



THE  
*BRIDE*  
PROGRAM

DANE GRIGGS

THE BRIDE  
PROGRAM  
*Saving Ceraste Book 1*

Dane Griggs

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*To my awesome husband who suggested I might enjoy writing smut as much as I enjoy reading it. I love you.*

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# CHAPTER ONE

## *Maya*

My mother and I are slumped together on our old couch, relaxing after a long day. I absently rub my fingers over a threadbare patch on the armrest. We should start dinner soon, but I'm feeling lazy. Maybe I can talk mom into getting take out.

Tasha, my little sister, is napping in her bedroom.

Mom is channel surfing. You would think it is a competitive sport the way she's flicking through channels. How can she even tell what she is looking at?

"Okay. Give me that thing. You're going to sprain your thumb," I tease my mom.

Mom pauses, gives me her signature side-eye, and finally passes me the remote. It is on the news. Ugh. No thanks. I am just about to switch the channel to something lighthearted when suddenly my hand freezes.

**"Breaking News: Aliens Exist" flashes across the screen.**

The overly-coiffed news anchor goes silent, breaking his Ken-doll perfection. He looks somewhere offstage and eventually nods slowly.

"This just in: Aliens are real. We now know for certain that humans are not alone in the universe."

WTF? I glance down at my phone. Nope, not April Fools day. I look at my mom. I can see she is in skeptic-mode too.

The anchor continues, "Details are just now emerging that aliens have been in contact with the world governments for the last several months. The aliens call themselves Cerasteans."

Holy shit. This is real.

Mom and I lean toward the television in unison.

“Apparently, the Cerasteans escaped their dying homeworld and have been searching the galaxy for a habitable planet. Their fleet is currently in orbit behind the moon, where it has been for the last several months. The aliens are offering to help humanity. As a show of good faith, they are offering a cure for... One second,” Anchor-bot pauses. “We have just learned that the President and the Cerastean leader are about to address the nation. We take you there live now.”

“The President. Ugh, I cannot stand that man,” says mom.

“Mom, please don’t get started again.” I guess aliens don’t change everything.

“I know. He’s just so—”

The screen adjusts to the President at a podium, but what has my attention is the alien standing next to him. He towers over everyone around him. He has hair so white it almost looks silver. He has a small horn rising above each temple, nestled in his hairline. I cannot look away from his eyes. They are an almost golden color with slit pupils. The President is talking, but I can’t comprehend a word.

“Whoa, I don’t know why I assumed they would be little green men.”

“He’s kind of hot,” says mom.

“Mom!”

“What? Look at him. He kind of looks like that blonde elf from that movie you like so much. And look at his eyes, like a snake. A hot snake,” says mom.

“Mom! You are so—”

I hold my breath as the alien steps to the podium.

“Good evening people of earth. I am Chancellor L’Forn, leader of the Cerastean people. We come to you looking to build a relationship of peace.

“Our homeworld was destroyed. The men of our starship fleet are our species last known survivors.

“Our vessels have been searching the galaxy looking for habitable planets. Your planet earth and your human species are the first we have found that are compatible,” says L’Forn

“I like him. He got right to the point, unlike that windbag of a President,” says mom.

“Mom! Oh my gosh! Let it go!”

L’Forn continues, “We have much to offer the human race. We have come to learn that your species has yet to cure lymphoma, leukemia and other forms of cancer. We offer you this cure. We will share our knowledge of intergalactic space travel and our advanced technology.

“After months of meetings with the governments of your world, we have come to an agreement to share all of this with your people in exchange for sharing your world.

“We are looking for volunteers of all kinds to help with the knowledge and cultural transfer between our two peoples. We need skilled doctors, scientists, engineers, and builders. But what we need more...”

He pauses and looks a bit grim.

“All of our women and the ruling class of our people were killed when our planet was destroyed. The male scientists and warriors onboard our fleet are all that remain of the Cerasteans. Until we found your world we believed we would be the last generation, that our people would perish. Finding earth and the women of your planet has renewed hope in the survival of our species.

“As part of our agreement, the governments of your world have joined together to create the Bride Program. We are seeking human volunteers willing to marry and have offspring with our species. We realize this is an unusual request. But be assured that any woman who volunteers for this program will be treated well and cherished. Volunteers will be allowed to pick a male of their choosing. And they can leave the program at any time,” L’Forn states in a deferential tone.

I look over at mom. As she looks at me, I can see tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. She is an older version of myself with her long light brown hair, hazel eyes, and freckled cheeks.

My sister Tasha is only 12 years old. She was a complete surprise for my parents. Tasha has filled our lives with extreme happiness and our hearts with wrenching grief.



Doctors diagnosed Tasha with chronic leukemia, a type of cancer that impaired her body's ability to make healthy blood cells when she was only seven years old. It is in her bone marrow. We have been fighting ever since that day, but we all know that leukemia is going to win.

Tasha is such a brave soul. But leukemia is cruel, extracting life from her body day by day.

I had to drop out of college early to help with the medical bills and to help take care of my little sister. I work as a medical transcriptionist. It's not as dull as it sounds. I interpret and transcribe dictations given by physicians and other healthcare professionals, mostly regarding patient assessment and diagnosis. Then present them in a document form. Okay, it is as dull as it sounds, but it's a job that I can do from home. This meant I could always be around to help with Tasha.

I snap back to the television.

L'Forn continues, "As this ensures the future of our species, the success of this program is our top concern. If it succeeds, we will help cure many of the diseases and issues plaguing the people of earth. I believe that in time humans and Cerasteans will become great allies and make your world even more extraordinary than it is now. Thank you."

I tune out as the President strides back up to the podium and reporters begin shouting the thousands of questions on everyone's mind.

"Mom, I'm volunteering. If I volunteer, I can try to get them to cure Tasha. I have to do this. It is a chance to save Tasha."

"Mi-mi, you don't have to do this. Maybe they will get enough volunteers without you. I don't want to lose you," says mom.

"Mom, there is nothing I wouldn't do to save Tasha. Nothing any of us wouldn't do to save her. I love Tasha, you and Dad. It's going to be okay. Let's at least see if we can find more information," I say.

We continue to debate for what feels like hours until mom finally gives in. She knows that once my mind is set no one can change it.

"Okay, okay. You're right. Now we have to figure out how you are going to tell your father," says mom.

My night goes exactly as I expect, filled with bellowing and huffing and puffing from my dad. But I say the same thing to him that I told mom.

“What wouldn’t you do to save Tasha? Plus, I can leave at any time if it’s not working out.”

It is hard to watch my bulldog of a father trying to hold it together.

“I don’t want to lose you,” Dad says.

“Dad you aren’t losing me. I will find a way to keep in touch. I know that it is going to be okay.”



Later that night, I sit beside Tasha’s bed looking at her sweet face.

She looks like she is sleeping, but opens her eyes and looks at me.

“Mi-mi, are you really leaving? I heard Dad yelling.”

When Tasha was little she struggled to say my name Maya, I have been called Mi-mi ever since. It is a nickname I cherish because it came from Tasha.

“Yes. There is a chance we can cure your leukemia if I go. Plus it’s going to be an adventure. I get to go on an alien spaceship and meet real-life aliens.”

“Maybe they have lightsabers,” says Tasha.

We debate what kinds of technology they might have. Tasha has somehow succeeded in getting me to promise I will smuggle her a tricorder.

After everyone has gone to bed, I log on to my work computer to search for more details. I soon find the online application to volunteer for the program. The form doesn’t take long. It has an essay section asking me to describe why I am joining the program. So I submit all the details about Tasha and her sickness.

*“Tasha is suffering from stage IV leukemia where her lymph nodes, spleen, and liver are swollen. The lack of platelets in her blood is causing anemia. Her condition is getting worse day by day despite the regular treatments which are both expensive and painful.”*

When I wake up the next day, I see I have received an email from the authorities. They are checking my application and will soon inform me if I have been accepted into the program.

When I head downstairs, I see that mom is stress cooking. Stacks of pancakes, bacon, scrambled eggs and more litter the counter.

“Good morning Mom,” I say.

“Good morning sweetheart.”

“Where is everybody?” I ask out of habit.

“Your dad is with Tasha because I wanted to talk to you. I have been thinking a lot about what you said yesterday. I don’t like this one little bit. It might seem like the only way to save Tasha, but I can’t ask you to sacrifice yourself like this. Let other people volunteer to be brides and join the alien sausage party. We need you here,” says mom with a deep frown.

“Okay, first of all, please don’t ever use the term ‘sausage party’ again. And secondly, Mom, my mind is already made up. This might be the only chance we have. And I will be on a spaceship! With aliens!! I will convince them to cure her. Besides, if it doesn’t work out, I can leave at any time. I am doing this. And I really don’t want to spend the time we have before I leave fighting.”

“Mi-mi, I am so proud of you. But I am so scared for you,” mom says while hugging me.

Later that evening, as I’m finishing my work, I receive an email stating that the authorities have approved my application.

“Oh shit. Oh shit. This is really happening.”

I have three days to prepare. Then I will be picked up by a government vehicle and taken to an undisclosed location to be interviewed and undergo a medical examination.

Those three days are a blur of packing, taking a leave of absence from my job and spending time with family. Mom has done so much baking; I have no idea how they will ever eat it all.

I can only take two bags, and it is difficult to figure out what I might need. I spend my time trying to ignore my fears, vowing to approach this with optimism. I have a feeling that the aliens didn’t *have* to ask for volunteers. They could have taken what they wanted, and humans would have been powerless to stop them. I decide that this is a sign they are the good guys.

I spend the morning with one eye looking out the front window waiting for the government officials to pull up to the house. When a big black SUV turns into our driveway, I'm still somehow caught off-guard and freeze for a moment.

As I watch two men in black suits exit the vehicle and begin to approach the front of the house, I turn and sprint for Tasha's room. I have to make sure I see her one more time. When I get to her bedroom, she is awake and looking very weak. Her eyes have dark circles, but she still has a big grin for me.

"Whatever happens Tasha, remember that I love you." I give her as big a hug as I can.

"Don't forget to bring me back a tricorder. Oh! And a phaser if you can," Tasha says.

I don't have the heart to tell Tasha that I am not sure if or when I can come back, so instead I vow that I will bring her as much alien tech as I can get my hands on. I feel like a jerk possibly lying to her, but I don't want her to feel guilty that I made this choice.

As I hug my weeping parents, while the two men wait impatiently, I can't keep the voices in my head quiet. They are screaming that I am making a mistake. That I am a fool.

I look up at the window to my sister's room and deliberately silence the frenzied voices. I give my parents one last squeeze and move toward the SUV.

"Wait, honey!" yells my mom, "I packed you a lunch."

# CHAPTER TWO

## *Maya*

First, they take me to a medical facility where they run a battery of tests to make sure I am medically fit. And fertile. Which shouldn't be a surprise, but catches me off-guard.

After I get cleared medically, a lab technician leads me to a small waiting room to await my interview. There are a few women scattered around the room. Right away I lock eyes with a red-headed woman who looks a few years older than my 23 years. She waves me over to join her. She introduces herself as Laney. I immediately get the sense that I will like her.

She is tall, red-headed and covered in freckles. Laney has the most fantastic eyebrows. Sharp-edged curved eyebrows with a perfect arch. I want to hate her on principle, but she is so sweet and likable it's not possible.

We exchange backstories, and Laney holds my hand as I talk about Tasha. Laney explains that a few years ago her fiance had cheated on her and since then she has had nothing but terrible dating experiences.

"I figured after the last date I had; aliens just had to be better than human men!"

"What was so bad about your last date?" I ask.

"He showed up drunk to the restaurant. He tried to tell me what to order. Then proceeded to explain that he was still married, but that his wife was 'flexible.' I noped right out of there!"

I can't help but laugh at her animated recounting of what sounds like the world's worst date. We spend the next thirty minutes talking and watching

as different girls are ushered in and out of their interviews. Laney continues to regale me with tales of her dating woes.

When they call Laney to her interview my nerves start to build. But I don't have long to wait before they call me in as well.

They lead me to a bland room with just two chairs and a table. There is a severe-looking older woman with her gray hair pulled back into a tight bun sitting at the table reading through a file. She looks up at me and asks me to take a seat. We verify my application information, and she asks me why I am joining the program. I talk about Tasha and my desire to get her healed. All the while I keep looking over at what I suspect is a two-way mirror. It is distracting because I keep wondering if there are Cerasteans on the other side of the glass.

Once the interview is over, they take me to a different waiting room. I look around for Laney, but I do not see her. The seats soon fill up with about thirty women. Then I finally spot Laney come in.

The severe woman enters and stands in the front of the room.

“Congratulations ladies. You are all accepted into the Cerastean Bride Program. My assistant will hand out program guides for you to review on your way to the spaceship. Your bags have already been taken care of.”

There is a collective intake of breath as shock hits the room. It suddenly feels very, very real.

They hand me a rather thick packet. Butterflies have apparently taken up residency in my stomach and are making a valiant effort to escape up to my throat.

The girl next to me, a seemingly quiet and shy woman, looks at the packet and then at me.

“How long have they been planning this? It's a freaking book!”

Soon we are herded out of the room and toward what I can only describe as what it is, a spaceship. A real friggin' spaceship. It is sleek and mostly silver with an oval squished-teardrop shape.

Laney catches up to me as we both stare at the ship in awe.

“A spaceship. A real, actual fucking spaceship,” whispers Laney mirroring my thoughts.

Standing on either side of the ramp are two Cerasteans. I think everyone is in shock seeing a real-life alien in person for the first time. I knew they were large, but I am almost overwhelmed by their size. The one closest to me is large, but the second Cerastean is absolutely ginormous.

The smaller Cerastean steps forward while we stand there stunned, frozen on the tarmac. I can hear someone chanting ‘Oh shit’ over and over again nearby.

“Welcome human females. I am L’Tarne, and this is my co-pilot D’Rett. Please come aboard, get buckled in, and we will take you to the main ship.”

L’Tarne speaking breaks the spell that had us all glued in place. We start to walk up the ramp and enter the ship. As I pass by the other pilot, D’Rett, he nods to each of us and gives us a small smile. Walking past him, I realize that he has to be more than a foot taller than my 5’8” height.

As we get settled and buckle into our seats, L’Tarne tells us to look through our packets and let him know if we have any questions.

L’Tarne walks up and down the aisle checking to make sure our safety harnesses are properly buckled. As he walks by, I watch him roll up his sleeves, and I see that his skin is scaled with a tan and brown diamond pattern. It reminds me of a desert snake I once saw on an Animal Planet documentary.

