



RUBY
DIXON

LAUREN'S
BARBARIAN
AN ICEHOME NOVEL

LAUREN'S BARBARIAN

A SCIFI ALIEN ROMANCE

RUBY DIXON

ICEHOME BOOK ONE

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A NOTE TO READERS

My intention is that this series will stand on its own. While there will be characters crossing back and forth from the *Ice Planet Barbarians* series (also available in KU if that's your thing!), the goal is that you should be able to read *Icehome* books without being caught up on that series. You might miss a few details of ongoing characters, but overall this story stands on its own. I want the new series to be about these new characters and their own journey into our favorite snow-covered world, not just as offshoots of the other tribe.

With that said, enjoy!

<3

Ruby

LAUREN'S BARBARIAN

A LUSH, TROPICAL ISLAND ON AN ICY PLANET MAKES NO SENSE.

THEN AGAIN, NOT MUCH MAKES SENSE ANYMORE AFTER WAKING UP AND FINDING MYSELF NOT IN BED BUT ON A STRANGE WORLD POPULATED BY ALIENS. SINCE THAT MOMENT, I'VE LEARNED THAT NOTHING IS NORMAL ANYMORE AND I'VE GOT TO ROLL WITH THE PUNCHES. I CAN HANDLE THIS, THOUGH. I'M STRONG AND CAPABLE.

SO... WASHED UP ON A TROPICAL ISLAND? GOT IT HANDLED.

SEPARATED FROM THE OTHERS IN MY GROUP? HANDLED.

STRANDED ALONE WITH A BRUTAL BUT DELICIOUS ALIEN MAN THAT CAN'T SPEAK ENGLISH BUT HAS GREAT...AHM...BODY LANGUAGE? YUP, HANDLED.

ADD IN THE FACT THAT MY COOTIE — A SYMBIONT I NEED TO SURVIVE — HAS CHOSEN MY BIG, HULKING ALIEN FRIEND AS MY FATED MATE? LET'S JUST SAY THAT THE SITUATION ISN'T THE ONLY THING THAT'S GOING TO BE HANDLED.

BUT IT ISN'T LONG BEFORE I LEARN THAT THE TROPICAL ISLAND PARADISE IS A DEATH TRAP AND WE'RE ALL IN GRAVE DANGER, ALIENS AND HUMANS ALIKE. TO SURVIVE THIS, I'LL NEED MY TEMPTING GUY TO GIVE ME A HAND WITH THE SITUATION...GOOD THING HE'S GOT FOUR OF THEM.

This romance features all of the adventure, humor and community you've come to expect in the Ice Planet Barbarians

series, but it stands on its own. You do not need to read the other series (or be caught up) in order to read LAUREN'S BARBARIAN. Enjoy!

LAUREN

“**S**he’s waking up,” someone whispers beside my bed. “Everyone, play it cool.”

I rub my eyes with my knuckles and yawn, peering out. I don’t have my glasses on and everything looks like a blur. My head’s pounding and fuzzy, and I can’t think straight, but I’m pretty sure there aren’t supposed to be people in my bedroom. “Michelle?” I call out sleepily to my roommate. “Why are you in my room?”

It’s quiet for a long moment.

“Is Mee-shell in one of the other pods?” someone asks. It’s a man with a deep voice and a strange accent.

“I don’t know,” the woman says again, impatient. “Do I look like a motherfucking pod whisperer? I know just as much as you do.” A hand reaches out and grabs mine, squeezing it. Oh god, it feels burning hot—either that or I’m really cold.

Actually, come to think of it, it is really cold in my room. My toes are freezing. I curl them automatically and wonder why I don’t have any blankets.

“Honey, listen carefully,” the woman tells me. She leans in closer and I see it’s a blonde woman in a parka, her eyes a vivid, glowing blue. She’s pretty, in an athletic, weathered, spends-too-much-time-outdoors sort of way. I don’t know

anyone like that. My people are more library people. Must be one of Michelle's jogging friends. She squeezes my hand again. "I don't want you to be alarmed, all right? You're safe here. We're the good guys."

"Where's Michelle? How come she let you in my room?" I frown, trying to pull my hand away from the woman. "Did you turn down the heat?"

"I think she's still groggy," another woman says in a quiet voice. "Should we have her drink something?"

The blonde woman moves away and turns into a blur. I can't see farther than a few feet ahead of me without my glasses, and everything else seems to be moving back out of range. There's a lot of blue moving at the edges of my vision, and I squint, but nothing comes into sight. Annoyed, I lean over the edge of my bed and fumble for my glasses on the nightstand—
Except there's no nightstand. Or glasses.

And when I roll over, I realize I'm not in bed. My face smushes up against something that feels like a wall, and I realize about two seconds later that I'm naked.

Is...this one of those bad dreams where you're naked at the mall? Or in class? I squeeze my eyes shut again, trying to re-route my dream. *Happy thoughts, Lo. Think happy thoughts.*

Except, my dream doesn't seem to be changing. I cautiously open one eye again and a blurry blue face—and horns? Are those horns?—looms into view. "Is she well?"

I bite back a scream, shrinking down against my bed. I push back only to feel my shoulder on the opposite side hit a wall, too. Two narrow walls and I'm naked... Am I in a coffin?

"Am I dead?" I cry out, horrified. I squint at the big blue horned face. "Oh my god, are you devils? Am I in *hell*?"

"Only if it's frozen over," says the blonde. "Yuk, yuk."

"Liz," scolds the other woman. "Be nice." A new face looms into view, and I can just barely make out a pale face and carrot red hair and another pair of crazy-blue eyes. A soft,

furry blanket is handed to me. “Wrap up in this. I’m Harlow. Don’t be alarmed. We’re the good guys. I promise.”

Good guys? Does that mean there are bad guys? “W-where am I? Why am I naked?”

The blonde bites down on her knuckle. “So. Many. Jokes. I can’t. I just can’t, though.”

“You’re safe,” the redhead says again.

“Maybe we should have planned a speech,” the blonde continues. “Like, Smurf you very much, welcome to our village!”

“Liz!”

“I couldn’t help it!”

“What?” I whisper. I press a hand to my throbbing forehead. Am I...high? Roofied? I am way too confused.

“Liz is just making things worse,” the redhead says and moves closer to my side. She looms in and her face is pale and freckled but friendly. She, too, looks a little weathered and she’s also wearing a furry parka. “Okay. You’re not at home, um...what did you say your name was again?”

“Lauren,” I tell her. “But everyone calls me Lo. Have you seen my glasses?”

“Hi, Lo. I’m Harlow. This is Liz.” She points at the blonde blur at her side. “And I hate to break it to you, but you’ve been kidnapped by aliens.”

“Um, aliens?” I squint. Now I’m wondering if they’re the ones that are high.

“Not these aliens,” Harlow reassures me quickly, waving a hand. Another blue form shifts in the background and someone walks—oh god, those blue things are people? Really, really big people? With horns? I’m not dreaming that? “We’re the rescue team.”

“The good guys,” Liz chirps. “Welcome to your new home.”



MY GLASSES ARE NOWHERE to be found. Neither are my pants, or my bed, or anything that resembles my apartment.

It seems I really have been kidnapped by aliens.

So far no one's hurting me, so I try to keep my panic to a minimum. I think the fact that I was drugged helps, because I'm not feeling like freaking out. I'm just mostly really tired and drained. Liz and Harlow help me out of my "pod" and wrap me in yet another furry blanket. They lead me nearby where I sit on the floor amidst a bunch of other blankets. "Wait here," Harlow tells me with a pat on my shoulder.

Like I'm going anywhere? I can't even see two feet in front of me.

I try not to stare as some big blue guy approaches and offers me a waterskin and a pouch of something that feels like granola. "Eat," he tells me in a gruff, accented voice, and then walks away a few feet. I'm pretty sure I saw a tail, which is alarming. I shove a handful of food into my mouth and crunch down, watching everyone around me. There are a lot of blue guys, and what's weird is that they don't seem to be wearing much clothing...unless they're dressed in all blue. It's strange, because I'm utterly freezing despite the layers of blankets on my body, and the contents of the waterskin they gave me are slushy with ice. Maybe I've caught a cold. That would explain my exhaustion and confusion.

I exhale deeply and watch my breath frost into a cloud in front of my face.

Okay, maybe I'm not sick.

"Is it winter?" I ask. "I thought it was summer." At least, it was back home.

"Suh-mer is not here. She is back with the others," the blue alien tells me, and then moves away a few feet to watch a blur in the distance.

Ooooookay. Now I'm really confused. I take a sip of icy water and nod as if it all makes sense to me and watch as everyone moves around. They're clustered around a dark blob and talking in low voices. A moment later, someone screams

loudly. Really loudly. I jump in my seat and nearly spill my drink.

“It’s okay!” Harlow calls out. “Please don’t be scared! Someone grab her before she runs away!”

There’s a big haze of movement and then the screamer lets out another choked sob before going silent. I stare, eyes wide, and try not to panic.

“Well, that went well,” Liz says dryly. “I feel like we need to practice our ‘We’re aliens’ speech a bit more. Like maybe we don’t open up with ‘Hi, we’re aliens.’”

“Let me handle this next one,” Harlow tells her firmly. “Go sit her down with her friend.”

The “friend” must be me. Is this my roomie Michelle, then? Maybe she’ll know what’s going on. A few moments later, Liz brings another fur-wrapped person to come and sit next to me in the blankets. This one is sniffing and crying, and I get a sense of impatience from Liz before she heads off to help again. Another blue guy steps in and offers the girl next to me her own snacks and then moves away once more.

“Hi,” I whisper to the new girl, once it’s clear that she’s not Michelle. Michelle has dark skin and short cropped hair. This girl has brown, messy hair and freckles, and she’s weeping and blubbering in a way that Michelle never would. Should I be panicking more than I am? For a moment, I’m kind of relieved that I can’t see shit without my glasses. “I’m Lo.”

“You’re what?” the girl asks, her voice twangy with a Southern accent. “Low?”

Oh. Maybe that didn’t make sense. “I’m Lauren. Everyone calls me Lo, though. Hi.”

“Willa,” she replies and swipes at her nose. “Do...do you know what’s going on here?”

“Not really.”

She leans in closer to me. “Are they bad guys?”

“I hope not,” I whisper. “Because I don’t have any underpants.”

Willa gives a teary giggle. “Me either.”

I start to laugh, too, and then we’re both chuckling as we eat our granola. It seems like such a stupid—but important—thing to be upset over. Funnily enough, though, I do feel better being able to laugh over things. “Where are you from?” I ask Willa. “I’m from Durham, but I don’t think we’re in North Carolina because it’s really cold.”

“Arkansas,” Willa says. “Hot Springs.” She sniffs her waterskin, as if not sure if she can trust it, and then takes a sip. “Where do you think we are?”

“Maybe the mountains?” I guess, though I’m not entirely sure. If we are, how did we get here? And why are aliens here?

“Do you think we’re safe?” Willa asks me, worried.

I shrug, because I really don’t know. “I think if they were going to kill us, they wouldn’t be feeding us and giving us blankets,” I tell her, since that’s the most hopeful thing I can think of.

“Oh good.” She sounds cheered up by this. “Lordy, I was about to pee in my non-existent pants at the thought of being killed by aliens.”

I smile at her words, though I’m not entirely sure we’re safe. Harlow and Liz seem nice enough, but I can’t help but think of their eerily glowing blue eyes and the fact that there are only two of them and a lot of big blue males.

A few moments later, another girl comes to join us. She stumbles as she falls into the furs, knocking my water out of my hands and tripping over Willa’s blankets. “Sorry,” she says quickly.

“It’s okay,” I tell her as I scramble to pick up the water before it can leak everywhere. Willa and I help her sit upright and she pulls her blankets close around her shoulders. “I’m Lauren, this is Willa.”

“I’m Veronica. Where are we?”

“Y’all’s guess is as good as mine,” Willa declares.

“How many of us are there?” Veronica wants to know. “Are... are all of these big black crates people?”

I think of the coffin thing I was pulled out of and squint over in the direction where Liz and Harlow are busy. They’re surrounded by a few of the half-naked blue guys. “How many of them are there? I can’t tell anything without my glasses.”

Veronica huddles down next to me while Willa gets to her feet, counting. After a moment she sits down again and leans in toward me. “I counted twenty. And they just pulled a pregnant lady out of another one of them boxes.”

Twenty people? Are they all like us, confused and naked? What the heck is going on? Why are we here? What do these aliens want with us?

Better yet, how do we get home?



ONE BY ONE, our small group turns into a rather large group. We’re joined by Nadine and Callie and Bridget, who all seem to be taking things in stride. They’ve got the same dazed expression I do. Samantha is panicky and slaps away the hands of anyone that tries to help her. Devi is a chatter, and a woman named Marisol decides that I’m the best one to hide behind. She huddles behind me, pushing up against my furs as if she can somehow slide under my skin. I don’t complain, because I’m scared, too. I can’t blame her for trying to find a safe spot. I’m just not sure I’m that safe spot.

We’re a motley group, I think. Nadine is black, Flordeliza is Asian, and Devi is Indian. I think. I’m also pretty sure Callie is Hispanic, though it seems impolite—and silly—to ask. What does it matter what someone’s skin color is when we’re surrounded by blue people? Then there’s Tia, who looks to be a teenager. Hannah and Penny and Steph are big girls with bouncy figures and cleavage that even my blind self can see.

And then there’s Angie.

Poor, poor Angie. She keeps touching her belly—her very, very pregnant belly—as if in shock. “Are you okay?” someone asks her.

“I think I’m pregnant,” she says, utterly astonished.

After that, it goes *really* quiet. It’s clear to all of us that Angie is very pregnant, but if it’s a surprise to her, how long has she been “asleep”? And who impregnated her? It’s disturbing and I get sick at the thought of what that means. If Angie’s been impregnated, what about the rest of us?

“That’s all the females,” someone says. “Now to get the males.”

My throat goes dry on the last of my trail mix. We’re a quiet group, everyone eating and trying not to freak out, though there’s the occasional panicky sniffle. I think we’re all just trying to figure out what’s going on. Harlow moves over to our shivering group while Liz stays with the others. As she passes by, I notice she has her hands at the small of her back and her belly juts out from her parka. She’s pregnant, too.

“I wonder if they got her while she was sleepin’, too,” Willa whispers, thinking the same thing I am.

A big blue blur comes up to Harlow’s side and brings her a chair. “Sit,” he demands. “You push too hard.”

“I’m fine, baby. I promise.” She leans into the blue guy and I realize a second later that the two blurs are kissing.

“Sit anyhow,” he demands, earning a chuckle from her.

A moment later, Harlow sits with our group on a padded stool. She adjusts her clothes and then gazes into our waiting faces, clasping her hands. “Before I launch into everything, because I know it’s going to be a little hard to believe, I want you to remember that I’m your friend, and I’ve been through this and I’m here to help, okay?” When no one says anything, she nods slowly. “All right. I’m sure you’re all wondering what’s going on. I have answers. You might not like them, but I *do* have answers.”

Marisol clutches tightly at my back, as if bracing herself.

“A few years ago, I, too, woke up in a strange, cold place surrounded by strangers. I’d been taken from my bed while I slept and woke up to a new world. Nothing made sense. I was rescued by a very kind group who took me out of a pod very

much like the ones you guys were in.” She gestures off to the distance.

