

author of Ice Planet Barbarians

RUBY DIXON

BARBARIAN

ICE
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LOVER

Barbarian Lover

Ruby Dixon

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As one of the few humans stranded on the ice planet, I should be happy that I have a new home. Human women are treasured here, and one alien in particular has made it clear that he wants me. It's hard to push away the sexy, flirtatious Aehako, when all I want to do is grab him by his horns and insist he take me to his furs.

But I've got a terrible secret - the aliens who abducted me are back, and thanks to the translator in my ear, they can find me. My presence here endangers everyone...but can I give up my new life and the man I want more than anything?

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PART ONE

KIRA

Two caves over, I hear the wet sound of sex, and a woman's whimper. "Oh God yes, like that," moans Nora. "Spank me like that."

A soft thwack echoes in my translator, and I groan and cover the hated thing with both my hands. I try to roll over on my side and push it into the pillow I've made out of scraps, but all that does is shove the translator harder into my ear canal, and it sends a shooting pain through my skull. So, I flip onto my back and stare up at the rocky ceiling of the bachelorette cave.

"Just like that, my big, strong, sexy beast," Nora cries again.

"Nnnngggghhhh," says her big, strong, sexy beast (also known as Dagesh). To make matters worse, I hear another woman giggle, and then Stacy and Pashov – who, because of crowding, share a cave with Nora and her mate – go at it, too.

Gaah.

I hate this translator. Hate it, hate it, hate it. I push the pillow over my face, ignoring the fuzzy fur that sticks to my mouth. It wouldn't be too bad if just made every conversation happen in stereo as it translates it. Oh no. It also amplifies everything. So I hear every ass slap, every moan, every grunt, every kiss...everything.

And the tribal caves are chock-full of people mating lately. With us humans that crashed here, we ended up having to take on what the aliens call a *khui*. It's a symbiont that allows us to live on the planet

without the atmosphere killing us. Of course, one of the side-effects of the khui is that it decides who and when you mate, and there's no going around it.

Considering that the tribe of alien men – known as sa-khui – outnumber the alien women four to one, I'm not surprised that mating after mating has happened. Out of the twelve human survivors dumped here, six have mated.

I'm...not one of them.

It's hard not to feel like a reject at times because my khui is silent. When it finds you the perfect mate, it starts to vibrate. It's a bit like purring, but more song-like. The aliens call it 'resonating' and a male will only resonate to his female and vice versa. And despite the insta-mating, everyone that has hooked up is blissfully happy. Georgie adores her alien, Vektal, who's the leader of the tribe. My friend Liz is fiercely protective of her mate, Raahosh. Stacy and Marlene and even weepy, terrified Ariana love their men. And it's clear that Nora is into her mate, if the sounds of sexy spanking are any indication.

All the 'leftover' girls – aka the unmated ones – are piled into a cave together. I was lucky enough to get the nook in the corner with a curtain for privacy. Not that it does much to muffle the sounds. I can still hear everything...and I can also hear when someone sneaks out to visit a guy, like Claire is currently doing.

Claire's one of the tube girls, so I don't know her as well as some of the others. When we were captured by aliens, several were held in stasis in pods stuck into the wall, oblivious of their surroundings. The rest of us – Liz, Georgie, me and a few others – were crammed

into the dirty, crowded hold like animals and lived there for weeks. You bond when you're in a situation like that, and I miss them.

I don't know Claire as well as I know them. I haven't bonded with her over weeks of hugging to share warmth and melting snow just to have something to drink. In a way, I almost resent the tube girls because they had it easy while the rest of us were scraping by to survive. It's not their fault, and they're just as shocked and traumatized by the alien abduction as we are. We just had it worse for longer.

I call a mental image of Claire to mind. She's pretty, with a soft, downy cap of white-blond hair cut in a pixie style that frames her small face perfectly. She's extremely quiet, and isn't prone to excessive weeping like Ariana is. And she didn't resonate.

So why she sneaks out to fuck one of the aliens, I have no idea. I don't know which one it is, either, but it concerns me. Has she been pressured? Led to believe that she has to give up her body in order to have safety? Are the single men here in the cave too direct and the girls afraid to turn them away?

I make a mental note to talk to her in the morning. I feel responsible for all the girls here. I was the first one to be left out of the stasis pods, so I feel like I'm the most senior. I've turned into the den mother of our human girls, even though Georgie's our unofficial leader. And I worry about them being taken advantage of. The fact is, even though Vektal's people have taken us in with open arms, we are still strangers to their customs and their world. It doesn't hurt to be cautious.

As the sound of more sex starts up again, I clamp the pillow against my translator to muffle sound and wait for everyone to fall

asleep.

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I don't actually fall asleep until late, and so when I wake up, I'm bleary-eyed and yawning. The translator surgically attached to my ear aches from pressing on it all night, and I'm exhausted. I shuffle out of bed and go to sit near the fire pit in the center of the bachelorette cave. Megan's poking at the fire with a stick, while Claire is toasting nuggets of raw meat. There's not a lot of vegetables on this ice planet, so our meals consist of meat, fish, and more meat. The only berries we know of are used for washing. There's a pounded gruel in storage that's saved for travel rations, and herbs for teas. Other than that, it's meat, meat, meat. Sometimes raw, sometimes cooked, depending on your tastebuds. Liz eats hers raw like the hunters do, but I can't bring myself to try it. I'm a wuss.

I sit next to Claire and draw my legs up. "Morning."

"Actually I'm pretty sure it's early afternoon," Megan says. She examines the burning tip of her twig, and then sticks it in the fire again. Megan is normally a pretty positive one, with encouraging words no matter how bleak the situation. But since we came to the alien caves, she's been...withdrawn. Quiet.

I worry about her, too.

Claire wordlessly offers me a stick and then a large, stone plate covered in gobs of raw meat. I gingerly spear a few pieces for my breakfast and then hold them over the fire. "You hungry, Meg?" I ask.

"Megan ate hers raw," Claire whispers.

Megan just gives me a thin smile.

“You’ve got a stronger stomach than me,” I say. I’m no good at being the cheerleader.

“Tastes like nothing when it’s cooked,” Megan says, and jabs at the fire again.

She’s not wrong. With the khui in our bodies, certain things about our physiology are changing. Smells are less strong – not a bad thing, given that the cave is built around a hot spring that reeks of sulphur. Taste is also less strong. All the sa-khui eat their meat raw and their travel rations heavily spiced. Some humans have adapted. Some of us haven’t.

I push my kebob over the flames.

“Aehako came by this morning,” Megan comments, poking at a coal with her stick.

“I’m not interested in Aehako,” I say pointedly, and then nibble on a chunk of my breakfast.

“He’s interested in you.” She looks up at me. “If you mated him, you’d get your own cave at least.”

I can feel my forehead setting in a frown. “I didn’t resonate to him.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t hook up.” Megan is serious.

I’m shocked. “I’m not going to sleep with a guy just because it’d get me a cave. Besides, where would we go? There are no more caves!” I gesture around us. “People are sleeping in the storage rooms as it is.”

Megan shrugs. “Might not be a bad thing to have a guy looking out for you here, like Vektal does for Georgie. And Aehako’s nice.”

I feel my face flushing with embarrassment. Aehako is nice. And handsome, for an alien. And flirty. And...I didn’t resonate to him, so

none of it matters. She thinks Vektal protects Georgie, but Georgie's pretty dang capable on her own.

And it doesn't matter because they resonated to each other. Now they're mates and stuck like glue, and Georgie's pregnant.

Claire's silent at this exchange, but talking about men gives me the approach I need. I choke down another cooked chunk of tasteless meat and give Megan a meaningful look, asking her to leave for a few. She gets up and heads back to her bunk, bundling in the furs and turning to the wall. I'll have to deal with that, too, I think. Soon.

Instead, I touch Claire's arm. "Can we talk?"

A wary look crosses her pixie face. She nods.

I gesture at the translator jutting out of my ear. It's a bit like a conch shell made of metal that sticks out of the side of my head. "I told you what this does, right?"

Again, Claire nods.

"Did I mention that it also allows me to hear a lot of stuff? More than your average person would?"

"Like...?" Her voice is a mere whisper.

I lean in. "Like girls that aren't mated going to visit men at night."

Her face flushes an angry red and she jumps to her feet. "You think you're my mother?"

"What? I—no! I just—"

"I'm an adult," she says, her fists clenched, and for a moment, I think she's going to hit me. I'm so surprised by her anger I can only stare at her. "I can have sex for sex's sake, you know. I can do what I want. And excuse me if I'm trying to find a little fucking comfort in a bad situation!"

“Claire, please. I just wanted to make sure you were all right. That no one’s coercing you—”

“Not all of us are stuck-up prudes like you,” she huffs. She flings her cooked meat into the fire, uneaten, and then storms away out of the cave.

I’m left behind, my mouth hanging open slightly from that outburst. Wow. My feelings are a little hurt but I’m mostly just shocked to hear such a violent outburst from such a small, timid person.

Not all of us are stuck up prudes like you.

Ouch.

“That went well,” Megan comments, rolling over in her bed to look at me.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“The same thing that’s wrong with all of us rejects,” Megan says. “She’s just trying to find a place for herself.”

I bristle a little at her words. “We’re not rejects.”

Her shoulders shrug. “We didn’t resonate. You can’t help but feel a little rejected over that.”

I did...but I also knew why I hadn’t. “Don’t be discouraged,” I tell her. “If you want a family, I am sure at some point you’ll resonate for someone. The healer said that sometimes these things take time.” Which also explained why I hadn’t resonated, but I keep that thought to myself.

She makes a soft snorting noise. “I know why I didn’t resonate, Kira. You don’t have to try and make me feel better.”

“What do you mean?”

She sits up in her nest of furs, and for a moment, the expression on her face is incredibly sad. “I was pregnant, remember?” Her hand

touches her stomach. “They sucked it out like it was nothing. And mind you, it was unplanned. Just a stupid night at the club that led to drunken sex. I don’t even know the guy’s last name.”

I say nothing. How can I judge? The life we left behind seems so very long ago.

“But I still think about it,” she says in a soft voice. “I still wonder about it.” She looks away for a moment, then blinks rapidly. “But I think maybe my khui knows my body isn’t ready for another child yet. So maybe it’s giving me time before it puts me back on the horse.”

“Oh.” I don’t know what else to say.

“And Josie has an IUD,” Megan says. “I think that’s why she hasn’t resonated. Maybe the other girls are on some sort of birth control. I’m starting to think that all of us that didn’t resonate just aren’t fertile.” She looks at me. “You on the shot?”

I shake my head.

“Huh.” She shrugs. “So, yeah. Josie hasn’t said, but she’s scared that someone’s going to figure out that she has an IUD and can’t get pregnant, and she doesn’t know how they’ll react. I can’t really blame her for trying to integrate herself.”

I say nothing. Josie has been working herself to the bone, learning how to tan, and weave, and everything else she can think of. I thought she just had a lot of nervous energy to channel. God. I truly am clueless. Of course she’s scared. We all are.

These alien men are interested in us because of what we represent. We’re wombs. We’re a chance for family. If we can’t give them that...at what point do they stop feeding us? Stop housing us?

Suddenly, the walls of the cave feel very narrow and enclosing. I breathe hard. “I...think I need to take a walk,” I tell Megan. I have to

get out of here. I'm starting to feel trapped again. The walls feel as if they're closing in on me. Have we traded one captivity for another?

What are they going to do when they find out that I'm sterile? That when my appendix burst as a child, it infected my ovaries and I won't ever have children?

What will happen to me then?

AEHAKO

I see Kira's small form hurry out of the caves, and I automatically follow her, a predator stalking its prey.

She's fascinated me since the beginning, this Kira. Ever since we rescued them from the black cave they were hiding in, I have been drawn to the human with the melancholy eyes and the strange device protruding from her ear. I thought perhaps that I would resonate to her, but my khui remains silent.

My cock, however, pays attention when she is around. It comes to life when she brushes a lock of brown hair behind her small, perfect, unadorned ear. It twitches in response when she gives one of her rare smiles to the other human women. And when she flushes and hurries away from me? It ignites the predator inside me.

I want to find her and grip her against me. Push her into the snow and fuck her until my name is on her lips.

But she resists me. It's the human way, perhaps. I've made it quite clear I'm interested in this particular human, but she ignores my attempts to get her attention. She's rarely alone, always surrounding herself with the other humans. This might be my one chance to give her the human courting gift that her friend Leezh suggested.

I race back to my bunk to retrieve the item I've been whittling. I will give it to her, and she will know of my interest. I want to see the look on her face when she realizes it. I want to see her soft, small human mouth part in surprise. I want to touch her smooth brow and find out the other places she is smooth.

I want to touch that third nipple between her legs that Vektal mentioned his mate had. He said it made her squeal. I want to make Kira squeal and lose that careful, calm expression she always wears. I'm good in the furs. I know I can please her.

Thinking about solemn Kira coming undone in my arms has made my cock stiffen in my breeches, and I rub a hand against it through my leathers, assuaging the ache. I haven't had a woman in some time, and my cock responds eagerly to the thought of sinking into the warm, ridged warmth of a woman's cunt again.

"There you are," purrs a voice.

I stifle a groan of irritation as Asha saunters into my family's cave. My bunk is closest to the entrance, and it offers little privacy. Certainly not enough for what Asha intends. "I'm busy at the moment, Asha." My voice is blunt in the hopes she'll get the idea. I hide the gift for Kira in the waist of my leggings, because the last thing I want is someone like Asha seeing what I have before my intended recipient does.

"Hemalo's out showing one of the ugly human girls how to dye leather," she says, and then moves forward to put a hand on my chest. "Want to come back to my cave with me?"

I remove her hand from my tunic. Once, I had welcomed Asha's forward attentions. She'd been unmated and flirty and I'd eagerly participated in bedsport with her.

Until she resonated with unassuming Hemalo, one of the tribe's tanners. Asha hadn't been pleased – at the time she'd been moving between the beds of several unattached hunters, eager to frolic and enjoy herself. Resonating meant she had a mate and a family...and someone she didn't want. Their joining hadn't been the most joyous of occasions, but I had genuinely wished well for her.

I am also relieved, because Asha can be annoying when she wants her way. I am glad she is not my mate.

But her kit died mere days out of the womb, and she and her mate fight, and now she seeks to recapture her old ways...only I am not interested in another male's mate. And Asha is not the only young female in the tribe anymore.

She clings to my arm. "Aehako, wait."

"I am busy, Asha. Go seek your mate if you want sex."

She huffs in irritation, and smacks my arm with one hand. "I am not interested in him. We have no children together. Why should I be tied to him?" She follows me as I head out of the privacy of my parents' cave and into the main tribal area. "You enjoyed sharing furs with me before."

"I'm interested in another," I tell her.

Asha gasps and clings to my arm, tugging me backward to face her. "Not one of those humans?"

"Who else would it be?" I chuckle.

"But they're so...ugly."

I roll my eyes. "Does it matter?" I do not find them ugly. Different, yes. Intriguing? Definitely. They could be as beautiful as a kas-fish with its opalescent scales, and she would find them ugly because they are competition. Poor Asha is threatened – before, she had all

the young hunters in the tribe at her beck and call. Now she watches them pair off with their own mates and feels unhappiness at her situation.

She pouts. “I miss you,” she says, trying another tactic. “Aehako, please.”

I give her a quelling look. She’s wasting my time, and all the while, Kira is outside alone. This is a rare moment I can spend with her and not have others peering over my shoulder.

“I must go,” I tell her firmly, and adjust the gift I am hiding under my clothing. Asha gives me a curious look but steps aside. I jog to the cave entrance, looking for Kira’s small body. The humans barely come to my breast, and I am not even the tallest of males in our tribe. They are delicate things, and I worry that Kira will not be safe out here.

There are tracks in the snow, and I follow them out of the caves and onto the nearby ridge, where Maylak’s healing plants grow in abundance. They are wedged into a small valley, buffered from the worst of the winds. Kira is here, grabbing leaves off of a plant angrily, a scowl on her face.

She turns and glares at me as I approach. Am I the recipient of some of her anger? I grin to myself. Her cheeks are flushed with that unusual pink color that some find ugly in humans. I find it charmingly adorable. She’s so many interesting colors – pink and brown, and her eyes are the vivid khui blue courtesy of the symbiont. “Hello, my small friend,” I call out in greeting.

“Not your friend,” she mutters. “And I’m not small.”

I chuckle at that. “You should pull a few of the intisar plant there,” I tell her. “It’s good for eyesight.”

She shoots me another glare.

I don't mind. I prefer her angry expressions to the sadness in her eyes that is so often there.

"I don't need herbs for my eyesight," she tells me.

"No?" I tease and move to her side, then point at another bush.

"That one is for potency."

She gives me a shocked look, and the pink returns to her cheeks.

"I do not need it, of course," I tell her. "My cock can stay erect for many hours without flagging. It is mostly for the elders or men that have been ill for a long time and wish to couple with their mates."

The noise she makes is strangled. "I don't want to hear about your...penis." She shoots me another vicious look. "Maybe you should go and talk to your friend about it more. She seems interested."

"Are you jealous?" I ask, pleased. I've tried to make it clear to Kira that I am interested in courting her, but she's rebuffed me at every turn. Has she changed her mind? I admire her fine brown hair as it blows in the wind and imagine it spilling over my chest.

And then I have to adjust my breeches again.

"Jealous? Ha! Why should I be jealous? I'm ugly, remember?" She taps the shiny metal shell attached to her ear. "I heard every word of your conversation!"

I cannot keep the delighted grin from my face. She did hear me speaking to Asha. And she *is* jealous. This pleases me greatly.

Perhaps Kira is not so aloof after all. It's time to present her with my courting gift.

KIRA

But they're so ugly.

Does it matter?

The words ring in my ears as I rip leaves from one of the wintry plants. Jerk. Jerk. Jerk. I like how he doesn't care what I look like as long as he gets laid. "Why don't you just go inside and leave me alone?"

"How can I leave you alone?" Aehako still has that teasing note in his voice that makes my stomach flutter...and makes me want to punch him at the same time. He puts a hand over mine. "You're plucking all the leaves from this plant. If I leave you, I'll find the entire hill bare." He tsks. "Maylak will be most displeased."

I glare over at him, but I stop denuding the bush I'm attacking. He's right – I've taken way more leaves than I should have, but the man gets me so darn frustrated. "I'll stop with the plant. You're free to go now."

He doesn't leave, though. Instead, he reaches out and touches the translator sticking out of my ear. His fingers brush against the shell of my ear where it's attached, and I have to fight back a shiver. "Does this thing hurt you?"

"It doesn't feel good." His touch does, though. His finger feels insanely warm against my skin, and a prickle of awareness runs up my arms. "It's heavy and I can't sleep comfortably. It gets cold, too." That, and I can hear every conversation for a mile around.

"Can you take it out? Do you want me to try?"

I pull away from him. A rush of horrible memories burst through my mind and I hug my furs tighter around my body. "They surgically

implanted it. I tried pulling it out myself but it's in deep. I'll just have to live with it."

It could be worse. They could have raped me like they did Josie. They could have removed my baby like they did Megan.

"I want to help you," Aehako says softly, and all the teasing is gone from his voice.

I give him a faint smile. "That's sweet and all, but I'm fine. Really." I drop the crushed leaves into a leather pouch. He's right that I'm squeezing them to death. I don't even know if I can give these to Maylak. They look pretty mangled.

"You're angry at me, aren't you, Sad Eyes? Is it something I said or did?" He leans in close and I catch a whiff of his scent. He smells like the berries they use for soap, and a hint of sweat that somehow smells wonderful on him. "My goal is to make you smile, not bring more sadness to your face."

"I'm fine," I say, even though his earlier conversation with the female sa-khui still stings. To me, it matters if he finds me attractive or not. I'm only human – ha.

"You're not fine."

"Yes, so you like to point out," I respond automatically, then mentally wince. Ugh. Why did I go there?

"What is this word? I am not understanding." He tilts his head. "Is 'fine' the wrong word? Raahosh says he doesn't understand half of what Liz says, so I worry our language barrier is worse than we thought."

"Don't worry about it," I say quickly. I step away since he's awful close and it's making me fluttery. "I think Maylak needed more tea leaves." I hurry over to the next plant.

“Fine means...ahhhh.” He chuckles and follows me. “You heard my conversation.”

I shrug my shoulders as a non-answer.

“You did, and your feelings are hurt because you think I do not find you attractive.”

“That’s not it at all,” I lie, averting my face. I feel like my emotions are painted across my forehead and he’s going to be able to see right through me.

“Mmm. Is that so? Then look me in the face, Sad Eyes, and tell me this.”

I don’t. I pluck a few leaves off of the newest bush, because it’s a nice distraction.

“Look at me, Kira,” he commands again.

I peek over at him. It’s weird that I’m so attracted to an alien. Back on earth, my relationships were nonexistent. I’m the type of girl invisible to guys. I don’t dress in sexy clothing, I don’t flirt, and I rarely wear makeup. My hair’s an uninteresting brown and sits flat against my head, and my face is a little too long to be pretty. I’m not even a great conversationalist. I’m not a virgin because I’m holding out for marriage.

I’m a virgin because I’m boring and unsexy. Normally I don’t care. But Aehako? He’s masculine and utterly breathtaking. He’s one of the few sa-khui who keeps his hair cropped super short against his skull. It’s a short buzz against his scalp, which just draws attention to his big, handsome smile and the enormous horns that jut from his browline. The plated, bumpy ridges down his face are also more prominent, and it makes his face – especially his nose – seem blunter than most. But he’s got such an endearing smile that you

can't help but find him handsome. He's tall and muscular, thickly built instead of lean like Liz's Raahosh, and his entire body is a pale slate-blue that I find intriguing.

To say he rings my bell is an understatement. And I hate that I don't do the same for him. I look away again. "I don't care if you think I'm ugly."

"I don't think that at all," he murmurs, and I feel the heat of his big body as he moves closer to me again. "I simply did not correct Asha because I wanted to get rid of her, not continue a conversation."

So he thinks I'm pretty? A happy shiver races through me.

I squelch that line of thinking. It doesn't matter if he finds me attractive. Leading him on is just a mistake, and I can't afford to get my heart caught up in matters.

I'm sterile. There's no way he's ever going to resonate to me. He can flirt all he wants, but a relationship with me is a dead end. "We're just friends," I say, when he leans in even closer.

"If we are just friends, why do you care so much?"

"I don't," I protest again. I look over and his face is inches from mine. It makes that weird flutter start in my stomach once more.

"Why...why are you standing so close?"

That lopsided, too-sexy grin curves his mouth. "Because you keep backing away." He leans in. "And I like the scent of you."

"Aehako," I say, my voice soft. I can't lead him on. He needs to know that flirting with me will get him nowhere. He should save his attentions for a woman that might someday be able to be his permanent mate. "Listen..." I stop, because he's pulling something out from under his tunic. "What are you doing?"

“I am giving you a courting gift.” He pulls something long and thick and wrapped in leather out of his tunic and holds it out to me.

“A gift?” I take it from him, touched. We humans have so little and I already feel like a big mooch with all the things that the kind sa-khui people have given us. Now he’s giving me a gift?

“A courting gift,” he emphasizes. “I worked very hard on it.”

A...courting gift? Is this a sa-khui thing? “I see.” I shouldn’t take it, but I have to admit that I’m curious as to what it is. It fills my hands and is about a foot long, and thick like a baseball bat. I unwrap it slowly... And then stare. Surely that’s not...”Is this your, um, penis?”

He nods proudly. “It’s a very good likeness. I worked hard to get it just right. Of course, the others think I’m mad for staring at my own cock for hours while I whittle.” He shrugs. “Do you not like it?”

It’s a dildo. I stare at it in a mixture of horror and disbelief. It’s made of bone, and I’m a little terrified of what sort of creature comes with bones this...thick. Oh God, I’m blushing. It’s really thick, though. And long. Surely these cannot be the actual dimensions of his penis. But there’s no mistaking the heavy crown on the end, and the veins tracing the length of his, ahem, equipment. It’s definitely a penis. There are even ridges along the top like the ridges on his brows and big muscular arms. And there are even balls attached, and something that looks suspiciously like a pinky finger above the cock.

Dear lord, that has to be the ‘spur’ Liz mentioned. I thought she was making fun of us.

Turns out, not so much.

I push the...thing...back toward him. “I can’t take this!”

For a moment, he looks crushed. His laughing smile disappears and his expression turns fierce. “Is it another? Has your heart

already been claimed?”

I give my head a small shake. “What are you talking about?” I’m baffled. I push the dildo back toward him.

His brows draw together and his hands go to his hips. “Is this not an appropriate courting gift?”

“Humans don’t do courting gifts!”

“But Liz...” He breaks off as realization crosses his face.

“I am going to kill her,” I say grimly.

Instead of being angry, Aehako throws back his big, horned head and roars with laughter. He clutches his sides, incredibly amused. I’m glad one of us is having fun at this little joke. I have no idea what I’m supposed to do here. “Take this back,” I say, pushing it toward him.

He raises a hand and shakes his head, still chucking. “Ah no, it was meant for courting, and I do intend to court you, my sad-eyed human. Keep it.” His eyebrows wiggle. “Unless you would like to see the real thing?”

“I—what? No!” I sputter. “I don’t want to see your penis!”

“Are you sure? It’s quite a nice one. Look at how fine my gift is!” He gestures at the bone dildo. “I would give you much pleasure with it. I’m quite good in the furs.”

“I don’t want to hear about your sexual prowess,” I hiss. I wrap the thing in the leathers again because I’ll be damned if I’m going to wave a big dildo through the entire cavern, and he doesn’t seem to be taking it back.

“No?” He looks momentarily frustrated. “How do human men court the women they like, then?”

“Not with dildos. They give them flowers and chocolates and kisses and things.”

His arms cross over his chest. “I thought you said they did not give gifts.”

“Kisses are not gifts!”

“What are they?”

I blink at him, stumped. He doesn't know what a kiss is? Is he joking?

“This is a trick, right?” I say, gazing at him suspiciously. “I'm supposed to tell you what a kiss is and then you insist on demonstrating and then the next thing I know, we're playing tonsil hockey together.”

His brows furrow as I speak, and it's clear he has no idea what I'm going on about. “Tonsil...hah-kee?”

“Stop it already.” I'm exasperated by both him and Liz, since they seem to be conspiring against me. “I can't believe Liz would tell you about dildos and not kissing.”

“So they're similar?” A speculative gleam enters his eyes.

“I'm done with this conversation.” I move away, edging closer to the bushes. “You should go.”

“Why is it so hard to believe that I wish to be with you, Kira?” He moves closer to me, ever determined, and his big hand touches my shoulder. It takes everything I have not to lean into that small touch. I'm so starved for love and affection that I don't trust myself not to just fling my panties off simply because he represents some stability in this weird new life.

“Because we didn't resonate to each other,” I say, tired. And we won't, because my body won't produce children, no matter how

much I might want them. Or the guy standing next to me.

“Can we not take what pleasure that our bodies offer us?” He leans in closer, and I feel the heat of his body against mine even though I won’t look at him. “Can we not know the joy of touching another?”

“And then what?” I ask. “What happens when you resonate to someone else, or I do?”

He shrugs, his big body utterly casual. “Then life goes on and we celebrate the new union.”

And no one has any hard feelings? I find that hard to believe, but I keep my thoughts to myself. No jealousy? No burning resentment? No envy that someone else gets your lover?

He might be able to turn his feelings off with a switch, but I know I’m not built like that. I know that when I commit, I’m going to want to actually commit. To have a relationship, not just a fuck-buddy. To be loved and love in return.

Unfortunately for me, all Aehako can offer is a fuck-buddy.

“Not interested,” I lie, and give him my best Serious-Kira-is-Serious face. “So you might as well give up now.”

He sighs and gives his big head a small shake. “We will talk again, Sad Eyes. I am not giving up on you even if you have given up on yourself.” He reaches out and brushes a finger over my cheek, then walks away.

I’m left tingling from that small touch, and full of aching need. Why me? Why must I be the unluckiest girl alive?

Because I know the moment I give in to my wants and have a relationship with Aehako, that’s the moment he’s going to resonate to another woman.

And I'll be left alone. Again.

It's not until he's halfway down the ridge that I realize I still have the leather-wrapped dildo in my hands. "Wait," I call. "Take this back!"

He ignores me.

• • •

I remain outside until I can't stand the cold any longer. Then, my fingers nippy with frost, my face chapped from the wind and my bag full of herbs, I finally return to the caves. The dildo is shoved into my herb bag since I don't know what else to do with it, but it sticks out an obscene amount. Fact of the matter is, it's huge. There's no way any guy's dick is this big. Not that I'm an expert on dicks, of course. I thought briefly about burying it in the snow but after all the time and effort Aehako put into it, it seems wrong.

Plus, I might want to study it a bit more when I'm alone.

I head inside and blow on my fingers to warm them. Gloves are a priority, as are snowshoes. Actually, we need a little bit of everything, if I'm being honest. Bras, panties – and I shudder to think what it's going to be like when I get my period again. I missed it last month, but I've never been regular. Thank goodness, because these people wear leather, and it doesn't make a great pair of underpants. Our options are pretty limited, though, and beggars certainly can't be choosers. We're lucky to be warm and fed.

The main cave is fairly quiet, though I wave at a few people that are hanging out in the central pool. During the day, a lot of the men go out and hunt for small game nearby, and the crafters work. Josie

mentioned to me that Maylak's husband Kashrem has a cave a short distance away that he uses for tanning, since it smells so bad that even our blunted senses get offended.

I head for the healer's cave, and tap the wall outside since the leather curtain is drawn over the entrance. "Maylak?"

"*Kay-sah*," she calls out. *Come in*, the translator intones in my ear.

I enter, and she's not alone. Megan's lying on the mat in front of the healer, and Maylak's three-fingered hands are spread wide over her belly. Her eyes are glowing fiercely, which I have learned happens when she's deep into her healing. In the corner, Maylak's little girl, Esha, plays with a few bone toys.

"Oh. Is this a bad time?" I say it in English because we still don't know the alien language.

"It's okay," Megan says with a soft smile. "I was just having Maylak check me out and stuff. To see if, you know...all my parts are working correctly or if the Little Green Men damaged something."

When they gave her the abortion? Oh. I hadn't even considered it. I sit down at the end of the mat while Maylak gives me a shy smile and then continues her work, pressing her hands gently on Megan's stomach. The baby – she has to be two, max – sees me and toddles over with a happy gurgle.

No translation, the translator says. It's baby talk. I grin and hold my hands out for Esha, and she hops into my lap, fearless. Her small blue hand immediately goes to my brow and she rubs it, feeling the difference between her ridged brow and my own.

"I was picking herbs and thought I'd drop them off," I say by way of explanation. "Has she been able to find anything wrong?"

Megan shrugs but doesn't get up. "There's a bit of a language barrier, but so far she hasn't freaked out."

"That's good," I say, then stifle a laugh when Esha peels back my lip and examines my square teeth. Her own are sharp little fangs.

"Esha," Maylak calls out and gives a small shake of her head.

"It's okay," I say, and bounce the baby a little. "I don't mind." I like children. I know Liz complained that she wasn't ready to be a mom, and Georgie said she never thought about children, but I do. I think about them all the time. Maybe because I can't have any.

Maylak pats Megan's stomach and the hard glow in her eyes softens a bit. "*Finished*," Maylak says in her language, and the translator automatically pings in with the words.

"She's done," I offer to Megan, who is looking at me, waiting.

"Am I okay?" Megan asks Maylak, sitting up. She puts a hand to her stomach and then moves her hands in a cradling motion, indicating a baby. "Is everything working properly?"

The healer nods and spouts a stream of the fluid alien language, gesturing at Megan's stomach and then looking at me. They all know I can translate. *Your womb has been wounded recently, Maylak says. There was a baby there once, but no longer. Your khui is repairing the damage. It is almost done, and when it is, there should be no reason why you should not be able to carry a child like any other woman. Give it a turn of the Little Moon and see.*

I translate for Megan and wince when Esha's small, grabbing hands discover my translator and pull on it. I gently tug her little fingers free, feeling envious of the growing smile of relief on Megan's face.

“I’m so glad to hear that.” She gestures at the healer, who is looking at me. “You want to get her to look at you? See if there’s a reason why you’re not resonating?”

I bite my lip and then shake my head. “I know why I’m not.”

“What is it?” Her eyes are wide.

I hesitate. I’m so frightened to tell someone but I also feel the need to share my burden. I want someone to understand why I’m so uneasy. “My appendix burst when I was thirteen. I nearly died, and I was in the hospital for a long time. It caused several of my organs to become infected, and when I was better, the doctors told me I’d be unable to have children.” I shrug. “I know I won’t resonate because I’m not fertile.”

The look of sympathy in her eyes hurts. She glances at Maylak, who is unable to understand our conversation. “Maybe she can look. Maybe...”

I shake my head and snuggle Esha, watching out for the little horns jutting from her baby head. They’re tucked flat against her skull for now, but they’ll grow larger and more protruding later. “It is what it is. I just worry they’ll boot me out once they find out the truth.”

“I won’t say anything,” Megan says fiercely. “You have my word.”

“Thank you.” I give her a soft smile.

She returns my smile and then her expression changes and grows weird. A giggle escapes her throat. “Um, you got something you want to tell us?”

I’m confused about what she’s referring to, and then Maylak chuckles as well. “Esha!”

I look down and the baby’s found my...courting gift and is examining it with great intensity.

“Oh my lord,” I murmur and take it from her, wrapping it with leather again. “Aehako gave this to me.”

“Uh huh,” Megan says, voice teasing.

“Blame Liz. She told him it was what human men do to court women.”

“Ooo, a romance blossoming?” She clasps her hands. “That’s so awesome.”

I shake my head. “It’s not going anywhere. I’m never going to resonate. How do I know he won’t resonate to you tomorrow? Or to Josie? Or Claire?”

Then I’ll be abandoned again. It’s the story of my life. Every time I meet a guy — a rare enough occasion as it is — and we start to connect, I feel obligated to point out that I can’t have children. And since I don’t put out, their interest dies. I’m not a long-term girlfriend. I’m a short, not-very-fun sort of fling until they meet the one they want to spend the rest of their lives with.

And it’s never, ever me.

This time, Megan’s sympathetic look of pity bothers me.

“It is what it is. Here,” I say, opening my pouch to turn the conversation. “I brought you herbs, Maylak.”