The ship takes off with a small jolt, and then pressure pushes me into my seat. I watch the earth get smaller and smaller through the windows. It is just like a movie. I don’t want to look away, but decide I should probably flip through the packet.

I find out the aliens come from a desert planet called Ceraste—guess there should be no surprise there. The Cerasteans have a caste system made up of Warriors and Scientists. They used to have other castes, but most were wiped out with the death of their people. All members of the Warrior caste have a name that starts with D’. They are naturally larger than other castes and have a protective nature. The Scientists’ names all start with L’. They are smaller, cerebral and analytical. The two castes get along well, but Scientists are the highest caste now that the Ruling caste has been destroyed.

L'Tarne asks us if we have any questions so far. The women begin to pepper him with questions.

“What happened to your planet?”

“Why weren't any of your women on the ships with you?”

“Are we going to live on a spaceship?”

“Our fleet was on a long-term exploration mission when we received an urgent alert from our home planet. By the time we got back, everyone was dead. We could not risk landing in case what killed our people was contagious. The probes we sent to Ceraste could not determine why everyone died. We have since been exploring the galaxy looking for answers and a new place to settle. We have also been looking for compatible females,” he explains.

L'Tarne tells us how their females were delicate creatures that could not physically handle long-term space flight, so none had been on the fleet mission. The Cerastean females were smaller than the average human woman but were quite fierce, with fangs that could inject venom. L'Tarne spends time describing his planet and people. D'Rett occasionally adds a comment in his deep rumbling voice. They seem like genuinely nice guys, and I can tell most of the women onboard are feeling a little bit of relief. L'Tarne has an infectious grin and a relaxed demeanor. While D'Rett appears quieter and more reserved. They work seamlessly together as they fly the transport ship and interact with us.

Suddenly I hear a loud gasp. I look to my left and see a vast, sleek, silver and black spaceship. It has a rounded top with gently sloping wings. Its shape reminds me of a stingray. We circle to the front of the ship and start to head toward a sizeable glowing opening.

“It kind of looks like a flared cobra head looking down at the earth. Don't you think? And we're heading right into its mouth!” exclaims Laney.

We gently land inside a huge echoing hangar filled with an assortment of small ships. As I exit down the ramp with the rest of the women, I realize it is also filled with Cerasteans. And they are all staring at us, each one as still as a statue.

“Get back to work!” bellows D'Rett. The Cerasteans turn back to their work, but I can see them casting furtive glances our way. As I look around,



I can't get over the sheer size of the ship. Everything is gleaming and futuristic to my eyes. Tasha would love this.

L'Tarne leads us across the hangar toward a hallway. Standing by the entrance is a human woman and an absolutely huge Cerastean. As I lock eyes with him, I feel a jolt run through me. I cannot look away from his mesmerizing gaze. His stare has me hypnotized.

"Hello, my name is Rosie Simson. I will be your human liaison on the ship. If you need anything, let me know," the woman says, "Please follow me as we escort you to orientation and then your dorm rooms."

I had hardly noticed the woman until she spoke and broke my attention away from the Cerastean. She is wearing a crisp gray suit with a peach scarf that compliments her ebony skin. She practically oozes competence. She's making me regret my choice of comfy jeans.

We are taken to a conference room. Laney grabs my arm and leads me to some empty seats at one of the tables. I notice a Cerastean standing at a podium. He is the smallest Cerastean I have seen yet, but he is still much larger than the average human man. As he clears his throat the whispers around the room quiet. He introduces himself as Director L'Corte, head of the Bride Program. He starts telling us about what to expect on the ship. I should be paying better attention, but I can't stop stealing glances at the enormous Cerastean standing near the door to the conference room.

"Are you okay?" whispers Laney.

"Yeah, sorry. Just distracted," I say.

"It looks like the man-shaped tank over there has all your attention," Laney teases me.

"I am not sure if 'man' is the right term, but definitely a tank," I whisper back.

# CHAPTER THREE

## *D'Avii*

As I watch the transport ship land in the docking bay, I look around with some amusement. There are many more Cerasteans working in the bay compared to usual. Not that I can blame them for wanting to see the first group of bride volunteers. These human females are the saviors of our species. Before we came upon Earth, we had started to give up hope that we would have another generation.

Most Cerasteans are fascinated with humans, including myself. Although humans have the same shape as Cerasteans and are sexually compatible, they seem so very different. Humans fill their world with art, humor, family and entertainment. We have only focused on duty and survival for so long that observing earth has reignited our desire to enjoy our existence. We have explored many worlds and met several other alien species, but most were undeveloped and wild creatures. Only a very few were sentient, and none were quite like humans. Humans have high resilience and endurance, even the females. They can withstand a vast range of temperatures and environmental conditions, they will eat almost anything, and are the only creatures we have found whose family structure comes even close to resembling the Cerastean family bond. Although I have heard that the females cannot form a mate bond like a Cerastean, the reports on a few initial matings have been hopeful.

I look over at Human Liaison Simson. She is quietly composed and standing with complete stillness. I covertly taste the air to examine what she is feeling, but apparently she has excellent instinctual control over her emotions. I have been told most humans broadcast their feelings loudly. It will be interesting to see if this rumor is true.

I see that while I was lost in my thoughts, the ramp lowered and the females started to emerge from the transport.

I have seen many pictures of humans and have been studying much of their literature and entertainment media. But it is a shock to see such a variety of skin and hair colors. They look like a flock of exotic birds clumped tightly together. Cerasteans only come in shades of tan and brown with minimal variation. We evolved to be top predators on our desert planet and to blend seamlessly into the arid environment of Ceraste.

The females pause and cling more tightly together when they collectively spot all of the Cerastean males avidly watching them from around the cargo bay. I don't even need to taste the air to sense their trepidation.

As Scout D'Rett barks at the males to get back to work, I can see that he is already very protective of the bride volunteers. The females shift closer to pilots D'Rett & L'Tarne. It is clear they feel safe with the males. I imagine that those two will be hounded with questions from the other males wanting to find out how they managed to gain the females' trust so quickly.

The females smell sweet, and there are so many varying scents at once, it almost overwhelms my senses. I thought all the females would smell like Liaison Simson, a delicate spice. But each one is unique, some unlike anything I have sensed before. Even the acrid odor of anxiety and fear is drowned out by their exotic floral fragrance.

As I try to gain my composure, I notice one female in particular. While most of the volunteers are clinging to one another and cowering slightly, she is looking around in wonder and astonishment. Her bravery in the face of the unknown has me mesmerized. I cannot look away. She is taller than many of the other females. Her light-brown hair cascades in gentle waves around her shoulders. She is wearing a bright red shirt, a color that reminds me of the *perfere*—a desert invertebrate whose striking coloration warns of its danger. The thought amuses me as she may indeed be very dangerous to me. All the Cerasteans are aware that the bride volunteers will pick males from the Scientist caste first, so this female is not for me. I ache a little at the loss of something I never even had.

The female looks down from admiring a scout ship and looks directly at me. As we lock eyes the female's steps stutter to a stop. I feel electrified from the top of my head to my feet. My ears are buzzing, and my world has narrowed to just a pair of hazel eyes with strangely round pupils. A woman with a red mane tugs her forward, and the group of volunteers shuffles to a stop in front of Liaison Simson. The female turns her attention to Rosie as she begins her introduction. I continue to watch and soak in her reactions to her new surroundings.

As we turn to escort the volunteers to the conference room, I can feel her walking behind me. I am tasting the air trying to discern her from the other women. I am trying to be discreet because I have been told that many humans react poorly when they witness Cerasteans collecting odors with our forked tongues. Apparently, humans use only their noses to detect smells. This means the humans' sense of smell is dull compared to Cerasteans who collect scents, pheromones, and chemicals with our tongues; and use the receptors in the roof of our mouths to process all the information from the air around us.

Finally the female's scent comes to me, the light floral and citrus fragrance brings memories of moonflowers on a warm Ceraste night.

Once I finish escorting the volunteers to the conference room I am free to go, but I find myself lingering. I tell myself that I will stay to make sure the volunteers don't need any assistance during orientation. Then I convince myself that I just need to make sure they arrive at their dorm rooms safely. I know that I am lying to myself, but I am reluctant to leave her presence yet. So I lean against the wall at the side of the conference room, pretending to pay attention to Director L'Corte while soaking in her scent.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## *Maya*

As L'Corte drones on I silently berate myself for not paying attention, but I just can't seem to focus. I promise myself that I will dutifully read the pamphlet later tonight. Thankfully, L'Corte finishes his speech and Rosie steps up again. She explains that we will be placed in dorm rooms that have five bedrooms each and share one bathroom. There is a small groan around the room as we process the bathroom to roommate ratio. Our roommates will be the five people seated at each table together. My relief at having Laney as one of my roommates is palpable. We clasp hands and do a little squeal of delight. For the first time, I look at the other three ladies sharing the table with us. One was the quiet woman with brown hair from the transport ship. The woman on the far side of the table has blonde hair cut in a short bob and is wearing thick horn-rimmed glasses. The other is a gorgeous Asian woman with long, straight, black hair who is getting around on 4-inch heels like it is nothing. I would have already fallen on my face.

After a round of introductions, we learn the quiet one is Sara. The blonde with the glasses is Ally. Trinh is rocking the stilettos.

Rosie leads us down a short hallway. She shows us a gleaming white & gray room with one huge counter in the middle. She tells us that it is the kitchen. It doesn't look like any kitchen I've ever seen. Where is the stove? And the dishes? I don't even see a microwave! I picture my mom in this kitchen and have to giggle to myself. Next Rosie takes us to a lounge area with several couches and chairs scattered about and tells us we can access earth movies & shows here.

As Rosie gives us a tour of the area, we occasionally happen upon Cerasteans. Each time we pass one he just stops and watches us. They

freeze so completely and are so silent I would think they are statues if it wasn't for their slow even blinking. As we walk, I keep covertly checking behind me to see if the Cerastean I have mentally dubbed Tank is trailing behind us.

The dorm rooms are in a hallway that branches off from the lounge. Our luggage is just off to the side of the entrance, waiting for us to take our stuff to our new rooms. My group picks the second room on the left. As I enter our room, I look back and catch a fleeting glance of Tank walking away. The main room is a small oval lounge with bedroom doors skirting around the edge. The door to the bathroom is across the living room from the entrance. The dorm is a continuation of the sleek modern look of the rest of the ship. We each pick one of the identical bedrooms. I explore my room for a few minutes but other than a lovely soft bed and a shiny dresser there isn't anything else to look at. So I head back out to the lounge. I really don't want to be alone.

When I enter the main room, I see the other women likely feel the same as they are already there. We exchange backstories. Ally wanted to join the astronaut program as a pilot, but her eyesight was too weak. She says she has a degree in aeronautical engineering. Ally seems like a genius to me. Sara is still very quiet and just says she joined the program to start a new life. She is so good at deflecting attention from herself; I almost don't notice that she turned everyone's focus to Laney so easily. Laney is busy cracking everyone up with more tales of her dating disasters. How can one woman have gone on so many awful dates?

Trinh tells us that she had stage four pancreatic cancer and joined the program in the hopes that the Cerasteans could save her life. I sit up so fast I probably look like a prairie dog.

"Did it work? Were they able to cure you? I joined the program because my little sister has leukemia and I want her to get cured," I ask, my intensity unnerving. I cannot help myself. I need to know if Tasha can be cured.

Trinh tells us that the Cerasteans did cure her cancer. She was put into a sealed healing bed a couple of times, and the disease slowly disappeared without any discomfort. Ally asks what technology the healing pod used to

eradicate the cancer cells. She starts talking about sound waves and nanobots before she realizes we are just staring at her blankly.

“All I remember is I would get in the pod. There would be a mist and the next thing I knew I was waking up. I don’t know what the pod did while I was unconscious. Frankly, it was a last ditch effort to survive. I didn’t ask a lot of questions,” says Trinh. Trinh tells us how she is still recovering physically from both the cancer and the aggressive chemotherapy she had been on before she volunteered for the Bride Program.

“I wonder if I can get them to help Tasha right away?” I ask.

“Why don’t we go talk to Rosie and see if she can help?” suggests Sara.

We head over to the office that Rosie pointed out was hers, but she is not there.

“I wish they had personal communicators like they do on Star Trek so we could buzz her,” I state.

Ally perks up. “Do you think they have those?”

Trinh suggests we look around the ship to see if we can find Rosie. I think she is just eager to get out and explore. She told us how she has vowed to live life to the fullest since she came so close to dying. I have to admire her for her vitality in the face of adversity. I swear she is wearing a designer dress while strutting around this ship in those heels.

“I’m not really sure if we are allowed to explore the ship. I don’t want to get in trouble,” I say hesitantly.

“The only areas we are restricted from are the command center and the engine rooms. And we need an escort to get into the cargo bay,” says Ally.

“How do you know that?” asks Trinh.

“Uh, I read the pamphlet. Didn’t you?” says Ally.

We all look at her like she is crazy. When did she have time to read the whole pamphlet?

We start exploring the ship. Most doors automatically slide open as we approach them. We decide to ignore the entries that do not open just in case. We find a couple of Cerasteans working on a wall panel near the kitchen and ask them if they know where we can find Rosie. They look so shocked that we are speaking to them you would think the Queen of England just asked them where the loo was. It’s kind of funny and endearing. Although

these Cerasteans appear ferocious, they have been nothing but courteous and respectful around us. There was a part of me that feared we would be treated like steaks thrown to the lions. I have never been so glad to be wrong.

They let us know that Rosie, L'Corte and some of the other high ranking Cerasteans are in a meeting. We decide to keep exploring anyways. We find a few medbays, another kitchen, a mess hall filled with Cerasteans and what looks like labs. I notice that we have picked up a small contingent of Cerasteans who trail behind us. Each time I look back at them they are looking everywhere but at us. Subtlety does not appear to be their strong suit.

Laney has apparently picked up on our admirers and has decided to turn hair flipping and sashaying into a fine art form. I shake my head at her silliness.

“Hey, slow down there man-eater. We’ve barely been here half a day. Give yourself some time before you start luring them in,” I tease.

“I can’t help that I’m irresistible,” she sasses back.

“Irresistible? Irresistible to the type of guy that spends the whole date talking about his ex maybe,” I joke.

She sticks her tongue out at me.

Ally is walking around just looking like she wants to open up all the technology and see how it works. She keeps touching things and talking about polymers and thermoplastics. She might be the most adorably nerdy person I have ever met.

As we turn the corner, doors open onto another lab. This one has several dozen cages of various sizes. The first enclosure we peer into is small with transparent sides and a layer of sand at the bottom. It has a few insects that appear to be the scarlet-colored love child of a scorpion and giant grasshopper. When Trinh taps on the cage the creature’s mandibles open displaying black fangs.