“He’s fighting,” Liz bellows out. “Someone get over here and hold him down! We mean you no harm, damn it. Fuck off with the hitting!”

Several of the big blue aliens rush across the room and Harlow pauses. Willa’s eyes go wide and someone else begins to cry quietly.

Things quiet down a moment later and Harlow sighs. She rubs her rounded belly and I can’t help but glance over at Angie, who keeps staring down at her own like it’s betrayed her. I guess it has, in a sense. “I was kidnapped by aliens that the others call ‘Little Green Men.’ They’ve got big eyes and skinny bodies and they take human women and sell them on the black market in outer space as slaves or pets of some kind.”

“Is that what’s happening to us?” one girl asks, her tone part horror and part anger. “We’re your slaves now?”

“No,” Harlow says calmly. “Those aliens aren’t the ones that took you. The ones that did were a different kind of slaver, but the crew was...not the same. Those slavers landed here trying to gather a few more slaves and we killed them.”

Someone raises a hand. “I’m confused. So the bad guys are dead?”

“Yes. They’re dead and they’re not going to harm anyone. I promise.”

“Where is their spaceship if you guys stopped them?”

“You’re sitting in it.”

Are we? I squint at my surroundings, but all I can tell is that it’s dark and cold. Really, really cold. I shiver and huddle deeper into my blankets. If we’re on a spaceship...

“So you guys are going to, what, drive the spaceship and take us home, right?” another woman—Nadine, I think—asks. “Is that what this is about? You’re going to take us back to our homes?”

Harlow pauses. “Um, not exactly. That’s a big problem with this. You can’t go home. You are home.”

“Where are we exactly? Are we even on Earth?”

“You’re on a different planet. This one has two small suns and two moons and it’s a little chilly.” She smiles to take the sting out of her words. “But it’s a very nice place and the people here are wonderful, I promise.”

Someone begins to laugh hysterically. Samantha. “So, wait. We can’t go home? Now? Or ever?”

“Ever, I’m afraid.” Harlow’s voice is so gentle. “There’s no way back.”

“Bullshit,” Hannah says, clearly upset.

Samantha just laughs and laughs, as if this is the funniest thing she’s ever heard. Someone else starts to cry. Several people, actually. I’m numb. I don’t know what to think.

No...home? Ever again?

I think of my apartment back near the institute. Michelle won’t care that I’m missing until the rent is due or my pet cockatoo starts screaming for food. Luckily, Nugget is really noisy and Michelle likes him. My poor Nugget. My poor parents. Poor *me*. I feel a keen sense of grief for everything I’ve lost in a flash. I’ve done nothing to deserve this, but my world has somehow been ripped away from me in an instant. I don’t even have my glasses.

I’ve lost everything.

“This is bullshit!” Hannah cries out. “We’re sitting in a spaceship. Why can’t we just turn it around and drive it back to Earth?”

Harlow raises a hand, as if to calm her. “I know how you feel. I promise you, I felt the same when I first woke up and realized what happened. But this ship originally came here looking for more slaves. They followed the records of the old crew, who had landed here earlier, and murdered them. If this ship goes back to Earth, someone’s going to take the flight paths and trace them back to this world and make everyone

that lives here unsafe. I'm sorry to say that there are dozens of families living here that would be endangered. You guys are outvoted."

There's a low ripple of unhappy murmurs amongst the group. I feel a stab of resentment, too, even though part of me understands it. The other part of me just wants to go home. Marisol shudders against my back. I reach backward and pat her as best I can. "So...what happens with the ship? What happens with us?" I ask. I can't stay silent. I need to know.

"The ship," Harlow says heavily, "will be destroyed so it can't fly out again." There's another murmur of outraged voices. "I know. I know what you're thinking. I'm not happy about it either, but if it means the difference between keeping the children safe, then that's what's going to happen."

"This is crap," Hannah says angrily. "We don't get a say in—"

The big blue alien at Harlow's side snarls, the sound low and menacing.

Hannah falls silent. We do, too.

"Rukh, baby," Harlow murmurs. "It's okay—"

"Is *not* okay," the alien growls. "Our people risk their lives to save them. Many scared. Many away from kits. Many risk themselves. For what?" He stabs a finger in the air and points off to the side, where Liz and the others are still working on taming the fighting male. "So that one can bite and try to hurt more?" He glares at all of us with angry, glowing blue eyes. "We all at risk. All. This not just you. This us."

There's a long moment of silence. "Sorry," Hannah mutters.

"This is all new for us," says Willa. "It's a lot to adjust to."

"Please don't apologize," Harlow tells us. "Truly. This is new territory for everyone. And we knew it was going to be hard to understand. There were some of our people that wanted us to leave you in your sleep chambers because it was safer for all of us already here, but at the end of the day, we couldn't. That wouldn't be fair to you. So we woke you up, knowing that not all of you would be happy to join our tribe, and that not all of you are..." She clears her throat delicately. "Human."

Somewhere in the background, there's an animalistic roar of fury.

"What's that?" Nadine asks.

"That would be 'not human,'" Hannah says drily.

"So you're not lying to us," Samantha asks, moving forward. "There's really no way home? And no one else is coming to get us?"

Harlow shakes her head. "One-way trip, I'm afraid."

"And the men?" Samantha asks. "How many are human?"

"None?"

Samantha pauses and then starts laughing again. She falls backwards into the furs and keeps laughing, even when she wipes tears from her eyes.

Well, I guess we all deal with grief in different ways. I squint at Harlow. "I don't suppose you guys have any spare eyeglasses around here? I can't see a thing without mine."

Another woman raises a hand. "I need my inhaler."

A second hand goes up. "I'm allergic to bees. I need an epi-pen if you guys have bees here."

Oddly enough, I wonder if they have birds here. I love birds. I'm trying to see the bright side of things, but it's a little tricky. "Where *is* here?" I ask. "Where are we?"

"Like I said, it's an ice planet. Two suns, two moons. Nothing else you'd recognize, I'm afraid. We're all very primitive here, hence all the furs." She smiles. "But it's a good life once you get used to it, I promise."

"There are no cities?" Willa asks.

"There's a village. Just one."

Jesus. I can't imagine. This sounds worse and worse all the time.

"Doctors?" Angie asks, and her hand strokes over her belly thoughtfully.

I feel a quiver of remorse. Even without glasses, I'm still better off than Angie, who's having a surprise baby. Oh god, I wonder if her baby's even human? I shudder at the thought. Better not think about that.

"We have a healer, but she's back with the tribe." Harlow gives Angie a bright look. "But both Liz and I have had children before, so if we don't make it back in time before your baby is born, we know what to do." She turns to look at me. "As for glasses, you won't need them."

Is she being funny? "Uh, no, I'm pretty sure I need them. I wouldn't even be able to tell how many fingers you're holding up right now." The thought of being stranded on an ice planet without my glasses is kind of terrifying.

"Uh oh," Willa whispers. "Don't look now, but red buns at three o'clock."

Someone titters and I look over. Sure enough, there's a big bright red guy standing off next to several of the ladies. He's, um, endlessly red. There's not a stitch of clothing on him... and I'm kind of bummed that I can't see what his junk looks like.

I'm only human, after all. If there's a naked dude, I want to stare, too.

Maybe I squint a little. Marisol reaches up and covers my eyes, and Willa giggles. Okay, maybe I was making that obvious. My bad. "Like I said, I can't see anything without my glasses," I call out a little loudly. Just so they know I'm not a total perv.

Just a somewhat perv.

"I know. I promise, you won't need them," Harlow says again, her voice gentle. She gestures to the big blue guy at her side and he offers a blanket to the red guy. Red guy takes the blanket handed to him, sniffs, and then casts it on the ground.

Well, all righty then.

Up goes the hand again. "What about my inhaler?"

Harlow is nodding. “The khui will take care of everything. Inhaler, too. Even cancer. It’s all taken care of when you get a khui.”

It sounds too good to be true. “Coo-ee? What’s a coo-ee?” I ask. “Is that like...Lasik? Because I don’t qualify.” And I’m not really sure what it does for inhalers.

“Well,” Harlow says, and wrings her hands for the first time. “No, it’s not a surgical procedure. It’s a...well, it’s a parasite.”

LAUREN

“*I* can’t believe we’re lining up to get a tapeworm,” Hannah grumbles at my side.

“Believe it, sister,” Nadine tells her, hopping up and down to stay warm. “If it stops my ass from freezing off, I’ll take a dozen of them.”

I’m on board with Nadine at this point. I’m wearing three layers of leather and furs, my boots are double-lined, and I still feel like a frozen icicle as we stand in the snow, watching a hunt. Or rather, the others are watching a hunt. I’m watching a bunch of colorful blobs move around in a field of white.

We’re standing in the snow, our group of humans huddled a short distance away from the others. The hunters are chasing down some big animal called a sa-kohtsk so they can get us something called a khui. It seems that all living things on this planet have a khui—a parasite—that helps them survive and keeps them from getting sick. It’s what makes everyone’s eyes glow the funky blue.

Hearing that I’m going to get a permanent parasite—which Liz jokingly calls a “cootie”—has been a bit of an...adjustment. I mean, there’s a small bonus in that it’ll stop us from getting colds and help us thermoregulate—two things that are sorely needed amongst the cluster of humans in our group. I’m starting to forget what it’s like to be warm again. Steph and

Penny have raging colds and Willa's nose is so red she looks like a country bumpkin clown.

It's cold. It's miserable. It's exhausting. At this point, I welcome my "cootie" overlord.

Of course, there's a catch. There's always a catch. I'm trying not to think about it, though.

So I put my hand to my eyes and squint, trying like heck to see what's going on out in the distance. Liz stands nearby, along with Harlow's husband, Rukh, protecting us. The others—including the tribe's chief—are busy hunting down the critter that's going to give us all our cooties and save us from freezing to death out here.

It's been a few days since we woke up now, and it's been an adjustment for all of us. From learning names to learning about this planet to learning, well, everything. I feel like I'm starting from the ground up. There've been nights that I've cried into my fur bunk, only to have the tears freeze on my face. I'm not the only weeper. I know Tia cries at night, because I can hear her, and there's another sniffler that doesn't admit it by the light of day. Some of us take things differently—Hannah's rather angry about the situation. Samantha just laughs. A lot. Angie's been lost in her own thoughts, but I can't blame her.

And Marisol? Well, Marisol hides.

Or she tries to, anyhow. But she goes missing a lot and then everyone goes on a hunt to find her somewhere on the ship. It worries the others, because Mardok and Harlow—the experts on the alien ship itself—fear that she's going to get into something that could harm her. I'm trying to take Marisol under my wing to give her courage. At night, we're bunking together to share body heat, and I try to keep her at my side and hold her hand so she knows she's not alone.

I kind of wish someone was there to hold my hand and tell *me* that I'm not alone, but if I can't receive, I guess I'll give.

"They're bringing it down," someone says, and Marisol's grip tightens on my hand. We stand at the edge of a big snowy

field, waiting to be called forward. The ship is far in the distance, and there's so much noise and thunder coming from ahead that it makes me nervous. I wish I was back in the ship, but it's been explained to me that if I don't get the cootie, I'll die. There's something in the air here that's toxic to humans. The cootie works symbiotically, modifying its host so they can both stay alive.

And while I'm not really keen on a cootie, I'm pretty keen on being alive. So here I am.

"Someone just jabbed a spear into it," Willa says, and next to her, a girl named Raven makes a grossed-out noise. Steph sneezes.

"What's it look like?" I ask, since I can't see anything but blobs moving around at the edges of my vision. "The sa-kohtsk?"

"Ugly," says Willa. "Kinda like if Godzilla and an alpaca mated and had a hairy baby with too many eyes."

Rather makes me glad I can't see it, then. To me it just looks like a moving blob chased by a lot of smaller blue blobs. Kind of like how Farli's pet dvisti, Chompy, looks like a skinnier-limbed camel with too much hair and far too many teeth.

"Stay with me, Lo," Marisol whispers, and holds my hand tighter.

"Of course," I tell her reassuringly. I know she's scared. I'm scared, too. There's been a lot of scared lately, and every day seems like a struggle to get past it.

"Do you think..." Willa begins, and then stops.

"What?" I prompt. "Do I think what?"

She stomps her furry boots, shaking the snow from them. "I dunno. Do you think we're going to, you know. What do they call it? Reverberate?"

"Resonate," Marisol corrects shyly.

"That's it. You think that will happen?" Willa looks to me.

"I don't know. For me, I hope not," I tell them.

Because the cootie, the symbiotic tapeworm that will give us electric blue eyes, a built-in space heater and super-charged immunity, also has a catch. It likes pairing up people and making babies. Seems that the cootie will pick out a “mate” for its person and you start “resonating” or vibrating from your chest. Someone else vibrates to you and that’s it. Boom. You now get to make children together and that’s that. I’ve been told that it’s impossible to deny and that the cootie always seems to pick correctly. Everyone here has resonated happily, including Harlow and Liz, both to blue guys.

Also, it seems to be not an “if” but a “when,” to hear the others talk. Which worries me. I’m still thinking about my own survival, not about starting a family or settling down with an alien stranger.

I decide an optimistic tactic is best. “Let’s just take it one step at a time. Cootie first. We’ll worry about resonating later.”

“I’ve never even had a boyfriend,” Willa says thoughtfully, ignoring my cheery advice. “Kinda neat that a cootie’s gonna find the perfect guy for me.”

“Unless he’s not a great guy,” Marisol chimes in. “What if he’s scary? Like the beast guy?”

I shudder at the thought. Jeez, Marisol finally decides to speak up and she’s Debbie Downer. “Let’s not go there.”

The “beast guy” is one of the four males that were in pods, along with the sixteen girls. Two of them were the bright red, fond-of-being-naked twins. One was a big golden guy who has a shock of golden hair that’s so stiff it stands up like a ruff. He’s even got horns, someone said, though I can’t make them out. And then there’s beast guy. He’s darker. And scary. And scarred. And the least human-looking with his hulking shoulders and hunched form. I haven’t peered too closely. He snarls at everyone and has big fangs and claws and red eyes, and that’s enough for me to stay the fuck away.

They keep him tied up and under guard.

But Willa doesn’t seem upset at the thought. She glances over at the cluster of people a short distance away. “I feel sorry for

the beast guy,” she admits. “I bet he’s scared like us. He just doesn’t know how to handle it.”

“Mm.” I’m not sure I agree. I find his rage unsettling, and I know I’m not the only one. No matter how friendly some of these aliens are, they’re not people like us. That much is evident from the tails and the horns, right down to some of the language choices. Liz calls her husband her “mate” and their children “kits.” They eat their meat raw and it seems they have a healer who does the whole “laying on hands” thing back in their village. To these people, Summer is a person (I’ve been told she’s nice) and not a season. I’m not even sure they *have* seasons other than cold and colder.

Every day that passes, the “un-reality” of our situation seems to grow.

“Come,” a voice yells out, and I recognize that of the chief, Vektal. He’s the big blue guy all the others follow. “Come forward and receive your khuis.”

“That’s us,” Willa says breathlessly. “Shall we go?”

I hesitate, because there’s no turning back once we get this cootie-thing. It’ll let us live here, but it’ll also change us forever. What if I resonate to one of the fierce, angry-seeming strangers here? The only one that seems at ease with the situation is the big gold guy, but even he seems intimidating. I just don’t know.

