



THE ALIEN'S
DOMAIN

ROVING STAR BOOK 7

BIANCA BELL

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ROVING STAR SERIES BOOK 7

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Synopsis of *The Alien's Bargain*

Book 1 of the *Roving Star* Series

When Cassidy accidentally becomes the negotiator for the entrance of humans into an alliance of the known species of higher intelligence, she thinks she is the worst person for the job—not least because she is more than a little attracted to the alien Q, who is not just the captain of the ship where she has been taken for these negotiations, but the leader of his species, the Vinree.

Negotiations take a turn for the better when Cassidy learns that humans are biologically compatible with the other species of higher intelligence. Because all the women of the other species have died from a disease simply known as the Extinction Virus, this gives humans the biggest bargaining chip on the table and a chance to secure their future forever.

Unfortunately, before Cassidy can complete negotiations, another alien species shows up at Earth, wanting humans for themselves. Thankfully, before an all-out battle can commence, a fleet of ships belonging to the Vinree shows up and saves humanity.

With humanity saved, Cassidy successfully negotiates the place of humans in the known universe, along with the protection of the Vinree. She also successfully negotiates her way into the heart of Q, who requests that she come with him to their home planet of Oprima, along with some of her friends who might want to see the universe—and maybe help the Vinree survive as a species.

Synopsis of *The Alien's Problem*

Book 2 of the *Roving Star* Series

When Alissa arrives on the *Roving Star*, the Vinree ship that is taking her and nine other human women—along with a crew of sexy Vinree men—to the Vinree home planet of Oprima, she has no intention of falling for anyone on the crew. It has only been a few months since she had her heart broken when her fiancé left her at the altar, and it's time for her to spread her wings and fly, not get roped into yet another relationship.

But then she meets Yosu, who is exactly the sort of guy she wants in life. She can see making a life with him, right down to the 2.4 kids and the dog in the yard (even if it is a half alien dog). The only thing is, he claims to have some problem that will prevent him from ever being a proper partner for Alissa. Once again, she has fallen for the wrong someone.

As the *Roving Star* gets closer to Oprima, something goes wrong, and everyone on board finds themselves at the edge of the known galaxy, in a star system with only one marginally habitable planet. It becomes clear that this planet will have to become their home while the *Roving Star* gets fixed, even though it is inhabited by what appear to be dinosaurs. When Alissa finds herself stuck on the planet and about to be eaten, Yosu comes to her rescue, and he discovers that his “problem”—that he can't have kids of his own—is not something that she cares about. The two of them will be able to create a life together. It's not the life that either had planned for themselves—it's even better.

Synopsis of *The Alien's Aim*

Book 3 of the *Roving Star* Series

Artie is a woman who doesn't need anyone else in her life—especially a man. When she gets on the *Roving Star* to head to Oprima, she has one goal: keep her friends and herself safe from any aliens that might try anything. The last thing Artie expects is to attract any attention from any of these aliens.

But there is someone on the *Roving Star* who wants her attention, and his name is Orie. Orie only has eyes for Artie. However, Artie isn't about to give up all she has worked for because some guy has finally paid her some attention, even if he is the sexiest alien on the *Roving Star*.

When Artie and Orie are forced to work together to provide security on the planet of Jurassia, where the *Roving Star* is stranded, Artie starts to realize Orie is not that bad of a man. Still, when she wants to explore a part of Jurassia Orie doesn't want to explore, she ditches him to do so.

But then, Artie finds herself facing off against some of the dinosaurs living on the planet, and she realizes she needs someone else to save her, despite everything she has done to make sure she never needs anyone else. Thankfully, Orie finds her before anything can happen to her. Saved from danger, Artie realizes that it isn't so bad to allow a man into her life—especially a sexy alien like Orie.

Synopsis of *The Alien's Surprise*

Book 4 of the *Roving Star* Series

Sophie knows all about bad men like Doba, and she wants nothing to do with that sort of a man. And yet, there is something about Doba that Sophie can't help but be attracted to, even if he drives her crazy with his quiet, brooding, and dark ways. When Asul forces the Sophie to work with Doba, she starts to discover a different side to this dangerous-looking man, and her attraction to him grows.

But then, when they are searching for non-dinosaur life on Jurassia, they come across a small band of Sintar warriors living deep underground, who capture Doba. Sophie knows it is up to her to save Doba, and she almost succeeds in doing so before being captured herself.

Together, Sophie and Doba manage not only to escape the Sintar, but to help the Sintar warriors get rid of an oppressive leader. Despite the traditional enmity between the Vinree and the Sintar, their mutual need to live and survive on Jurassia creates an alliance forged by Sophie and Doba, and the three species come together to live underground on the dinosaur planet of Jurassia. Sophie finally recognizes that Doba is not the sort of bad man she needs to avoid; he's exactly the right kind of good man she want in her life forever.

Synopsis of *The Alien's Education*

Book 5 of the *Roving Star* Series

Shana, like all the human women, is happy to have the help of the Sintar while they try to survive life on Jurassia, the brutal dinosaur planet where they are stranded. However, despite the help they are going to provide to the humans and Vinree, the Sintar are known to be a brutal, ruthless species. Shana doesn't want to have any more contact with them than is necessary to survive until they can get off Jurassia and back to civilization.

But then, Shana feels the strangest attraction to one of the Sintar men, Talu. It's almost as if there is something inside her that draws her to him. It turns out, Talu considers Shana his "beloved"—his fated mate—and if she doesn't reciprocate the attraction, it just might kill Talu.

As Shana gets to know Talu, she realizes that he isn't the horrible alien she had been led to believe he would be. If anything, he is the best thing that has ever happened to her. When Shana gets sick with some disease that no one understands, it looks like she is done for. Just before the sickness kills her, it is discovered the only thing wrong with her is that she is pregnant, and her body is only fighting to keep the baby alive at any and all costs. It turns out, a Sintar alien is everything Shana has ever wanted in her life.

Synopsis of *The Alien's Fear*

Book 6 of the *Roving Star* Series

Dani knows she should love the life she is now living—after the near-disaster she and her friends encountered on Jurasia, she’s living on the ultra-modern Vinree planet of Oprima and she has everything she could ever want right at her fingertips. Except, Dani doesn’t like any of it. She misses her quiet life back home, and she wonders if she ever should have joined this excursion with the aliens and her friends.

But then, Dani meets two Vinree. U’sup is rich, famous, and can promise her the universe and then give it to her. Klauk is dark and mysterious, and he is hiding a huge secret about his past. Dani knows she should be attracted to U’sup, but it’s the enigmatic Klauk who draws her attention.

Dani soon realizes Klauk’s secret: he tried and failed to help save several kidnapped Vinree women during the time of the Extinction Virus. His failure still haunts him. When Dani is kidnapped from a party on Oprima, Klauk is forced to re-live the time of the Extinction Virus and his failure. This time, though, he saves Dani. Dani realizes she can’t live without her haunted Vinree, and the two find their way to Klauk’s home planet, a backwater planet where the two of them can live in peace, away from the spotlight like they both want to do.

Chapter One

Camille

The moment I step out of the pod, Shana lets out a happy scream and rushes—or, more aptly, quickly waddles—over to me. She reaches out her arms and attempts to hug me, but her large belly gets in the way, lending an air of hilarity to the attempt.

“I know, I’m huge!” Shana pulls out of the half hug, then puts her arms around her pregnant belly. “I don’t know if I am going to give birth to a person or an elephant!”

Behind me, the pod takes off. Asul had told me it would be leaving almost immediately upon my arrival as a safety precaution against the dinosaurs that live here on Jurassia. They are attracted to the technology that makes the pods, and most of the other fancy alien gadgets I’ve grown used to lately, work. It doesn’t seem like it, but it’s much safer for us on Jurassia without a means of escape nearby than it is to be here with the pods and the escape route they provide us.

Shana, seemingly aching to talk to another human in person, doesn’t stop speaking as we head into the familiar tunnel that leads to Sintaria, the small cave dwelling where I briefly lived and where Shana still lives. We ended up here thanks to a malfunctioning ship. Despite the short time I spent here, it feels a little like returning home.

Shana only has an hour or so with me here, though, so I don’t blame her for wanting to do as much talking as possible. In an hour, I’m leaving with Intar, one of the Sintar who lives here still, and heading to their home planet of Forlia on what I am thinking of as a goodwill mission.

If I think of it as what our goodwill mission actually is—a mission to prevent an all-out war between the Sintar and the Vinree, the species that “discovered” us humans a few months ago—it makes me want to freak out.

So, goodwill mission it is.

“How big is Cassidy?” I follow Shana, our voices echoing against the walls of the tunnel as soon as we are inside its relative safety.

“Not as big as you.” I saw Cassidy just a few days ago, right before we left on this mission. She is pregnant by Q, the leader of the Vinree. Technically, she has been pregnant longer, but you wouldn’t know it by looking at the two of them. Cassidy looks pregnant, but Shana looks like she is going to have her baby any day now.

“The worst part is, Asul says I’ve got at least two or three more months before this little one decides to make an appearance. It’s a good thing Asul doesn’t have a physical body, or I am not sure she would have survived telling me that. Also, I’m pretty sure I have three months, and she gave me a lower time estimate to make me feel better.” Shana shakes her head, knowing, as we all do, that Asul may be some sort of AI or computer, but she is closer to a biological person than those terms give her credit for. She is well known for stretching the truth, telling people what they want to hear, and otherwise doing what she thinks is right, even if it sometimes has unintended consequences.

Shana keeps chatting about things that have happened since I left Jurassia. She has told me plenty of these things in emails, but it’s nice to see her in person. Back on Oprimia, there is some limited ability to communicate with Earth almost instantaneously, but they don’t have that yet here on Jurassia. Asul is still unsure how it would affect the dinosaurs, and until she is sure the dinosaurs will be OK with it and not go all kill-kill-kill on the humans and aliens who live here, everyone on Jurassia is going to be stuck dealing with less instantaneous forms of communication, like email.

I sometimes tell Shana about life on Oprimia in our correspondence, but there really isn’t much to tell, as far as I am concerned. I live in a sort of bubble, with little contact with the outside world, lest I get ambushed or otherwise accosted just because I am one of only few human women on the planet who are considered available. There are some dinners and events, but otherwise, I spend most of my

time in a compound on the planet. I have everything I could want, except the ability to do much of anything outside that compound.

There was a reason I volunteered for this trip to Forlia, despite how much rides on it and despite how much I'm worried about what I have to do.

I'm bored out of my mind back on Oprima.

When we reach the bottom of the tunnel, the large cavern that houses everyone who lives on Jurassia appears beneath bright lights, its small houses and layout familiar and comforting. As we step out of the tunnel and into the cavern, a large figure, his red skin shining in the light, his tail flicking in happiness, comes bounding toward us.

"Talu!" The way Shana says his name, you would think she hadn't seen him in weeks, even though I am sure it has only been minutes since they last saw each other.

"My Shana." Talu, a Sinter, does not naturally show his feelings toward women, but thanks to some lessons he got from some of us humans when he first fell for Shana, he seems to have learned well. He pulls Shana toward him, nuzzling her neck with his lips. I see his tail wrap around Shana's leg, both affectionately and protectively.

Shana squirms out of his grasp, clearly happy with the affection and a little embarrassed that it is happening with me right here. Talu finally seems to recognize that I am here for the first time when she becomes uncomfortable. "Camille, it is so good to see you again."

"It is good to see you, Talu. It looks like you're taking good care of Shana."

"Only the best for her and our baby." I can see that the other Sinter who still live here on Jurassia are coming out of their homes and making their way over to us. I smile at them. The Sinter are far more reserved than either humans or Vinree, but they got used to us humans at least a little during the time we spent here, so I even see a few awkward smiles among them in response to mine. I'm sure they're excited to see anyone different on the planet, especially a

woman. When that woman is supposed to be visiting their home planet, like I am about to, she is probably that much more interesting.

What I don't see is the one Sintar I am here to fetch: Intar.

"Where's Intar?" I ask. We are only supposed to be here an hour or so. If we are here longer, Asul is going to have a fit. I don't need a lecture from her, especially if I am not the one responsible for us being late.

"Oh, I'm sure he is around here somewhere." Shana gestures generally at the cavern. "Talu, why don't you go see if you can find him."

Shana takes me to the home she and Talu share, where she has been busy preparing for their baby. Shana's little house looks like a baby store blew up inside it, with nursery items everywhere. There is a crib, and everything on the walls is some shade of pink.

It's a far cry from Shana's goth-like look.

"I thought you weren't finding out if you're having a boy or a girl." The room around me clearly indicates that Shana is having a girl.

"Shh...don't tell Talu. I couldn't wait to learn, even though he wants to. Luckily, he has no idea that pink means girl, so he is happily oblivious. No one else here has any idea, either, so whenever I use the manufacturing printers to make something for the house, or have Asul send me something here, no one has any idea. It's great." I smile and shake my head at this, but Shana's secret is safe with me. "Plus, I am sort of scared about what would happen if I had a boy. The two penis thing is great when it comes to Talu, but can you imagine a baby boy with two penises? That's just strange."

I can't help but giggle at this. I sometimes forget that the Sintar have two cocks—a large one with a smaller one on top. The first time I saw them in a porn Asul showed us, it was shocking. Apparently, the Sintar women used their tails to stimulate the top one during sex. Clearly, that's not happening with Shana and Talu, but apparently however she handles that second cock makes him happy.

Shana puts some fruit on the table, and I recognize it as some of the delicious food that grows here on Jurassia. I take a personal favorite—a small pink ball that looks like an oddly colored grape and tastes like a strawberry—and pop it into my mouth. I haven't had one since we left Jurassia, but its taste is as good as I remember it being.

The two of us chat for a bit, Shana glowing and happy from her pregnancy. I am getting more anxious with every minute that passes where Intar doesn't arrive.

Finally, with only a few minutes before we are scheduled to leave, Talu returns to the house, with Intar in tow.

As a Sintar, Intar's natural personality is very serious. Still, he is one of the less serious of the Sintar. He is one of those who has learned to smile at us humans, and I even heard him attempt to make a joke once.

But the Intar who shows up at the house is anything but this happy Sintar I remember. His face has a look like he is being led to his execution, without a hint of levity or brightness in his eyes. Even his normally red skin looks pale and sickly.

"Is something wrong, Intar?" I ask, wondering what could have caused this sort of change in him.

He shakes his head no, but I can see that is a lie.

Something is wrong.

And I am pretty sure whatever is wrong has to do with the trip to Forlia we are about to embark upon.

Chapter Two

Dani

It takes us five days to reach Forlia.

During that time, I hardly ever see Intar, except when we are forced together by circumstances. I am acting as a representative of humans, and Intar is acting as one for the Sintar on Jurassia. Most of why we are here is because the Vinree want to ensure there are no problems between the Sintar and us humans, but we're also here because of the Sintar on Jurassia. The Sintar on Forlia refuse to recognize those on Jurassia as existing, because they were originally sent to Jurassia to secretly attempt to save some of their women from the Extinction Virus that killed off all the known women in the universe, except us humans. Even though it didn't work, the Sintar still think they can get in trouble for their actions under whatever treaties these aliens have between themselves.

As if any of that matters now that the species can be saved by us human women.

The Sintar are known as a rough and stern species, but I would think Intar would be at least a little excited to be returning to his home planet. Yet, he seems like he is walking to his execution.

When we are only a few hours away from our arrival, I finally decide I have to talk to Intar about his mood. If there is something wrong, I need to know it before it comes up at an awful moment. The last thing I want is to be discussing relationships between all the species out here in the universe and find out something that can destroy whatever goodwill may have been created at that point.

Asul lets me know when he heads to the dining room on the ship—an actual, restaurant-like room, as this is a ship meant for pleasure, not exploration or war like the *Rising Star*, the previous Vinree ship I was on—and I head straight there.

I see him, sitting at a corner table, clearly attempting to avoid the few people who are on the ship. It was built to hold probably 100 Vinree,

but there are only 15 or so of us on the ship, and most of the Vinree are on the ship to help run it. Only three of us are here as part of the goodwill team.

I smile as I approach his table, where he has already started eating. I hope the gesture will throw him off. I want him to think I'm only here to talk about boring things, not whatever is bothering him.

"Intar, you've made yourself scarce since you got on the ship." I take the seat across from him, not bothering to let him invite me to do so. He still looks as bad as he did when we were on Jurassia and I first saw him. If anything, he looks worse than he did then.

Instead of responding with words, I get something like a grunt out of Intar. The noise makes it clear he doesn't even want to make small talk, let alone have the conversation I want to have with him.

I choose to ignore the noise and its clear implications.

I had planned to be nice, but I can see that's unlikely to get me anywhere. Intar already looks like he is planning to get up and just leave, rather than be forced to talk to me.

"Intar, what's wrong? Something is clearly bothering you, and I need to know what it is. I have a whole planet full of women back on Earth who are counting on me to make sure that the Sintar abide by the treaty we've signed. These are women who could come back to Forlia and help repopulate your species. You know Talu and Shana. You know this is possible, and you know how much those two care for each other. But if you are hiding something that could affect our talks while we're here, that could ruin those chances. Neither of us want that."

Intar sighs, both as if this is something he has already thought of, and because he doesn't want to talk about it.

I give him my best, stern look. I know it is working when he looks away.

Something tells me Asul is in his head, too, telling him he needs to talk to me. Between the two of us, this seems to be enough to get him talking.

“The other Sintar chose me to go back as an emissary for a specific reason. No one ever explicitly said it, because no one needed to say it as we all already knew. There isn’t any reason any of you would have ever known it.” Intar looks around, as if there is someone who would be looking for him. It’s like if he says anything, he will get himself in trouble. “I didn’t agree with the decision for the same reason they made it. But I would never go against a decision like this. There was no other real choice we had among those of us who are left on the planet.”

Intar hesitates again, not wanting to finish the thought. “Intar, you need to tell me about this.”

He moves some food around his plate, then looks up. “I’m not just another Sintar. Do you know Toku Tschar?”

I nod. He’s the leader of the Sintar, and he is the main person we are heading to Forlia to meet. I know more about him than I know about any other Sintar, thanks to a lot of reading. Whatever the Vinree know about him, I know about him.

“He’s...” Intar stops speaking, as if he is considering one last time whether to keep this a secret. “He’s my half-brother.”

Chapter Three

Toku

Standing on the balcony outside my main office in the imperial palace, I look to the sky.

It is a gray day here today, but even if it wasn't, I still wouldn't be able to see the ship I know has entered orbit around Forlia. Even so, coming out here and looking up to the sky is what I need to do right now.

But as soon as I do, I feel the ire rising through me, growing to a level I haven't felt in a long time. The last time I can remember feeling this angry was when I was a much younger man and had less control over my emotions.

When the Vinree sent their initial list of who would be coming to Forlia for what I fully expect to be pointless discussions, nothing about the individuals list had raised any flags among either myself or anyone else here on Forlia.

But today, when the Vinree ship arrived in orbit, they sent an updated list of who would be participating in the discussions.

Before, there had been an entry for an unknown Sintar. Years ago, when the Extinction Virus began killing off our women, we sent a group of Sintar to a known, but unimportant and mostly ignored planet, hoping that they could preserve our species should something happen to the rest of our women. This violated various treaties we have with the other known species of higher intelligence, but we did not care then. We were in a desperate race for survival, and I am sure we were not the only species that tried something like that.

However, when the virus killed off all our women on our planets, as well as those on the planet where we had sent the group in hopes of survival, it provided a convenient method for me to take care of a problem I had sought to take care of for many years.

Intar.

My younger, half-brother, Intar was always our father's favorite. Most Sintar form one, lifelong bond with a female, but my father was extremely unusual in that he managed to form two in his lifetime. My mother died when I was a young boy, and we thought we would lose my father to the grief, as often happens when a Sinter loses his or her beloved. But he formed another bond during his recovery with another, and their union produced Intar.

When it came time to potentially save our species by sending others to a far off planet, my father chose Intar to help save us, not myself.

I stayed behind. When his second mate died, we lost my father to the grief, and I ascended to become leader of the Sinter. Perhaps I should have viewed this as something good. Becoming the leader of the Sinter should be the highest honor I could want.

Except I knew, had my father loved me the most, I would have been the one who was sent away to help save our species.

And to me, that love would have meant far more than being the leader of our great species. We Sinter may be known among the known species as being vicious and violent, but we value love. It is our love that may make us vicious and violent—we understand the importance of fighting for and defending that which is most important.

When we learned that the women on the other planet had died of the virus as well, we could have brought the men who had been sent there home.