“Whoa. It’s a vampire bug!” exclaims Trinh. “I think it just hissed at me.”

“Trinh, I don’t think you should touch anything,” says Sara.



“I’m sure it’s fine. They wouldn’t leave the door open if it weren’t safe,” states Trinh.

The next cage has a few brown lizard-looking creatures. They barely open their eyes to look at us as we peer in.

Suddenly Laney gasps.

“Oh my gosh, get over here! These are the cutest things I’ve ever seen.”

We rush over to the large pen she is gazing in to. There are several large branches covered with what appear to be blue leaves. At first, I don’t see anything else. Then I see a little blue and white face peek out at us from behind a large frond. The creature has mottled blue fur, large curious eyes, and big round ears. It looks like it could fit in my hand. It reminds me of the sugar glider a high school friend had years ago.

As the creature cautiously crawls forward, I notice several other little faces starting to peek out from behind leaves around the enclosure. The animal trills softly at Trinh.

“Hi there, cutie. Aren’t you the cutest thing ever? I just wanna eat you up!” coos Trinh.

She leans in making kissy faces at the creature. Suddenly the animal reaches out and grabs a handful of Trinh’s hair. Trinh starts screeching and trying to free herself from the creature’s grasp. We all rush over and try to help pry her away from the little blue-furred fiend. Trinh’s hair starts to slide off her head. It’s a wig. I only have a moment to process, but I quickly make the connection to what Trinh told us about her intensive chemotherapy.

Several Cerasteans come rushing into the room. As they enter the room, Laney slips and falls against the wall. I think she must have triggered a button to open the enclosure door because next thing I know more than a dozen of these previously timid creatures come scrambling out of the cage.

Pandemonium ensues as humans and Cerasteans rush around the lab trying to grab the critters. They are almost impossible to catch because, apparently, the little imps have chameleon-like abilities that allow them to blend into their surroundings. I am not sure us girls are helping much, scrambling over furniture and diving after creatures only to come up empty-handed. The Cerasteans are clearly more effective hunters. When the males

spot one of the blue gliders, they go still and slowly approach the creature. Then they strike, snatching up the unsuspecting animal at lightning speed.

Over the screaming and chaos, I look up to see Tank standing in the doorway, frozen in shock.

## *D'Avii*

After spending several hours in a meeting with Liaison Simson, Director L'Corte, General D'Annon and other department heads going over details to ensure that the needs of our volunteer brides will be met, I am exhausted. Still, I feel a need to pass by the volunteer quarters to check on the potential brides. General D'Annon is walking with me, but he is busy reviewing schedules on his tablet.

Abruptly, I hear a scream from up ahead. General D'Annon and I race in the direction of the cry. As we run I detect more screaming and loud cursing coming from Cerastean males. As I round the corner to Lab 3, I stop in shock. Human females and Cerasteans are chasing more than a dozen dulcis around the lab. To my horror, I see that one of the dulcis has ripped the hair from one of the bride volunteers. Dulcis are generally timid creatures. The worst I have ever seen them do is try to steal wiring to line their nests. I have never seen one attack a person like it has this poor female with her hair torn from her scalp.

It takes almost an hour to catch and contain all but one of the dulcis. One of the lab technicians believes it escaped through the ventilation system and he left to get a high powered scanner. By the time we are done, the females are clustered together by the entrance looking very guilty. They have stammered several apologies and explanations. I am just glad that they did not open the cage holding the venomous perferes. That could have been deadly.

I had heard that humans are insatiably curious. There are already reports from other ships stationed around the planet of the human females getting into 'shenanigans'—a word the humans use for the mostly-harmless trouble they cause. On *Ceraste B524*, which is hovering over China, the human women somehow started a fire in the galley. I don't even know how it's

possible to start a fire in a food replicator. Who knew such innocent-looking beings could cause so much trouble?

General D'Annon narrows his eyes at a delicate looking female with brown hair that is practically cowering behind the red-headed woman. The longer he stares at the small volunteer, the more she hunches down into the flame-haired woman's back. I am worried that he is scaring the human. The scar down the side of his face can make the general appear very intimidating. With the scowl he is sporting it makes him seem almost menacing.

The woman with the fake black hair, which I have learned is called a wig, clears her throat.

"We are so sorry about releasing your blue squirrels. It really was an accident. If it's okay, we would like to head back to our rooms and get cleaned up. Nothing like this will happen again. We promise."

I hear General D'Annon snort quietly in disbelief.

General D'Annon steps closer to the females.

"I am General D'Annon and this is Commander D'Avii. We will escort you back to your rooms if you don't mind."

The female that holds all of my attention steps closer to the general. "That won't be necessary, Sir. I promise we will head straight to our rooms. No more trouble from us," she states.

As the volunteer with the wig lays her hand on the female's shoulder, I wonder to myself what is a 'sir'? I will need to review the document on human slang terminology again.

"But Maya, you needed to talk to Rosie. Remember?"

Maya. Her name is Maya.

It is still strange to hear a formal name without a caste designation. I wonder if this female that reminds me of the perfere would have been a part of the ruling caste with their T' designation or the artist caste with their A'. Not that it matters now. She is Maya. Just Maya.

"I can escort you to Liaison Simson's office," comes out of my mouth before I have even fully processed the thought.

"That is a good idea. Commander D'Avii, if you could please escort this female to Liaison Simson's office. I will see that the rest of these females

arrive safely at their quarters” states General D’Annon.

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# CHAPTER FIVE

## *Maya*

D'Avii. His name is D'Avii.

It is unlike any name I have ever heard before. But I suppose an alien-sounding name makes sense for an alien.

D'Avii gestures that I should walk with him away from what the girls are now calling The Blue Squirrel Liberation. Who knew such cute little creatures could cause so much trouble? As we walk down the hallway toward Rosie's office, I keep glancing sideways at the Cerastean Warrior.

"So... I really am sorry for the mess we caused back there. Who knew those cute little squirrel creatures would cause such a ruckus," I say.

"It is strange. The dulcis are usually very docile creatures. I have never known one to attack before," D'Avii says.

"Is that what they are called? Dulcis? And why did they grab Trinh's wig like that?" I ask.

"Yes. Dulcis are tree-dwelling creatures we discovered on a jungle planet. We have been studying their camouflage system to try and discover how it works. They are very meek creatures normally. A few months ago they caused problems with our internal navigation array by building a nest in the wiring," D'Avii tells me.

"Maybe that's why the little guy grabbed Trinh's wig. Maybe he wanted it for a nest. Hey, if you guys are interested in animals that can change to blend in with their environment, you should check out chameleons and octopuses. Or is that octopi? I don't know what the plural of octopus is. Octopuseses? Um. Uh, either way, they are earth creatures that can camouflage as well," I babble.

*Oh my god. Shut up. I scream internally. You sound like a lunatic.*

“I will let the Scientist caste know about these earth creatures. They will likely be very interested” D’Avii tells me.

It seems like no time before we arrive at Rosie’s quarters.

“I will leave you here, Volunteer Maya. Please let me know if you need any further assistance,” D’Avii tells me.

As he turns to leave, I place my hand on his forearm to stop him. His skin is warm and dry. I briefly admire the diamond pattern on his arm.

“Is there something else you need?” he asks.

“Please call me Maya. Just Maya,” I tell him.

“As you wish. Maya.”

I look up and get caught in his gaze. Up close I see that his eyes are striated with gold, amber, and blonde tones. It feels like I’m drowning in fire. My neck is getting hot, and my breath is becoming shallow.

A flicker of movement at his mouth breaks my attention away from his eyes.

“Oh. Um, I need to talk to Rosie. Thank you for accompanying me here,” I stammer.

“You are welcome Maya,” says D’Avii.

I briefly watch as he turns and walks away.

*Was his tongue forked like a snake or am I crazy?* I think as I knock on Rosie’s door.

My thoughts are interrupted as Rosie opens her door and ushers me into her office.

I can feel sympathy radiate from Rosie as I tell her about my sister. She promises to put in a request with L’Corte to expedite Tasha’s medical request. Given the urgency of Tasha’s condition and my involvement in the program, Rosie assures me that she will likely be treated in the next several weeks. She promises to keep me updated on the progress of Tasha’s application. Poor Rosie has to witness my ugly crying session, but the relief I feel has overwhelmed me.

“Oh, by the way, I just wanted to let you know that my roommates and I accidentally released some creatures in a lab. It was an accident. We helped get all but one of the dulcis back into their pen,” I let Rosie know as I stand up to leave.

“Yes, I was just reading through the report on Lab 3 before you arrived. I wanted to ask you what happened. One of the Cerasteans who was there reported that one of the volunteers mentioned wanting to eat a dolci before opening the cage. I let Director L’Corte know that there was very little chance that one of the women was trying to eat the creature, but I promised to look into it further.”

“Oh no. There’s a report?” I gasp. I am not sure if I have ever been this embarrassed in my life.

“Don’t worry. None of you are in any trouble, but I would appreciate it if you could clear up the confusion,” Rosie assures me.

I explain to Rosie that Trinh was just baby-talking to the dolci saying ‘I could just eat you up,’ not planning to make a snack out of them.

“The Cerasteans have a remarkable grasp of our language and culture, but some things still get lost in translation,” Rosie says.

I debate about asking her if the Cerasteans have a forked tongue, but I decide I don’t want to look like a weirdo if I am mistaken about what I thought I saw.

I thank Rosie as I leave her office and head back to the dorm room.

## *D’Avii*

I watch as Maya exits Liaison Simson’s office. Her face is blotchy and her nose is red, as if she has been crying. But as I sample her emotions I can only detect relief and happiness, with a hint of embarrassment. How strange. Perhaps I need to review the document on interpreting human facial expressions again.

# CHAPTER SIX

## *Maya*

When I get back to the dorm, the girls and I do a squealing happy dance when I tell them about my meeting with Rosie. Laney can't stop laughing when she finds out the Cerasteans thought Trinh wanted to eat the dulcis.

Trinh announces that we need to have a movie night in the lounge to celebrate my good news. We head to the kitchen to see if we can figure out how to make popcorn. The Cerastean pilots from the transport ship are there and offer to show us how to use the food synthesizer.

L'Tarne taps a touch screen on the wall. "You choose your food from this menu," he says. "It has both human and Cerastean cuisine."

I am very curious about the Cerastean fare, but it is not in English so I can't determine what anything is. Disappointingly, popcorn is not available on the list. L'Tarne shows us how to make requests for additions to the menu options. D'Rett is curious about popcorn. After we describe it to him, he suggests that we try gherro. He tells us that it is made from the dried & roasted leaves of the gher plant. Gher is a plant similar to our earth cactus, but without spines.

Once D'Rett selects the gherro on the food replicator, a panel lights up on what I thought was a blank wall and we can hear a whirring noise.

Ally practically has her face pressed against the surface trying to see inside.

"How does it work?" she asks excitedly.

"From what I understand it rearranges subatomic particles to form the food. It takes atoms, like carbon and hydrogen, and converts them into anything we have already scanned into the system," D'Rett tells her.



“Oh wow! That means you don’t have to stock bulk provisions like food and water. I have read theories that you could use a similar process for a transporter. Do you guys have a transporter?!?” exclaims Ally.

L’Tarne explains that Cerasteans do not have any transporter technology. Undeterred, Ally continues to chatter excitedly about amino acids and microns.

I am just bummed that no one will be able to beam me up.

With a small beep, the door to the food synthesizer slides open. D’Rett places the bowl of gherro on the counter. We lean in close to take a look at it. Gherro looks like a bowl full of green desiccated zombie toes. There is no way in hell I am putting that in my mouth.

After a long pause, Trinh grabs one out of the bowl. She stares at it for a moment before tossing it into her mouth.

I watch as each of my roommates grabs a gherro chip and starts to eat them. Even timid Sara eats one. I am going to wait and make sure no one gets sick before I consume any alien grub.

Laney makes a humming noise of surprise.

“I was worried it would taste like kale chips,” says Laney. “But I like these. They remind me of mushrooms dipped in cheese.”

I take the tiniest nibble of my gherro. It’s, well, interesting. I don’t hate it. What does this remind me of? I have a bigger bite and close my eyes trying to figure it out. Laney is right. It does have a sort of salty, cheesy-earthy flavor. The more I eat it, the more I like it.

“If a sweet potato, mushroom, and cheeto had a baby it would be gherro,” I declare.

“I think this will be perfect for a movie night. All I need is something crunchy and salty, so this fits the bill. Let’s get some other snacks and get our movie night on,” declares Laney.

After we finish getting our snacks, we invite L’Tarne & D’Rett to join us.

We decide to do a sci-fi marathon once we find out that the Cerasteans have mostly been viewing dramas, histories, and documentaries. When Laney questions if they have watched any romantic comedies, D’Rett &

L'Tarne looked distinctly embarrassed. I think we may have some closet rom-com fans in our midst.

I grab a couple of cookies and a handful of gherro to eat as we start the first movie. The chocolate chip cookies are pretty good, but can't compare to my mom's baking. It makes my heart ache to think of my family, but I am glad I'm here.

L'Tarne, D'Rett and a few other Cerasteans that have joined us seem to love sci-fi movies. Although, I suspect they view them more as comedic material than serious films. At the end of the night, L'Tarne declares that Galaxy Quest is his favorite. He seems particularly taken with Sigourney Weaver. Not that I can blame him. She makes a killer blonde.

As the night winds down and we head back to our dorms, we promise the Cerasteans to do more movie nights soon.

It takes a long time to fall asleep. I think my brain is just overwhelmed by everything that has happened. I also can't stop thinking about D'Avii.



Despite being anxious about Tasha's fast approaching appointment at the medical facility, the next few weeks seem to fly by. Almost every evening we gather in the lounge to hang out. A few of the Cerasteans always join us, not just to watch films. We also spend a lot of time talking with the males as we learn more about each other's species.

We have learned more about their planet Ceraste, the Cerastean culture and stories from their travels through space.

They inform us that humans and Cerasteans are not the only intelligent species in the galaxy. They have discovered dozens of planets with life. Several planets even have conscious life forms, but the fleet leaders decided against contact with these beings since they were primitive and incompatible for mating. The Cerasteans have found two species that also have space travel, not including humans. There is the Hisk that have several colonies on the other side of the known galaxy. They apparently look like huge shaggy centaurs with camel faces. The other species are called Ostiums. They are more humanoid than the Hisk. They are mostly gray

with shades of purple, and they have large silver eyes. We are told that they are extremely reclusive and the Cerasteans only conduct a small amount of trade with them.