• • •

Things are quiet for several days. The humans keep themselves busy enough. Josie’s decided that she wants to learn how to cook, and Tiffany’s still working on trying to make dvisti wool into yarn of some kind. Megan is with Maylak tending to the herb plants around

the caves, and Harlow is scraping skins. Claire hides with her alien boyfriend and watches the small children when the parents are busy.

Everyone's staying busy, including me. There's granulated salt from the 'great salt lake' a few days travel away, and it's precious to everyone, so I'm trying to figure out how to salt or smoke meat to make it last longer. Food's precious, though, so I take the unpleasant bits that people don't like the taste of and experiment on those. Even that feels wasteful, though. One of the caches of frozen meat was buried under an avalanche and the tribe is worried that there won't be enough food to feed everyone when it gets 'really cold' so we're all in work mode. There's extra mouths, pregnant women, and lots of clothing needed so there's no time to be idle.

Aehako hasn't been around lately. He's been out hunting as well, and it's weird, but I miss his flirting and his laughter. I tell myself that I shouldn't, but everyone else seems to be blending in just fine with the group...except me.

I feel weirdly lonely. Maybe it's because my closest friends all seem to have found love. I hate that I feel envy when I see Vektal feeding Georgie choice bits of meat, or the fact that Liz and Raahosh prefer to stay out in the field because it means a lot of alone time for them. I'm even envious of Ariana, because her mate Zolaya bends over backward to make her smile.

The only person I have is Aehako, and I chased him away.

The hunters have been afield all week long, and it makes the caves quiet. Nevertheless, when Aehako returns from a hunting trip with extra furs and a wink for me, it's hard not to feel flushed with excitement. Especially when he insists on saving the furs for me to make a cloak for myself. He's so thoughtful.

Of course, then I remember the dildo, complete right down to the veins, and get all embarrassed again.

That day, Liz and Raahosh stop by with a sled full of meat for the tribe and will stay overnight. They've come in at the same time as Cashol, one of the many single hunters in the sa-khui clan. I hug Liz, happy to see her. She's utterly radiant, glowing with good health and love for her mate.

"How's the hunting?" I ask, beaming at her. "That mate of yours keeping you fed?"

She laughs and steps to the side as Cashol slings a dead dvisti over his shoulder, bringing it into the caves for the tribe to eat. Someone directs him toward the bachelorette cave, probably because Tiffany's trying her darndest to make something with all the dvisti wool. Liz giggles and catches my attention again. "God, yes. When we're not fucking like bunnies, we're eating. So much food." She pats her belly. "Raahosh is determined to make me expand early."

The scarred-up alien leans in and gives his mate a kiss on top of her head. "I must go say a greeting to my chief." He heads off in Vektal's direction.

Liz watches him go with a possessive smile, and then she turns to me. "How are you? How's life in the crowded caves?"

"Crowded," I agree. "We're all stepping over each other. They're talking about starting a second cave again in a few years, once all the babies are here."

"They are?"

I nod. "Apparently there was a second smaller one nearby back in the day, but after the sickness everyone moved in to just the one."

“So why not open it up again?” Liz slings her arm around my waist as we head toward the bachelorette caves to sit for a bit.

“Because they’re not sure if we have enough supplies to feed two caves,” I tell her. It’s been a topic of much conversation lately. “The caves are a half a day’s walk during good weather, and impossible to get to during bad weather. They’re afraid someone might starve in the winter. For now we’re going to stick here and see what happens.”

I’m torn on the thought of another cave. It might be nice to have a bit of privacy...but I also worry that it will turn into a ‘send all the rejects over to this other place’ situation and I don’t want that to happen, either.

“I don’t mind the crowding,” I add after a moment. “I—

A high pitched squeal echoes in the cavern. Liz and I share a look and then we both race for the bachelorette cave, which is where the squeal came from.

When we get there, Megan’s got her arms wrapped around Cashol’s neck. He holds her against him, his face tucked against her, and her feet aren’t touching the ground. She giggles and squeals again, and then we hear it—the faint sound of purring in symphony.

“Oh shit,” Liz says, and gives a happy clap. “Did you two just resonate?”

“We did,” Megan says, and presses a kiss on a stunned Cashol’s face. “Are you okay?”

“My mate,” he says reverently, and then swings Megan around again. “My mate!”

She kisses his face over and over, and then gives him a smacking one on the mouth that confuses him.

By now, there's a crowd forming at the entrance of the cave, but Megan and Cashol are oblivious. She's staring happily into his eyes and he can't stop touching her. We might as well not exist. The purring in the cave is loud enough to make my own silent chest feel over-quiet.

"This is a good day," Vektal says behind us. "Our tribe continues to grow and thrive."

"Yo," Liz says as Cashol starts to undo the laces in his pants. Megan's equally oblivious, now tonguing his mouth with an enthusiasm that's a little obscene to watch. "I think we should give them some privacy."

Georgie strides forward, pushing past all the onlookers, and she pulls the curtains over the entrance to the bachelorette cave shut. "Let's leave them alone," she says brightly. "Most of the hunters are back, and we've got good news. I'd say this calls for a celebration."

A few happy cheers echo in the air, and chatter begins, drowning out the happy couple's purring. I step away, feeling a little lost and lonely. I should be happy for Megan. I should. For some reason, I glance over at the edge of the cavern and see Aehako.

He's watching me.

And my heart aches a little more because I can't have him.

AEHAKO

There's a fermented tea called *sah-sah* that Maylak's husband Kashrem is an expert at making. It smells like the backside of a scythe-beak, but the taste is pleasantly warm on the tongue and it loosens inhibitions. The tribe is breaking out skin after skin of the

sah-sah in celebration, and everyone is feasting, laughing, and happy. Old Kemli and her mate pull out their drums and flutes, and happy music fills the cavern, covering any noises that the now-resonating couple might make as they give in to their khui's demands.

Kemli's daughter Farli – still young enough to be nothing but a sapling – has out her paints and draws decorative symbols on the skin of anyone who will sit long enough to let her. I have a soft spot in my heart for Farli, so I'm one of the first to fall prey to her pretty begging, and when I'm done, she's painted spirals on my horns and sweeping symbols across my face and chest. The elders smile at this – it was common for people to decorate their bodies in celebration of a mating back in their time, and they like to see the custom revived.

The humans are enthusiastic about the painting as well, and I watch as Joh-see gets blue shapes painted on her pale skin. Kira of the sad eyes sits nearby, watching. There's a smile on her face but it doesn't reach her eyes. It rarely does. Occasionally she glances over at me, and then just as quickly turns away.

Even amongst a celebration, she seems alone.

"Can I have this?" I ask Farli, reaching over for a pot of the reddish paints. She and Joh-see are giggling at the stripes she's painting, and the red is unused.

"Of course," Farli says in sa-khui. "Are you going to paint someone?"

I nod and gesture at Kira. "She looks as if she could use more celebrating."

Joh-see grins. She doesn't understand our words but she knows who I'm talking about. "Try to make her smile, please? She is bringing me down."

"Bringing you down where?"

Joh-see just giggles again. "Never mind."

Strange humans. I take the paint and a skin of sah-sah, and before I head over to Kira's side, I lean in to Joh-see once more. "Do you know what a kiss is?"

She gives me a flirty wink. "You hitting on me, big guy?"

I chuckle. "You are too much of a handful for me."

She giggles, and it's clear she's been hitting the sah-sah for some time. She hands another color to Farli, and then rolls up one of her fur sleeves. "Do my arms!"

I wait as Farli gestures and then begins to paint colorful circles on Joh-see's skin.

"A kiss," Joh-see says, musing. "I think Georgie and Vektal referred to them as mouth matings."

Ah. I have seen this for myself. Vektal plants his mouth on his mate when he thinks others are not looking, and they lock together. It even seems like he sticks his tongue in her mouth, which is interesting. I have tongued a cunt before but never a mouth, and I'm eager to try it.

I look over to Kira. She's moved away from the boisterous tribe, hiding in a corner to stay out of the way of the dancers that are beginning to move to the beat of the drums. Another kit on the way and another happy resonance is always a cause for celebration. It doesn't matter that there's no place for the new couple to make their

home. There is always room for one more, even if we have to sleep piled atop one another.

I would not mind sleeping atop Kira.

Asha saunters in front of me as I walk through the busy cavern. “Is that for me?” she asks when she sees the sah-sah skin in my hand.

“No.” I stalk past her and ignore the irritated sound she makes. I head straight for Kira, who has hidden herself into a corner. She sits on a stuffed pillow, and there is an empty one next to her. Good.

The human gives me a frustrated look when I drop onto the pillow next to her. “I don’t want company.”

“You never do, Sad Eyes.” I offer her the skin of tea. “Lucky for you, I am not easily dissuaded.”

Kira sniffs the drink and wrinkles her funny, tiny human nose. “What is this?”

“It is...” I cast about for the right word. “Burns in the belly and makes you feel good? Yes?”

“Alcoholic,” she corrects. She sniffs it again and offers it to me. “You first.”

I take a healthy swig from the skin and grimace at the sharp taste, but the warmth floods through me a moment later. “Strong.”

She takes the skin back from me and sips it. I watch her small lips curve where mine were just a moment ago and lust shoots through me. Kira is a difficult one to chase, but I am determined.

She grimaces at the taste, but takes a second swig. “It’s awful.”

“Drink more. It will start to taste better.”

She takes another healthy mouthful and then coughs, wiping at her mouth. “I think you’re lying.”

“Perhaps a slight exaggeration,” I say, and when she tries to offer it back to me, I decline. “Keep it. You need a bit of alcoholing.”

“Inebriating,” she corrects.

“Your language is confusing,” I tell her, and dab my finger into the small red paint pot. “Your words are nonsense much of the time.”

“You’re not wrong. We should probably learn your language. Go back to the mothership and get the brain dump Georgie mentioned.”

By ‘mothership’ I assume she means the elders’ cave, which the humans swear is another ship that our ancestors landed from. They might not be wrong, but it’s still odd for me to think of it as a ship. As she drinks again, her gaze strays to the group of dancers in the center of the cave. A few of the newly mated human women are with their men, dancing around the heated pool and having a wonderful time. Nearby, others lounge. My friend Zolaya is being fed tidbits by his doting mate.

“They all look so happy,” Kira says in a soft voice. “I should be glad for them, shouldn’t I?”

The fermented tea must be working quickly on her; she’s actually speaking to me of her own accord. I look over at the others. “Should they not be happy?”

“No, they should.” She looks over at me with those sad, sad eyes again. “It’s me that’s the problem.”

I drag my paint-tipped finger down her small nose, creating a stripe. “Because you are not happy that they are happy?”

Her eyes cross and she peers at the stripe. “Why are you painting me?”

“It’s custom when we celebrate. We show our joy with color.”

The sad look enters her eyes again. “Then maybe you should save your paint for someone else.”

“Nonsense.” I dab a bit on her chin, and then make two colorful streaks on her delicate cheekbones. She’s silent as I do, watching me. I want to say flirty things to her, to bring a smile to her small face, but she just looks so forlorn that any jokes I make will seem foolish. I finish with her face, study my art, and then dab my finger into the paint pot again and begin to draw lines on the delicate cords of her neck. Her skin feels so soft under my touch that it makes my cock ache instantly. “You bring me joy. Does that not count?”

Instead of the eye-roll I expect, she just looks even sadder. “You should give up on me, Aehako. Spend your attentions on a girl where you might go somewhere with her.”

“Go...somewhere?” This is another baffling human phrase. We have the words, but the way these humans use them does not make sense.

Kira just sighs and tries to look away.

I catch her chin before she can. “I found out what a kiss is,” I tell her, pleased with myself. This will distract Kira and bring the sadness from her eyes. I expect her to flinch away, to pull back and chide me for flirting with her again.

Instead, her gaze goes to my mouth. Her lips part slightly and she leans in. “Oh?”

I know an invitation when I see one. I lean in and brush my mouth against hers. I’m uncertain about the details of kissing but I’m sure I can figure it out. If it’s anything like licking a cunt, I’ll just watch for her cues.

Kira's lips are soft and pliant, and my mind automatically imagines them on my skin. My cock feels like rock inside my breeches. She presses her small lips to mine, and I pause, uncertain where to take this. Vektal always looks as if he's devouring his woman.

But then Kira's tongue brushes against the seam of my mouth, and I part to let her in. She's taking the lead on the kiss and I'm fascinated – and aroused. Her hands curl in the front of my tunic and I pull her against me, feeling how fragile the human is compared to my stocky, muscular body. She has no horns, no plated ridges to protect her soft parts, and her vulnerability frightens me.

Then her tongue touches mine and I forget all about her fragility. Lust roars through me, and I tentatively flick my tongue against hers. She tastes like the fermented tea, a sweeter, more delicious version. And her tongue is smooth and slick, unlike mine that has the textured ridges that all sa-khui do. She realizes this and a soft sound of surprise passes from her mouth.

But she doesn't pull away. Her hand goes to my cheek and she caresses my jaw, and we continue to kiss. My mouth slants over hers, and I tongue her back, mimicking the motions she began with. When she doesn't stop, I continue, my flicks stronger and bolder, questing. Over and over, I fuck her with my tongue. This, I realize, is what the appeal is to humans. This is a tease with mouths, a promise of what a mating will be like. It feels incredibly deviant.

It also feels amazing.

I can't stop kissing her. I see why humans are so addicted to this.

She pulls away after a moment, and looks up at me. There's dazed lust in her eyes, too, and her hands are clinging to me.

“Come,” I murmur, leaning in and flicking my tongue over her lips again. “The others are busy celebrating. My cave will be empty. We’ll have time to be alone.” And I’m eager to explore her human body and find out what she likes.

She blinks rapidly, and then shakes her head. “No, not yet. I...” Her voice trails off and her eyes become glazed. Her hand moves to the silvery shell that juts from one ear.

Then, a look of horror crosses her face.

PART TWO

KIRA

They're coming back.

A small part of me had always hoped that we'd never see their spaceship again. That they'd forget all about the cargo they dumped here and let us live out the rest of our lives here in peace with Vektal's people. We'd settle in, make the best of a strange situation, and eventually forget all about our initial kidnappers.

Wishful thinking, I guess.

But when the birdlike tones of the Little Green Men filter in through my translator earpiece, my entire body tenses with a wash of memories. Of being pulled from my apartment in the dead of night and waking up on an examining table. Of the horrific first encounter with the aliens, and their frustration with me when I couldn't understand them. Of being held down while they forced – painfully – the translator into my ear. Of weeks spent terrified in the hold, reeking of filth. Of being afraid to make the slightest sound.

Weather conditions on the planet are not ideal. Equipment retrieval will be delayed.

That's the only thing that comes through, but that's all I need to hear. They're coming back to pick things up.

And I still have a translator in my ear.

My breath rasps in terrified pants, and I cling to Aehako's arms.

"What is it?" He touches my chin. "Kira?"

They're going to find me. They're going to find me and because the translator won't come out of my ear, they're going to take me back with them. Oh God. I swallow back a sob.

"Surely the thought of visiting my cave is not so terrible as that?" His voice is teasing and sweet, and anchors me back to this place. I cling to his arms, gripping him tight.

I can't tell anyone about this. The others will panic. My mind is whirling. If they're coming after the translator earpiece, maybe I shouldn't be at the caves.

My thoughts are so far away that when he leans in to kiss me again, I automatically draw away from him.

His expression darkens. "Is it me, then? Do you not want my attentions?"

"I...it's just...complicated." I shake my head at him. "I think I'm going to go sit by the fire, all right?"

Maybe if I'm surrounded by all the others, their happy voices will drown out the fear surging through me.

AEHAKO

Something's wrong. I watch as Kira gets up and woodenly approaches the central fire pit. She has a wan smile on her face for the others. And even though she sits with them, I sense her thoughts are not in the cave, or with anyone in particular. She is distant, staring into the fire, and the troubled crease has returned to her brow.

Perhaps it is me after all. Perhaps my attempts to court her unsettle her. Frustrated, I get to my feet and return the paint to Farli.

The celebration no longer holds any joy for me. I watch Kira for a few moments more, and even though she smiles and talks to the others, it is clear to me that she is distracted and unhappy.

Never before have I been turned down by a woman I have approached. I've shared furs with both women my age, and both were eager for my attentions until they found their own mates. My own mother refers to me as a charmer. Yet this one small human with the sad eyes cannot wait to get away from me.

Troubled, I hand Farli my skin of sah-sah and head off to my furs. I've moved back in with my mother and father and my brothers since there is so little room in the caves. I don't mind – it's not as if I have a mate, though I'd gladly find a quiet spot and share pleasure with Kira.

When I get to my furs, though, they're already occupied. Asha is there, and curls a finger at me, urging me forward. This is not what I needed tonight. Weary, I scrub my face with my hand, smearing the paint Farli worked so hard on. "Why are you here, Asha?"

"Everyone is at the celebration," she says, breathless. Her hand strokes over my bed. "Come and join me. I've missed you."

I shake my head. "Go find your mate, Asha. I want no company tonight." It's a lie, of course – if Kira showed up in the next moment, I'd gladly take her into my furs. But Asha has a mate, and I'm repulsed by her careless attitude toward him.

"I don't want him," she says, pouting. "I want you."

"I don't want you," I say as gently as possible. Asha is an old friend, for all that she is determined to make me miserable now. "Our khuis will never unite, Asha. Stop seeking the past."

She stands up and straightens her leather dress, glaring at me. “That human won’t have you either, Aehako. Best take your pleasure where you can.”

I ignore her as she leaves. I hate that she’s right.

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The next morning, I watch Kira as I sit down in the central cavern and work on my carving. I am making a toy for Esha, who is getting to an age where she is into all her mother’s herbs and needs something to distract her. When Farli was little, I made her bone rings, linked through careful carving, and she enjoyed the rattling sound. I will do the same for Esha. I take one of the long dvisti thigh bones and start working on it. Making a rattling chain for a kit involves a lot of hollowing, and it allows me to sit quietly and watch the humans in the cavern.

One in particular always has my attention. Kira is seated near the banked fire this morning. That she is not in her cave tells me she is looking for someone. That she does not approach me stings, but I’m curious to see who she is waiting for. She looks tired, circles under her eyes, and the colorful, playful streaks I painted on her face last night are gone. Two other humans sit with her, chatting, but she is distant.

When Vektal and Georgie enter the cavern, though, she grows alert. Ah. So she is waiting for the chief. I strain my ears, curious to see what she will say.

She greets Vektal and Georgie easily enough, and then she launches into her plan. “I would like to take a trip to the elders’ cave.”

“The ship?” Georgie asks, curious. “Really? Why?”

Kira looks uncomfortable as she responds. Her body shifts and she touches the silvery shell in her ear. “I’d like to see if I can get this removed. If I can, I’ll need to get the language from the computer there. And I’ve been thinking.” She gestures at the cave. “Look around us. This cave isn’t a natural formation. The doors are too smooth, the ceilings too perfect. I think that when Vektal’s people landed here, they must have found a way to do stone cutting of some kind. I’d like to see if we can do so again. Maybe we can cannibalize parts from the ship and make new cutters. We’ll need more room for everyone.”

Vektal rubs his chin. “It is a good idea.”

“I’ll just need one person as a guide,” she continues on quickly. “Just send me out with one of the hunters and I’m sure I can find my way back once someone shows me the way—”

I’m standing before she can even finish her sentence, my protective instincts getting the better of me. I stride over to where she’s speaking with the chief. Her plan is a mad one. The humans do not know anything about this place. They are not familiar with the snows, the creatures, the dangers. Kira would never make it back if left on her own. I won’t let that happen. “I will take Kira to the elders’ cave.”

She looks over at me in surprise, but I notice she doesn’t protest. She simply firms her little human mouth and then looks at Vektal.

This worries me. She wants to leave so badly she is willing to endure my flirtations? She is indeed troubled by something.

“You should take more,” Vektal instructs. “Other humans need the language as well.”

Kira's expression grows even more troubled. "Oh, but if it's a fruitless mission, I don't wish to waste the time of others. Really, it's all right."

"We can keep the group small," I compromise. "Perhaps three hunters and three humans?"

Vektal nods. "When will you set out?"

I look to Kira.

She looks frustrated. "I would like to go as soon as possible."

"Tomorrow, then. First light. I'll ask around and see which hunters wish to go."

"We have to take two humans?" Kira looks unhappy.

"What's the matter?" Georgie asks.

Kira gives a quick shake of her head and puts a false smile on her face. "I just hate to waste everyone's time."

That's not it. She's hiding something, but what it is, I am not sure. I intend to pry it out of her, though.

• • •

After being pressured, Kira agrees to bring the two humans called Harlow and Claire with us. Harlow is the one with the orange mane and the speckles covering her skin. I remember her because of her unusual coloring. Claire I remember nothing of save that she is extremely quiet. That, and she is apparently sharing furs with Bek whenever she gets a chance.

Bek, of course, immediately volunteers to join us with our traveling party. No doubt he will see this as time to spend with his human lover away from the overcrowding of the cave.

I don't blame him; it's why I shadow Kira. In addition to protecting her, I secretly hold out hope that one of my flirty barbs will hit the mark and she will melt in my arms.

I'm less pleased that three other hunters are volunteering to go with us. They do not care that our party is supposed to be small, only that they might get the opportunity to spend some exclusive time with the unattached human women.

"After all," Harrec says. "Is that not how Raahosh resonated to his woman? He kept her away until she gave in." He nods at the women preparing their packs nearby. "I would not mind having time alone with one of the women. Perhaps I can convince their khuis that I am ready for a mate."

I frown at his words. "This is not about mating the females."

"No? Tell Bek that. He thinks the tiny one with the small voice is his property, for all that they are not properly mated. I'll stay away from her, though." He shrugs. "Either one of the others will do for me. The one with the shell in her ear has nice eyes."

A hot surge of possessiveness blasts through me. "You can go next time," I lie. "Haeden is coming." When Harrec starts to protest, I add, "He has to check his traps." And I storm away, furious that he thinks to approach my Kira.

He just wants a mate – he doesn't care that Kira's eyes are sad or that she feels alone. He's not right for her.

When the other two hunters ask when we are leaving, I give them the same excuse – our party is full. And then I approach Haeden and tell him that I wish for him to join us. My surly friend is not amused.

"You volunteered me?" he asks, sharpening the head of his favorite spear with a stone. "Why?"

“Because you are the only one I trust not to think with your cock when it comes to the human females.” I cross my arms and watch him, trying to keep my voice casual.

He grunts and glances up at me. “You wish to keep them away from the one you picked out, you mean.”

I laugh, because Haeden has always been able to see through me. “Perhaps. But can you blame me?”

The look he gives me is sour. “Which females are going? Is Joh-see?”

“No, she is not.”

“Good.” He stands and blows the bone-dust off of his spear tip. “Then I will go.”

“Did you want her to go? I can speak to Kira...” My voice trails off into a chuckle at the scowl he gives me. “No? Joh-see is harmless.”

“She talks incessantly,” he says in a curt voice, placing a small, leather protective case over the tip of his spear. “Regardless of whether or not I am interested in hearing her words.”

Amusing. “Perhaps if you spoke to her instead of ignoring her, she would realize what an unpleasant fellow you are.”

“And perhaps I should tell Harrec you changed your mind.”

I raise my hands in surrender. “No need to get testy, my friend. Will you join us? We leave in the morning.”

He gives me a quick nod. “But if Joh-see shows up, you are going without me.”

KIRA

As I pack my bag, the translator in my ear makes it impossible not to hear Aehako's conversation with Haeden. A hot flush covers my cheeks. He's chasing the other hunters away because he wants to be the one to spend time with me. I'm flattered, even though I tell myself I shouldn't be. Aehako has no claim on me.

I just...wish he did.

But now the aliens are coming back, and I guess it's a good thing that I'm alone.

At my side, Harlow makes a face as she tests out one of her snowshoes she's made. "This one's splitting, I think. The wood isn't green enough. Or, um, pink?" She pulls the shoe off and examines it. It's made from leather straps and the wood from the pink, whippy eyelash trees clustered outside of the caves. "I need a new branch." She gets to her feet and dusts off her soft leather pants. "You guys want to come with me? We need to make a pair for Claire anyhow."

I stand, abandoning my pack. The guilty part of me wants to continue to listen in on Aehako's conversation, but I shouldn't. "I'll go with you." I already have shoes but Claire rarely leaves the cave, so she does not.

"I'll stay inside," Claire says in her small voice, and she busily works on repacking her bag. A quick glance around shows Bek hovering nearby. Ah. I shrug on my fur cloak and a pair of mittens, and then get bone-handled knives for myself and Harlow.

We head out of the cave into the snow and walk a bit further down the path, toward the thick copse of the pink, flippy trees. I hear footsteps crunching behind us and know that one of the hunters is shadowing us. They're always very careful to keep the humans

watched – not out of anything negative, but simply because we’re clueless about this world. They don’t want us to get hurt.

Harlow studies the trees. “I wish they had a lot of branches like the trees at home. That would make this so much easier.”

I nod, moving into the ‘forest’ of trees. Some of them have a split branch at the top where it forks outward, but for the most part, the trees are straight up into the air, with just feathery fronds for leaves that jut out of the bark. They do look like one big eyelash covered by a lot of smaller ones. “Let’s just use saplings, then? It’ll be less cutting.”

Our snowshoes are simple creations – they’re one long piece of wood twisted into a teardrop shape and lashed together at the heel. Leather has been crisscrossed to make a mesh for the center, and they’re strapped on to the foot. The good news is that they don’t require a lot of construction, so we should be able to take care of them easily.

Harlow and I pick out a likely tree. It’s a little shorter than we’d like, but if we cut directly at the root, it should be long enough for Claire’s light weight. Harlow picks out a nearby sapling and we both get to work cutting at the stem. The weather’s colder than usual today, with big fat snowflakes falling out of the gray skies. I worry that they’re going to think the weather’s not good enough for us to travel and delay our trip.

I need to go. Soon. The sooner the better.

I dig at the snow with my mittens, searching for the root. The ground here, once I dig down far enough to find it, has a curious bluish tinge to it, and I swipe at it in surprise. Just another example of how this place is different from home, I suppose. I clear a bit more

of the dirt away, noting ironically that I've dug almost two feet down in snow, and we're on the hillside, which means it's less deep here than other places. A moment later, I uncover something whitish, and I begin to dig at it.

This plant doesn't have a taproot, like I expected. It has a...bulb. Like a turnip? Excited, I dig with my knife and my mittens, ignoring my original task in favor of this new one. By the time I've uncovered the plant in its entirety, I've found a root-like bulb about the size of a beach ball. It smells woody and is whitish in color, and when I heft it onto the snow, Harlow comes over to my side to take a look at it.

"Is that a potato?" she asks excitedly.

"I don't know. Do you think it's edible?" They only seem to eat meat around here.

"I'm willing to try it," she says with a laugh. "I was a vegetarian before. This has been hard for me to adjust to."

I'll bet.

We saw off the woody stem for the snowshoes, and I carry the tuber itself inside, pleased. Maybe we can bring a few aspects of our human diet to these people and increase everyone's food. I like the thought of contributing instead of just constantly taking.

That night, we eat slices of roasted root along with our raw meat. The root itself is declared edible by Kemli, an elder woman who is the tribe's expert on plants. She's confused why we would want to eat it, but everyone tries out the cooked slices and I see hands reaching for seconds. I'm pleased and happy.

I'm less pleased when Aehako pulls me aside. "Do you want to delay the trip? It's growing colder by the hour."

"What? No! Don't be ridiculous. It's fine."

His brows draw together and he nods at the cave entrance.
“Come. I’ll show you.”

I finish my bite of not-potato and head after him. A bitter breeze is coming in from the front of the cave, but I suppose it would just reinforce his decision to stay if I go get my cloak. So I suck it up, cross my arms over my chest, and follow him as he leads me outside into the night air.

Another foot of snow has fallen since early this afternoon, and the air is definitely colder. Aehako takes a few steps out, and then turns to look at me. “The wind has changed patterns,” he says, gesturing at the sky. “It’s now blowing from the east.” Well, the word he says isn’t east, but that’s what the translator turns it into. “It will hit the mountains and then turn back here, which means even more snow.”

“So?” I say, trying to sound nonchalant. “It always snows. What does it matter?”

He steps back toward me. We’re out of the warm light coming from inside the cave, and it’s darker out here than I expected. I instinctively move closer to the cave wall to block the breeze, and I can’t say I’m sad when Aehako moves in front of me, blocking even more of the chill wind. “Humans are fragile,” he says. “I would not want you to hurt yourself on this journey.” He reaches out and brushes a lock of hair from my face. “You may be fierce in spirit, but your body is puny.”

“Puny?” I sputter, and then give his arm a light smack when I realize there’s a playful grin on his face. He’s teasing me.

“Your hands are already like ice,” he says, taking my fingers in his. “Even your khui cannot keep up with this kind of cold.” His grip

radiates warmth and he pulls my hand to his mouth and blows warm air on it.

For some reason, this makes my nipples prick. His touch is tender and caring, and the teasing look he gives me is flirty and totally Aehako.

“We have to go very soon,” I tell him in a soft voice. “It’s imperative.”

“Something troubles you,” he says, cupping my hand between his and rubbing my fingers to keep them warm. “Will you share with me what it is?”

Oh God, I really want to. I move closer to him and offer him my other hand so he can give it the same treatment, and he takes it, gently cupping it and then rubbing his fingers on my cold ones to warm them. But if I tell him, will he try to mobilize the others to save me? Their spears and slings won’t do much against aliens with the technology I’ve seen.

So I come up with a lie. Or a half-lie, anyhow. “I just...worry that the aliens are going to come back. I worry that each day here is going to be our last. That I’m going to wake up tomorrow and find myself back in the alien ship, a captive again.”

I expect him to give me comforting words. To tell me that it isn’t the case. That I’m safe with him. Instead, he gently blows on my hands again and says, “No one can predict what will happen tomorrow, Kira. I might fall off of a cliff and break my neck. I might catch a khui sickness. Or...I might live to be old and grizzled like Kemli and her mate Borran.” He shrugs his big shoulders. “But I do know that living in fear of what might happen prevents us from enjoying what we have today.”

Oddly enough, his words make me feel better. I slide a little closer to him, sharing his warmth. "I'm afraid I can't turn my mind off enough to live in the moment. I wish that I could."

"I can show you how," he murmurs.

I stare at his mouth, fascinated by the flashes of sharp teeth behind those soft smiling lips. I shouldn't kiss him. I shouldn't want to kiss him. My time here is limited. The bad aliens are coming back, and they're going to come straight for me, because I'm still wearing this stupid earpiece. But I'm so ridiculously attracted to Aehako that it's insane. I want him to touch me. I want his kisses and his attention. I want to flirt back with him, even though every ounce of my being says that it's a bad idea.

Damn it, I want flirting to be a good idea.

"Life can be sweet, even if you take it one day at a time," he murmurs, and his fingers go to my tangled hair, brushing it away from my face.

I lean in to his touch. I can't help myself. I've felt so isolated and alone since we were taken. I want to be able to relax in safety. I want someone to hold me close and tell me that everything's going to be all right. "I'm afraid I might not have many days left," I confess to him. My hand covers his, and I hold it to my cheek. He's careful not to touch the hated translator piece jutting from my ear, but I'm all too conscious of it there. Even now it hums and chirps conversations from inside the cave into my head. I hate that it won't be quiet. I want silence. I want an end to all the worry and anxiety.

Aehako leans in and tilts my face up to his. Intention is written over every line of his face. He's going to kiss me. He's also moving in slow enough that I can stop him at any time if I don't want it.

But I do. So I grab one of his big horns and pull him down closer to me, closing the distance between us. His mouth meets mine, and then we're hungrily kissing. His mouth slicks over mine, his tongue questing deep into my own mouth, and for a time, I forget all about aliens or the chatter inside. I forget about the translator surgically attached to my ear. I forget about everything but the soft lips of the man kissing me, and his wonderful taste. Of the gentle clash of our teeth when our kiss gets too enthusiastic. Of the way his tongue coaxes against my own, encouraging me to be just as aggressive as him.

His hand slides up to my breast and he pushes me back – and to my surprise, I realize I'm pressed up against the cliffside, the smooth rock hard against my spine. His hand goes to my breast, his mouth never lifting from mine. I give a small squeak in surprise against his lips when his thumb grazes my nipple. That small touch sends skitters of pleasure all through my body, jolting nerve endings that I didn't realize I had. My pulse hammers through me, and I want him to do it again. I break our kiss and stare up at him, panting. "I..."

"Is it too much?" he asks, voice low and husky and so sexy it makes me want to melt right into the snow. "Are you too cold?" His knuckles lightly trace a trail between my breasts. "Shall we go inside?"

Once again, he's letting me lead. I'm more skittish than a fawn, unsure and trembling all at once. I know what I want, but it wars with common sense.

What if I let myself get attached to Aehako and he resonates to someone else tomorrow? What if the aliens take me away just when I give in to the longing that's rippling through me?

His thumb brushes across my swollen lower lip. “One day at a time, Kira,” he murmurs.

It’s as if he can read my mind. Even if tomorrow goes to hell, we have today. Maybe I need to claim today for myself. Maybe I need to make a few memories to carry me through the bad things that are certain to be ahead.

So I take his hand in mine and stare down at it. We’re so different, he and I. My skin is the pinkish-white of untanned human flesh; his is the blue of his people, and suede-like in feeling. Three big knuckles lead to three thick, strong fingers tipped with shiny bluish fingernails in blunt squares. My hand looks positively tiny against his, but I don’t feel threatened with him.

I feel safe. And so I jump.

“Your hand is cold,” I tell him in a low voice.

For a moment, disappointment flickers across his normally laughing features. He starts to pull away, seeing my response as a decline of his attentions.

But I grip his hand, not willing to let it go. Instead, I guide it under my soft leather shirt and place it against my warm stomach, my gaze meeting his.

I’m letting him know that I want to go on. That I want more of this. More of him. That I’m living for today.

A low groan rumbles through my translator, and he leans forward, pressing his ridged forehead against my smooth one. “You will undo all my good intentions, Kira.”

“I didn’t know you had good ones,” I tell him, feeling breathless and a little flirty. This isn’t me, to be a tease. But I like pushing my boundaries with him.

And I love his response.