But I chose not to, denying that these men even existed. It was convenient. We had violated treaties, and by choosing not to acknowledge this, I could get rid of Intar and the potential threat to my rule. If I couldn't have my father's love, I could at least be a great leader of the Sinter.

It was perfect, and it worked for many years.

But now, Intar is back.

I look up at the sky, my mind already working through the many methods I could use to take care of this problem. In a few minutes, I

will be heading to one of our ships orbiting Forlia, where I will meet my brother again for the first time in decades.

This time, I need to take care of my problem with my brother for good.

Chapter Four

Camille

Looking down at Forlia from our ship, I am surprised to see just how Earth-like it looks.

Oprima, the home planet of the Vinree, is extremely developed. Most of the planet is city or suburban, but even most of those areas that aren't are neatly partitioned into fields or carefully cultivated to appear natural. Nothing there is wild. From the sky, its development is obvious, from the lights of the parts of the planet where it is dark, to the hard, unnatural lines of the daytime landscape.

Forlia, though, could be Earth, but for the different locations and shapes of its continents. White clouds streak across its sky, and blue oceans stretch huge distances across its surface. Green forests on its continents give way to mountains and deserts. As we see darkness below us during the portion of our orbit that takes us over parts of the planet experiencing nighttime, the lights are mostly concentrated in city areas, with smaller cities scattered elsewhere. Large swaths of the continents appear wild and undeveloped.

I've never been here before, but it feels like home—even more so than Jurassia did on our brief return there. And it definitely feels more like home than Oprima.

It is hard to believe a species the Vinree do not trust at all and who are known to be malicious come from a place like this.

Intar is standing next to me, his nervous energy obvious.

"Forlia looks like Earth. It makes me miss home." I gesture to the planet we are orbiting.

"Forlia is a wonderful place. I have missed it, as I am sure you miss your own home." Now that he says it, I can sense that there is some sadness coming through Intar's anxiousness. Or maybe, it's more of a regret for having left in the first place.

Asul's voice interrupts our gazing at the planet below, reminding us that we have something to do other than sightsee. "I wanted to remind the two of you that you are scheduled head to Sintar ship in less than half an hour."

Inwardly, I groan. I get the feeling this is how Intar feels as well. I didn't press Intar for more information on his relationship with his half-brother, the leader of the Sintar, but I got the distinct feeling their relationship was not good.

I doubt that anyone who had a good relationship with a half-brother would have abandoned that brother on a planet full of dinosaurs for two decades. That's the sort of thing you do to someone you never want to see again.

Clearly, there is a lot more going on between these two than Intar wants to talk about. I need to learn more about it, but I didn't think I could press Intar in that moment. For now, I am hoping it's enough to just know of the bad relationship.

I have to hope this is enough. I can't have something like this ruin everything for us humans. I decide to take one last shot at getting the information out of Intar.

"Is there anything I should know about this meeting?" I ask. "Things I should or shouldn't do? Things I should or shouldn't say? Things I need to know?"

"You know the formality of the Sintar. Your Earthling informality will likely take them by surprise, even though they have likely already read of it and know to expect it."

Intar is silent for a few seconds, pondering whether to say something else. "Also, I do not think my brother will be happy to see me. I don't think he ever thought he would see me alive again, and I am sure he was happy about that."

It's just what I was worried about. I try to get more information out of him, but that's all Intar will say. The words hang like an ominous warning in my mind.

Now, Intar isn't the only one who is nervous.

Toku

The three pods arrive from the Vinree ship, smoothly arriving on the landing platform of our ship. The pods are sleek and seemingly seamless, unlike our own clunkier transports. Our engineers have long sought a way to recreate the Vinree technology and metals in these pods and their ships, but we have not been able to do so.

It is yet another reminder of the many things I dislike about the Vinree.

As if I needed another reminder of the things I dislike about the Vinree. The fact that they are the ones who first came across the humans is enough to make me hate them forever.

I want it to have been us Sintar who came across the humans first. If it had been us, I wouldn't be here, practically begging to have contact with the humans so that us Sintar can perpetuate our species.

And yet, I am excited that today, I will finally meet one of the humans.

The first of the pods open, revealing a Vinree man. He looks like all of them, with their pearly skin and colorful tattoos. This one's tattoos are deep blue, and I have been told that his name is Tinda. This is about as much information as I ever want to know about him, and I ignore him to see the second pod opening.

I force my face to be blank with emotion as soon as I see the red skin of a Sintar in the pod. Soon, the entirety of the Sintar comes into view, sitting back in the seat of the pod.

He looks older than when he left, but his face still retains the round cheeks and bright eyes of his mother, making him seem younger than his years. His thin, pointed nose is that of our father, as are his larger than normal horns, the slight protrusions that most of us have almost twice as long on my half-brother. Back when there were

female Sintar, those horns would have driven them wild. They always enjoyed men with larger horns.

I continue to make my face a blank slate, even as Intar's shock and surprise at seeing me on the terrace registers.

I know what he sees—his half-brother, dressed in the regalia of a leader.

When he left, this would have been worn by my father, but now, it is I who wears it. Surely, Intar has learned I am now the leader of the Sintar, but to see me dressed in this clothing seems to have surprised him.

This makes me happy.

The third pod begins to open, and I know I should look to see the first human I have ever been in the presence of, but my desire to keep watching Intar almost keeps me from doing so.

But then, I catch a glimpse of something shining from inside the pod, and my attention is distracted from Intar to this human.

The glint comes from several bracelets on her wrist, their gold color bright against her deep, brown skin.

Most of the human women whose pictures I have seen have lighter skin than this woman, somewhere in color between us Sintar and the Vinree, but this woman's skin is rich and deep brown.

The pod continues opening, and my brother is forgotten as I stare at the Earthling is exposed.

She is more beautiful than anything I have ever seen. I have learned that all the humans wear far more clothing than necessary, hiding their bodies. This one does as well, her chest and most of her legs covered by a yellow dress, its cloth formed around her body and showing off curves at her hips and breasts that were entirely missing from our Sintar women.

But it is her face that draws my attention. Her mouth is formed into a smile, her white teeth bright against her deep red lips. Her brown eyes sit above a nose that is flatter than that of most Sintar, and her

curly hair forms a large frame around her face, as if it is drawing you into a painting that has somehow come to life.

The woman has not even said a word to me, and yet, I know it already.

She is my beloved.

Chapter Five

Camille

On my outside, I hope I am the picture of a professional young woman on a goodwill mission as I am introduced to the two Sintar who have met us at the loading dock of their ship.

On the inside, I am a mess.

One of the Sintar is a liaison, and he introduces himself as Phochu. He is polite and staid, just as the Sintar from Jurassia were. However, just by interacting with us, I can tell he is making an effort to be more outgoing than he would be normally. He tells us that, as part of an introduction to their leader, the Sintar have a formal introduction ceremony.

I have been told to expect this, so I am not surprised when the liaison begins a slow chant that sounds like monks back on Earth. In another situation, it might be hypnotic or relaxing, but everything about this situation is anything but those things.

Because the Sintar leader, Toku Tschar?

I can't take my eyes off him. He is tall, even for a Sintar, and the two horns protruding from his head just add to the perception of height he is giving off. His red skin is deeper than that of any of the Sintar back on Jurassia I have met. It's not the pale, sometimes almost pink skin of those Sintar, but a deep, rich red that isn't so much bold as it is warm. Like every alien species, he is wearing virtually no clothing, just a pair of boxer-like pants. His tail flicks lazily behind him, as if he doesn't even know it is happening.

The man is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

I catch him looking at me, and I look away quickly, trying to focus on Phochu the liaison instead of Toku.

Toku was looking at me in a way that was both slightly uncomfortable to my American manners that suggest staring is inappropriate, but at the same time, highly intriguing.

And, I think, he was looking at me as if he wanted to eat me alive in the best way possible.

The liaison finally finishes his chanting introduction. From learning about it before, I know it was a recitation of the long ago deeds of the family of the current ruler, Toku Tuchar, as well as his claims to the leadership of the Sintar. I briefly wonder how Intar fits into the whole story, but as soon as my mind wanders, Toku strides forward to us in a move I do not expect, based on what Asul told us would happen.

That we're off-script of what was supposed to be a very formal dinner is not helping my inability to focus on the task at hand.

Especially when Toku strides up to where I am standing.

He reaches a hand out to me, and I lift my own to shake his.

Except, instead of shaking it, he lifts it to his lips and kisses it. It's a move I would normally find cheesy and old fashioned, but I don't feel at all that way right now.

I've heard of people talking about feeling a spark between themselves and another person, but what passed between Toku and myself when he did that?

That wasn't a spark.

It was like lightning.

I don't want him to let go of my hand.

Ever.

The move is so distracting that, when he finally lets go of my hand—after holding it for a length of time that would normally have been awkwardly long, but was somehow far too short with him—it takes me a few seconds to realize how strange it was for a Sintar to engage in a behavior like that. When Talu became interested in Shana back on Jurassia, we had to tutor him in everything about human women.

It seems, though, that Toku has been reading up on ways to interact with human women.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Camille.” Toku has the deep, gruff voice that all the Sintar seem to have. Toku nods the smallest of acknowledgements at my companions then gestures toward a wall of the ship. I am somewhat taken aback by the lack of acknowledgement of them. It seems rude. Taku gestures toward a wall of a ship. There, I see what is clearly a door in the wall. The walls of the Sintar ship are not the smooth, metallic walls of the Vinree ship, but more like the walls of a ship in an old television show, with buttons and screens. It looks far more like what I would expect an alien ship to look like than the Vinree ships do.

Toku leads us through the door, and into a hallway that is, like the landing platform, very much like an old fashioned looking alien ship. “We are thrilled to have you here, Camille. Please let us know if there is anything we can do for you while you are here.”

As we walk, another Sintar comes toward us in the hallway, and I realize he is the first one we have seen, other than the liaison and Toku. Rather than just allowing him to walk past us, as soon as he sees him, Toku’s voice rings out in the hallway.

“You! You have orders.” A look of horror comes across the face of the Sintar. He seems to be surprised to see us here. “Phochu, take care of this matter. Immediately.”

There is something in the way that Toku says this that suggests something very unpleasant is about to happen to this poor Sintar who was in the hallway. I want to ask what is going to happen, but before I can, Toku turns to me.

“I’m sorry you had to see someone of that class. We wanted to keep you from having to deal with those lesser Sintar.” As soon as Toku says this, I feel the anger start to boil up in me.

“A different class? Us humans—at least the ones who have come to space—don’t think of anyone as one class or another. We judge people on whether they are good or bad people.” I try to temper my anger. I am a guest here, with a species that is far different than us humans. I may not like what he has to say, but I need to keep my mouth shut. Plus, I have to be a goodwill ambassador. What good

will it do if the first thing I say is to start telling the Sintar what they should or shouldn't do?

"You're foolish. I am sure that there are many Earthlings, even Earthling women, who are not as worthy as you are, Camille." Again, I hold my tongue. But still, the moment he says this even slightly nice thing to me, I feel my heart flutter, like I am an infatuated teenager.

That's exactly what I feel like, I suddenly realize. I feel like a teenager, with all her feelings overwhelming reason.

And I realize there is something familiar about this.

I have seen someone acting like this around a Sintar before.

Shana.

When she met Talu, it was as if she could only think of him. Her hormones went nuts, even though he was uncouth and had no idea how to treat her, especially in bed.

This is exactly how I feel.

And then I know it.

Toku is the one.

As I see him glare at the other Sintar as he slinks the opposite way, I realize I have an even bigger problem than Shana did.

A much bigger problem.

Chapter Six

Camille

This is a disaster.

A real and true disaster.

I am seated next to Intar, who almost seems to be shaking, he is so scared.

Throughout the meal, Toku keeps talking to me, as if there is no one else at the table. Still, Intar is terrified, and he just picks at his food, hardly eating anything.

But I can hardly pay attention to Intar, because Toku is there. Each word he says to me makes my heart flutter in the best of ways, and it is all I can do to concentrate on what he is saying and answer like a normal person, because my mind can only think of one thing.

Sex.

The thoughts of what I want Toku to do to me are overwhelming. I want him to drag me on to the table and kiss every part of my body, before taking me in front of everyone. My entire body wants him, and it wants him now.

Still, I somehow manage to make it to the last course of the meal. As they take away the dish from the second to last course, the sex thoughts are so overwhelming that I ask a question I know I shouldn't, just to see if I can get them out of my head for even a few minutes.

"Toku, Intar told me that the two of you are related."

The look that crosses Toku's face as soon as I say it is a look of pure hatred. It isn't directed at me, though, but at Intar.

It's the same look he gave Intar when we first got to the ship. He manages to mask the look when he turns back to me.

"We are brothers." Just saying this one phrase seems to take a lot of effort by Toku, as if he doesn't want to admit to this fact. "We have

the same father, but different mothers.”

“Wait. I’m confused. Don’t you Sintar form lifelong bonds with your partner? I was told these bonds can be so strong, it can kill the surviving member of the bond to have to live without their partner.” I know all this from what nearly happened to Shana back on Jurassia, when she first got pregnant. She was already so bonded to Talu, despite only having known him for a few days, that her body would rather kill itself than harm the baby her body had demanded she have with him.

Now that I think I may be bonded to Toku, I am doubly curious about this. I can tell that the last thing I want to do is leave him, even though he is clearly an awful person who hates not just his half-brother, but random people he feels are beneath him. But I will have to leave him at some point. I’m not moving to Forlia because I’m having some crazed sex feelings toward someone here.

Except, my body tells me it isn’t crazy at all.

It wants to stay here with this horrible man.

“It is true that the death of one member of a bonded pair may die upon the other’s death. My father nearly died after my mother did. During his healing, he met another woman and formed a second pair bond. It was a rare thing to happen when we still had our women around, but it did happen sometimes, particularly during the healing process.” I notice that Toku doesn’t use Intar’s name, nor is there any warmth in his statements about Intar’s mother.

“Is the second bond as strong as the first?”

“When it happens, the second bond is usually stronger. With my father, this was the case. Upon the death of his second bonded mate, he passed away shortly thereafter.”

“How did she die?” For the first time during our meal, Intar says something. His voice is higher than normal, his nervousness coming through. As he says this, I realize he must have known his father died, because Toku was now the leader of the Sintar. But he would not have known of his mother’s death. The Sintar on Jurassia have

long been cut off from the rest of the Sintar, and even now, the Sintar have refused to acknowledge that they exist, preventing the exchange of information, unless it is something known by the Vinree or that Asul found out and passed along.

“It wasn’t the virus. There was an accident.” Toku pauses, as if he doesn’t want to discuss the matter any further but knows he should say more. “At least, it appears to have been an accident. She was on an official visit to one of the newer colonies, trying to reassure everyone that we were doing what we could to prevent the spread of the virus, even though at that point, you were already gone, and it was becoming clear that there was little or nothing we could do to stop or contain it. While there, she was hit by a vehicle on her morning walk.”

“Was there an investigation?” Intar’s voice has regained some of its normal power.

“There was. The vehicle was not on automatic pilot, and the driver had some tangential connections to one of the other Families.” Before I came here, Asul told me all about these Families—a group of seven Sintar families who periodically fight amongst each other for control of their society. “But it seems to have been an accident. Before he passed, our father made sure that there would be a major investigation.”

“Where is he now? The one who killed her?” There is now an edge to Intar’s voice, as if he wants to hurt whoever killed his mother.

“Our father had him taken care of.” When Toku says this, Intar nods. The Sintar are not the sort to put people in prison. When something happens, they don’t hesitate to inflict whatever punishment is necessary.

There is a bit of silence between the two of them, and then one of the Sintar waiting on us brings out the dessert course, which looks like a molten lava cake.

It’s my absolute favorite dish.

“Is this lava cake?” I can’t help but ask. The last thing I want to do is to dig into a piece of what I think is chocolate cake, only to find out that it’s some horrible tasting alien food that has nothing to do with cake at all, other than in appearance.

“It is. I was told you humans enjoy dessert, and that this particular dessert is one of your favorites. I wanted to make sure you felt at home here on Forlia.” He doesn’t smile, but the look on Toku’s face suggests he is pleased that I am happy about the dessert.

“Thank you.” I manage to say before digging into the cake in front of me. I bring the first bite to my face, and it is absolutely divine. I am halfway finished with it before anyone else even appears to have started to eat theirs.

“It seems you like it.” When I look at Toku again, the way his mouth is curled is even closer to a smile.

“Like it? I love it. This is fantastic.” Before I know it, I am finished with my cake. I look around, and I see that Toku has taken a bite of his, and Tinda has eaten almost all of his, seeming to like it almost as much as I do.

Next to me, though, Intar has not even touched his.

“Intar, you have to try this!” I insist. He gives me a look suggesting that the last thing he wants to do is to eat any of the cake.

“Forgive me, Camille. I am not a fan of chocolate. We have had some on Jurassia, at the insistence of Shana, and it is not something I enjoy.” Part of me is incredulous that someone might not like chocolate, but part of me is perfectly fine with this, because I have a great idea.

“If you don’t want it, I’ll take it.” I don’t care that this is a goodwill trip and there is some diplomatic rule against eating the desserts of others while on such a trip, but I don’t care. These cakes are good, and I am not about to let one of them go to waste.

Intar looks as if I have asked him a question that he can’t comprehend. I lift up my fork and lean over so I can take a bite of his.

“No!” Toku says. Except, he doesn’t say it in his normal tone of voice. Instead, it comes out as a desperate shout, as if the last thing he wants is for me to eat some of the cake. “Do not eat that!”

I stop my fork in midair and look at Toku. “What’s wrong? It’s just cake. I mean, I just ate all of mine and it was fantastic.”

For a moment, Toku looks like he can’t think of a reason not to have me eat it, and I am about to dive into the cake when one of the waiters swoops in and takes away the cake from Intar before I can eat any of it. As if by magic, another cake appears in front of me, and in the flurry of action, I can’t tell if it’s the same one that just got taken away or if it is an entirely new piece of cake.

I get the feeling it’s a brand new one, though.

Something was very strange about what just happened. I am sure Intar will know better, and I want to talk to him about it when we get back to our own ship. Something tells me that there is more going on there than I can tell, but that Intar knows exactly what was going on.

The rest of the dinner goes quickly. Whatever happened with the cake has influenced everything else at the table. Even my second piece of cake doesn’t taste anywhere near as good, as if it is tainted by the sudden change of mood around the table.

As we head back to the landing platform and our pods that will take us back to our own ship, I stop thinking about the cake, because something else has taken over every thought in my mind.

I want to stay here with Toku.

Every step toward the landing platform is painful and difficult.

By the time we get there, every fiber of my being is telling me I need to stay here with Toku.

It isn’t helping that he is standing right next to me, as if he can’t bear to have me leave.

The other two get in their pods, but I stand there, as if I am stuck to the landing platform.

“Camille,” Toku finally says, long into what should have been an uncomfortable silence but was anything but, “it has been a pleasure to meet you. I shall await your arrival on our planet of Forlia tomorrow with as much anticipation as I have ever awaited anything.”

I don't know what to say to that. It's how I feel, but at the same time, it's far cheesier than anything I have ever said to anyone, or like anything I could ever imagine myself saying to someone.

So, instead I say something that sounds far worse, in every way, shape, and form.

“I'll miss you.”

Toku pauses, as if he didn't expect this from me. Then, he regains the slight bit of composure he lost with my strange statement. “I will miss you more than you can know, Camille.”

Toku take my hand in his, and every fiber of my being wants to ask him to come with me. The idea of being parted from him is awful, even knowing we will be together again in the morning.

I can't believe I feel this way about someone so awful.

Toku doesn't kiss my hand; instead, he just holds it for a moment. The other pods have closed, and I know I have to go. I reluctantly pull my hand from his, then before I can change my mind, turn and half run to the pod, thinking that if I do anything more slowly, I won't get in that pod tonight.

I jump in, and it closes around me. I purposely avert my eyes from looking at Toku until the last possible moment as the pod shuts, to see him standing there, forlorn and looking as if my leaving is the worst thing that has ever happened to him.

The way Toku looks is the way I feel.

Chapter Seven

Camille

“What’s wrong?” Asul says, the moment our pods open back up on the ship.

We had agreed not to talk with Asul during our trip to the Sintar ship. Still, I suspect Asul keeps an eye on us there and would not hesitate to step in if necessary. She does, after all, have to be somewhat involved, as she is the one who runs all the Vinree technology, like the pods. Without her, we would be unable to do anything.

“He is trying to kill me.” Intar says this matter-of-factly, as if someone trying to kill him is something that he does every Monday.

“That is to be expected.” Asul replies as if she, too, knew Intar was going to have an attempt made on his life. I’m still confused, though. I didn’t see any assassins or anything that even resembled a dangerous situation.