I often see D'Avii nearby, but he doesn't hang out with us. He just watches quietly from the sidelines. I also occasionally see General D'Annon, but he is usually just observing Sara. She calls him General Duh Annoy behind his back. As soon as Sara notices the general is nearby, she quietly slips away to her room. I have no idea what is going on with those two.

Laney has been flirting heavily with one of the scientists from The Dulci Liberation incident. Apparently, those two had a little 'moment' when he helped her off the floor. His name is L'Arc, and he seems entirely smitten with Laney.

Ally has been caught three times trying to sneak into the engine rooms. She says that she was just curious about the ship's propulsion system. Finally, L'Corte found a Cerastean male who was willing to spend time teaching Ally about Cerastean technology. The other day I came into the dorm room to discover our small service robot in pieces while they discussed electromechanical reactions. I can still hear Laney's outrage over what they had done to 'Dobby.'

As a group, we have become closest to the transport pilots D'Rett and L'Tarne. Laney has started calling them Goose and Maverick. So, naturally, we had to watch Top Gun together. Trinh and D'Rett got into a heated debate after the movie because D'Rett states that Iceman is right that Maverick is dangerous.

Trinh squawks with outrage. I love it when she gets all worked up about something. She has to stand so she can gesture wildly with her hands. D'Rett points out to her that Maverick is reckless, doesn't follow orders and is too busy showing off to ever be a genuinely competent pilot.

"Ugh. I hate when you use logic and reason. Fine, you're right. Maverick might be dangerous. But I will never like Iceman. He's a jerk," Trinh says. Trinh's hair has started to grow back, so she was able to ditch the wig with relief. Her hair is super short, but she still looks gorgeous.

“You are right, Trinh. Iceman is an asshole,” L’Tarne pipes up from the couch.

“See! L’Tarne gets it. He can be my wingman anytime!” announces Trinh.

“Laney! You have got to stop teaching them cuss words!” exclaims Ally.

As we continue to discuss the merits of Top Gun, we find out that D’Rett and L’Tarne are actually stealth pilots and don’t usually fly the transport ship. They spend a lot of their time on long-distance scouting expeditions. Apparently, this is one of the more dangerous assignments for Cerasteans. L’Arc jokes that all scout pilots are slightly insane.

“Anyone who decides to become a scout pilot has to be a little crazy. Almost all scouts end up forming a nest bond,” says L’Arc.

“What’s a nest bond?” asks Trinh.

D’Rett explains that males who spend a lot of time isolated together can form a bond with each other. Their bodies become attuned to each other, and they suffer withdrawals from each other’s pheromones when separated for too long of a period. This also means that nest bonded males typically share a mate. It is rare but not unheard-of, nor frowned upon in the Cerastean society, for two males to share one mate.

“A nest bond is not unlike a mate bond except it is not sexual in nature, and the withdrawals are not as severe,” explains D’Rett.

“Wait. What exactly is a mate bond?” I ask.

The Cerasteans explain that forming a mate bond is similar to love between humans but stronger. The Cerastean male forms a permanent bond to his female. Cerasteans mate for life. A male will literally become addicted to his female. He needs her pheromones and scent to function. Apparently, nothing is happier than a Cerastean male with his mate’s scent on his tongue. I don’t think they realize how kinky that saying sounds.

“Actually speaking of tongues. I’ve been meaning to ask. Are your tongues forked like a snake?” I question.

“Yeah. Their tongues are forked,” chimes in Laney.

We all turn to Laney at the same time with raised eyebrows.

“Really, Man-eater. How exactly do you know that? Hmmm?” teases Ally.

We tease her mercilessly until she finally stands up all pink-faced and points an accusing finger at us.

“Oh shut up, you bitches. You only wish you knew for yourselves!” Laney snarks at us.

“Once you pick your mates from the Scientist caste, you might be able to find out for yourselves,” says L’Arc.

“Wait. What do you mean? We have to choose a mate from the Scientist caste only?” I ask. I glance over at D’Avii who is staring down at his clasped hands.

“We follow the tradition of the Cerastean Presenting Ceremony. Males that want to find a mate present themselves to the unmated female Cerasteans. Males are grouped and chosen in order of the rank of their caste,” he explains.

I am not sure if any of us fully understood that we are supposed to choose mates from the Scientist caste only. I didn’t even fully realize where my heart was leaning until the possibility of D’Avii becoming my mate is taken away from me. Disappointment swamps me, and I decide to head to bed early.

The next morning I head out to talk with L’Tarne and D’Rett more about this Ceremony thing only to remember that they will be gone for a few days on a scouting mission. I don’t know how I could have forgotten, the girls spent hours arguing over what songs should go on the mixtape we made for their trip. If I never hear Leaving on a Jet Plane by John Denver again...

For the next several nights I don’t sleep well, and I am super grumpy. I notice my roommates might be avoiding me as I stumble into the galley to get my morning coffee.

When I get there, I see D’Avii staring intently at the human menu on the replicator. He looks up at me as I enter the kitchen.

“Ah, Volunteer Maya, I was hoping to speak with you,” he says.

“Maya. Just call me Maya. What can I help you with, D’Avii?”

“The other night Trinh used a term I did not understand. I was hoping you could explain it to me so that I could add it to the report on human colloquialisms. Also, I was hoping to try a cup of coffee. The bride volunteers all seem to be obsessed with it.”

I suggest to D'Avii that he try coffee with cream and sugar to start, but he decides to try it black. I watch avidly as he takes his first sip. I shouldn't enjoy his shudder of disgust as much as I do, but he should have listened to me. Coffee without cream and sugar is just hot bean water.

I slide my cup over to him and suggest he try a sip of mine. It's clear he enjoys this cup much better, so I tell him to keep it while I get myself a new one. I place D'Avii's old mug of hot bean water in the reprocessor on my way to the replicator.

"So what term did you not understand?" I ask.

"When Trinh said the other night that Scout L'Tarne could be her wingman, what did she mean? I reviewed Trinh's file, and she was not a pilot on earth. Is this one of the strange human 'slang' terms?"

The look on D'Avii's face is priceless when I explain that humans took a word that meant a pilot that supports another pilot in a dangerous situation and changed it into a word that means a person that helps you pick up women at bars. D'Avii marvels at how creative humans are with language but laments that it often creates misunderstandings for Cerasteans.

D'Avii has a whole list of terms that the Cerasteans don't quite understand. I offer to help. We spend the next half an hour discussing human slang. I can't stop laughing when I find out that all the Cerasteans were very confused when Trinh told General D'Annon to stop being so salty about The Dulci Liberation incident. He apparently went to a med bay to get his electrolyte levels checked.

It becomes our routine to share a cup of coffee every morning before D'Avii has to report in for his shift. D'Avii seems to have developed a taste for cappuccinos. We also discuss human customs, traditions, and holidays—not just slang. He is particularly confused by the idea of the Tooth Fairy.

"So human children put their milk teeth under their pillow, and their parents' tell them that a stranger is going to sneak into their room while they are sleeping and collect the teeth. And the 'Tooth Fairy' exchanges money for the teeth. I don't understand. What do the children think this fairy does with the teeth?" he asks.

"You know what? I have no idea. When you put it that way it sounds super weird," I reply.



This morning I am excited to see D'Avii. I thought of some slang he will enjoy. I can't wait to tell him what 'kick the bucket' means.

Before I can get to the kitchen to find D'Avii and make my precious brew, Rosie waves me over to her. She requests that I meet her in her office in 30 minutes as she & L'Corte has some news for me regarding my sister. I sprint back to my dorm room as fast as my fuzzy slippers will take me.

As I come skidding into our room, Sara jumps up from the couch and quickly shoves something into the pocket of the oversized hoodie she is always wearing.

"Are you okay? Is something wrong?" she asks.

"Rosie says she has news about Tasha. She wants me to meet her in her office in 30 minutes. I am freaking out!" I gasp.

Sara gets me calmed down, and I head to the shower to get cleaned up for my meeting. Sara really is sweet. I just wish she would open up to us. I feel like she is always on guard and could be lonely. I make a mental note to talk to the girls about making sure Sara is okay.

I take the fastest shower possible in scalding hot water to wake myself up. I find myself in front of Rosie's door with a few minutes to spare. My nerves start to get to me, so I start pacing back and forth trying to calm myself down. Rosie finally opens her door and tells me to come inside before I wear a hole in the floor.

## *D'Avii*

I have been concerned about Maya since the night we all watched the strange military movie. She scented of sadness and exhaustion for several days after. This morning I have decided to intercept her in the galley and check on her personally.

I explain to Maya that I am interested in slang terms and trying the human beverage coffee. Coffee seems to be very important to the bride volunteers. I even heard the female with the wig threaten to 'cut a bitch' if she did not get her coffee. Thankfully, there are not any canines on the ship. I make a mental note to ask Maya about the other female's violent nature.

Coffee is repugnant. It is a bitter and burnt tasting brew. Why would humans drink this foul beverage?

Maya offers me her cup of coffee. The cream and sugar vastly improve the taste, but her lingering fragrance on the mug is what makes it palatable.

As Maya explains human idioms to me, I can sense her mood lightening. I especially enjoy her delight over General D'Annon's misunderstanding of the term salty. Her laughter is unrestrained and joyous.

Every morning I meet Maya to share a cup of coffee and conversation. I enjoy learning more about human language and traditions. How humans turn and twist words, altering their use and meaning on a whim, is both confusing and remarkable. Maya seems to enjoy teasing me about my attachment to making reports.

This morning I am looking forward to seeing Maya. I am hoping to find out what 'dafuq' means. As I enter the main lounge area, I see General D'Annon. I head over to him to check on news of Pilots L'Tarne and D'Rett's scouting mission.

Just as I am about to reach General D'Annon, I spot Maya stumbling past the lounge. She races past as fast as she can while wearing strange fluffy shoes. Before I can approach her, she rounds the corner into her room. A short amount of time later I observe Maya exit her dorm wearing a gray outfit I have heard referred to as a 'power suit.' I cannot discern what type of power it uses from across the lounge. I will have to research that later.

The 'power suit' looks restrictive, uncomfortable and drab compared to Maya's usual attire. Maya usually wears colorful flowing clothing or blue pants she calls jeans.

Nervousness and excitement overpower her usually sweet scent as she paces outside of Liaison Simson's office. I decide to wait and check on Maya after she sees Liaison Simson; however, General D'Annon waves me over to him.

"General D'Annon, I was waiting to speak with Volunteer Maya. I am concerned about her," I tell him.

"Actually Commander D'Avii, I need to meet with you regarding Volunteer Maya and some other issues. Please follow me to my office,"



responds General D'Annon.

I take one last long look at Liaison Simson's door and turn to follow the general.

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# CHAPTER SEVEN

## *Maya*

Isit on the edge of the seat Rosie offered me, waiting on tenterhooks.

“I have good news for you, Maya. Your sister was admitted into the medical facility earlier this week. And after the first treatment, I have been informed that her prognosis is excellent.”

I sag in my chair as relief swamps me. My eyes are wet as I try and calm my breathing. Even though I have immersed myself in my new life, worry for my sister and family has continuously hovered in the back of my mind. My relief is so intense I feel lightheaded. I practically feel like I am floating.

Rosie tells me to slow my breathing because she has more good news and doesn't want me passing out on her floor.

“Your sister has two more treatments, and they believe she will be cured of leukemia. I have convinced the Cerasteen directors to allow you to visit your sister in three days, right before she is scheduled to be released from the facility.”

I bounce up from my chair so fast my feet leave the ground. Then I realized that I am looming over Rosie, so I abruptly sit back down. I have to go tell Laney and D'Avii, so I jump back up and turn toward the door. But it occurs to me that Rosie probably has more to say to me, so I sit back down again. I must look like a whack-a-mole on crack, but I can barely contain my excitement.

“You will leave at 0900 in three days. You will have at least one Warrior escort. There have been some protests and riots on earth regarding the aliens and the Bride Program, and we want to ensure your safety. Although your sister is at an undisclosed location, we do not want to take any chances

given the current political climate on earth. Please don't leave the facility or take any unwarranted risks. You need to do everything your bodyguard says. Good luck on your trip. I can't tell you how happy I am for you and your family," Rosie beams.

As Rosie escorts me to her door, I turn and envelope this dignified woman in a tight hug. She freezes for a moment and then she gently rubs my back in a very maternal gesture.

"Thank you for this. I know you made the visit possible," I whisper.

"I'm just so happy for you. Have a great trip."

As I exit her office, I look around for D'Avii so I can tell him the good news, but I don't see him anywhere. Then I spot Laney and L'Arc over by the lounge.

I screech her name as I sprint over and practically tackle Laney to the couch. Once she figures out what I am babbling about, we jump around hugging and squealing like crazy people. I see L'Arc staring at us with a freaked-out look on his face.

"I can't wait to tell everyone. Where are the girls? And D'Avii? And L'Tarne and D'Rett? And... We should have a celebration! L'Tarne promised us he would sneak us some Cerastean booze! This is the perfect excuse to try some. This is the best day ever!" I whoop.

"The girls are in our room. I saw D'Avii leave a few minutes ago with the general. And remember, D'Rett and L'Tarne are on a mission. I thought they were supposed to be back by now, but I'm sure they'll be back soon," Laney informs me.

Laney and I head to our room to get the girls and figure out what I need to pack. L'Arc trails cautiously behind us.

## *D'Avii*

General D'Annon informs me that Maya will be visiting her sister and family in three days.

"I want you to escort Volunteer Maya to the medical facility and back personally. Although the facility is well secured and hidden from the general public, I want to ensure all possible precautions are taken. As you know, there is unrest among some of the humans regarding the alliance

between the Cerasteans and Earth. We have also lost contact with Scouts D'Rett and L'Tarne. They should have returned yesterday from patrolling the Proxima Centauri star system, but scanners cannot detect them at this time. With everything that is happening, I want to guarantee all the bride volunteers' safety. As one of our most decorated Warriors, I trust you explicitly with this duty," the general informs me.

"Of course. I would be honored to safeguard Volunteer Maya on this trip," I tell him.

"I scent some trepidation from you," states General D'Annon with a raised eyebrow.

"I have found that I am very attracted to her scent. I am worried that if I start to become emotionally attached to her, I might trigger a mate bond," I inform General D'Annon.

"I trust you to remain professional. You are a Warrior. I need you to oversee this excursion. Perhaps when you return from this trip, we can move you to the tail wing of the ship with the younger warriors. They can learn from your example, and you could take over their combat training. Putting distance between yourself and Volunteer Maya should help alleviate your attraction," he suggests.