Then again, I’d like to see.

And be warm.

And, you know, not die.

Damn it. “Let’s get this over with, I guess.”

“Here, take my sleeve,” Willa offers. “Watch your step. The snow’s churned up around here.”

I hold on to her and Marisol holds on to me and we form a human chain, along with the other humans marching forward. One of the big red guys has an arm around pregnant Angie, and I feel a twinge that I didn’t help her out. I should have thought of her. I’m glad someone did. Off to the side, three of

the big blue guys are half-dragging the beast guy, who's tied up with ropes, and snarling, still fighting against them as if his life depends on it.

For a moment, I want to do the same. I feel out of control, pushed in one direction after another by fate. I don't blame him for fighting and snarling and trying to break free. But Marisol's squeezing my hand tight, and Willa's leading me forward, and off in the distance, I know the others are waiting. I know they're doing their best to help us out.

So I go. I don't have a choice, in the end.



“NO RESONANCE FOR YOU, HUH?” Hannah gives me a sympathetic look. “Disappointed?”

“Nope,” I tell her, spooning more soup into my bowl. We're all back inside the ship, sitting in the mess hall after the day's hunt, and we're all still recovering from receiving our cooties. The moment mine touched my neck and slipped inside me—something I prefer not to think about—I went unconscious. Happens to everyone, I'm told. Now that I'm awake, I'm noticing a few things.

One—I feel like I was hit with a sledgehammer. I'm exhausted and achy all over.

Two—I'm freaking starving. I could eat a whole cow if someone put one in front of me. As it is, I'm just chowing down on all of the stew I can spoon into my bowl. I'm not the only one. The red twins have been back for fourths and fifths.

Three—I'm no longer freezing my ass off. It's a little chilly outside, but it's far more comfortable. Like a “crisp fall day” cold instead of “naked in the Antarctic” cold. No wonder Harlow and Liz seem so unbothered by the chill weather.

Four—I think my eyesight is improving. Just like they promised, instead of nothing but blobs, the stuff closer to me is starting to take better shape. It's not much, but it's a start. I can see Hannah's face, and she's pretty.

She also looks glum. “Disappointed that you didn’t resonate?” I can’t help but ask.

Hannah makes a raspberry noise. “Me? Please.”

I wouldn’t blame her if she was. It’s hard not to think about right now. Veronica—clumsy, plain, quiet Veronica—sits next to the big golden guy. The lion-haired one. They’re resonating. It started apparently the moment that Veronica woke up and hasn’t stopped since. There’s a low thrumming purr coming from both of them and it’s so loud that everyone can’t help but notice. Veronica looks shy and embarrassed.

The big gold guy looks as if he wants to eat Veronica up with a spoon.

I didn’t want resonance for myself, but it’s kind of difficult to ignore how he’s gazing at her. Even with my crappy eyesight, it’s obvious that he’s utterly fascinated with her, and every time she twitches, he reacts. I suspect if Veronica would let him, he’d try to feed her. I watch them surreptitiously from my seat. Even from here, I can see how bright red Veronica’s cheeks are. The big guy’s sitting extra close to her, and as one of the red twins walks past, he stiffens and gives him a furious look for daring to stroll nearby. He’s practically bristling with possessiveness.

At my side, Hannah sighs. She sees it, too.

Yeah. If you’d ask me, I don’t want resonance. But...that kind of attention from a hot, sexy guy is tough to pass up.

“You think they’re going to share quarters tonight?” Hannah whispers between bites of stew.

I shrug. “It’s none of my business.” Though I admit, I’m super curious, too.

“Oh please,” Hannah says. “It’s a small group. It’s everyone’s business. Look at how they’re all watching them, too.” She nods at the doorway and I notice that there’s a bunch of blue guys standing nearby, arms crossed. They’re watching Veronica and her new boyfriend, too.

Chaperones. Good. I’m actually happy to see that. It means that even if Veronica wasn’t interested—which, damn, she’d

be crazy not to be—no one’s going to force her into anything. It makes me feel better. I shovel a bit more stew into my ravenous belly. “Did anyone else resonate?” I ask, since Hannah seems to have all the deets.

“Nope. Just those two. I think someone’s got her eyes on one of the red twins. What about you?”

I look back behind me carefully, where the—very naked—red twins are sitting. No one’s sitting at their small table with them in the mess. They both eat hunched over their bowls with grim, methodical shoves of their spoons into their mouths, as if they’re in a hurry. Neither one looks at his food, either. They’re too busy watching everyone else.

One looks in my direction and I hastily turn my attention back to my food. I don’t want to be caught staring. Seems rude, especially when one of the parties is naked. “They seem... nice.” I can’t think of anything else to say.

Hannah snorts. “And Cujo’s just a dog.”

She’s got a point. But I’m trying to stay positive. We’ve got enough to worry about right now. Everyone’s dealing with all of this differently. Some people are kind of...nosy about all of it. I finish my food and glance around. “Have you seen Marisol? Or Willa? They’re not eating.”

Hannah shrugs.

Crap. I bet Marisol’s hiding again. She’s struggling with change—not that I blame her. “I think I’ll go see where they’re at. Talk to you later.”

“Don’t forget that we’re arriving at the shore tomorrow,” Hannah reminds me. “Last day of ship life before we go all primitive.” She twirls a spoon in the air. “Goody.”

Right. The ship is slowly crawling over land right now and we’ll be arriving at the coastline of the ocean in the morning for part two of our “rescue,” in which our new friends promptly destroy the only spaceship we have.

I don’t think anyone will be forgetting about that. “Thanks, Hannah. I’ll remember.” Like I can go anywhere in the meantime? What am I going to do, jump out of a moving

spaceship and hope to strike out on my own? I put away my dishes, because the tiny dining area in the ship feels a bit too cramped with so many people inside, and I go to look for Marisol and Willa.

Willa's on her way back to get more food, an empty bowl in her hands. "Are you not eating with the group?" I ask her, curious. "Is everything okay?"

"I brought Gren some food. I don't think he's been eating," Willa tells me in that soft drawl of hers.

"Gren? Who's Gren?" We've met so many people in the last few days that they're all starting to run together. I mentally try to place the harsh-sounding name with one of the alien faces.

"You know." Willa gives me an exasperated look. "The one they keep tied up."

That's Gren? I shudder, remembering those bright red—now blue—eyes and the feral anger on his face. "Are you sure that's safe, Willa? He's not exactly happy about being here."

"Are any of us?" She shakes her head, her expression full of sympathy. "He's just as freaked out as I am. He just shows it in different ways. He needs a friend."

Here I was thinking he needed tranquilizers, but maybe Willa's right. Still, I don't trust it. "Just be careful, okay?"

"We're all in this together," she tells me simply. "He's lost his home, too, and everything he knows."

And now I feel like an ass. I smile at her. "You're right. I'm just worrying." I peer past her, and then ask, "You haven't seen Marisol, have you?"

"I think I saw her running down one of the back halls."

I bite my lip. "Thanks. I better find her before the red twins eat all the stew."

"And I'd better get my friend a second bowl." She holds her dishes up, smiles, and heads on.

I pause, wondering if I'm being unfair. Gren really does creep me out. But if Willa's learned his name, maybe that's the first

step to calming him and being his friend. I know the others are more concerned about him harming us than caring for him overall. We've got too many people that are too helpless right now. I get it. We're in a triage situation—you take care of the most urgent stuff first and then worry about the trickier stuff later.

I know Harlow and Liz and the others are feeling overwhelmed. I can see it on their faces. Liz looks like she hasn't slept in days and Vektal—the chief—seems frayed at the edges. The hunters are either constantly watching over us so we don't get hurt or hunting to feed and clothe us. Harlow and Mardok and Farli are racing around the ship, trying to salvage as much as they can before we trash it all in a blaze of questionable glory. Twenty newbies is a lot to bring into a small group, and everyone's pulled to their breaking points.

Which is why I'm trying to help.

Which is why I need to find Marisol.

I head down the hall once more, looking for her. I start peering into any human-sized nook or cranny on the ship, trying to think like a frightened woman. If it were me, where would I hide? I'd try to find the last place anyone would look for me, of course. Someplace dark and quiet and that I could disappear into and just hide away from all my problems for a bit.

I think for a moment and then head for the cargo bay.

“Are you lost, Lo-ren?” One of the big blue guys—Zolaya, I think—asks as I pass him in the hall. He seems friendly enough, his expression open and honest. He has long, messy braids, and I remember him telling the others yesterday that he misses his mate because she usually fixes his hair for him. I remember that, and I remember him talking about their kit together. It makes me trust him a bit more, weirdly enough, to hear that he's got a wife and family and he misses them.

But I'm pretty sure Marisol wouldn't appreciate the alien company. She's still skittish around all non-humans. “I'm just looking for my friend.”

“Do you need help?”

I shake my head. “I think she’s scared and hiding.”

Realization dawns on his face. “Ah. That one. Mar-ee-sol.”

Poor Mari. A legend already. “That’s the one. I’m going to find her and bring her back to the dining hall.”

He nods. “I am heading that way. Come find me if you need help.”

“I will. Thank you, Zolaya.”

He grins to hear his name and looks boyishly human for a moment before he gives me a little nod and then heads onward. I relax. Maybe they’re people just like us after all. Of course, as he turns, his tail flicks back and forth as he walks, and that quashes that thought pretty fast.

Human-ish, maybe. Not *quite* human.

I wait for him to leave, and then I head into the cargo bay. I pass by each of the pods, running my hand along the surface of one. How long was I in here for, I wonder. How did they take me without me knowing? What would have happened if no one had come to wake me up? I shudder at the thought. Even now, though I’m not thrilled to be stranded here, I’d rather be awake than in limbo, unaware of anything. That seems like a special kind of hell.

One of the pods in the back has the lid pulled over it. I move toward it, keeping my steps noisy enough that I won’t be sneaking up on Mari. When I come to the side, I hesitate, and then knock gently. “It’s me.”

She opens the lid a peek and looks out at me with teary, electric-blue eyes. “What?”

“I came to see if you’re okay,” I tell her gently, pushing the lid aside so I can see her. “Everyone’s eating but you.”

“I’m not okay.” She sniffs, swiping at her cheeks. “I woke up on a strange planet and someone put a parasite in me. Why would I be okay with any of that?”

“I know,” I say, patting her shoulder awkwardly. “I feel like you do. I’m overwhelmed and I don’t know what to think. But it’s better than being stuck in limbo.”

“Is it?” She shakes her head, wiping away more tears. “Because at least then I didn’t know what was going on. At least then, I wasn’t afraid.” Mari presses a trembling hand to her forehead. “I wish no one had woken me up, you know? I don’t know that I can handle...all this.” She waves a hand at our surroundings. “I’m not brave like you.”

Brave like *me*? I resist the urge to laugh hysterically. I’m hanging on by a thread myself. I sigh and eye her pod, and then start to climb in beside her.

“What are you doing?” she asks, startled.

“Seeing if this works,” I tell Mari. “If I can hide away from all of this for a few hours, I’m going to join you.”

She gives a husky little laugh as I squeeze in next to her. “I have to warn you, it doesn’t. The hiding only helps a little.”

“Ah, but it does help, right?” I lie down beside her, our shoulders pushing into one another, and I squeeze her hand. I know how she feels. The only reason I haven’t broken down sobbing myself is because one more crying person isn’t going to help things. Others need someone strong to look to, so I might as well be that person. I give her hand another squeeze. “It’s going to be okay. I promise.”

“Are you just saying that?” She sounds teary again.

“Yes?”

I get a laugh out of her, at least. It’s something.



THAT NIGHT, as all the humans are piled into our fur beds in one of the storage rooms in the ship, the gentle rocking motion makes it easy to fall asleep. The glowing eyes of my neighbors, not so much. I drift off anyhow, and I’m not surprised when Mari comes and curls up next to me. She’s decided that I’m her protector, somehow, so I put a motherly arm around her, pat her back, and try to go back to sleep.

As I do, I hear the nighttime crying again. I think it’s Hannah.

I guess we all deal with things differently. She’s a daytime bitch and broken by dark. It happens. I wish I could help, but I

don't think she wants anyone to know her "weakness." So I close my eyes and try to sleep through it.

Things will get better, I tell her silently. *This is only the beginning. When you hit rock bottom, there's nowhere to go but up.*

Of course, I'm not sure if I'm telling her that, or trying to convince myself.

LAUREN

I stare out at the waters of the ocean, numb with shock.

There's lots about this world that's different, of course, but there's also so much that's the same. Snow is snow. Mountains are mountains. Rocks are rocks. And back where we were, the landscape was nothing but snow and rocks covered by snow. It didn't look so foreign, at least not to my eyes.

But this beach?

This is alien. This is otherworldly.

This is downright *creepy*.

The ship made it between the valleys of the jagged mountains surrounding us and has come out to the water's edge. The long ramp extends out into the sand, but the ship itself is already in the water itself, resting on a tripod of legs that look like they should be sturdier than they are to withstand the slamming of the weird-ass ocean.

And boy, is the ocean weird.

The water's green. Not a comforting sea-foam green or even blue-green. It's a deep, bottle-green and the froth that curls along each wave is green as well. The sand is a darker, almost jade color and the grit is thicker than I seem to recall it being on earth. It smells like the ocean, at least, even if it doesn't

look like it. The waves are chaotic, too. I recall summer vacations spent at the Florida beaches when I was a teenager, and being disappointed that the waves were so tepid that you couldn't ride them like surfers did on television. They were gentle, refreshing little waves.

Not here. These monstrous waves are chaotic and angry. They crash and slam onto the beach as if trying to punish it. I know that has something to do with the pull of two moons instead of just one, but it's alarming to see.

And the *creatures*.

God, there are creatures everywhere. The crabs look more like scorpions and the waves undulate with tentacled, serpentine things. And lucky me, my vision has corrected itself enough that I can see them in all of their glory. This is not a friendly place. Somehow, when I heard we'd be taking the ship to the ocean, I thought of white sandy beaches and rolling, gentle waves. Even if it's snowy, it'd still be lovely and comforting to look at.

Yeah, not so much.

But...there are birds. Brown, fat little birds cluster along the cliffs and fly away in waves the moment anyone approaches. Bigger, white-feathered birds with long, spindly legs dip needle-like bills into the waves and fish out treats. It's not quite like home, but seeing the birds somehow makes me feel better. Watching them always calms me. It's interesting how creatures here are similar to the ones at home, but still wildly different. The bird in the waves looks like a strung-out pale cousin to a flamingo, but its beak looks more like a razorblade. The crabs here are similar but creepier. The ocean is water, but not quite the same as ours.

The people here...same thing.

"Well, this is...different." Willa moves to my side, gazing out at the water. She hugs her fur wraps closer to her chest as the strange bird in the waves wanders away from us. She absently kicks a tiny crab-scorpion away from her boot. "I don't recall the beach looking so very...spidery."

“Me either.” I watch as one of the plate-sized spider-like crabs scuttles nearer to the water. Something with tentacles reaches out and snags it, dragging it into the waves, and I shudder. “Good thing it’s too cold to swim, huh?”

“Good thing,” she echoes, agreeing, then glances over at me. “Mardok says he wants help salvaging some of the equipment if you’ve got time.”