Of course, I was thinking of sex most of the time we were there, so I was, admittedly, a little distracted.

“How did he do it?” Asul asks.

“The dessert dish. I think it was a slow acting poison. Something that wouldn’t have killed me during the negotiations, but maybe in a month or two. Long after we were gone from here.”

“Makes sense. I am glad you caught it.”

“I didn’t. The Sintar had made a chocolate dessert they thought Camille would like. I knew from Jurassia that I am not a fan of the chocolate the humans so love, and I was planning not to eat any of it. When Camille went to eat it, they pulled it away from her quickly, like there was something wrong with it. That was the first time I suspected anything.” I listen to this, remembering that I thought there was something wrong about the dessert at the time. I never suspected that it was poisoned.

I can't imagine that Toku is trying to poison Intar. Intar is such a good person. I can see that Toku does not like Intar, but to attempt to kill him? This is like something out of a medieval drama.

And yet, knowing he is actively trying to kill his brother, I still want Toku.

I realize I am part of this drama, whether I want to be or not. If Toku is supposed to be my beloved, I can't get out of this. At least, I can't get out of it without the potential of killing myself out of grief.

"You're going to have to be careful with everything."

"I know." Toku says this with a weary note in his voice, as if he knew this was something he was going to have to do, but does not want to, even if the result of him doing it is his own death. "If I had stayed on Forlia, I already would have been killed long ago. It's usually the fate of a second son of one of the Families, and that is even when brothers are full-blooded. When you're the ruling family like ours, it's even worse. I've had a longer life than I ever thought I would."

There is resignation in Intar's voice. I can't imagine living a life where you live in constant fear that you will be killed.

"I will do what I can to protect you." Asul's voice has a lilt to it, as if she is going to enjoy this. Something tells me, no matter what she has agreed to as part of these talks, she is not planning to be on the sidelines if something is going to happen to Intar. She likes Intar, and I am guessing she knows things about Toku that she has not told us. I wouldn't be surprised if she is doing everything she can to hack into every Sinter system while we're here, trying to find out even more than she already knows.

I am briefly relieved to know that Asul will be protecting him.

Then Asul starts talking to me. "You're quiet, Camille. First, I am glad you helped save Intar. You may not have realized what was happening, but he owes you one. Second, how do you think everything went?"

"OK." I don't know how to say the one thing I know I need to tell Asul. I'm somewhat surprised she has yet to figure it out. Still, a part of me

wants to tell everyone what happened. I want to blare it from the highest mountain, so everyone knows.

“That’s it? OK? Do you even have an impression of Toku?”

When I hesitate, Intar speaks. “I don’t know about Camille’s feelings, but Toku was as enamored with her as I have ever seen him enamored with anything. It was almost like...”

Toku trails off, and I don’t have to have him say anything else to know that he knows.

It takes Asul a few more beats to figure it out, but she does.

“Oh no, Camille. Please tell me it isn’t true.”

I don’t say anything. I just shake my head. No one has to say anything, because they know. Toku is my fated mate, and I can’t do anything about it, and neither can anyone else.

“Well,” Asul finally says, her voice sounding resigned, “this changes things a whole heck of a lot, doesn’t it?”

Toku

I should be focused on one thing: securing my right to the leadership of the Sintar.

My first effort at getting rid of Intar failed. At first, I thought he somehow sensed that there was something wrong with his food, but had he done that, I don't think he would have allowed Camille to even come close to eating off his plate, as he seems fond of her, just as she inexplicably seems fond of him.

Then, I suspected he might have the artificial intelligence the Vinree use for so much of their communication and technology telling him not to eat it—the technology they call Asul, as if it is a real person—but there were two problems with that. Again, there was the issue that the artificial intelligence would never have allowed Camille to get as close as she did to eating the food. There was a second issue in that, no matter how trusted he is, I cannot imagine the Vinree ever allowing a Sintar to have use of the technology as an implant, as we believe she does with the Vinree.

Finally, I settled on the only choice that made sense. Intar had no idea he should not have eaten that cake. He only got lucky that he didn't like it and Camille attempted to eat it. Even the smallest bite of the cake would have been enough to kill him. Not immediately, but well after he is gone from Forlia.

This idea to rid myself of Toku by poisoning him had been the best of the ideas my advisors had come up with. If he has figured out what I was doing—and I have to assume he has—Intar will be wary of any food I give him going forward.

Thankfully, we have other ideas of ways to take care of this problem I have.

I do now have to reevaluate all those options, however, in light of what happened at our dinner this evening.

I cannot take any risk that something happens to Camille. Had she eaten that cake and been poisoned, it certainly would have killed me to know that I had sentenced her to death.

Any plan we have come up with that could pose even the slightest risk to Camille has to be abandoned now.

It is going to make it more difficult to take of Intar, but I am sure my advisors will come up with something. I have already informed them that nothing can happen to Camille, but that every option remains on the table with Intar. They do not even have to inform me if they are going to attempt something. Indeed, I find this idea—that they will take care of my problem, so I can focus on Camille—refreshing.

I lie awake in bed, thinking of Camille. I want her badly, and I let my hand wander toward my pants, thinking I will get some relief and sleep from pleasuring myself to thoughts of her.

I am about to place my hand on the base of the larger of my two cocks when my tablet, sitting next to my bed, rings with an important message.

I consider ignoring it, but if it is a message important enough to interrupt my sleep, it is likely important enough of a message that someone will shortly be knocking at my door, interrupting me in the middle of my pleasuring of myself.

I groan and reach over for the tablet, fully expecting a crisis that will require me to get up and entirely forego my own pleasure. Even worse, this will prevent me from being in my finest form in the morning, when I get to see Camille again.

At first, when I see the message on my tablet, I am confused. It is not from anyone I recognize. Indeed, it seems to be from someone I don't even know. For a moment, I consider ignoring it or having someone else take a look at it, in case it is something malicious. Particularly now, with my brother here at Forlia and the other Families knowing that there are now women who can save our species, I need to be extra vigilant with those who would want to do me harm.

Still, it is late, and I do not know of any way to kill someone through a tablet. I open the message, and as soon as I do, I know I made the correct decision.

The message is simple, but those simple words make me as happy as anything I have ever seen.

Toku –

I thought you should know – I know what you felt today upon our meeting. I felt it, too. I know what it means for us, but know that, until we get through these next few days, I can't act on how I feel. Know that I want you more than I have ever wanted anything before.

Camille

I don't know how Camille figured out how to use the messaging system we use for our Sintar governmental business—I suspect the Vinree AI had a major part, and I will have to look into its ability to get access to the system—but right now, that is a worry for another time and day.

I quickly type out a message in response.

My Beloved –

My body aches for you, but I would never do anything against your wishes, even if those wishes are not wishes I share. It shall come close to killing me, but I am a warrior, and I shall persevere through the pain of not yet being able to take you entirely for my own.

I hesitate before I finish, thinking of the few human things we have been able to secure here on Forlia—a few of their films, some books, and little else, all of which was sent by the Vinree in advance of our

meetings this week. Our scientists have analyzed everything we have been given, but I do not know much of the humans and their customs. This is how I knew about the human custom of hand kissing, which I find confusing, but Camille seemed to like it, and therefore I know I should learn more of these strange things Earthlings do, if only so I can please Camille.

I need Camille's help.

If I may ask you a favor, us Sintar do not know much of you Earthlings. Could I ask you for information on humans? Things that would inform us of how we should act with you, or tell us of your home planet, or anything that you think might be useful to the Sintar generally and myself specifically? I would be grateful and use whatever you sent me to work toward ensuring your eternal happiness.

Your beloved, Toku

I send the message quickly, hoping Camille will respond.

She does.

I will have Asul send you everything you could ever want about us humans.

The first words Camille sends show me that she is familiar with the Vinree artificial intelligence, which they have given a name as if it is a person, rather than a computer. This has always struck us Sintar as a strange habit, but the humans seem to have adopted it already. I shall have to remember this when talking to her. If Camille is like what we know of the Vinree, she will truly embrace the artificial intelligence as a person, including having warm feelings toward it.

But I will have her send you, personally, some things that will help you learn what us human women want and need. From the Sintar I have met on Jurassia, I know that human women have different expectations of their men than Sintar women once did.

I think you will enjoy the personal items I have Asul send you.

I do not have to wait long before another message arrives on my tablet, this time with additional information attached. There appear to be some books and videos among the group of attachments.

I open the first attachment, and my eyes are immediately assaulted with a video of two humans in some sort of film. I start watching while the man and the woman—a woman who is far lighter skinned than the beautiful Camille—talk to each other for a few brief moments, before they start kissing, as I already know the humans like to do.

Then, the two stop kissing, and I realize this is not a regular film.

This is a pornographic film.

Camille

Asul insists on making the messages I send to Toku more formal than I think they should be. She says the Sintar don't have the same methods of informal discussion over electronic media that us humans do.

Or, as she put it to me, "you can send him emoji-laden, misspelled messages after the two of you have known each other for more than ten seconds."

I still considered sending him the messages I wanted to send him, but I figured Asul would change them anyway, so I just went along with her.

Despite the message review from Asul, just getting to communicate with Toku made my heart flutter. When I got to send him the information on how he needs to treat me in bed? I am shocked I didn't immediately request we have phone sex or tablet sex or whatever aliens do when they are separated from someone.

The only reason I don't immediately see if I can do this when he doesn't immediately respond is because of Intar.

Asul didn't just insist on my sending of the formal messages because of the relationship between Toku and myself, but because she wants to know all the communications that now pass between the Sintar and our ship. She is convinced that Toku will attempt to kill Intar, it's just a matter of time about how and when that happens. She wants to know any hint we might get about how Toku is going to try to kill Intar, and she thinks messages might give just such a hint.

The more she talks about this, and the more I learn about the Sintar, the feelings I have toward Toku become more confusing.

I knew the Sintar were prone to violence, but I didn't realize the extent of what goes on in their society. On Jurassia, the Sintar were staid and serious, but other than one problematic Sintar that they

took care of before I had even met any of them, they seemed like good people.

Apparently, the Sintar we knew on Jurassia were completely unlike other Sintar. On their main planets, prior to the Extinction Virus, there was near-constant violence among the ruling families, except when they were at war with other species and had a different enemy to focus on. Even then, an occasional assassination was normal. For a brother to kill his brother? Among the Sintar, that's just a normal, average day.

To make it clear how violent this society is, Asul has started to tell me about some of this violence among the Sintar.

"You'll get a kick out of this one," Asul says to me, "it's about a Toku's great-grandfather. Apparently, he had a habit of taking out the women of his rivals, hoping that this would kill them in a cruel, heartbreaking way."

"Asul, I don't want to hear any more about this." I have already told Asul I am tired of this topic, but she seems fascinated with it and doesn't want to give it up. "You're talking to someone who is likely going to have to live among these people the rest of her life. It doesn't help me to tell me how violent and unpleasant they are."

I'm already thinking Shana has it right—live with her sexy beloved on some backwater planet. Sure, she might get eaten by a dinosaur at any point, but at least she isn't in danger of losing her own head.

Thinking of Shana, the danger I am in really starts to hit home.

When they had women, the Sintar would take out anyone they thought could be helpful to their own cause, just like Asul just said.

If I'm the beloved of their leader, I am going to have a target on my back.

I probably already do.

"I probably shouldn't have mentioned that one." Asul's next statement shows she realizes it took it a step too far. "Pretend I

never said anything. I'm sure, now that women are precious, there won't be violence toward them. You'll be perfectly safe."

I put my head in my hands.

Asul can try to reassure me, but I know now. I can't forget.

I'm never going to have peace in my life again, so long as I am the beloved of Toku.

Chapter Eight

Toku

I should sleep, but I cannot tear myself away from the items Camille sent to me.

The humans are affectionate toward each other in a way us Sintar never were with our women. They do not use each other's bodies solely for relief or procreation, but they enjoy each other with sex. It is fascinating.

And the human women? They can enjoy sex as much as the men can.

This is revelatory to me, not just because I want to learn everything I can about how to make Camille moan and scream with pleasure, but because I wonder if we could have done this sort of thing for our own women. Could us Sintar men have overlooked these fun and simple ways to please our women?

If we could have done so and failed, this is a horrifying thought.

We would have failed them entirely, forsaking their pleasure for our own.

I vow to myself that this will not happen with any humans we are lucky enough to have in our beds. I am going to start by showing Camille exactly how happy I am to have her as my own, as soon as I have the opportunity. And so, I watch the films she sent and read the books, learning where it might give my Camille pleasure to be touched. I learn that I will have to explore her body and discover for myself the specific places she likes touched the most and how she likes to be touched in those places.

The only reason I eventually fall into a short slumber is because there is a chance I find myself alone with Camille in the morning. Then, despite her saying we have to wait, I can begin the explorations that I know will last the rest of our lives together. I want as much energy as possible before that happens.

Chapter Nine

Camille

Admittedly, I am a little disappointed that Toku didn't reach out to me again after I sent him his the things to read and watch.

I'm especially disappointed because I need something to take my mind off the fact that I am probably going to be killed soon by some rival Sinter family to Toku, and talking to him, even by email, would definitely do the trick.

Unfortunately, as I laid awake in bed last night, I didn't get any response, so the only thing that could get my mind off this fact was the potential that Intar could be killed at any moment.

What upsets me most about this is that Intar doesn't have any desire to stay here on Forlia, let alone lead the Sinter.

Back on Jurassia, where there were very few Sinter, he let others lead, even though they all knew who he was. Intar seems like the type who doesn't care about power and titles. It seems that for the Sinter on Forlia, this is such a foreign concept that that no one can believe it—more so because Intar has such close ties to the leadership of the species.

I don't really understand this, but at the same time, I am starting to at least learn about the Sinter. That has to be the first step to knowing where they are coming from, even if it never is something I can truly understand.

Still, I know the strange things I'm learning about the Sinter are going to color everything that happens today in our talks. I don't care that Intar seems resigned to being killed as his fate. It doesn't seem right to me.

I need to make this clear to Toku.

It may be the way Sinter do things, but that doesn't make it right.

Maybe I can do something to change this.

If I have to be part of this society in any way, I need to at least try to do so.

As soon as I get out of my pod on Forlia, though, I see Toku and I am overwhelmed with desire again.

How do any Sintar ever get anything done?

Toku is at my side almost immediately, again taking my hand in his and kissing it.

If anything, this gesture makes my heart race even faster today.

“My beloved, welcome to Forlia and my home.” Toku gestures around us, and this makes me follow his gaze. I knew we would be going to the Sintar imperial palace, but my mind didn’t equate that with the place where Toku lives until he says this.

The pods have landed in a garden that looks like something out of an English manor or castle’s grounds. Every tree is manicured, the lawn is short and looks as if someone from the military has drilled it so it all stands at the same height and space. There is a large fountain that looks to have been carved out of some beautiful, white stone, with water cascading down multiple levels. And then, I see the house.

Everything on Oprima was futuristic. The city that makes up most of the planet was all curves and sexiness, more modern than even science fiction would imagine. But this palace?

It’s like something out of a dream or a fairy tale.

The house looks just like a palace would look back on Earth—at least, how it would look in a movie featuring a palace. The building is huge, all carved stone and brick. There is a wide staircase leading up to a giant patio, with huge windows facing toward us on the lawn. Carved figures grace the eaves, and some ivy-like plant is creeping up some of the walls, giving the building the appearance of great age.

It is absolutely gorgeous, and it is also completely disconcerting to see something so familiar on an alien planet.

“You live here?” I manage to say.

“Of course. Just as you will.” When Toku says this, it hits me that, unless I want to be separated from Toku—something my body clearly doesn’t want, based on the last few hours without him—this will be my home.

It doesn’t make sense.

I am a customer service representative for a cable company back home. Sure, I have my music on the side, but I’m not the sort of person whose life changes like this. Then again, the exact same thing happened to my friend Cassidy, with the leader of the Vinree.

Still, it just doesn’t seem real.

“It’s beautiful. It looks like something we would have back on Earth. All of it does.” Now I gesture to the grounds. Intar and Tinda have gotten out of their pods and are looking around. Intar looks as if he is thinking of memories of a previous time here, but Tinda looks like he is almost as overwhelmed by this place as I am.

“Then it already looks like home.”

I laugh at Toku’s comment, but it comes out as more of a snort.

“Home? Not my home. It looks like the home of a king or queen. I’m just a normal person back on Earth. I live in a crappy apartment with a roommate. The house I grew up in was nothing like this, either.”

“How could the humans not value you enough to give you somewhere like this to live?”

“That’s not how it works where I live on Earth.” I want to explain more, but as I talk, Phochu, the Sintar representative, seems to arrive out of nowhere to let us know that we need to get started with the talks.

Phochu leads us into the house, and Toku continues to act as if I am the only one who exists and has come to these talks, pointing out various aspects of the grounds and house around us that he thinks I will like, but with each thing he mentions—the colorful fish in the large fountain I can see in the distance, the tame birds from across

the Sintar planets in the aviary, the horse-like creatures in the barns, the flower gardens—I am paying less and less attention to what Toku says. There is just too much to take in, when I already have a mind swimming in problems and tasks I need to take care of while we are here for these goodwill talks.

When Toku mentions the parties they once held on the large patio we have to cross to get to the palace, though, it's all I can do not to lose my determination to focus on my tasks as a goodwill representative for Earth. I love a party. When Toku says that the parties used to have music, it takes every ounce of willpower I have left—after not jumping Toku as soon as I saw him—to keep myself from asking about a thousand questions about the Sintar music.

I do, however, make a mental note that as soon as I have the opportunity, I need to find out much more about the music, whether I ask Toku or Asul. The Vinree have music that sounds horrible to my ears, but perhaps the Sintar have music that sounds less like sounds thrown together haphazardly and more like our music back home. Forlia already looks much more like Earth, so maybe it isn't a stretch to think that their music is more like ours than that of the Vinree.

Inside the palace, it's not so much ornate as tasteful, with clean lines and a lack of extra decoration. If the grounds of the palace looked like something royal, inside it looks like a magazine where people live in perfect little homes.

I don't think there are any leftover pizza boxes around here. This is definitely unlike my own apartment, where I am pretty sure I left one on the coffee table before I left.

Then again, I am guessing there are cleaning robots around here who take care of that sort of thing.

If they even have pizza. Or takeout. Not that you would need it in a place like this.

As I realize my thoughts have completely wandered again, Phochu leads us into what looks less like a conference room—which is what I expected, having seen the room Cassidy used for negotiations back on the *Roving Star*—and more like a dining room. The table

isn't set for dinner, but there are gorgeous bouquets of unfamiliar flowers on the center of the table, and the walls are painted a light shade of blue that is a perfect complement to the yellows of the flowers and the slight brown tint of the wood in the table. It looks as if the flowers were purposely chosen to be as beautiful as possible in this room.

If you were to have shown me this palace without knowing anything about the Sintar, I would have thought they were a warm, inviting species, instead of killers and warriors. And if you had asked me to choose which of the species, between the Sintar and the Vinree, were those killers and warriors, it would be the Vinree.

For a second, I feel a faint glimmer of hope that maybe, just maybe, they can change.

Then, I catch a glimpse of Intar as he sits down across from me at the long table.

He may have looked like nothing was affecting him a few minutes ago in the gardens, but now, he looks terrified, like he has seen something that he wished he had never seen.

I take the seat across from Intar, wanting nothing more than to ask if he is alright, but I know this is something I can't do. Instead, I give him a look that hopefully suggests I am concerned about him. I don't have time to come up with anything else before Phochu, still standing, begins speaking.

"We welcome our representatives to the discussion today. I shall be taking my leave shortly, leaving the four of you to discuss in private. Should any of you need anything, please press the button at your seat, and we will have someone come to your service." I look at the table in front of me and see a small button in the table, almost invisible unless you are looking for it, it blends in so well to the smooth wood.

Phochu leaves the room, and there is an awkward silence once he leaves, as if no one knows how to get this sort of a meeting started. I would say something, but I definitely have no idea how one goes about starting a goodwill meeting that could greatly affect almost

every individual in the known universe. I am not surprised when the first person to speak is Toku.

However, as he speaks, his voice is almost dripping with malice, and the look he shoots Intar as he speaks is even worse than the way his voice sounds.

“Let’s start with the issue of the Sintar who are living on a planet that I believe is now being referred to as Jurassia.”

I have the distinct feeling that, given the opportunity, Toku would kill Intar right here at this table.

Something tells me this is not the way you want to start off goodwill discussions.

Chapter Ten

Toku

Intar makes three requests regarding the Sintar who remain on Jurassia.