I agree with this proposal from General D'Annon, though I don't want to lose Maya. Perhaps it is for the best. I cannot imagine having to watch as she chooses a mate from the Scientist caste. Just picturing it makes me want to rend the imaginary male to pieces as I ache with loss.

Even now I want to go look for Maya. I am continually inventing excuses to check on her. Everything about her appeals to my senses. I dream about her scent. I have even started drinking the vile coffee beverage because it means I have an excuse to be in the galley when she is there. This separation is probably for the best, but I hate it.

I wish I were an unranked human male so that I could pursue a mating with Maya. It seems like this so-called 'dating' must make it very easy for humans to find mates! Humans have even created programs to choose their potential mates like selecting an item from the replicator menu. Human dating seems so uncomplicated. Lucky humans.

With a heavy heart, I return to my quarters to begin preparation for the trip and the move to new quarters in the tail wing.

## Maya

The next three days drag on forever. I can't concentrate in my training classes. Several of us had gotten bored with just eating and movie watching, so we approached Rosie about getting jobs so we can contribute to our new home. She was able to put together a job training list for us to choose from. I thought Long Range Scanning Technician sounded interesting. I get to scan the galaxy for anomalies while working with the ship's navigators. However, my mind has been unable to focus on reading screens of data.

I got even more excited when I found out that D'Avii was going to be my escort. I can't wait for my sister's reaction to him. However, in the protocol meeting this morning he seemed distant and kind of down. A protocol meeting. Ugh. We had to review a report on 'the official procedure for visiting a human establishment.' I'm surprised they didn't create a stratagem for bathroom breaks. I swear these Cerasteans love their procedures.

Tomorrow morning can't get here fast enough. I have a feeling I am not going to sleep well tonight. Well, at least the Cerasteans have good coffee. Maybe D'Avii will join me for a mug in the morning. I haven't shared a cup with him for a few days. None of the other Cerasteans seem to like coffee, but he loves it. I am hoping to introduce him to mochas soon.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## *Maya*

I was right. Last night's sleep was shit. But it doesn't matter because I get to see my family today!

I am up two hours early. I decide to linger over my cup of coffee in the hopes of 'accidentally' bumping into D'Avii, but I never see him. It makes sense though. He probably still has a ton of preparation and beloved reports to review.

I am glad I have the extra time since I end up changing my outfit four times. I have no idea why I am nervous. It's my family. They've witnessed me in my favorite pair of ratty sweatpants on hundreds of occasions. Maybe I just want to show them that I am doing well. I finally settle on the skirt from my gray suit and a silk blouse. I don't want to be too formal, but the suit always makes me feel confident. I debate about bringing the jacket but decide it will be overkill.

I am supposed to meet D'Avii over by Rosie's office so he can escort me to the cargo bay in about 45 minutes. I can't wait around in my dorm room any longer, so I head over just in case he is there. He isn't. I lean against the wall outside Rosie's door to wait. Then I decide to rest on the hall sofa, but I am unable to stay still for long. So I start pacing. It turns out that there are 62 steps from Rosie's office to the women's lounge and 33 from the lounge to the galley.

Finally, I spot D'Avii coming down the hallway from the Warrior crew quarters.

He has switched out his typical gray uniform for a form-fitting black outfit that looks armored. The texture of the fabric is reminiscent of his scales, and it seems like plating has been embedded along his chest, upper

arms, and thighs. He has a utility belt with all kinds of pockets filled with what I assume are weapons. I lose my breath a little as I realize how form fitting this new uniform is. He looks incredibly hot. And intimidating.

“Maya. Are you ready? Do you have everything you need?” he asks.

“Ready? Uh, ready. Yes. I am ready. I’m all set,” I falter.

As he turns to lead me to the cargo bay, I get a good look at his ass in the new uniform. Damn.

After giving my head a quick shake I catch up to D’Avii, and we head toward the cargo bay. I am disappointed to see that the pilots of the transport are not L’Tarne and D’Rett. They are two Cerasteans I have not met before.

The trip to Earth is quick and uneventful. The pilots land the transport on the roof of a bland, nondescript square building. D’Avii makes me wait behind him as he opens the transport ramp and samples the air for danger. I am not sure I will ever get entirely used to how the Cerasteans flick their tongues to smell things. I watch as D’Avii inserts a small communicator over his ear and lets the mothership know that we have landed safely.

Once D’Avii is convinced that the area is safe we disembark the transport and enter the building. Inside it looks like every hospital I have ever seen. And I have been in a lot of hospitals. Well, except there are aliens everywhere. That’s new.

We finally get to the correct room. D’Avii makes me wait behind him again as he samples the air for danger. I shuffle and fidget behind him in impatience. Finally, he gives me a nod to let me know it is safe. I knock gently and start to open the door. Next thing I know I am being yanked into the room and into the screaming, loving arms of my family. My mom is screeching ‘Mi-mi’ over and over again. My dad just has me wrapped in a tight silent hug, but I can feel him shuddering.

Tasha worms her way in between us. Pulling back, I look down at her sweet face. I want to see that mischievous grin. Shock steals my breath. I have to step back and take a look at all of her. Tasha has not looked so healthy in years. Her face is pink, not ashen gray. The circles around her eyes are gone. She is still thin and fragile, but she looks like a regular kid.

“Tasha. Oh my god. Tasha!” is all I can get out before I am ugly-crying all over her.

I had not frankly allowed myself to believe it would work. I didn’t dare to hope. Hope can be a cruel bitch. All the cures and ‘miracles’ we had tried before had let us down, and I didn’t realize that I had been holding myself back from believing.

My sister is going to get to grow up. She will get the chance to find love. To really live.

The Cerasteans saved Tasha. They saved my whole family really. In that millisecond my loyalty to the Cerasteans becomes absolute. The debt I owe them is immeasurable.

Just then the sound of a slamming door snaps our attention to D’Avii as he enters the room.

He stands in shock as he takes in the spectacle my family is currently making of themselves. I can hear my family’s intake of awed breath.

“Whoa. And I thought the alien doctors were big,” says my sister.

“Cerastean doctors. Not alien,” I absently correct Tasha.

D’Avii looks like he is about to turn around and exit the room to leave us to our private moment.

“Hey everyone, this is my friend Commander D’Avii. D’Avii, this is my father George Arnold, my mother Willow and my sister Tasha.”

## *D’Avii*

I should wait outside and leave the Arnold family to their private moment, but I hear Maya crying.

As I enter the room, my senses are overwhelmed with the scents of happiness, relief, and love. Their joy is like a wave crashing against me. It has been such a long time since I have witnessed a family bond. The shock and staggering nostalgia have me momentarily lose my faculties, and I accidentally let the door slam shut behind me.

The loud noise jolts the family out of their joyous reunion, and they all turn and stare at me.

I start to turn to leave the room. I do not belong here. But Maya’s voice stops me.



A woman who is undeniably Maya's mother steps toward me and extends one of her hands. Thankfully I remember that this is part of the traditional human greeting ceremony. I am pleased that I reviewed the cultural norms report last night. Willow Arnold's hand is soft and delicate, but her grip is firm. She places her other hand over our 'handshake' cocooning my hand as she stares at me with gentle intensity. She appraises me in a way that only mothers can, and it makes me think of my own mother who is long-gone.

"Greetings Willow Arnold," I state.

"It's nice to meet you Commander D'Avii. Please just call me Willow. Come in, won't y—"

"I'm Tasha," interrupts the child next to Willow.

"Tasha, what have I told you about interrupting adults when they are speaking," chastises her mother.

Little Tasha turns to me and rolls her eyes. I attempted to roll my eyes at Maya once, but she advised me not to do that again because it was 'creepy.' But I think it is adorable with the child.

"Are you really a warrior? Have you ever fought in a battle? Do you have a sword? Is it true that you guys are half-snake? Have you ever killed someone?" Tasha rapidly questions me.

"Tasha!" exclaim Maya and her mother, while her father just shakes his head.

I kneel down to speak with Tasha.

"Yes, I am a Warrior. I have fought in battles, but not in many years. I do not have a sword, but I have trained with them. Mostly I carry a laser gun and a stun baton. Cerasteans are not part-snake, but we do share many traits with earth serpents," I reply.

"A laser gun! A stun baton!" shouts Tasha. She grabs my hand and pulls me further into the room. Although she appears very tiny and frail, she tugs me into the room with surprising strength.

She leads me over to a chair placed next to a hospital bed.

It turns out that little Tasha has a mind filled with questions. She seems especially intrigued with Cerastean technology, particularly our weapons. She is quite bloodthirsty for such a small and adorable human offspring.

“No, I cannot get you a ‘phaser.’ But I believe that I can get you a communicator so that you can keep in contact with Maya on the ship,” I tell Tasha.

The family gets so excited over this prospect that I vow to myself that no matter what I will get them a communicator. Willow Arnold decides this is worth celebrating and brings out a container of what she calls her ‘world famous salted caramel chocolate cookies.’ I did not realize that Maya comes from a family that is famous worldwide.

Willow hands me one of these ‘cookies.’ It smells intriguing but looks like something you would find on the floor of the dolci enclosure. However, I do not believe I can snub this offering, especially as Willow Arnold looks at me with such an expectant expression.

I decide that a small nibble should be sufficient enough not to seem rude. I bite, then stare down in shock. This cookie is sweet, salty and gooey. There is a hint of bitterness that is reminiscent of coffee but somehow balanced perfectly with the sweetness. I have never tasted anything as delightful.

I look up at Willow Arnold in shock.

“Wars have been fought over less. I have never tasted its equivalent,” I tell her.

“She’s going to love you forever now. Wait until you try her cheesecake. If you’re not careful, you’ll end up with a pot belly like mine,” jests George as he rubs his rotund stomach.

Willow Arnold starts cooing at George about how he is perfect just the way he is when there is a sharp knock at the door.

“Oh thank god! Gross you guys!” states Tasha with a disgusted look at her parents.

## Maya

I don’t mind that my parents are so lovey-dovey. I like that they still love each other after so many years and struggles together. However, I am worried that their PDA might make D’Avii uncomfortable. I don’t want to scar the poor guy.

After the knock, a dark-haired woman enters the room followed by a Cerastean Scientist. He is large for a Cerastean from the Scientist caste. The woman introduces herself as Doctor Serena Salcedo and the Cerastean as Physician L'Vect. D'Avii and I exit the room so that they can administer Tasha's final physical exam in private.

"Sorry for my crazy family. I know they can be overwhelming," I say to D'Avii to break the silence.

"Your family is a joy. It gives me hope that Humans and Cerasteans may one day be able to form family bonds as powerful as yours. It is a miracle that we discovered earth. I am filled with hope for the future of our species," D'Avii responds.

"Do you really think you could get a communicator for my family?" I ask.

"Yes. You have my vow," D'Avii says.

I can't decide if I want to dance with happiness or hug him. Hug him. As I start toward D'Avii, the room door opens and distracts me. Dr. Salcedo and L'Vect exit the room. The doctor turns briefly back into the room and says "Don't forget to come back in six months to get re-scanned."

Dr. Salcedo says her goodbyes to us while L'Vect stands silently by her side.

After they leave, I enter the room to check on everyone. Once again I am yanked into a circle of arms. I look up and see that mom has pulled D'Avii into the group hug. My dad gently turns my head and brushes his hand across my cheek.

"My brave, beautiful girl. Mi-mi, you have made all this possible. I'm so proud of you. I love you so much," he tells me.

I glance over at D'Avii.

"No Dad. The Cerasteans made this possible," I whisper to him.

After a few more moments of cuddling D'Avii steps back and presses his hand to the communicator on his ear.

"I am sorry Arnold family. I am being told that we need to leave for the transport ship shortly. If you would like, Maya and I can escort you to the exit first," says D'Avii.

“That would be lovely,” my mom says as she goes to pick up her already packed bag.

“Please allow me to carry your belongings.”

As D’Avii bends over to pick up my mom’s bags, I catch her ogling him.

“Mom!” I mouth at my mom as I poke her arm.

“What? Nice ass!” my mom mouths back at me while waggling her eyebrows.

“Mom! Oh my god. Cut it out!” I mouth back.

On our way to the lobby over a dozen Cerasteans and a few human staff members stop us to bid farewell to my family. It looks like my mom was casting her magic over the unsuspecting masses as usual.

As we say our goodbyes at the exit, my father squeezes me in a long tight hug.

“These Cerasteans seem okay. All the ones at the facility were very nice. And D’Avii. He seems like a genuinely good person. We were so worried for you, but I think everything is going to work out,” he whispers to me. Then he lets me go and turns to give D’Avii a firm handshake.

I watch from the doors as my family walks across the parking lot, gets in our beat-up minivan and drives away. The ache in my heart is bittersweet. I miss them terribly already, but I am excited about Tasha’s future, and my own.

We have a bit more time to spare, so D’Avii offers to escort me to the facility lunchroom for a quick cup of coffee. Over the cookies my mom insisted we take with us, he tells me more about the facility. I am amazed to find out that they have already cured hundreds of people of cancer in just this building. And there are more centers peppered all over the world. The idea of how many lives have been saved already fills me with awe.

“Why does your family call you Mi-mi?” D’Avii asks me.

I explain how Tasha gave me the nickname when she was little and couldn’t say Maya. D’Avii seems quite taken with the concept of nicknames. Cerasteans are so formal with each other that nicknames are quite a novel concept.

D'Avii gets a comm message that the transport is ready to depart. So we head to the elevator that will take us to the roof and back to my new life on the spaceship.

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# CHAPTER NINE

## *Maya*

Today was one of the best days of my life.

I look over at D'Avii to thank him for bringing me to the hospital and for being so awesome with my family. As I open my mouth to speak, he suddenly straightens up and hits the emergency stop button on our elevator. We come to a sudden jolting halt. I would think D'Avii was making a move on me if it wasn't for the alarmed look on his face.

He presses his hand to the communicator and murmurs a bunch of affirmatives.

"Yes. I understand. Complete radio silence until further notice. Yes General, I understand," he says.

"What's happening? Is everything okay?" I ask.

"The facility is on lockdown. There is a terrorist threat to the building. They believe they have the location of the terrorist narrowed to a specific area of the building. The ship has our position locked on their scanners and needs us to remain in this location as they neutralize the threat," D'Avii informs me.

"Are we in danger?" I ask.

"No. We are perfectly safe. We just have to stay here," says D'Avii.

The next ten minutes last forever. I just want out of this stupid box. I am straining my ears trying to hear anything from outside our elevator. But all I hear is our collective breathing. The lights in the elevator cut out unexpectedly, drowning us in complete darkness for a moment before a red emergency light kicks on.

My heart is about to jump out of my chest. I am just so glad my family has already left the building.

