sweet one? This?” I ask, thrust up hard into her.

“Fuck yes. More!”

My mate needs more of my cock and by Quorr I’m going to give it to her.

I hold her tight to me, and drive into her, pounding that juicy cunt again and again as it squeezes my entire length.

She bites her lip, whimpering, her nails clawing at me.

It's madness being inside her.

The pleasure is overwhelming—a powerful, all-consuming force that makes me forget everything but the sheer joy of the moment.

Our bodies slap together, my passion rising to a peak, my leg muscles burning.

Suddenly, she gasps as the tension within her snaps, and she arches against me.

“Yes! Tak.. Holy hell, I'm coming,” she screams, and I'm right there with her, flying, soaring, in a sublime climax that has me roaring.

I continue to thrust slowly as we come down, trying to catch our breath. The jungle around us seems frozen, and for a fleeting moment, it's just her and I—devoid of space and time.

IRIS

The jungle canopy above filters the sunlight, casting dappled shadows that dance across Tak's silver skin. His chest rises and falls with a steady rhythm, a stark contrast to the turbulent storm raging inside me. I can't believe I just had sex with an alien—and not just any alien, but Tak.

And not just any sex... spectacular sex. The best sex of my life.

What was I thinking? I wasn't, clearly. Or at least, I wasn't thinking with the proper part of my brain. One minute I was tangled in those creepy vines, and the next, wrapped in Tak's arms, consumed by a desire I hadn't felt in years.

Something about him ignites a fire within me that burns away all rational thought. Now, in the quiet aftermath, reality comes crashing down around me like a cold, eye-opening wave.

A part of me wants to reach out, to trace the line of his strong jaw, to run my fingers through his silvery hair. But I don't. I can't. Because if I do, it means admitting that this could mean something more than what it really is. That he means something to me.

Am I ready for that?

My heart pounds in my chest as panic sets in. I've been here before—vulnerable,

open, trusting. And look where that got me. Betrayed, broken, and vowing never to let anyone in again. Yet here I am, feeling things I swore I'd never feel again.

It's terrifying.

I need to move, to do something, anything to distract myself from all of these ...emotions.

Survival. I need to focus on survival. We're still in the middle of a dangerous jungle, with who knows what kind of threats lurking around every corner.

I can't afford to get distracted by... feelings.

But even as I tell myself this, I can't help but lose myself in his electric green eyes, as a soft smile curves his lips. My heart does a stupid little flip, and I hate myself for it.

"Iris," he murmurs, stroking my back.

"We need to keep moving," I say, my voice sharper than I intend. I see the flicker of confusion in his eyes, but he nods, pushing himself up.

"Of course," he replies, his tone patient and understanding. It only makes me feel worse. Why can't he just be a jerk? It would make this so much easier.

As he dresses, I turn away, and put on my own clothes. I can feel his gaze on me, but I refuse to meet it. If I do, I know I'll see that kindness, that gentle smile, and it will chip away at my defenses even more.

We set off through the jungle, Tak leading the way with his unerring sense of direction. I follow, my mind in a constant battle with my heart. It leaves me exhausted and on edge.

Tak glances at me, his eyes filled with concern. "Are you alright, Iris?"

"Fine," I snap, immediately regretting my tone. I take a deep breath, trying to soften my voice. "I'm just... thinking about our next steps."

He nods, but I can see he doesn't believe me. He may know something's wrong, but he doesn't push. Instead, he reaches out, gently taking my hand. His touch is warm, comforting, and briefly, I let myself lean into it.

Slowly, the fear creeps back in, and I pull away, putting space between us. Tak's hand falls to his side. He says nothing, just keeps walking. I can see the hurt in his eyes, and it tears at my insides.

As we walk, I can't help but feel like I'm walking a tightrope, balanced precariously between my fear of vulnerability and my feelings for Tak.

I must've let myself lag behind for neither me nor Tak heard someone come up from behind.

The cold, calloused grip of a massive hand clamps around my wrist. Instinct kicks in, and I try to twist free, but the hold is unyielding.

Tak turns his eyes flashing with fury as he sees who has me.

The Warden of Lyrica, a hulking beast of an alien, that looks like a sasquatch in handmade leather clothes, grins maliciously. "Thought you could escape me and my prison, did you?" he sneers, his breath hot and foul. Two additional guards, minotaur-like, and heavily armed, flank Tak, their weapons pointed at him.

"Let her go," Tak growls, his voice a low, threatening rumble.

The Warden chuckles, sounding like a life-long smoker chewing gravel. "You're in no position to make demands, Kraetian." He jerks me closer, his grip bruising. "I had to come after you myself. My jailers couldn't be trusted to do the job right."

Tak's eyes narrow, and I can see the calculations spinning through his mind. He's not just a tracker; he's a strategist, always looking for the best way to turn a situation around.

"You're making a big mistake, asshole," I snap. "We have powerful allies."

The Warden laughs, a harsh, grating sound. "Powerful allies? You mean Ydris? I just met with the King and his new Queen. They're clueless. Told them I'd do my best to find you. I didn't say if I did that I'd let them know. You'll be quite the prize for the right buyer." He drags me toward the ship, the guards shoving Tak along beside us.

Tak's eyes meet mine, and there's a spark of something there.