First, he requests that two individuals—Shana and her beloved, Talu—be allowed to return to Forlia or any of the other Sintar planets, if they so choose. This is something I am happy to grant. A Sintar child? This is something we have not had for two decades. It will unite the Sintar like nothing in our contemporary history ever has.

Second, he requests that any other Sintar on Jurassia be allowed to return to Forlia or their home planets as they desire, despite our long non-acknowledgement of their presence on Jurassia. The Vinree representative has no objection to this, which suggests to me that the Vinree, like us Sintar, did desperate things as the Extinction Virus killed off our women—things that violated treaties and agreements long in place. Although I am less happy to grant this request, I allow it as well. The Sintar on Jurassia are some of the few who have had close contact with human women, and their knowledge is reason enough to allow them to return if they so desire and spread their knowledge.

It is only the third request Intar voices that surprises me.

“My final request is that I be allowed to live on Jurassia permanently.”

Inside, the request fires my brain with thoughts. The initial ones are thoughts of surprise, but those are quickly replaced with trying to figure out the angle Intar is taking by asking to live on Jurassia permanently. There must be a reason he wants to live there, and I suspect that whatever the reason, it is to plan an eventual takeover of the Sintar. From Jurassia, he would be able to plan without worry. For all I know, his plans could be near completion and he is just asking to go back to finish whatever he is planning. I cannot let that happen, nor can I let Intar know that I suspect his ulterior motives with this request.

On the outside, though, I know I show a complete lack of surprise, as if I both expected this request and have long considered how to handle it.

I know I will refuse this request.

However, I also cannot immediately refuse the request. I need to keep Intar here long enough that he can be taken care of. If I tell him he can go back to Jurassia now, there is a chance that he leaves immediately, which would be the worst thing that could happen.

“You have carefully considered this request?” I ask.

“Very carefully. I have now spent half of my life on Jurassia. It is where I am most comfortable. There is nothing for me here on Forlia. On Jurassia, I have meaningful work to do for the community. It’s not the work I was born to do here on Forlia, but it is something that means more to me than any work I could be doing here.” Intar considers his next words carefully before speaking. “There, you will not have to worry about me, either. I have no desire to have any position of power on Forlia or any other planet. I haven’t taken a position of authority on Jurassia at any time, even when I should have. This way, you can get rid of me and not have to think about the possibility that I would attempt to take your position from you.”

I do not respond immediately, hoping that my silence will be taken as my own careful consideration.

“You understand if I do not immediately acquiesce to this request. You have been gone a long time from Forlia, Intar. You can give me a thousand assurances that you have no desire for my position or power here on Forlia, but having spent my whole life here on Forlia and the other developed planets, I am hesitant to just trust another Sintar, even one who is my own brother.” I do not have to remind Intar of all the stories of the Sintar who came before us and their murderous ways. Those are the stories we grew up hearing. “But I will consider this request.”

He attempts to hide it, but Intar can’t entirely mask the relief at my statement. He must have expected me to outright deny his request.

But I don't need to do that.

All I need to do is to keep him here on Forlia long enough that I can take care of him as a problem.

He will not be going back to Jurassia. Not if I get my way.

And I always get my way.

Camille

I don't know how I know it, but I know that Toku has no intention of letting Intar go back to Jurassia.

And, based on what I know about the Sintar, that also means that Toku has no intention of letting Intar live long enough to know that he has no intention of letting him go back to Jurassia. And yet, Intar looks relieved, like he hasn't thought of this possibility.

I have no doubt about the sincerity of his statements, but if my intuition is right, he needs to be worried about never getting back to Jurassia.

But something also tells me I might be able to do something about this situation.

I have to try to keep Toku from killing Intar, and I have to let him return to Jurassia.

After Intar makes his requests, Tinda and Toku begin talking about some minor issues the Sintar and Vinree have been having—something about a shipping route, and a whole lot of small requests about other similar items regarding ships and planets and trading. I use the boring conversation as a time to think of a plan to save Intar.

The only problem is, I can't come up with a good plan.

That isn't to say I don't come up with plans. I come up with plenty of plans, but none of them are good. Most of them are truly terrible or impossible to pull off, like the plan where I somehow come up with a gun and physically protect Intar from Toku, like some kind of crazy superhero in a movie. Or the plan where the entirety of the Sintar population of Jurassia somehow shows up on Forlia and I lead them to Intar to save him.

The worst part is, those aren't even the worst of the plans. Those are the best ones.

I don't know how long it takes for Tinda and Toku to get through everything, but when they do, I still don't have anything approaching a realistic plan.

Phochu says there will be a lunch ready in a bit, but that there will be some relaxation time before then.

Except, the moment he says this, I do anything but relax.

This sounds like a way to have Intar let down his guard so that some crony of Toku's will be able to take Intar out.

I need a plan, and I need one now.

Except, before I can come up with even a dumb plan that has the slimmest chance of success, Toku has moved to my chair. It is clear he has something in mind.

"Camille, would you care to join me? I have something I think would greatly please you." I look around, hoping that perhaps Tinda or Intar will have heard what Toku is saying and have something to distract me, so I don't have to go with Toku and I can keep an eye on Intar.

Because the moment Toku opens his mouth to talk to me, any chance I have of coming up with a plan is gone. My entire focus is suddenly on Toku, and even attempting to think of someone or something else becomes impossible. I want to go with him, and I won't be able to say no unless there is some reason for me to stay here.

Toku touches my arm, and the small touch sends a bolt of tingling excitement through my arm. Unsurprisingly, I also feel my pulse in my pussy, as it reacts so quickly to his touch.

I know I should stay here and watch Intar, but every part of me wants to go with Toku. When his arm starts gently pulling me up, I don't resist. I shoot a look at Tinda that I hope gets across my desire to have him keep an eye on Intar. Tinda nods at me, and I hope that the message came through my look.

I let Toku lead me out of the conference room and back outside. We walk silently, but it's comfortable, like we are meant to be walking

together. Toku still has his hand on my arm, leading me without pulling me along.

It feels nice.

But it only feels nice so long as I don't think about the fact that this man is a cold-blooded killer who wants to take out someone I care about. And there's that whole hatred of Sintar he feels are beneath him thing, too.

The two of us walk outside, heading around the large house. Ahead, there is a tangle of bushes and trees that looks far wilder than the rest of the well-manicured grounds. Toku takes me straight to the tangle of greenery. As we approach, I can see a door of some sort, blending in with the tangled web of plants. Unlike most of the doors I have seen since getting to space, this door doesn't automatically open as I approach it, or require little more than a hand wave to open it.

Toku pulls the handle of the door, and gestures for me to walk through.

Inside, I can see that this is not just a tangle of brush, it's a cage of some sort. Around me, there is something that looks like wire, and like a cage back on Earth, there is a second door ahead of me. We're in a small area meant to ensure that whatever is inside this cage can't get outside, even if it sneaks through one door.

I start looking around, wondering exactly what Toku wants to show me here. Part of me worries that I'm about to come face-to-face with another of the creatures from Jurassia, but something about this cage doesn't suggest what there is anything of that sort around me. Funny enough, the smell of the cage is what makes me realize this is not somewhere housing dinosaurs. Jurassia has a distinct smell somewhere between fresh fruit and musty old basement. The smell in this cage is like freshly mown grass or newly fallen rain on a sidewalk—sweet without being cloying and pleasant in a way that makes me want to capture it so I can smell it forever, whenever I need to smell something good.

And then, something moves in the leaves above me as we pass through the second door.

I flinch a little, and Toku takes my hand reassuringly. It's something I doubt the Sintar do, based on what I know about him, so he must have learned about it from one of the things I sent over to him.

He may be the ruthless leader of a planet full of aliens, but he is a quick learner.

I can't help but wonder what else he might have learned already.

"It's a rooly. It's a bird." Toku points to a branch above our heads, and now I see where it went. The bird is about the size of a crow and looks like a crow, except it has bright blue feathers on its body and a red head. When it opens its mouth it doesn't caw like a crow; instead, it sings a song that reminds me of a canary one of my friends had growing up. "They are beautiful, but they are truly valued by us Sintar for their songs. They love to sing."

Once again, I find myself surprised by the Sintar. They really do seem to love pretty things and music. The contrast between this and their lives cannot seem to reconcile themselves in my mind.

The rooly stops singing after a few seconds, then hops and flies away. "What is this place?" I ask, looking around at the plants around me. A dirt path leads ahead of us, nothing like the manicured lawns outside.

"It's an aviary, or something like it. Mostly birds from here on Forlia, although there are a few other animals we keep in here."

As if on cue, a small, white creature jumps seemingly out of nowhere to a branch that is nearly at eye level with me. Again, I jump, and Toku squeezes my hand. I don't even have to see him to be able to tell he is giving me a rare Sintar smile. "What's this?"

"This is something you will love." Toku holds out his hand, and the little creature immediately jumps from the branch to his hand, giving me a better chance to get a good look at it.

It is, without question, the cutest thing I have ever seen.

The creature looks like an adorable combination of a kitten and a monkey, with pointed ears on a whiskered face, but a body like that of a monkey. Its eyes are huge and a deep, dark blue, framed by big eyelashes. It's bigger than a hamster but smaller than a chinchilla, and its white fur looks lush and soft and just begs you to pet it.

"Can I touch it?" I ask, already holding my hand out to it. Without Toku responding, the animal jumps from Toku's arm to my outstretched hand. Once there, it runs up my arm and nestles against my neck. When it does, I can feel that its fur is even more luxurious than I had expected it to be. The animal must be itty-bitty, but its fur makes it appear much larger.

"This is a moly." As Toku speaks, another moly appears on a nearby branch. Where the moly nestled against my neck is pure white, this one has jet black fur. When Toku holds out his hand, the moly jumps on it, just as the first one did. "The males are white, and the females are black."

Toku lifts the black moly to his face, where it cuddles against his red skin. The way Toku looks at the creature, you can tell he has a lot of affection for it. Seeing that I can touch it more, I put my hand up for the white one snuggled against my neck, and it jumps on my hand. I start stroking his head and it is as if I have given him the greatest gift ever. He starts making a noise like a loud purr and pushes his head against my hand, as if he wants nothing more out of life than to be petted.

"You are going to have a friend for life if you pet him like that." Toku places the black moly back on the plant next to us. It sees that I am petting the white one, and it immediately jumps onto my hand and starts pushing his head into my hand, so I am petting two of them at once. Their purrs twirl around each other, almost like a song.

"That's good, because I never want to let them go." I lift the animals to my face and kiss the top of their heads. Their purring softens now that I have stopped petting them, but I can still feel it through my hand. Toku reaches out to the black one, lifting it off my hand and placing it on my right shoulder. He then does the same thing for the white one, putting it on my left shoulder. Immediately, the creatures

cuddle against my neck. “How in the world are these not the most popular creatures in the universe? I have never seen one before.” Back on Oprima, there are all sorts of strange animals. I spent as much time as Asul would allow me with them at various parks and zoos. I was completely fascinated by them. After the dinosaurs of Jurassia, it was nice to see some animals that weren’t trying to kill us.

“They’re extremely rare. We found them on a moon in one of the solar systems we were exploring about ten years ago. They were extremely friendly, and the men on the ship exploring that moon brought several on the ship, even though it was against all regulations adopted after the Extinction Virus. Shortly after, the planet had a catastrophic volcanic eruption, wiping out most life on the planet. All the molies we have now descend from those few who were smuggled on the ship.” Again, hearing a story about the Sintar, I find it hard to believe that these are a species who are so ruthless and horrible. They may act that way, but somewhere inside, they are different.

“Can’t you just clone them or something? Make a lot of them quickly?”

“We could, but we’ve discovered it’s healthier to allow them to breed naturally. It is also helpful to their diversity. If they are all the same clones, one disease could wipe them out. We’re slowly and naturally increasing their population. These two are a couple. They’ve had seven babies so far. Hopefully more to come. They’re also very protective. Sweet now, but if they sense harm coming to their mate or children or someone they care about, they become as fierce in protecting them as they are sweet right now.”

Toku continues to lead me around the aviary, pointing out birds as we walk—birds that will hopefully find the facility to their liking and breed as well.

As we go to leave, he plucks the molies off my shoulders, placing them back on one of the trees. The two stay there, looking at us as if they are hopeful they will be able to go with us, wherever we are headed.

“We can’t take you with us.” Toku gives each of the creatures a pat on the head, lightly brushing their fur. They scatter back into the leaves of the trees, as if they know it is time for them to go back to whatever it is they do when there aren’t humans around.

“Are you sure we can’t take them with us?”

I see the faintest hint of a smile from Toku. “Everyone who meets them wants to take them home.”

“Are you bringing a lot of people here?” I smile at the small teasing comment, then realize Toku, being a Sintar, probably won’t realize it.

“Not very often. The keepers think we should minimize the contact the animals here have with those who are unfamiliar.”

I shake my head, still smiling. “I was teasing you, Toku. It’s the sort of thing a woman on Earth might say to a man, suggesting that he was bringing lots of other women to see something.” When I say it out loud, I can see that, even if the Sintar were inclined toward teasing, there would have been a lot he would have had to understand about human culture to make it work.

Plus, it probably isn’t good to tease someone about the lack of women, when all their women died of a horrible disease.

“I read a little about teasing. It is one of the many human things I do not entirely understand. I have many questions about these things. Some things I want to understand far more than teasing.”

“Maybe I can help explain. What is something you really wish you understood?” I ask the question, but I don’t expect the answer at all.

“I wish I understood kissing.”

Chapter Eleven

Toku

As soon as I tell Camille that I wish I understood kissing, I wonder if this is something I should not have asked her.

Us Sintar do not kiss. Or rather, when we still had women in our lives, we did not kiss them. From what I have seen with the humans, though, they love to kiss and do it often with each other. And it's not just between men and women who are romantically involved; they do it with friends and family.

When I mention the kissing, though, Camille turns her head away from me, as if she is embarrassed by what I have said.

"Is that something you don't want to talk about?" I ask, hoping that she does want to talk about it. The humans seem to love kissing, and if this is something that Camille would like, I will do it for her. I want to make her as happy as possible.

"No, it's not that. It's just...well, it's not really something humans talk about in this way. I guess we're all used to kissing. It's something we grow up knowing about and seeing." Camille looks back at me now, seeming less embarrassed now. I think perhaps I just surprised her with the question. "What don't you understand?"

"I can't figure out when you do this. Sometimes, it seems like it is something between two people who are in a relationship, but other times, it is done between friends or family members." I start with a question that does not seem as intimate as others I have. While I want to ask the questions about kissing that seem more intimate, it seems as if I should start with something more basic.

"I can see why that's confusing." I decide we would be more comfortable elsewhere, and I lead Camille out outside as we talk, knowing a nice place we can sit and talk before we are due back to the goodwill discussions. Camille keeps talking as we move. "So, a basic kiss, just a peck of the lips, or a kiss on the cheek, that's something you might exchange with a friend or a family member.

There are some places on Earth where it is a common greeting to kiss anyone you know on the cheeks when you meet them, but not where I am from, or where the other women I came with are from.”

“This is where it starts to confuse me. How do you know if a kiss means something more? It seems different when humans do it with someone who is a lover.”

“It can be confusing for us as well, particularly when the other person involved is someone who we might be involved in a relationship with. Unlike you Sinter, we don’t have the sort of relationship with those we choose to spend our lives with as you do. We often think we’ll be with someone the rest of our lives, but we end up not. I guess the answer is that you just sort of know who gets a regular kiss, and who gets one that means something more.” When Camille tells me this, it makes me feel slightly better that even humans can be confused by kissing.

“With me, what would a kiss be like?” Again, Camille looks away as if she is embarrassed by the question. Now that I know it has nothing to do with not wanting to answer me, I find it attractive.

Cute, I think the humans would call it.

“It would definitely be the more intimate kiss. Except, because we’ve never kissed each other, and I don’t think you’ve ever kissed anyone, we would probably want to start with something more like the friendly kiss. But it would be done with the intention of it becoming something more.” I have led Camille to a bench in a more private part of the gardens near the house. Not that anyone would disturb us without my permission on the grounds, but I want to have her to myself for this conversation, which she seems to find less than a completely comfortable conversation.

“Could I try kissing you?” Now that we are sitting, the difference in our heights seems far less. From what I can tell of the movies I have seen, this will make kissing far easier.

Instead of speaking, Camille nods her head. She seems to recognize that I do not know exactly what to do, and she pushes her body toward mine, then up to my mouth. As she does, she closes her

eyes, as I have seen humans do on the films of them I have watched.

I don't want to do this, though. I want to see what is going on. I can't learn if I don't see what to do.

But mostly, I want to see Camille. I don't want to take my eyes off her if I don't have to.

Camille presses her lips to mine, as I have seen the humans do in videos.

It does not feel as I expected it to. This is not a cold, strange feeling. Instead, Camille's lips are warm against mine, her lips soft despite pressing into mine. I like having her this close to me—it feels like the intimacy I desperately want from Camille. She pulls away from the kiss after a second or two, opening her eyes as she does.

“That's a regular kiss. Not quite what you would give to a friend or family member, which would be faster, but something more than that.” Camille smiles.

“Did I do it alright?”

Camille smiles wider. “Yes. But that's the easy part.”

Without saying anything else, Camille leans back toward me and again she presses her lips to mine. This time, though, she opens her mouth slightly, and presses her lips against mine slightly harder. When I follow her lead and open my mouth, I feel her tongue brush against my lips, clearly trying to find its way into my mouth.

Having seen this on videos, I expected it to be an unpleasant sensation. It looked cold and wet.

But this? This is not unpleasant at all. Camille's tongue is soft and just slightly wet, and the way it touches my lips and then my own tongue is suggestive, like our mouths are anticipating sex. It is amazing.

This is not something us Sintar would ever do to one another, but I realize this just means we have been missing out. This is something I could do for hours.

We should have been kissing our women while we still had the chance.

Then, I once again follow Camille's lead, touching hers with my own.

As soon as I do, like something native within me, my tongue flicks at hers, quickly moving in a way that is familiar even though I can never remember doing it.

When I do this, Camille opens her eyes, surprised at the motion. When she does this, I pull away. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, not at all. That thing you just did with your tongue was unexpected. Humans can't do that." Camille doesn't look unhappy.

"Do you want me to stop doing it?" I ask the question, but I don't know if I can stop it. It seems like something so natural, it's almost as if I didn't even have a choice in whether I did it or not.

"Please, don't stop. That was perfect." Rather than belabor the point, Camille leans back into me, once again pressing her lips to mine. This time, though, I know exactly what to expect, and I kiss her back, letting my tongue flick at hers the way that seems so natural to me.

When I do, this time Camille is not surprised, but lets out a low moan, as if this is something she likes.

It brings out something in me that wants to make her this happy as much as possible.

I can't believe it takes so little, and something so pleasant, to make Camille so happy. This is the easiest and most pleasant task of my life. I love the way her tongue feels on mine, searching it as if she can't get enough of me and hinting at something more. When I put my arms around her and pull her close to me, it is as intimate as I can imagine being with another person. When we had Sinter women, there were some I used for release, but that was something I did because I needed a release, not because there was any connection with those women.

If kissing feels this intimate with my beloved, I cannot even imagine how sex will feel.

Again, though, thinking about this makes me wonder if our own Sinter women would have reacted this same way to being kissed. That we never even attempted to make them this happy makes me both immediately sad and makes me realize again that we can never let down any women we are lucky to be with in the future. We owe it to them, and we owe it to the memory of our own women, who we should have treated better.

I continue kissing Camille, who has now put her own arms around me, pulling me closer to her. It is like the two of us cannot get close enough.

I never want this to end.

And then, Camille pulls back from the kiss. I want to ask her why, but before I can ask, she pulls the shirt she is wearing over her head, exposing more of her dark skin than I have ever seen before, though her breasts remain covered with some sort of additional clothing I also saw in the movies I watched. After tossing her shirt to the ground, Camille puts her hands behind her back and then, quickly, the clothing covering her breasts falls away, exposing her breasts.

Her breasts are large, like many of the women in the videos I watched, the nipples even darker than her skin, their tips taut and begging to be touched. When she moves, they seem to quiver and jiggle, only making me more fascinated with them.

“Can I touch them?” I ask the question, having seen the men in the videos I watched touching them, but mostly, I ask the question because I want to touch them more than I can remember ever wanting to touch anything before.

“Please. Please touch them.”

As soon as Camille says this, I put my right hand on her breast, cupping it in my large hand. Still, despite my own size, it feels heavy and large in my hand. Without taking my hand from her breast, I rub my thumb over the nipple. The skin tightens when I do this, making it even more prominent against Camille’s skin.

Camille moans now. This time, it is louder, and she kisses me hard, thrusting her tongue into my mouth, as if she is the one who can't help herself now.