I sink down to the floor since my knees feel too weak to hold my weight.

“D’Avii, will you sit with me? I’m freaking out a little here, and I don’t want to be alone,” I beg him.

“Of course, Maya,” says D’Avii as he folds himself down to settle next to me.

D’Avii gently rubs my back as I get my breathing back under control.

“My parents really liked you, by the way. And Tasha has developed a serious case of hero worship. Thank you for putting up with them, I know they can be a little much,” I say. I just need to talk and get my mind off our current situation.

“I liked your family very much. However, I do not think your father liked me,” responds D’Avii.

“Are you kidding? He totally likes you. He shook your hand and everything. If he didn’t like you, he wouldn’t even acknowledge your existence. And my mom *loved* you. Your reaction to her cookies was enough to make her love you forever,” I tease.

“Those cookies. I have never tasted anything like them. Do you think we could get a few to scan and add to the food replicator?” he asks.

I gasp in shock.

“No way. If my mom found out that you want to steal her secret recipe, she would kill you. Like literally try to sneak on board the ship and off you in your sleep.”

“Perhaps we can find a way to get your family to visit, and she can bring me more cookies,” D’Avii suggests.

“Are you using me for my mom’s cookies? You know what? I would be cool with that. Actually, if you could find a way for them to visit, nothing would make me happier. Only if you think you could put up with more of their public displays of affection and kissing,” I joke.

“The kissing was interesting. I think I now understand better why humans kiss.”

I lift my head from his shoulder. Apparently, I had snuggled into his side without noticing

“Wait. What do you mean? Cerasteans don’t kiss?” I ask.

“Our females had fangs filled with venom. Kissing was not an option,” he tells me.

“So you’ve never been kissed? Ever?” I ask.

He gives a negative shake of his head.

That’s a shame, I think to myself. D’Avii’s lips look so very kissable. His lips are plump, and up close I can see that the seamless scales that cover him are also scattered across his mouth. I bet his kiss would feel interesting against my lips.

D’Avii’s tongue flicks out briefly, and that seals the deal for me. I have to see what kissing him feels like.

I lean closer and pause briefly with my mouth a fraction of a breath away from his. I take a moment to hover close and enjoy the look on D’Avii’s face. He looks excited and slightly bewildered.

I place my lips against his mouth and brush my lips gently across his. Okay, that was really nice. I back away an inch, tilt my head and press my lips more firmly against his. At first, he seems hesitant, but he picks up the movements very quickly. His lips are just as soft as I thought they would be but firm against mine. His kisses are gentle, lingering and incredibly sensual. I flick my tongue against his plush bottom lip, hoping he will open up for me.

With a groan D’Avii grabs me by my waist, lifts me over his lap and seats me over both his legs. My skirt rolls up partway up my legs as I straddle his massive armored thighs.

## *D’Avii*

Maya is running her hands through my hair. I am intoxicated by her scent. She has always smelled amazing, but the intensity of her aroma has me reeling. I know that I should not indulge in this moment, but I am powerless against this desire. Her scent deepens with her growing excitement. I can’t get enough. As she slicks her tongue into my mouth, I flick it with mine. She gasps in erotic surprise.

My senses allow to me interpret all Maya’s desires. I mentally catalog what causes every hitch of her breath. If I flick my tongue with hers, it



makes her moan softly. When I gently squeeze her hips, she shivers. All her reactions give me a roadmap to her pleasure.

I slide her further up my legs and press her close to my chest. I gently tunnel my fingers through her hair and tilt her head back. I feel crazed with desire. I entwine my tongue with hers and pull her even closer. I will never get enough of this. Her tongue surges and retreats from my mouth, snaring me with desire. She pulls away and gasps for breath.

As she tilts her head back, I flick my tongue against her throat to imbibe the pheromones on her skin. I trace my tongue down her neck following the trail of hormones to where they are more abundant. Maya helps me undo her blouse as I nuzzle closer. She unhooks her bra and slides it down her arms. I instantly understand the appeal of breasts, though Cerastean women lack them. They are soft and round and are concentrated with Maya's aroma. I flick her nipple with my tongue to get more of her taste, and she moans loudly. So I do it again. And again. She gasps for air, so I draw her nipple into my mouth and suck. Maya groans and rocks against the rock hard ridge of my cock.

All logic is gone. I have to taste her pussy. I don't want to lay her on the floor, so I grab her by the waist and lift her to my mouth.

## Maya

I am practically kneeling on D'Avii's shoulders, my legs spread wide in front of his face and my underwear pushed to one side. I am shuddering with excitement, one hand gripping the handrail and the other clutching one of his horns.

D'Avii flicks his tongue up the seam of my pussy. I watch D'Avii's eyebrows raise when he hits my clit, and I keen and shiver. He grabs my ass with both powerful hands, tilts me closer to his mouth and begins to devour me.

Next thing I know I am riding his face and chanting 'yes right there' over and over again. The wave of my orgasm crashes over me as I cry D'Avii's name while I twitch and jerk in his arms. D'Avii gently slides me back to his lap as I quake and gasp into his chest.

I look up at his face and watch as he sweeps his tongue around his lips with a look of supreme satisfaction. He doesn't even know what satisfaction is yet. I can't wait to get my mouth on him.

I slowly slide back onto my knees and kneel between his legs. I am just starting to work his zipper down over his sizeable bulge when he abruptly grasps my hand. As I look up at him in shock, I see him tap the communicator that is somehow miraculously still attached to his ear despite my wild gyrations earlier.

"Commander D'Avii here. Yes, General. I understand. That is good news. Yes, we are perfectly safe. Right away General," D'Avii says softly.

He taps the communicator and looks at me.

"The threat has been neutralized. The General has commanded we exit the building with haste," D'Avii tells me.

That's not fucking fair! We were just getting started. I just needed ten more minutes in this stupid box.

# CHAPTER TEN

## *Maya*

We quickly fix our clothing as we ride the elevator to the roof. As the doors start to open, I am still finger-combing the tangles out of my hair. I begin to exit anyway, but D'Avii stops me with a hand on my arm.

“Maya, we should talk for a moment,” he says.

Uh oh.

The look on his face says it all. What the hell. I don't understand.

“Maya, I don't think we should spend any more time together. I am in danger of forming a mate bond with you. You need to choose a mate from the Scientist caste, and I have no right to form an attachment to you. An unrequited mate bond would cause both of us distress. This is why I have requested a transfer to a different wing of the ship. I am going to take over the combat training of the younger Warriors,” he tells me.

“You're moving? I don't understand. When did you get a chance to request a transfer?” I ask.

“I requested the transfer before we left this morning,” D'Avii says.

“What! You knew you were leaving and you didn't tell me? You let me make a fool of myself in that elevator. Why didn't you say something? What the fuck D'Avii! You are such an asshole,” bursts out of me.

I stomp off with clouds of anger billowing off me. My face feels hot, my vision blurring around the edges. I consciously focus on my fury because I can feel hurt wanting to seep in. I storm past the pilots, up the loading ramp and take a seat in the far corner of the ship.

Across the aisle from me, I spot Dr. Salcedo and the Cerastean physician from earlier today. They look like they've been through the wringer. Their clothes are dirty, ripped, and splattered with some kind of lilac-gray

substance. The Cerastean's arm is wrapped around her shoulder, gently rubbing her knuckles with his free hand. Dr. Salcedo looks like she is trying to burrow into his chest. I think she might be crying. I hope the doctor is okay; she seemed really nice.

I watch out of the corner of my eye as D'Avii talks to the pilots and takes a seat near the exit. He briefly looks at the couple seated across the way from me with a look of disquiet on his face. I see him give the smallest of glances in my direction before turning his attention to the front of the transport ship.

Not long after takeoff I look over and see that Dr. Salcedo has fallen asleep nestled next to her Cerastean. Poor thing. I think she might have had an even worse day than me.

For the rest of the flight, D'Avii could be a statue. I am so mad at him; I kind of want to go punch him in the nose. But I am more angry at myself. I knew better, I really did. I knew we couldn't be together, but I decided I just had to kiss him. I am an idiot, this is all my fault. I am such an asshole.

## *D'Avii*

The pilots practically dive out of Maya's way as she goes storming onto the transport. As I approach the ship, I see both pilots sample the air and give me a sharp look. I am covered in Maya's scent.

"Is everything alright, Commander?" the Scientist pilot asks me.

"Yes. The volunteer bride and I just had a misunderstanding," I tell them.

As I enter the transport, I spot the human doctor and Physician L'Vect sitting near the rear of the ship. They are covered in scratches and dirt like they have been in a fight. There is the scent of blood in the air.

I glance over at Maya. She is slightly hunched over, hugging her arms around herself. She looks small and lonely. She still smells strongly of anger, but misery and sadness are overpowering the other emotions. I am a fool. As soon as I realized I was forming feelings for Maya, I should have stayed away. This is all my fault. Maya is right; I am an asshole.

Even though the flight back to the ship is a short one, it feels interminable. Maya's unhappiness is permeating the passenger cabin. Once

we touch down in the cargo bay, I see that it is unusually empty. Physician L'Vect gently picks up the human doctor and carries her off the transport. Maya and I follow behind them down the loading ramp.

A small contingent from the Scientist caste leads Physician L'Vect away with his human. As we reach the bottom of the ramp, General D'Annon approaches us.

"Greetings Commander D'Avii and Volunteer Maya. I hope both of you are okay after your ordeal at the facility," states General D'Annon.

"Thank you General, we are fine," murmurs Maya.

"We are still in the process of gathering intelligence on the attack, so I ask that you do not speak to anyone about what occurred at the facility today. It is of the utmost importance that we keep this event confidential until the investigation is concluded. Until we can guarantee that all relevant information and culprits have been tracked down, you need to remain silent."

"Of course. I won't tell a soul," responds Maya.

General D'Annon and I escort Maya back to the Women's quarters and watch her join her friends.

"Is everything okay, Commander D'Avii? Did something happen at the hospital?" asks the general with raised eyebrows.

"Yes, General, everything is okay. Volunteer Maya and I kissed at the facility, but I have explained to her that we cannot see each other again and that I am moving to a different section of the ship."

"You kissed her, Commander?" he asks.

"It will not happen again, General," I tell him.

"I am sure it will not. I have faith in you," he states as he turns to leave.

After he leaves I take one long last look at my Maya as she rushes off to her room with her dorm mates.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## *Maya*

I head toward the lounge with General D'Annon and D'Avii trailing behind me.

I wish they would just go away; I want to be alone. As I reach the women's lounge area, I spot Laney practically sitting on L'Arc's lap giggling in his ear. I am really not in the mood to watch those two fawn all over each other.

The moment Laney spots me, she abandons L'Arc, rushes over, and starts dragging me to our dorm room. She calls out to Ally and Trinh to join us.

Sara is in the main room of the dorm as usual. The moment the door closes behind us Laney whirls on me.

"What happened between you and D'Avii?" she asks.

"What? Me and D'Avii? Nothing. Nothing happened," I tell her.

"Oh my god! You hooked up! You totally did. Look at your face!" she shrieks.

"How in the hell can you tell that by looking at my face?" I question.

"I know you," she states.

"Okay. Yes. We kissed in the elevator," I tell the girls.

They start dancing around and high-fiving each other to my dismay.

"TELL. US. EVERYTHING." demands Trinh.

And because I am weak, I do. I leave out the terrorist attack. I just tell them that the elevator got stuck in between floors. I also gloss over the more nitty-gritty aspects of our tryst.

"Fine. Fine. Don't give us all the details. Just tell me this. How is that snake tongue?" asks Trinh with a grin.

My face is beet red as I admit his tongue is incredible.

“Yeah. L’Arc’s tongue is amazing too,” interjects Laney.

We all take a moment to just stare at Laney.

“Seriously? You’re just telling us this now?!” exclaims Ally.

“Well, it just never came up before,” replies Laney.

“I doubt that, Man-eater. I have a feeling it ‘comes up’ all the time,”  
Trinh snorts.

Laney throws a gherro chip at her.

I thought I wanted to be alone, but I am so glad I have these awesome women to talk to. When I signed up for the program, I thought I would find a mate. Instead, I found my best friends.

We spend the next hour dissecting every moment I ever spent with D’Avii.

“I don’t get it. Why do we have to choose from the Scientist caste only?” I lament.

“L’Arc told me that it’s a deeply ingrained part of their culture. During the Presenting Ceremony, the highest ranked females would pick males from the highest rank caste. Only once all the males from that caste were chosen, would the next caste get their turn. Apparently, there were rare occasions when a male would not get chosen, and it could hold up the whole process. It would start a standstill until someone picked the male or he stepped down. If he stepped down, he couldn’t present himself again. In their society, it meant that there was something fundamentally wrong with him and he was pretty much shunned. They called them The Unwanted,” Laney informs us.

“Jesus. That’s rough,” says Sara softly.

It’s not fair. I’m human. Why should I suffer because of the Cerasteans archaic rules? But I know why. I signed up for *their* program to save my sister’s life. The Cerasteans have held up their end of the bargain. Now I have to hold up mine.

Thank goodness there isn’t a deadline on choosing a mate, because I think I’m going to need some time to recover from this heartache.



The next few weeks suck. I haven't seen D'Avii once, and I miss him terribly. I'm trying to act normal, but I suspect everyone can tell I am unhappy. Especially the Cerasteans, with their keen sense of smell. Even General D'Annon stopped me and let me know that he was available if I ever needed to talk. I think I would rather shave off my eyebrows than have a heart to heart about my love life with the general. Still, it was nice of him to try.

The one bright spot in my day is using the communicator that was delivered to me a few days after returning from the trip. Being able to talk to my family has been such a blessing. Tasha is very excited because she is planning to return to school. I think she just loves being able to live a normal life. Mom keeps asking about D'Avii, but I have been able to deflect attention back to Tasha. That will not last.

I am also grateful I have work to keep me occupied. My department has been given some new specific trace elements to scan for. This new project has been given top priority. It is going to take us months, if not years, to analyze all of the data. And that's even given the fact that this project is being split between several of the other ships in orbit over earth.

The whole ship seems to be in a state of heightened alert. I am sure it has something to do with the terrorist attack, though I haven't heard anything more about it.

L'Tarne and D'Rett are back apparently. While I was gone, Ally saw them arrive in the cargo bay with an unknown woman. She says they were hustled off by the top brass, and we haven't seen or heard anything about them. Not even Trinh with her gift for ferreting out information was able to find anything. We haven't been able to see them; apparently they are being sequestered.

I have seen Dr. Salcedo and her Scientist partner L'Vect around the ship several times since the transport trip. I believe they are on staff here now. Dr. Salcedo is really nice, but L'Vect may be the most unsociable Cerastean I have met yet. Bedside manner be damned, he helped save Tasha.