Mardok’s one of the big blue aliens, with tattoos and silver horns. He looks very different from the others, and I think someone mentioned that he was part of the crew on the ship a long time ago. There are so many layers and backstories that a newcomer like me is doing good just to keep names and faces straight, so I try to focus on that sort of thing. I do know that he knows a lot about the ship, and I know he and Harlow have been working hard to strip components and small bits here and there before the entire thing goes up in a blaze of glory at the beach.

Seeing as how we’re now at the beach, I guess it’s close to fireball time. “Sure, I can help. I don’t know if I’ll have an idea of what I’m looking at, though. I’m not up on my spaceship knowledge.”

“Me either. I think he just wants extra hands. The other big blue guys are off hunting or setting up tents. Or caves. Or something.” Willa makes a face. “God, I hope it’s not tents because I don’t know if I’m going to be able to sleep on the ground knowing those spider-scorpion things are around.”

“Great. Now I’m not going to be able to sleep,” I tease as we turn back toward the ship. I can’t resist one last look back at the waves and I see the white bird dip its head under the water and pull out something slimy. It glances over in my direction and pauses, and I feel an absurd urge to wave to it, like it’s giving me permission to live on its planet.

Stupid of me. It’s just a bird at the end of the day. I’m stuck here whether he wants me to be or not. But I’m smiling as I follow Willa back to the ship, anyway.

Inside, it’s surprisingly quiet. For the last few days, there’ve been people on top of people. Mardok’s told us that the ship

normally has just a four-man crew and I believe it. While it seems large from outside, the interior living quarters are actually kind of cramped. You can't pass shoulder-to-shoulder down a hall with one of the big aliens inside, not without someone having to scuttle out of the way. Today, though, most of the tribe is outside on the beach or away hunting, and the place feels surprisingly empty.

Mardok is in the cargo bay, his back to us. He stands off to one side, by the lid of one of the coffin-like pods we awoke from. He's got a shining tool in his hand that reminds me of a screwdriver and is using it to pry one of the circuit boards apart. "I brought an extra pair of hands," Willa announces.

Marisol peeps over the edge of one of the coffins and smiles at me, then ducks back to work. I grin at her, and then look over at Mardok.

"Hi," I say with a timid wave when the big alien glances at me. I always think Mardok is one of the most intimidating of the aliens. He's one of the tallest, and his horns are covered with gleaming metal. One side of his body is heavily tattooed, and I heard a rumor that he's part cyborg, though I can't tell what part. That makes him a little scary. Then again, Rukh is also scary. And Vektal. And okay, most of them, even if they're doing their best to seem nice. It's just taking me some time to get used to things.

"Good, another pair of hands. I need all I can get, because Vektal wants to get this ship launched and underwater by the end of the day today. That means I've got to get everything powered down and taken apart in the next few hours and time's wasting."

I roll up the sleeves of my long tunic. "Show me what to do."

Willa claps her hands. "I'll go grab lunch and then I'll come back and help."

She dashes off, and as she does, I lean in and watch Mardok pry a tiny golden, three-pronged chip from one of the panels. "I need as many of these as you can find. If you pry up this layer of circuitry, you'll see that there are four on this level, and three on the next. With twenty of these pods, that should

give us one hundred and forty of them. Think you can do that for me?”

“I think so,” I tell him, and take the tool he hands me. He walks away and I’m left on my own to get started. Oh, okay. That’s all the training I get. Well, all right. I size up the room and decide to start by the far wall. One of the coffins is pushed up against the side of the ship, and the panel I need is naturally on the part I can’t get to from the accessible side. I try to push the coffin away from the wall, but it weighs more than I do and if there were rollers on it, they’ve been stripped down or turned off. At any rate, it’s not budging. All right, then. I climb atop the coffin and slide down the opposite side, my butt wedged against the wall, against a bar and what looks like a closed window. I bend over and start to pry the compartment open.

“Wait! Loden, don’t!”

I glance up. Is he talking to me?

“Lauren,” Marisol corrects quietly. “Her name is Lauren.”

“Sorry. It’s a lot to remember,” he says, racing over to my side.

“How do you think we feel?” I blurt out.

Mardok laughs and shakes his head. “Sorry. I’m sure it’s worse for you guys. You’re fine. It’s just, don’t lean against that wall. I’ve stripped the escape hatch mechanism.” He pats the bar my butt was resting against. “If you push down on this, the entire panel could open up and dump you into the water below.”

Eek. I guess that closed window wasn’t a window but a hatch. “It’s almost like this alien technology is dangerous,” I say dryly.

He laughs, surprised and pleased at my attitude. “Almost.”



I’VE PRIED one hundred and twenty chips out of the coffins when Farli heads into the cargo bay, breathless. Her gaze is focused on her mate. “Have you seen Wil-lah?”

I glance up and watch as Mardok wipes sweat from his brow and puts aside the equipment he's working on. "What do you mean?" He glances back at me.

Was I the last one to see her? "She was bringing lunch, wasn't she? I haven't seen her since I came in." I look over to find Marisol, but she's gone.

Well, shit.

Farli makes an alarmed noise. "Gren is missing, too. The others think he might have taken her."

I feel sick at the thought. I know Willa's been trying to befriend him. This is what happens when you try to be nice. That doesn't explain where Marisol went, though.

"You have to help us look," Farli tells Mardok. "We need you."

Mardok hesitates, clearly torn. I know he wants to finish salvaging the ship. Vektal's already been in several times while we've been working to tell him to hurry along. Now that we're on the shore, he doesn't want to wait any longer to ditch the ship. Every moment it's here is another moment he clearly feels its presence is threatening the tribe. Maybe he's not wrong. I do know Mardok's been stripping—and crushing—several components as he works. Maybe a fiery inferno is the best solution for this ship.

But if that's the case, I need to find Marisol.

Mardok glances back at me and I wave him on, doing my best to look like the industrious little human I am. "I'm just going to finish these," I lie. "You go ahead. I'll catch up with the others when I'm done." It's only a half lie. I am going to finish up...but I'm going to do my best to find Marisol first. People are more important than parts, and if the sa-khui are super fired up to get rid of the ship, then I need to find her, pronto.

They turn and race out of the cargo hold and I immediately put down my tool and the bag of chips I've been working on and head down the hallway. "Marisol?" I call out. "Are you in here?"

I know it's futile to call her name out—she never answers—but I can't help but try.

“Marisol?” I try each time I enter a new room. In the last two days, the ship's been looking more and more ravaged. Pieces have been torn out of the walls, components stripped from their circuit boards, and wires dangle from the ceiling in more than one room. The lighting and motion-sensitive doors no longer seem to work, either, and I have to slide my way into the hall that leads to the bridge.

There's a big metal bar in front of the door, just about forehead height, and I nearly bang my head on it as I enter. Must have fallen when Harlow and Mardok were stripping parts. I try to shove it out of the way, and when it doesn't budge, I duck and slide my way into the bridge, squeezing past the now-broken door. “Hello? Are you in here, Marisol?”

She's not there, either, but I am a little surprised to see stacks of strange-looking parts set in most of the chairs and on every surface. I have no idea what these are, but when I look closer, I see a warning symbol of some kind, and something that looks like squiggles of fire.

Fuck. I know what those are. These are explosive parts salvaged from the ship. They must be stacking them here at the front to ensure that when the ship's set on fire, it explodes and the bridge isn't usable by anyone thinking to salvage her.

My skin prickles with awareness. It's definitely not safe here. “Marisol!”

No answer. I kneel down at one of the stations and hold on to the counter, peering underneath. It looks like a good hiding spot.

“Activating distress beacon,” the computer calls out in a garbled voice.

What? I jerk to my feet and stare in horror down at the panel. The spot where I put my hand is lit up, covered in lots of squiggly-looking keys that I probably hit somehow. I don't know what I did to make it light up, but I know I can't

duplicate it. Holy hell, what have I done? This is exactly what the others didn't want to happen.

"Cancel distress beacon," I call out. When that elicits no response, I try again. "Hello? Cancel distress beacon!"

Seriously, what the *fuck*? Why did no one cover up this panel if it was so damn important? I smack it with my hand.

"Activating distress beacon," the computer calls out again in that calm, eerie voice. It sounds like its slowed down, as if the computer itself is slowly dying. I don't know if it's repeating itself or if I've somehow now sent out two distress beacons. I whimper in frustration.

I have to let someone know about this. I have to tell them that we need to stop this thing before it's too late. Mardok will know what to do.

I turn and race for the door.

BANG.

The bar I forgot about in my haste? It knocks me on my forehead and I realize I should have ducked about two seconds before the world goes dark.

LAUREN

*B*ANG.

A muffled vibration shakes my body, jerking me awake. My head throbs and I try to sit bolt upright, only to smack my head on something hard again. “Oooh.” I fall back again.

“Don’t sit up,” Marisol whispers at my side, in the dark. “No room.”

I squint, trying to make out where I am. Still on the bridge? No, it’s really dark and cramped. I can feel the heat of Marisol’s body as she presses her arm against mine. It feels... claustrophobic. “Where are we?”

“In one of the coffin pods.” She winces as there’s another loud bang and our pod shakes and shivers like it’s on a rollercoaster. “Bad news. The ship’s on fire.”

“What?” I stare at her, wide-eyed. “Already? They didn’t wait for us?”

“Well, um.” She bites her lip and looks miserable. “I was having a bad day and wanted to go back to hiding. Just for a bit. But you looked uncomfortable where you were, so I moved you and...” She winces. “I threw my tool.”

“Your tool?” My head’s ringing and I’m having a hard time following what she’s talking about.

“It’s a weapon,” she whispers. “Just in case.”

I pat her arm, because I know what that “just in case” is. Just in case aliens come back and try to take us captive again. “Gotcha.”

“And like...I think I hit something important. Because a bunch of stuff caught on fire.”

I think of all the flammable stuff in the cockpit. Yeah, I can see that happening. “Bad luck,” I murmur.

She clenches my arm, worried. “And you wouldn’t wake up. I didn’t know what to do so...I brought you here.”

“And here is...” My vision is still fuzzy and I rub my eyes, wishing I had my glasses. My vision gets better by the day, but it’s not perfect.

“Inside one of the pods,” Mari whispers. “I think we’re sinking now.”

“Of course we are,” I murmur, because that’s my luck. I’ve survived a kidnapping by aliens and being stranded on a wintry planet only to go down with the ship. Seems about right. “Do the others know we’re here?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen anyone.”

Between the distress beacon and Willa disappearing, I can kind of see that. It’s been a hectic day and I’m not supposed to be on here. I’m supposed to be “catching up” with the others once I finish my task. Someone’ll figure out eventually that I’m not there, but by then it will be too late. I press a hand against the lid of the coffin. “How did you get me in here?” I rub my bruised, aching forehead. All I remember is...ah yes, the bar. God, so stupid of me.

“Dragged you,” Marisol’s voice is ultra quiet, as if she thinks someone will overhear us. “What do we do now?” she asks, worried.

I have no idea. But I’m the one that always has a plan, so I need to think of something. I rack my brain, trying to think of how we can get out of this. If the ship’s on fire, it’s not like we can jump out. I think of all the explosives at the far end of the

ship, on the bridge. Maybe those are what's making the pounding noise that slams into our little coffin and makes the entire thing—and my insides—shiver. I inhale, but there's no scent of smoke, just Marisol's slightly sweaty smell and her frightened body pressing against mine. For a moment, my head throbs and it feels so tight and cramped in here that I want to kick my way out. It's too small, too dark, too little room to breathe.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to calm myself. Okay. Okay. Being in this coffin is a good thing. We're not going to burn to death. That's a bonus.

But we've got to get out of here. I don't know how long we can stay at the bottom of the ocean in this thing, but my guess is not that long. The air won't last and we've stripped so many parts from the pod itself that I'm surprised that even the lid is staying on. One thing at a time, though.

I touch the lid again, and it feels cool. Either we're well insulated or there's no fire in the cargo bay. I don't know which it is, though. I'll have to risk it at some point of course, but for now, I want to think the rest of my plan through. "We need a way to get out of the ship."

"Lo?" Marisol whispers in a trembling voice. "What can we do?"

Hearing her fear galvanizes me, oddly enough. Okay. She needs me to be strong and decisive, so I will be. "Let's think this through," I tell her, trying to sound calmer than I really am. "Did you move the coffin any? Or are we still in the cargo bay?"

"Still in the cargo bay."

"And you said the way off the ship was on fire?" I think of the long ramp.

I can feel her nod. "I didn't realize until everything was filled with smoke what was happening. By then it was too late. I thought about screaming but..." she sighs. "I hid instead."

I pat her arm. "It's okay. We're going to get out of this."

“All right,” she tells me in a calmer voice, as if me saying it has made rescue a sure thing.

So I just have to make it so.

“Are we in one of the coffins at the front or back of the bay?” I wonder how far we are from the explosions or if we’re sitting in a fiery inferno even now.

“Um...back, I guess.”

I try to think of what was in the area. Crates? Doorways? Hatches? Anything? “Any tools in here?”

“I didn’t grab anything but you,” Marisol says meekly. “No time.”

“It’s okay. I’m just trying to figure everything out. Do you hear any more explosions?” I twist and try to put my ear against the metal hull, but I can’t quite reach, and with Marisol shoved against me, it’s impossible.

“I don’t hear anything at all,” she confesses. “Maybe the ship sank and the fires went out?”

I don’t know if I find that reassuring. If it did, that means whatever oxygen is in this small coffin is all we have...and there are two of us sucking it in. Even now, every breath feels more and more claustrophobic and like there’s not enough air to go around.

“I think I’m going to have to open the coffin,” I tell her.

“Okay,” she says with a nod.

“It might kill us both,” I warn her. “There might be no air out there. It might be nothing but water. Or it might be nothing but smoke and we’re going to die if we can’t get out. I’m just telling you because I know it’s dangerous...but I do know we can’t stay in here.”

Her eyes seem to get a little wider in the dark. Her hand clutches my arm tight. “If you think it’s best.”

“I don’t know if it’s best,” I admit. “But it’s what we’ve got to work with. I’m going to push the lid open and get out. You try and hunch down so if there are flames...” I pause, swallowing

hard. "If there are flames or it's super heated in here, it'll hit me and not you."

"Thank you for being so brave," she tells me in an admiring voice.

I want to tell her that I'm not brave. That I'm just as terrified as she is, but one of us has to act. I just give her another pat on the arm. "Be ready. I'm going to do this on the count of three."

Before I lose my nerve.

"One, two," I say aloud, and then take a long, deep breath just in case it's my last. "Three."

I push at the lid even as Marisol scrunches down behind me.

The lid doesn't budge easily. I brace my knee against it and push and it finally moves. As it does, something sticky and black melts and leaves long strings behind, as if glue is melting from between the lid and the coffin itself. Some sort of seal, then.

Melted.

I push the lid aside and peer out. It's smoky in here, and the air feels stiflingly hot, but there's oxygen. It's not an inferno. Not yet. I can hear something burning in the distance, and the dry heat of the air makes my throat tickle. I cough, sitting up. My head throbs with heat and somewhere in the distance there's a low roar. Flames? I wonder, even as I crawl over the side of the coffin. "Stay put," I tell Marisol like she's a two-year-old instead of a woman my age.