I know exactly what I want to do to her next.

Chapter Twelve

Camille

Whatever I was expecting, it wasn't this.

When Toku asked to kiss me, I knew I should have said no. I have work to do here, and I have to keep Intar safe.

But the urge to kiss him was overwhelming.

In the moment, I pushed all my concerns away, and I kissed him. This wasn't difficult; it was what my body felt compelled to do, even though my brain knew it wasn't what I should be doing.

I don't know what I was expecting out of kissing Toku. Part of me expected that it would be bad. The man had never kissed another person and had no idea what he was doing. He had no idea what he was doing.

And yet, it wasn't bad.

And then, it was very, very good. I don't know if it was watching videos or a natural talent, but the moment Toku's tongue touched mine, it was like another person took over my body.

All I wanted was more of Toku.

I forgot all about the horrible things I know go on with the Sintar. I forgot about how he wants to kill his own brother. I forgot about the way Toku treats those he thinks are below him. I forgot that I have a job to do while I am here, and that I should probably not be engaged in this behavior with someone I am likely going to be opposed to on issues that could affect not just me, but all the humans in the universe.

I blame this forgetfulness for what I did next, which was take off my top and bra. It felt like the most natural thing to do. I wasn't worried about how I would look without my top off, or whether I should have been exercising more lately, or comparing myself to some other woman, like I always would have been back on Earth.

I just wanted to let Toku see more of me.

And, if I admit it to myself, I wanted to move beyond kissing. At least, my body wanted to do so. It was like someone else took over my body, forcing me to take off my clothing.

And yet, I never tried to stop it from happening.

The way Toku looked at me then, after I took my top off, was a look like I had never seen before, but was a look I immediately knew I had been waiting for my entire life. Toku looked at me not only as if I was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen or ever would see, but as if he could never get enough of looking at me. To him, I was the only person in the world.

Then he took my breast in his hand, my tight nipple getting stiffer at his touch.

As he touched my breast, I couldn't help moaning at his touch. He might never have touched the breast of a human before, but he seemed to know exactly how to tweak my nipples to draw out the greatest pleasure in me.

What Toku does next, though, surprises me like nothing else he has done before has surprised me.

He leans in and takes my breast in his mouth.

If you had told me it had only been minutes since this man had first kissed a woman, I would never have believed you, except that I knew it was true.

As soon as my breast is in his mouth, I let out a low groan, more out of surprise than any immediate feeling. Then, he sucks my breast toward him, the pressure somehow stiffening my already taut nipple. Now, the groan is one of pleasure.

Toku lets go of my nipple, then traces its edge with his tongue. The movement is slow, as if he is attempting to learn every bit of my breast through touching it with his tongue.

I am letting myself lose focus, just enjoying the moment like I can't remember doing in a long time.

And then, I hear something that is, unmistakably, the sound of someone clearing his throat.

The moment I hear the sound, I pull back from Toku, the moment between us gone. I desperately look for my top or bra or anything to cover myself, and I see them on the ground several feet away, where I seem to have flung them in the heat of passion.

“Shit.” I swear, and the statement seems to jump Toku out of his own lusty trance.

“Phochu, I thought I insisted that there be no disturbances.” I turn my head to see Phochu. Or rather, I see the back of Phochu, who is clearly doing all he can not to look at the two of us.

I quickly jump off the bench and grab my top and bra, pulling the top over my head without bothering with the bra. I hope that whatever caused Phochu to interrupt us, it isn't something that is going to involve me having to do much physical activity, because I am someone who needs a bra for anything like that.

“I understand. However, this is something that could not wait.”

“Then tell me what it is, then, if it is so urgent.”

“We have had an infiltration of the estate.” Phochu finally turns around, apparently having decided things would be in better order by this point.

“An infiltration? What do you mean?” As he speaks, Toku stands up, seeming to have put what just happened between us out of his mind.

“What we think are half a dozen people overwhelmed the guards out front after disabling the remote security somehow. They are somewhere on the property, but all our normal detection means seem to have been disabled as well. We need to get you and Camille to safety immediately.” This doesn't sound good, particularly knowing what I know about the Sintar. This is some assassination attempt.

“Just Camille needs to be taken to safety. We're going to need everyone else to deal with this. I'm going to do what it takes to keep

her safe.” Toku turns to me. “You go with Phochu. He will take you to the safest place on the property.”

“Me? You need to go as well. I can’t have something happen to you.” I hear the words come out of my mouth, and they sound desperate.

They probably sound desperate because I am desperate. I truly can’t have something happen to Toku. I hardly know him, and yet my body seems to know that there is something about him that it can’t live without.

It feels that way, even knowing what I do about him.

This beloved thing is more powerful than I thought.

“They aren’t here for me.” Toku kneels down next to me and takes my hands in his, looking as if he is about to run off and leave me with Phochu to tell me what to do. Then, I realize this is exactly what he is planning on doing. “We have the only female on the planet for twenty years. We may be a warring people, and there are many who want me dead, but there are many more who value a woman more than anything. Including power.”

Toku is right—whoever is here probably doesn’t care about him. They want me, and they want me in a way that will not be good for me.

This is not good. Not good at all.

Chapter Thirteen

Toku

The moment Phochu interrupted us, I was mad enough to kill.

The exploration of Camille's body and giving her pleasure was the best thing I had ever experienced. To have that interrupted made me as mad as I can ever remember being at anything.

At least, it made me mad until Phochu informed me of the intruders on the estate.

At that moment, the only thing I cared about was getting Camille to safety.

Her pleasure could wait, as much as I hated to stop.

"You will be safe." I continue to hold Camille's small hands in my own. She looks shocked to have found out that whoever has entered the estate is there for her, not me. I am sure that, given the opportunity, whoever is on the property will take me out as well. However, there is no doubt in my mind that the main reason whoever is here has a primary purpose of kidnapping Camille and using her for their own release.

There is no way this can happen.

I will die before I will let this happen.

I will have to let Phochu take her to safety soon enough, but for as long as I can, I will stay with her.

"We need to go," I say to Camille, who lets me lead her away from this site where so much happiness so recently came to me.

As we start walking, I want her to move faster—who knows where these men who are on the property may be—but I do not want her to be more afraid than she already is. Camille finally comes out of her shocked state and asks me a question. "What about the molies? Will they be alright?"

I nod at Phochu, who immediately knows what I want him to do and turns away from us, already walking toward his destination. "I'll have Phochu get them and bring them to you."

Camille nods, but I can see that this small gesture makes her a little less scared. The molies are in no danger from whoever is on the property, but I have seen even the fiercest warriors comforted in a bad situation by something small like this. Camille is not a fierce warrior, which means the gesture will be even more appreciated.

I lead Camille directly back into the house, heading for a secure level several floors beneath the surface. After a short elevator ride, we arrive there. I can see that there is already a security team outside the door, with two violent-looking Sintar on each side of the door to the home's most secure room.

None of them nod at me as I open the door to the room. Everyone is in a heightened state of wariness.

Inside, I see that Tinda, and Intar are already here. Seeing my brother upsets me, until I see Camille smile at seeing him, and my anger subsides a little. For now, I will take a small comfort in knowing that Camille is with people she trusts. And, for as much as I dislike Intar, I do know he will do whatever he can to keep Camille safe. I may want him dead, but I know that no brother of mine would do anything to harm a woman.

The secure room is comfortable, having been built long ago. Whoever built it expected that those using it could be there for weeks or even months. The front room is a sort of receiving room, with comfortable chairs. Beyond this, there is a conference room, as well as several bedrooms, a kitchen, and other rooms necessary to the functioning of not just daily life, but also the functioning of a government.

Camille grips my hand tight still, not leaving my side. I don't want to leave her, but I have to. "You'll be safe here."

She turns her head to me. "You're going to take care of whoever is out there, right?"

“Yes.” I say the words, hoping they prove true. I do not know anything of the situation. “Phochu will be here soon to watch over you, plus the guards outside. And you have these two as well. I do not doubt that either of them will be willing to do whatever is necessary to protect you.”

The two men nod, as I knew they would. For all the personal issues between my brother and myself and the differences between the Vinree and Sintar species, we do share some similarities. Our desire to protect the women who we now know exist is one of these that I know we share, even without having to speak it aloud to each other. Not all Vinree or Sintar would be the same, but I somehow know these two men can be trusted.

“Be careful.” After Camille says this, she hugs me. I attempt to return the gesture, but like kissing, this is not a gesture Sintar are familiar with. For some reason, it seems more difficult to hug someone than it is to kiss them. Kissing, once I started it, seemed natural. This is something else. It may not be something us Sintar are used to, but I can see why the humans do it and enjoy it. You are close to someone, and there is a certain comfort in holding the body of another close to you.

“I will be.” I want to add that I will not hesitate to give up my life for Camille, should it come to that. Something tells me that Camille would not appreciate knowing this about me, particularly when I am going off to what I worry will be a fight I would rather not participate in. This sort of statement would never bother a Sintar female, but in the little time I have known Camille, I have determined that, though there are many similarities between her and a Sintar woman, there are just as many, if not more, differences.

Phochu comes in the door then, and Camille breaks off the hug.

I want to take Camille back into my arms and forget that there is someone on the estate who wants to find her and take her away from me. I want to be the one who stays here and makes sure she is safe. To have to trust my beloved to those who, while competent, are not myself, is tortuous.

But it is the way it has to be.

Phochu has the two molies in some sort of a carrier, which I suppose makes sense given that they had to traverse an outdoor area where the two could have escaped. When Camille sees the two creatures, I can tell her mood has lightened. Does she still seem worried? Yes. But is it an overwhelming sense that will keep her from functioning? No, and this is important. Although I do not think it would come to this, there is a chance Camille could have to fight in this situation. I want her head to be, if not in the right place, at least not in a bad one. I know now I was right to have had Phochu go back for the molies.

I realize I have to leave. I do not need to spend any more time here, when there are potential threats outside of the room to the one inside it that I love.

“Camille, we will see each other again soon, my beloved.”

Camille looks as if she wants a hug again, and I pull her toward me in the unfamiliar gesture. “Please come back safe. I will worry about you the entire time you are gone.”

“And I will as well for you.” I pull Camille so close and move my head so it is near her ear. I want to whisper something to her, like I have seen from video from Earth, but no words form on my lips.

I pull away from the hug, as each moment I stay here makes it that much harder to go back to the surface to find out what is going on with the intruders. I gently kiss the top of her head, then without a word, I leave the safe room for the outside world, which I know is anything but safe right now.

But if I can make it safe for Camille, this is all that matters.

Chapter Fourteen

Camille

I feel like I should be upset that Toku has left to go do something that, from what I can tell, might kill him, but I am hardly upset at all.

It's like my body knows he is going out there to protect me and that I can have no one better out there looking out for me.

As soon as Toku leaves the room, Intar goes to the door and makes sure it is fully closed. He pulls on it, apparently making sure it is locked. I don't see a locking mechanism, but I suppose there is one that is automatic. Plus, there are the Sintar outside the door, should anyone attempt to get in here.

Intar nods at me when he is finished, going back to his seat where he and Tinda appear to be discussing something serious. I suspect it has something to do with the current situation, particularly by the way they keep looking at Phochu and the door. It looks like they are worried about being overheard. I wonder what they are talking about, but I decide not to interrupt the conversation. Instead, I head toward Phochu, who immediately seems uncomfortable at my approach.

The two molies in the carrier, however, look as if they are going to jump out of their furry skins with excitement as I get closer to them. I can't help but smile at the antics of the two creatures. Back on Earth, these things would immediately become the most popular pets around. They seem to have all the best qualities of the pets we already have.

Of course, I don't know if you can potty train them. If you can't do that, I don't think anyone will want one.

"Phochu, I'm going to let them out." Phochu, who seemed so calm and serious during every previous interaction I have had with him, seems disturbed now. For a few seconds, I wonder if I am doing something the Sintar thinks I shouldn't be doing, but then I realize the man's last interaction with me involved walking in on me literally half naked.

That must be it. He's just embarrassed at what happened.

Without a word, Phochu hands over the carrier, and I immediately set it on the ground and go to open it.

"I wouldn't do that." Phochu speaks up now.

"Why?" I ignore Phochu and look at the carrier's closing mechanism. It isn't like anything I have seen on Earth, but I assume it can't be too difficult to open or close. The carrier itself looks like an animal carrier back home.

"The molies, they can be dangerous." Phochu says this as if he is truly scared of them. Toku had told me they could be protective of those they loved, but I'm not terribly worried. They know me from seeing them before, and there was no issue.

"I'm sure I'll be fine." I fiddle with the clasp a little, and it pops open. Immediately, the two molies run out, then easily make the jump from the ground to my shoulder. Unlike when I met them before, though, they don't seem happy and lighthearted. Instead, they seem to be focused on something. I can't see them, but it seems to me that they are upset with Phochu. "They must be upset with you for having put them in the carrier."

Phochu nods, as if I am probably correct. Still, though, he moves away from me and the molies. "If you do not mind, I will go to the kitchen and make sure everything is in order there. I am sure you are in good hands and no danger here."

Phochu leaves, and I see that both Intar and Tinda follow him out with their eyes. Once he is gone, they move their heads further apart, clearly more relaxed than they were with him in the room. The molies, too, have relaxed, and they begin to make their purring noises that I had heard while we were back at their compound.

I find a seat on one of the large, Sintar-sized chairs in the room. It's soft and comfortable, and I settle in, wondering how long this is going to last.

Chapter Fifteen

Toku

The information about what I now know is an attack on the estate is coming in far too slowly and in far too many bits and pieces for me to have a truly clear picture of what is happening.

The first thing I did upon leaving Camille in the care of Phochu and the others was to proceed to arm myself. During our discussions, I had left the many weapons I would normally carry on myself elsewhere, knowing that such armaments would not have been appropriate at such discussions.

With this breach of the estate, though, I arm myself much differently, with more powerful weapons than I would carry day-to-day.

Once that was done, the head of my security briefs me on what little we know.

“They came in at six different entry points, by foot. Apparently, they had somehow gotten access to our computer systems before doing so, because we should have known of their presence long before they even reached the first of the perimeter fences.” The entire property, and huge swaths of the surrounding properties, are constantly monitored for anything unusual, from movements to even a slight increase in the presence of heat, which could indicate someone arriving. Coming by foot, though, certain of our most sophisticated detection systems—and offensive intruder repellent systems—would not have engaged.

Still, we did have some on the ground that should have worked. “And they didn’t trigger any of the resistance measures we have in place?” My head of security talks as we walk, him leading the way. I don’t have to ask him where we are headed, as there is only one logical place for us to be going—the main security area of the estate. It takes up a huge portion of the main home on the property and is only an annex of the main security system for my family’s base of operations here on Forlia, which is located elsewhere.

“They didn’t trigger anything. We are still trying to figure out how they did so, because there is no way anyone should have been able to do that. I don’t like to make assumptions, but I have no doubt this is an inside job.”

As soon as my head of security says this, my horns twitch. He is right, of course. To get past all the security we have, you would almost certainly have to be on the inside. Not just that, you would have to be someone with extreme access to everything on the property. There are only a few people on the property to whom that could apply, and my head of security is one of the few people who fits that description.

As if he senses what I am thinking, my head of security stops in his tracks. “Of course, I am one of the few here who would have the sort of access and knowledge that could do something of this scale. I understand if you would like me immediately dismissed or, if you have any doubt, taken care of.”

I look at my head of security and shake my head. He is someone loyal to me, as his family long has been. His father served my father as head of security. I have no doubt that, should I want him taken care of because of this, he would bravely accept that fate.

“No, you are one of the few here I would trust.” In my head, though, I start running through everyone who could have the access to do this. “Do you have a list of everyone who could have this sort of information? Or enough of it so that, with only a small amount of additional help, he could pull off this sort of thing?”

“I have asked some of my most trusted lieutenants to look into this already. We should have it shortly.”

“Good.”

“I have also taken the liberty of relieving anyone who has not been on our security staff for at least ten years. All those men have been taken to a secure location on the property for the time being. All went willingly, so I doubt it was any of them. Still, I do not want to take any chances on someone who is not well known to myself or the other members of the security staff.” I nod at this. My head of security has

clearly been proactive since discovering the breach of the estate. I would expect nothing less of him.

“What do we know of those who breached the estate? Who they are? Numbers?”

“Very little. Likely the same way they eluded our security, they also managed to hide all the information we would normally have about them. However, we have enough information to make several other assumptions. Namely, they appear to have breached the perimeter in six locations, as you know. However, their numbers are low, based on how quickly they are moving. We are estimating no more than two men came in at each breach.”

“Twelve men, plus whoever they may have on the inside.” We reach the edge of the estate’s security area. A scan quickly determines we are both cleared to enter, and a heavy door slides open quickly, shutting behind us almost as quickly as it opened. We continue heading toward the center of the operation. We move past several additional, automated security measures.

“We still do not know who they are, other than assuming they have at least one, and likely more, people on the inside. We have some of our best on-the-ground troops already out on the property, attempting to intercept at least one of the men who breached the estate, hopefully more.” As we approach the center of the security complex, someone is coming toward us. I recognize one of my head of security’s children, all of whom work here in trusted positions. I am glad to see him, rather than someone whose family is unknown to me.

There is no greeting; the son just launches into what he has to say. “We have one of them”

Neither my head of security nor myself have to have his son say anything else. We know what he is talking about.

“Bring him to the secure room immediately.”

*

The Sintar who arrives in the secure room is not in the best of shape. Clearly, whoever found him in the woods of the estate did not have any qualms about beating the man to within an inch of his life.

Considering he was probably here to take Camille? I have no issue with whatever they did to this man. Unfortunately, it means he is not in good shape to talk to us.

“What has he said?” I ask the two guards who brought the man into the secure room.

“Nothing that was useful. He has been babbling nonsense since we brought him in.” The two guards holding up the intruder—and they are definitely holding him up, because he is in no shape to walk—unceremoniously drop his arms, and the intruder falls to the ground with a loud thump. There, he lies on the ground, hardly able to hold his own head up.

Still, there is a defiant look in his eyes.

“Who are you working for?” When I ask the question, the Sintar looks to me. As he does, there is a look of recognition that crosses his face. He may have been beaten to within an inch of his life, but this Sintar still knows who I am.

The Sintar lets out what I think was supposed to be a guffaw, but it comes out as a bloody hack of a cough. Despite the way he looks, the man manages to respond to me. “Someone who pays me well.”

I kick the man in the side, and his head collapses to the ground with the rest of his body. I suspect he had more information than he gave us, just as I am sure he was here to come after my Camille. Having known her for the small amount of time I have, I know she is a person who deserves to make her own choice about who she is with. Kidnapping her could not make her love someone.

I have no doubt the other humans are the same way.

I may be the leader of our species, but I will not make the women who will save our species do something they would not do of their own free will.

If this makes me the target of other Sintar, so be it.

We as a species will be the better for not forcing the humans to do something they do not want to do.

I decide this man is not worth my time. He isn't even worth feeling the heel of my shoe again. "Take care of interrogating him. Let us know if he has anything useful to say. If he doesn't, you know what to do with him."

The men in the room nod their assent, knowing exactly what I mean.

Chapter Sixteen

Camille

I don't know how long I have been asleep when I wake up. It seems the combination of the soft, comfortable chair and the excitement of the day made me so exhausted I just fell asleep, despite the potential danger here.

The molies seem to have fallen asleep with me, curled up next to me and each other, as if they are used to sleeping with humans. Their warm bodies stir as I do, their big eyes opening up to see what is going on. The two of them start to groom each other when they see I am awake, and it seems like this is something they must do every time they wake up.

Tinda and Intar have stopped talking, and they seem to just be sitting in the same places they were before. Phochu is nowhere to be seen.

I get up from the chair and stretch. The molies immediately jump onto my outstretched arms, then scamper up to their normal positions on my shoulders. I walk over to where the two men are sitting, and I see that while they are on comfortable chairs, neither of them looks at all comfortable.

"How are you doing?" Tinda asks the question, but his eyes remain on the molies.

"Good, all things considered." I look to Intar, and he is eyeing the creatures as well. Based on the timeline Toku gave me, Intar would have been on Jurassia when the molies were discovered. "Do you want to see them? They're called molies. They are awesome."

As if they understand me, the two molies move down my arms, looking at the two men in front of them. Their little noses sniff the air, and I suspect they must have a decent sense of smell. It probably also helps them determine who is friend and who is foe. If it does, they seem to deem Intar and Tinda to be friends, as almost in unison, the molies jump from my hands to the two men.

I spend the next few minutes discussing what little I know about the molies with Tinda and Intar, who are as beguiled by the creatures as I am. It's a nice break from the stressful situation we're in.