As we're loaded up the ramp onto the ship, Tak makes his move. With a swiftness that belies his size, he snatches a taser from one of the guards, breaking free from their grasp. He lunges at the Warden, the taser crackling with electricity.

The Warden yelps in pain as Tak steps on his bulky chest to hold him down, then yanks the laser gun from his belt.

Two fiery rounds blast from the gun, striking down each guard.

I stumble on the ramp, catching myself on the side of the ship.

I watch as the Warden rises up behind him. "Tak!" I yell.

But as Tak turns back the Warden swipes at Tak, his claws raking a huge gash across

Tak's chest. Dark blue blood pours from the wound, and Tak staggers back, his face contorted in pain.

"No!" I don't think; I just act. I pick up the laser gun from one of the guards and shoot the Warden in the back. He falls with a hard thud, his body going instantly still.

I drop the gun, my hands shaking.

I've never killed anyone before.

I look over to my silver alien. "Tak!" I rush to his side, my heart pounding heavy in my chest. He's slumped on the ground, his hand pressed to the wound, blood seeping through his fingers.

"Iris," he murmurs, his voice weak. "You... you saved me."

"Don't talk," I say, my voice choked. I pull the tool kit from Tak's pack at his belt. I'm trembling as I try to open it. "I need to stop the bleeding."

I work quickly, tearing open the kit and pulling out gauze and antiseptic. I clean the wound as best I can, my heart aching at the sight of his blood. I press the gauze to the gash, applying pressure.

"You're going to be okay," I whisper, more to myself than to him. "We're going to get out of here."

Tak's eyes flutter open, and he gives me a small smile. "If I don't make it...know that I love you, Iris. Whether or not you believe it, you're my mate. I know it in my heart."

I blink back tears, my throat tight. "Don't say that. You're going to make it." I sniff.

"I refuse to let fate dictate who I love. But...in our case, I think fate got it right. I love you, too, Tak."

His amazing green eyes widen, and he reaches up to stroke my cheek. "There's no way I'm not going to make it now. If I have you by my side, my world is complete."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:52 am

TAK

I watch as Iris finishes patching me up, her hands gentle yet efficient. She's trying to hide her worry, but I can see it in the tightness of her jaw, the slight tremble of her fingers. It's a stark contrast to the fierce woman I've come to know, and it tugs at something deep within my soul.

She loves me.

She wants to see me alive and thriving.

And I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my days loving her in that same passionate way.

I want to pull her into my arms and reassure her that I'm alright, but we don't have time. Soon, Lyrica will send more guards and word will spread about us to all those looking for riches, from pirates to bounty hunters.

We're fugitives running from a twisted justice.

The bodies of the Warden and guards are still strewn about under the ship as Iris steps forward, her grip on my arm tightening as she helps me up the incline of the ramp.

"There's no need to board that ship." A booming voice echoes through the clearing, familiar and commanding.

I turn to see Ryz striding towards us with a smile. Beside him is Zadren, the Chief of

Security, ever vigilant. Relief washes over me at the sight of them, and my knees buckle slightly.

But there's a figure running past them that makes my heart swell.

Queen Gwen rushes to Iris, her face alight with joy. I nudge Iris to let her know I can stand on my own and the two women collide in a hug, their laughter and tears mingling. Iris pulls back, her eyes shining as she looks at Gwen.

"You're really here," Gwen whispers.

Iris nods, grinning. "Of course I am! I told you you'd always have me around."

Gwen's gaze flicks over to me, and I can see the gratitude in her amber eyes.

Iris turns back to me, her hands on my arm. "Gwen, we need to get Tak to Ydris. He needs proper medical attention for his wounds."

Gwen nods with a concerned expression, then looks over at Ryz.

"Ready the ship," he says to Zadren. "We leave immediately."

The journey back to Ydris is a blur. I drift in and out of consciousness, Iris's voice always there, always anchoring me. When I finally come to, I'm in my own bed, the familiar scent of home surrounding me. Iris is there, fussing over me, her brows knitted in concentration.

"Iris," I murmur, reaching out to take her hand. "Just sit with me for a moment."

She looks at me, her eyes soft and nods. Her hand is warm in mine, her presence comforting. I close my eyes, letting the peace of the moment wash over me. But my mind is restless...

“I know I’ll heal in time,” I start.

“Stop that,” she interrupts. “Chom and Ferg said you’ll be fine in a couple of day-cycles, you big baby.”

I chuckle and it hurts. “Don’t make me laugh.”

She puts a hand on my cheek and grins. “Sorry, my mate.”

My entire body goes hot. I love when she calls me that.

“As I was saying...” I begin again. “I want to marry you.”

Iris’s big blue-gray eyes go wide. Then she squeezes my hand.

“I want to marry you too. More than anything,” she leans down and kisses me, and I swear each of her kisses is more healing than any medicine.

When she pulls back, I tease. “Are you sure? Gwen told me you said men are overrated.”

She smirks. “Human men, yes.”

I laugh again, and groan in pain. “I love you, my mate.”

“And I love you...”

I take a deep breath. "I've been thinking about Lacey, again," I say, unable to completely let go if a tracking task is at hand. Especially one this important. “There’s someone I believe is much more involved than we previously thought.”

Iris's expression turns serious. "Who?"

I whisper his name.

Iris blinks wildly. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”