His fingers stroke against my stomach under my shirt, and it feels ticklish. I squirm a bit, and when his nose nudges mine and then his mouth brushes against my lips, I open up for him, accepting his kiss. I want to point out to him that he hasn't mentioned his good intentions, but they suddenly seem unimportant. I just want more caresses. More touching.

Aehako's hand strokes over my ribs and then moves up my shirt, to caress the globe of my breast. I suck in a breath, realizing just how big his hand is. My boob must be positively tiny to him. I think of the big, strong women of his tribe. I'm still a little frail from weeks of starving and captivity. My boobs certainly aren't what they used to be, and they weren't super impressive then, either.

But his fingers trace the curve of one breast and he kisses my lower lip, sucking gently on it. Jesus. For a man that didn't know how to kiss until yesterday, he's pretty darn good at it. "You are beautiful, Kira. As delicate as a scythe-beak."

The compliment strikes me as a strange one, and a nervous giggle escapes my throat as I picture a killer toucan. Not a sexy mental image. "What's a scythe-beak?"

"Shhh," he says. "It isn't important." His thumb brushes over my nipple again, and then circles it.

I suck in a breath. His touch feels like utter perfection. I close my eyes, my legs weak against the onslaught of sensation. I feel his big arm go around my waist, supporting me even as I sag against the wall. He won't let me fall. All the while, he presses soft, attentive kisses to my face.

“Tell me if my touch is too much,” he murmurs and then slicks his mouth over mine.

It’s never too much. It’s so good that I can hardly think straight. For once, the endless chatter in my earpiece doesn’t seem to matter. All that exists is Aehako’s big body pressing against mine, his arm gripping my waist, and that thumb that drags over my pebble-hard nipple.

“You are so soft, Kira,” Aehako says, nuzzling at my un-modified ear. He gently bites my earlobe and it sends shivers all through my body. I cling to him, lost in sensation. “Are you this soft everywhere?” he muses. “If I explored you between your legs, would I find you this soft?”

Oh God. A soft protest rises to my lips and then remains unspoken. I don’t want to stop him. I want him to discover all of me and to keep touching me. I’ve touched myself before, but it’s never felt half as good as his caresses.

My breath is gasping and ragged as he gently brushes his mouth over mine, and then his hand goes to the waistband of my leggings. It’s a draw-string, since buttons and zippers haven’t been invented here, and I seem to come apart the moment the knot does. My pants slide down my hips a few inches, loose, and my entire body is tense with anticipation.

His fingers stroke against my belly. “You are allowed to touch me, as well, Sad Eyes,” he says in a low, amused voice.

Oh. I blink my eyes open and realize my hands are fists curled up against his chest, unmoving. Of course he’d like to be touched, too. I’m such an idiot. I flatten my palms and grasp at his tunic. There are

laces at the collar and I fumble with them, ever conscious of his gaze on my face and his hand stroking the soft skin of my lower stomach.

I don't know how I'm expected to concentrate with all this going on. So I focus, trying to drown out everything but the task at hand. Operation: Touch Aehako. I pull at the laces of his collar, loosening them until they gape open and reveal an expanse of blue, muscled chest. My hand slides under the fabric and I touch him, surprised to feel the rough texture of more ridges over his heart. I always forget that these aliens have tougher, ridged skin over sensitive parts of the body. "You're rough here," I murmur to him, gliding my fingers over the strange patch of skin.

"And you are so smooth everywhere, are you not? I find it fascinating." His fingers dip lower and brush against the curls of my pubic hair. "Ah...and this. I forgot about this."

My legs automatically squeeze together and I reach to pull his hand away in humiliation. That's right. The aliens don't have body hair like humans do. We must be gross to them. "I-I-I..."

I can't think of a thing to say. *Sorry about the bush? There's no razor here?*

He ignores my pressure on his wrist and drags a finger through my curls, exploring them. "It's different than the hair on your head, is it not?" He rubs his mouth over my long bangs, testing them with his lips. "So interesting."

"Aehako, please," I whisper, my face burning. "I just..."

"Do not be ashamed. I am learning your differences. I like them." He leans down and kisses my mouth again, then gently tugs on my lower lip and sucks on it. That distracts me and turns me into mush

again, and when he releases it, he whispers, “I will add it to my list of sensations to think about when I rub my cock.”

My eyes widen. He’s going to think about my pubic hair when he jerks off? Why is that so...filthily arousing? I inhale deeply and stare at his big, broad chest again. I could stop him, but...I don’t want to. Despite my embarrassment, I want his exploring hand to go further down, for him to get even more fodder for his spank bank.

Which is terrible and naughty of me, but I can’t seem to care at the moment.

I slide my hand sideways into his collar, feeling along one thick pectoral. God, it’s like a slab of rock. I brush against something hard and realize it’s his nipple. Curious, I drag my fingers over it, exploring. I never thought of my own nipples as soft until I feel his. It’s as rough as the plate-y skin over his heart. So odd.

“And now you are adding to your sensations, are you not, Kira?” He breathes, his eyes glowing hot. “So you can think of me when you touch yourself in your bunk late at night.”

I can feel my face growing hot at the thought of doing such a thing. I want to protest that I wouldn’t, but...I’m afraid that’d be a lie. And he’s arrogant enough to assume that I’d be thinking of him.

Which is also not a lie.

I bite my lip and pull my hands from his collar, then move to his waistline. I want to keep touching him, but the moment my hands leave the warmth of his clothing, the chill of the outdoors creeps in again. I move under the skirt of his short tunic and brush my fingers over his strong thighs. He wears knee-high boots but there’s bare skin under there that shocks me. It’s like a Scotsman with a kilt, and I wonder if he’s wearing anything under that kilt.

And I wonder if I'm brave enough to find out.

His breath hisses out when my fingers drag up one corded thigh muscle. "Keep exploring me, Kira. I don't intend on stopping with you." And his mouth captures mine again just as his fingers move lower and touch my folds.

He groans into my mouth and swallows my gasp of surprise at the touch. With his fingers there, I can feel so many things. I can feel how big his hand is, how thick and blunt his fingers are. How warm his skin is.

How very, very wet I am between my legs.

I have no panties on. There's no leather that makes a good alien panty, and so I've learned to go without even though it feels shockingly bare. Right now, though, I'm glad for the lack of panties, because his fingers stroke through my wetness and he groans again. "I bet this tastes like the sweetest nectar."

I moan again, my fingers digging into his thigh at the thought of him tasting my juices.

Aehako's tongue flicks against mine even as his fingers explore my folds. They drag over my labia, find the entrance to my core that makes me gasp and stiffen, and then glide back up to my clitoris.

When he touches that, my breath explodes.

"Ahh," he says, and he sounds so pleased with himself. "I have found your third nipple."

My — what?

I should correct him. Really should. But his fingers are gliding over it like he did with my breast and it feels so incredible that I cry out and cling to him, unable to do anything but lose myself to the sensation.

His mouth captures mine once more even as my leg hooks around his, and then I'm practically straddling his hand as he begins to play with my clit, his thumb rubbing it back and forth as I whimper and grind against him, full of desperate need. My tongue flicks into his mouth and I'm mindless with lust. I'm so close to coming, and I should tell him to pull his hand away—

But then he changes the kiss, flicking his tongue against my mouth and then presses more of them to my jaw, my cheek, and moves to my ear. He nibbles on my earlobe again and then sucks on it, even as the pads of his fingers drag over my clit.

And I'm lost. With a low moan, I come. I come so damn hard my entire body quakes with the force of my orgasm. The world tilts, and there's nothing but the rasp of my breath and the feel of the hot, hard body pressed up against me, and the insistent rub of his fingers against my clit. A burst rockets through me and I come, and instead of Aehako pulling away, he continues to stroke my clit, driving me into an even higher fever-pitch. I – I don't know what to think. Every time I've touched myself, the moment I come, I stop. Job done. But he's still touching me, and I can't handle it. A loud cry escapes my throat as I come again, harder, sharper, and his mouth covers mine to muffle the sound. And I just keep coming.

By the time the aftershocks finish rolling through my body, I'm twitching and sensitive, and I give a small little mew of protest when his fingers slide away from my clit. I look up at him, dazed, as Aehako kisses me on the nose one last time and then brings his wet fingers to his mouth. It's so cold outside they're already icing up, but he licks the frosty dew off of them and his throat rumbles with pleasure.

And I just stare.
What have we just done?

AEHAKO

Kira's hands are clenching my ass, so close to my tail that it's making me twitchy. I don't know if she realizes what she's holding – judging from the glazed look in her eyes, I don't know if she's aware of much.

And I'm smug at the thought. I like that I've made her utterly senseless.

She's mine. Resonance or not, Kira is my female, my mate, and I'll challenge any male that thinks otherwise. I hold her possessively, watching the expressions moving over her small human face.

The moment she comes to herself, though, the sad look returns to her eyes. I can't let that happen. So I nudge her with one more kiss and then whisper, "Are your hands warm enough?"

She blinks at me, hazy, and then jumps away as if burned when she realizes she's holding my ass. Her face is cherry red, her nose from the cold and her cheeks from embarrassment.

"We shouldn't have done that."

The possessive male side of me instantly becomes growly at the thought. Why shouldn't we? I watch as she hitches her pants back around her hips and ties her laces. "Why should we not? Did you not enjoy yourself? Did I not make you shudder with pleasure?"

Her fingers press to my mouth to silence me, and she glances around to see if anyone else is watching. I find this amusing, considering that a moment ago she was keening her pleasure as she

came. When she is satisfied that no one else is around, she looks up at me again, reproach in her eyes.

“Why shouldn’t we do that?” I question again. “It felt good.”

“Yes, but we’re not attached! With my luck, you could mate someone tomorrow.”

“Ah,” I say. “But this is tonight.” And I lean in for another kiss and am frustrated when she turns her mouth aside.

“I’m a virgin,” she says.

“I am not familiar with this word.”

“I’ve never had sex with anyone.” Her face is adorably red again. I wonder if it will stay like that if she grows embarrassed enough?

“And?”

“And I should save myself for a mate! Provided I ever get one.” Her expression grows sad again.

I’m confused by this logic. “Why should you save yourself?”

“Won’t he want to be the only one to touch me?”

I snort. “I should think he would rather you know what you are doing. What kind of male would hold your pleasure-seeking against you?”

Her eyebrow goes up, but a hint of a smile curves her mouth. She’s softening toward me. “That’s not a very human way of thinking.”

I open my arms wide and gesture. “Look at this male before you. Does he look very human to you?”

Kira gives me another half-smile and then shakes her head. She looks up at the sky, where a heavier snow starts to fall, coating us in the pale flakes. “Do you think that will let up before tomorrow?”

“I do not.”

She looks disappointed.

“We can delay the trip. A day or two will not matter.”

Again, the panic crosses her face. She shakes her head. “We can’t.”

“Kira,” I say, putting my hand to her cheek. This isn’t about pleasure, or mating. This is about something else that is wrong, and she’s going to tell me what it is. “What is it that you are not sharing?”

She blinks up at me, and I can see the thoughts churning in her head. Something is bothering her and she is terrified to share it. Her big eyes are so sad that it makes my chest ache. I would take this sadness from her if I could.

If she will let me.

She bites her lip. “It’s nothing.”

“It is not nothing, and if you do not tell me, I shall go into that cavern and tell everyone what we just did together.” Not that they would care, but I know shy Kira will be bothered at the thought.

Her lips fall open and for a moment, I think she wants another kiss. But then her mouth snaps shut and she scowls at me. “You’re not being fair, Aehako.”

“I am not,” I say agreeably. I will not be fair when it comes to her. She’s mine. I touch her cheek. “But you will tell me what bothers you anyhow.”

She bites her lip again and her fingers touch the strange metal thing that projects from her ear. “If...If I tell you, you cannot tell anyone. Not Bek, not Vektal, not *anyone*.”

As if I would tell Bek anything. The male has nothing but snowdrifts between his ears. But I nod.

Her hands tense into fists and then she crosses her arms over her chest. Not in anger, I realize, but...hugging herself. Protecting herself. "The others are coming back," she whispers. "The aliens. And I think they're going to be able to find me."

PART THREE

AEHAKO

“Tell me everything.”

She wrings her small human hands and then does just as I command. Her worries spill out – the things she hears from the strange shell in her ear and her concern that they are coming back to get her. As she speaks, I see the stark terror on her face, and I ache that she has been hiding this inside her, that Kira feels it is a burden she must shoulder alone.

She’s not alone, though. She’s mine.

When she’s done speaking, she wipes at the corners of her eyes, pushing away her tears before they can freeze to her cheeks. “Say something?” she asks me.

“Can we remove the shell from your ear?”

She shakes her head and touches it. “I’ve tried. It’s attached to my ear and sometimes I think I should just cut the whole darn ear off, but I worry there’s a part that goes deeper into my head.” She bites her lip. “I don’t want to lobotomize myself.”

I don’t know this word, but I understand what she is saying – she is wise not to fool with things she does not understand. “Then we must get it out of you.” I stroke a hand over her hair. “I will still go with you, Kira, but we must tell the others. It is not right to bring them with us if it will put their life in danger to be around you.”

Her face crumples a little. “Do you think I’m putting them in danger? That’s the last thing I want. I want to get away from the cave so no one’s in danger but me.”

“If you think they are coming after you,” I say, considering the alien device stuck to her head. “Then it is best we are not near the others. Do you not agree?”

“You’re right. I should have said something earlier.” Kira looks defeated.

“There is no shame in fear,” I tell her, and tip her chin up so she will look at me. “I have not abandoned you. Fear not.”

Worry creases her brow. “But it’s not safe.”

“What in this world *is* safe?” I tease. “I could die tomorrow from a fall or bad food.”

“Don’t say things like that.” Kira’s eyes shimmer with more tears. “You’d be safe if it wasn’t for me.”

“I’d be lonely and sad if it weren’t for you,” I tell her. “Do you think you are not worth a little risk?” At her silence, I continue. “I do.”

The brave smile she gives me wobbles a little. “I’m scared.”

“Shall I come to your furs tonight and distract you until you are no longer scared?”

She buries her face against my chest. Only her small chuckle tells me that her mood has lightened a little with sharing her burden.

It’s enough that she trusts me with this. Soon, she’ll trust me with all her secrets. Then she will no longer fight the thought of being my mate. But first I must help her rid our skies of those that would seek to take her from me.

I mentally add more weapons to my travel supplies.

KIRA

The Next Morning

It's not easy to confess to Vektal and the others the truth about why I want to visit the elders' spaceship. I feel ashamed, as if it's my fault. I see the worry on Georgie's face, and the others, and I feel responsible. I've burst their happy bubble and brought fear back.

Only Aehako's strong hand on my back keeps me from running away like a coward. I don't understand why he supports me through all this, but I'm grateful for it. So, so grateful.

"Have you heard them again?" Georgie asks. Her voice is calm but there's a furrow of worry on her brow. As I watch, Vektal tangles his hand in her curly hair, as if to anchor her to him.

I shake my head. "It's better to be safe than sorry, though. I want this thing out of my ear, and all traces of them gone. If the elders' ship can do that, it's worth a try."

"And if it doesn't work?" Georgie's voice is gentle, even though her question pierces me to my soul.

I don't know what I'll do if I can't remove it. I can't come back and be a danger to others. "I'll cross that bridge when I get there, I suppose."

"Bridge?" Vektal asks.

"Figure of speech, love," Georgie pats his shoulder. "It's nothing to worry about."

"Whatever happens, I won't bring them back here, I promise," I tell her. Even upon pain of death – or worse, my own re-captivity, I won't

sell out the others. I just hope the aliens will leave well enough alone.

She bites her lip and looks at her mate, the chief. Then, Georgie looks back to me. “I don’t want to tell the others if we don’t have to. I don’t want to worry them over nothing. Ariana’s no longer crying at the drop of a hat and Claire isn’t cringing when I talk to her. And Megan...”

I nod. Megan just mated with Cashol. She’s radiating happiness. I can’t take that from her. “I’ll tell the others that plans have changed and we no longer need them to go.”

“I’m still going,” Aehako says, stubborn. “I will not let Kira leave my side. I shall keep her safe.” He looks down at me, and I have to fight hard to keep the blush off my face, remembering what happened last night. “I suspect Haeden will accompany me, if I ask. He has no family to endanger.”

“I can go by myself,” I protest. I don’t like the thought of putting others in jeopardy. “Just point me at the ship—“

Aehako frowns fiercely at me, stunning me into silence. “I will not allow it,” he says. “I will keep you safe.”

“So protective,” Vektal comments. “Are you sure there is no resonance between the two of you?”

“If hope was enough to waken my khui, my chest would be thundering, my friend,” Aehako says easily.

I say nothing. I just sit there and blush. “I’ll, um, let Claire and Harlow know that plans have changed.” At Georgie’s worried look, I amend, “Don’t worry. I won’t say the truth. I’ll sugar-coat it.”

I wouldn’t wish the knot of fear in my stomach on anyone else.

We separate a few minutes later and I head off to the human 'bachelorette' cave to talk with Claire and Harlow. Claire is fine with not going, especially once I tell her Bek's no longer heading off with us.

Harlow, however, is stubborn. She shakes her head and shouldered her bag, her manner unchanged. "I'm going with you."

I take her by the elbow and steer her to a corner of the room, where I'm sure Claire won't overhear us. "Harlow, it's not that I don't want you to come along, it's that...things might be a bit more dangerous than we originally anticipated. It's best to keep the party small."

She stares at me with her bright-blue glowing gaze, evidence of the khui strong inside her. It looks odd against her red hair and pale, freckled skin. "The elders' cave. You said it's a space ship, right?"

"Well, y-yes, but it's several hundred years old and it doesn't fly anymore," I stammer. "The computer inside it is still working but I don't know that much else is—"

"Then I'm going," Harlow says. "You can't really stop me."

I frown at her, frustrated by her pig-headedness. "It might not be safe," I stress again.

"Because of the weather?"

"Because of other things," I hedge.

She considers for a moment and then shakes her head. "I'm still going. I'll take my chances. I need to see that ship."

For a moment, I stare blankly at Harlow. Does she have a listening device somewhere too? Or is something else going on? "Anything you want to talk about?"

“Nope.” She hoists her pack and adjusts the strap against her shoulder. “When do we leave?”

I sigh, defeated. “Very soon. Come on.”

I get my pack and Harlow and I meet Aehako and Haeden at the front of the cave.

Aehako immediately takes a bedroll from my pack and ties it to his. “You are carrying too much. Let me help.”

“I’m fine,” I say, feeling a little embarrassed. Haeden’s not hovering over Harlow like Aehako is with me. Then again, Harlow and Haeden probably didn’t do what Aehako and I did last night. I blush hard just thinking about it.

I know twenty-two is old to be a virgin, but I’ve never given it much thought until now. There’s just never been much opportunity to have sex with someone. Now, it seems like opportunity is knocking with a sexy alien...and the timing couldn’t be worse. How can I even think about getting involved with someone?

Of course, to him it might just be playful, fun sex. Meaningless except for a night between the covers. But that’s not how I’m built. I can’t just tumble into bed with a guy for fun and not think about it again. I need to make Aehako aware of this. Oh no. A terrible thought occurs to me. What if he’s focusing so much attention on me simply because I’m available for ‘fun’? Maybe it’s a cultural thing and women that aren’t tied down by a resonance-mating should be wild and free with their bodies? There’s nothing wrong with that...but that’s not who I am.

I feel guilty that I’ve led him on for this long. I need to talk to him. I touch his arm. “Can we talk?”

“We should hurry. We need to make good time before the weather gets worse. It’s going to slow us as it is.”

I look at the others, waiting on me, and tap on Aehako’s big shoulder. When he arches an eyebrow at me, I sigh in frustration and indicate he should bend down so I can whisper in his ear. It’s not an easy task considering he’s seven feet tall. When he finally does bend down, I lick my lips, suddenly nervous. “I think I should go alone.”

“Why? I thought we settled this—“

“I don’t want you to think, well, that things are different between us.”

He rears back and gives me a guarded look. Then, he leans in again and pulls me close to him. “How should I think things are between us, then?”

I wring my hands in a maidenly gesture, but dammit, I’m feeling a bit maidenly at the moment. “It’s just...I just...” I blow out a nervous breath. “So last night? What happened between us? I realize you’re all fun and games and party time and not thinking about tomorrow, but that’s not how I’m built. I can’t form a casual relationship. I’m not set up that way. So I don’t want you to think that I’m into just having sex for sex’s sake and nothing else out of it. I don’t think I can do the things we, you know, did—“

“We did not do very much,” he interrupts, a dry note of amusement in his voice.

I ignore him and continue.

“—without thinking there’s going to be something between us in the long run. And I don’t want you to think that you have to sign up for a relationship with me.” Gosh, I’m getting all flustered now because he’s just staring at me. “I’m just telling you that I’m the

wrong kind of girl for fooling around with. And I don't want to lead you astray."

The big alien gazes down at me in silence.

"Well?" I ask.

"Are you finished vomiting excuses at me?"

My arms cross over my chest. "Those aren't excuses."

"Then you are not done?"

"No, I'm done—"

He puts a big hand behind my head and tugs me in, bending down to my height. We're eye to eye and nose to nose, and he's so close I can smell his faint scent and breathe in his same warm breath, which feels oddly intimate. "Listen to me, Kira. My interest in you is not just for sex. Though, I would gladly take it if you were to offer it."

I look around, horrified, because he's not speaking in a whisper. He's loud enough for everyone in the cave to hear.

Fingers tip my chin, forcing me to look back at Aehako. His gaze is intense and I can't look away.

"I am interested in you. All of you. Your sad eyes, your soft smiles, your tears, your courage, and your worries. I am at your side now, and I will be at your side until you tell me to leave. I do not need a khui to tell me who is the mate for me. You are mine and I will take every moment with you as a gift."

"But what about—"

"If my khui resonates for someone else? I will not let it." He grins, utterly confident. "My heart is for you and you alone."

"That's not how it works, Aehako."

"That is how it will work for me," he says, ever stubborn. "And if your khui should resonate for another, I will send you to his arms

with gladness for your happiness.”

Hot tears prick my eyes. The knot in my throat prevents me from speaking, but if I could, I’d probably just gurgle a few insensible words about what a good man he is. Because he’s the best.

“You were mine the moment you landed on this planet, Kira,” Aehako says. “It does not take a khui to tell me that. Nor will I let anyone take you from me. So, come, we shall remove this shell from your ear and free you from worry, and then you will fall into my arms and lick every inch of my skin to show me your appreciation.”

A choked giggle escapes me.

“There, that is better, Sad Eyes,” Aehako says. He tenderly touches my cheek. “Now, we should go. We have a lot of ground to cover before it grows dark.”

• • •

If I thought Haden and Aehako would set an easy pace for us because we’re humans and a bit frailer than they’re used to, I’m dead wrong. They make sure we’re bundled well against the cold winds, check our snowshoes, and then set a breakneck pace through the ridges and valleys of the snow-covered land. I huff, my breath freezing against the furry scarf that covers the lower half of my face, and I’m walking so fast it feels like I’m jogging. In snowshoes.

It’s ridiculous, but even Harlow is walking faster than me, so I can’t complain. I just do my best to keep up with the others.

The height of the aliens – along with the different makeup of their broad, spread feet – means they don’t have to use the snowshoes

like we puny humans do. They slow me down and make every step feel like effort. Before the cave has even disappeared from sight, Aehako jogs back to me, plucks my pack off my back, and then gives me words of encouragement so I will keep up.

If all it took were determination, I'd be at the front of the pack. Instead, I'm at the back, and it just gets more difficult as the storms pick up and snow pours from the grey skies. I put my head down and march on, grimly determined to keep up with the others. Georgie said the ship was only a day or so away from the tribal caves, so it can't be that long of a journey. I just need to suck it up and keep moving.

We pause after a few hours to eat. Haeden has killed a critter of some kind with his sling, and the two men cut raw bits off of it and offer them to us. I'm not used to eating my meat *au naturel* but Liz has assured me before that it's fine. And again, Harlow is eating quietly so I feel like I can't be the one to demand a fire. So I gag the warm, bloody bites of food down. It's fuel, I remind myself. Fuel that is desperately needed, because I suspect my 'tank' is going to be on empty before the day is over.

Once food is eaten, we get to walking again. Aehako drops down beside me, and his steps seem impossibly slow. "Are you well?"

"I'm hanging in there," I assure him. I feel like a putz for being so slow, what with him carrying my bag and his, but I'm having a hard enough time as it is.

He nods and gives me a quick squeeze over my fur-covered shoulders, and then paces ahead at his regular, fast gait.

Hours pass and my world becomes nothing more than placing my feet in the path that Harlow's snowshoes have trod ahead of mine.

I'm no longer aware of the cold, or the travel. I thought coming to the tribal caves the first time was exhausting, but now I'm remembering how much of the time we were carried, too weak to walk. I kinda wish someone was here to carry me now. The snow continues to pour forth from the skies, making it nearly impossible to see further than a few feet ahead. I don't know how the guys can tell where we're going, but we seem to be heading in a straight line. That's encouraging. I think.

A hand touches my arm. "Kira?"

I look up and realize that the scarf over my mouth has frosted to my face, and my teeth are chattering. "W-wh-what?"

It's Aehako, his big face concerned. He pulls his hood back from his horns, and he looks no more bothered by the weather than if it's a rainstorm and not the Snowpocalypse. "Come," he says, pulling me against him and wrapping a supporting arm around my waist. "We're near a cave. Come."

I sag against him and more or less let him drag me the rest of the way to the cave. I didn't realize how tired I was until he broke me from my trance, and now it feels as if every ounce of strength has left my body. The translator feels like a block of ice against my ear, and I can't feel my toes. Or my fingers. My teeth are clacking like they're tap-dancing and all the while, the snow just keeps pouring down.

Maybe we should have waited after all.

I don't even have the energy to protest when Aehako slings me into his arms and carries me the rest of the way to the cave. At least there will be warmth there, and fire. Gosh, I love fire.

But when we get to the cave, it's dark inside. There's no fire.

“Predators in this area,” Haeden explains. “It’s a dangerous place to have a fire. We’ll have to share body heat.”

I look over at Harlow, who is just as bundled in furs as I am. It’s gonna be a cold night.

Harlow, however, takes one look at me as Aehako gently sets me down, and then drops her pack next to Haeden. She unrolls her bedroll and strips off her wet, snowy clothing and then inches against him like a big furry worm in a blanket.

Which means I’m with Aehako.

I should have seen that coming, I guess. I stand there like a big snow-cone as Aehako tugs my gloves off my frozen hands and then blows on my chilled fingers to warm them. “H-how c-come H-h-Harlow’s not as c-c-cold as me?” I chatter. “How c-come I sssssuck at traveling so bad?”

“She was not sick for two weeks like you were,” Aehako says easily. “You will get stronger with time.”

Harlow yawns and scoots further into her furs. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m cold and exhausted, too.”

It doesn’t, because she doesn’t look as if she’s about to fall to pieces like I do. Sure, she’s cuddling up to Haeden, who really isn’t the most cuddly of people. But I’d feel better if I wasn’t the only one struggling.

“Get some sleep,” Haeden says. “We’ll eat in the morning and then set off again.”

Aehako strips me down to my last layer of clothing, spreading the others out to dry. The cave is small but there’s no bitter wind, at least. I watch as Aehako lays out my furs and then his, pushing them

both together. Then he guides me down into the bed and pulls the covers to my chin.

It doesn't feel warm at all. I'm about to whine about this when Aehako's enormous body gets into the furs next to me and he pulls me against him, my face pressing against his bare chest.

And...oh. Okay. This is where the warmth comes in. Because sleeping with Aehako is like sleeping with a space heater. A soft, velvety one with lots of muscles. I'm pretty sure he's naked, too, or at least down to a loincloth.

Man. Now I wish I'd been paying more attention.

My teeth stop their chattering and I press my cold hands and feet against his skin. He doesn't protest, just hugs me closer. Delicious warmth seeps through my body, stolen from him, and I start to feel good for the first time since leaving the tribal caves hours and hours ago.

"Are we almost there?" I whisper to Aehako. "To the elders' cave?"

"About halfway," he says in a low voice. His finger traces my ear and then my jaw, sending shivers up my spine. "We're moving slower than we'd like. The storm is hindering things."

The storm, and the slow-ass human, I think, but I don't say it aloud. He knows I'm doing the best I can. I snuggle closer to him and rub my fingers on his stomach. Gosh, he feels good. My fingers glide up and down the flat plane of muscle that is his belly, and I explore him with my touch even as he caresses my face.

I should be really embarrassed that Harlow immediately assumed I was sleeping with Aehako. But...I find I can't really care. I'm glad. I don't want to cuddle up to her because she's not warm and delicious

— and I sure don't want to snuggle with Haeden. I'm glad Aehako and I are under the blankets together, even if it's just for warmth.

And I think about what he said earlier. About wanting to be with me no matter what. Heat pools through my body, and even though I'm utterly exhausted, I find my hands sliding lower to check if he's wearing a loin-cloth after all.

My questing fingers encounter nothing but muscular, lean hip. Oh. So...there's that. There's no waistband. No leather. No nothing. Just me and big naked alien that I have to burrow against for warmth.

Gosh, it is so hard to be me sometimes.

Aehako leans in and brushes his lips against my forehead. "Your fingers are feeling playful. Are you not tired?" His voice is whisper-soft so the others can't hear.

"I'm exhausted," I tell him. I'm still curious, though. Can't blame a girl. He's big and warm and velvety and I can't stop petting him.

"You should sleep."

"I will." Soon enough. I just want to explore him for a bit and keep touching. I'm addicted to the feel of his soft skin over all those hard muscles. I keep petting his stomach, because I'm not quite brave enough to go lower. Something brushes my arm and I gasp and pull back, scandalized. Was that his...

"Don't be shy. You wanted to explore, then explore." There's a challenge in his voice, along with amusement.

That sounds an awful lot like a dare. I'm both outraged and fascinated. I shore up my courage and reach down. My hand encounters hard, hot flesh. A lot of it. I'm...not entirely sure that this is a normal size, but maybe it's normal for aliens. I grip his cock in my hand, wrapping my fingers around him.

His hand immediately cups my face and his groan of delight is so soft. It's just for me.

And I'm a little addicted to this. To his responses. I release him and slide my fingers up and down his length, exploring him with touches. I can feel veins, and there's a thick set of ridges running along the top that reminds me of his brow. The head feels bigger than the rest and my fingers encounter slickness there. "Are you supposed to be wet?" I ask, a little scandalized.

"My seed cannot seem to stay inside when you touch me," he murmurs, and his mouth traces my brows. "Your touch is too exciting."

My touch? Me? I don't think anyone has ever used the word 'exciting' to describe me, ever. I bite my lip and slide my hand lower, grazing new anatomy. Balls. The word seems like a silly one. Sac might be better. He's hairless down here, the skin even softer than I imagined. I circle the thick base of his cock and my fingers brush up against...oh. That has to be his spur. It's a hard, horn-type thing above his cock, about the size of my pinky finger. Such a weird, strange piece of anatomy. I wonder how it's going to match up with my anatomy. I assume it can, since neither Georgie nor Liz has had any complaints. I stroke it with my fingers, and I can feel him tense against me. Ooh. An excited throb starts between my legs, and I press my thighs tight together. "What should I do?" I ask him.

He leans down and kisses my mouth gently. "You should stop."

That...wasn't what I wanted to hear. I pull away as if burned. "Did I do it wrong?"

"Not at all." Aehako nips my mouth with his teeth, sending another pleasurable jolt through me. "I just have no idea how I'm going to

explain to the others how my seed was sprayed all over the cave if you continue.”

A horrified giggle erupts from me, and Aehako’s hand covers my mouth.

“Quiet,” snarls Haeden from a few feet away.

Oh lordy. Aehako’s right. We should be quiet. Still, it’s hard to take my hands away from him and place them back on his nice, safe chest.

He must be feeling the same way, because he kisses me hard, and then releases me. “Sleep,” he murmurs. “You can explore more when we are alone.”

As I drift off to sleep, I think the idea’s one that has a lot of merit to it. I hope I dream of warm blue skin and spurs and fun things like that.

AEHAKO

Rousing myself from my furs the next morning is an ordeal. Not because I’m tired, but because Kira’s sweet form is curled against me, her small body pliant and pressed against mine. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to remain in one place so badly.

The other human is still asleep, though Haeden’s furs are empty. There is no connection between them, then. Not surprising – I think Haeden is even more remote than Raahosh. At least, he has been since he lost his mate before he could claim her. Who can say what that will do to a man’s heart?

I ease myself from the furs without waking Kira, and dress quietly before heading out to the mouth of the cave. Haeden is nearby,

staring at something on a snowy crest. I join him, and he points at the snow.

“We’re not alone,” he says.

My hackles rise at the sight of the footprints in the unspoiled, thick snow. They’re not deep enough to be mine or Haeden’s, and the shape and size is wrong for human feet. But it’s clear that during the night we were visited by someone.

Or *something*.

I squat down next to him and touch the track. The snow is crusted, meaning that the track is several hours old. “I don’t recognize this creature,” I say to him, keeping my voice low so the humans will not hear it. “What has three toes like this?” The track itself is twice the size of my own foot, shaped into three long prongs for toes. I have three toes but...not like this. It’s curious.

It also makes me angry and fiercely protective, thinking of the fragile humans sleeping in the cave. To think something came this close makes me feel helpless.

“Do you think it’s the aliens that Kira mentioned?” Haeden glances up at me. “The tracks circle around our cave and disappear a short distance away, crossing a stream.”

I lick my thumb and test the wind. It’s against us. If there’s a scent trail to follow, it’s long gone. Curse it. “If it was the aliens, why did they not attack while we slept? Under the cover of the storm? Kira thinks they want their shell back from her. If that is what they truly want, why not take it?” I rub my forehead at the base of my horns. I’m angry at myself – angry that someone came so close to our cave and threatened my woman. Angry that I didn’t set a watch and

instead crawled into bed with her to share a few fleeting minutes of pleasure.

Haeden shrugs and gets to his feet. He's not bothered. To him, this is just another hunt, another day. Sometimes I wish there was something that would take that deadness from his eyes. To wake him up and make him realize what is at stake here for me. He puts his hands on his hips and glances at the fresh snow, then at the sky. "Whatever the reason we are followed, we should hurry and take the women to the elders' cave before our new friend returns."

He's not wrong. I nod and go to wake the women up. I debate telling them of the situation, not sure how they will react. Kira's frightened enough as it is.