Behind me, I hear a door open, and I turn to see Phochu coming into the room with a large tray. The molies unexpectedly hop back to me, heading straight to my shoulders. They aren't purring, and something about the way they are holding themselves suggests they are not happy.

Funny enough, I can sense that there is a large amount of tension in the men behind me that there wasn't just seconds ago when we were discussing the molies.

It seems that no one here is completely comfortable around Phochu, but he is Toku's trusted assistant. If Toku trusts him, I should as well.

"Hi Phochu," I say, putting a smile on my face and making nice. Phochu attempts a small smile himself, even though I know this is an unusual thing for a Sintar to do. They can learn, but smiles do not come easily to them. The Sintar on Jurassia started smiling this way, and now they may not be comfortable with it, but it is no longer completely awkward for them. "Any updates?"

"They have found one of the intruders. They believe there were about a dozen of them. They are searching for the rest now." I am comforted knowing there are so few of the intruders and that one has already been caught. I'll be happier when they are all caught, but this may not be as big a deal as it seemed to be at first.

"Any other information on them?" Intar's voice comes from behind me. There is an edge to what he is saying, as if he is not sure he should trust the information Phochu is giving him.

"Not that I was told." Phochu stops speaking, as if he is waiting for more questions. When there are no questions, he continues. "Would anyone like me to prepare a small snack or meal?"

The three of us all make statements suggesting that we don't need anything to eat. "Are you sure?" Phochu questions. "It is part of my job to ensure that those entrusted to my care, whether it is our leader

or those he wishes me to take care of, have whatever they need for their well-being. It would be my pleasure to prepare you something to eat.”

The way Phochu looks at us, it makes me feel sorry for him, as if by not eating a meal he prepares, we are somehow letting him down. “I guess I could eat something,” I say. “Not a lot, just a small snack.”

When I say this, Phochu’s eyes light up, as if I have made his day just by making him go serve me. “I will be back shortly with something.”

As soon as Phochu is out of the room, I turn to Intar and Tinda. Tinda motions me toward them, suggesting he urgently needs to talk to me. I shrug a little and take a seat next to Intar. The two men both lean in, whatever they want to talk about seeming to need to be whispered rather than said out loud.

“When he brings the food, you should not eat any of it.” Intar says this with the same urgency his desire to have me join them had in his voice.

“Why?”

“Remember what nearly happened to me? I imagine this could be a similar situation.” Intar references the near-poisoning he almost endured.

“That’s just for you, though. There is no reason for me not to eat. No one is trying to kill me. Kidnap me? Yes. Kill? No.” When I say this, Intar and Tinda share a look. Whatever they were talking about earlier, I suspect it has something to do with this, although I can’t figure out how.

Whatever may have passed between them, though, they do not let me in on the secret. “No, they are not trying to kill you. But we do not entirely trust anyone here. I have no doubt they are still trying to kill me, and if there is any problem, like a mistake in who gets the correct food, it could kill you.”

“Fine.” I say, not terribly hungry. “I’ll just push my food around my plate. Will that make you happy?”

“Yes. Please make it look like you are intending to eat. Just do not eat anything until we are sure about the food down here.” Intar looks pleased at what I have just told him.

Meanwhile, my stomach growls.

It seems I was hungrier than I thought.

Toku

I am there when we find the second set of men who have entered the estate.

They have climbed a tree and were nearly invisible to the naked eye as we came upon them. There was probably no way to see them, as they had covered their bodies in some sort of camouflage I am not familiar with, but which my head of security seems to know well.

It not only hides their physical bodies, but any trace of electronics, heat, or anything else they may have on them, thwarting many of our defenses against individuals entering the property.

The one reason we find them is because, despite how well the camouflage may work, the men cannot hide their smells. Our copras—four-legged animals who can smell far better than us Sinter can smell—were not fooled by their camouflage.

Before the men can use their weapons against us, one of those with us takes both of them out, stunning them rather than killing them. Hopefully, they will have useful information for us. Whether they do or not, it is unlikely that either of them will survive much longer.

This is how we Sinter do things.

Traitors do not survive.

Especially traitors who are attempting to kidnap my beloved.

Though, just thinking of Camille, I suspect she would not entirely approve of this. She would want to show them mercy. She would probably suggest the men were only doing something out of desperation, and they should not be killed because of it.

That I immediately think of Camille's objections to this is surprising to me.

These are not objections any Vinree would ever think of, let alone think of in the middle of the search for men who wanted to find his

beloved.

Once we are through with this, I am going to have a lot to think about.

The two men fall from the tree almost immediately after being stunned. One of them hits several branches on his way down, and I do not expect that he will be in good shape, no matter what protective gear he might have been wearing beneath his camouflage. The other manages to miss all the branches, but still, the fall is steep, and I would be surprised if he is entirely alright. All protective gear I know of is not meant to protect against falls.

Immediately, the men I am with descend on the two who have fallen, the copras already on top of them. I know what they mean to do.

“Stop.” At the sound of my voice, all the men stop. A direct order from me is enough to do that. Even the copras stop briefly, though they quickly go back to pulling at the camouflage of the two men. “We need to interrogate these men if possible. The last man who was brought in was too far gone to be of any use.”

I get several looks suggesting uncertainty about what I have just said, but these men know better than to question something I say, particularly in a situation like this. One of the men pulls out a shot that I know will wake up the men from being stunned. He first gives the shot to the man who fell straight from the tree, then the one who hit the branches. Without any further orders, my men approach the intruders and begin stripping them of everything they have on their bodies. Although it takes almost no time to stun someone, the reversal takes slightly longer.

By the time the first of the men—the one who fell straight down—starts coming to, he has been stripped to his pants and nothing else.

From what we can tell, the man had no true weapons on him. He had a knife, but not one that could do much damage—it was more of a knife to cut rope or do useful things, not the sort of knife you would use except as a last ditch attempt at defense.

This does not make any sense to any of us.

“He’s awake.” One of the men guarding the two men on the ground says of the man who had fallen straight from the tree. I rush to his side, the men guarding him having him pinned to the ground.

Almost as soon as he is awake, the man starts screaming in agony. His body starts moving slightly against the pain, but whatever is wrong, it seems to be affecting his ability to move. He probably has a broken back, if not more. The guards are easily able to keep him pinned to the ground.

Someone produces another shot, which must be some sort of painkiller; no one has suggested taking the man for medical treatment. As soon as he gets the shot, the man stops screaming and writhing. His breath is still coming in short spurts, as if he is having trouble getting air into his lungs.

I lean over him. His eyes are closed, like there is still enough pain that opening them to the light is something he can’t bear. “Open your eyes,” I order. The man complies, and I wonder if there was something extra in that shot, that might help us get information out of him.

I hope so, for the sake of Camille.

When the man opens his eyes, it takes a moment for them to focus. When he does and sees me, his eyes show both terror and defiance, and I have no doubt he knows exactly who he is dealing with. If he was stronger, I suspect he would attempt to spit at me.

He does not seem to have that strength, though. I suspect I will not have much time with this one before he passes out again or even passes away. Whatever happened when he fell from the tree, it was not good for this man.

“Who are you working for?” I ask, as if he might just answer the question. Unsurprisingly, the man does not answer. “You’ll tell us who you are working for, or we’ll make you tell us.”

The man still does not answer, and one of my men holding him to the ground stands up, and stomps on the man’s arm. There is a telltale snap of a bone breaking. Despite the painkilling shot, the noise of his

bone breaking is enough to start the man screaming again. This time, he quickly calms down.

“Do you have an answer for me now? Who are you working for?”

This time, the man gives an answer. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Perhaps you want another broken arm?” The man holding down the other arm stands up, ready and almost excited, it seems, to do as I may ask.

“I don’t!” The man now sounds panicked. If I had to guess, I would guess he is telling the truth.

“Why don’t you have any weapons?”

When the man doesn’t immediately answer, he gets his second arm broken. Another scream follows, but again, it seems to be more of a reaction to the sound than actual pain, because the screaming does not continue.

Again, he quickly answers. “We are here to help extract an asset. Nothing else.”

My face must give away that I am considering having another appendage of his broken, because the man starts offering other information, apparently coming up with more than nothing. “We are just supposed to wait. We may not even be needed. We were told the asset was valuable, but nothing where we would have to use weapons to extract it.”

His answer doesn’t make any sense. Getting an asset out of a situation would usually involve a lot of weapons, no matter what the asset.

Before I can ask more questions, the man passes out. Apparently, the painkiller was not enough to prevent his body from giving out. Almost immediately after the man passes out, one of the men guarding the second to fall out of the tree calls out.

“We’ve lost this one. He’s dead.”

I swear. I had hoped to corroborate the story and, perhaps, get information on this asset and why no weapons were needed.

Then, my head of security steps in. “We have another one in custody.”

My heavy heart has a slight glimmer of hope return as we take off through the woods, heading to the location where we have been told the other man is in custody. While my feet fly, my mind also races, trying to figure out why these men had no weapons and why there is seemingly no reason for them to need weapons in a situation that would surely warrant them under nearly all circumstances.

If I can figure this out, perhaps I can figure out how to save Camille.

Chapter Seventeen

Camille

From the moment Phochu puts the food on the small coffee table between the chairs where Intar, Tinda, and I are sitting, I know it is going to be impossible for me not to eat something.

Not only is there no way anyone on this planet wants me dead—I am a valuable female, after all—but it looks downright delicious. Someone has clearly asked what humans want to eat, and, I am guessing, asked what I, in particular, would like to eat, because everything on the plate of little appetizers Phochu brings out looks delicious. There are little pieces of something that must be sushi, what looks like cheesy muffins, and something that is clearly fried and might be anything from cheese to mushrooms.

As soon as the plate is on the table, I instinctively reach out to grab one of the pieces of sushi, but when I do, the looks both Intar and Tinda shoot me suggest they will kill me if I eat any of these foods, so I won't have to wait for any potential poison to do the job.

“Thank you, Phochu, this looks delicious.” At my acknowledgement of the food, Phochu looks happy, apparently satisfied that he is doing his job. He also turns and heads out of the room, back to the kitchen or elsewhere to do something unknown.

Intar and Tinda start discussing something about planets I have never heard of in some solar system that I imagine is a long way from here, and I zone out, my brain thinking about nothing and everything all at once.

Which is why, when the molies scamper down to the table, I hardly notice it.

Nor do I immediately notice it when each of them grabs a different piece of food off the table and starts chowing down, as if they are always helping themselves to food off tables.

By the time I notice that they are eating the food that none of us are supposed to be eating, it is too late.

If there is something wrong with the food, the molies are goners. They are eating as if they haven't been fed in weeks.

I grab the black one first, placing her back on my shoulder. Her little paws are still gripping tightly to a piece of sushi as I do so, like it is the best food she has ever eaten. I pick up the white one next, and this one has what I now can see is some sort of fried vegetable in his hands. He scarfs the rest of it down as I put him on my shoulder, and I wonder how such a little creature can so quickly eat something that is rather large compared to his size.

"Well, I guess we'll find out soon enough whether the food is poisoned." I hope my tone isn't too happy. I have no doubt there is nothing sinister about the food, no matter how Intar and Toku feel. I get up, taking the molies with me, and heading back to the comfortable chair.

The commotion over, Intar and Toku go back to their discussion.

Settling into the chair so I they won't see what I am doing, I pull out the food I had quickly hidden under a napkin and stuffed under my shirt as I grabbed the molies.

I don't care what those two think.

I'm hungry, and I am going to have something to eat.

Toku

We quickly find a second set of two men.

This time, they are not in a tree, apparently not being the climbers the first ones were, or not as scared of the copras as the others we came across.

Even though the other two men we came across were not armed, we take no chances with these ones, and tranquilize them from a distance. Once we reach them, we find that these men do not have the weapons we would expect on them. Again, we quickly wake them, only this time, there is no danger that the men will die on or us be unable to answer our questions.

One of my men only has to break one arm to get an answer out of the first of the men we wake, after his initial refusal to speak to us.

“Who are you working for?” I ask him, for the second time.

“I don’t know.” He says through teeth gritted in pain. My man threatens to break another arm, and the man again screams. “I really don’t know. That wasn’t part of what we needed to know for this job.”

“Where are your weapons?” I ask. This man doesn’t need any more threats to talk, though, which I am thankful for. The less we have to work on him, the faster I can be assured that Camille is safe.

“We don’t have any.” He says quickly, still in pain but looking to be less so. I am guessing his body’s natural systems are starting to dull the pain.

“Why not?”

“Our job is to bring an asset off the property. That’s it. We were told there was a good chance we didn’t even need to help with this, just wait in case we are needed. Whatever this asset is, we aren’t supposed to need weapons to get it off the property.” The man’s answer is almost the same as the last one’s answer. Either they have all been drilled with the same story, or they are telling the truth.

None of these men has struck me as particularly talented or a professional with this sort of thing, so I am going to believe they are telling the truth.

Now, though, I have the chance to see if I can get more information. The last men were unable to give us anything more. "What is the asset?"

"No one told us."

"But no weapons? That didn't strike you as odd?" Whoever brought these men here had to have known that they would be met with a large amount of firepower and brawn as soon as it was realized the perimeter of the property was breached. It does not sound like the men who are on the property were given the entirety of the story.

"It struck me as odd and foolish. But I am being paid well. And I assume that whatever we're extracting or may be extracting is so valuable that whoever is actually snatching it is worried that giving us weapons will just encourage us to rob him or it. If that's the case, I can see why we are not supposed to have weapons."

I consider this. There is some sense in it. Knowing that the asset is Camille, I can see exactly why no weapons were involved. She is more valuable than anything else on this planet right now. Whoever wants her doesn't want there to be any chance something happens to her.

"And how are you supposed to communicate with this person who has the asset?"

"We aren't. We are just supposed to reach a specific point and stay here until a previously designated time. If we are not met by someone who has the asset, we are supposed to leave, as if we have never been here."

"And how are you supposed to know if the person has the asset, if you don't know who it is that gave you the job?"

"Easy enough. He is just going to find the spot and tell us a secret word. A password of sorts."

That the men haven't had weapons makes even more sense now. Not only does this prevent them from stealing Camille away, but it means they can't shoot the person bringing out the asset, whoever it may be.

The man tells us the password, but he claims not to know where the other groups who may help extract Camille are, and I am sure he doesn't know. Whoever planned this had a very specific idea of how they wanted this to work. It is not what we would have expected, but that's why it's smart. The typical Sintar would have tried to steal Camille with guns blazing. Whoever is in charge of this operation seems to think he will be able to get her out of here without anyone noticing.

If there are only a few people who could access everything they needed to allow these groups onto the property almost without being noticed, there are even fewer who also could move about the property with Camille without anyone thinking anything of it.

The only person who I think can do both of these things is myself.

Then, a moment later, I realize there is someone else.

The panic sets in a moment later, but I suppress it immediately.

I know exactly who is attempting to steal Camille away.

Chapter Eighteen

Camille

The food is delicious.

It's so good that I manage to sneak even more of it away. The molies are great at helping me with this, because they seem to think the food is just as good as I do.

We secretly snack away in the chair, cozy and comfortable. It's as if we are in this completely safe and happy cocoon, where I can forget that out on the property, there are a lot of men who want to kidnap me.

I'm so cozy that I almost doze off, but then I see something unusual.

At first, I only pay it a small amount of attention.

It's almost like a haze is sneaking into the rooms where we are, coming in from somewhere outside the door, where the guards are sitting. It's not really a haze, though. It's like a small bit of wind. It's clear, but at the same time, I can see it, almost like when the air is disturbed on a very hot day. It's like the air has blurred, but I can't see what is making it blurry.

I don't initially think much of it. We're on an alien planet and who knows what is normal and what isn't normal here.

Then, I hear something thump in the hallway, as if someone has collapsed. Several similar sounds follow in quick succession.

I don't know for sure, but if I had to guess, I would guess that something has happened to the men guarding us. This is not good.

If I had any doubt that something was wrong, the two molies start chattering to each other, both moving to my right shoulder so they are together. Whatever is going on, they seem nervous.

I stand up from the chair, my automatic reaction being to get closer to Intar and Tinda, if for no other reason than for them to tell me that I am just imagining things.

As I turn around, though, something looks wrong about the scene.

The two men are still sitting where I last saw them talking. The food in front of them appears untouched, though I know that some of it is now in the bellies of the molies and me.

“Tinda? Intar?” I move closer to them, trying to figure out what is wrong. Neither of them answer. I repeat myself, this time louder and faster.

Again, I don’t get any response.

I move closer, and I see that the men are staring into space. They look like they are about to pass out.

Then, Tinda does just that, slowly tilting to his side before slumping over.

I can’t help but let out a little yelp of surprise. Another one follows when Intar does the same thing.

At that moment, I hear a door opening. At first, I am worried that it is the door that is being guarded, and whoever has entered the property is now here for me. But then, I see that it’s one of the side doors, and Phochu walks in. He is carrying a large weapon that looks like a technologically-advanced gun. It’s not quite the same as what the Vinree use, but it is close enough to them that I have no doubt what it is.

I am grateful to see that we aren’t unarmed here. I only wish I had my own weapon.

Like me, Phochu seems to be unaffected by whatever is in the room. I am so thankful that there is someone else here who is alright that I want to run up and hug him.

However, at his mere appearance, something like a low growl rises from the throats of the molies. They do not like Phochu at all. They are supposed to be good judges of character, and this continued dislike of Phochu makes me hesitate.

“What happened?” Phochu says, rushing over to the two men.

“I don’t know. I just turned around, and they passed out. But I heard some thumps in the hallway that sounded like the same thing happened to the guards. Plus, I think there is something in the air. It’s not like smoke, it’s almost just a disturbance of the air.” I hope that my explanation of what I saw is enough to convince Phochu that there is something around us we can’t see.

Phochu does something to the men that looks like he is taking their pulse. “They’re still alive. Something happened to make them pass out, though.” Phochu goes to the front door of the compound, then slowly opens it and peers outside. As soon as he does, he swears. “You were right, they are out, too.”

“What do we do now?” Part of me wants to hunker down here. Whatever is in the air doesn’t seem to be affecting me, and I know this is where Toku expects to find me. Despite the current situation, it does feel like a safe place to be. At least, Toku thinks it is safe, and I trust him, if for no other reason than I am his beloved, and he would never put me in harm’s way. Another part of me wants to get out of here as quickly as possible, because something has gone wrong here. And just because I’m not passed out now, doesn’t mean I am not going to pass out soon from whatever is here.

“There is a secondary protected area on the property. We can go there. Toku would know to check there if he does not find us here.” Phochu says this in a confident manner, which gives me some confidence.

“But Intar and Tinda are still here. Won’t he worry that something has happened to us if he comes here and finds them passed out?” I look at the men, slumped over. I am concerned about what I say, but I am more concerned that whatever is in the room is going to kill them. Something about the situation tells me that I shouldn’t express this, though. I’m not sure what it is, but something is off here. It makes no sense that neither Phochu nor I nor the molies have passed out, but these large men around us have. If someone wanted to take me, they would presumably want everyone taken out. That includes Phochu and me. I’m a lot harder to kidnap if I am awake than I am if I am passed out. And Phochu may not be a warrior, but he is

someone who could at least make an effort at protecting me, if for not other reason than he is well-armed.

“He’ll worry a lot more if we don’t leave, and he finds you here dead, or elsewhere kidnapped.” I nod and decide I need to go with Phochu, even though I am wary and don’t want to leave my friends.

Then again, Toku trusts Phochu, and I should as well. Plus, even if I didn’t want to go with him, he’s the one with the gun. He could make me go with him.

Somewhat reluctantly, I follow Phochu out of the rooms. I have to step over the bodies of the four guards, who appear to have passed out in much the same way as Intar and Toku had inside, except they must have fallen from a standing position. They are slumped over each other, as if they all fell in a giant pile. I wonder if I should ask Phochu if I can take one of their weapons, but by the time I think about this, we are well past them, and I don’t want to go back now that we have at a plan that involves getting out of here.

Phochu and I trace our way back upstairs. We are moving faster than I thought we would. If there is someone in the house, it seems to me that we should be careful and move slowly and deliberately.

We’re doing almost the exact opposite, though. We are moving fast and, it seems to me, taking a direct route wherever we are headed. If there is someone in the house, they will surely hear us coming.

“Phochu,” I whisper, touching his arm to get his attention, “shouldn’t we be quieter?”

Phochu stares at where my hand is touching his, the look one I have seen before. It’s not the look of someone who is here to protect me, but someone who is interested in me romantically. I immediately pull my hand away from his arm, not caring if he sees this as something rude.