As I am dragging myself out of bed this morning, I decide that I am going to need a vat of coffee to get through today. Maybe two vats. In the kitchen, I spot L'Arc. Surprisingly I do not see Laney with him. Those two



are usually stuck together like velcro. I am happy for Laney, but I also burn with jealousy when I see them together. They practically glow. Fuckers.

I say good morning to L'Arc and head over to the food synthesizer.

"Oh, I need to put in a request to get mochas added to the menu," I say out loud.

"What is a mocha?" L'Arc asks me.

"It's a type of coffee sweetened with chocolate. I thought that D'Avii might like it since he likes coffee so much," I reply.

"I do not think D'Avii would like that. He does not enjoy coffee," L'Arc informs me.

"What? Yes, he does. D'Avii drinks coffee."

"Well, the times I have witnessed him drinking the coffee he scented of distaste," L'Arc says.

"What? No. That doesn't make sense. We had coffee together all the time. Why would he—"

But I know why.

You know what. Fuck this. Fuck this day.

Fuck everything.

I am going to go back to bed, burrow under my pillow and never get up again. My department doesn't technically need me. I am just a trainee anyways.

I trudge back to the dorm. Sara is in the main room, kneeling down peering under the couch. Then she starts lifting sofa cushions and looking under them. It seems like she must have lost something. Typically I would offer to help, but I am just not in the mood.

I flop down on the bed, curl around a pillow and try to turn my brain off.

It must work eventually because a scream wakes me up. I bolt up in bed and look around in shock. Then I hear another cry. I go racing out of my bedroom and see all my dorm mates running toward Trinh's room.

We burst into her room and see that she is somehow perched on her dresser. I barely have time to admire how Trinh got onto the chest in those heels and skinny jeans.

"Oh my god. There's something under my bed. There's a creature under my bed," she screeches.

“That’s just Tribble,” says Sara.

“What?” we all ask at once.

Sara kneels down next to the bed and makes a chirping noise. She reaches under Trinh’s bed and pulls out a large, black long-haired creature.

“Is that my wig?” asks Trinh.

“Tribble just wanted it for her nest,” replies Sara.

I step closer and take a look at the wig. There, nestled in the middle, is a dolci. It is currently blending into the black hair, but it is definitely a dolci.

“Is that a dolci? How did you get a dolci?” asks Laney.

“It happened during The Dolci Liberation incident. In the chaos, she escaped into my hoodie pocket. She just seemed so scared that I let her stay. Tribble is very tame and well behaved” explains Sara.

“You named it Tribble?” giggles Ally.

“It seemed appropriate,” replies Sara.

“I’ve been jokingly calling us The Dolci Liberation Front, but I didn’t realize it was true!” laughs Laney.

As we watch, the dolci scrambles out of the wig onto Sara’s hand and then rubs her cheek against Sara’s thumb. That may be the cutest thing I have ever seen.

We gather around and coo at Tribble. Well, except Trinh who keeps a wary distance. The dolci apparently loves to cuddle, so we all take turns holding her. Her fur is soft and silky. It is strange to see something change and blend into its surroundings so wholly. It was especially amusing when Tribble climbed up my arm and camouflaged herself with my owl-covered pink pajamas.

After the other girls leave, Sara and I relax on the couch playing with Tribble.

“Is Tribble why you hardly ever leave the dorm?” I ask Sara.

“Somewhat. Every time I leave the dorm, General Duh Annoy is always watching me like a hawk. I think he suspects I have a dolci. Plus it’s been nice to be able to just relax alone and read, with nothing else to worry about,” Sara tells me.

“You’ve got to stop calling him that! If the general hears you, you’re going to hurt his feelings,” I say.

“I seriously doubt that Duh Annoy has any feelings,” Sara rolls her eyes. But she also looks a tiny bit concerned.

“Speaking of feelings. You seem down. Are you okay?” Sara asks.

“I don’t know, I’m trying. I just miss D’Avii. I really like him. But I have to choose a Scientist eventually. I can’t even stomach the thought right now,” I tell her.

“Maya, I looked through the pamphlet again, and it never says you *have* to choose a Scientist. Actually, I reviewed all the documentation and reports I could find, and nothing says a volunteer has to choose a Scientist. Everyone just assumes that’s what we will do. Nothing is stopping you from choosing D’Avii as a mate.”

“If I chose D’Avii wouldn’t I turn all the Scientists on the ship into Unwanted?” I ask.

“They aren’t on Ceraste anymore. We aren’t Cerastean women. They need to learn that we are different and that the castes don’t matter to most human women. You’re going to have to fight for what you want, and we will help you. If we have to me and the girls will riot until the Cerasteans see things our way.”

“Really? Do you think it could work?” I ask hesitantly.

“Yes, I do. We will put Trinh in charge of getting the Cerasteans to change their ways. They won’t stand a chance once we get her rolling,” jokes Sara.

Sara is right. D’Avii is worth fighting for. I abruptly stand up and whirl for my room.

I need to find my power suit.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

## *Maya*

I exit our dorm room donned in my suit. I feel battle ready.

As I cross the lounge, I see Trinh and Laney have L'Arc cornered. Trinh is dramatically waving her arms around, with L'Arc looking slightly terrified. The girls spot me, wave and give a thumbs up.

I am about to knock on Rosie's door when I spot Sara talking to General D'Annon. Standing in front of the general, Sara looks positively tiny. And this is after she has filled out some. She was practically skin and bones when we first met.

Is this what they mean by 'squad goals'? I've never had a squad before. It's pretty awesome actually.

I rap firmly on Rosie's door, and she invites me to enter. She is clearly in a meeting with L'Corte, but they tell me I am not interrupting anything important.

Rosie, L'Corte and I talk for a long time. I explain how I have fallen for D'Avii. I leave out the details on our hook up. I don't want them to think I am thinking with anything other than my head. Rosie agrees with me that asking human women to pick mates only from the Scientist caste is going to cause problems. L'Corte doesn't understand why I would want someone from a lower station when there are plenty of Scientists available to choose from. It takes a long time for us to get him to understand that ranks don't mean anything to human women. Once we finally get him to understand, Rosie suggests that it would be better to address this issue with the Cerastean population now. It is inevitable that one of the volunteers would fall for a Warrior before all the Scientists are claimed.

“Do not worry. We are going to make sure that all the Cerasteans understand human women will be able to choose any male they want, regardless of caste. Feel free to pursue your Warrior,” L’Corte tells me.

“Really? Oh guys, thank you so much. You are the best!” I exclaim.

“We are happy to help,” Rosie responds.

When I exit Rosie’s office, the girls surround me. I tell them how the meeting went, and they respond with piercing shrieks of delight. They hustle me to our dorm room to get me ‘dolled up.’ Despite Trinh’s protests, I keep my power suit since it makes me feel confident.

“Okay fine. But let me grab my heels. That will knock D’Avii’s socks off. He won’t be able to resist you,” says Trinh.

“I can’t wear your stripper shoes. I’ll break my neck!” I declare.

She gasps in outrage. “Stripper shoes! You take that back! They are Louboutins!”

Finally, after they fix my hair, spritz me with some perfume and do a breath check, they send me on my way with a mint and a, “Go get your man, girrrrrl.”

Laney told me that L’Arc said that D’Avii was conducting some training lessons two floors down in the back of the ship. So I head in that direction.

I wander around for a while until I hear some loud grunts, thuds, and thunder-cracking noises. I cautiously peek around a corner. Two Cerastean warriors are fighting with long bo staffs. They are somewhat smaller than the warriors I am used to seeing. They must be the younger warriors still in training.

I will have to tell Trinh about this class. She was pissed when she saw that the bride volunteers were not offered any options to train for Warrior jobs. She would love combat training. I can picture her doing it in stilettos and a bodycon dress.

I watch as one trainee sweeps the legs out from the other. Finally, I spot D’Avii as he approaches the two and helps the downed warrior off the mat. He corrects the trainee’s stance and says a few words to him quietly. I see the moment that D’Avii realizes I am there. His head snaps up, I see him sample the air with his tongue, then he turns his head to look right at me.

I'm not going anywhere, so I lean against the doorway and get settled-in to wait. The class has broken up into twosomes that are practicing combat moves. D'Avii walks among the trainees making corrections and giving praise. D'Avii is ridiculously hot, and I want him so bad.

Now that I have allowed myself to want D'Avii, I can't stop staring at him. He is patient with the trainees. He is tall, muscular and moves sinuously. I love the way his uniform shows off his massive shoulders and strong legs. And the way it molds to his ass. That ass should be illegal.

## *D'Avii*

It is almost impossible to concentrate on the combat training once I detected Maya's sweet scent. It is slightly covered with a strange chemical flower fragrance, but it is undeniably her.

As I approach her after the class has ended, I mentally prepare myself to send her on her way. For my own sanity, I can no longer be around Maya. The loss I feel threatens to swallow me whole. The more time I spend with her, the closer I come to forming a mate bond.

## *Maya*

I watch as the class wraps up, the trainees gather their items, then shuffle past me out the door. After the final warrior exits the room, D'Avii advances toward me. He stops near where I am waiting in the doorway but keeps distance between us.

"Is everything okay, Maya? Why are you here?" he asks me.

"I needed to talk to you," I tell him.

"That is not a good idea. I have explained why it is dangerous for us to spend any more time together," D'Avii explains.

"That's just it. It's not dangerous for us to be together anymore. I talked to Rosie and L'Corte, and they are going to change the Bride Program rules. Humans won't have to choose from the Scientists caste first anymore. We can choose any mate we want."

"But the highest caste is always chosen first. This is how it has always been. If a Warrior were chosen early, it would shame the Scientists. They would become Unwanted," says D'Avii.

“You don’t understand. Human women do not care about castes. Those rules don’t apply anymore. No one will become Unwanted. Cerasteans will learn that human women can’t be stopped when we decide we want something,” I say.

“And you have decided that you want me? That we could be together?” he asks as he steps closer to me.

“Yes. You can’t get rid of me that easily,” I tell him.

He picks me up by my waist, and I wrap my legs around him.

“You can be mine?”

“I already am.”

D’Avii presses me gently against the wall next to the doorway. He just looks at my face like he is memorizing me. He runs the fingers of one hand through my hair and brings a few strands to his face where he flicks the end of my hair with his tongue.

“I thought I had lost you forever. That I would never get to bask in your sweet scent ever again,” he says in a hushed tone.

I can’t wait any longer, so I lean forward and press my lips to his mouth. He groans softly. Then he wraps one arm around my waist, his other hand cups the back of my head as he begins to devour my mouth.

## *D’Avii*

Maya informs me that we will be allowed to mate. It is my greatest desire, but I don’t dare to hope. To cast a ship full of Scientists into the Unwanted would be catastrophic for my species. Every male needs to have the chance to find a mate and produce offspring. I cannot do that to my people, not even for the opportunity to be with Maya.

Maya explains that the caste system does not apply to human/Cerastean matings. Perhaps she is right. I beg she is right. It does seem the old ways no longer apply when it comes to the remarkable human females. These unorthodox, irrepressible women have continued to challenge Cerasteans at every turn, so it should be no surprise that they can change our deeply-ingrained mating beliefs.

Maya could be mine.

Mine.

Before I give myself time to overthink things, I have Maya pinned against the wall. Her mouth tastes sharp and tangy, almost spicy with an intense cooling effect. I gently tilt her head so I can get more. I need more.

“Mi-mi, what is this taste on your mouth?” I ask.

“Oh, it’s just a mint to make my breath smell better.”

“Hmm. Your breath is fine, but I do like this mint,” I tell her.

I greedily gorge myself on her mouth. I pull Maya closer to me. Her breasts are pressed against me as I squeeze her luscious ass. I let the barrier erected around my heart drop, and I feel my mating bond roar into existence. I am consumed with desire. The scent of Maya’s arousal fills my head and robs me of all reason.

Maya makes a small noise of protest, so I pull back slightly.

“Wait. Wait. Just a sec,” she says as she leans to one side. She presses the button to close the door and engages the manual lock.

“I don’t want to get interrupted,” she says before returning to my mouth.

Maya moves her mouth down, across my jaw, then toward my ear. She starts mouthing and sucking on my earlobe. It is intense and lights my nerve endings on fire. I use the grip I have on her ass to angle her hips so I can press my erection fully against the seam of her pussy. I rub up and down against her as I start to suck on her neck. Maya thumps her head back against the wall and moans loudly. She grabs my collar and tries to work me out of my uniform.

“Oh god, yes. Naked. Get naked. Now. Get naked now,” she commands.

I set Maya carefully down and step back. I tear my uniform open and step out of it. Then I stop to watch Maya. She has removed her jacket and blouse but seems to be stuck in her skirt. She finally just yanks on the material and it comes off with a small tearing noise. Maya turns away from me to toss away the article of clothing. I step up and press myself against her back.

Maya is wearing dark blue lace undergarments. I had not understood the purpose of these articles of clothing before, but now I know. They are clearly meant to entice and inflame a male. I am lost in her. I sweep her hair over one shoulder and press my lips to the back of her neck. Maya exhales a small breathy ‘oh’ and sways closer against me. I continue to mouth the



back of her neck while I slide my hand around her and cup one of Maya's breasts. I thumb one of her nipples while she shivers and gasps in my arms.

Maya twirls in my arms and reaches her hands toward my face to kiss me. Suddenly she stops as she catches sight of my erection.

"Oh. Oh my."

## Maya

He has no body hair that I can detect. The dark brown diamond pattern on his massive chest narrows down toward his tan waist. Like an arrow pointing to where I should look, grab, suck.

Oh. Oh my.

That's a really big dick. I had felt him against me, so I knew he was large, but this is something else. And it isn't like any human cock I've ever seen. It has large ribs running along its length. The ridges meet and swirl along the sides of his dick, bulging out slightly. The bumps get smaller and tighter as they get closer to the head. The rim of the head flairs out from the shaft and then gently slopes to the tip of his cock.

I'm a little intimidated. It's been quite a while for me, and I am not entirely sure I can handle him.

I wonder what those ridges feel like. I drop to my knees and place one hand on D'Avii's thigh. With my other hand, I lightly wrap my hand around his cock. I look up at D'Avii's face to make sure this is okay. He is staring at me avidly, his eyes literally glowing in his face.

Even here he has scales. They are so tiny and seamless that I can only see them because I am so close. His balls appear to be more of a large lump that is tight against his body instead of the hanging sack I am used to seeing.