When I enter the cave, though, Kira is sitting up, a troubled look on her face. "We're being followed?" Her voice is soft.

I look over at the other human's still-sleeping form. She hasn't heard a thing. How did Kira catch my conversation with Haeden?

As if guessing my thoughts, Kira touches the shell in her ear. "This lets me hear...pretty far. I heard you speaking with Haeden. Are we in danger?"

I consider downplaying the danger, but Kira deserves to know. I spread my hands. "I don't know. Something came close to the cave and left, and we don't know what it was. But we had best hurry on to the elders' cave."

She nods and jumps to her feet.

KIRA

Yesterday's snowstorms have disappeared and left behind the weak, thready sunlight from the two tiny suns and an extra foot of fresh, powdery snow on the ground to trudge through. My heart sinks at the sight of it, but there's no time to sit around and hope it'll melt. We need to get to the elders' cave, and soon.

We break camp and set off at a fast pace. It seems even faster than yesterday's brisk hike, but maybe it's because I'm tired. Whatever it is, I struggle to keep up even more than usual, to the point that Aehako has to come and retrieve me a few times. It's embarrassing, but no one calls me out because it's obvious I'm doing the best I can.

The next time Aehako jogs back to where I'm lagging, he unslings the packs he's carrying. "Come," he says. "I'll carry you on my back the rest of the way."

His words make me sputter. Carried? Really? My pride is insulted, but this mission isn't really about pride, is it? I'd gladly strip down naked and lick the feet of every single alien on this planet if it meant that the Little Green Men wouldn't be a threat. So, with a small sigh, I nod. "All right. Let's do it."

"Be careful for my tail," he teases.

No sooner does he say that than it bats me across the legs, like a big, playful cat. I arch an eyebrow at him and just shake my head. Even in all this stress, it's hard to keep the grin off of Aehako's face. I wish I could be as easygoing as him. Even without the worries from all the alien abductions, I've always been a serious sort.

I still have no idea what he sees in me.

He crouches low in the snow and pats his thigh. "Take your snowshoe off and put that puny human foot here."

“I’ll put it in your balls,” I mutter as I pull off my snowshoe. “Puny human, indeed.”

Aehako’s laugh of delight makes me feel better, and I climb onto his back and lace my arms around his neck. He hikes my thighs around his ribs and then grabs our bags, one in each hand, and tosses one to Haeden as he sprints to catch up.

Oh sure, make it seem effortless.

Haeden turns and gives Harlow a sour look. “Do you need carrying too, human?”

“I’m fine,” she says, shouldering her pack to adjust it. “I can keep going.”

I’m envious of the redhead’s seemingly-endless reserves of strength. I hate that I’m the one that has to be babied.

As if sensing my thoughts, Aehako squeezes my thigh and says, so low that only I can hear it, “Most likely she just doesn’t want to be around Haeden’s pleasant personality for any longer.”

I stifle my giggle.

A weird chirp sounds nearby, and I glance around, looking for birds.

Weather update? My translator intones.

I stiffen. That wasn’t a chirp. That was one of the Little Green Men. More chirping echoes in my translator. *The storms have stabilized. We should be able to find a sufficient landing area very soon.*

Look for the cargo hold. If the ones in stasis are still there, we can recover them.

We’ll set down near it.

“What is it?” Aehako looks at me from over his shoulder.

It takes me a moment to realize that I'm clutching his neck so tightly I'm practically choking the man. I relax my grip, though my anxiety remains. "They're coming. The storm's gone and they want to land."

"Then we have to hurry," Aehako says. He looks to Haeden, and the man nods. Before Harlow can protest, she's slung over his shoulder like a pack, and then both aliens are off, running through the snow at a speed faster than our human legs can move.

As more alien chatter feeds down, I can only hope we get there before they realize the translator is nowhere near the old cargo hold and come looking for me.

I want this thing out of my head *now*.

• • •

Even though the sa-khui — our blue alien friends — call it the Elders' Cave, it's actually a spaceship. Some three-hundred-and-change years ago they crash-landed here much like we did, and over time lost the use of their technology. The ship is still there, and the computer works. And if they have the advanced technology to have a working spaceship once upon a time, I'm hoping that they also have some sort of working medical equipment that can get this thing out of me.

At this point? I'm willing to chop off my own ear to get rid of it. The implant feels like an anchor, weighing me down with worry.

I'm relieved when the snowy expanse of the ship appears in the horizon. It's enormous, like a gigantic, overly flat hill. Off to one side I

see the 'cave' opening. It represents safety, even as I hear another sequence of alien chirps come through the translator.

"Hurry, please!" I squeeze Aehako's neck as something bright zips past in the skies overhead. It's not headed in this direction...yet. Doesn't mean it won't, though.

Aehako picks up the pace, and with me clinging to his back, he heads for the entrance to the ship in a full-on sprint. Haeden follows close behind.

As we approach, I see the rounded door entrance. It's iced over and dark, but the interior is deep. The snow around the door itself is high, masking any steps. We race inside, and I see that off to the sides there are doors tightly hugging the rounded walls.

"Can we shut the doors?" I ask frantically. The chirping is filling my ear to the point that it's making my anxiety go wild.

"*Mja se fah-ree,*" calls out a computerized voice. *Door sequence initiated,* the translator tells me.

"What's it saying?" Harlow asks, sliding off of Haeden's back.

Aehako releases me gently, pulling out one of his bone knives from his belt and eyeing the skies. "It says it is quenching doors. I do not know what this means."

"Sequencing," I correct. "That means it's about to shut them." I pull Aehako back a step or two, watching. I'm a little unnerved that the computer's listening to us. We'll have to be careful what we say.

There's a heavy groan of metal, and then the snapping of ice. Harlow shields her face and Aehako protectively steps in front of me as ice flies everywhere, and then the doors to the hatch roll shut. The sunlight disappears, and we're in utter darkness.

Somewhere in the dark of the interior, a red light blinks.

“Hello?” I call out. “Can you turn on the lights?”

A big hand clasps my shoulder, nearly making me crawl out of my skin. “Stay close, Kira. We do not know if it’s safe—“

“North American English, Planet Earth. Is this the default language you wish to use?”

“Um, yes please.”

“Accepted.”

I glance around. Maybe the computer is like an overgrown version of Siri from my iPhone. “Computer, turn on the interior lights, please.”

Something sizzles and I jump closer to Aehako. A flutter, and then a dim light comes on overhead.

“There is a malfunction in regards to the lighting in the main bay. Please contact a service technician.”

“Computer, please turn off malfunctioning lighting and turn on all other lighting,” I correct. I don’t want anything catching on fire. I rub my arms, mindful of the chill in here. Temperature control might be a bit too much to hope for. “Are we safe with the doors shut?”

“The doors can be opened upon request. Do you wish to initiate a lock-down sequence?”

Oh, I absolutely did. “Yes, please.”

“Would you prefer biometric pass-keys or verbal authorization?”

Aehako looks at me in confusion in the dim lighting. “I do not understand any of this.”

Harlow leans in. “We want verbal authorization. A password.”

She’s right. I nod. “Something that’ll be easy to remember. Any ideas?”

Her smile is thin. “Earth?”

I glance over at Haeden and Aehako. They look uneasy, both of them gripping weapons. "I'm not sure that if things get ugly, they'll remember where we came from. Maybe we'll just go with Georgie? Since she's Vektal's mate and all."

Harlow shrugs. "Works for me."

"Computer," I call out. "Please lock down all doors to the exterior. No one can enter or exit without the password of 'Georgie'."

"Password Georgie accepted."

I move to Aehako and squeeze his hand. "If you guys need to leave for whatever reason, just say her name."

He nods, still looking around with something akin to awe. Underneath the ice that coats the interior of the ship, there are lights and panels and instruments. This must seem very foreign to him.

Heck, it's foreign to me but I'm starting to get used to weird things at this point.

Harlow takes a few steps forward and shrugs off her thick, furry overcoat. "You think it's okay for us to explore?"

I gesture at the air. "Ask the computer?"

"Right." She gives me a sheepish look. "Computer, are there any other living things inside the ship other than us?"

"Performing bio scan. Please wait." A low hum fills the room and a red beam flashes from one side of the cavelike hold to the next, scanning us. "Four life forms detected, two modified sakh and two modified human."

Modified human? I touch my chest, where my khui is wrapped around my heart. "You mean us, correct?"

"That is correct."

“Cool,” Harlow says. “I want to go have a look around, if that’s okay with you guys.”

I shrug. I certainly can’t stop her. She’s her own person, and this isn’t my ship. I have my own agenda here, and if Harlow doesn’t want to talk about hers, that doesn’t bother me. It must be personal.

Aehako’s big hands tug on my icy cloak, helping me take it off. “Is it safe to build a fire?” He asks.

“I don’t know if we should. There might not be a vent for the smoke, and we might set off smoke detectors in the interior. I don’t know how the ship will respond to that.”

“Smoke...detectors?” Haeden asks, a frown on his face.

“Long story,” I say. Another chirping sequence of flight commands comes through my translator, reminding me why I’m here. I clutch it and approach one of the frozen panels. “Computer, do you have a medical bay somewhere on this ship?”

“Medical bay is located on floor two, section D.”

I look over at Aehako. “That’s where I’m going.”

He steps forward. “Not alone.”

For some reason, I appreciate that. I smile at him, feeling shy. “All right.”

Haeden moves toward the snowy portal that we entered through, now shut. Muddy, slushy footprints mar the flooring. “I’ll stay here and guard the door.”

I want to tell him that we’re probably safe, but...I don’t know that we are. For all I know, the computer can think we’re safe and the aliens can show up with some new technology that will bust the doors open. So I nod and start forward. There’s a dark hall off to one

side, and Harlow disappears down it, her hand tracing along the wall as she explores. She's fearless. I envy that.

"Computer," I say. "Can you show me the quickest way to get to the medical bay?"

The track lighting on the edge of the floor flickers off to one side. There's a door there, and after a quick command to open it, it rolls back and exposes a different, dimly-lit hall than the one Harlow went down. Exposed wires hang from a missing tile in the ceiling, and it leads on into darkness.

This feels...creepy.

I touch the translator in my ear. It doesn't matter if it's creepy or not, I need to take action.

Aehako's hand touches the small of my back, and that small gesture bolsters my courage.

I plunge into the ship.

PART FOUR

KIRA

The ship is a lot bigger than I originally anticipated. It looked big on the outside, but moving through the empty halls makes me realize just how vast the interior is. The long hallways wind and twist, and I pass door after door, some of them rusted shut, others with flashing red lights on their panels. It's obvious that this ship has been in a crash, and it's also obvious that it's been cannibalized for parts at some point. There are panels removed and loose wiring here and there, and stacks of things set into corners. Old footprints cover the floor gratings from long-dried mud. There's a faint musty smell in the air.

Aehako's big body is a few steps behind mine, and each movement makes the floor shake and rattle, as if a hundred metal plates are upended with every step. I cringe at each movement, worried the floor won't hold us both.

The track lighting in the floor stops in front of a yawning archway with a seam down the middle. It looks as if it might be double doors. It looks like part of the wall, but there's writing of some kind on one side, and a control panel on the other. A broken light flickers overhead and then goes dark.

The moment it does, the chirping sounds in my earpiece again.
Report back on what you see. Are the stasis pods intact?

“Please, open up,” I say, pressing my hand to the door. “I need this thing out of me!”

The metal is warm under my hand, which surprises me. It gives a small shiver and creaks open, and I step inside.

“Kira?” Aehako asks as I enter. “Be careful.”

The time for being careful is past. I just want this thing gone. I put a hand to the translator and walk into the room, gazing at my surroundings.

I’m not going to lie, it looks a bit like a laboratory. That’s scary. There’s tables, and a few benches, and a row of space-like cots jutting from a wall in the distance. Another wall is nothing but screens and monitors. As I step inside, they fire up one by one, scrolling unintelligible words across the screens.

I swallow hard. I don’t like the looks of this, but I’ve never been a fan of the doctor’s office. “Do you have something that can remove foreign objects, computer?”

“There is a self-assisted surgery compartment,” the computer intones. “I shall activate it.”

Self-assisted surgery? Not high on the list of things I want to have done. I’m even more alarmed when one of the walls opens up and spits out a long bed. Monitors flicker and dance with messages.

“Please enter the surgical compartment.”

I swallow hard and walk slowly toward the bed. I can do this. It’s just like getting a CAT scan back home, right? No big deal. I’m sure these people have – or rather, had – some sort of anesthesia or pain numbing sort of thing. Even if they don’t, it still has to come out.

I still have nightmares of when the aliens implanted the thing in my head. Of being held down and strapped down to a table, their voices

chirping around me. Of the cool metal object placed against my ear...and then things burrowing into my brain, sending blinding pain through my body. I'd had a migraine for a week after it was implanted.

I can't imagine what the extraction is going to be like.

Mouth dry, I sit gingerly on the edge of the bed.

"Please lay flat upon the indicated pallet." The computer's voice is changing, turning into a gentle, soothing counterpart. Bedside manner, perhaps. Whatever it is, I relax a little and start to lie down.

Aehako immediately appears at my side and grips my hand in his. "Kira."

"What is it?"

He looks at the walls, full of monitors and flashing lights and computerized technology that I can't comprehend. He looks...more than a little alarmed. This must be terrifying for him. His hand squeezes mine. "You do not have to have this thing removed. I will protect you from the aliens with my life."

I give him a wan smile. "Aehako, they have laser guns and technology that both you and I can't even comprehend. Spears and slings won't do much against them. If they want to take me, there's nothing I can do to stop them. I'm trying to get rid of this thing because I want to hide, not because I think you can't protect me."

His broad face studies me, and I can see the worry etched in his ridged brow and the set of his jaw. He doesn't like this, not one bit. It's startling to see in one as easygoing as Aehako.

"You can let go of my hand now," I tease, trying to keep my voice light.

“Kira,” he says, and his voice is low and husky. Instead of moving away, he leans in. He clasps my hand tighter in his and presses it against his breast. “Be my mate.”

I stare up at his big body in shock. Was that...the alien version of a marriage proposal? “Your mate? But I thought we had to resonate—“

He shakes his head, big horns cutting through the air. My hand is pressed against his thudding heart, the tough, platy ridges covering it. “We will not be resonance mates. Just mates.”

“What’s the difference?”

He stares at me, so intent and serious. His other hand reaches out and brushes lightly along my jaw in a tender caress. “We choose to be mated to each other until we are separated.”

“Separated?”

“By death or by khui.”

I can’t decide if this is romantic or heartbreaking. “But if you resonate for someone—“

“I will not.”

“But how do you know?”

“I don’t. All I know is that you are my mate, and I will not listen to anyone or anything – even my khui – that says otherwise.”

Yeah, and I’m sure his newly resonated mate would just *love* that.

He’s looking at me, waiting for an answer, though. And I’m...torn. Not because I don’t want to be his mate. The thought sends happiness shooting through me. Aehako and I have flirted for weeks now, and he’s shown himself to be caring and funny and kind and just all around wonderful. If I could pick a guy for my mate here on this frozen ice ball of a planet? It’d absolutely be him.

But I’m barren. I can’t have kids.

We'd just be mates until his khui decides that it's time for him to add to the gene pool. Then he'll mate with Harlow, or Claire, or one of the other unmated humans, and I'll be left all alone. Again.

And I don't know if I can take the abandonment. I'm not strong like Liz or Georgie. I'm weak and wimpy and the thought of being put aside for a new mate hurts fiercely. And I've seen Aehako around the others. He comes from a good-sized family. He loves his mom and dad, and his younger siblings. I'd be robbing him of everything but my company if I agreed to be his mate. I can't have children. I'll never resonate for him. If he pins his hopes on me someday resonating for him? He's in for a rude awakening.

It's something he deserves to know before I make up my mind.

I should tell him. I look up at his big, broad face.

The words that come out are, "Do you want children?"

Aehako blinks in surprise. I can tell the question wasn't one he expected. But it's worth asking. If he doesn't want children, I'll feel better as his 'mate'. Maybe because at that point, I'll know that I'll still have a place in his heart even if his khui kicks in and decides he should be a daddy. But his words shatter that hope. "Of course I want children." A slow smile curves his mouth. "What man doesn't dream of a family of his own?"

I feel about as big as an ant. A tiny smushed ant ground into the carpet. I let go of his hand. "Okay, that's what I wanted to know. Thank you."

He laughs and cups my face in his big hands. "Kira, do not worry so. I have seen the khui resonate amongst those mated for many years. It is as if it can sense the love between two people and decides to unite them in every way."

Yeah, right. More like the khui gives up and gives one last shake just to get a little something out of its host. I don't think it's as romantic as he thinks. And it wouldn't happen anyhow. I give him a thin smile. "We'll talk about it when I get out, okay?"

Worry clouds his expressive gaze and he leans in and gives me a quick, soft kiss. "I will wait here."

I slip from his grasp and lay flat on the pallet. "I'm ready," I tell the computer. The bed immediately begins to recede into the wall with me on it, and I watch Aehako's worried face disappear from sight.

Lights flick and then go dark.

I suck in a breath, because this isn't like a CAT scan after all – more like a slab in a morgue. What if the machine breaks down and won't let me back out? I start to breathe rapidly, full of anxiety. My hand touches the panel over my head. It's less than a full arm's length away, ditto the sides. Lights begin to flicker, and I watch the walls come to life with more writing and dancing charts – probably my vital signs.

"How can we assist you today?" the computer's smooth voice asks.

"I need a foreign object removed." I point at the translator in my ear.

"Please remain still. Our systems will scan you to make a health determination."

I put my arm down and lie flat on the bed, careful not to move. I look around, wondering at the technology. I'm a lot smaller than the bed itself – I think even Aehako's brawny form could fit in here – which tells me that the sa-khui haven't changed much since the crash. There's a head rest – maybe in case the patient has

extremely large horns – but it’s too big for my neck and I ignore it, tilting my head off to the side.

“Our sensors have noted two foreign bodies,” the computer informs me pleasantly. “Would you like for us to proceed with extraction of both?”

“T-two?” I stammer, shocked. “What do you mean?”

“Our sensors indicate a non-organic compound attached to your human sensory organ. Further scans indicate that you have also acquired a parasite native to this planet—“

Oh. The khui. I keep forgetting that Aehako’s people crash-landed here and had to take the khui, same as we did. No wonder their computer views it as a foreign object. “I want to keep the parasite and get rid of this thing.” I tap the translator. “The non-organic compound attached to my um, ear.”

“Please turn on your side so we may examine the object in greater detail.”

I roll over and immediately, computerized arms sprout from the wall and begin to touch the translator. Things whirr and chirp, and I have to bite down on my lip to keep from jerking every time something taps on the metal, as it sends feedback screeching through my skull.

“Object identified,” the computer informs me. “Sensors indicate it is a *strbde qreiduvp scipqrei*.” The computer rattles off a sequence of unintelligible sounds. “Would you like to proceed with extraction?”

I notice no one’s offering anesthesia or novocaine or any sort of medication to numb the pain. I lick my dry lips. “Is it going to hurt?”

I mean, I still need to get it removed either way, but I want to know what I’m in for.

“Sensors indicate that the equipment is attached to sensitive neural tissue. It will take some time and effort to remove without damage, but the probability for successful extraction without requiring additional surgery is 97%.”

That sounds encouraging. “Let’s do it, then.”

The table underneath me whirrs and shivers, and a sleek metal cuff slides around my neck.

“What?” I yelp, jerking as another cuff locks around one of my wrists, and another on my ankles.

“Kira,” Aehako bellows, and his voice sounds far away, muffled through the machinery.

“Please remain still,” the computer admonishes me. “You are being restrained for your own safety. The slightest movement can affect the operation. Do you still wish for us to proceed?”

“Kira!” Aehako shouts again, and I hear a clatter of equipment, and an angry chirp from the computers.

“It’s okay,” I call out in a small, thready voice. “I’m all right! Tell him I’m all right, computer.”

It’s silent for a moment, but I don’t hear Aehako shouting anymore, so I suppose that’s a good sign. I force myself to relax, trying not to think of the cuff around my neck as choking me. It’s just like a blood pressure cuff. That’s all. No problem.

“Please remain calm during the procedure.”

“Okay.” I close my eyes so I don’t see the robot arms moving around. Something pings and I feel a tug against the translator, and my body tenses.

“Your blood pressure is abnormally high. Shall we provide soothing music?”

The question strikes me as utterly absurd, and I swallow my hysterical giggle. "I'll calm down," I promise.

"Do you have any other questions you wish to have answered?"

My stomach chooses that moment to rumble, and I decide to make a joke. "Is there a snack bar around here?"

"Query: what is snack bar?"

Oh. Now I have to explain. I feel a bit childish. "A place where you go to eat."

"This ship has three dining locations. However, current food and water supplies are exhausted."

Of course. The people that crashed here probably cleaned out the pantry. "How many people were on this ship?"

"At the time of landing, this vessel had one pilot and sixty-two passengers."

Interesting. I hear the computer arms humming and the thing in my ear tugs. I squeeze my eyes even tighter shut, trying to relax. "So what kind of trip was it? The one that crashed?"

"The charter for *Se Kilahi* reads: A voyage for those to commune with nature."

Se Kilahi must be the ship. It sounds pretty. "Commune with nature? Was this a...camping trip?" If so, they got a heck of a camping trip. Maybe they were a back to basics kind of group and that would explain why Aehako's people went from advanced technology to leathers and hunting/gathering in the course of three hundred years.

"Query: what is camping trip?"

"Never mind." Something tugs on my ear again and I cast about for another question. "So what's the weather going to be like for the

next week, Siri?”

“Query: what is Siri?”

“Never mind.” I smile inwardly at my own joke.

“The atmosphere indicates that more snow will return at this planet’s sunset.”

Yaaay. I never thought I’d be so happy for snow. Maybe it’ll prevent the other aliens from landing. “Can you tell if there is another ship in the atmosphere here?” Worth a shot.

“Affirmative. Sensors have located an alien ship three drumah away.”

I have no idea how far a drumah is, but I hope it’s far. “How many aliens on board?”

“Sixteen.”

Ulp. “You can tell there’s sixteen? Seriously?”

“Affirmative. This unit is connected to a satellite orbiting the planet that allows the ship’s computers to track and record information.”

“Like how many sa-khui are here?”

“Affirmative. There are thirty-five modified sakh and twelve modified humans currently on the planet.”

Huh. I wonder what the point of recording all the information is for. Before I can ask, there is a sharp tug on my ear and I yelp.

“Please remain still as the extraction begins,” the computer’s sweet voice tells me.

Then, there’s a blinding, red-hot shot of pain that seems to jolt directly to my brain and the world goes black.

AEHAKO

My heart stops beating when the wall spits Kira out. She's crumpled on the strange bed, small and still, and there are bloody bandages pressed over her ear. Her strange metal shell is gone but her face is so pale, and she's unconscious.

Mouth dry, I touch her cheek to rouse her. When she doesn't stir, I collect her in my arms and take her away from this room. I don't trust it. I don't trust the elders' cave, with its strange magic and glowing walls and disembodied voices. I want to take Kira back to my own cave and lay her down in my furs—

Well, it's not really my cave but my family's cave, and it would be awkward to lay her down in my furs and mate with her with my younger brothers and my parents looking on. But I'd find someplace quiet to take her and comfort her. To hold her and make her mine.

None of that matters, though. Kira's unconscious and not well. I scent Haeden somewhere nearby and follow my nose until I locate him, still at the front entrance, staring at the strange stone doors with a grim expression. He gets to his feet at the sight of me with Kira in my arms, his scowl deepening.

"What is wrong with her?"

"They removed her shell," I say. "But she won't wake."

He grunts. "She might be tired. Perhaps the walls chatted her ear off."

I cradle her closer to my chest. "Are they talking to you?"

He nods. "It keeps asking me if I wish for anything. I wish for silence and for stone walls not to speak to me."

"Ask the stone walls where a bed is. If Kira is going to sleep, I will stay with her until she awakens." I look around. "Where is the other human?"

Haeden shrugs. “Does it matter? She has to come out through here to leave.” He gestures at the closed cave-mouth.

My friend has no love for the humans. He might be the only one in our tribe who was not beside himself with joy at the discovery of so many women. I turn and look at the strange stone walls with their flashing lights and moving wiggles. I decide to address it. “Where is a cave? I wish to set my mate down to sleep.”

Haeden arches a brow at me but I ignore his silent question. Kira is my mate, even if neither my body nor hers realize it yet. They just need time.

The computer speaks in the human language. “Living quarters are in the south wing.”

“Lead me there,” I demand.

The floor lights up as it did for Kira, and I hold her close, pushing my way into the bowels of the cave. I don’t like this strange place, but it seems to be safe from predators. The strange lights lead me down another winding path, and stop at a cave with a half-open door that shivers as if trying to shut itself. There is a broken piece of the wall hanging down from the ceiling that prevents it from closing, and I slide under and into the cave itself.

It’s a small, too-square compartment with more of the flashing panels, but I’m pleased to see that there’s a square pallet covered with a soft, squishy, strange-feeling animal skin. I toss my cloak down over the pallet and gently lay Kira down onto the bed so I can examine her again. Worry makes my heart pound and I smooth a hand down her arms and legs and chest, looking for hidden wounds I might not have seen before. She seems healthy in body. I peel back the bandages over her ear. There are reddened holes along her

lobe, and dried blood crusted inside her ear canal, but otherwise I see no issues.

There's nothing to do but wait for her to awaken.

I slide onto the bed next to her and wrap my arms around her. She fits against me so perfectly. I sweep my hand over her hair and press my mouth to her strange, smooth forehead. "You are safe with me, Kira," I murmur in a low, soothing voice. "No one will harm you while you are with me. I will fight to the death to keep you at my side. Enemies will look upon my spear and recoil in fear." I run my hand down her small back. "Then, you and I will get a cave of our own. I am not sure how, but we will manage. And we will set up a nest of warm, thick furs to keep your fragile human body warm, and I will press my mouth to every inch of your soft skin and show you how much you mean to me." My fingers graze over her face, tracing her small nose, her tiny brows. She is strange looking compared to the women of my tribe, but I have a great appreciation for her flat brow, pale face and sad eyes, and her small mouth that so rarely curves into a smile. I decide right then and there that I will act a fool around her if it will only bring a happy look to her face.

I will do anything for her.

I settle in to the bed, describing in great detail how we shall set up our cave. How my mother will fuss over the thought of having a daughter, as she has only sons and none of them mated. Of how my father will shake his head at my ways, but it won't matter because it is all for Kira.

"The biggest, warmest bed in all the caves," I decide. "Dvisti fur is the warmest and I will line our nest with that, and then ask Kashrem – that's Maylak's mate – to create soft coverlets that are softer than a

kit's bottom, but warm enough to please you. It will cost me much, but Kashrem's always been jealous of my carving, so I shall create him some new tools, I think. Perhaps a few baubles for his kits." I consider thoughtfully. I've always given away my carvings with ease, not concerned with getting anything in return. Now that I have a mate, I shall have to consider things more carefully, so I may provide all the things she wants. "And we shall need furs for the entrance of our cave," I tell her. "To muffle your shouts of pleasure when I take you every night."

Perhaps that is my own male pride talking there. I do not think Kira is a shouter. Not like Asha was. She will be the quiet type, the kind that comes with a widening of her eyes and a parting of the lips, and no more than that.

I picture it, and my cock grows uncomfortably hard. Time to think of other things. I stroke my hand down Kira's arm. "I imagine that the first brutal season with my people will be hard on the humans. You struggle right now, but I will do my best to ensure that you are always warm and well fed. And when the snows are too high for even the hunters to go out, we shall stay in our furs all day long."

Strange, how badly I want the life I am envisioning. My heart thuds hard, thinking of Kira, warm and smiling up at me from a long night of vigorous mating. Kira, with her belly rounded with my child. Kira, nursing a tiny human-sa-khui halfling, with a pink tail and stunted horns. What would our child look like?

Lost in pleasant thoughts, I continue to talk to my unconscious mate.

KIRA

My head feels like a cracked-open melon. Pain pounds in my brain, and I remain completely still, hoping that the lack of movement makes the agony dissipate. As I do, I hear a soft, low voice.

“I might have to stack the back of our cave with extra dung so I can keep a fire going for you at all times. I’ll just have to figure out something to disguise the smell. Maybe some of Maylak’s herbs. And I know you like your meat cooked, so there’s that to consider. And when it gets too cold at night, we can heat some snow in a quill-beast bladder. You can preserve them a certain way and place them at your feet to keep your furs warm at night. Either way, I’ll make sure you’re happy and comfortable.” Aehako’s big fingers trace my jaw. “But I’ll take care of you.”

My headache fades a little at his soothing touch. I’m cradled against him with my face pressed to his chest and my hand nearby. His arms are wrapped around me, hugging me against him, and it feels...like home. I keep my eyes closed, relaxing in the low thrum of his voice as he tells me all about his plans for ‘our’ cave and how we’ll weather the brutal season – the winter – together and all the plans he has for us. I have to admit that hearing him talk about his plans for the two of us together fills me with an incredible amount of yearning and muted joy. Joy because setting up a cozy cave with him sounds incredibly wonderful and I still can’t believe someone as fun and sexy as him is interested in someone as quiet as me.

Yearning because he starts talking of kits and when I have his children.

Which will never happen, because I’m still barren. A small sigh escapes me. He wants me and a family, but he can only have one of

those things.

“Kira?” I feel his big body move under my cheek and my hand.

“Are you awake?”

I nod and lick my dry lips. “Head hurts.”

“The shell is gone,” he says, keeping his voice low.

I reach up and touch my ear. It sends a new round of blistering pain through my head, but I also feel...lighter? I trace along my earlobe and feel the new holes there. It’s really gone. “Did you destroy it?”

He tenses against me. “Should I?”

“Please,” I whisper. “They might be able to track me with it.”

“I’ll take care of it,” he says, getting up from the bed. “But first you must drink.”

I nod and manage to pull myself into a sitting position. He pulls out his water skin and holds it to my mouth carefully so I can drink, and when I’m done, he helps me lie back down in bed and then gently tucks the blankets around me. My heart is brimming with affection for this giant, laughing man that can be so tender with me.

I hate that I can’t keep him. That I’m flawed and I’ll never be what he wants in a woman. In a mate.

I sigh softly and close my eyes again to relieve my pounding head.

“Rest, Sad Eyes,” he tells me, and caresses me once more before heading toward the door. “I shall handle everything.”

I close my eyes and hope he’s right.

• • •

When I wake up later, my headache is all but gone and my stomach is growling. I sit up in the bed, conscious of a big warmth curled around my backside. It's Aehako again, and he's returned while I've slept, and we're spooning.

Gosh it's hard to be me.

Aehako's big hand goes around my waist, curling me against him. "Kira?" His sleepy murmur of my voice sounds like honey, and I can feel the rather...prominent erection he's sporting pushing against my backside. "How is your head?"

"I think I'm okay," I tell him. "I need to find something to eat, though. And a bathroom."

"Bath...room?"

I nod sleepily, peering at the room we're in. It looks like a small private bunk of some kind, maybe someone's quarters. There's a faded poster on the opposite wall, and I can't make out what was on it. A few more wires hang from the ceiling and there's a fine layer of dust over everything. The room has been stripped, right down to the bed which is nothing but a mattress with our furs placed atop it.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed and get to my feet, testing my strength. I seem to be fine, my surgery-induced migraine gone. If this is a private cabin, I'm sure there's a potty around here somewhere. By running my hands along a few interesting looking seams in the walls, I manage to find what I'm looking for. It's a cubby with a strange looking basin that's a leetle too high off the ground for human legs. Off to one side is what looks like a shower.

God, I would love a shower. I manage to wiggle my way onto the alien toilet a moment before wondering if it's even functioning. "Um, computer? Are the facilities working?"

“Query: what is facilities?”

“The toilets and the showers?”

“I can re-activate them with stored snow. It will take twenty-seven seconds to melt and heat. Would you like to proceed?”

“Oh, yes!”

By the time I finish my business on the toilet, there’s water pouring from the spout in the shower ceiling. At first it drizzles a muddy color, but then runs clear, and I run my fingers under the water to test the heat.

It’s perfect.

With a small sigh of pleasure, I strip off my leathers and toss them to the dusty floor, then move into the shower itself. Some things are eternal, I suppose, because it’s almost exactly the same as a human shower, and I wipe my wet hair off my face with pure bliss. This is exactly what I need.

“Kira?” Aehako knocks at the door. “Are you well?”

“I’m fine,” I call.

The door opens a moment later. “Then you will not mind if I come and spend time with you?”

I squeal, covering my girl parts with my hands as he steps inside. “What are you doing?”

He spreads his arms. “Is it not obvious? You hide in here so I will join you.”

“I’m trying to shower!”

“Shower?”

“Bathe!” I hate that the language that the sa-khui learned is three hundred years old. A lot of our language has changed since then.

“Washing!”

His eyes gleam and he looks me up and down. Aehako's gaze is scorching. "I have soap-berries in my bag. I shall be more than happy to help you wash."

The blush on my cheeks feels like an inferno. "I'm naked."

"I noticed." The look he gives me is appreciative. "And your parts are as fine as I imagined."

I know I should tell him no, to go away. But then it hits me...why should I? What is the point in being modest? Who is there to judge or shame me? I want him to come shower with me. I want his big, blue body rubbing up against mine. I like it when he takes care of me. It makes me feel loved and cherished, and those are two emotions I am utterly hungry for. But...I don't know how to invite a man into a sexy situation. It's not in me to flirt back. So I just give him a mute, helpless look.

As if he senses my agony, he hesitates. "Do you wish me to leave, Kira?"

I stare at him for a long moment. At the big, seven-foot tall alien male wearing only a loincloth that doesn't do much for modesty. He's got horns and ridges and should be frightening. And instead, I'm terribly attracted to him. So I steel my courage and shake my head. I don't want him to leave. "G-get the soap."

He flashes me one of those quick, pleased Aehako-grins and heads out of the alien bathroom, leaving me only moments to try and make myself, well, pretty. I smooth a hand over my wet hair and glance down at my legs and arms and my pale body. I'm not at my hottest. I...guess it doesn't matter. He doesn't have other humans to compare me to except the ones I came here with. When he comes back with his small pouch of berries, I'm nervous but...so excited.