When my feet touch the ground, though, I realize what the roar is. It's water, ankle high and coming in to flood the ship. The water's surprisingly warm, but I don't know if that's from the heat of the fires elsewhere or if it's my cootie or what. At any rate, it's not welcome. I gaze around in frustration as the pouring, roaring sound grows louder. We won't have much time before the entire ship fills up. I've got to figure out a way out.

Smoke pours out of the entrance to the cargo bay. Not through the rest of the ship, then. That's no good. I gaze around the room helplessly. The water's filling up even now, and as I

watch, one of the coffins by the wall lifts up, bobbing slightly. Fuck. It won't take long now for this to completely flood and then I'll drown.

Think, Lo, think. I wade forward, scanning the large chamber. There's got to be a way out. Somehow. Somewhere. This is a cargo bay. Okay then...how do they get the cargo out? I scan the walls and my gaze locks onto the hatch Mardok warned me about earlier. What did he say? Something about a latch being busted? No, wait. It was something about components and stripped parts and if I touched it wrong it'd bust the entire wall open...

That's exactly what I need right now.

"I know what to do," I tell Marisol, sloshing through the water back to the side of her coffin. I point at the hatch. "That wall. Remember what Mardok said? You were in the room, weren't you?"

She nods and her eyes widen. "It'll come apart and knock us out of the ship. Do you think it'll work?"

"One way to find out," I tell her grimly. "But I don't know if it'll work, or even if it does, if we'll be sucked away from each other."

"I'll help," she says, and starts to climb from the pod.

"No," I say, and stop her before she gets out. "There's no time to argue, but if this is dangerous, one of us needs to survive. You climb back in the pod and pull the lid on. Even if we're both sucked out into the ocean"—I shudder at the thought of that dark, green water with the strange, tentacled creatures in it—"then you have a better chance of living if you're protected."

"But—"

"No buts, Marisol. Please. Let's just do this, okay? Every moment we waste arguing is another inch that the water rises." I gesture at my legs, now wet up to the calf. "If it gets much higher, the pressure might be too much for us to blow whatever hatch there is in here."

She hesitates, pleading in her eyes. "I don't want you to die."

“Me either.” I grab the lid of the coffin and start to drag it over her pod again. “So let’s get this done and see if we both make it out, all right?”

I think for a moment that she’s going to protest more, but she nods and slides back down into the coffin, helping me drag the lid back over her. When it’s on, there’s a little hiss of air and then it seals itself again. Well, that’s something at least. The bubble of glass atop the pod is too covered with ash and soot for her to see out—that makes sense, as it was pitch black in there—and I hesitate for a moment, wondering if I should clean it off for her.

No time. She can sightsee when she’s safe.

I slosh my way back to the wall, trying to recall exactly what Mardok told me. There’s a coffin bobbing against it, floating in the water, and another one is sliding its way toward me. I push it aside, a little unnerved at how easy they are to move now. Damn water. I cough again, fanning a hand to try and clear the smoke. There’s not enough air in here. Not enough air and too much water. What a mess. “Whose bright idea was it to explode the spaceship?” I mutter to myself as I feel along the wall, looking for a latch or a handle of some kind. There’s a bar with alien writing on it, and it leads into a gap in the wall that looks like it’s been worked on—or scrapped—recently.

I place my hands on it. *Please work.*

Please don’t kill me.

Please don’t let a sea monster be out there waiting to eat me.

Please don’t let me drown.

So many requests, but I won’t know unless I push this hatch open. I suck in a deep breath, because I know this is suicide, but I do it anyhow.

The bar creaks, metal groans, and then I’m jerked outside in a rush of air and water as the vacuum sucks me out into the ocean.

I can’t help it. I scream. Or I try to, but there’s nothing but water and current. My mouth and lungs fill up with saltwater and I choke, trying desperately to breathe, but there’s nothing

to breathe. There's also nothing to hold on to as I'm ripped through the water, carried along by the current. I reach out, but there's nothing to grab, nothing to hold on to.

I'm going to die.

I claw at the water, flipping back and forth in the endless deep. I don't know which way is up or down. I fight against the suction of the water and open my eyes, squinting out into the brine. It burns and stings, but I see something move past my head. An enormous air bubble. Oh god, it's going the other way. I flip over in the water and there's sunlight far above—so far above. Frantic, I swim forward, my lungs and nose burning. It's hard to swim with all these leathers on me and it's so damn cold. I keep swimming, though, because the sunlight looks so close and yet so far.

Black creeps in at the corners of my eyes and I try to take another breath. Whoever said drowning was peaceful lied to me, because all I want to do is breathe and I can't. Please. Please. The light's so close but I can't reach it, and it feels like the current is still fighting me.

Why am I fighting so hard? Why don't I just give up? Let the water envelop me and sink into it. End all this struggle. The thought is a surprisingly easy one to latch on to. If only I could take a breath, I could think clearly, but I can't. There's no air.

My limbs grow heavier and it just becomes too much effort to reach the sunlight. It doesn't matter that it's so close now that I can practically touch it. Too little, too late. I'll save all that sunlight for someone else. I'll just close my eyes and—

Something grabs a handful of my hair and yanks me up.

Pain lances through my scalp and I flail weakly. My head breaks through the water and then there's air on my face, bitterly cold compared to the strangely warm water. I cough and sputter, saltwater pouring from my nose and my mouth.

Marisol leans over her pod, her eyes wide. She's still got handfuls of my hair snagged in her fingers. "Are you alive?"

Choking and coughing, I nod and try to suck in enough air to please my burning lungs. Everything hurts. Everything. It feels

like Marisol pulled my hair out by the roots, but that's twice she's saved me now.

She releases my hair and shoves a hand in my face and I weakly grab on to it. "Get in," she tells me. "Hurry."

The air feels colder than the water does, but I remember the things that live in this ocean. I hold tightly to her as she does her best to haul me into the pod. It takes a lot of effort from both of us to drag me into the pod and by the time I collapse onto the bottom, I'm exhausted and wheezing. My lungs still feel like they're heavy with salt water, and brine is in my eyes, my nose, and my pores.

"Are you okay?" she asks, worried.

I give her a weak thumbs up.

She settles back down against me, not caring that I'm cold and wet, and takes off her jacket, offering it to me. She elbows me in the face as she does, but that's okay. My teeth chatter and I strip off my sodden fur parka and use hers as a blanket. "Y-y-you're okay?"

"I'm okay," she agrees and pulls the lid back down over us. It gets dark immediately, but it also gets warmer. I'm fine with that. "My pod immediately went to the surface. One of the others did, too, but I think the rest didn't have lids on so they filled up. There's no sign of the ship, either. I waited and waited, but I think when we were jettisoned, it pushed us far out to sea." She hesitates for a moment and then adds, "I can't see the shore."

"It's okay. Thank you for saving me," I cough out, and I mean it. I've been babying Marisol because she's been frightened, but she's shown a staggering amount of bravery in the last while and I'm going to be forever grateful to her. "I...didn't think beyond this," I admit to her. "I don't have a plan for getting us to shore." A cuss word bubbles up inside me, but I end up just coughing out more seawater.

She pats my shoulder absently. "Don't worry. If we're near a shore of any kind the waves will carry us toward it. I think."

I nod weakly, and then I'm too tired—or too waterlogged—to stay awake. I close my eyes to relieve my aching, splitting head. I just need to rest for a moment, I think. Then we'll come up with a plan to get back to shore.

Just a moment.

K'THAR

One cannot live on an island without seeing strange things wash up on shore. Sometimes it is the carcass of a strange water creature with fins instead of legs and strange glowing blobs instead of eyes. Sometimes it's an enormous bone from a long-dead animal, or the naked branches of a fallen tree. Shells. Fish. Smooth stones. Small stones. Large stones.

But...never before have I seen a stone as large as the black one that bobs against the surf in the distance. It looks to be larger than a full-grown male. Larger, even, than the fat, scaly body of a kaari.

And it floats. That in itself makes it unusual. I have to know what it is.

I scan the cliff I stand atop, looking for vines leading downward to let me climb my way to the shore. I must be quick. Even though the four clans—now three—live apart, we have an agreement. If something washes up on the shore, it belongs to those that find it.

And whatever this exotic, floating stone is, it is going to be *mine*.

Excited, I find a strong vine and begin to climb my way down the cliffs. There is no spot on this island I do not know like the

backs of my hands, and it does not take me long to descend. A skyclaw soars overhead as I do, looking for easy prey, and I shift skin-tones with a thought, automatically blending to match the rock I press up against. The skyclaw flies right past without stopping, and if I did not have another mission, I might try leaping onto its back as it flies past. Skyclaw are good eating, after all, and there is plenty of meat for the entire tribe.

But there will always be more skyclaw, and I have never seen anything like this floating rock before. So I continue climbing down. I drop onto the beach quickly, pleased with the speed with which I've managed to cross the craggy cliffs. Were I not in a hurry, I might skip the vines and follow the winding trails down the cliffs. Check my traps. Forage greens. Enjoy the day. But the uniqueness of this find calls to me, makes me hurry.

I move toward it on the beach, letting my color fade back to normal. As I do, my steps slow and a growl forms in my throat, because I see another approaching from the opposite direction. Not just any sakh, but my most hated of rivals, R'jaal of the clan of the Tall Horn.

Of course it would be he.

I growl low in my throat and march toward him, pulling out my four blades and brandishing them in his direction, letting the threat speak for itself.

He gives me a sneer of welcome as he approaches, spear casually held in one of his hands. "I should have known you'd be here. Trash always washes ashore."

"Big words for a male with only two puny hands," I tell him. I gesture at the large rock, bobbing on the shore. "That is mine. I saw it first."

"No, *brother*," he says, using the term derisively. "That belongs to me. Even now I stand closer to it than you do." And he leans over and taps the surface of the rock with his spear. "My sea gift, not yours."

I eye him with loathing. He is tall and lean where I am strong and muscular. His natural color is slightly lighter than my

own, camouflage rippling up and down his arms and changing colors with emotion. He might only have two arms to my four, but he is as strong as any, I know. I have fought him in the past.

But I have twice as many opportunities to grab him, if I can get close. The only thing that might cause me trouble are the massive sweep of horns arching from his brow that give his clan their name. Still, I am not the chief of the clan of the Strong Arm because I am a coward.

I flex aggressively, letting my colors show my anger. "I will not back down. This is mine to take." I do not tell him that the food is scarce in our territory lately, or that I'chai has passed on, leaving us to care for her small son. That we struggle with bringing in food, since the same hunt that killed I'chai took N'dek's leg. J'shel must remain behind and care for both kit and kin, which leaves all the hunting to me.

But R'jaal will not care about any of this, just as I do not care about his tribe's troubles. His clan is dying, just like mine. All of us are dying out. We only prolong it with every day of survival. There is no hope for our people, not since the Great Smoking Mountain exploded seven turns ago and destroyed most of the island...and most of the people living on it.

No, R'jaal will not care if the clan of the Strong Arm is starving. Nor do I care if the Tall Horn are thriving on their side of the island. All I care about is this thing on the shore and that it is mine.

"So quick to battle me, K'thar?" R'jaal's glance is mocking. "When you don't even know what it is?"

"And you do?" I tell him, scoffing. I am still wary, but I do not sense an urge to fight from him, only his usual dismissive attitude. Cautious, I holster two of my knives, willing to stand down...but only a little.

"I think it is an egg," he tells me, sliding his spear into its holster at his back to free his hands. He rubs them together, then gestures at the large black stone in the surf. "Look at how it bobs in the current. It is a monstrous egg of some kind." He glances over at me through narrowed eyes, his skin color

fading slightly to a more neutral shade. “We can crack it and split the contents. There should be enough food for both of our clans.”

I eye him. Why is he so eager to share? Clans do not share. We are rivals, he and I, and to give him half without a fight seems strange to me, unless R’jaal realizes that this sea gift is mine and he is trying to game a share for himself....

Or his people are hungry, as well.

I study him, thinking. I know I am hotheaded. I know it is my nature to fight. Everything in me is telling me to snarl and challenge him and claim this for my people. My people, not his. If he’s right and it is an egg, this yolk will feed little Z’hren for many days. I should not split it. It is mine to claim.

But if I fight R’jaal and he wins...then I return empty-handed. If it were anyone else, I would be completely assured of my success. I am the strongest of hunters on the island...but R’jaal is the quickest. He and I have sparred at clan gatherings and come out even more times than not. If it were anyone else...

I can chance it, or I can think of my clan’s well-being. I growl low in my throat because I know what I want, and yet I must think of my clan first. “I do not like sharing.”

“Nor I. But I also do not feel like fighting this day.” He puts his hands on his hips, tail flicking, looking very much as if he’d wish to fight after all.

I scowl at him. Lies. He loves a good spar as much as I do and I am his favorite fight partner. Something else must be troubling him, or he is sick.

Or starving.

Or he knows something I do not.

I study him for a moment longer, full of mistrust. Every moment we waste is another moment someone else could come along, though. I know it would not be one of my tribe. N’dek is cave-bound and J’shel will have the kit. It is only me out and about on this day. If another of the Tall Horn clan arrives, I will be outnumbered. Or if one of the Shadowed Cat clan arrives, we will have to split the sea’s bounty three ways.

With a frustrated snarl, I flip one of my blades and offer it to him, handle first. “Let us carve out our shares, then.”

He grunts and sounds surprised that I have agreed. R’jaal takes the knife with a nod to me and then strides forward, tail flicking. I follow behind, my other knife still in hand as we approach the strange thing.

It looks dark, the shell of it smooth and unblemished unlike any creature I have ever seen before. There is a small circular bubble of some kind at the far end—an eye, perhaps—but the rest of the thing is unrelenting black. I touch the surface as R’jaal peers at it, and it feels like no eggshell or hide I have ever felt before.

He taps the end of his blade—my blade—against the surface and listens. “Sounds hollow.”

A hollow egg with a hard shell might mean the creature inside is ready to hatch. “Too dark to be a skyclaw egg,” I point out. Too large, too. Shame—skyclaw are good eating and can feed a clan for days on one egg. “Be ready for any creature that will emerge.”

He nods, his mouth firming into a hard, irritated line. I know how he feels. I do not like working with him either. But I think of the hungry mouths back at the tribe and the squalling kit who needs his mother’s milk—and will never get it. I must think of them first. I tap my own hilt on the surface and place my hand on it, checking for movement. There is a hairline crack along one side. Good enough place to stick a blade, I suppose. I push the edge of my knife in the crack and pry.

To my surprise, the shell hisses and lifts up. I jump backward, camouflaging even as I pull my knives from my belt once more, ready to attack. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice that R’jaal camouflages as well, his skin changing to match the greenish-brown of the sand even as he pulls out his spear, readying to attack. I crouch low, twirling my knives, prepared to strike.

The piece of shell continues to rise and then moves gently to the side. The hissing stops. There’s a noise like a yawn, and then something rises from within.

It's a female.

I think.

Her camouflage is a strange golden color that matches none of her surroundings, and she smacks her lips and rubs her head, shaking out her mane. Her sleepy gaze lands on the beach, and then on R'jaal. Then me.

She pales and her eyes roll back in their sockets. Her body slumps and she disappears back inside the stone-egg.

“What...” R'jaal looks at me, shocked.

I straighten, putting away my knives. I let my camouflage fade to my natural blue and stride forward. “Was that a female?”