The look that flashes across his face when I pull my arm away from him is clear: he is angry. For a brief moment, I wonder if he is going to hit me.

If I hadn't been wary of this situation before, I would be now. As it is, I no longer have any doubts that there is something going on here. I have to figure out what is going on, and I have to figure it out now—before something bad can happen to me.

“I want to get you to the secondary protected area as quickly as possible.” This isn't an adequate explanation in my mind, but I don't want to protest. That look Phochu just gave me is more than enough to make me hesitate about making him mad.

What I want to do is to figure out what is going on here as quickly as possible.

Something tells me that, if I don't, I will find myself in a lot worse situation than the situation in which we left Intar and Tinda.

A lot worse.

We reach a door leading outside, and as we exit the building, I get even more worried. Not only are there unknown people out here, but I can't imagine any secondary protected area would require us to go outside to reach it. Sure, there could be some outdoor, underground bunker, but I doubt it.

I need to figure out how to get away from Phochu as soon as possible, or I might not be able to.

Then, I think of something. It's not much, but it's something.

Toku

I know something is wrong as soon as we re-enter the building.

It is extremely quiet.

Something is wrong about this. The building is normally full of activity. At first, I think it could be that everyone has sought safety somewhere, but something about the way this silence feels suggests it is something else. Even if people had sought safety, there would be murmurs from them, and, inevitably, not everyone would have sought safety.

But the building is absolutely silent.

It takes a moment for me to realize that this means there is something more wrong than it seems. Then, I catch it.

It is brief, and I would not have noticed it had I not lived in this house my entire life.

I catch just the smallest whiff of something that is not the normal smell of the house.

“Outside!” I order, and everyone leaves immediately. I notice a few of the men’s eyes are drooping, as if they are tired. I feel the same way, when I should be filled with adrenaline and a rush from hunting for whoever wants to take my Camille.

As soon as we are outside, the sleepiness dissipates. “There is something in the air in the building.” I announce, and I see nods of others, as if they, too, had sensed that something was wrong inside. “What is security in the building saying?”

“Nothing.” The familiar voice of my head of security speaks up. “I can’t get anyone to respond.”

I swear. This nearly confirms what I suspect. “There’s something in the air inside. We can’t go in there.” All I can think is that I’ve left Camille inside, where whatever it is will kill her. But that is not the

case. Whoever wants her, wants her alive. Whatever is in the air in the house, it will not kill Camille.

As I am thinking about what to do, I hear something.

Just as with the air inside, this is something I might have missed under different circumstances. But my body is attuned to anything Camille does, and I have no doubt what I heard, because my body felt as if it had been jolted by a shock that could knock the wind out of me. I recognize the noise as both something familiar, and something I should not be hearing.

Somewhere, outside, Camille just screamed.

Chapter Nineteen

Camille

I don't know why I scream, but as I let out the noise, it feels right.

I am pretty sure Toku is outside somewhere. He was supposed to be going to find the men who had infiltrated the property, who were presumably still outside. I have no reason to believe he isn't still out here somewhere. I have to take the chance that he is close enough to hear me, and he will recognize my scream and come to help.

As soon as I scream, I consider running.

Except, where would I go? I don't know this property, and Phochu does. Plus, he is surely much faster than me. I was never one of those kids who won races back in school, and I suspect a Sintar could outrun most humans, even if I was someone quick.

Phochu turns to me, the look on his face as if he could kill me. He raises his hand like he is going to slap me. I can't recall ever having been slapped by anyone, but just seeing his raised hand makes me flinch backward, as if my body knows how to react to the gesture despite never having seen it before.

"What are you doing? You need to keep quiet."

For a second, I consider asking him why we need to keep quiet, when he seemed to have no concerns about moving quickly through the house, but I decide it's best to keep my mouth shut. He didn't slap me just now, but that doesn't mean he won't hesitate to do so if I do something he doesn't like going forward.

Instead of slapping me, Phochu puts his hand down, and I see a look come across his face that seems like he is physically forcing himself to make his face blank. He must already suspect I am onto him.

As if to confirm that he is suspicious that I have guessed something is going on with him, Phochu reaches out and grabs my arm. Instead of doing it in a nice way, as he did when he touched me before, this is a definite grab. He wants me to come with him.

My natural reaction is to pull away. Phochu, however, seems to have anticipated this, and his grip is strong enough that I know there is no way I will be able to get away from him. "You're coming with me. We need to get going. Now."

Still, I take a chance and pull away, and Phochu doesn't hesitate, pulling me along with a grip that is so hard that I think he could dislocate my shoulder or otherwise hurt my arm if I continue to protest. He turns, and I see he knows I will have no choice but to follow him, or he will happily start dragging me along, whether I am injured or not.

At the moment I feel myself giving in, though, I feel a tickle of fur on my upper arm, where my short sleeves end against my skin.

The molies.

They are rushing down my arm. The little animals are quick, and before I can do anything, they have rushed down the entirety of my arm and have jumped on Phochu.

"What the hell?" He says, turning but still gripping my arm.

The molies, who I have seen jump before, now jump from Phochu's arm to his shoulder. Except where they sit happily on my shoulders, purring, they seem to have no intention to do the same with Phochu. They throw themselves at his head, seeming to be aiming at his vulnerable eyes.

I don't know what they intend to do to him, but I do not think whatever they are planning to do is something Phochu will enjoy.

The male moly manages to poke his little front leg into the eye of Phochu, who screams. However, before the moly can get away, Phochu has grabbed him.

For a second, I worry that he is going to squeeze the poor little guy to death. Before he can do that, though, the female moly changes her attack tactics and moves to rescue her distressed mate. She jumps onto the hand holding her mate, opens her mouth wide, and chomps down on Phochu's hand. Phochu drops the male moly, who falls to the ground unharmed.

However, he flings his hand outward, and the female moly goes flying.

I scream a mere moment before her body hits a nearby tree and falls to the ground. On the ground, she looks limp and doesn't move.

The male moly immediately abandons any interest he might have in going back to attacking Phochu in favor of running toward his mate, making noises that sound like something between crying and screaming.

I am about to chase after him, to see if his mate is OK, when I feel a strong grip on my arm.

“Do not even think about it. And if you scream again, you've seen what I can do to those pets of yours. Do not test me.” Phochu snarls as he starts dragging me away. I feel tears rising to my eyes as I see the male moly reach the side of his mate and place his head on her body, trying to get close to her but unable to do anything more. All I want to do is go over there and see if there is anything I can do to help these two small creatures. They hardly knew me, yet they were willing to risk their own lives to help me. I owe them a lot more than just checking on him.

Phochu pulls us away from the house, heading toward more trees and a forest that seems to make up part of the grounds of the palace. I can see that as soon as we are in there, it is going to be doubly hard to be found.

I can't let that happen, but I don't know a way to stop Phochu. Even if he wasn't so much stronger than me, he is the only one who has a weapon.

I do the only thing I can think of in the moment.

I fall to the ground, using all of my weight to stop Phochu from continuing to drag me along.

“Stop!” I yell, using my most agonized voice I can muster. I already have the tears, from what happened to the moly, so this is only going to help my ruse. “My ankle!”

I point to my ankle, which doesn't look as if anything is wrong with it—probably because nothing is wrong with it. I have to count on Phochu not noticing this or noticing it and assuming that an injured human wouldn't show an injury. He remains standing, but never lets go of my arm. I am half dangling, with my legs hardly on the ground. Finally, seeming to decide that I am injured, he lowers me slightly, having to bend over me to let me lie on the ground.

For a moment, I think I have won this round, and he is just going to let me lie here, maybe until someone comes to rescue me.

My heart lightens, just thinking that I have won.

Then, in a smooth motion, he lifts me from the ground and tosses me over his shoulder, now heading off toward the forest at a clip that is almost a run.

It's exactly the opposite of what I had hoped would happen.

Chapter Twenty.

Toku

We turn around the corner of the building, and as we do, I see Phochu toss Camille over his shoulder. As soon as he has her there, he sets a fast pace as he heads toward the forest.

I am about to start running after him, but my head of security taps me on the arm with his weapon. He then motions toward the forest, and I can see what he wants to do—he wants to cut them off.

I nod, and we head off in the direction he suggested. Phochu does not seem to notice that we are here, but he is never out of our eyesight.

Just as we reach the woods, where we can cut him off, Phochu lifts his head from where he has been watching the ground.

He sees our small group, and he stops in his tracks.

We are close enough to him that I can see that our presence is not something he expected. However, the surprise in his eyes only lasts a moment. Then, it is replaced by a hard look. He may be surprised to see us now, but I can tell he has at least thought of what he would do in this situation.

In that, he is in a better position than we are. We are just reacting to what he does.

“Put her down.” I demand.

From where she is, Camille can't see us, but as soon as I speak, her voice rings out. “Toku!” Her voice wavers a bit as she says my name, but there is an unmistakable hint of hope in it.

Phochu looks from Camille to me, and then shifts his weight. When he does this, Camille drops to the ground, hitting it hard. By the time she hits the ground, Phochu has shifted his weapon so it is pointing at Camille.

“Don’t even think of moving.” Phochu’s voice is as hard as his eyes look as he speaks. For a second, I think she still considers getting up and running, but when Camille looks at Phochu, she seems to see the same hardness in his eyes and thinks better of it.

“What are your plans? Do you think there is some way out of this for you?” Around me, everyone has their weapons drawn and pointed at Phochu. But I know everyone realizes the same thing I do—anything we do will end with Camille getting shot.

I cannot let that happen.

“I do have a plan. I think you will let me go. Otherwise, your beloved here will meet her own end. And you and I both know that you will never let that happen.”

“And then what? What are you planning to do with her? She is the only human on this entire planet. It isn’t as if you can hide her.”

“It isn’t? I think you are wrong there. She is small. I can disappear her into any house or building on this planet. You’ll never see her again.”

“And are you planning to take her for your own? What will you do if she manages to get pregnant? How will you hide her then? And her child?”

“Who says I am taking her for my own benefit? You have plenty of enemies here who would be happy to take her. They would also be happy to shelter me for the rest of my days. Once you let me go, you will never see me or Camille again. But we will both be taken care of for the rest of our lives.”

I shake my head. “You won’t get away with this.”

“I won’t? Watch me.” Toku keeps his weapon pointed at Camille, but he leans over as if he is going to pick her up again.

At that moment, I catch something move behind them. Whatever it is, it is coming up fast.

And whatever it is going to do, we aren’t going to be able to do anything about it.

Camille

I hear whatever is behind me, but I can't see it.

As soon as I do, I shut my eyes, certain that I am about to be shot and die here on some alien planet.

I hear a whoosh that is nothing like the sound one of our guns would make, and yet it is still unmistakable to me as the sound of a weapon firing.

Except, the expected death that follows never happens.

I open up one eye in time to see Phochu fall to the ground next to me.

In front of me, I expect to see the group of Sintar who had come across us—the group including Toku—putting down their weapons and celebrating. They took care of Phochu, and now I am alright and can rejoin them.

Instead, the group still has their weapons pointed at someone. Except, instead of Phochu, it seems they have their weapons pointed at someone who is still standing near me.

I turn around, and I see a recognizable face behind me, but one I did not expect to see: Intar.

He is holding a weapon, but he is not pointing it at the Sintar standing across from him. Instead, Intar is continuing to point the weapon at Phochu's crumpled body, as if he is worried that Phochu is going to get up, while everyone across from him is worried about Intar.

I jump up and place my body in front of Intar.

"What are you doing?" One of the men with Toku speaks. I don't recognize him, but he has a look suggesting he is military or someone used to being in charge.

“What does it look like I am doing?” I imagine I look somewhat absurd. Intar is at least a foot and a half taller than me. If anyone in this group wants to kill him, they only need to have a decent shot to the upper half of his torso or his head, and it would be done.

“It looks like you are preventing us from saving your life.”

“No, I think you’re attempting to kill the person who saved my life.”

Toku is looking from the man talking to me and back again, seeming as if he is trying to figure out what is going on. I wish I knew better about what was going on as well, but at least I know who the bad guy here is. And that bad person is not Intar.

“Where did he get that weapon, then? He is not supposed to have one. I don’t trust him.’

“And I don’t even know you, but I do know him.” I glance at Intar, who seems to have decided Phochu is no longer a threat, and has let the weapon drop to his chest, hanging on a strap of some sort. “I don’t know where he got that weapon, but I suspect he took it off one of the guards outside the rooms that were supposedly safe. It turns out, they were anything but, but I’m sure you figured that out by now. I’m also thinking that if you men were the only ones here, the person slumped dead on the ground right now wouldn’t be Phochu, but me.”

“And how did he come to get that weapon off of those guards?” The man’s hard look softens just a little, and I am slightly less worried that this standoff is going to end with the death of Intar. But only slightly.

“Probably the same way I almost got one—by taking it off of their bodies where they were passed out in the hallway. It seems he is the smarter one here, because I didn’t actually do it, and he did. Maybe if I had done the same thing, I wouldn’t have needed him to rescue me.”

The look on the military-like man’s face shows a little confusion, and when I look to the others in the group, I see that he is not the only one who seems confused by what I am saying.

“They don’t know what happened.” I hear Intar’s voice, quiet, behind me.

“And I don’t know how you got out of there. The last time I saw you, you were passed out in the safe rooms.” I respond to Intar in the same quiet voice. He and I probably know more about the situation than anyone, but that doesn’t mean that either of us knows exactly what happened. Then, I notice that the men with Toku have several dogs on leashes with them.

Not dog-like creatures, but dogs.

Real life dogs.

On an alien planet.

If I had any doubt, one of them barks at that moment. “I’m also wondering why you have dogs with you. Where did you get dogs?”

“Our copras?” The military man asks, as confused as I am as he looks at the shepherd-like dog on a leash, just like you would see back home. But I don’t get an answer, because Toku interrupts us.

“All of you, stop.” Toku’s strong voice rings out, and everyone immediately listens to him. “No one is going to shoot anyone right now. What we’re going to do is go back to the palace, figure out what is going on, and then we will discuss what to do once we have more information.”

“We can’t go back yet,” I say. Toku raises an eyebrow, as if he doubts there is something worth staying out here for. I get that; after all, who knows who else is out here? We could still be in serious danger. But I am not going anywhere until I take care of one thing.

Toku

For a moment, I consider stopping Camille.

I do not think there is more danger out here, but I am not certain. The last thing I want to do is keep Camille in harm's way, but she looks desperate to stay here and do something.

I can't tell her "no" right now. Not so quickly after I almost lost her.

Camille begins leading our small group back the way she and Phochu had come. Intar falls in with the group, and for now, I let him do so.

It is not lost on me that he has just saved my beloved for me.

For now, I just let the situation move along. I have a lot of questions, but right now, I am just happy to have Camille back with me.

She seems to feel the same way, as she slows her pace so that she is walking next to me, and she picks up my hand in her own, leading me toward something unknown. Camille's pace is quick, and I get the feeling she would like to move faster. At the same time, there is something she fears that is making her move slightly slower.

I notice my head of security has found a place among our small group that gives him a good line of sight to Intar, but the more I think about it, the more I am convinced that he doesn't have to worry about Intar.

I have started to believe that even I do not have anything to worry about from Intar.

We have only walked a small bit when Camille drops my hand and rushes out in front of the group. She seems to have seen something that caught her attention.

"Oh, no!" She says, upset and desperate. I follow her at the pace she sets, then I see what has caused Camille so much distress as she kneels down on the ground near a small tree.

The two moles are sitting near the base of the tree, but then I see the female isn't moving. Her body is limp and lying as if she is dead on the ground. The male mole is standing over her, looking sick with grief.

Camille picks up the female mole's small body carefully, and the male jumps on her hand, clearly trusting Camille. She puts the small body up to her ear, and I realize she is listening to it, hoping to hear it breathing or its heart beating.

After a moment, her face brightens.

"She's alive!" Camille says and looks to me. "We have to save her."

I nod.

Everything else can wait. Camille is safe, and she wants something I can give her.

Chapter Twenty-One

Toku

When one of our doctors suggests there is nothing our doctors and veterinarians can do for the moly, Camille insists that we immediately take her to the Vinree ship in the hope that Asul, the Vinree artificial intelligence, can do something more for her.

I only hesitate for a moment. Although I would normally never allow the Vinree to help on something like this, that doesn't matter when it comes to making Camille happy.

"I can't make any promises." This is what Asul tells us when we reach the ship. It is not what I had hoped Camille would hear from her, but it is more optimistic than what anyone on Forlia would tell us.

Asul has Camille take the small creature to the medical bay. The male moly has never left Camille's shoulder. He seems to know that Camille is the one he needs to trust to help his mate. The rest of us who have come to the ship take spots in a small, nearby room, holding vigil as if we are waiting on surgery for a loved one, rather than a small creature that does not even qualify as a pet.

If I had any doubt about the compassion and love of the humans, this erases it.

As we wait—myself, my head of security, Intar, Tinda, and Camille, once she returns from dropping off the female moly in the medical bay—the entire story of the day emerges. Eventually, we reach the part of the story where Phochu takes Camille out of the safe rooms.

"I still don't understand how the three of us were able to avoid the sleeping gas. The molies, too." In the time since we arrived on the ship, the main building of the estate was discovered to be full of some sort of clear, odorless sleeping gas. It was not dangerous, but highly effective in knocking out anyone who breathed it in.

"I think I have a guess as to that." Intar speaks up. I realize now, looking at him, any desire I had to have my half-brother killed off disappeared when he saved my beloved Camille. Without him, I

would likely no longer have her. Now, he addresses her. “Did you eat any of the food that Phochu brought to us while we were in the safe rooms?”

Camille looks to the ground, seemingly embarrassed. “A little.”

“As did the molies, and so did I.” When he says this, Camille looks up.

“You told me not to eat it!”

“I know. I was worried that Phochu had adulterated the food. I suspect I am right, though not in the way I thought I was. I believe he put some sort of antidote to the sleeping gas in the food. The molies were eating plenty, hence why they were not knocked out by the gas. You ate the food, which is why you were not knocked out. And I ate a bit as well.”

“But when Phochu checked on you, you were passed out. Were you faking that?”

“No. I only took the smallest of small bites. The sushi was something you humans always spoke of on Jurassia, and I could not help myself from taking a bite of it. It must have been a small enough bite that, when the gas was at its strongest, it knocked me out. But I came to quickly after you left. It was so quick that I could hear you in the hallway, leaving. I immediately followed you, picking up a weapon from one of the guards outside the door.”

“How did you catch up with us?”

“Ah, you forget that your beloved is not the only one who grew up in this palace. I know all the hidden passages and shortcuts that an adult, even one like Phochu who spent much of his life in the palace, would never know of or find. Once I could tell where Phochu was going, I just had to employ some of that knowledge to catch up with you.” Intar looks slightly nostalgic, thinking of a happy childhood before everything in his life, and the lives of everyone around him, completely changed with the arrival of the Extinction Virus. “And we all know what happened then.”

I look to Camille, then to Intar. Intar looks almost resigned. It seems that, although he just saved my beloved, he fears that his life, and what he wants from it, is still in jeopardy.

But I have seen what being around a human can do to someone. After all, here I am sitting in a Vinree ship, allowing their artificial intelligence to attempt to heal a small, seemingly unimportant animal, all because the woman I love wants this for it. I know that Intar does not have his own beloved, but he has been around many human females. He has clearly grown fond of them, and especially Camille.

I suspect just knowing human women has changed not just him, but the rest of the Sintar who were sent to Jurassia. The more I am around Camille, the more I suspect having human women—any human women—here on Forlia and on the other Sintar planets will change us all.

And I have no doubt that their presence will change us in only the best of ways.

I know what I have to do.

“Intar,” I say. My half-brother looks to me, his eyes sad and drooping. “I suspect you know that I have been planning to have you killed.”

“To be fair, you’ve already tried to have me killed since I got back to Forlia.” When he says this, there is a glint of amusement in Intar’s eyes. He may not be happy, but he seems to have forgiven the attempt made on his life with the food. Intar may not be someone I have gotten along with for most of my life, but seeing that, I am reminded of my own father and even myself. When you are faced with regular attempts on your life, you start to find those attempts amusing when they do not succeed.

“This is true.” My admission does no harm. No one is going to do anything to me for an attempt on someone else’s life. Killing a rival is something I am expected to do, though I am questioning the wisdom in this way of living. “I suspect you also realize I have continued to plan on your death.”

Intar nods. Again, this is not surprising to him. Camille, though, looks as though I have done something horrifying, like kicking a baby. This is something that definitely differentiates Sintar from humans.