My nipples are already pointing and hard, and I flash him a quick, shy smile, hoping that he finds me pretty. Which is weird to think about considering he's blue and horned, but I still want him to be attracted to me because of me, not just because I have a vagina.

Aehako sets the bag down on a nearby counter and scoops a few of the berries out. I push back the glass door of the shower at the exact same moment that he whips off his loincloth.

And...okay. So that looks a lot bigger than I'd initially 'felt'. It's one thing to see pictures of naked men and statues and the like, and it's another to have a fully aroused guy standing right in front of you. With a spur. Can't forget the spur. And here I'd thought his big carved 'present' of his cock was...well, an exaggeration.

Doesn't seem like it.

His cock looks as long as my arm, though surely it can't be. It's also flushed a darker blue than the rest of his skin. I can't help but stare at it as he enters the shower with me.

And then I have to squeeze against the back wall, because Aehako's big body is enormous and the shower clearly wasn't built for two. A nervous giggle escapes me. "Should I get out?"

"I can fit," he says, stooping a bit lower to get his big horns into the shower. "It just means we'll have to stand a little closer together." And he gives me another flirty look that makes me giggle.

"You're hogging all the hot water." It cascades off of his body and his horns but doesn't seem to hit me at all. He'd make a great umbrella, not such a great shower partner.

"Hogging?"

"Taking," I correct, then think about it. "I should probably get the language dump while we're here. I want to know your speech."

“It can wait another day,” he tells me, and smashes the berries in his fist. “Shall I rub this on you?”

A shiver moves through me, and my skin prickles with awareness of him. Even hunched over, Aehako’s size is intimidating...but I know he can be oh-so gentle. And if I move in any closer, his penis is going to be rubbing up against me.

It’s a bit like sensory overload. I want to explore him, and I want him to explore me...but I mostly just want to kiss him.

“Aehako,” I breathe, and reach up to wrap my arms around his neck. Water immediately dumps in my face. I sputter, and then wipe my face clean. “Will you kiss me?”

“You need never ask, Sad Eyes. All you need is to turn your face toward me.” His big arm goes around me and pulls me against him, and I’m startled at the contact of our wet skin. It feels decadent and strange and I want to run my hands all over him and explore him.

But then his mouth covers mine in a hot, hard press, and I moan in surprise and delight. His tongue flicks against mine in invitation, and then we’re kissing wildly, the water streaming down on both of us. Lips locked, we kiss over and over again until I’m pressing up against him as much as he’s holding me to him. My nipples rub against his chest and it sends shivery bolts through my body...so I make it a point to rub against him repeatedly.

“Kira,” he groans, and then pulls away, which leaves me dazed. I nearly stumble without his big body to lean against. The look on his face is sober as he indicates I should turn around. “Let me wash you before we continue.”

I stiffen even as I turn, my back going ramrod straight. “Is it because I smell?”

“No, it is because I don’t have many berries left and I need to wash, too.”

Oh. I stand obedient as he rubs the berry juice over my back and shoulders and then into my hair. He rubs at my hair for a bit and then smooths his hand down my arm, washing my skin. It feels good, like being stroked. Almost like a massage.

Then, his hand comes forward and cups my breast and I forget all about massaging. The breath explodes from me and I gasp in shock and startled pleasure.

“You are so delicate.” His hand moves over my breast, then glides to the other. “Soft and delicate all over.”

I tilt my head back and I’m surprised when Aehako’s other arm goes around my waist, pulling me against him again. The feel of his cock against my back is like a stabbing spear, but he holds me against him and smooths his soapy hands all over my body and I’m helpless to do anything but stand there and let him. It feels way too good.

His mouth nuzzles at my neck and he licks and then playfully nips at my skin, even as both of his hands move to cup my breasts. I moan with pleasure. I’ve touched my own breasts but when he does it, the pleasure goes from simply ‘good’ to off-the-charts. I press back against him and my hands go to his arms. I’m desperate to show him that I want more of this lovely, exciting touching, but I don’t know how to show him. “Aehako, what do I do?” I scratch my nails over the plated ridges on his forearms.

His low growl of pleasure surprises me. “Anywhere you touch me is a pleasure. Just like it is for me when I touch you. And right now, I intend on taking my pleasure from my mate.”

Aehako's passionate words are like a slap of cold water in the face.

His mate.

Oh no. I need to tell him. "Aehako," I say softly, and turn around to face him.

"No, Kira." He leans in and nips at my mouth to silence me. "I will hear no protests. You will be my mate. We need no khui to bind us. You are mine and I am yours. Our khuis will simply catch up later. It has happened in many a mating. You choose, and then eventually the khui chooses."

I shake my head. "It won't ever choose me, Aehako."

"You do not know that—"

"I do," I say, and before I can even think about keeping the words in, I spit them out. "I'm barren."

PART FIVE

AEHAKO

It takes me a moment to digest the word 'barren'. The mental visual the translation gives me is that of scorched, fallow earth with no animals and no plants, no water, no anything.

Then I realize what she is telling me. "You cannot have kits?"

Tears pool in her sad eyes and she nods. "When I was very young, I got sick and nearly died. I was in the hospital for a long time and when I finally healed, they told me that my reproductive system had been compromised by the illness and I'd never have children." The tears spill down her cheeks and she swipes at them with quick, angry motions. "That's why we can't be together. Because you want to have a family. And I have to tell you that if you choose me, you'll never have one. I won't ever resonate, because I can't have children."

I feel a sharp pang of regret, but it's quickly banished. Is this why she's so sad? Is this why she holds me at arm's length when it's clear she is desperate to be loved? That she craves affection the way I crave her smiles?

I touch her chin and force her to look up at me. There's such misery and heartbreak in her eyes. She truly thinks I shall cast her aside now that I find she cannot create life in her belly? "Is there anything else?"

A half-sob turns into a laugh and she swipes at her tears again. “I think that’s plenty, don’t you?”

“What if I told you it did not matter to me if you could have kits or not?”

Her small brows furrow. “But you said you wanted a family. I wouldn’t deprive you of that.”

“Do not worry on my behalf, Sad Eyes. There are no children without resonance, and now I do not have to worry about another male snatching you out of my grasp.” I stroke her cheek gently. “A few moons ago, I had resigned myself to a lonely life of hunting and the only companionship that of my hand.” My crude words make a small, horrified laugh erupt from her, and I continue. “Now, I have met you and I see a life ahead of me of laughter, and caresses, and loving. Does it matter to me that we will never resonate? It does not. Just to have you in my life is enough for me. You are my heart, Kira, and you should be my mate.”

She starts to cry again. “I don’t want you to feel trapped with me.”

“Trapped?” I laugh. “Trapped with a beautiful, strong, smart mate in my furs every night? I welcome such traps.”

“But children—“

“If we have no kits, then we shall always have our cave to ourselves,” I tell her, pulling her against me. Her wet skin sticks to mine and creates a delicious friction between us. I can feel the small nubs of her nipples rub against my stomach and it makes my cock jerk, desperate to be inside her. “And we shall scandalize all of the others by being the loudest mated pair in the caves.”

A horrified little giggle escapes her, and I’m so relieved that I’ve made her smile that I squeeze her tight against me.

“If you’re sure...” she says softly.

“I was sure the moment I saw your face.”

She pulls back, surprised. “You were?”

I nod. “I saw you and thought, if ever there was a female that needed a male to make her smile, it was you. And that we would be perfect together.”

Kira bats at my chest in mock annoyance, but I can tell she’s pleased by my words. She’s softening against me, and the tears are drying. “I just...I never said anything. Your people were so excited about the fact that we could resonate and have children. I never wanted to admit that I was flawed. I didn’t know what would happen if I was. Would I be welcome any longer?”

“Of course you would be welcome. We would not cast you out simply because you cannot bear kits. Do we cast out Farli?”

She snorts. “Farli is too young to have children. That’s not even a fair comparison.”

“Then Asha? Whose kit died too young? Or my mother, Sevvah, who is now too old to have more kits?” I touch her cheek. “You bring more to the tribe than just your body.”

“I’m not so sure,” she says softly. “The only thing I was good at was translating, and I just had that removed.”

“Then you will bring new skills and joy to the tribe. We just have not seen them yet.”

Kira gives me an exasperated look. “Do you have an optimistic answer for everything?”

“Yes.” I grin at her. “That is what I bring to the tribe. Well, that and my carving skills.”

Another small giggle escapes her, muffled under the falling of the bathing waters. “Yes, I still have the present you made for me.”

“Ah. Because it is such an impressive likeness?”

Her giggle turns into a snort and she buries her face against my wet chest, her arms going around me. “Because I wanted to compare the sizes. I figured it was exaggerated.”

“Shall I show you just how accurate my carvings are?” I slide my fingers down her wet back, and then take her hand and place it on my aching cock. I hear her suck in a breath, but she doesn’t pull away. Instead, she caresses me and explores. “Be my mate, Kira.”

She looks up at me, hope in her eyes. “But the aliens—“

More excuses? “Let them do their best to separate us. They will fail.” I touch her cheek again. “And let us not predict doom for our future. Let us live for today, yes?”

I have always been a practical male. I have seen too much sorrow to let it guide my life, like Haeden does. If it means I must smile one day and weep the next, then I shall enjoy the day of smiles all that much more. I want Kira to realize this – that life is sweetest when we take what it offers with no worries.

She squeezes her fingers around the base of my cock and then gently glides her hand up, stroking me. “Today,” she says in a low voice, “Is a really, really nice day to be with my mate.”

My heart swells with affection. “Yes, it is.”

The water changes temperature from a delicious heat to an ice cold, and Kira yelps at the same time I do. She rinses the berries from her hair and then quickly jumps out of the water, and I follow a moment later.

“I guess we ran out of hot water,” she says, her arms pressed against her chest as she shivers and gives a little hop.

“Was that not supposed to happen?”

“No!” She laughs. “No one can bathe in that cold of water.”

I shrug. I don’t understand anything about the elders. But as I watch Kira delicately pick up her leathers from the floor, quivering with cold, I decide there are other ways I can warm her. Ways that are as old as time. I scoop her up in my arms and ignore her startled squeal. “You are entirely too cold, my lovely mate. Let your male warm you up.”

Instead of the shy protests I expect, she wraps her arms around my neck and clings to me. My cock feels like aching stone. I’ve wanted this since I saw her. I carry her into the other room and gently lay her down on the bed. Kira looks up at me with trusting eyes, and my heart swells again with affection.

This is my mate.

It doesn’t matter that our khuis haven’t chosen or that she cannot bear kits. She is mine to claim. Mine to pleasure.

“You are beautiful,” I tell her. She is. Her human limbs are dewy with water, her skin gleaming with smoothness. Her eyes – blue with khiu – seem big and bright in her face, and her hair is slicked back against her skull, making her seem even more fragile than usual. Her chest heaves with nervousness, and each short breath makes her breasts jiggle enticingly. Her legs are curled together, but soon I shall lick her between them and taste her honey.

Kira smiles up at me and reaches out for my hand. I lace my fingers with her smaller ones, noting again our differences. She has four small fingers and a thumb, where I have three and a thumb. Her

toes are the same – four small toes next to a large one on a slender foot. My own foot is more than twice as large as hers, and my toes – one less than her – are more spread to balance my larger form. There are no plated ridges on her body to protect it, only softness everywhere.

I cannot deny that I find the thought of all this softness incredibly arousing.

I free my hand from her grip and touch her chest, eager to feel that smooth skin. The valley between her breasts feels as soft as the underbelly of a quill-beast. She trembles at my touch, her gaze on me, and I watch her nipples harden in response to my touch, going from soft pink circles to hard, ruced little tips. I don't touch them yet, though. I'm still exploring, still admiring my mate's body. This is our first chance to be truly alone and unclothed with each other, and I would like to enjoy it.

Her belly is flat, with a tiny dip for a navel that makes me want to kiss it. Her hips flare out slightly, rounded and inviting, and between her thighs is a thatch of dark hair that hides her honey-covered folds and her third nipple. It's begging for my mouth, but I suspect my shy Kira would jump right off the furs if I spread her legs and buried my face there, so I must woo her with kisses and caresses.

I want to feel her against me, so I climb into the bed and lie next to her. My body dwarfs her smaller one, and she shifts a little. I lean my weight on the side so I don't crush her, and throw a possessive leg over her thighs so she can't squirm away from me.

Then, I lean in to kiss her, pulling her body close to mine.

She sighs and leans into my kiss, her tongue flicking against mine. I deepen the kiss, make it more explicit, more obvious as to what I

want from her. I fuck her sweet mouth with my tongue, and she responds with soft cries and wriggles of delight under me. My cock aches to claim her, but I must go slowly. Kira has never mated before, and she is skittish.

I nip at her mouth, enjoying her responses – noises of pleasure. My mouth grazes to her jawline and then I lick at her neck, which sends trembling through her entire body. She likes that. I lick the soft skin there and gently bite down on it, and her fingers dig into my shoulders. “Do you enjoy my mouth on your neck?” I murmur. “Or shall I move it elsewhere?”

“I like your mouth everywhere,” she says in the softest, breathiest voice. It makes my cock twitch. I’ll give her my mouth everywhere, then.

I lick and suck at her soft human skin, tracing along her collarbones. With each press of my mouth to her flesh, she gives a low moan, and her hands move over my shoulders and arms, fluttering. It’s as if she doesn’t know where to place them, but wants to touch me. She can touch me as much as she wants; I will gladly take it. But for now, I’m concentrating on her. She’s had so much worry on her mind lately I want to make her come undone.

Also? I want to make sure she has no doubts about being mine.

I move down over her smooth breastbone and then graze my lips over one breast. The tip is pebbled with arousal, and I lick it enticingly, then wait for her reaction.

“Oh,” she breathes, her voice trembling. When I lift my head, she blushes and looks shy.

“Show me what you want, Kira.”

Her cheeks are bright pink as she grabs my horns and pulls me back down to her breast again in a silent command. It didn't take much convincing, and I'm pleased that my mate is enjoying my attentions. She's so small and delicate, and I worry one as big and brutish as I am is going to be frightening to her. But the way she directs me makes me think I have been overthinking things. That she's as hungry for my touch as I am for hers.

I capture her nipple in my mouth and flick at it with my tongue. She gasps when the ridges on my tongue drag against the tip, so I make sure to do that over and over again. "My Kira," I murmur, cupping her breast so I can better feed it to my mouth. "My sweet mate. You taste as good as I've imagined."

She makes a soft little groan, and her hands skim down my arms again, her hips undulating on the bed under me. The scent of her arousal perfumes the air around us, and I rock my hips against the furs, my cock desperate to sheathe into her warmth. Patience is difficult when your mate is under you for the first time. I want nothing more than to fling myself on top of her and bury deep inside her. I want to watch her lips part with awe as I stroke into her.

Instead, I trail my mouth lower on her belly, my impatience getting the better of me. I drag my teeth against her skin, enjoying it when she shivers in response. My tongue circles her navel, and then I dip lower, to the curls between her legs that shield her folds from me. My mouth waters with anticipation.

They say no taste is sweeter than that of a resonance mate on a male's tongue, but we are not resonating. We never will. I do not think she will taste any less sweet, though.

Her thighs press together and her hands slide over my horns.
“Aehako,” she murmurs. “I don’t know...”

“Have you ever had a male lick your honey before?”

Her face flares a bright crimson. “Just you. Before.”

Ah, yes. It’s a good memory, and one that fuels my lusty fantasies. Of my hand dipping between Kira’s legs and teasing her until she comes, then licking her sweetness off my fingers even as it frosts. “Then I shall be your first and last,” I tell her, and find a bizarre amount of pleasure in this bold statement. She will never be anyone else’s but mine. Ever.

I nip at her thigh, entreating her to open for me. She makes a nervous sound and her legs tremble. “Open for me, my mate. I want to lick all of you.” To prove it, I drag my tongue down her hip bone, all the way to the curly little tuft of hair. “Part your legs for me.”

I feel Kira tremble again, but she does. Her legs open and I take my hand and push them even further apart, until she’s spread for me. I hook one knee over my shoulder so she can’t close her thighs again. Then I get to admire my mate’s spread cunt. The folds gleam with wetness, making me salivate once more. Her folds are pretty and a deeply flushed pink, like her cheeks. I drag one finger through her wetness and my cock aches when she squirms and makes soft noises of pleasure.

“I’m going to taste you.”

She presses a hand to her forehead and her eyes close. “Oh, God.”

Interesting. She’s not pulling away, though, so I lean in and explore her with my mouth. The first burst of her taste on my tongue

is like nothing else – she’s like salt and musk and Kira...and utterly delicious. I growl low in my throat, feral with need. “Sweet.”

Kira’s breath shudders in her throat.

I grip her legs and want more. Pulling them further apart, I lift her off the bed so all of her is open to me, and lick her from her third nipple to the entrance to her cunt. A low moan escapes her, and I lick her fully again. This time I start at the pucker of her bottom and circle it, then drag my tongue all the way up through her folds, to her third nipple.

“Oh my God,” she moans again. “You did not just do that.”

“I can do it again,” I tell her. I will gladly do so. Her taste is sweeter than anything I have ever had. I repeat the action, making sure to swirl my tongue around the entrance of her bottom and then slowly move upward through her folds, coated with delicious honey, and swirl again around the hood of her little nipple.

When I do that, she cries out and her hips jerk.

Aha. I repeat the motion, my tail lashing with my own excitement. I love making her respond to my touch, love that shy, contained Kira moans and cries when I lick her cunt. I could lick her for hours and never get my fill. I tease and nibble at the nipple between her legs, and she presses her hand to her forehead again and cries out.

“More?” I tease, and suck on the tiny bit of flesh.

A cry escapes her throat and I feel her body shudder underneath me, her trembling increasing. Her hips rock against my mouth, and so I continue to suck at the tender spot until she is moaning and boneless with pleasure. “Oh mercy,” she pants. “That was... something else.”

I lick my lips, tasting her on me. “Your cunt tastes sweeter than I ever imagined.”

The blush on her face becomes fierce, and she pants, still pressing that hand to her forehead.

“Is your head hurting you?”

“What? Oh, no,” she says quickly, and her hand flops down on the bed. A small giggle escapes her. “I guess I was just...trying to hold my brains in before they all fell out.” And she chuckles.

Strange words, but I chuckle too. I like making her smile. I press another kiss on the small thatch of hair and then lick her again. Kira shudders, her skin prickling with small bumps at the caress. I press a finger to the entrance of her cunt to see if she is wet enough to take me, and it comes away soaked.

My mate is more than ready. The fierce need to claim her burns through me, and I move over her, my bigger body pressing her into the strange bed. Her arms wrap around me and she welcomes my kiss, and another little gasp of excited pleasure escapes her when I grab a fistful of her hair and arch her neck back so I can lick it again. I bite gently at the cords of her throat and slide my hips between her spread legs, my cock resting against the cradle of her hips.

And I grind it against her so she can feel it.

Kira’s small gasp as I rock against her is incredibly pleasing. Her thighs spread a little wider, and I pull one around my hips. Instead of plunging into her, though, I kiss her again, my tongue dancing along her mouth, sipping at the small moans that erupt in a steady stream. The look in her eyes is dazed with need. I rock my cock through her folds again, dragging up and down, wetting my length with her honey. She moans louder, and her fingers dig into my skin.

She's ready.

I grip my cock and hold it at the entrance to her cunt. The thick crown presses against her heat, and her nails dig harder into my skin.

"You feel...really big," she says, a note of concern in her voice.

"That is because I am," I tease, and then kiss her worries away.

"But you can take me. This I promise. Are you ready to be claimed by your mate?"

She looks up at me with such big, soft eyes. Her hand moves to my cheek and she strokes it, and my heart aches with love for her.

"I'm yours," she tells me. "All yours."

"Mine," I agree, and sink deep. I know I will cause her pain – she's never mated before and she's small and tight, but it's best to get it done quickly, like the resetting of bone.

Her sharp cry of pain wounds me, though, and I hold her gently. "Shhh."

"Ow," she tells me, and her fist thumps against my arm. "That hurt!"

"It is a pain that will be soon gone, I promise." To make up for it, I kiss her sweet mouth over and over, until her frown gentles and she starts to respond to my caresses again. My cock feels like a throbbing brand, so tightly sheathed in her wet warmth, but I dare not move until she is ready for me again.

When she gives a small sigh at my latest kiss, I drag my cock slowly out of her, and then stroke in again. She stiffens, but doesn't mention the pain. Her gaze is on me, her eyes trusting, and my heart breaks with the beauty of her. She is beyond lovely, my mate. Lovely,

and soft, and sweet, and giving. “You have my heart, Kira,” I tell her again, and nuzzle her throat.

I stroke in again, careful to gauge her reaction, and when she remains relaxed against me, I shift my weight to one side and caress her breast, teasing the peak until the tip is hard and aching, and she is moaning and wiggling against me.

“Everything feels so different with you inside me,” she says, and she sounds breathless and full of wonder.

“Still hurt?”

“I don’t think so.” She bites her lip and looks up at me. “Do something and I’ll let you know.”

Do something? I will do everything to her. I knot my hand in her hair again, anchoring her against me, and stroke deep.

She gasps. “That felt...” Her startled eyes flick to mine.

“Good?” I can practically feel my chest puffing out with pride.

“Do it again?” Her voice is small and timid, but she arches her back, pressing her body against me.

I do, and she gasps again. Her cunt seems to tighten around me, and when she quivers, I feel it through every span of her body.

“I think I’m going to...again.” She bites down on her lip, her body tensing under mine.

“Good,” I tell her, and stroke deep again. Her next gasp is followed by an intense dig of her nails into my arms, and a definite clench of her cunt around my cock.

“Oh God!”

Yes, she’s definitely going to come again. Pleased at how responsive my mate is, I claim her mouth in a brutal kiss and begin

to push into her in a steady rhythm, over and over again, slicking deep into her soft body.

“Ridges,” she gasps against my mouth. “I feel ridges! And oh God, is that your spur?”

It might be. I surge deep again and she jerks against me, her hand sliding between us to go to her cunt. “It’s too much,” she says, shielding her folds from me. “I can’t handle it all—“

“Then let it take you away,” I tell her, grabbing her hand and pushing it back into the furs. I capture her mouth with mine, and pump into her again, and she moans, her hand gripping mine tightly. When she comes again, she cries out sharply, so loud that it rings in the chamber.

Not nearly as loud as my own shout as I come, but almost. We are going to be a noisy pair, I think with pleasure as I collapse onto the furs next to my gasping, panting mate. They will have to move us into one of the back caves so our late night antics do not wake all the kits.

I pull Kira against me and kiss her sweaty brow, well pleased with my mate.

KIRA

My brain is mush. Good mush, but still mush. I slowly drag myself awake. Aehako has his leg over mine and his hand over my breast. I turn over in bed and his tail flicks, then swats me.

“Go back to sleep,” he mumbles.

“I need to stretch a bit.” I ignore his request and slide out of bed, taking a few ginger steps toward the bathroom. I feel a bit sore

between my legs. Okay, a lot sore. But it's a good sort of sensation, and I don't mind it in the slightest. It just reminds me that I belong to Aehako, and I enter the bathroom with a dopey grin on my face.

The first thing I do is check my ear out in the reflective glass of the shower. It feels weird to not have the translator in anymore, and I've got a few new ear-piercings in weird spots as a memory of the device. Overall, though, my ear seems to look okay? There's a vague ache deep inside, but I imagine I'm still healing up. And Aehako said he got rid of the device, but..."Computer?" I whisper. "Has the translator that was removed from my ear yesterday been destroyed?"

It beeps for a moment, and then a tinny voice pipes into a speaker over the sink. "The device was destroyed upon request. It was disassembled and then crushed in the trash compactors. Do you wish retrieval?"

"No, that's okay," I tell it, relieved. "I'm good." One problem down, at least.

I clean up with water from the sink, do my business, and then dress in my leathers. Maybe it's because I did a lot of sleeping yesterday post translator removal, but I'm pretty awake. I enter back into the bedroom, but Aehako is still sacked out. I contemplate getting back into bed with him, but I worry about Harlow. It's no secret that she and Haeden aren't exactly rubbing along, and this is an alien spaceship...and I've probably been unconscious for about a day. I should check on her.

I exit the room and head down a hall, until I realize I have no idea which way is back to the front. "Computer, can you lead me to Harlow?"

“Please follow,” it indicates, and the lights edging the floor go in the opposite direction I’m heading. Oh. I turn around and follow its twisting path through debris-strewn halls. Several corridors later, I hear the sound of what seems like a power drill, and when I enter, I see Harlow with a pair of oversized protective goggles on, drilling something together and peering at a computer screen.

“Hi?” I call out.

She looks up at me and the goggles slide down her face. “Oh! Hey!” She pushes at the goggles. “These stupid things do not fit human heads very well.”

I stifle my laughter and approach, gazing at the bits and pieces she has strewn on a metal table. “What is all this?”

“Well,” she says, setting the drill down and putting her hands on her hips. “This is a bunch of junk at the moment. But I’m having the computer read me a manual about how to create a rock cutter.”

“A rock cutter?”

“Yeah, so, did you ever notice that the bachelorette cave has one wall that’s rougher than all the others?” Harlow peers at me and pushes back her wild red hair. Her freckles crinkle around her eyes as she swipes a hand over her forehead and leaves a greasy mark there.

“Um, you know, I don’t think I ever did.” Now I feel a little silly. “It’s unfinished?”

“Yeah, and I always wondered about that. But you know most of the cave is super smooth. So I figured that when they left here, they probably cannibalized a lot of the computer parts to make rock cutters, and the computer told me I was right. I guess they just ran out of juice when they got to our cave.” She shrugs. “So I thought I’d

see if we could put together some new cutters in order to hollow out a few more home caverns for people, since we're so crowded."

That's so thoughtful of her. And here I was just having sex and thinking about myself. "You're wonderful, Harlow. You know that?"

A surprised smile crosses the redhead's face. "Thanks," she says shyly. "I was just trying to think of ways I could help out, you know? My dad was a mechanic and so I know my way around a few things, but I have to admit that all of this is baffling to me." She spreads her hands out and gestures at the metal junk on the table. "Luckily there's lots of pictures on the computer, so I'm mostly going off of that."

"Smart," I say, examining the table. All of the pieces look like nothing I've ever seen before. Even the drill Harlow is using isn't exactly normal looking.

"How's your ear?" she asks, picking up a piece of metal and holding it up to get a better look at it.

"Better. Translator's all gone." I hesitate, then ask, "You get what you came for?"

Harlow gives me a guarded look. "More or less."

I can take a hint. She's clearly still not talking about whatever it is she tagged along to find out. I understand that sort of thing, what with my infertility and all. Some things just aren't open for sharing with strangers, and I don't know Harlow as well as I know some of the others. There's always just been so many people around that we've never really gotten to bond.

I feel guilty about that.

"You need help?" I volunteer. "I'm not sure how much help I'll be, but maybe another pair of hands can't hurt?"

“You sure?” she asks. “This isn’t a fun job and I don’t even know if it’s going to work at the end of the day.”

I shrug. “Aehako’s still asleep and will be for a while, I imagine.”

“Mmmhmm. Yeah, I heard you guys down the hall. So you and him are a thing?”

My face feels white hot with embarrassment. It never occurred to me that someone might be able to hear us. “He decided I’m his mate,” I say, moving closer to the table. “And I decided he was right.”

“If you’re happy, I’m happy,” Harlow says, and runs her hand over a bunch of small pieces of copper-colored metal.

“I am happy,” I tell her, and it is true. Other than the nagging worry about the Little Green Men returning, I’m incredibly happy. My translator’s gone, and I have...Aehako. Big, flirty Aehako who treats me like I’m the best thing that’s ever happened to him. Really, it’s the other way around. He’s the best thing that ever happened to me. I think even if I were offered a ride home back to earth tomorrow, I’d decline, just so I could stay with my big alien mate.

Maybe that makes me crazy. But what did I have back on earth? No one that cared about me, an entry-level job in finance, and a mountain of student debt. Here I have an entire tribe of people, and Aehako.

“Let me know if you see a silvery-looking cross-shaped piece,” Harlow says, picking through the bits. “About the size of your pinky.”

I nod and start at the other end of the table. My fingers brush over the different kinds of metals, and there seem to be hundreds of pieces here. Harlow’s set herself up with a daunting task...and I notice she hasn’t had any help until now. “Have you seen Haeden?”

Harlow snorts. “He’s guarding the entrance. I think it’s just an excuse to get some alone time. He’s not that good with people.”

“I noticed.” Aehako mentioned to me that Haeden has a sad past. I guess he can’t really move past that. I find a cross-shaped piece and offer it to Harlow. “This it?”

“Yup,” she says, plucking it out of my hand and taking it to another table. “Let me solder this bad boy on and we can move forward.”

• • •

The time with Harlow passes surprisingly fast. There’s a schematic projected on one of the walls, and if it flickers every now and then, it’s still better than consulting a paper version. Harlow’s a genius with the metal parts, piecing things together and soldering, drilling, and basically making me feel like a useless hack. To pass the time, we talk about our old life back on earth. Harlow’s dad ran a car garage and fixit shop in Minnesota, but passed away last year. No mother in the picture, and she’d recently sold the business and wasn’t quite sure what to do with herself. Turns out that isn’t an issue anymore, I suppose.

“The ironic thing?” she tells me. “I wanted to travel. I guess now I got my wish, right?”

I manage a wan smile at that.

We talk about foods that we miss, and things that we lack here – like regular shampoo and even porcelain plates. Instead of getting morose, though, Harlow grows thoughtful. “I’m sure we can bring our knowledge to the tribe and maybe improve things. And we can

scavenge around here. Tiffany said she was good with makeup and hair stuff back home, so maybe she could make us soap.”

I like that Harlow doesn't dwell on the past. Instead, she's looking ahead to the future, to how we can improve our situation here versus mourning about what we've lost. It's a great attitude.

When we take a break, we both decide to get the language dump from the computer. We take turns and Harlow goes first, and I have to admit, it's pretty scary when she slumps and goes unconscious after the laser-beam hits her right in the eye. She's awake a few minutes later, and I hand her the waterskin she brought. She sips it, rubs her forehead, and gives me a rueful look. “I guess it could be worse. They could speak several languages, right?”

I laugh at her words, but it makes me think about the Little Green Men. Should I learn that one, too? Just in case? I won't be able to speak it, but it'll be handy to know.

When it's my turn, I call out, “Computer, can I learn more than one language at once?”

“I can insert up to three languages into your memory at once,” the computer tells me. “Which languages would you like to download?”

“The sakh language,” I tell it, the computer's name for Aehako's race. “And...” I pause, because I don't know the name of the race for the Little Green Men. “Um...”

“What are you thinking?” Harlow asks me, curious. When I explain to her my idea, she nods. “Maybe if we narrow it down to sentient races in or around this planet?”

“Good idea.” I'll need to narrow it down a bit more. I think for a moment, and then clear my throat. “Computer? How many language-speakers are there on this planet?”

The computer calculates for a moment, then answers. “Sensors indicate there are thirty-five modified sakh, twelve modified humans, three szzt, and one—“ the computer makes a weird chirping sound that sends shivers up my spine. It sounds just like the Little Green Men. The szzt must be their guards. I rub my arms, uncomfortable. Maybe I should learn both languages.

“Huh,” Harlow says next to me.

“What?”

“I thought there were thirty four in the tribe.” She wrinkles her freckled nose. “Did someone have a baby?”

“It’s too soon,” I tell her, but I realize she’s right. The numbers are off. I move to the table and mentally count out who lives in each cave, using pieces of the small scrap metal to represent the big blue aliens. When I’m done counting, I’m still one number short than the computer.

How is it that we’re missing an alien?

I turn to Harlow, about to ask her that same question, when a searing sound cuts through the skies overhead. It reminds me of a jet plane...except there are none on this wintry planet.

The other aliens have arrived.

I turn back to the computer, grim determination on my face.

“Computer, please give me the languages for the sakh, the szzt, and the last one you mentioned.”

“The ___?” Again, the bird chirp that won’t ever be pronounceable by human vocal chords.

“That’s the one.”

“Please hold steady while the information is transmitted into your memory. You may experience some discomfort—“

Blinding pain slashes through my head and that's the last thing I remember for a good bit.

• • •

KIRA

When I wake up, Aehako's in my face, a concerned expression drawing his brows together.

"Are you well, Sad Eyes?"

"I'm fine," I promise him as I sit up, his hand supporting my back. "I was just getting some languages, um, installed." I look over at Harlow and press a hand to my aching forehead. "How long have I been out for?"

"About an hour," she says with a grimace. "Three languages might have been too much at once."

My head throbs in response. "I think you're right." With Aehako's help, I get to my feet, though I'm wobbly. I lean against Aehako, glad for his comforting presence. "Any more signs of the Little Green Men?"

"Just the sound of the ship flying overhead," Harlow says. Her arms are crossed over her chest and it's clear she's worried.

"Again?" I look at Aehako with concern. "I think the aliens know we're here."

He rubs his mouth and considers. "What do their feet look like?" That's a weird question. "Their feet?"

"Haeden and I saw tracks in the snow on the way here."

I gasp. "You didn't say anything!"

“There was no sense in worrying you when you are already beside yourself with fear.” He touches my cheek, and my anger fades. “The tracks were unfamiliar to us.” He spreads his fingers as if they’re prongs. “Three large, spiky toes. Does that match your aliens?”

I shake my head, trying to remember. The orangey aliens with the pebbled skin had two toes, and the little green men had small, wispy feet. “So now we have something else to worry about?”

“One thing at a time,” Aehako tells me. “We should find Haeden.”

As we head out of the mechanics bay, I turn to Harlow. “You think there are still guns on the ship?”

She gives me a shocked look. “Wasn’t this a pleasure cruiser?”

“Surely even those would have some sort of defense system? We need guns if we want them to listen to us.” Now that’s a phrase I never thought I’d say.

Harlow looks worried at my suggestion. “I don’t know how to shoot a regular gun, much less an alien one.”

“Yeah, but the aliens don’t know that,” I tell her. If it comes down to it, we might have to bluff our way out of things. “If we look like we’re armed and dangerous, then maybe they’ll use a bit of caution when approaching us.”

She nods, though she doesn’t look happy. I don’t blame her. I’m not thrilled about it either, but we’re low on options. All I know is that I’m not going back with them. Period. I rub my sore ear, thinking of my memories from being a captive on the ship. Harlow doesn’t have the same memories I do. Of the constant terror. The rapes. Of being treated like you’re less than an animal. That you don’t matter.