He puts a hand to his chest, over his heart. His jaw clenches and he glances over at me. “Mine. She is mine.”

“Do you resonate to her, then?” I wonder why I do not feel possessive for the female. If it truly is one, she is the only female left on this island after the Great Smoking Mountain destroyed our clans and with the death of I'chai. I should claim her for my clan. But I do not feel anything for her.

Surely if she were meant to be mine, I would feel something, would I not?

“No,” he says swiftly. “All the same, she is mine.” R'jaal moves forward, leaning over the edge of the egg to gaze inside at the fallen female. Then, he looks at me and laughs. “There are two!”

Two? My heart thuds heavily in my chest. Two females? Why? Why do they come to us in an egg? Is it...a sign from the ancestors who came to this world in an egg?

I move forward and lean in, scarcely daring to believe R'jaal.

There, nestled inside the egg, lie two females. Both of them are colored all wrong for camouflage. I hold my breath, because they are unmistakably female. They are smaller than sakh females, and far more delicate, and their teats are bloated, but I cannot deny that they are female. Neither one has horns.

They cannot be of the Tall Horn clan, then. I clench two of my fists, counting arms. Only four for both females. Two for each. Not clan Strong Arm then, either. R'jaal reaches out and touches one female's arm—the dark-maned one that collapsed. Her forearm is smooth and unfurred. Not clan Shadowed Cat, then, either.

I do not care about that female, though.

It is the other one that holds my attention. She is paler than the other, her skin more a strange whitish-pink than the warm gold of the other. Even their camouflage does not match properly. Her mane hangs about her delicate face, and the color of it is pale as well, a rosy reddish-brown instead of the dark black it should be. Her lashes are long and shadow her cheeks and she has the most charming little nub of a nose and a soft pink mouth.

This one is *mine*.

I feel it surge through me, the intense knowing and covetous feeling of finding something that truly belongs to me. It does not matter how this female got here.

She is leaving with me.

I reach in and gather her in my arms, careful not to harm her. Her head lolls and I put a hand under it to support her, then carefully lift her out, cradling her body against my chest. For a scant moment, I worry she is not breathing, and I hold my own breath until I see her teats rise and fall.

Alive.

Thank the ancestors.

“Wait,” R'jaal says as he lifts the other female out. “They should both go with me. You know the clan rules. Four arms goes to clan Strong Arm. Both of these females have two.”

I bare my teeth at him. He dares to quote the ancestors' rules at me? “You have that female. This one is mine.” I stroke her hair off her brow, already fascinated by her. It does not matter to me that she is weak and only has two arms. I will protect her and care for her as if she is as whole as any other female.

“There are others in my clan that need mates.”

Rage seethes inside me. He thinks to take what is mine? “I see no horns on your female, friend,” I sneer back at him. “Neither should go with you, either.”

He narrows his eyes at me and cradles his female to his chest. “You cannot have her.”

I do not want her...but I will kill him if he tries to take this one from me. “You have yours. I have mine. I do not care about clan rules.” Clan rules would say that no distinguishing features would go to the Outcast clan, but they are long gone. Just the thought of having to give up my female makes me mad with rage, and I hold her tighter. Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

The word throbs through my mind, as fierce as any heartbeat. I can feel it, pumping through me like blood. Mine. Mine. Mine. This female is *mine*. That is why I did not care about the other—my heart knew this one was coming to me.

I am not entirely surprised when my khui begins to sing, its tempo matching the beat in my head.

R’jaal’s eyes widen in surprise, and then he nods slowly. “Yours, then.”

“Mine,” I say with fierce pleasure. I resonate to her. No one will ever take her from me.

She is mine and *mine* alone.

K'THAR

Neither myself nor R'jaal are interested in the egg any longer. We part from the beach without another word, each of us carrying off our burdens as quickly as we can. He cannot take my female from me—not with my resonance song thrumming in my breast—but I know he feels vulnerable since he has not resonated to his.

I just want to be alone with my female. I want to look at her, explore her, learn about her.

Awaken her. See her look at me.

I want to hear her khui resonate to mine.

That it has not yet is not troubling to me. She is unconscious and in a deep sleep. Once she wakes up, it will draw her to me as mine is drawn to hers. Resonance is never one-sided. All I have to do is wait.

I carry her as quickly—and as carefully—as I can, moving swiftly down the shore and heading toward the distant treeline. When we are out of the open, I set her gently down in the shade of a large fern underneath one of the tallest trees. Here, she will be sheltered from any patrolling skyclaw or wandering kaari. I kneel down beside her and touch my fingers to her chin, tilting her head toward me.

She yet sleeps. Is she sick? My worried gaze flicks over her. She breathes shallowly, but she breathes. Her skin is unnaturally pale and when the fern fronds ripple their shadows over her, she does not change colors to adapt. I do not understand. Even the youngest of kits knows from the day it leaves its mother's body that it must camouflage to survive. I worry that something deep inside her is broken, that I have found my mate only to lose her.

“No,” I murmur, and take her small hand in my own. “You are mine. Now that I have found you, you will wake up and you will join me. We will make many kits together and work to bring our clan back to greatness.” I press her palm to my mouth, breathing in the scent of her skin. She smells like the salty waters of the sea and something else, something sweet and wholly her. I notice as I press my face against her skin that she does not react to my nearness either.

I also notice...she has an extra finger.

Odd. I examine her other hand and she has one there, too. A birth anomaly? Like our clans with the identifying features? It's been said that sometimes a member of the Tall Horn clan would be born with four arms, or the furred skin of the Shadowed Cat clan, and the kit would be taken from his family and given to the correct clan. I have never heard of someone being born with extra fingers, however.

Nor have I heard of anyone camouflaging to such a strange color and staying there.

Again, I wonder if she is ill. I touch her face gently, caressing her cheek and brow. I press my ear to her chest, but I can hear nothing through the strange things she has covered her body with. Perhaps these are the problem? Maybe they are why her camouflage does not seem to be working.

I need to take them off of her. Then I can better gauge what is ailing her.

I run my hands along her arms, looking for a way to pull these strange skins off of her. They smell like hide, and I worry they are connected to her somehow and that removing them will harm her. When I tug at them, though, it does not seem to pain

her. I move my hands underneath the hides, searching for an attachment to her skin of some kind, but all I feel is softness underneath.

Just touching her makes my cock ache in a way I have never felt before. It becomes too much to bear and I pull my hands back, closing my eyes and breathing hard as I strive to contain myself.

A resonance mate is the greatest gift. I have been told that over and over again. I thought I would never experience it, not after the death of the Great Smoking Mountain and the decimation of the clans. I thought it was something lost to the past, like family and a life of ease and the great competitions. I thought all hope had been lost with the deaths of so many.

Now, for the first time...I feel hope once more. Perhaps the sakh are not doomed to die with the remnants of our clans. Perhaps there is more to look forward to than merely existing.

I touch her cheek again, already fascinated by her. I have not felt this strongly for anyone or anything since the mountain's death. I crave touching her. Is this how other resonance mates have felt? Or do I only feel this way because she is the first mateable female I have seen in so many turns of the seasons? I saw the other female at the same time R'jaal did, though, and felt nothing for her.

It is this one that holds that special spark. There is something about her that my body, my khui, instinctively recognize as mine.

Satisfied that these skins are merely decoration, I take one of my knives and cut them off of her limbs, revealing more pinkish-pale skin. Her arms are thin and strangely unmuscled, as if she has never climbed a vine or a cliff in her life. Where did she come from, I wonder, that such things are not needed? Unless she has been sick for a very long time. I squeeze her upper arm again, checking. She is strangely flabby here but the muscles do not feel tight, just soft.

Perhaps whoever she lived with before did not allow her to leave their cave. Perhaps even now, she is escaping them.

But how did she get into the egg? Why is she covered in such strange things?

Why is she pink?

I continue cutting the layers off of her body. There is another strange band of leather across her teats. She cannot be nursing. I would not resonate to a female that is already taken. Another sign of illness? I cut the band off and her teats spring free, full and bouncy.

Shocked, I sit back on my haunches, studying her form.

I...have not seen this before.

My cock, already stiff, grows harder yet. I give it a quick swipe before pushing it back under the leafy loincloth I wear. This is no time to be thinking about mating. My mate is sick, clearly.

Certain parts of her are...swollen.

Is this why she bound them? To reduce the swelling? I touch one hesitantly, squeezing the flesh. It does not feel hot with fever. The tips are a darker shade of pink than the rest of her skin, but they do not feel flushed either.

When I touch her there, though, she moans and the little tips tighten.

I snatch my hand back. Clearly they are tender. I see no other signs of infection, though. No cuts, no bruises, no markings or red angry lines that suggest her flesh is full of sickness. I touch behind her ears, and the nodes there are not swollen, either. If this is an infection, it is a very odd one.

I think of I'chai. Her teats swelled when her kit was born, but never as large as this, or as full. I did not think twice about her body, yet I find I cannot stop staring at the pink tips of this female's chest and the way her teats jiggle ever so slightly with her breathing.

I do not know what to make of this...or my own reaction. I should be thinking of nothing but her health and instead, I keep thinking of mating. Of what it would feel like to pull her up on her haunches underneath me and sink into her body...

With a hiss, I jerk to my feet and close my eyes, storming away a few steps to gather my thoughts. It is because this is all very new to me. I was nothing but a stripling when the mountain died. I entertained thoughts of flirting with females at the next gathering, perhaps taking one to my furs to learn pleasures...but those days never came.

Now my cock wants to make up for lost time.

I am never going to be able to help her if I cannot concentrate. Perhaps I need to relieve my body so I can focus on my mate entirely.

It is a good idea, I think. I place one hand upon the nearest tree to steady myself and push aside my leafy loincloth, freeing my cock. With the image of her in mind, I begin to stroke myself with precise, slow strokes, imagining her body under mine.

It feels shameful to spend myself at the thought of infected, swollen teats and pink flesh...and yet I have never come so hard in my life, nor has it felt so good. With a low groan, I spill my seed onto the leaves of a nearby fern. My seed is strangely thick and milky, unlike the usual clear spend. Odd.

My cock still aches even after I shudder with my release. Once more, then, and then I will be able to concentrate.

LAUREN

My eyes flutter open to the sight of tall, leafy green trees overhead and shadows dancing over my skin.

Am I...home? In a park?

Am I on drugs? Because I don't understand how I went from a winter planet to a tropical paradise, but here I am. Leaves rustle in the warm breeze and I can hear the distant sound of the ocean. The surreal feeling continues, but when I press a hand to my forehead, I feel...well, I feel like me. I ache all over and I swear I'm going to have saltwater in my nasal cavity for weeks, but this doesn't feel like a dream. I feel too sore and smell too sweaty for it to be a dream.

I rub my face and that's when I notice that I have no sleeves. Or any shirt at all.... I'm topless, my long, fur-lined tunic given to me by Liz is gone, only my leggings and boots remaining. I vaguely remember stripping off my outer furs when Marisol pulled me from the water. Did I take the rest off in my sleep, then? But how did I get here? I squint up at the trees, wondering if my eyes deceive me.

They really do look like trees. Jungle trees.

A groan from nearby makes me glance over. I do, and then I suck in a breath, startled.

There's a man standing nearby, his back to me. He's completely naked, his tail flicking back and forth across light blue, very tight buns. He's got the broadest shoulders I've ever seen, and the broadest back, with muscles that go on for days. As I watch, his arm pumps in a way that can only mean one thing.

He's...jerking off.

What the *fuck*.

Is he why I'm topless? Was I being molested while I slept? Horrified, I search the ground and see my tunic nearby. I snatch it, only to realize that it's been cut to ribbons. I gasp, my gaze flicking back to the man.

He stiffens, and in that moment, he...disappears.

I blink my eyes repeatedly, not entirely sure of what I'm seeing. It's like he faded away right before my eyes. I close my eyes and press on the lids, wondering if the seawater I inhaled—or the horrid headache I have—is causing my eyes to play tricks on me. They've been getting better day by day, but people just don't disappear.

I rub them hard and then open them again.

The man is there again, the pale blue color of his skin standing out against the leafy trees that surround us. Okay, my eyes are being weird. That must be it. I give my head a little shake to clear it and it throbs in response. "Hi."

“Hi,” he replies. It’s clear that he’s one of the blue people—the sa-khui, though his horns seem to be smaller than everyone else’s, and his color a little lighter. I guess that shouldn’t be surprising, since I’ve seen that the others come in a billion different shades of blue, just like Earth people come in all kinds of shades of white and gold and brown. Still, there’s something about him I can’t quite put my finger on. Maybe it’s the fact that he’s got a bit of a five o’clock shadow, like his face has a hint of scruff to it. Maybe it’s that his teeth aren’t sharp like the other sa-khui. Or maybe it’s because I caught the freak *jerking off* while I was sleeping.

I focus on the trees instead. It’s green here, leafy and verdant and completely unlike anything I’ve ever seen before. I feel a little betrayed at the sight of it, actually. For the last week or so, the entire tribe’s been filling our head with tales of how cold it is on the ice planet, how bitter the snows are and how it just gets worse, not better. This place? This is paradise. It’s like finding Hawaii in the middle of the Arctic.

And it makes no sense, just like finding a stranger jerking off makes no sense.

I hold the destroyed remnants of my tunic to my chest protectively. “Where am I?”

“Whry’m’yyy,” the man replies, voice thickly accented. He squats down next to me and I can’t help but notice that he’s naked. Really, really naked. Well, no, I take it back. He’s not completely naked—he’s got a knife-belt slung over one shoulder. That’s it. And um, he’s not exactly built like human guys. Wow, this is awkward. I want to stare at everything he’s got dangling between his thighs, but that seems rude. I freeze my gaze upward...

And I realize when he reaches out to touch my face that he’s got a lot of hands.

Like, a *lot* of them.

It takes me a moment before I realize he has four arms.

“Um.” I squeeze my eyes shut and then open them again, wondering if I’m seeing double. When the four arms remain, I

glance up at his face, studying it for any other doubles. Wouldn't he have two noses if I was seeing double? But there's only one. His broad face is handsome in an alien sort of way, but he's definitely only got the one nose. "I don't remember anyone having four arms..." I wonder if it's even polite to bring it up. I change tactics. "Are you with the rest of the tribe? That's back in the village?" Vektal and the other blue guys talked about their families back in a stone village on the far side of the mountains.

I'm pretty sure no one mentioned four arms, though.

Or trees.

"B'c veeh l'sshh?" he echoes, garbling my words. His brow furrows as he watches me, as if trying to understand what I'm saying, and I realize he doesn't speak English.

Okay, this is weird. All the other aliens spoke English. Maybe...maybe there are other alien tribes that I wasn't aware of? He does look different, now that I think of it. In addition to his slightly lighter color, he seems to be stockier than the others. Where most of the sa-khui were muscular and fit, this guy looks like he's a poured slab of muscle without an inch of fat. It's...well, it's kind of freaking amazing. I've never seen a guy so fit as him. His chest is practically twice as broad as a normal man's and he's got two sets of arms, one stacked on top of the other. It seems like something that would look highly unusual, but he's so fluid with his movements and so well built that it seems totally natural, oddly enough.