I brush my hand up and down his cock. His skin is soft and slightly thicker feeling than a human's. The ridges are stiff but have some give when I squeeze gently. That's going to feel amazing inside me. D'Avii's thigh quivers under my hand.

What would those bumps and grooves feel like against my tongue? I lean forward and run my tongue from his sack all the way to the tip of his cock. The texture of his dick drags and tugs against my tongue, each bump

lighting up the nerve endings in my mouth. As I get up to the tip, I look up at D'Avii because I want to see the look on his face. As I glance up, D'Avii's lips pull tight across his teeth, and he exhales a sharp breath that sounds just like a hiss.

The look on his face is intense and burns me on the spot. His pupils have grown so wide they almost appear oval. He is entirely still except for the flicking of his tongue. I bet this is what a mouse sees right before a viper strikes.

D'Avii tumbles me to the ground and briskly parts my knees as he kneels between them. He runs a hand up the seam of my panties.

"Mmm, wet," he hums.

D'Avii grasps both sides of my underwear and tears them down my legs. He tosses them aside as he lowers his face over me. The first lick has me gasping. The second has me clutching his horns and arching up from the floor. He gives me long, slow licks up my center. Then he flicks my clit with his snake-like tongue. I used to think his tongue was strange and intimidating. I was wrong; it is the best thing in the universe. I fucking love it.

He continues to take it slow until I am crying for more, harder, faster. Only once I am begging, does he give me the intensity I need. I am so close. I am going to come all over his face.

D'Avii slides one thick finger inside me, and it sets me off. A wave of euphoria pulses through my body and I keen and quake on the floor mat.

D'Avii slithers up my body and pauses over me with his erection pressing insistently against my opening. He hovers above me, looking at my face for a long moment. I rock my hips slightly, trying to take him inside. With a small hissing groan, he presses forward. It is a tight fit, but I am so wet he glides in with hardly any resistance. I've never felt so full.

One of D'Avii's hands is planted by my head, and the other is tightly clutching my hip. He begins thrusting powerfully into me. I curl tight to D'Avii's chest, with my arms wrapped around his neck and my thighs cradled around his hips. Every nerve ending in my body is singing. Every surge and withdrawal of his cock sends waves of electricity through my body. Oh god, I am going to come again.

My head starts to slip off the mat. I didn't realize that we had somehow scooted across the gym floor. D'Avii gently picks me up and bends me over some kind of waist-high workout bench. He wedges himself back into my body then leans down over my back. As he begins to thrust forcefully, I reach down to rub my clit. D'Avii skims his hand under mine and intertwines our fingers as we rub. The pulses of my orgasm start in my center and radiate out through my limbs. I know that I am screaming D'Avii's name, but I can't help myself. I am submerged in pleasure. D'Avii wraps his arms tightly around me and suddenly rears up so that I am even more fully impaled on him. He bites down on my neck and fucks me harder. It should hurt, but it doesn't at all. It feels fantastic. D'Avii then roars out my name as I feel him pulsing inside me.

## *D'Avii*

My control snaps when Maya puts her mouth on me. A Cerastean female would not be able to explore me with her mouth like this. An inferno of desire roars through my veins, I press Maya to the floor and wedge myself between her thighs.

Her underwear is damp with desire. The scent of Maya's excitement fills my senses. Nothing will ever make me happier than the taste of my mate on my tongue.

After I wring the first orgasm from Maya, I work my way up her body. I pause a moment above her, committing this moment to my memory forever. I press slowly inside her in slow pulses as Maya's body stretches to accommodate me.

Nothing could have prepared me for the feeling of being inside Maya. She is slick and hot. With each of my thrusts, the tight clasp of her pussy has me reeling with desire. I am desperate for her.

I gently pick Maya up and bend her over a bench. I drive back inside her. As she rubs her clit, her fingers brush against my seminal pouch. I trace my fingers down her arm to where she is strumming herself. I entwine my fingers with hers as we both work her towards another climax.

As her panting moans grow in intensity, I feel her pussy start to contract and release around my cock. I instinctually bite my mate on her nape to

ensure she does not escape me. The start of her release triggers my own. A bolt of pleasure surges up my spine. Euphoria drenches my entire body in waves of bliss.

I gently lay us back down across the bench. I hold her tight and rest my forehead between her shoulder blades. With Maya wrapped tight in my arms, I vow to myself that I will do whatever it takes to keep her at my side.

“My mate. My mate,” I whisper reverently over and over again.

Once I recover, I check over my mate’s neck. She appears fine—her delicate skin is unbroken with no significant bruising. I was unprepared for my biological instincts to demand I give my female a mating bite. For Cerastean females, the mating bite would induce estrus. Logically I know that Maya’s fertility works differently, but I was unable to deny the biological drive to bite Maya and hold her in place while I mated her.

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# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## *Maya*

D'Avii is able to find a towel so we can clean up. He was very anxious about my neck. I had to assure him that I am fine. Better than fine. His bite was insanely hot.

As I get dressed, I realize that I ripped the side seam on my skirt.

“Oh no! This was my favorite power suit!” I cry.

“Why is it called a ‘power’ suit? I have been unable to detect any power source from the clothing,” he asks.

“What? No. It just means that I feel powerful when I wear it. It gives me a sense of confidence,” I giggle.

“This restrictive clothing makes you feel confident?” he questions.

I nod my head.

“Interesting. I will add that to the report on human attire,” D'Avii says.

“You guys and your reports! How am I going to get back to the dorms in this skirt? My ass will be hanging out,” I lament.

“I will carry you, my sweet mate, so that no one but I will see your lovely ass,” he tells me.

And that is precisely what he does. As D'Avii carries me past the women's lounge, I can see Ally, Trinh, and Laney clutching each other and beaming at me. I want to disappear because it couldn't be more obvious what we've been up to. A walk of shame. Actually, it's a reverse walk of shame—but I'm not walking, and I'm not ashamed. Plus, this is not a walk after we are done, more of an interim stroll between rounds.

“By the way, I found out that you do not like coffee. Why didn't you say something?” I ask D'Avii.

“I like coffee because I get to share it with you,” he responds.

“Well, okay. That’s really sweet. But from now on, I want complete honesty between us. If you don’t enjoy something, just tell me. Besides, I think I know something different that you will like.”

“What’s that, my Mi-mi?” he asks.

“It’s called hot cocoa. You’re going to love it. And if you don’t, we will find something else for you to drink while I have my coffee. Okay?”

“Yes,” he promises.

As we enter through the main door of the room, I can hear Laney whooping it up and Trinh telling me to ‘Get it gurl.’ We pass by Sara in the living room, who looks up from her book with a look of shock on her face. Tribble is perched on her shoulder nibbling on a gherro.

“Was that a dolci?” D’Avii questions as we enter my room.

“Yes, and don’t ask. You don’t want to know,” I tell him. I motion for him to wait while I grab a sock out of my drawer and hang it on my door intercom panel.

Once I peel off my destroyed clothes, I kneel on my bed crooking my finger at my mate.

“Get over here,” I tell him.

D’Avii starts to climb on my bed when I click my tongue at him.

“No. No. Too many clothes. Get naked,” I tsk.

D’Avii peels down his uniform, revealing his magnificent form an inch at a time. I don’t know if he realizes the show he is putting on, but I am a fan.

I direct him to lie down while I lounge next to him partially propped up on one arm. He is a feast laid out before me. I run the back of my fingers down his temple, across his jaw, trailing my fingers to his chin. I rub my finger over his full lips until he teasingly flicks me with his tongue. I gently knead his chest and trace the veins in his arms down to his fingertips. I run the pad of my thumb over the sharp tip of his horn.

I want to memorize every inch of him.

D’Avii follows my every movement with a burning, half-lidded gaze. His amber eyes lit with a banked fire.

I sit up and straddle D’Avii. I rub myself up and down his erection. I would call this dry-humping, but I’m so wet. I want to tease him for a bit,

so I rub myself against the ridges on his dick. I am slick and hot against him. The feel of the bumps against my clit is already pushing me towards orgasm. I meant to tease D'Avii, but I am teasing myself as well. Suddenly D'Avii plants his feet, lifts me by my waist and thrusts up into me. All I can do is gasp and groan as he lunges into me from below. D'Avii uses his tongue to encircle and tug on my nipples as he moves me up and down his cock. When I come, D'Avii follows right after.



Later we cuddle together on my bed while D'Avii tells me about the Cerastean Mating Ceremony.

“I have been studying the matrimonial traditions from your part of the earth. What do you think about incorporating some of your human traditions into our Mating Ceremony? It would be a good way to represent the blending of our people,” D'Avii suggests.

“I love that idea. I wonder what we should include? Maybe I could get a dress and some flowers? Could the girls be my bridesmaids?” I ask.

“Anything you want, my mate. Although I admit, some of your wedding traditions are confusing to me.”

“Like what?” I ask.

“Why must the bride and her mate smear cake on each other’s faces?” he asks.

“You know what. I have no idea why that’s a thing. I would actually really prefer if we didn’t do that,” I tell him.

“Excellent. I would be glad to leave that out of our ceremony,” he states.

“I have another question actually,” D'Avii murmurs hesitantly.

“Ok,” I say.

“Why did you put a sock on your door panel? Is this a human mating ritual I should know about?” he asks.

I giggle, lean over to kiss him and tell him I will explain later.

Much later.

I plan to keep him occupied for the next several hours.

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# NOTES

## *Willow's World Famous Salted Caramel Chocolate Cookies*

*(Don't tell Willow)*

### **Ingredients**

½ cup room temperature unsalted butter  
½ cup sugar  
½ cup dark brown sugar  
1 large egg  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract  
1 cup all-purpose flour  
⅔ cup cocoa powder, unsweetened  
1 teaspoon baking soda  
⅛ teaspoon salt  
2 tablespoons half and half  
1 ½ cups milk chocolate morsels  
Werther's Soft Caramels, one for each cookie  
Coarse sea salt

### **Directions**

1. Cream the butter in a mixer on medium speed. Add both sugars. Cream together until light and fluffy. Add egg and vanilla.
2. In a medium bowl sift flour, cocoa, baking soda, and salt together.

3. Slowly spoon dry ingredients into the mixer. Pour in half and half.
4. Turn off mixer and fold in chocolate morsels.
5. Chill dough in the fridge for at least an hour.
6. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
7. Roll 2 tablespoons of dough into a ball. Gently press one caramel piece into the center of the ball. Make sure caramel is completely covered, then flatten the ball slightly and place on a lined cookie sheet.
8. Repeat with the remainder of dough. You should get between 16 to 20 cookies.
9. Sprinkle each cookie with sea salt.
10. Bake for 12-14 minutes. Allow to cool a bit before eating. Cookies will be very soft and gooey.

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# CHARACTERS

## *Humans*

**Maya Arnold:** 23 years old; medium height & build; long, light-brown hair; hazel eyes; left college early to help her family with bills and taking care of sister. Joins the Bride Program in an attempt to save her sister Tasha.

**Ally:** 25 years old, short blonde hair with thick-rimmed glasses. Wanted to be an astronaut. Has a degree in aeronautical engineering.

**Laney:** 28 years old, tall, red-headed and covered in freckles. Her fiance cheated on her a few years ago, and she has had no luck dating. After a series of terrible dates, she decides to give the aliens a try.

**Trinh:** Vietnamese, 25 years old. She had cancer but submitted herself to the program to get cured. Vows to live every day to its fullest. Loves couture clothing. Loves high heels and how they confuse the Cerasteans. She had a wig but is now growing out her straight black hair.

**Sara:** 26 years old. Medium length brown hair. Short and very thin. Extremely quiet and shy. Also the de facto leader of the Dulci Liberation Front.

**Dr. Serena Salcedo:** 33 years old, slender, dark wavy black hair, brown eyes. Hematologist, focused, slightly nerdy, black hair—usually in a bun.

**Willow Arnold:** Maya's mother. Troublemaker. Amazing chef and baker. Devoted to her family.

**Tasha Arnold:** Maya's little sister. She is 12 years old, suffers from leukemia. Vivacious and bold. Loves movies and television, especially sci-fi.

**George Arnold:** Maya and Tasha's father. A loveable teddy bear of a man. Quiet but loves his girls dearly.

## *Cerastean Warriors*

**Commander D'Avii:** Large, quiet & reserved. A decorated warrior. Because of his patience and years of experience, he trains many of the younger warriors. Yearns for a mate and family. Devoted lover of reports.

**General D'Annon:** General of all the Warriors on Cerastean ship *B187*. Very observant and has a serious demeanor.

**Scout D'Rett:** Gentle giant. Nest bonded to Scout L'Tarne.

## *Cerastean Scientists*

**Chancellor L'Forn:** Leader of the Cerastean refugees

**Director L'Corte:** Head of the Bride Program on Cerastean ship *B187*. Occasionally condescending. Believes that everyone should act with decorum, so human women confound him. However, he is a good person who is working tirelessly for the good of his people and the humans.

**L'Arc:** Scientist who works with the dulcis. Smitten with Laney.

**Scout L'Tarne:** Scout pilot, specializes in fixing and maintaining the scout ship. Secret rom-com fanatic. Loves and embraces everything human. Has a nest bond with Scout D'Rett.

**Physician L'Vect:** intelligent, tall, lean but muscular, and easily distracted. Has trouble understanding and interacting with others, especially humans.

Social cues and bedside manner are not his forte.

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# ABOUT DANE GRIGGS

Dane Griggs lives in Florida with her very-patient husband, two trouble-making children, a bratty long-hair dachshund, and too many fish tanks. In her spare time—which like most moms, she has very little of—she loves to read (a lot!), write, watch movies, drink wine & pots of coffee, tend her aquaponic garden, go surfing, do wood working, and volunteer with the PTA and Girl Scouts.

Saving Ceraste, Dane Grigg's first series, chronicles a group of alien warriors and scientists who have been roaming the galaxy since the destruction of their planet. They believed their generation would be the last until they found earth and its women. Working with the world's governments, they offer to share their technology—including cures for many common diseases—in exchange for help. Thus, The Bride Program is born. Follow the adventures of the Cerasteans, the bride volunteers, doctors, and others on their adventures to build a better tomorrow.

Mrs. Griggs enjoys writing about relationships that evolve and grow over time, with lots of super-hot sex. She strives to put her characters in interesting situations where their strength and wit shine through—no Mary Sues allowed. So grab a bottle of wine and come hang-out in the mind of Dane Griggs and a world of characters you would actually enjoy sharing that bottle with. And if you are into it, be sure to follow Dane Griggs on Amazon.

Interested in becoming a Beta Reader who receives pre-release copies of Dane Griggs work in exchange for feedback, sign-up at <http://www.danegriggs.com>

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