Liz had joked that her dad had treated his farm animals better than we’d been treated, and she wasn’t wrong. To them, we were nothing

more than cargo.

Here, on Not-Hoth, I matter. To Aehako and the others, I matter.

So I clear my throat. “Computer, show me what functioning weapons are still on board this ship.”

• • •

Two hours later, I’m bossing everyone around and trying to get things done. Haeden’s been no help, so I have him sitting on the bridge, in charge of the single defense gun that the still-somewhat-functioning computer has. He has a bright red button he can push if things go to hell that will (hopefully) activate the single gun, provided it hasn’t rusted over after all this time and the harsh weather. There are a handful of alien guns from the ship’s security, but only one has any charge left. Harlow and I debate over who’s going to handle it, but I win the argument.

I’m going to be the negotiator in charge, because I’m determined that things are going to work out.

And if they don’t, I want Harlow, Aehako, and Haeden to get away.

The gun doesn’t have a trigger like regular human guns. It’s some sort of laser cannon that has a control panel that’s voice activated and reveals – no joke – a button. And here I thought a trigger was *déclassé*. I’d feel better with one.

“What’s the status of the alien ship?” I ask the computer as I practice aiming my laser cannon. “Is it still in the atmosphere?”

“Affirmative,” the computer tells me. “Would you like a visual?”

“Yes, please.”

The room's screen lights up and shows me the mountains in the distance, the ones that look like purple ice. Hovering just over the peak of one is the flat disk of the alien's ship, a black smudge on the gray skies. "Has it moved any in the last six hours?"

"Negative."

The sight of it is making me antsy. "Can we call it toward us somehow? I don't want it getting back to the others."

"I can relay a communication signal. Would you like to do so?"

"Not just yet," I tell it quickly, then look at Harlow. There's a few things I have to get done before we can proceed with our plan. "Can you do me a favor?"

The redhead turns toward me, curious. "What's up?"

"Can you go see how Haeden's doing? Make sure he's not going to get trigger happy?"

She nods and heads out of the room.

I immediately shut the door behind her and flip the lock. I turn around, resting my back against the door. "Computer? I need a fail safe."

"Query: what is fail safe?"

"I need a secondary plan." I lick my lips, thinking hard. "A weapon I can smuggle on board the alien ship with me if I'm taken captive." After a moment, I add, "And I need a way to interface your computer to theirs."

The computer screen flashes with a variety of options, and I listen intently.

If they take me back with them, I'm bringing them down. If I'm not getting out of this alive, neither are they.

• • •

It's sometime later that I emerge from the locked room to find the others. I've got a secret packet wrapped in a thin polymer film tucked into my hand, and new determination in my step. Unfortunately, my determination falters when I run into Harlow in the hallway.

"They're on the move," Harlow tells me. "The guys are at the front. Come on!"

We race down the narrow halls of the ship, heading toward the entrance. I guess Haeden's abandoned his post already, because when I arrive at the icy entrance, he's kneeling there in the meltwater with Aehako. My mate has his ear pressed to the door, listening on the other side. I want to point out that he's not going to be able to hear anything through the hull of the ship, but he gets to his feet the moment I arrive.

"Aehako," I say. "What—"

"Their ship has arrived," he tells me. He caresses my cheek and pulls me against him. "You and Harlow must stay here. Haeden and I will go out and speak to them."

I push away from him. "No, this is something I need to do."

"Kira," he says, a warning tone in his voice. "Let me protect you. You are my mate to take care of."

"That's sweet, Aehako." I reach up and pat his cheek. "But you are my mate, and I'm going to take care of you." I flick off the switch that covers the trigger-button on my laser cannon. "Now, I'm going to go out and talk to those bastards."

"Talk?" Harlow's laugh is nervous. "You're kidding, right?"

“Nope.” I’m tired of running scared. My heart’s racing a mile a minute, but inwardly, I feel calm. This is it. For once and for all, I’m not going to be scared of these bastards anymore. Because if the worst case scenario happens, there’s no longer anything to fear.

“You are serious?” Aehako’s hand grips my arm. His voice is incredulous. “Kira, this is dangerous.”

“I know.” I look up at him. “So give me a kiss for luck, and make it a really good one.”

He makes a strangled noise in his throat. “I don’t want to kiss you right now. I want to throttle you for being foolish.”

I shake my head. “This isn’t foolishness. I’ve got everything under control. I promise.”

The look on Aehako’s face is pained and full of worry. I expect him to protest again, to tell me that I’m not the right girl for the job. Instead, he grabs me in a fierce bear hug and hauls me up to his face for a kiss. His lips brush against mine, surprisingly tender. His nose nuzzles mine. Then he closes his eyes and murmurs, “I will protect you with my life, you know that, yes?”

I’m overwhelmed by his sweet words. Hot tears threaten, and I fling my arms around his neck and kiss him like he should be kissed – wild and utterly abandoned. This might be the last kiss I have with him, and I let him know how much I love him. My tongue slicks against his ridged one, and I kiss him so passionately and so fervently that Harlow clears her throat behind us.

Right. I have a mission.

I give Aehako one last peck. “I love you,” I whisper to him.

“Be safe, Sad Eyes,” he tells me. “Do not make me come out there to protect you.”

“I won’t.” I force a smile to my face, like everything’s okay. Truth be told, I have a really bad feeling about this. I look at Harlow and the two hunters, both of whom are gripping their spears as if they’d do something against these aliens.

They’ll be slaughtered. I can’t let that happen.

I move toward Harlow and hug her. She seems surprised by my spontaneous gesture, and her arms go around me slowly. “Whatever you do, stay inside the ship,” I tell her in a low whisper. “If I don’t make it back, make sure Aehako and Haeden go back to the caves, all right? They can’t come after me.” I pull back and smile at her, pretending like nothing’s wrong.

Wide-eyed, she nods at me.

I shoulder my laser cannon again and approach the door. I take a deep breath, and then furtively slip the small packet into my mouth, fitting it between gums and teeth. No one will know it’s there, and I can barely feel it in my mouth. Perfect. “Computer, give me a visual on the aliens, please.”

A wall panel off to my side lights up and displays the snowy wasteland outside. Only, instead of being uninhabited, there are three figures off in the distance, heading in this direction. Two of them have rounded, burnt-orange heads that I remember has hard, pebbled skin. The one in the middle is smaller, rail-thin.

One of the Little Green Men, accompanied by his bodyguards.

I need to stop them before they come any closer.

“Open the door,” I say resolutely, then look behind me at the three. “Stay inside, whatever happens, all right?”

“This is madness,” Haeden growls, clutching his spear.

Aehako puts a hand on his chest. “Let her do it.”

The door slides open, and I take one last look back at Aehako's broad, blue face before I step outside. The air is crisp, the winds high. It's a beautiful day on Not-Hoth, ironically enough. There's no snowstorms brewing and I can see far enough in the distance that I can see the expressions on the aliens' faces as they see me.

I hoist my laser cannon, aim, and fire at their feet.

"Hold it right there," I yell out in szzt. I can't make the sounds of the birdlike Little Green Men, but I can speak the other language well enough. "We have guns trained on you and we're prepared to shoot."

A little bluffing never hurt anything. I just hope they buy it. If they don't, well, I'm toast.

They pause, and I can see the slim green alien gesturing to the others.

"Guns down," I command.

They don't obey. But they do remain in place. They confer for a moment and then one of the basketball heads calls out, "Why do you shoot?"

"Because I know why you're here," I yell back. "You want your cargo back, and we're not coming back." I keep my laser cannon trained on them.

More conferring. Then, "You will be treated very well if you return with us," the basketball head translates.

Oh, bullshit. I know they're full of crap. "You can't take us off this planet. We've been infected with native symbionts and will die if we are removed. Your cargo is gone either way."

"Where are the girls that were in the stasis tubes?"

Nice to see we matter to them. "Gone. Infected as well."

More hushed whispers. Then, the alien guard speaks, his tone angry. "My masters are out a great deal of money with nothing to show for it. You have destroyed their property."

A gasp escapes me. "Property? They're not property. They're people! You can't just take them against their will!"

"And what of the animal skin you are wearing?" the alien growls at me. "Did you ask its permission?"

"That's different." I have a sinking feeling I'm losing this argument.

"The shipment my masters deposited here has been stolen from them," he says again. "They are out a great deal of money and have many clients waiting for their purchases. My masters are honor bound to return their property to them."

I grip the laser cannon tighter, a sinking feeling in my stomach. The aliens stare at me with black, calculating eyes. I notice one of the orange ones keeps eyeing my gun.

"Your ship is very old," one comments. He takes a step forward, his own gun held casually in hand.

"Stop or I'll shoot," I tell him, my voice wavering.

"I think you are lying," the one guard says, still approaching. The other two aliens watch him calmly, weapons in hand. "I think your ship is not armed. I think we will take you, and then you will lead us to the others."

"You can't! We can't be removed from this planet," I say desperately. "Look at my eyes! Our symbionts—"

"You lie," it says, and strides forward.

I lift my laser cannon to fire again, just as the alien in the distance lifts his gun. Something hot zings my hand, and the gun goes flying

out of my grip. I'm smacked to the ground with a forceful blow, the air knocked out of my lungs.

"Kira," Aehako bellows behind me, and I hear the sound of feet slamming into the snow.

"No," I gasp as one of the aliens kicks my gun away. He steps on my wounded hand, pinning me to the ground. As I watch in horror, he raises his gun and fires, and I hear two shouts of pain. "No! Aehako!" Ignoring the brutal pain in my arm, I twist around to see.

The two men are flat on the ground. Haeden's lying in a pool of blood, his leather tunic smoking. Aehako is face down and unmoving.

My chest constricts with agony. "Aehako! *No!*"

The birdlike Little Green Man chirps a question. *Are they dead?*

The basketball head tilts his head, and as I watch, I see Aehako twitch and lift his elbow, trying to rise up off the ground. There's no sign of Harlow. I'm relieved. She's hiding in the ship like I told her to. "Not dead yet," the guard says and lifts his gun again. "I will fix that."

"No, wait!" I scream in the alien language. "I'll go with you. I'll take you to the others! Just leave them alone!"

The guard lowers his gun and looks over at his master.

An irritated chirp sounds. *They don't matter. Just bring her.*

The boot lifts off my hand, and a strong arm hauls me off the ground.

AEHAKO

I fight off unconsciousness as wave after wave of crashing pain moves over me. The intruders moved so fast. I barely saw them

raise their strange weapons before Haeden and I were flattened on the ground. I hear Kira's cry of worry, and her frantic jabber in the strange language.

Then, silence. I try to sit up, but my body won't obey. It's like an invisible net has been cast over me. The blackness I've fought against so hard claims me.

One thought rings through my mind even as I succumb: they've taken my mate.

• • •

"Aehako?" A small, cold hand taps my cheek. "Wake up. Please."

Pain blazes in my side. I'm still face-down in the snow, and my entire body aches as if I've drunk three skins of sah-sah. With effort, I push against the earth and roll myself onto my back, squinting at the late afternoon sunlight.

A face swims into view. Pale, freckled, with a bright orange-red mane. Not Kira. I struggle to sit up, and her weak human hands try to assist. "Are you okay?" she asks in a tremulous voice.

"I am not dead," I grit out, though my ribs might complain otherwise. I run a hand down my side and pain stabs through me again. Punctured with one of their strange weapons, but not a fatal wound. It aches and bleeds but will not kill me. "Where is Kira?"

The girl's eyes fill with tears and she sniffs hard. "Gone. They took her."

Agony pounds in my chest. No. Not Kira. Not my sad-eyed, soft mate. I'm helpless and filled with rage all at once. "I must save her."

"Your friend...he's not doing so well."

I look around. Off to one side, Haeden's body is slumped. There's a dark stain under him that makes my chest clench with new worry.

"Is he—"

"He's breathing, but I can't get him to wake up, and I can't carry him." She wrings her hands. "I don't know what to do. Kira told me to take you guys back to the cave—"

"She what?" I get to my feet with great effort, sending another wave of sheeting pain through my body.

The red-haired one – Harlow – wrings her hands again and paces. "She said that if they took her, I need to take you back to the cave so you can be safe. She doesn't want anyone coming after her."

"*She is my mate!*" I roar. I won't leave her. I'll get my spear, take off after their ship, and demand—

"They have guns!" Harlow cries. "And Haeden is dying!"

Haeden. My old friend. My truest friend. I stagger over to his side, clutching my wound, and roll him onto his back. His breathing rasps shallow in his chest, and the wound is in his gut. I can see the white of his innards in his wound, and there's blood everywhere.

He needs to get back to the healer, soon, or he will die.

I'm torn. I need to go after my mate, but it's clear that if I leave, Haeden will die. With a snarl of helpless fury, I turn to Harlow. "Why are you just standing there?"

"I don't know what to do!"

"Get something to bind his wound! Quickly! Or get poles for a travois!" With a travois, maybe even Harlow can take him back to the caves. I grab her arm before she darts off. "I must go after Kira. Can you take him back to the tribal caves if I make you a travois?"

Her face is pale but resolute. She nods. "Tell me the way and I will do it."

My heart sinks. She doesn't know the way to the caves. One slight storm, one wrong turn, and she will drag Haeden into the wild where he will die. I press a hand to my forehead. The stink of blood is everywhere. We must do something soon, or predators will come after it to investigate.

I...cannot go after Kira. Not if it means leaving these two helpless ones to die. I close my eyes. *Forgive me, my mate. I will come for you as soon as I can.*

Then, I turn to Harlow. "Take a knife and cut two poles for a travois from the trees. I will find something to bind Haeden's wound."

"What about the ship? We can use it—"

I shake my head. I don't trust it. "We'll take him back to the healer. Hurry."

She nods and darts away.

KIRA

One of the basketball head guards hisses at me as he hauls me up the ramp to the alien ship. "Walk faster."

"I'm walking as fast as I can," I mutter. Actually, that's not true. I'm dragging my feet deliberately. I don't want to go on the ship. I want to run for the hills, but I have to be brave. I knew this was coming if we couldn't scare them off.

And I have a Plan B, the contents of which are still safely tucked inside my mouth, between gums and cheek.

I'm still terrified.

Nothing's in my control anymore. These things would just as easily take back my dead body as they would my live one. And I don't know if Aehako is even alive or dead.

I can't think about that right now. If I do, I'll totally break down. I have to think about my plan.

They drag me into the hold of the ship despite my deliberately slow steps. Instead of flinging me down into another hold like they did before, I'm taken to a sterile white room and dumped onto a narrow white board of a bed. Oh God. This looks like an operating room.

The guard that has taken me as his personal hostage looms over me, fingering his weapon. A few moments later, the door opens and another one of the Little Green Men comes in. He speaks, and his voice has a different timbre than the others.

This is the infected one that was mentioned? It tilts its head toward me, curious.

"Yes," the guard says in his growling language.

I try to chirp back to it, to let it know I understand its words.

Its head tilts again. *Is it trying to speak?*

"It's stupid," the guard says, and smacks my arm with the butt of his gun. "Want me to kill it?"

"I'm not infected," I say in the guttural language of the szzt. "I have a symbiont. A creature living inside me. But it can't be removed without killing its host."

A parasite? How very curious. I wonder that I can remove it anyhow. I should like to study this and see how long it can survive in an artificial environment, if at all.

They want to kill me just to see what happens? These guys are dicks, as Liz would say. “You can’t do that,” I say quickly. When they simply stare at me, I cast about for a logical explanation as to why they can’t. “I’m worth more alive than dead.”

The Little Green Man tilts his head and then reaches out to touch my ear. Even though I want to slap his hand away, I have to force myself not to react. *This is the one we implanted the translator in, yes? Her aural cavity shows markings of one, but I confess all these things look alike to me.*

“I had a translator,” I tell him.

Where did it go?

“I had the ship remove it.”

The ship on the surface? The creature’s head tilts again. If it weren’t for the fact that my life was in danger, all the head-tilting would be kind of hilarious. *It is not functioning.*

“It’s not completely functioning. It doesn’t fly, but I have a secret code,” I bluff. “I know the access codes to the computers. I can give you the ship if you return me to the surface and never come after me and the other women ever again.”

The thing chirps repeatedly, and somehow, I know he’s laughing. *Why would I want an old ship that does not fly?*

“You can tow it,” I tell him, staring into the enormous black eyes of the alien with what I hope is a confident expression. “I’m sure you have a way. And people always pay good money for...” I struggle to find the alien word for ‘antique’ and settle for “...very old and special things. That ship has lots of valuable equipment, plus all the valuables its passengers left behind when it was stranded several hundred years ago.”

The aliens exchange a look.

We can simply take it with us, along with you, the one alien says.
You know both of what you speak.

“But if you take me from here, I will die. My dead body is of very limited use to you. Your employers won’t pay as much for a dead girl as they would for a live one. I know this.”

I don’t know this. I’m guessing.

The black eyes of the Little Green Man blink slowly. *We will discuss this.*

I look over at the computers blinking on the wall. “Cool. You want me to just wait here?”

Put her in one of the holding cells.

The guardsman grabs me with a brutal hand, his rough skin tearing at my arm. I fight against him, but it’s only playacting. It’s what I think they expect me to do. In reality, a holding cell will work just as well as anything else for my plans. So I struggle and fight against the guard as he drags me down one of the narrow, metallic halls of the alien ship, and flings me into a dark hold. This time, there’s no cage, just what looks like a storage room. Good. I skid to the floor and huddle against the wall, doing my best to look frightened. Granted, it’s not that hard because I’m scared out of my mind, but I’m also thinking hard.

The guardsman looks down at me and curls his thick lip. He says something that I have no translation for, but is probably an insult, and slaps a panel on the outside wall. The door closes, and I’m alone in the dark.

Panic flutters in my chest. I have to remind myself that this is good news. This is what I want. I need to be alone.

Oh God, I need this to work.

I run my tongue along my gums, searching for the small packet I pushed there. Still there. I pull it out and rub it against my tunic to dry it, then press it between my lips to hold onto it while I look for the air filters to this room.

I'd noticed on the elders' ship that it'd had air vents much like my old apartment back on Earth did. That had got me thinking about a game plan and what I could do against the Little Green Men. They have more technology than I do. They have guns and they have the numbers, so I have to be sneaky...and fearless.

I find a vent near the edge of the floor and dig my fingernails into it until I locate what feels like a fastening of some kind, and then rip it off. I tear a few fingernails, but that is a small price to pay. With shaking hands, I peel the thin layer of plastic off of the packet and remove half of the contents.

One part is a computer part, much like a USB drive, that will allow the elders' ship to access this ship, provided I can find a compatible slot to plug it into.

The other part is a small square of filter that I've pulled from the elders' ship. After hundreds of years of being in the atmosphere, it's filled with concentrated naliium. I know that there is an element in the atmosphere of Not-Hoth that makes it impossible for humans to survive for long. There are trace elements of it in the atmosphere, and within a week, we succumbed to sickness, our bodies growing weak and our minds disoriented. Our khui adapts us and allows us to live planet-side. Of course, planet-side, there's only trace amounts of naliium in the air. But after hundreds of years, the ship's filters are full

of the element. And if I add it to the air supply in my room, I'm hoping it'll poison my guard.

The computer assured me that the tiny amount that I drop into the air filtering system is enough to do it, but the computer's also three hundred (and some change) years old. It could be wrong. This ship could be more self-sufficient than I hope.

A million things can go wrong. All I can do is cross my fingers.

I replace the filter cover and sniff the air. I don't smell anything. The air doesn't taste weird. I have no idea if it's working or not, if the poison is seeping into the air of my small chamber or throughout the ship.

I tuck my body against the wall and wait.

• • •

Hours later, I'm in a frenzy of worry. There's no difference in the air that I can tell, and all I have left is the small bit of computer I'm supposed to somehow interface to one that's three hundred years younger.

This is the stupidest plan ever.

Despair threatens to overwhelm me. I ignore it, because there is no Plan C. This has to work. This has to.

A mental image of Aehako's fallen body flashes before my eyes, and I clench my fists, determined not to cry. He's not dead. He's not.

I'd know if he was, wouldn't I? But we're not connected by khui. We're only connected by heart and mind and choice. We don't have that deeper bond. We never will because of my body—

Someone fumbles at the door.

I jerk to my feet, my stiff muscles complaining. My body's instantly on alert, my heart hammering in my chest. Did they decide to take my offer after all? The broken ship for our freedom?

Then again, what is to stop them from taking the ship *and* us? Or taking the ship and then coming back and snaring us at a later date? If they're into slavery, it's not as if they're upstanding people anyhow. They can't be trusted.

The door slides open, and the guard walks in.

No, he staggers. His steps trip, but he manages to catch himself, and he raises the gun. "Come on," he says. His words sound slurred.

My hands fly to my mouth.

Oh my God.

It worked. He's sick. I'm immune to it because of my khui, but it's affecting the guard. Maybe it's affecting everyone.

Hope flowers in my chest like a sunburst.

I get to my feet. He stumbles forward again, and I dart behind him. He turns groggily, and I kick the back of his knee. The guard falls forward, weapon clattering to the ground. I grab it, and race to the other side of my cell. There's a place to put the hand that's similar to my laser cannon, and I aim it at my enemy and fire before I can think twice about it.

The gun blasts, shooting forth a bolt like liquid flame. It slices through the guard's head like butter, and he slumps to the floor, dead.

My throat closes and my nostrils flare as the hot smell of charred flesh saturates the room. I did it. I killed him. I'm not even sorry. These monsters don't care if I live or die, so I'm not going to waste a minute on regret.

I step over him, clutching the gun, and head for the door. It's slid shut again, and no amount of me slapping my hand on the panel will open it. Shit. This wasn't something I considered.

I turn and look back at the fallen guard. His arm is extended out to one side, his rough palm face down. Oh, man. Swallowing hard, I lock the gun under my arm, aim, and shoot again.

The dismembered hand flies across the room.

Ugh.

I swallow hard and move to pick it up, then lay it across the panel. The door opens a moment later, and I step into the hall.

I'm one step closer to freedom. *You can do this, Kira*, I tell myself. *Just find the bridge, find a place to wire the two computers together remotely, and you're golden.*

There are two doors on one side of this narrow hall, and a door at the far end. I have no idea where I'm going, which means checking every door. I move quietly toward the first one, slap the dead guy's hand on the panel, and hoist my gun, ready to fire, as the door slides open.

It's a small room that looks like a storage closet. Of course it is.

Breathing a little easier, I pick up my extra hand and move down to the next door. This door leads to a cargo bay that makes me shudder with bad memories. It reminds me too much of my first time here.

It's also oddly empty. That makes me incredibly uneasy. Where are all the aliens?

The door at the end of the hall leads to another hall shaped like a T. I head directly across instead of forward, because I want to narrow down all possible ambushes. The last thing I want is to be close to freedom and then have it taken from me because I wasn't careful. So

I explore the other wing of the ship. I find the medical bay again, and resist the urge to use my gun like a flamethrower and burn everything to the ground.

I also find the dead body of one of the Little Green Men sprawled on the floor. My poison's working better than I thought. I push away the twinge of sadness I feel at killing them. They wouldn't have thought twice about me, and they aren't worth my pity.

Two doors over, I find a room with four small, strange doors lined up in a row. They're rounded, almost like bubbles in the wall, and I can't quite figure out what they are. I push my severed hand on one of the panels next to a bubble and speak in szzt. "Computer, can you open the door to one of these? What are they?"

"The doors in front of you are emergency deployment units."

"Escape pods?"

"They are alternate methods of egress, yes. Shall I ready one for you?" The computer's voice sounds as pleasant as the one back on the surface, despite the guttural tones of the language I'm speaking.

I get a wild idea. "Ready all of them." The panels light up, and then flash green. "How do I deploy them?"

"The unit can be deployed via an interior panel. Alternately, you can deploy a panel remotely from the control panel behind you on the wall."

I turn to the wall and sure enough, there's a flashing schematic of four pods. Writing flashes across the screen, indicating the various system checks.

"What do I push to deploy?"

The computer gives me the instructions, and I press the sequence with the guard's dismembered hand. A door locks in front of one of

the panels, and I watch as it moves backward down a tunnel, then shoots out into the air. Sunlight streams in from the place it once was, and I can see snow and the mountains far below.

Quickly, I deploy two more of the escape pods until just one is left. Then, I grab my hand and my gun and head off to figure out how to take over the rest of the ship.

• • •

My badass takeover of the ship ends up not being quite so badass. When I find the bridge, all the aliens are unconscious or dead. There's three Little Green Men sprawled on the floor and two more guards, and even though they're the enemy, I can't find it in myself to put my gun to their temples and kill them in cold blood. So I step around them and try to figure out how to interface with the chip I've so carefully smuggled on board.

It doesn't work, though. No matter what I do, I can't figure out how to get the stupid chip interfaced, and no amount of questions I ask the computer itself seem to help.

Frustrated, I slap the panels with the disembodied hand that is my key-card to accessing the ship.

The world tilts.

I catch myself before I can tumble to the ground and stare at the control panel, alarmed. What did I hit that made the ship move like that? Through a little experimentation, I find that one of the panels is touch sensitive, and acts a bit like a steering wheel. I tilt the ship downward, and then figure out how to make it accelerate instead of simply hang in the air.

Then, with one last slam of the controls, I push it into gear.

The ship groans and moves forward, and I watch as it begins to pick up speed. It doesn't move much at first, then slowly, it begins to descend, heading on a crash course for one of the far away mountain peaks.

That done, I get my gun and hightail it back to the last remaining pod. I slide in to the seat even as I hear the wind whistling and searing. It sounds like an airplane crashing – except I'm in the plane still. I slam the panel shut around me, hating that it feels like I'm trapped in a test tube. I push the alien's hand on the panel.

“Release! Go! Go!”

“Where do you wish to go?” the computer asks. “Please input coordinates.”

As if there were any question where I want to go. “Take me back to the surface.” Back to my mate and my new people.

“Please enter in coordinates or access manual controls.”

“Um, give me the manual controls, I guess.”

Two joysticks spit out from the control panel, and I grab them. The moment I do, the pod detaches and slings backward in high speed, and my ears pop a bajillion times as the pod flings itself into the atmosphere, then hovers, waiting.

I watch as the alien ship tilts even more, listing to one side as it heads for the mountain. I wince, waiting for the collision. It doesn't seem like it's moving that fast, but—

BOOOOOOM.

The mountain – and the ship – explode in a fiery inferno. I sigh heavily and a weight feels as if it's been lifted from my shoulders. Those aliens won't bother us again.

Also, damn. I'm kind of a badass for taking down the bad guys. Who knew that little, shy Kira had it in her, huh?

HARLOW

I need two poles for a travois. Okay. I can do this. Aehako's instructions ring through my mind, over and over. My heart races wildly in my chest as I sprint through the snow, looking for the thin pink wispy trees of this planet. Kira's gone, and both aliens are wounded. They need my help, and I can't let them down. My feet sink into the snow, but I trudge forward over a drift-covered hill, and when I see trees in the distance, I pick up the pace.

I have Haeden's knife, since he's too wounded to use it. When I get to the first tree, I touch the bark and wince, because it feels spongy and damp despite the chill in the air. It doesn't feel like a hard, woodsy tree at all. I have no idea if this will work, but I'll give it a shot. Kneeling down, I begin to hack at the base of the first tree. The knife sinks in with a squishing noise, and sap squirts out onto the snow. Ugh. I wrinkle my nose and keep cutting.

The snow crunches nearby, and I stand upright, surprised. It almost sounded like a footstep. "Hello?" I turn around and look. "Aehako?"

No one's there. I must be imagining things. Or maybe it's a rabbit. Or...whatever the rabbit equivalent on this planet is. I can't be a silly chicken and freak out at every little sound, though. I turn back to the tree and continue hacking at it.

I hear the crunch of snow again, and a moment later, a heavy thudding. No, not quite a thudding, a...purring? What on Earth...

Something slams into the back of my head, and I pitch forward into darkness.

Even there, the purring follows me.

AEHAKO

There's no sign of Harlow. Damn the human for abandoning us.

I'm loading an unconscious Haeden onto a makeshift travois when a roaring sound comes from overhead. I look up and watch as the black smudge of the alien ship on the horizon approaches. My heart slams in my chest as I watch it slowly crawl across the sky. Is it leaving? Taking my Kira with it? Helpless fear burns a track through my guts.

The oddly shaped flying ship seems to be tilting to one side, continuing its slow descent. It flies overhead and I turn, then realize it's heading directly for the side of the nearest mountain. "No!"

My hoarse shout echoes on the lonely, snow-covered plains. It doesn't stop the alien ship from plunging headlong into the rocky slope, or the crash and fiery explosion afterward.

"KIRA!" I fall to my knees in agony.

No. My mate. My sweet, sad-eyed mate. The pain of loss is like nothing I've ever felt before. I've always been a lucky one, born into a large, loving family. We were spared when the khui sickness hit the caves hard many years ago. I've never lost someone I loved so intensely as I loved Kira.

The thought of going on without her staggers me.

I fall forward and press my fists to the icy snow, trying to contain my rage and grief. Haeden needs my help, even though I want

nothing more than to chase down that black, smoking char of a ship and find any traces of my sweet Kira. Was she in fear when she died? Hurt? A harsh sob breaks in my throat.

She deserved better than this.

Dully, I look over at Haeden's unconscious form. It would be easy to just roll onto my back and wait for my own end to come. To give up and join my Kira in death. But Haeden is here, and he needs the healer, and for a moment I feel a wave of ugly resentment for my wounded friend, that he won't let me join her.

But that doesn't mean I cannot grieve for her.

I sit up on my haunches, ignoring the stabbing pain of my wound. I grab a fistful of snow and begin one of the mourning songs, the one for a mate. I have no ashes to pour over my horns, so I let the snow trickle down over my brow, and I give my dead mate the respect she deserves. I will have a better ceremony when Haeden is safe. I will give my horns the proper cuts, smear ash upon my brow and chant songs of our love before I can go on without her.

If I can go on without her.

Right now, the thought seems impossibly cruel.

I pour another handful of snow over my brow and horns, my mourning chants growing louder. I'm so lost in my grief that I don't hear the noise around me until a shadow passes overhead. Then, I realize there's a thick buzzing in the air, a hum not unlike the elders' cave.

I wipe the snow from my eyes and watch as a pod, the same dark color as the alien ship but much, much smaller, lands delicately in the snow nearby. There's a whoosh of air, and then a hatch opens,

like an egg cracking. Something is immediately flung out into the snow, and the scent of blood and char touches my nose.

It...looks like a severed hand. An orange, alien hand.

Then, a small figure stumbles out of the pod and lands, face-first, into the snow. It's a human, with pale brown hair, dirty, torn leather clothing, and the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen.

"Aehako," Kira chokes.

"My mate," I growl, surging to my feet. I forget my wound. I forget the mourning rites. I forget Haeden, lying unconscious nearby. All I care about is that my Kira — my beautiful, delicate human Kira — is in front of me, alive and whole. I stagger toward her and sweep her into my arms, clutching her against me so tightly that I fear I'm going to crush her.

I can't let her go, though. She's never leaving my sight again.

"Aehako," she sobs again, and her voice is full of laughter and joy as well as tears. Her arms around my neck are the most beautiful thing I've ever felt, and when she grabs my face and begins to press sweet kisses to my mouth, I nearly explode from joy.

"Kira! Kira! My mate! How is this possible?" My fingers dig into her hair and before she can answer me, I claim her in a rough kiss, my tongue seeking hers. The need to brand her as mine, to take her before she can be stolen from me once more, overwhelms me. I want to devour her whole, if only so she will never be apart from me again. It takes every ounce of my strength to stop kissing her long enough for her to draw breath, and when she looks up at me with a dazed, hungry look on her face, I kiss her all over again.

I will mate with her mouth for days on end now that she is back in my arms. There is no part of Kira that will be safe from my hungry

tongue. I will worship every bit of her.

Her breathless moans are utterly intoxicating, and I want to rip my loincloth free and thrust my throbbing cock into her welcoming cunt. I press her back into the snow, only to hear her gasp.

“I smell blood, Aehako—“

“It is nothing, my mate,” I tell her between fierce kisses. “Let me mate your mouth with my tongue before I mate you with my cock.”

Her hand pounds on my shoulder, and her outraged gasp echoes in my ear a moment later. “Aehako! You’re bleeding!”

I sigh and simply hold her close, hugging her against me as her frantic hands move over my chest. Has ever a sa-khui male been so happy? I stroke Kira’s soft hair and inhale her scent. Nothing else matters except my mate is alive.

“You’re wounded!” Her cry of surprise screeches in my ears. “Aehako, stop! Let me look at you!”

I cannot stop smiling, cannot stop touching her. “My wounds do not matter, Sad Eyes. Where have you been? How did you escape?”

“Your wounds matter to me,” she fusses, and it feels good to have my mate’s small hands pulling at my clothing, determined to care for me.

I could die happily in this moment.

As she strips my tunic from me and binds my wound, she tells me how she escaped from the ship. Her eyes are troubled as she presses a thick piece of leather to my wound. “I killed them all, Aehako. I’m not even sorry about it. I just keep thinking of what would have happened if we went back with them. I couldn’t let that happen.”

“You protected your people, as fiercely as any chief,” I tell her, caressing her cheek. “I am proud of you.” Proud, and so utterly beside myself with joy that she is alive.

“I keep telling myself that maybe I should have negotiated more,” she says in a soft voice, wrapping a long strip of torn clothing around my chest. “That maybe they’d have listened to reason and left us here. But I couldn’t take that chance.”

I say nothing. It’s clear that she’s working through this on her own. All I can do is support her and love her – two easy tasks.

“And I just thought—,” her thoughts stop and she looks around, then back at me. “Where is Harlow?”

“Gone,” I say, unable to stop the irritation from flooding my voice. “Abandoned us and fled like a coward.”

Kira’s brow furrows. “I didn’t think Harlow was a coward. I wonder what happened?”

“She left to get poles for the travois, and never returned. She has ran for the hills seeking safety from your aliens. She is foolish and has caused her own death, and possibly that of Haeden.” I force myself to get up, even though I want nothing more than to remain here, seated in the snow with my mate as she fusses over me. “We must get him to the healer, and soon. I do not know if he will last another night.”