His face is different, too, I think. He's got the broad, strong features of the other sa-khui people, but he's missing the hard, plate-y ridges on his forehead that they had. He's got horns, but they don't look like the gigantic, oversized ram horns that the others have. His are kind of wee baby horns that curl back from his brow and arch back, as if holding his wavy black hair back in place.

"Are you one of the tribe?" I ask him. "Do you know Vektal? And Liz?"

"L'sh," he repeats, frowning at me. He reaches out to touch my jaw, and when I jerk back, he looks upset. "L'sh?"

“Er, no, I’m not Liz.” I sigh, biting my lip. “I’m Lauren, but you can call me Lo.” I guess it’s time to break out the “You Tarzan, Me Jane” routine. I tap my chest. “Lo.”

“Llllll,” he begins, trying to form his mouth around the syllable of my name. It’s like he can’t figure it out. The longer he tries, the more he makes it sound like a gagging noise.

Greeaaaat.

“Llll,” he says finally, half-puking my name, and then nods at me as if that was anything *close* to being correct.

“Not quite,” I say. I try again, tapping my chest. “Let’s go with Lauren, then. Lauren.”

“Llllll’rhn.”

He’s trying, I’ll give him that. It’s like he’s having trouble with vowels. Like he’s not used to moving his jaw like mine. His language must be all consonants or something. Curious, I tap his chest. “Who’re you, buddy?”

He looks pleased that I’ve asked. He rubs his fingers over the spot I’ve touched, which makes me feel all kinds of weird, given that I’m topless at the moment, and then says something that sounds a bit more like a sneeze than a name.

When he doesn’t continue, I realize that *it* is his name. Oh boy. “Can you repeat that?”

He shakes his head at me and studies my mouth, as if trying to follow my words. One hand reaches up, moving toward my lips, and I feel all flushed and bothered at the thought of him touching me.

I shake my head, and he drops his hand. I hug my destroyed tunic against my chest, studying him warily. I should be freaking out over the fact that I was unconscious and he took my clothes off, but I’m not getting a creepster vibe from him. He’s not even looking at my breasts or trying to touch me inappropriately. It’s like all he really wants right now is to communicate.

Of course, I did catch the guy jerking off.

Then again, I was unconscious. The thought is awful but...if he wanted to hurt me, he could have. "I hope that I'm safe with you, my friend," I whisper. "Because I am really damn vulnerable right now."

"Llll," he says again, then gestures at me. "L'rn."

Aw. It's like he wants to spit the word out, or better yet, turn two syllables into one. "Not quite. Lauuuuuu-rennnn," I say, exaggerating the word and elongating my mouth with each syllable.

"Lll'rn." He frowns as if to himself, knowing that it's not right.

I can't help but smile at that. It's clear he wants to learn and it's kind of cute. "Lauuuu," I begin again, and then pause, waiting for him to try.

"Llll—"

I reach out and squeeze his slightly furry jaw, trying to elongate it into an "O" shape. Of course, the moment I touch him, his eyes get soft and he caresses my hand, and I get a funny little quiver in my belly.

All right, Lo, focus. "Lauuuu," I repeat, and keep my hand on his jaw.

This time, when he mimics, he lets me pull slightly and tries to form an "O" of his own. "Lllllaaaahhhhhoooooooooo," he drawls, and then looks to me.

"That's pretty good," I tell him, smiling.

He grins back at me, and I'm struck at how attractive he is. He's still an alien, of course, but there's something so boyishly charming about that happy grin that the little fluttering butterfly in my belly does another flip.

"Llllooo'rhnn," he tries again. Then, "L'ren."

"I'll take it," I declare with a nod. "Now tell me your name again, and please don't make it sound like a sneeze, or I'm going to call you Gesundheit." I point at him.

He tries again, slowing his name down an exaggerated amount that's clearly difficult for him. It sounds like...Kathar, but if I swallow all the syllables and make them one weird sound. I try to mimic him. "K-tharr?"

"K'thar," he agrees, and this time when I echo him, he seems pleased.

"Okay, we're getting somewhere," I agree. "L'ren and K'thar. I'm pretty sure the other aliens didn't have names like that, so you must be from a different people. Yes?"

He frowns slightly at me, as if trying to follow my words. After a moment, he points into the trees and lets out a stream of syllables that I can't follow, much less pronounce.

Right. "I didn't catch that, but we'll just move on, okay? Are we back past the mountains? Or on the shore? Did you see the spaceship go down?" I move my hand in the air, trying to make it seem, well, spaceship-like. "Spaceship?"

He squints and then gestures at the trees, spitting forth another round of guttural words I can't follow.

Well, shit. I hug my tunic remnants to my breasts and contemplate my situation. Someone back in the other tribe—Liz? Vektal? Mardok?—had mentioned getting us a "language dump" of some kind so we could learn sa-khui. We'd been pressed for time and there'd been so many people—all of them speaking English already, even the alien men—that it had been put on a backburner. I wish it hadn't been, because I can't talk to my new friend. "Do you know where Vektal is?" I ask him, bringing up the chief's name. "Vektal?"

He makes a gesture for drinking and gives me a curious look.

"Yep, getting nowhere," I say, and reward him with another awkward smile. It's not his fault. He's doing his best to help out.

He says something else and motions at my boobs, which are covered up by my shredded tunic.

I clutch it tighter to my chest and give him an indignant look. "You're not taking this from me. I realize this is a clothing optional beach, but I'm not feeling that vibe." I don't look

down, because I'm going to see a whole lot of alien penis if I do. "In fact, I need a new shirt."

He says something else and presses a hand to my forehead, worry on his face.

Does he think I'm sick? "If you think I'm so sick, why do you want me to be naked?" I mutter to myself, trying to think of a way to communicate. Maybe we need to go down to the shore and draw figures in the sand. It's more pebbly black earth here under the trees, which is odd to me, but I don't know much about alien botany. Or any botany. Maybe Marisol...

Wait.

Where *is* Marisol?

I jerk to my feet, clutching the tunic to my breasts. Worry makes me stumble forward, and I ignore the squish of my sodden leather boots. My pants are dry, and that makes me wonder how long I was unconscious. I study the pounding waves, but there's no pod floating in the water. There's only endless black sand.

Black...sand? It hits me just now. That's *new*. It was greenish and pebbled on the other beach.

"Marisol?" I call out. "Are you here?"

The big guy moves to my side, touching my arm. He shakes his head violently, murmuring something. He's probably telling me to shut up.

Like I care? Where's my companion? Where's Marisol? If she's hiding, she could be in danger. I can't leave without her, and if this alien thinks it's just me on the beach, that could be dangerous. I cup a hand to my mouth and yell out her name. "Marisol!"

The big alien hisses something at me and touches a hand to my arm.

I shake him off, even more worried. I push forward, heading for the beach. "Marisol," I bellow out. "Answer me! I'm here! Where are you? Are you hiding?"

He follows after me, reaching for my hand again. "L'ren, *hst*."

I don't know what "hst" means, but I can guess it's something along the lines of "shut up." Except I don't want to. I jerk away from him and start to run, heading for the beach. "MARI—"

My words die as he grabs me and pins me against him, placing one big hand over my mouth. I scream against his fingers, struggling.

"*Hst*," he repeats into my ear. And he carries me away from the beach and back toward the trees.

I fight against him, but with four arms, it's far too easy for him to hold me captive against him and still keep me muffled. I feel a surge of despair as he carries me into the jungle, moving quickly, and then sets me down near a tree. He presses a hand to my mouth again, gently, and then shakes his head, as if indicating quiet. There's a look of worry on his face that makes me feel uneasy.

"L'ren." He gestures at the tree, indicating that I should climb up it.

What? "I'm not climbing a tree! Why would I do that?" I eye the thing. Even if I wanted to, it's bigger than any tree I've ever seen, with a trunk wider than I am tall and no low hanging branches. The closest one is at the top of my reach, and I can't even close my fingers around it when I stand on my tiptoes.

"L'ren," he says again, trying to haul me up the tree.

I smack at his hands, releasing the branch. "Stop it! I can't climb that! It's too tall!" I gaze upward and the tree continues high above my head, and I'm pretty sure the next set of branches above are even further apart than the first set.

K'thar makes a hopping gesture and then points at the tree again, urgency on his face.

"No, I..." I go silent. In the distance, I hear the crashing of something big and heavy through the leafy undergrowth of the jungle.

Oh shit. My eyes widen.

Something big is coming.

K'thar's dusky jaw clenches. He grabs me and pulls me after him, half-dragging me to a tree a few feet away. I want to protest, but I'm too afraid to make a sound. The crashing noise is getting closer and my new friend has a rather grim expression on his face. He hauls me to the new tree—a short, squat thing covered in large, jagged leaves that flutter in the wind—and presses me against the trunk of it.

The tree's far too short to climb, only a few feet taller than me, and so I'm not sure what he wants until he puts a hand over my mouth and then he captures my hands with his, pinning me against the trunk with his big body. He gestures to his own mouth, indicating quiet.

He's protecting me with his body. Terrified, I nod.

The crashing sound comes closer and I can hear the snorting breath of a loud animal...at the same time that a terrible stink touches my nose. Ugh, it smells like hot roadkill and dead things. I swallow hard, and the look K'thar gives me is one of warning, even as his hand remains pressed to my lips. The message is clear—don't make a sound. Don't move. Don't breathe.

I don't do any of these things. I'm too scared. My eyes are wide and locked to K'thar's and I tremble against him. He keeps his hand against my mouth, but his fingers feel less like a press and more of a...caress. His gaze is soft as it meets mine and he doesn't look worried. Protective, yes. Worried, no.

It's that protective look in his eyes that makes me feel...flushed all over. It feels intense to gaze into his eyes, our faces so close together that I can feel his breath on me. He's got the same bright electric-blue eyes that everyone does, the khui blue gaze that speaks of his symbiont.

I feel...strange.

But then the creature thunders right past us, all leathery skin and stink, and I go still underneath K'thar's shielding body. I can just make out parts of it from over his shoulders, and I see

lots of horns, lots of brownish-gray skin, and a long, swishing tail that saws down plant life as it passes back and forth.

And it's just walking past us.

Maybe this is one of those things where like in the movies, the dinosaurs can't see people unless they move. I hope.

I look back at K'thar...and I realize that he's changed colors somehow while I was focused on his eyes or on the creature that's paused behind us, sniffing the air.

K'thar's thumb rubs over my lips, ever so softly, reminding me to stay silent. As if I could speak in this moment. I'm too stunned by what I'm seeing. It's not the horned lizard behind us that has me so surprised but my new friend. The fingers laced with mine have changed to the color of the tree bark, and as I study his arm, I see the rest of him has turned the same color.

We completely blend with the tree, and his larger body hides my non-camouflaged one.

I have so many questions I want to ask. Could the others do this and I just wasn't aware of it? But they didn't have the four arms that he does, and K'thar doesn't speak English. I don't know that he's one of the same aliens as the others or if he's a completely different kind.

All of this is a mystery.

The creature nearby makes a whuffing sound and then lumbers away, but K'thar doesn't move. I don't, either. I'm not going anywhere until he gives the okay. I study his coloring instead—he's somehow managed to perfectly match the tree.

Maybe my eyes aren't so bad after all. Maybe I saw him shifting colors like a chameleon earlier.

It's fascinating.

His grip loosens on me and I slide my hands out, but when he continues to cage my body against the tree with his arms, I know it's still not smart to walk away yet. The creature's still nearby, even though it's getting farther and farther away with every step.

That's fine. I can stay here, because I'm far too interested in what's before me.

I run my fingers up his arm, wondering if he's going to stop me. Truth is, I want to see—to feel—if his skin has the same texture that the tree bark does, because he's matched it so very perfectly. It just feels like skin, though, warm and smooth, and I'm even more fascinated by that. I should probably stop touching him now that the creature is moving on, but I can't help myself. He shudders, closing his eyes, and it's like I'm transfixed. I want to keep exploring him, keep touching him. I know he's a stranger. I just don't care at the moment.

I slide my fingertips up one bicep and then across his shoulder. He's pressed so close to me I can feel all of his body against mine, and I can feel the excited rasp of his breathing as it quickens. He likes my touch. I can tell by the way he reacts—and by the way certain parts of his anatomy are stiffening against my stomach. He's completely naked against me and I'm just now noticing that...and that I'm topless, my tunic forgotten somewhere in our haste to find a tree. My breasts are pressed up against him, and I can feel every breath he takes right down to my pores.

I've never been this close to another person, especially not a stranger. There've been boyfriends, but it's never seemed like the right time to take things very far. There was always something else, or I just didn't like them enough. I've never been nearly naked with another guy pressed up against me, and never one the size of this man.

It's...breathtaking.

I inhale deeply and my nipples graze against his chest. They harden immediately and I feel an intense jolt of longing sweep through me. I'm not the kind of girl to rub against a guy naked in the jungle, but it seems today I am. I can't help myself. I gasp and press forward, moving against him again just to feel that sensation.

He groans low in his throat. K'thar's hand goes to my hair and he grabs a handful, tilting my head back and exposing my neck. I whimper, expecting him to kiss me, but all he does is

lean in and sniff deep, as if he's just now aware of my scent for the first time.

I've never been sniffed by a guy before. I never realized such a small thing could be so very erotic, but as his nose drags along the cords of my neck and he inhales? If I had panties, they'd be wet. I want him to kiss me. I want to know what it'd be like to be possessed by a guy this big, this primal. I didn't realize this was my thing at all, but I'm learning quickly that everything's different on this planet.

And I really, really want him to kiss me.

I reach up and caress his jaw, angling my mouth toward his. It's a silent request for a kiss if there ever was one, but all he does is rub his face against my neck once more. Maybe his people don't know how to kiss? But that can't be right—I've seen Liz and her mate, Raahosh, sneaking kisses when they think no one is looking. Maybe he just doesn't want to kiss me?

That can't be right, either, though. I can feel just how much he's turned on. His cock is a bar of heat pressing into my stomach. His hands roam over my shoulders and caress my hair, and I can hear his heavy breathing panting into my ear. He's as into this as I am. Heck, the guy's practically purring—

Purring?

I freeze. No way.

K'thar looks up at me, heat in his eyes, his sexy mouth parted as he gazes at me. God, that's something else. I get all quivery just looking at him. In fact, I'm quivering even harder with every moment that passes...

And then I realize it's not just him that's purring. I am, too.

With dread, I realize what this means. When they gave us our cooties, the tribe told us what would happen. The khui picks a mate for you and resonates whenever they're near. Your body hungers for that other person and you're incredibly turned on to the point that you can't think of anything other than having sex with that person, and it continues until someone ends up pregnant. Veronica and the big golden guy back at camp

resonated to each other and he looked at her like he wanted to devour her.

Like the way K'thar's looking at me right now.

I press a hand to the center of his chest. Sure enough, I can feel the thrumming of his cootie in his chest, purring and vibrating its "song." "Resonance," I whisper. "This could be a problem."

K'THAR

I grin with satisfaction as my female resonates to me. Now she understands. Now she will yield to me and we will mate. I need to get her away from this area if there are kaari nearby so we can have time to yield to resonance and enjoy each other.

I like that thought very much.

“L’reu,” I murmur, touching her chin. “Come. We must get away from this place.”

She gives her head a little shake, indicating she doesn’t understand me. I bite back my frustration. It is not her fault she cannot grasp my words. Wherever she is from, her people did not speak the same as mine. I do wonder at a clan that puts people in eggs, but perhaps she will tell me more in time.