“But I have made a decision. You can go to Jurassia. You can stay on Forlia, or travel between them as you see fit. It’s no secret that I have suspected you of attempting to usurp my power. Even without your actions to save Camille, I can see that you, too, have been changed because of your time among the humans. I have no desire nor am I going to make any further attempts on your life.”

As I speak, the look on Intar’s face brightens. He can see that I mean every word I say. More importantly, I know he can see that I have been changed by the Camille, and I know and understand that, at least for us Sintar, the humans are going to change a lot more than just the two of us.

“Thank you, brother. The humans are amazing, aren’t they?” Intar and I look to Camille. She looks embarrassed, though slightly pleased at the same time.

“I have no doubt that the humans will change all of us Sintar for the better. And I suspect it will be happening sooner rather than later.”

Camille

It is late before Asul finally gives us an update on the moly.

“She is still hurting, but I think we have fixed all her injuries.” I let out a breath I didn’t know I had been holding. “You are lucky you got her here when you did. She was close to dead.”

Toku takes my hand and squeezes it.

I am so going to make him let me keep the molies as pets.

They can still have babies, but they are far too wonderful of animals to leave alone in a cage—even a beautiful cage that mimics nature and has plenty of space to roam. If nothing else, they tried to save me from Phochu. They may be small, but they are my security contingent.

Phochu seems to read my mind. “You want to keep them as pets, don’t you?”

I nod.

“You’ll still have to let them breed. But you can keep them.” I squeal and thank Toku, who manages to smile, even though it still seems awkward on him. I am already thinking up names for the two of them. Now that I know I can keep them, they are going to have to have names. I’m sure, knowing the Sintar, they probably gave them numbers or something else dry, rather than naming them. Then again, I’ve learned a few things in the short time I have been on Forlia. The Sintar may seem like they are always serious, but they clearly have a different side. Perhaps someone has already named them. Obviously, there were Sintar in the past who loved the molies enough to sneak them home from their own moon.

This reminds me of something that I had wanted to discuss with Toku since we got to Forlia. Now that the molies are alright, Toku is not going to kill Intar, and we are all safe, I can think about other, less important things.

Intar and Tinda head to their quarters on the ship, leaving Toku and myself alone.

“Are you going back to Forlia tonight?” I ask the question, feeling shy. I know we have already fooled around a bit, but if Toku stays the night, I know what will happen. It isn’t as if there is any doubt about our relationship.

I want it to happen, but at the same time, it feels a little strange.

“I was hoping to stay with you.” Unlike me, Toku seems to have no qualms about being forward.

“The molies will be alright for the night. They are comfortable. Besides, I don’t think the male one would stand for being separated from the female one if he knows she is alright.” Asul says, seeming to recognize that this is a concern I have.

I nod, then turn to Toku. “Before we do anything, I want to talk to you about something.”

*

Five minutes later, we are sitting in the main room of the suite where I have been staying on the ship, surrounded by some of the most amazing music I have ever heard.

In case there was any doubt remaining in my mind that the Sintar are not the hard, serious men they portray themselves as to the outside world, it has been ousted from my mind by hearing their music.

There are no lyrics to the music, but it is lyrical. It seems to envelop me with its notes, going places that human music never goes, but it is still familiar and fascinating.

I could listen to this forever.

“How can a species that seems so tough and serious create something so beautiful?” I ask, the question slightly rhetorical, but not entirely.

Toku takes it as something other than a rhetorical question.

“Perhaps we are just a contradictory species by nature.” Toku is sitting next to me on one of the room’s couches, and I am leaning against him, just enjoying his closeness and the music. I could stay like this forever.

Which is a good thing, because I am, apparently, stuck with him forever.

“You do seem to have an innate ability to change. That’s not something other species seem to embrace. Humans included. You were going to have Intar killed until today.” Toku doesn’t immediately say anything.

“Maybe we have just been waiting to have something worth changing for.” Toku brushes my arm lightly with his long fingers, the feeling at once both ticklish and amazing. He doesn’t have to say that the reason to change is us human women. Anyone can see that. “We could have done better for our own women, though. We did not

view sex with them as anything but a serious matter. We should have been enjoying it and taking pleasure in our relationships.”

Toku strokes my arm still, then leans his head over and kisses my neck. I lean into his kisses, his tongue flicking against my skin in a way that makes me want him to keep doing it forever. “I am sure that my fellow Sintar will want to make up for what we didn’t give our own women, though. This Sintar surely does.”

Toku turns my head, pulling his mouth from my neck and kissing me. If the strokes of his hand were light and anticipating something long and slow, this kiss is entirely different. There is neediness there, and a desire that is almost embarrassingly blatant.

I’m pretty sure that, as I kiss him back, my desire for him is equally apparent.

And I don’t care.

I move from where I have been sitting, so I am straddling Toku.

If there was a part of me that had wanted our first time having sex to be long and slow, that part of me is long gone.

I have been trying to keep my desire for Toku at bay for far too long. Every part of my body is telling me that I need to have Toku, and I need to have him now.

It’s like lust, but kicked up a thousand notches.

I’m shocked that the Sintar men and women never figured out how to make sex a pleasurable thing, because the way I want Toku? That alone is enough to get me close to coming, even without anything more.

Toku’s tongue desperately flicks at mine, and I moan a little. The way it flicks against mine feels so good and natural.

Suddenly, I feel Toku’s big hands around my side, and he is lifting me up.

“What are you doing?” I ask, surprised at how easily he lifts me. I am not a small woman, but he has no trouble picking me up as if I am a

child. He places me so I am sitting on the couch, and he is kneeling on the ground in front of me. He is still tall kneeling there, his tail flicking like a cat's tail, back and forth as if he is excited.

“I am going to taste your pussy before I lose myself. I am not going to sacrifice your pleasure for my own.”

Before I can say anything to this, Toku has his hands at my waist, unzipping and pulling off my pants. After the day I have had, I should be tired and want to sleep, but I don't.

Instead, I feel a surge of energy—I don't want this day to end. I want Toku, and I don't want to wait for a day when I am not so tired or a day when I haven't had the sort of things happen to me that happened to me today.

That feeling only increases as Toku leans over me, my underwear still on, and licks from the back of my pussy to the front, as if he can't wait to do this long enough to take my panties off.

Toku lets out a low growl, then tugs my underwear away from me. For a second, I wonder if he will have any idea what he is doing. The man, after all, has never done this to a woman—not even a Sintar woman, back when they were still here.

He dives back into my pussy as if it is the only thing he has ever wanted to do, and there is no doubt that he knows what he is doing.

It's like the man has done this a million times.

His tongue finds my clit, and the way it flicks against it? It's as good as I had thought it would be.

No, it's better.

Right away, it feels like I am going to come, and I let out a small noise that is something like a small scream. My pussy clenches as it gets excited, already ready to let go with pleasure.

Still, I want this to last, so I focus on what Toku is doing, holding in my pleasure as long as I can. Toku's tongue flicks against my clit, then he finds his way around it, the tongue flicking nearby and nearly driving me over the edge.

I feel as if I am getting antsy, and I grab hold of Toku's horns, as if they were put there solely for this purpose, willing myself to stay still so he can continue what he is doing.

As soon as I grab them, Toku growls again, in a way that suggests I have just done something unexpected, but that it is something he is happy I am doing.

In response, I feel his hand on my thigh, then his fingers are in my wet folds, feeling for something. Then, one of his fingers finds its way inside me, followed by two more.

Now, instead of using Toku's horns to keep myself from moving, I find myself rhythmically pushing my pussy against his hand and mouth, no longer wanting to wait to come.

The wave of my orgasm washes over me as I push myself onto Toku's fingers, and I can feel how wet I am on him. I say Toku's name as I come, then I can't help but yell it as the orgasm seems to hit every part of my body.

It's like no orgasm I have ever had before.

It keeps going, far longer than I think it should. Toku keeps lapping at my pussy, as if he is trying not to miss a drop of my juices. Finally, my body goes limp, exhausted from the orgasm. When I drop my hands from his horns, Toku pulls his fingers out of my pussy and lifts his head, licking me off his fingers as he does, tasting me as if I am the best thing he has ever eaten.

I am trying to think of something to say, when Toku growls again. Now, he lifts my shirt over my head, and, seeming to have learned more, undoes the strap on my bra, letting my large breasts fall open to him kneeling on the ground.

Before I can tell him I am exhausted, Toku has my left breast in his mouth, his tongue working it.

And even though I thought I couldn't go on, the feel of that flicking on it makes my body, somehow, respond, my pussy already getting wet again.

I know exactly what it wants, because it's what every part of me wants: his cock inside me.

Then I remember.

He has two of them.

Toku

The taste of Camille is still on my lips as I rip her shirt over her head.

My body wants nothing more than to pound my large cock into her pussy, letting its wetness envelop me and giving me a pleasure I have never fully known.

But still, I want to touch her beautiful breasts again, to feel her hard nipples on my tongue before I let my cock loose inside her.

Now that I have seen how Camille takes the brassiere she wears off, I am able to quickly loose its straps. Like a gift for me, her breasts fall out of the cups that had been holding them in, their round shapes like invitations begging me to hold them in my hands. I grab one with my hand, but I dive into the other one with my mouth, the nipple tightening into a hard nub as I do so.

I lightly flick my tongue against Camille's warm skin, and I feel her respond to the motion. She had seemed exhausted after I made her come before, but I am happy to see that I will have a chance to make her scream my name again in pleasure as I take her fully as my beloved, our bodies moving together as one, like we are meant to.

I keep one of my hands on her breast as I lick her, but my other one can't help but find its way into her warm folds. As soon as it is there, I can feel Camille's body getting slick with her juices again, wanting my cocks as badly as I want to give them to her. I tease her clit with my fingers, not touching it so much as brushing up against it as lightly as I can. Camille gasps, and once again grabs my horns.

I can't help but growl when she does that, an involuntary noise on my part. Sinter do not let others touch our horns, and the gesture is at once intimate in a way that I had never suspected it could be. Camille is doing this because she wants me where I am, licking and touching her in a way that makes her scream with pleasure.

I will never be able to look at my horns again without thinking of the way she holds them, begging me to keep licking her cunt or her

nipples.

My tail finds its way to Camille's leg, working its way up her leg until it is teasing at her rear end, trying to find its way between her and the cushion of the seat. Camille lifts herself up, and my tail touches her ass, exploring it with its tip and making me want to do the same with my fingers and tongue.

Or, I suddenly realize, my smaller cock.

I want to explore her ass, but my cocks are straining against my pants, and I know I do not have long before I will need to sink deep into Camille, letting myself go within her warm folds. I move my mouth to Camille's other breast, then I know I cannot wait any longer.

I move my hand from Camille's breast to the waist of my pants, loosening the fastening mechanism and letting them fall to my feet.

My cocks, now loose from having been straining at the pants, both stand at attention, happy to be in the open air.

Camille looks from my face on her breasts to my cocks, and her eyes widen.

Until she gives me this look, I had forgotten the humans only have one cock, like the other alien species. She must be surprised to see both of them.

Then again, she must have known about my two cocks. I imagine the Vinree artificial intelligence told her of them, or maybe it even showed her some videos of us Sintar using our double cocks.

Perhaps she is surprised at the size of my larger cock.

From the items Camille sent me to review, I have gotten the impression that my cock, like those of the Sintar in general, is larger than those on the human men, though surprisingly similar in appearance.

For a moment, I wonder if perhaps I will hurt Camille with my cock, but then her wide eyes begin to look excited, and I am less worried and excited again.

Then I realize I need to say something else to Camille before I do this.

“Once we do this, there will be no taking it back. It might kill me now if you were to reject me, but it will definitely do so once we have done this.”

After I speak, Camille pulls me toward her, and kisses me. It is almost enough to send me over the edge as her tongue touches mine, but I manage to keep myself under control.

When she pulls away, she looks at me, her eyes intense. “I think it would already kill me if we had to be apart.”

Camille’s words are exactly what I want to hear.

I kiss her again, then, unable to help myself, kiss each of her breasts. I take my larger cock in my hand, and rub it through the folds of her pussy, letting her juices wet it, even as I can see a bit of cum on its tip, unable to hold it in any longer. I want to run my tongue through those juices again, to taste Camille on my tongue, but now is not the time.

There will be plenty of time for that again soon enough.

Instead, I place the tip of my larger cock so it rests against Camille, ready to enter her. I look at Camille again, her teeth biting her lower lip. She nods, wanting me in her as much as I want to be in her, and I slowly ease my cock into her. Despite my fears, her body opens to meet mine, taking the shaft of my cock inside it as if I was meant to be her, her warm, tight pussy enveloping me. There are ridges along my cock—one of the few differences between a Sintar cock and one belonging to a human—and as each one pushes into Camille, she lets out a gasp. Each ridge seems to surprise her in the best of ways, and she wraps her legs around my waist, pulling me toward her, forcing my cock all the way into her.

I sink deep into her, her body taking all of me without a problem.

As I do, Camille grabs my smaller cock, and pushes it into her wet folds. She is pushing it against her clit, and I see how much extra pleasure doing this will give to her.

Camille may not have a tail to use to pleasure my smaller cock while we do this, like a female Sinter would have done, but she seems to know exactly how she wants to use it.

I pull my cock out, then sink it into Camille again. This time, instead of the surprised gasps, Camille moans loudly, her legs moving with me and forcing me as deep as I can go into her pussy, her hand forcing my smaller cock exactly where she needs it.

Camille yells my name, and now I cannot stop.

I pump in and out of her, concentrating on making this last as long as I can, even though I could lose myself at any time. I want Camille to come again. After what seems like an excruciating wait, I feel her tight pussy clench even harder around my cock as she pushes my smaller cock hard into her wet pussy and clit, and I know she is there.

Then, and only then, do I let myself sink as deep as I can into Camille, holding myself there as the first rush of my cum pulses down my cock and into Camille. She yells something incomprehensible and pulls me toward her with her legs, wanting every bit of me inside her. I take a few more small thrusts, emptying myself into her before I sink on top of her, moving her body as I do so we can lie on the couch together, our bodies slick and joined together still.

I worry that might crush the smaller body of Camille, but she wraps her legs around me tighter, pulling my now spent cock into her again, pulling the last bit of her own pleasure out of me. When she is done with that, she lets go of my smaller cock, relaxes, and pulls me onto her body.

How I have lived so long in my life without someone to share this with, I will never know. I do not ever want to live without it again.

Camille runs her hand up my arm, lightly brushing my skin, and I realize I don't ever need to live without it again.

More importantly, I know I will not have to live without Camille ever again.

I would do anything for this woman, and I will enjoy doing so for the rest of our lives.

Epilogue

Camille

I step out into the afternoon light from the palace, and it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust.

The day is sunny, and the temperature is perfect. Then again, this could be a description of almost every day here on Forlia. At least, it's a description of every day here at the palace, which seems to be the San Diego of Forlia in terms of weather. I know now, after a year on the planet, that most of Forlia isn't quite this nice, climate-wise—it is basically like Earth—but when you're standing here on yet another perfect day, it's easy to forget that other places are snowy and cold.

When my eyes adjust, I see the familiar figure of Toku, sitting at a table on the large patio. His tail is behind him, flicking back and forth. I can't tell from here whether it is because he is happy or upset.

Considering his brother, Intar, is sitting across from him, it could easily be either one of these feelings.

As I approach the table, I can hear their conversation.

"I swear to you, this is true." Toku sounds as if he is upset, but in a good sort of way.

"And I am telling you, she is not old enough to speak. She did not say anything of the sort." I can see Intar, and he is smiling. In his arms, he is holding a familiar form.

I come up behind Toku and give his tail a little flick, knowing how sensitive it is and how much he likes it. I get a little growl in response, then lean over and kiss his cheek. In Toku's arm, I see another familiar form.

I don't have to ask to know that the two of them are talking about our twin girls, Callie and Coco. It's rare these days that Toku is not talking about them.

For someone who was once a ruthless ruler of an alien species, ready and willing to kill as necessary, he has changed. Sure, he's still

the ruler of the Sintar, but he—and the rest of the Sintar—are no longer the crazed killers they once were.

Granted, there were some growing pains and misunderstandings over the last year—some major growing pains and misunderstandings, particularly when it came to differences between the classes and ruling families that were once so important to the Sintar—but things are great now. Or, if they aren't great, they're getting better every day.

Who knew some backward humans could bring this sort of change to an entire alien species?

I take the baby from Toku—it is Callie, her name written across the small, pink dress she is wearing in both English and the Sintar language—and hold her close to me. The twins are identical, and even though I would never admit it, I have trouble telling them apart and insist on putting their names on everything, so I don't accidentally mix them up. From their skin that is the color of a burnt umber crayon to their little horns, the two of them are little clones of each other, right down to their lack of tails, like little humans.

“Tell me, Camille,” Intar says, “at what age do human children begin speaking?”

“I don't know, maybe they start saying a word or two before they are a year old, but that's just a word. Not full sentences or anything.” I kiss Callie's head and hand her back to Toku. She stays asleep during this exchange. She is definitely the easier of the two babies, in terms of fussiness.

“See! She is not talking, then.” Intar has a triumphant look on his face. The blossoming of the relationship between Intar and Toku—despite Intar spending most of his time on Jurassia—has been something wonderful to see. They even act like brothers, bickering and talking as if they grew up close with each other, rather than growing up in a way that set them at odds.

“Who is doing what talking?” I ask, looking between the two men.

“Coco. This morning, when I went into her nursery to see if she was awake, I swear she said, ‘I love you, daddy.’” Toku looks at me as if there is no way I can dispute this statement.

However, when he looks at me, it seems he can see I am incredulous. The babies are only a few weeks old, after all. Still, it is wonderfully sweet how Toku dotes on the two girls, loving them and thinking they are the most perfect little creatures to ever live.

“Fine.” Toku sets his mouth in a way that suggests he no longer wants to discuss this topic. “Neither of you has to believe me. I know what I heard.”

Behind me, I hear a familiar patter of feet and the muzzle of a nose on my leg. I lean over, and pet my copra, Buttercup, on the head. It turns out, the copra I first saw on that horrible day when Phochu tried to kill me really are dogs. As in, full on, Earth dogs. I made Asul run tests, because from the moment I saw the copra, I was curious.

It turns out, the Vinree have dogs as well, which look remarkably like poodles. And supposedly the Caprir have them, too, and they look like pitties.

When Asul found out these were all actual dogs, as in the same animals we have on Earth, I wasn’t the only one who was curious. Since then, Asul has been slightly obsessed with figuring out how dogs got to all these planets, because there are dogs all over the universe. As far as I know, she has yet to discover any reasonable explanation for this.

As I lean over to give Buttercup a good petting, my two pet molies come running, launching themselves off Buttercup’s back and onto my shoulders. You would never know that Huff, the female moly, nearly died. About the only thing that suggests something once happened to her is the extra attention Puff, the male, now pays to her at all times. I’m not sure he ever lets poor Huff out of his sight. Huff is probably dying for some alone, girl time, especially since their last litter of babies was weaned a few months ago. I wonder if I can distract Puff and let her have a few moments of peace.

For now, though, the molies are content to snuggle in my hair, their jealousy as a result of my attention to Buttercup clear by their actions.

“Are you looking forward to your trip back to Earth?” Intar asks, changing the subject.

Toku and I are leaving tomorrow for my first trip back to Earth since I left so long ago. I have been able to talk to my family with the technology the Vinree developed, but it’s not the same as seeing them in person.

Plus, my mom is dying to meet her grandchildren in person.

We can finally go, because things on Forlia are going well, and Toku trusts that all will be well here while he leaves Intar temporarily in charge.

Plus, with the near instantaneous communication Asul now has across the universe, it’s not as if Toku is going to be on vacation from his duties here on Forlia and the other Sintar planets.

“I can’t wait.” I packed my bags a week ago. To say I am excited is an understatement.

“Did Camille tell you we are taking a zoo with us?” Toku teases. I can’t believe this serious Sintar now jokes and teases as if it is something he has been doing his whole life.

“It’s not a zoo. It’s just a few animals I think people will be interested in back on Earth.” We’ve had this argument several times. I’m just taking a few pets. It’s not like I can leave the molies here for the two months we’re planning to be gone. Or Buttercup.

Or the other six pets coming with us.

Coco starts stirring, and I can tell she is going to be hungry when she wakes up. I stop petting Buttercup and go to take her from Intar’s arms. Around us, there are Forlian birds singing, and the sun is shining. I can hear a fountain bubbling nearby, and there is just the slightest of breezes to stir the air, but not enough to make it unpleasant or chilly.

I realize something that I haven't thought of before, as I sit here with Toku and my girls, chatting with Intar while my pets are nearby.

I may be going back to Earth tomorrow, but I won't be going home again until we're leaving Earth and heading back here to Forlia.

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