Kira’s eyes are wide. “But Harlow—”

“We must choose,” I say gently. “We can wait here and hope she returns, and Haeden will almost certainly die. Or we can leave her to her fate and take Haeden to be healed.” I leave the choosing to her. It is not my choice to make, because I will never be able to choose

flighty, fickle Harlow over the man I have grown up with and whom I think of as a brother.

Kira's gaze moves to the travois, and then back to me. "Of course we can't stay," she says, her voice soft with sorrow. "I just thought..." she shakes her head. "I guess it doesn't matter. Poor Harlow. I hope she can find her way back to the caves at some point." She gets to her feet and then presses a hand to my bandages as I stand. "Let's get Haeden back safely. If he dies, I'll blame myself."

"Then we will not let him die," I tell her in a firm voice.

KIRA

The return back to the caves is brutal. I worry about Harlow, who's gone missing. She's so secretive, though, I don't know if she's all right and just in hiding, or if something else has gone terribly wrong. Aehako is wounded, and Haeden is hovering at death's door, so there's no time to wait and see if she's going to return. We load Haeden onto the travois and pull it across the crisp snow.

For once, the weather holds on us, and the day fades into night with clear skies and not a bit of snowfall. We don't stop even when the sun goes down. We walk through the night, endlessly trudging back to the tribal caves. Aehako's weaker than he tries to let on; he has to pause and rest several times. I take the poles of the travois from him and drag it for a while to help out, though my strength is not even half of his. He kisses the top of my head and murmurs words of thanks at my efforts, though.

It's a long, miserable night. I make it by simply concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. As long as I'm with Aehako, it

doesn't matter. Nothing matters. I wish I could hold his hand, but when he doesn't have the travois poles, I do. So I just tuck my hands into my fur cloak and imagine what life is going to be like when we get back to the caves.

Because I'm moving in with Aehako. He's mine and I'm not waiting any longer to claim him, khui or not.

Eventually, the sun rises. My feet feel heavy and cold as ice, but when we pause to check on Haeden, I can tell that Aehako's worried about him. He doesn't need to say anything; it's obvious that Haeden might not make it back to the caves. I bind his wound tighter, take off my fur cloak and wrap it around his unconscious body, and then we continue on.

I'm utterly numb with exhaustion when I hear a high pitched cry. It sounds a bit like a bird. I look over at Aehako, and his face lights up with joy. He cups a hand to his mouth and repeats the cry, adding a shrill yi-yi-yi at the end. "Hunters," he tells me. "Raahosh is near. They will help us."

"Oh, good," I breathe. Right now, I'd take a piggyback ride all the way home if it was offered.

"There," Aehako says, and points over a rise. Two fur-covered bodies are jogging toward us, one wearing snowshoes and a thick fur cloak, the other dressed in simple leathers and a loincloth. One horn twists up from his head where there should be two.

Sure enough, it's Raahosh and Liz.

"Marco," Liz calls, laughing as they approach.

I want to laugh at her joke, but I'm too tired. I lean against Aehako's arm as we wait for them. I could fall asleep on my feet right about now. Actually, I don't think I've slept in a long time.

“Yo, dude, you’re supposed to say ‘Polo,’” Liz says, hopping over to us before flinging her arms around me. Then, she blinks, takes one look at my pale face and the travois, and then at Aehako.

“What’s wrong? What the hell happened?”

“We were returning to the caves because we saw the alien ship,” Raahosh says in a grim voice.

“Yeah, but it left again, so I thought everything was cool,” Liz says.

“It didn’t leave,” I tell her. “I smashed it into the side of the mountain.”

“We can tell you on the way back,” Aehako interrupts. “But we must get Haeden to the healer before it is too late.”

Raahosh’s eyes narrow and he moves to the travois, ripping my fur cloak down and uncovering him. A moment later, he gets up, replaces the blanket, and takes the travois poles from Aehako. “I will run it in. Stay with the women.”

Aehako claps him on the shoulder gratefully, and we watch as Raahosh takes off like a dervish, hauling the travois behind him with a speed and energy that makes me exhausted to watch.

“You okay, Kira?” Liz asks. “You look ready to faint.”

“I’m fine,” I assure her, though I weave unsteadily on my feet.

“I’d offer to carry you but my muscles are kinda puny,” she says, flexing an arm. She adjusts her bow, slung across her back. “But I’m happy to give you a shoulder to lean on if you need it.”

“There is no need,” Aehako interrupts, and in the next moment, he picks me up into his arms.

“You’re wounded,” I protest. “You can’t carry me.” I try to slither out of his grip, but Aehako only holds me tighter.

“You guys okay?” Liz asks, worried.

“I am fine. And you weigh nothing, Kira,” he says, and then nuzzles my throat. “It is my honor and pleasure to carry my mate.”

“Oh my God,” Liz cries and claps a hand to her mouth. “You two resonated? Really?”

I shake my head, but Aehako interrupts. “No resonance. We have chosen each other.”

“Aww, that’s romantic, I think,” Liz says, and there’s a wrinkle in her brow as if she’s not quite sure if she should be happy for us or not. I know what she’s thinking – what happens if one of us resonates to someone else?

So I distract her as we start walking, heading down the path that Raahosh has cut through the snow. “You haven’t seen Harlow, have you?” I ask her. “She was part of our group and ran off, and we can’t find her anywhere.”

“Jeez, I feel like I’m missing a big chunk of story here,” Liz says. “Someone wanna fill me in between alien plane crashes, wounds, and a missing person?”

We do, and it takes a bit of telling. By the time the story is finished, we’re striding into the mouth of the cave, me in Aehako’s arms, and worried tribesmates swarm around us. I can practically feel the love and worry in the air, and it’s a good feeling. For the first time, I don’t feel like a lonely outsider.

Maybe it’s because when Aehako sets me down, he refuses to let go of my hand and keeps me at his side. I like that.

Raahosh returns a few moments later and puts an arm around Liz’s waist, possessive. He nods at Aehako. “Haeden is with the healer.”

“I am glad you ran into us when you did.”

“You need the healer, too,” I point out. “You have a wound—“

“Hush,” Aehako says, and presses a kiss atop my head. “My mother will pack it with herbs and that will hold me until the healer is ready. Come. We should tell her she has a daughter. She has always wanted one.”

Liz giggles evilly. “Oh boy, meeting the in-laws. Have fun with that.”

I cast a look back at her, but I don’t protest when Aehako leads me deeper into the caves. His wound is first and foremost in my mind, not whether or not his mother likes me.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I ask, squeezing his hand.

“I will be fine. I don’t wish to distract Maylak from the healing she is doing on Haeden. He needs all her attention.” His brows furrow with worry and he casts a look at the healer’s cave. “If he doesn’t live...”

“He will,” I reassure him. And when he hesitates, I gently steer him back toward his own cave. “Tend to yourself first, then you can see how he is doing.”

He nods and tugs me along. I pass by Tiffany and Josie, who have worried looks on their faces. The loss of Harlow is one I’m not ready to talk about yet. I’m not even sure if I can grieve. It just doesn’t feel real yet. How can we have possibly lost a human? There are too few of us as it is.

“My son,” an elderly woman cries, and I see Sevvah emerge from her cave, holding out her arms for a hug. “What is this I hear about a wound?”

“It is nothing, Mother,” Aehako says, and his usual grin resurfaces. “You worry too much.”

“And you do not worry enough,” she fusses, embracing him.

My hand slips from his as he steps into his mother's arms, and I remain behind, feeling a bit timid. I've talked with Sevvah plenty of times before. It's a small cave, and I like her. She's lovely, with gray braids looping around her horns and the same pale blue her son is. She looks regal and there are lines at the edges of her eyes from laughter, which is good. I shouldn't feel weird about walking right in and sitting down as she leads her son into their cave. I mean, she's invited me in for tea before.

It's just that the last time I was just one of many humans, not a daughter-in-law. A daughter-in-law that will never resonate.

I swallow hard.

"Where are you wounded?" Sevvah fusses. "Oshen, bring me my herb bags. Sessah, move away. Go play with Farli."

As I linger at the mouth of their cave, Sessah – a boy that can't be more than ten years old or so – bolts out of the cave, giggling. I always forget that Aehako has a much younger brother. I know he has an older one named Rokan, but the sight of Sessah's skinny body and twig-like horns makes me feel a curious kind of longing. Is that what Aehako's children would look like?

A tail flicks at the edge of my vision and as I watch, Asha saunters into Sevvah's cave as if she owns it. I watch as the flirty female moves toward Aehako, and puts an arm around his back.

To his credit, Aehako flinches away and looks for me. "Kira?"

I bite my lip and head in, though I feel like an intruder. Sevvah's giving me a curious look and Asha's shooting daggers at me with her blue gaze. Oh dear. I am really not good with confrontation, and this feels like confrontation.

Ironic that I took out the aliens without an ounce of anxiety, but approaching the man that loves me while his ex-girlfriend tries to slide in on my territory? While his mother watches? This is hard.

Meekly, I step to Aehako's side and lace my fingers with his again.

"Hold this?" Sevvah asks, and hands me a small bone bowl full of herbs and what looks like fluff. "Now, Aehako, tell me what sort of things you have been up to, you naughty scamp." His mother's voice is loving, the affectionate tone of a woman who knows just how much trouble her son can be.

"Did you miss me?" Asha demands, pushing her way to Aehako's other side as if I'm not there.

He frowns at her and shakes his head. "I, no—"

As I watch, her hand slides to his tail and she grips it at the base. I gasp, because that seems incredibly sexual.

How dare that bitch touch my man?

My hand leaves Aehako's and before I can even stop to think of what I'm doing, I slap her hand away from him. "Quit touching my mate!"

The words tumble out before I can stop them, and everyone in the cavern stares at us. Aehako's father Oshen, his mother Sevvah, Asha — they all look at me as if I've grown another head.

Then, Sevvah gasps and a smile breaks across her face. "My son! You resonated? And to such a lovely human!" She beams at me with matronly warmth.

"No resonance, Mother," Aehako says, and pulls me against his side, carefully steering me away from a gaping Asha. "I've chosen her as my mate, and she's chosen to be mine."

I wait for Sevvah to question this, but she only smiles. “Equally wonderful.” She pulls at the laces of Aehako’s leather tunic, but it’s clear it’s not going to come off like that.

I step back out of Aehako’s grip. “Take off your shirt so your mother can see the wound.”

He removes his clothing, and then hands his tunic to me with a wink. “Not back an hour and my mate’s having me strip down. You see why I took her as my woman? She’s demanding.”

I blush.

Asha’s still standing there, and I sneak a peek over at her. She is frozen in place, an unreadable expression on her face. It’s clear she doesn’t belong, and it’s also clear she’s making no attempt to leave. This is awkward. I feel bad for her. I know she’s throwing herself at Aehako, but it’s clear that she’s miserable, all thanks to a khui that picked someone else.

Her gaze flicks to me and I offer her a tentative smile.

She scowls at me and storms away.

So much for sympathy.

Sevvah shakes her head and takes a handful of the wooly herbs out of the bowl I’m holding. “That one has a hard head. Perhaps now that you’ve taken a mate she’ll get it out of her mind that you should be together.”

“One can hope,” Aehako says drily. He hisses when Sevvah presses the bundle of herbs against the wound.

“This should be stitched,” Sevvah tells him.

“Maylak can fix it.”

“Maylak will be exhausted trying to save Haeden,” Sevvah insists. “I won’t have you bleeding out while you wait for her to recover. You

have a pretty mate to take to your furs. The last thing you want is to spend your time moaning in pain.”

“Not when I’d rather spend it just moaning, eh?” Aehako teases.

Oh my God, I can’t believe he just made that joke with his mother. I stare at him, horrified and unable to laugh.

As if she can read my thoughts, Sevvah rolls her eyes, taps his cheek with her hand, and says, “Behave, you randy fool.”

A giggle escapes me, and Sevvah flashes me a grin. Maybe the whole mother-in-law thing won’t be so bad after all.

“So,” Sevvah says as she readies an awl and a thick length of cord. As she pulls up a small stool, her husband Oshen retrieves a bowl from a shelf over the fire pit and carries it forward with gloved hands. Hot water. He sets it down nearby and Sevvah dips a bit of leather into it, then dabs at the edges of Aehako’s deep wound.

“Where will you and your new mate be caving?”

“Caving?” I ask.

“What, you don’t want us here, Mother? I am wounded.”

My eyes widen. Sharing a cave with Aehako’s big family? And trying to have sex while doing so? The idea is unthinkable. But there’s no place else to go, either, and Harlow – and any hopes of a stonecutter – are gone. This is something I haven’t even considered, and I shoot Aehako a worried glance. Does he really want us to live here?

But even as I look over, he winks.

Sevvah snorts. “The last thing a young mated pair needs are two old ones and two boys snuggled up in the furs nearby. Your mate will want more privacy than that.” She dabs at his wound again, then looks at me. “Since there are so many newly mated pairs, there is

talk of opening the caves to the south for the winter and splitting the tribes.”

“Then we’ll go there,” Aehako says, wincing as his mother tends to him. “Kira and I will definitely need our own space.”

“A noisy one, is she?”

“The noisiest,” Aehako says proudly.

I’m so going to die of embarrassment.

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I must drift off to sleep at some point, because the next thing I know Aehako is kissing my brow and tucking me into bed. I should get up, but it’s so warm and safe and I’m curled up next to him so I just snuggle down closer and drift back to sleep.

It’s heaven, pure and simple.

I wake up at some point because I feel like someone’s staring at me. I squeeze one eye open and Sessah – Aehako’s much younger brother – is gazing down at me. I feel a little awkward and shy under his scrutiny. “Good morning,” I say in his language, since I know it now. The words feel fluid on my tongue, and I realize this is the first time I’ve been able to say more than just ‘hi’ to the younger ones, who haven’t been out to the elders’ ship for the language dump. I decide to show off a little. “Am I sleeping funny? Is that why you stare?”

“You’re Aehako’s mate?”

“I am.”

“But you didn’t resonate. How can you be mates?”

Oh boy. Am I going to have to explain the birds and the bees to this kid? “Well, ah, sometimes when two people love each other very much, they want to be together all the time despite the fact that they can’t have a baby.”

He wrinkles his nose at the thought. “Does this mean you’re moving into our cave? It’s already crowded.”

“I don’t know. Um, is your brother Aehako around?”

“He is with the chief.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, and straighten my clothing before emerging from the bed. I’m still dressed, thank goodness, but my leathers smell like smoke and sweat and I kind of wish I had something else I could change into. Clothing’s been at a premium with twelve new people to tend to, though. Maybe someone will have extras I can change into. I slide out of the furs, glancing around. I’m still in Sevvah’s cozy cave, though this portion has been sectioned off with a strategic rocky outcropping and a large woven basket to give the illusion of privacy. Nearby, I can still hear the heavy breathing of someone else sleeping, and the low murmur of Sevvah’s voice nearby.

Sessah’s right. The cave is definitely small and crowded. I’m grateful for the bed, of course, but I think longingly of my loft apartment back on Earth that had seemed so small two months ago and now seems like unrivaled luxury. When the babies get here, we’re going to be falling over each other with the crowding.

I...suppose that won’t be a problem for me and Aehako. I feel a guilty pang at the thought. It was his choice to mate me despite knowing my flaws, so I can’t worry about it. I tell myself this as I slide

on soft boots, give Sessah a pat on the head, and then emerge from the private cave into the main interior of the tribal caves.

I yawn as I pad out into the main area and realize...I slept great. For the first time in what feels like forever, I slept without overhearing everyone having sex, the whispers picked up by the translator, everything. No wonder I feel so utterly refreshed. Even now, the cave is crowded but not overwhelming with voices. Instead, it's like a low, pleasant hum of conversation.

This is...awesome.

Of course, a small downside is that I have no idea where my mate is now. I can't follow the sound of his voice via the translator. I'll have to hunt him down the old fashioned way.

Nearby, Tiffany and Josie are scraping skins stretched on frames. Josie gives a happy squeal at the sight of me and waves her gore-covered arms. "I'd hug you, girl, but I'm gross! I'm so glad you're back!"

Tiffany's the more reserved of the two, and she just smiles at me.

"I'm glad to be back, too." I rub my earlobe. "I feel so much better without the translator." I wonder how much they know about the ship returning and wanting to snatch us all again, or if that's being kept on the down-low.

"I almost didn't recognize you," Josie says in a sunny voice, then turns back to scraping her skin. "Maybe I should check out the old mothership and see if it does breast implants. I'm feeling pretty inadequate around the sa-khui ladies." She shakes her small chest back and forth, trying to make what little she has jiggle.

"Oh, stop it," Tiffany says and nudges Josie with an elbow. "For real. No one's gonna give you boob implants because you're a

skinny white girl.”

Josie sticks out her tongue, and Tiffany returns the gesture before they both start laughing.

Yeah...I'm thinking they weren't told about the ship. They're entirely too...happy. I gesture at the mouth of the chief's cave. "Is Vektal in there?"

Tiffany leans over to look at the entrance of his cave. "I don't think so? I thought I saw him walk outside with a few of the others earlier. You might check with the hunters if he's not in the furs with Georgie." She winks.

Oh, yikes. The last thing I want to do is run into them having sex. Lord knows I've heard it enough already. "Um, maybe I'll check with the hunters first."

"Good call," Josie cackles. "I saw more than I wanted to, once."

"These people need some damn doorbells," Tiffany says, and shakes her head.

I can't disagree with that. I give them both impulsive, one-armed hugs around their shoulders that they can't quite return because of their hands, and then trot off to find Aehako and the chief. Marlene is tending to a small fire where the cooked human food is prepared, and offers me a root-cake – not unlike a hash-brown cake – for breakfast. I nibble on it as I walk. If there was some coffee around here, I'd say this cave was downright cozy.

I find Aehako and Vektal talking near the entrance to the cave. They're up on a rise, just far enough away not to be overheard. Georgie squats nearby in the snow, dry heaving as Vektal strokes her hair.

I cram my root-cake into my mouth and chew rapidly. Probably a bad idea to eat around the pregnant lady with morning sickness. Poor Georgie. She's been barfing ever since she got knocked up.

Of course, I'd gladly trade places with her. I'd barf every day for three years in a row if it meant I could have Aehako's child.

My mate looks up at that moment and sees me approaching, and a smile crosses his broad face. I bask in the warmth of his approval, so happy I could burst. The aliens are gone, my translator's removed, and I have the love of a sexy, delicious alien. Oh, it is so *tough* to be me.

Aehako kisses me on the mouth as I move to his side and then swipes at the corner of my lip. "You have grease on your face."

I scrub at my cheek, blushing. "I was trying to eat fast so I wouldn't bother Georgie." I look over at my fellow human sympathetically. "How are you today?"

"Not bad, actually," she says, and stands up, wiping her own mouth. She looks pale and tired, but gives Vektal a small smile of thanks as he hands her a waterskin. She rinses her mouth and then spits off to the side.

Vektal studies me, arms crossed. His tail flicks once. "I did not recognize you without your shell," he says, and gestures at one ear.

"I had the translator removed," I tell him, feeling awkward. Am I truly so forgettable? But as I watch, his gaze devours Georgie, and my hurt feelings dissipate. I'm probably just another human to him, when Georgie's the only one that matters. It's clear that Vektal is obsessed and utterly in love with his human mate. I think it's cute, even if he still intimidates me a little.

Georgie leans against Vektal and his arm goes around her waist. “It’s good that you arrived,” she says. “We were just discussing things.”

“How is Haeden?” I ask.

“Recovering,” Aehako tells me. He takes my hand in his and twines his fingers with mine. “Maylak has worn herself out working on healing him, so I will stay wounded for a bit longer.” He pats his stomach, at the bandaged spot. “I guess you will have to be gentle with me in the furs, my Sad-Eyes.”

I see Flirty Aehako is back in full force. I snort and ignore his overt words. “And Harlow? Any sign of her?”

Georgie shakes her head. “I hate that she’s just completely disappeared. Something about it stinks. She didn’t strike me as the type to recklessly throw her life away.” Then, she’s silent again, and I know we’re both thinking of Dominique. Dominique was another redhead who was captured and thrown into the hold with Georgie and I on the alien spaceship. The guards had raped her, and it had broken something in Dominique’s mind. She’d survived the crash, but the moment she had the chance, she’d ran away into the frigid snow wearing only a nightgown. She’d frozen to death.

The loss of her still hit hard, even after everything we’d been through.

“Harlow’s smart,” I offer, thinking of her quick mind as she’d pieced together parts for the rock cutter. “Maybe she’ll find her way back.”

“I think we should send hunters after her,” Georgie says.

Vektal shakes his head. “The brutal season is coming on fast, and we have twelve—“

“Eleven,” Georgie quietly corrects.

“*Eleven* new mouths to feed. And several of those are bearing young. We must think of the good of all of the tribe, and the hunters are needed every spare moment. If they are not leaving to hunt food, we cannot spare them.” He touches her stomach. “I will not put you and our kit – or all of the other new lives to be born – in danger for one foolish human girl.”

I don’t like his answer, but as I look at Aehako, he’s nodding. They know the weather of this place better than we do. If they’re worried about not having enough food for the winter, then we need to worry too, I suppose.

I can tell Georgie’s not happy, either, but she shoots me a helpless look.

“She’ll turn up,” I say, determined.

We discuss the second spaceship and its demise. Georgie agrees with Vektal on this one – they don’t want to tell the others. No one but us – and Liz and Raahosh, who were out hunting and saw the craft – will know about it. Georgie doesn’t want the others to panic, not when they’re just now settling in.

“And if they’re all dead, there’s nothing to worry about, right?” She gives me a determined nod. “Right. Which means we should talk about the tribe split.”

“Split?” I look at Aehako, worried.

He nods. “When we were young kits, our caves overflowed and we had a second cave to the south that was also full of families. The khui-sickness took so many lives that we all moved to this cave system, but with the new families, I suggested to Vektal that we re-open them.”

“Only because you do not want to share a cave with another couple,” Vektal teases. “You are like me and want your mate all to yourself.”

Aehako gives his chief a lazy grin. “Is that such a bad thing? To want to be able to mate my female without the worry that Asha is going to show up and demand to join in?”

I make a choked sound. “Um, I’m for a new cave, too.” The idea of Asha watching – much less trying to join – is utterly horrifying.

Georgie giggles. “You should see your face, Kira. Oh my God.”

“If there is a new cave, all of the humans must remain with the healer.”

“Is that fair to the others?” I ask. The last thing I want is to have the rest of the tribe resenting us.

“The humans are carrying kits,” Vektal argues. “If they are not yet, they will be. They need to be with the healer.”

I remain silent.

“I agree with Kira,” Aehako says. “A cave full of elderly and single hunters will only breed dissent. It is fairest to split the tribe evenly.”

“We only have one healer,” Vektal growls. “She will remain with Georgie.”

“Calm down, Vektal,” Georgie pats her mate on his big arm. “I’m sure things can be divided in a way that’s fair to everyone. What if we send the single humans to the new cave and keep the pregnant ones here?”

“What about Raahosh and Liz?” I ask.

“Their punishment remains,” Vektal declares. “They will continue to hunt until Liz is too heavy to do so. But they can den with us when it comes time for Liz to have her kit.”

“Then who will be in charge at the new cave?” Aehako asks. His hand tightens on mine.

For a moment, Vektal looks perplexed. “I was going to send you, but now that you have mated, this poses a problem. Kira will need to stay near the healer.”

I bite my lip. I guess it’s time to speak up. “Kira doesn’t, actually. I can’t resonate. I’m barren.”

Georgie’s face softens while Vektal looks confused.

“She cannot bear children. We have chosen our mating,” Aehako declares, and hugs me close against him. “There will be no kit, but it does not matter. All that matters is that she is mine and I am hers.”

His declaration makes me weepy.

“And if there is resonance to another later?” Vektal asks.

“Then we will handle that as it comes,” Aehako says. “Until that day comes – if it should ever come, I belong to Kira, and she belongs to me.”

Vektal nods and gives us both a look of understanding. “I would have done the same for Georgie, had she not resonated for me.”

AEHAKO

It takes two full days and nights before we are allowed to go and visit the other cave system. Kira has taken to calling them the South Caves, and the name has stuck with me as well. We have said nothing to the others. If I am to be the leader of this small fragment of the tribe, I want it all decided and carved in stone before anyone is moved. Once we are in for the brutal months, the visits between the caves will be few and far between.

Balancing the tribes is a delicate matter and one that takes many days of discussion between myself and Vektal, and we include our mates, who are the voices of reason when it comes to the human women. If we do not balance things just perfectly, those moving to the South Caves will feel abandoned and useless. But if we take our strongest to the South Caves, then we handicap the tribe cave.

Back and forth, we argue about who should stay and who should go. Plans change hourly, until I'm ready to tear my hair out if Vektal puts his foot down and says 'no' to my suggestions one more time.

He is the chief, and he is my friend, but he is also incredibly stubborn. A pain in the ass, as Kira says.

I'm short tempered, myself. Haeden is still healing and Maylak, who is pregnant and must be careful with her own health, hasn't had time for my wound. It pains me, but not nearly as much as being unable to sleep with my Kira and not caress her.

She doesn't have to tell me that she's uncomfortable sleeping in the cave with my family around her. It's evident in the stiffness of her body as we undress for bed. Or at least, I undress for bed. Kira simply takes her shoes off and lies down, fully clothed and twitching with every small sound. Every hiccup Sessah makes, every snort my brother Rokan makes in his sleep, every murmur of my father and mother as they mate – Kira hears all of it, and it's clear she's bothered.

There will be no mating until we have our own cave and privacy.

Very well, then. I will just have to push things along. My need to claim my Kira again overrides everything. I hunger to taste her sweetness on my tongue, to mate her mouth with mine, to sink my cock deep into her cunt and hear her bellow with pleasure.

It's these thoughts that drive me to suggest a trip to the South Caves the next morning. Kira's nibbling on one of the root-cakes that she and the human women seem to enjoy so much and chatting with the others by the fire. Vektal is relaxing in the pool while Georgie braids his hair into a thousand tiny braids that stand up straight around his horns and look like a strange nest. Everyone's relaxed and enjoying themselves before starting the day – a perfect time to sneak away with my Kira.

When she finishes eating, I pull her aside. "Come with me today."

She dusts off her hands and nods. "Where are we going?"

"To see the South Caves. I want to take a look at how many caves we have and their placement before we make final decisions of who should stay and who should go."

Kira tilts her head and gives me a curious look. "You don't know the caves?"

I do, actually. I know them by heart, and have been many times. But I'm itching to have alone time with my lovely mate, and this is the best way to do it. "I do, but I wish your feedback."

A brilliant smile crosses her face and my cock surges at the sight of it. We definitely need to get away from the others, or else they're all going to watch while I claim my lovely mate, because I'm not going to be able to resist touching her for much longer.

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"Well?" I ask as she steps into the mouth of the South Caves. "What do you think?" I'm anxious to hear her thoughts.

She gazes up at the high ceiling. "You have stalactites."

“I do not know this word.”

“The rock icicles,” she says, and points at them. “They’re not in the other cave. I think Harlow was right that the elders had rock cutters of some kind when they made your cave.”

I admit I’m a little dismayed that her response isn’t enthusiastic. If I’m in charge of this cave as Vektal wishes, she’ll be with me. I want her to like it here. I want her to be with me.

“These caves are very different,” I admit. “There is no bathing pool in the center of the cavern, for one.”

She gives me a prim look. “That is not exactly a bad thing. The less I see of other people’s junk, the better.”

I chuckle. Her modesty is strange. She’ll lose it eventually, but for now, I’ll enjoy her blushes and her squirming. “Do you not wish to see your mate naked?”

“I see you naked plenty,” she says, and her cheeks are pink as she steps past me, gazing around her. “It’s darker in here, and colder.”

I follow her. “The other cave is warmed by the underground spring, so it stays pleasant even in the brutal season. Here, we would need to rely on more fires.”

“Fires aren’t bad,” she says, her expression thoughtful. “We still have a lot of people eating cooked food. And the ceiling is high so the smoke won’t be so bad.” She heads toward one of the private nooks that are living quarters. There’s still an old leather screen propped up in front of the cave mouth as a nod to privacy. And she gasps. “My goodness. It’s so big in here!”

“Is it?” I feel a hint of pride return. “Do you like it?”

“As long as we don’t freeze in the winter, I think there’s potential,” she says with a small laugh. She pushes into the private cave and looks around. I follow her. It’s been at least fifteen full cycles of the seasons since this cave was inhabited, and I don’t remember who it once belonged to. In the center of the room is a dug-out fire pit with neat rocks circling it. There’s a flat section off to one side that probably housed the bed furs, and a few withered baskets that have been chewed at the bottom. She walks past all this, and then flashes me a smile and sticks her hand out. “Show me which one you had in mind for us?”

I return her smile and take her small hand in mine. I love the feel of her cold fingers lacing between mine for warmth, and the urge to drag her to the floor of the cave and claim her is nearly overwhelming. I stare down at her, my cock hardening in my loincloth.

“Cave?” She squeezes my hand. “Aehako?”

My name falling from her lips makes my balls tighten. Somehow, I manage to focus and turn, judging the maze of small caves attaching to the bigger one. Whereas the tribal cave is built like a ring, this one is more like a horn, where the entrance is wide and open and narrows further down into the side of the mountain. The caves at the front will be for the hunters, I have decided, and the fully sa-khui families. The humans are fragile and do not retain heat nearly as well, so they will need to be at the back of the cave, away from the snowy winds. There’s one particular cave I have in mind, and I steer her toward it. It’s smaller than a few of the others, but it has other charms.

There's a screen covering it as well, faded painted symbols dancing along the hide. Kemli had a sister once, Koloï, but she died with the khui-sickness. Koloï enjoyed painting, much like Kemli's daughter Farli now does. And her old cave still bears the remnants of her fanciful designs. I push aside the screen and duck to enter the cave, tugging Kira behind me.

Her pleased gasp tells me I've done well. "It's so dark in here, Aehako. But are those..."

"Designs, yes. The woman who used to live in this cave painted the walls. Do you like it?"

"It's so pretty." She steps forward, toward the fire pit, gazing up where a trickle of light comes from overhead. "Smoke hole?"

I nod.

"That's handy." She gazes around again, and then points at the back of the cave. "What's that?"

I take a few steps into the shadows and recognition dawns. "It's the skull of a sa-kohtsk. There's no bathing pool here, so they would hollow the skull out and line it with waterproof hides to make a small bathing pool—"

Her shriek of excitement echoes. "It's a tub?"

I shrug my shoulders. I don't know the word. "I suppose?"

Kira hops in place and then bounds toward me, grabbing my hand. "I want this cave. This one's ours, right?"

I feel a sweeping sense of pride at her excitement. "Yes. This is what I picked for us."

Her arms fling around my waist. "This is wonderful!"

To think that my Kira would be so excited by a bit of paint on the walls and a makeshift bathing pool. My hands go to her back and

slide up and down her spine. "I am glad you like it."

"I love it," she says. "I can't wait to move in. So much privacy will be wonderful. We'll have time to clean things up and make it cozy before the winter comes."

Winter is her word for the brutal season, so I simply nod.

She tilts her head back and gazes up at me, and there's a hint of a smile playing around her lips. I'm entranced at the sight of it.

"There's one thing this place needs," she tells me.

"Oh?"

She steps back and pulls her bag off her shoulder. I know she's brought a waterskin and some of the root-cakes that the humans love for a meal, but I'm curious as to why we would need them now. She turns her back to me and moves toward the wall, toward the nook of the sleeping area. There's a bit of a shelf mixed among the spiky edges of the cave, and she places an object there.

I see it, and a bark of laughter erupts from my throat.

It's the courting gift I gave her – the replica of my cock, carved from bone. She's brought it and made the cave 'ours' by placing it here. I laugh long and hard at the sight, and her happy laughter twines with mine. The sound of her carefree laugh – her happiness – makes my entire body react, and I pull her against me. "My sweet mate," I murmur, and drag my fingers through her hair. "Did you bring that so I could use it on you?"

Her expression changes to one of shyness and she averts her eyes. But instead of a protest, her hands slide to the front of my tunic and she tugs at it.

Aha. So my mate misses my body as much as I miss hers. Need surges through me. I dig my fingers into the silky strands of her

mane and tug it back, exposing her neck. I rake my teeth over the cords of her throat, and then drag my tongue over her skin.

She shivers. "I've missed you, Aehako. I feel like we haven't had a moment alone in forever."

"Look around you, my mate. There is nothing but privacy here."

Kira tugs at the front of my tunic. "Then why are you still dressed?"

I nibble on her throat before releasing her. "So eager. It does a male's heart good to hear his mate is so anxious to join with him." I undo the laces of my tunic and then tug the entire thing over my head, leaving me only in leggings and loincloth. I spread my tunic on the dusty floor so my mate won't have to sit on the cold rock.

She immediately begins to undo the laces of her cloak, and I stop her. "I will undress you."

"Oh?" A smile plays at the corners of her mouth. "Are you going to unwrap me like a present?"

"Like a bit of organ meat hiding under the ribs of a fresh kill," I tease.

Her nose wrinkles. "That...sounds awful."

"Ah, but those are the tastiest, juiciest parts." I undo my loincloth and she watches me undress, chewing on her lip thoughtfully. I toss it down on the floor, and then my leggings, and soft boots. Then I am completely naked in front of her, my cock jutting hard, eager for her body. I clasp my cock in my hand and give it a teasing stroke, just to see her expression.

She gives a small gasp and her gaze locks with mine.

"Shall you watch me pleasure myself?" I love how startled she looks at the sight, and I pump my cock again, just the way I like,

tightly dragging my circled forefinger and thumb from the base to the crown, and then giving it a small flex of the wrist.

“I’d say yes any other time,” she whispers, unable to take her gaze off my movements. “But I really want you to touch me. Does that make me greedy?”

“If it does, then I am the luckiest male to have such a greedy mate,” I tell her, and undo the clasp of her cloak at her throat.

She stands still, trembling with anticipation, and her eyes are huge as she gazes up at me. There’s no fear or wariness in her face, just longing. She’s so beautiful that it makes me ache to look at her. I am truly the luckiest male ever. I press my mouth to her strange, smooth forehead, and kiss her tiny, too-flat nose. She is perfect to me.

I bend down and touch her chin. I tilt her head back so I can kiss her mouth, mate our tongues in the slick, decadent way that the humans are so fond of. She leans into my kiss, her hands sliding to my sides and then resting on my hips, gripping me against her. My cock presses against her belly, hard and insistent. It wants attention, too. Soon, I remind myself. This is but the second time we will mate, and I must still be careful with her to make sure she is ready.

So I continue my slow removal of her clothing. I take the cloak from her shoulders and lay it on the ground, spread like a blanket. Her dress is made of the softest leather Kashrem creates, but the sleeve is torn and the garment is ragged and still has soot stains on the skirt from her capture. I frown at the sight of it, not only because the memory of her near-loss makes my heart seize in my chest, but she needs warm, clean clothing. “You need a new dress.”

“I forgot to ask for one.” She shrugs. “It’s not important.”

“It is important to me. You are my mate. I want you clothed warmly.”

“I’d like to make my own clothing,” Kira says in a shy voice. “I want to learn. I want to be capable.”

“I can show you how to make leather, but not nearly as fine as what Kashrem makes.” I tug her dress over her head, and the moment I do, she grips my cock in her small hands, making the breath hiss from my lungs.

“Let’s not talk about clothing right now?”

I chuckle. “So eager?”

The shy duck of her head tells me everything.

I sink to the ground on the furs and tug her down against me, pulling her into my lap. She settles on one of my thighs, her small, tailless bottom wiggling as she adjusts herself. I cup one of her breasts in my hand, admiring the softness of her skin and her gasp of response. “You are so soft all over, my Kira,” I murmur, and lean down to take a taut nipple into my mouth.

She moans and her hips buck, and her arms go around my neck, clinging to me.

I lick and suck at her nipple, teasing it with the ridged tip of my tongue. Her soft cries tell me that she likes this, very much, and I can feel the wetness from between her legs seep onto my thigh. My other hand moves there to her cunt, to dip into her sweet honey. She’s hot and soaked under the dark curls between her legs, her folds juicy and waiting for my tongue. My mouth waters at the thought.

And then I remember that she brought the courting present I made for her. Does she want to try it? I’ve not heard of such a thing, but

humans are adventurous and I'm eager to participate. I did make it as big as my cock, and even though I want nothing more than to bury myself between her legs, I'm intrigued by how she'd react if I use the courting gift on her.

My fingers glide between her slippery folds. She's hot and wet, and her hips move as I stroke her, encouraging me to push into her. A little moan escapes her as I lick her nipple, and that decides me. I want more of her moans, her cries, her wails of my name. I want to drive her wild.

I reach back to the shelf and pick up the courting gift, and hold it in front of her.

Kira inhales sharply, and her gaze flicks to my face.

"It's a good replica, is it not?" I admire my carving, right down to the veins tracing along the shaft. "You have no idea how many hours I spent staring at my own cock to get this right."

She giggles softly. "And you did that just for me?"

"Of course. You are my woman and I wished to please you."

She leans forward and her arms tighten around my neck, and she kisses me softly on the mouth. "You always please me, Aehako."

I drag it over her belly. "And now I want to please you with this," I tell her between kisses. I feel her stiffen, and her breath quickens, but she doesn't tell me no. Encouraged, I slide it lower, moving the head of it to her mound. "I think, like my cock, I will need to make sure it is wet with your juices before I slide it into you."

A whimper escapes her throat and her arms tighten around my neck.

"Spread your legs for me, my mate," I tell her.

She bites her lip again, but her legs ease open. I can see the gleam of wetness on her upper thighs, and I can smell the hot scent of her. It drives me insane with need. A growl forms low in my throat. The need to claim her is strong, but my curiosity and the titillation of the toy – as well as the thought of pleasing her – drives me. I push the thick head of the toy between her folds and it presses against her third nipple.

Kira cries out and her hips lift, her arms tightening around my neck. “Oh God!” The scent of her musk perfumes the air even thicker than before. Her body quivers.

I drag the head of the false cock through her wet folds, getting it slick. Every movement of it makes Kira react – she is climbing off my lap with her need, her fingernails digging into my shoulders. I push the head of the false-cock into her, and she whimpers. I move no further, because to do more, she will have to change positions, and I want her to ask for it. I want to know she’s enjoying herself as much as I am. My own cock throbs with neglect, but for now, it is all about Kira and her need.

When I push no deeper, her whimpers increase, and her hips rise up, encouraging me. “Aehako,” she pants, and her nails dig into my skin. “Please.”

“Do you wish more, my mate?” I lean in and kiss her, and give the fake-cock a little push to remind her of its presence.

She makes a soft, wordless sound, and then nods.

“Do you trust me?”

Again, she nods. Her eyes are huge in her face, her pupils dilated with need.

“Then lie flat for me.” I pull the fake-cock out, and when she simply stares at me, I lick the head clean of her juices. A low growl escapes my throat. She’s delicious, and I want my tongue on her.

Kira shivers, and then nods. To my surprise, she flips over onto her belly and pushes her bottom up in the air, her legs slightly spread. Her stomach presses against my thigh, and I want to correct her...but stop.

Her bottom is smooth, no hint of a tail to interrupt the sweet curve. I realize that if I press the false cock into her, there is nothing to stop me from sinking it all the way inside her. Entranced by the thought, I push my fingers between her thighs to stroke her cunt, and she moans hard, pressing her face into the furs.

She’s wet and slick and ready, and I remove my hand and push the head of the false cock at the entrance of her cunt. Her wriggle of encouragement is beautiful to see, and I press it deeper, inch by inch, until it’s halfway into her. She moans as I begin to work it slowly, pushing deeper into her with each stroke. I’m fascinated by the sight of the cock – my cock – pushing into her and my own cock jerks in response.

“Aehako,” she moans, and her hips wiggle as I push it deeper into her. As I do, the spur presses up against her backside, and she lets out a squeal. “What was that?”

“That was the spur.”

“Oh,” she breathes, and relaxes again. “Oh, God, I don’t know how I feel about that.”

“Is it bad?”

“No, and that’s the problem.” She moans and pushes her hips higher again, encouraging me to give her more. I thrust it into her

again, deeper, nudging at her bottom with the spur with every stroke of the cock.

And as she cries out, a stab of jealousy shoots through me. Stupid to be jealous of a carving, but I want her moans and cries for my cock. I want her cunt squeezing tight around me, her juices soaking my cock, not a bone carving.

I pull it out of her and toss it aside, ignoring her cries. But when I get up and adjust her hips, raising them into the air, her protests change to needy sounds, and she encourages me with her body. I run my hand over her smooth ass, my tail flicking. I never realized that a lack of a tail could be so...utterly erotic. I spread her thighs for me and sink into her in one fluid motion, watching as my spur penetrates her bottom.

Kira's cry of pleasure reverberates in the cave. "Yes!"

The growl escapes my throat and I grip her hips. It's been too long since I touched my mate and claimed her for my own. I can't hold back. I thrust into her again, rearing back and sliding deep into her once more, and Kira cries out her excitement. She can't contain herself. The more I stroke into her, the louder she gets, and the closer together her wails become until she's making one long keening noise as she comes. Her cunt clenches around me like a mouth, and then it becomes even more difficult to retain my control. I thrust three more times before I spill inside her, my entire body feeling as if it's emptying between her thighs. I don't stop pumping into her until I'm completely spent, and when I pull my cock from her body, I feel a slight sense of loss. Already I want to return.

But she sighs happily and collapses on the furs. "Oh, Aehako."

“Mmm,” I say and lie down next to her, tucking her smaller body against mine.

“It should be criminal to be as happy as I am.”

I chuckle. “Do we not deserve a bit of happiness?”

She’s thoughtful as I pull the scattered clothing over her naked body to act as a blanket. I don’t want her to get cold. “I don’t know,” Kira says after a moment. “I just worry that the other shoe is going to drop.”

“You are not wearing shoes.”

She laughs. “It’s an expression. It means things are going so well that they are going to herald something bad.”

I kiss her smooth shoulder. “You worry too much.”

Her smile is soft as she looks back at me. “Maybe I do.”

KIRA

The move to the new cave is not what I expect, I suppose. In my limited experience between dorms and my own apartment, packing to move involves boxing up everything at a furious rate, and days of unpacking and placing items in their new homes. But the sa-khui people don’t have as much junk as your average American girl does, and once it’s decided who is moving to the new caves, everyone’s packed and ready to go that afternoon.

It’s a little shocking, but also exciting.

Aehako and I are taking the painted cave. I have to admit I’m excited to have my own cave, especially one that’s already decorated and comes with a makeshift tub. Aehako loads his furs, his hunting tools, and his carving utensils, and he’s ready to go. Me,

I have even less than that. My worn leather dress, a pair of snowshoes, and my blankets. I think Aehako's mother Sevvah takes pity on me, because she fills his arms with a few baskets and utensils from her own cave, clucking over her baby bird finally leaving the nest.

Coming with us to the new cave is a mixture of old and new. Maylak and her family will be staying in the primary cave, since she is the healer. Vektal and Georgie, and all of the newly-mated couples will also be staying with them, since no one knows exactly how a sa-khui/human pregnancy is going to go. Elder Kemli and her mate Borran and their young daughter Farli will be coming with us to the new caves. The elders – all men – will be coming and split into two of the caves. Tiffany, Josie, and Claire will be joining us, along with several of the bachelor hunters who now get to split the big, roomy caves at the front of the South Cave system. There's a bit of grumbling because the South Caves are full of the single and the elderly, but Vektal wants the elders to teach the humans the way of life here, and who better to do that than someone who's already lived a hundred turns of the season and is still going strong?

The only couple coming with us that Aehako's unhappy about is Asha and her mate Hemalo. While they're a mated couple, they also don't have a small child, which means they're a natural pick to come to our cave, and all of the other caves back at the tribal complex are now back to their original uses. One of the hunter caves is now meat storage once more, and there's an empty cave that Vektal wants set aside in case Liz's pregnancy progresses faster than expected.

It's a good group heading to the South Cave, despite Asha's annoying presence. We hug all around – even though we're only a

few hours walk – and then set out. Claire's happy as could be, now that she knows Bek is also heading to the South Cave, and Tiffany's eager to learn more crafts from the elders. Josie's chattering happily to Kemli and Farli, even though neither can understand her. Haeden's coming to the new cave as well, and he looks rather irritated at Josie's talking. Part of me thinks that Josie's blabbering is good for Haeden, who's entirely too self-contained and lost in his own thoughts most of the time.

When we make it to the South Caves, people exclaim with happiness and for the next few hours, there's a lot of eager running around and exploring, checking out each other's caves, and setting up. A large fire is built in the central area, for lighting as well as to give the area a homey effect. It's nice and toasty warm for us humans, though I do notice that several of the hunters strip down due to the heat.

"Can't say that's a terrible side effect of things," Tiffany murmurs at me as I gawk at Aehako's brawny, sweaty chest as he sweeps a branch over the floor, ridding it of debris.

"No," I say, distracted as another near-naked hunter strolls past. "I can't say it is."

At that moment, Asha stomps forward and puts her hand on my mate. "I want to talk to you, Aehako. I don't like my new cave! It's too small."

Tiffany rolls her eyes. "Here we go. Princess is going to lobby for your cave, just you watch." She saunters away. And she's probably not wrong. It's clear that a long, long time as one of the few single women in the sa-khui tribe has made Asha rather spoiled and demanding. Of course, she's mated now.

Of course, I am, too. And she's touching my mate's arm and pretending to cry, and the sight of it irritates me. I watch as Aehako reaches out and pats her shoulder, trying to comfort her. "Your cave is one of the nicest. I promise."

"It's small," Asha pouts.

Oh, for Pete's sake. She doesn't have to share with anyone except her mate, which makes it twice the size it would have been if she'd had another mated couple squeezed on top of her. I sigh with irritation as she takes Aehako's hand and tries to pull him toward her new cave, as if to give him a personal tour.

Enough of that.

I step forward, approaching Aehako's back. As I do, I notice his expression changes to one of horror as he stares down at Asha.

Worried, I quicken my steps—

And hear the unthinkable.

Aehako's resonating and Asha's got her hand in his.

Shoe? Dropped.

PART SIX

KIRA

I can't breathe. My heart's pounding in my chest so hard that my blood is thumping in my ears.

Aehako just resonated for another woman. I've lost him.

The shock and grief is overwhelming. I stare at their joined hands, and look at my mate. He puts a hand on his chest, and I can hear it thrumming from over here.

He's resonating – his khui is reacting to the presence of his perfect mate.

And I'm not it. Asha is.

"I don't understand," I say. I can barely hear my own voice over the roar of blood in my ears. "Asha has a mate. You can't resonate to her."

You're mine, not hers.

It's too unfair. Aehako is the best thing that has ever happened to me and I'm going to lose him so quickly? A sob chokes my throat. My heart thumps a wild beat.

My handsome mate stares down at his chest, and then releases Asha's hand. "I'm not resonating for her." He turns to me, and his eyes seem unnaturally blue and bright.

The heartbeat in my ears pounds louder, faster. It keeps speeding up—

And then I realize what it is.

And I collapse with joy.

A moment later, Aehako's big arms go around me and he cradles me to his chest. "Kira," he murmurs, and holds my head tucked under his chin. "My Kira."

My own chest reverberates and thrums with resonance. That pounding that I was hearing? It wasn't my pulse. It was my khui, responding to his.

How is this possible?

Even as I wonder, my body changes. Intense feeling and need sweeps over me, like a full-body flush. A sexual flush. I feel my thighs press together, and the ache to be filled settles deep inside me. My nipples feel oversensitive, and my skin aches even as my khui sings a humming beat along with Aehako's.

I cling to him, torn between hope and despair. "I...don't understand."

He laughs, and the sound is full of joy and wonder all at once. His mouth presses on my forehead, and he kisses me as we sit in the midst of the cave, collapsed around each other. "What is there to understand, my mate? Your khui simply needed more convincing."

I laugh, and my laughter turns to tears. "But...I can't—"

"Perhaps you can." He strokes my hair back from my face. "The khui adapts you to live here. Perhaps it changed more in your body?"

I stare at him in wonder. Maybe it did. Maybe the khui finds the broken parts in a body and mends them. All I know is that I've always been told I could never have children. And yet here I am, resonating to the man I love.

"You are quiet," he murmurs, and his arms tighten around me. "Are you not pleased?"

I press my head to his chest, listening to the sound of his khui singing to mine. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard. "I am beyond joy. I can't even..." Hot tears well up. "I never imagined..."

More than the child, more than anything...Aehako is mine forever.

He growls low in his throat, and I feel the press of his cock against my hip. "Shall we go to our cave and please our khuis?"

I choke out a laugh, clinging to him. "Yes, please! Please!"

Aehako gets to his feet, and I immediately feel bereft – and needy – the moment I'm no longer pressing my skin to his. But then he scoops me up into his arms, and I'm filled with such utter joy once more that nothing could break my happiness.

Nothing at all.

He heads toward our new cave and calls over his shoulder, "My mate and I will be busy. Do not bother us."

I should be horrified that he's told everyone what we're doing, but I'm too happy to even care. I peek over his arm and look back at the others in the cave. Tiffany and Josie are standing together, whispering, but they have smiles on their faces. Asha looks forlorn and lost. The other hunters simply laugh and call out jibes about Aehako and his prowess.

All the while, my khui sings and sings and sings.

Aehako carries me into the cave and gently sets me down on the pile of furs that will make up our shared bed. They're still bundled into rolls for transport during the move. We've been so busy overseeing the others that we haven't had time to set up our own cave. "Wait here," he tells me, and stalks to the entrance of our private cave, propping the stretched leather privacy screen in front of

the entrance. All the while, I watch his ass flex under his loincloth, his tail flicking madly as he walks.

A tail has never been so sexy to me. But right now? It's driving me wild with need. Oh wow. I press a hand to my chest, and I can feel everything vibrating from the strength of the khui's song. It makes me want to reach out and touch Aehako...or myself. My thighs press together tightly and I fight down the very real urge to flop back onto the blankets and stroke my clit until I come. I've never been this utterly sexualized. The khui is making it impossible to think about anything but grabbing Aehako and licking him from head to toe.

So, so hard to be me. So hard. Truly.

Instead, I reach for the rolls of the furs and work on untying them. We'll need something to lie on. My fingers, however, don't seem to want to work properly. My hands are shaking and I'm distracted. All I can think about is Aehako and sex.

Boy, they were right about this khui thing. It's like someone flipped a secret switch inside me and made me into an instant nympho. It's so strange. But I'm not unhappy about it – not in the slightest. I have to fight the urge not to cry out of sheer emotion, and my fingers pick at the leather knot uselessly.

I feel – rather than see – Aehako come and sit behind me. My khui's acutely sensitive to his, and our matched purring sounds feel strange and yet so right.

His hands come up from behind me and he cups both of my breasts in his hands and kisses my neck. "My mate. Truly mine."

The emotional tears I've been fighting finally burst free. I clutch his hands against my breasts and sob.

I feel his big body stiffen. "Why do you weep, Kira?"

“I just n-never t-thought it would happen for m-me,” I babble. I’d resigned myself to being the only human amongst the others that couldn’t have a baby when having children was so vitally important to the tribe. And Aehako had wanted them. I’d never considered having one myself.

It wasn’t until now that I realize how badly I want those things. And it overwhelms me. I weep even as he shushes me and his embrace goes from sensual to supportive. He strokes my hair and murmurs as I cry against his chest. I’m not unhappy. I’m the opposite. And I have no idea why I’m so weepy, but I’m happy and so full of emotion I could burst, and I guess tears are the way it’s coming out.

“Shhh,” he tells me as he strokes my hair. “Everyone will think you are miserable at the thought of carrying my child.”

A hiccupped giggle escapes me.

“It’s true,” he murmurs, and his hand slides down my arm, gliding over my skin. “They will say she is sorry that her khui has such poor taste as to mate a clever, beautiful girl with a fool like him.”

I snort at that. No one could ever accuse Aehako of being a fool. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I am not. There are twice as many unmated males as there are the human women. Do you not think me the luckiest of males that I would resonate for you? I do.”

I sigh, my tears drying because he’s so sweet. I love this man so much. He’s always seen me, even when no one else has. My flaws have never mattered to him – my smiles are the only thing that does.

“I’m the luckiest,” I tell him softly, and brush my fingers over the line of his jaw. He’s so very handsome, my mate. I’m getting even more aroused just looking up at his big, broad face and his glowing

eyes, and the smile that curves his mouth. I lean up and kiss him, and his hands immediately tighten around my waist, holding me against him.

“Kira,” he says, and he sounds as breathless as I feel. His nose nudges mine before he takes my lower lip in his mouth and sucks on it. Oh god, he is way too good at kissing now. “When I take you this time, I will not be able to control myself. We will have long, tender nights of mating in our future. But I think now...if I do not sink inside you, I will lose my mind.” He presses his ridged forehead to my flat one and closes his eyes. A tremor rushes through him and I realize just how close he is to losing his control. Oh wow.

My response to that? I slide my hand down to the front of his breeches so I can trace the outline of his cock. His breath hisses from his lungs, and I’m practically flung off his lap in the next moment.

Giddy with need, I expect to have him tackle me. Instead, I watch as he savagely rips the cords of the blankets with his bare hands, snapping the sturdy leather like it’s nothing. He flings the blankets down onto the cave floor with unimaginable speed, and then turns to look at me, eyes blazing.

A shiver moves through me. He’s so...brutal with his need. That is so damn sexy.

Then, he reaches over to me and grabs the front of my dress, then pulls me forward for a savage kiss. Hot prickles of need skitter through me and I moan against his mouth, my hands going to his neck.

“My Kira,” he says roughly, and then pushes me onto my back, onto the furs. He jerks my skirts up around my thighs and the next

thing I know, he's face-down between my legs, his tongue seeking my clit.

A loud gasp of surprise escapes me.

He groans between my thighs, and I feel his tongue move over my sensitive flesh again. "You're so *wet*." He lifts his head and I see a feral gleam in his eyes as he licks his lips, shining with my juices.

Aehako rears back and rips at his loincloth. His cock emerges, a darker blue than the rest of him, the crown gleaming with pre-cum. I could stare at it for hours, but all I get is the briefest glimpse before he's on top of me, and his hand moves to my hair. His mouth captures mine—

And then he sinks in completely, thrusting into me in one hard movement.

My cry is swallowed by his lips and his seeking tongue. I cling to him, because, oh God, the sensation of him inside me is making my khui go into overdrive. It feels as if everything inside me is vibrating, and that only makes Aehako's cock feel that much better. I feel his spur rubbing against my clit, and my legs jerk, because I already feel like I'm about to come.

"Am I hurting you?" His voice is a gruff whisper against my jaw as he nips at my chin.

I manage a breathless shake of my head. "Feels good," I tell him. 'Good' is perhaps an understatement, but I'm not sure that my lips will form around the words 'earth shattering'.

His hips move and he pushes deep into me again. A moan escapes me, and my legs quake again. I'm going to come with just two thrusts, I know it. I raise my legs and lock them around his hips, just under his tail. Aehako growls again and thrusts once more, and I

feel my khui hit a fever pitch with its humming. All I can hear is the song between us, and then as he sinks deep into me again, stars explode behind my eyes. I come, and come, and come...and I don't stop. It feels as if I come forever when he thrusts into me with powerful, needy strokes. Then he groans my name and his body stiffens on top of me, and he comes inside me as my body clenches and quivers around him.

Aehako drops on top of me, panting. He puts his weight on his elbows so he doesn't crush me, and nuzzles me with kisses on my neck and jaw as we try to catch our breath.

When my entire body no longer feels like it's about to splinter with sheer pleasure, I sigh heavily. "Wow." I'm pretty sure the furs are shoved up under my butt. I'm also pretty sure that was probably only three minutes or so of sex. I can't even be sorry about that, because I'm pretty sure I came harder than I ever have before.

He leans on his side and presses a hand between my breasts. "Your khui is pleased."

"Is it?" I place my hand next to his. The humming has gone down a bit, but it's still going strong. Even at those small touches, my nipples harden and my legs jerk, making me acutely aware that he's still inside me...and still hard.

And I'm still aroused.

"Um," I say, and stroke a hand down his arm. "How long does resonance last?"

"Until I plant a kit inside you." He kisses my jaw. "It might take many, many days."

Dear God. I will die of pleasure overdose. What a way to go. "But I'm ovulating right now, right? That's why I resonated?"

“What is ovu-lay-“

“Never mind,” I say. That must be it. He wouldn’t be able to make me pregnant otherwise, and all the others seemed to make it through their resonance all right. Wrecked, happy, but still whole.

His hips move, and I feel his cock drag in and out of me again, the movement slow. I moan, arching up. “Oh God, are we going again?”

“We will go again many, many times,” he tells me with a nipping kiss. “And then you will carry my kit.” His hand goes to my belly. “This is mine,” he murmurs. His hand slides lower. “And this is mine,” he says, brushing a hand over where his spur grazes my clit. “Your cunt is mine and mine alone, sweet Kira.”

I moan, because it feels like I’m about to start coming again. “All yours, Aehako.”

“And then we will move back to the main cave so you can be near the healer—“

I shake my head even as he presses his thumb on the other side of my clit, sending ripples of pleasure through me. “I don’t want to.”

“No?” He sounds surprised.

“No,” I say, and I’m confident. For some reason, I trust my khui. “I won’t need the healer. Things will be fine. And this is where we’re meant to be.” I gaze up at the painted walls of my cave and feel a surge of joy. “We’re home.”

“My home is wherever you are,” Aehako tells me.

I touch his face gently. “I feel the same way.”

Note to Readers

Dear Readers,

Thank goodness for self-publishing!

I have wanted to write science fiction romance for the longest time. It's a genre I adore, but I write for New York under another name, and contracts tend to keep me busy. Still, back in 2010 or so, I started a manuscript called 'The Symbiont' about a race of people that had crash-landed on a planet and had to have a native parasite to live. It sounds terribly romantic, right? Nothing says sexy quite like a parasite. The book never really got off the ground, because I had to keep putting it aside. In between contracts, however, I kept returning to the story and poking at it, hoping for a miracle.

Then, earlier this year, I felt burned out by writing. It was a job, and one that I love, but my creative fuel gauge was on 'empty'. A friend dared me to write something new and exciting just for myself. All right, then. I immediately picked up my symbiont story. I'd left off with my heroine Georgie deciding to stage a break-out from the alien ship. I made it crash, I introduced Vektal, and I fell in love with the story – and writing – all over again.

And I discovered that I love my big blue aliens.

Ice Planet Barbarians was an utter labor of love from start to finish. I was sure that it was weird and out of the box, but it was the kind of story I'd been wanting to read – and write – for so long that I loved every moment of it. I'd also wanted to try a serial, and this seemed like the perfect opportunity. It was a creative stretching of the mind,

and I was shocked (and pleased!) when it took off. I didn't expect to write a sequel.

Well, that's not entirely true. I already had Raahosh and Liz paired up in my mind, along with Aehako and Kira, but as a writer, you hope for the best and prepare for the worst. I've killed a series mid-stream before, and it hurts, so I prepared myself for this to fail. If it was one book, it'd just be one book. Reviewers asked if there would be a series, and I answered honestly: only if there was demand for it.

But there's been demand! In fact, the demand has been so incredibly exciting. So exciting that I jumped right into book two, and then into book three between my contracted obligations. My schedule for the latter half of the year is filling up rapidly, but I'm hoping to publish book four, BARBARIAN MINE, before Christmas. Hopefully earlier! I know it's not super speedy, but I want to deliver a good story. If it takes a bit longer...then I'll just have to figure out how to write faster.

A note about borrows: I'm really sorry that the books are no longer available for borrows. I really had fun with the serial format, and I liked the idea of readers borrowing each portion every week to see the new adventures. But once KU changed the payout, it no longer became financially smart for me (no matter how much I love writing the books) to continue forward with their program. So I've made the books available everywhere, and going forward, I anticipate continuing that. In addition, I don't feel that the serial format works when it forces readers to pay \$6 for the full book instead of the regular price, so I'm going to just do complete novels from now on and I'm taking down the individual portions.

I did the serial format as a way to stretch my wings, but it's clear that readers just want a fun story. So on we go! That's the great thing about self publishing – if it's not working, you can change it.

The next book I am calling BARBARIAN MINE (at least in my head) and will be about Harlow and her mysterious captor. I hope you're excited to read about them! We'll also see more about the pregnancies, the human women, and how everyone's settling into their new lives. There's been a lot of chatter about the babies and I LOVE the feedback. If you want to see a particular story piece hit on, don't be afraid to speak up! Your feedback is invaluable to me as an author.

Lastly, if you enjoy the books, please, please leave a review. Tell me what you think and who you're hoping to see in future books. Tell me if you want more about Georgie and Vektal or if you want stories about new characters only! I want to know your thoughts and leaving reviews helps me as an author in so many ways.

I sincerely hope you enjoyed Kira and Aehako's story, and I'm so happy to be writing more blue balls and cooties. Onward!

— Roo

Ice Planet Barbarians

Ice Planet Barbarians, Book 1

You'd think being abducted by aliens would be the worst thing that could happen to me. And you'd be wrong. Because now, the aliens are having ship trouble, and they've left their cargo of human women – including me – on an ice planet.

And the only native inhabitant I've met? He's big, horned, blue, and really, really has a thing for me...

Part One GEORGIE

Up until yesterday, I, Georgie Carruthers, never believed in aliens. Oh, sure, there were all kinds of possibilities out there in the universe, but if someone would have told me that little green men were hanging around Earth in flying saucers, just waiting to abduct people? I would have told them they were crazy.

But that was yesterday.

Today? Today's a very different sort of story.

I suppose it all started last night. It was pretty ordinary, overall. I came home after a long day of working the drive-thru teller window at the bank, nuked a Lean Cuisine, ate it while watching TV, and dozed off on the couch before stumbling to bed. Not exactly the life

of the party, but hey. It was a Tuesday, and Tuesdays were all work, no play. I went to sleep, and from there, shit got weird.

My dreams were messed up. Not the usual losing teeth or naked in front of the class dreams. These were far more sinister. Dreams of loss and abandonment. Dreams of pain and cold white rooms. Dreams of walking in a tunnel and seeing an oncoming train. In that dream, I tried to lift my hand to shield me from the light.

Except when I went to raise my hand, I couldn't.

That had woken me up from my slumber. I squinted into the tiny light someone was shining in my eyes. Someone was . . . shining something in my eyes? I blinked, trying to focus, and realized that I wasn't dreaming at all. I wasn't home, either. I was . . . somewhere new.

Then the light clicked off and a bird chirped. I squinted, my eyes adjusting to the darkness, and I found myself surrounded by . . . things. Things with long black eyes and big heads and skinny pale arms. Little green men.

I'd screamed. I'd screamed bloody murder, actually.

One of the aliens tilted its head at me, and the bird chirping sound happened again, even though his mouth didn't move. Something hot and dry wrapped over my mouth, choking me, and a noxious scent filled my nostrils. Oh shit. Was I going to die? Frantically, I worked my jaw, trying to breathe even as the world got dark around me.

Then, I went back to sleep, dreaming of work. I always dreamed of work when I was stressed. For hours on end, angry banking clients yelled at me as I kept trying to tear open packs of twenties that wouldn't seem to come open. I'd try to count out change only to get

distracted. Work dreams are the worst, usually, but this one was a relief. No trains. No aliens. Just banking. I could deal with banking.

And that brings me to . . . here.

I'm awake. Awake and not entirely sure where I am. My eyes slide open, and I gaze around me. It smells like I'm in a sewer, I can feel a wall behind me, and my body hurts all freaking over. My head feels blurry and slow, like all of me hasn't quite woken up yet. My limbs feel heavy. Drugged, I realize. Someone's drugged me.

Not someone. Something.

My breath quickens as a mental image of the dark-eyed aliens returns, and I look for them. Wherever I'm at, I'm alone.

Thank God.

[Ice Planet Barbarians](#) is available now!

Barbarian Alien

Ice Planet Barbarians, Book 2

Twelve humans are left stranded on a wintry alien planet. I'm one of them. Yay, me.

In order to survive, we have to take on a symbiont that wants to rewire our bodies to live in this brutal place. I like to call it a cootie. And my cootie's a jerk, because it also thinks I'm the mate to the biggest, surliest alien of the group.

BARBARIAN ALIEN is a sequel to ICE PLANET BARBARIANS. You do not have to read both in order to understand the plot, but the story will be richer if you do!

Part One

LIZ

Kira and I watch as Megan and Georgie run their fingers along the panel of the alien ship's hull, trying to figure out how to pry it open and get out the girls enclosed inside. There are six capsules, and each one has another captive girl. Each girl inside has no idea of where she is or how she got here.

"I can't decide if they're the lucky ones or the unlucky ones," I tell Kira.

"Lucky," she says, her soft voice flat. Her gaze is fixed to the blinking lights and the dark wall of the hull. "They don't know what we've gone through for the last few weeks."

I grunt a maybe sort of agreement. I don't know that I agree with Kira, but she can be a real Debbie downer at times. The last few weeks haven't exactly been a party for the rest of us, but maybe it's better to know everything than to be blind to it.

I guess.

Kira and I are watching the others work because we're too weak to actually help. Of the six of us, Georgie is the strongest still. She's been with the alien guy so she's been getting three squares a day and warm clothing. The rest of us have been stuck in the hull, and Megan is doing the best out of our small group. I'm weak and lethargic, and my toes hurt like mad. Josie has a leg that looks like it's broken in two spots, and no one knows how to fix it. Kira's ankle is swollen and she's super weak. Tiffany is possibly dying, since we

can't wake her up out of the deep sleep she's in. She roused for a bit of broth and then fell unconscious again.

We don't need a warning from the aliens that this planet is killing us. Big duh there.

"It's opening," Megan says, and she and Georgie step back. The panel lifts from the wall with a hiss, just like in the sci fi movies. Inside is a girl in a t-shirt and panties, weird coils wrapped around her body and feeding into her throat.

I shiver despite myself.

Georgie and Megan study the sleeping girl, trying to figure out the best way to free her. Eventually, they just start ripping tubes and cords off of her and she wakes up and begins to gag. A moment later, the new girl is collapsed on the floor and vomiting up the last of the tubes as Megan strokes her back.

Well, that did it. For better or for worse, we have another person.

The girl begins to sob, her eyes wide. She's clearly confused and frightened, and Kira stands up, opening her arms to pull the girl to her. She makes quiet, soothing noises and enfolds the girl in a hug, helping her away from the wall. Without a single person touching them, the rest of the pods suddenly open.

"Shit, I think we triggered something," Georgie says, and they get to work freeing the next girl. In moments, there are several more girls collapsing on the floor. I get to my feet as best I can, ready to help out.

I limp forward, and as I do, I hear the sounds of the aliens talking. I look over even as the girl nearest to me begins to hysterically wail. "What's happening? Where am I? Who are you?"

I offer her my hand. "I'm Liz and I'll explain when we get the others, okay?"

She keeps wailing and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from shouting at her. Look, I feel like shit and am probably a few steps behind Tiffany on the death ladder, but am I squealing and moaning? No, no I am not. I am sucking it the fuck up.

I gather up a second new girl, this one with freckles and bright red hair, and as I do, Squealer starts to make horrified, choking cries. "Oh my God, what is that?" She points a trembling hand in the distance, and I slap it down.

[Barbarian Alien](#) is available now

The Ujal Volume One

Celia Kyle

The first three books in the bestselling Ujal series at one low price!

Vados – A human woman, a tail-sporting alien, and a deadly hurricane... of course they're going to hook up! Or rather, they did hook up. But that was then. This is now.

Tave – Rina Zeret is not prepared to settle down. Unfortunately, her mother has other ideas and submits Rina's biological material to the Population Ministry to see if they can find a genetic match for her. Suddenly Rina is presented with Tave fa V'yl, Crown Prince of Ujal, High Warrior of the Ruling Caste and Earth's greatest ally.

Rhal – Sometimes a lie is the only way to get to the truth. Rhal fa Adar—Ujal assassin—is a liar and Cara is more than ready to beat the truth out of him. She knows she wants Rhal fa Adar—with his thick muscles, midnight black scales, and dark eyes. But he always keeps her at arm's length, sharing pleasure and nothing more. He wants her but refuses to mate her. When she discovers the reasons he told her are lies, she takes her battered heart to the Intergalactic Mating Agency. But what if all she can imagine is a future with Rhal?

[The Ujal Volume One](#) by Celia Kyle is available now!

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BARBARIAN LOVER

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