For now, all that matters is her safety.

“We must go,” I tell her again, my colors rippling to match the leaves of the nearby trees. Through the branches is the best, safest way to get my mate home.

L’reu gasps and touches my skin, fascinated by the colors. Her reaction is surprising to me. Does she not have camouflage of her own? She remains the same pale whitish-pink, and that fills me with concern—how can she protect herself if she

cannot mask her appearance? Even little Z'hren changes his colors, and he cannot yet crawl.

“Prng,” she tells me, patting my chest again. “Shtdissisbaad.”

I do not understand her nonsense words, but I cannot get distracted by her touch. “We must take to the trees. I will bring you to my home, where you will be safe. It is high in the leaves, beyond where any kaari can reach, and the branches will shield us from skyclaw. On the ground here, we are vulnerable.”

She looks troubled. “Cant biresnatin.”

“Yes,” I agree. “Very vulnerable. Come.” I gesture at the branches of a nearby tree. “You should be able to reach this one with your small hands.” I worry that she only has two of them. What if she should lose her grip with one hand? The other will not be strong enough to hold her weight.

The answer is simple—I must carry her.

For one of the clan of the Strong Arm, being carried is a deep humiliation. It is why N'dek refuses to leave the clan-home after the loss of his leg. Once you are beyond a kit's age, it is expected that you will rely on your own strength. But I remind myself that L'ren is not of my clan and there is no shame in carrying her. I carried her off the beach, after all, but she was unconscious. That is different.

“I must carry you,” I tell her, indicating with a gesture that we need to take to the trees.

“Nd t-talk bout resnens problm,” she says to me, patting my chest again.

Ah. She is asking about mating? I am delighted at her eagerness. “My cock can wait until you are safe, my lovely mate.” I lean in to nuzzle her in a show of affection so she knows I am still pleased with her.

She makes a soft yelp and slaps my cheek. “Noh!”

I frown, surprised. Is this how her people show affection? Slaps on the face? I do not think I can follow this custom. One of my lightest taps would send her delicate body reeling. “I

will come up with different ways to pleasure you, this I promise,” I tell her and press my hand to her lips. “Quiet now while on the ground.”

L’reen blows out a little breath from her nose, clearly frustrated. I had no idea a mate would be so very incensed that I do not flip her onto her back and mate with her right here. Her safety must come first. “Soon,” I promise. “Do not doubt that I want you. Surely you can see that.” I gesture at my aching cock, then my singing heart. “Is this not clear enough?”

Her cheeks camouflage slightly. Curious. “Nt wht I ment.”

My mate’s tone sounds as if she is giving in to reason. I am glad. I extend my arms to her again, offering her the chance to come to me of her own accord. “I will carry you,” I say, indicating to the tree again. “That way I know you will be safe.”

Brow furrowed, L’reen shakes her head at me. “Dnt nnerstnd.”

“No, it must be so, my mate. Do not argue with me. You are not of the Strong Arm. There is no need to feel embarrassed.” I move forward and pull her against me.

L’reen stiffens, struggling against me.

I hold her arms down with mine and use my free hands to begin climbing the tree. I go up a few branches and then pause, because she’s stopped struggling, and then move her arms to my neck. “Hold on to me.”

Her cheeks are camouflaging that strange shade again. “Fil lilsilly. Thotchuwannet smthn else.”

“I know you are eager,” I soothe her. “Time enough for that, I promise. I must have you safe before I have you under me. Then you can slap me to your heart’s content.”

She says nothing, her arms tight around my neck. I prop her legs around me and remember that she still wears the strange layers over them. Something to fix when we get to the tribe. She will want to be free of such things, I know. They cannot be comfortable.

Much like my own aching cock is making climbing rather... interesting. It juts out from my groin, stabbing at the branches as if they are my mate's warm flesh. It will not go down, either. Not with L'ren pressed so sweetly against me, her swollen teats rubbing against my chest and her arms around my neck. With her body against me like this, even as I climb, I think of mating. I cannot help it. Her enthusiasm for such things, along with the steady song in her chest, brings my own need to a fever pitch. Her legs are wrapped around me and I cannot help but think it would be so easy to slide her forward just a bit and sink deep...

It is a shame she wears these layers, or we could both get what we want.

With a gusty sigh, I climb higher into the trees, heading for the canopy.

LAUREN

For the first time in days, I really wish I couldn't see so well now. Without glasses, it's relatively easy to phase out what I see, to mentally isolate myself from things. I can't see it happening, so it can't be so scary.

Unfortunately, this no longer seems to be a coping tactic I can use. I'm acutely aware of just how high up in the trees we are, and just how far below the ground is. My new friend—K'thar—doesn't seem to notice how very high up we are, because he moves through the trees as if he was born to them. Branch several handspans away? No problem, he'll just leap to it. Tree not strong enough to hold his weight? Piece of cake—he'll springboard off of the trunk with his legs and fly over to the next tree, all without stopping. My extra weight doesn't seem to be a burden to him, because he climbs and hauls the two of us around with such speed that I feel like I'm getting motion sickness.

So I just cling to him tighter, arms and legs wrapped around his body. He holds me against him with two arms, and his

others move swiftly from branch to branch. Clearly this sort of travel isn't a problem for him. Great.

One problem down, so many to go.

I know Marisol should be my chief concern. She's a grown woman, of course, and should be able to take care of herself about as well as I can. We're all equals right now because no one's familiar with this place. But I know Marisol has struggled to adapt. She likes to hide away from the world, and I've focused a lot of my fear and worry into being her protector. I haven't lost it because I knew Marisol needed someone to be strong, so I volunteered.

I don't know how she'll fare out on her own. I don't even know if she's safe...or if she's alive. I can't even ask.

More than the problem of Marisol being missing, I don't know where I am. This place doesn't match up to anything that the others have told me. It's not snowy in the slightest, and the air is hot and muggy. The greenery is out-of-control huge, and none of this makes sense. Did I somehow get taken to yet another planet while sleeping? It sounds ridiculous, but I'm pretty sure *all* of this is ridiculous—tapeworm, ice planet, blue guys, four arms—and it's happening to me. I would love for a big pinch to wake me up, but that's not happening.

The big guy shifts me against him and his cock rubs up against my thigh as he climbs ever higher into the trees. My cootie purrs as if it's thrilled by this small contact, and I have to admit that I'm feeling a little hot and bothered myself.

Yeah, that's another problem.

Resonance.

I was warned by Liz and Harlow. It's a side effect of the khui and everyone that has a khui experiences resonance at some time or another. Since it was either khui or death, I chose khui. I knew this was bound to happen at some point, since all of the humans that had been rescued on the ice planet so far had resonated within a year or two of arrival.

But seeing as how we only had four un-mated males in our group and one had already resonated to someone else, the odds

were good that it'd be a long, long time before I resonated to someone.

I didn't count on K'thar. I didn't count on this island—or wherever we are—and I sure didn't count on resonating to someone the moment I saw them.

I don't know what to do about him and I. I mean, there's nothing *to* do, but it feels like a problem I need to solve. I'm pretty sure he's going to want to mate.

I am also pretty sure I'm not ready for that. Mentally, anyhow. Physically? Oh boy, is my body ever ready. My cootie's thrumming a mile a minute and his is, too, reminding me that I'm not the only one feeling the effects of resonance. I'd been told that it would be impossible to resist, and at the time I was also rather certain that most people didn't resist because they didn't want to. That it was more of an endorphin high than an imperative of some kind.

Oh, how wrong I've been.

Resonance is more or less a slap across the face telling your hormones to get in line, because they are about to get served. My breasts haven't stopped aching and feeling tight since my cootie started acting up. My skin feels sensitive. My, ahem, lady parts? They feel achy as well, as if needing something that isn't there. I know exactly what that something is, and my body's just going to have to wait.

I am so not ready to jump into a relationship.

He says something to me, his hand hitching lower and caressing my butt as he chuckles.

"Yeah, I have no idea what you just said," I tell him moodily. "Step one of this budding relationship is establishing some sort of communication, even if we end up with mostly yes and no questions. I have a lot of damn questions."

K'thar gestures again and then pats my hip with one hand and points at his neck with another.

Oh. I think I'm holding on too tight. I feel my cheeks heating. "Sorry about that."

He reaches up and caresses my cheek, saying something again. I'd slap his hand away except for the fact that I need all of my limbs to hold on to him so he doesn't drop me. "I'm going to let that one slide for now."

Another garbled sentence. He points up, and I glance up, too. Oh god, we're near the top of the canopy. It's a dizzying sight, and just angling my head up like that makes me queasy. I close my eyes and bury my face against his neck again, moaning in horror. I didn't realize I was scared of heights until just now.

K'thar murmurs something soothing, and his hands tighten on me again. This time I don't mind the hand on my butt. If it lets him hold on to me better, I am all for it. I can feel his muscles bunch as he jumps again, our bodies moving and swaying. I keep my head down, because I don't want to see any of this travel.

He pauses, and I feel the ruffle of wind against my hair. "L'ren," he whispers, then strokes my arm.

"You should probably be holding on to something other than me," I point out, not lifting my head. "Focus, buddy. Focus. I'm too important to drop." I hope.

A big, comforting hand strokes my hair. "L'ren," he says again. "Vy skh."

The big guy keeps repeating that and touching my shoulder, and I realize he wants something. Biting back my fear, I lift my head, just a little.

I see sky.

Terrified, I clamp my legs around him harder, clinging to his neck. "Don't drop me!"

"Es ket." A pat on my back. "Ket."

I glance up at him again, and when he gives me an encouraging smile, I ignore the surge of my excited cootie and try to look around this time, to see what he's showing me.

There's more sky, and my hair whips around my face, flying up. I can hear the rustle of leaves up here, hundreds and thousands of them, shivering in the breeze. The sky is pale

pinkish orange in the parts where the suns can be seen under the clouds, a sign that night's going to be coming soon. And beyond the trees...bottle green.

Water.

I gasp, sitting up straighter. The ocean. It's the same ocean as before. I squint, not daring to raise a hand to my eyes, but I'm pretty sure I can see for miles and miles around this high up. I swear we're in the highest tree in the forest, and if I could get past being terrified, I'd probably think that's cool.

I haven't left the planet for another one, then. I'm on the same planet...just a different place. I bet if I could see far enough, I'd see the icy peaks of the other side. Unless I'm a continent away, of course. Something tells me that I'm not, though. It's weird, because up here with the breeze, the air feels colder. Down below, amongst the trees, it's humid and muggy, but up here it's as brisk as I remember.

K'thar says something to me, gesturing at the land.

"Mm," I say, just to respond, but I'm not paying attention to him. I'm trying to think. Something about this is making me uneasy, and it's not just the height we're at. I gaze outward at the water, and the trees all around us. There are islands in the distance, a little flatter and not nearly as green as this one. It's interesting, though, because they're curving around, almost as if they're making a big circle. And in the center of the circle, there's more water, a paler, bright green than the rest of the ocean, like a lake. Except it's strange, because at the center of the lake, there are bubbles and a plume of smoke. Just a tiny one.

Realization strikes me.

I know what this is.

Clinging to K'thar's neck, I turn, trying to see behind us. We're at the highest point for what looks like miles around, and from here, I can see almost everything. It's like we're up the side of a very steep cliff, and down below spreads out miles and miles of trees. In the distance, I see the faint black line of sand. I turn my head again—

And gasp.

At the far end of the island, where the land narrows, it's all black and smooth land. This wouldn't be all that alarming except that there's smoke pouring from the water in a steady stream, sending masses of smoke into the air. *I know what this is.* I saw a video about Hawaii back in Geology 101 in college. An active volcano that still has flowing lava makes steam when it hits water. In the distance, that's cooling lava that's hitting the ocean. Lots and lots of it. I gaze downhill, then toward the tiny plume in the center of the "lake" that's surrounded by islands.

Except it's not a lake and we're not on an island. It's a caldera—the crater of a volcano—and we're right on top of it. These trees, this forest, everything's made steamy and warm because we're right smack on top of an active volcano.

Oh, this is *so* not good.

K'THAR

L'ren is upset about something. I think she does not like the land. Something about it frightens her. I took her to my favorite spot, high in the trees, because I love gazing out at the world and imagining what it is like beyond our home. I like the view, and the cool breeze that moves this high above the land. But instead of being surprised or pleased at what I have shown her, she has grown pale and worried. There are shadows in her eyes and she looks unhappy. She keeps pointing to the thick, ever-present mist in the fire-lands and saying strange words.

“I will not take you there,” I reassure her. “I know it is dangerous. Trust me.”

She does not look happy, but her tense grip relaxes a bit when we descend back down into the canopy. There is no more time for sights. I need to take her to the clan-home, before it grows dark and the nightflyers grow active with their hunting.

So down we go, moving through the trees once more. She trembles against me as I do, and it makes my body remember that we are resonating. Perhaps I should take her somewhere more private than the clan-home?

Not this night, I decide. J'shel will need help with the kit. They will need food. Mating with her somewhere private will have

to wait just a bit longer. I feel a pang of annoyance at the thought. It cannot be helped. The safety of all must come first.

But that does not mean I cannot resent it, just a little.

It is nearly dark when the carved-out hollow of the clan-home becomes visible. Our tree is not quite as spacious as the coral-surrounded clan-home of Tall Horn, or the cave cliffs of Shadowed Cat, but it is easy for us to climb to and easier to defend from predators. I worry that it will not be safe for her with its woven platforms and snug dens. I make my way to the top platform and then set her down gently.

She whimpers, clinging to my neck. “Dnt drpmi!”

“It is all right,” I reassure, stroking her hair. “This is home. We are safe.” I touch my fingers to her chin. “Wait here.”

The moment I turn away, she lets out a cry of protest and holds on to my knife belt.

“I do not go far, I promise,” I tell her, and grab one of the carved wooden bowls waiting on a shelf inside the hollow of the tree. I grab a handful of night-moss and crush it between my fingers, and it begins to glow. I place it inside the bowl and then offer it to her. “You can hold this if you like.”

She takes it, a surprised look on her face. “S’gloin?”

“Light,” I tell her. “So you can see.”

“K’tar?” J’shel calls out from below. A moment later, the kit wails a protest. “Can you come down here and take this one before I tear my own mane out?”

L’ren stares at me in shock and horror. Her hand goes over her swollen teats. “R usrs? M’nakd!” She drops to her haunches on the platform and hugs her knees to her chest. “Nd smthg tu wr!”

“Do not be frightened,” I reassure her, moving to her side and crouching next to her. So skittish, my mate. So terrified of everything. “J’shel is a friend.” To him, I call out, “Come up!”

The kit wails again and I hear the squawk of Fat One, joining in. The tree hollow creaks and groans, a sign that J’shel is climbing up. I get to my feet.

L'ren realizes this, too, and she makes an unhappy noise, shoving the light-bowl into my hands and then plastering herself against my back. She wraps her arms around me from behind, and the sound she makes is indignant.

Is she trying to camouflage herself against me? I glance down at the pink hands against my chest, but they remain the same color. Does she not realize she cannot turn colors? Has she lost the ability?

J'shel emerges from the tree a moment later, with Z'hren in a leather sling against his chest, Fat One perched on his shoulder. He looks tired and frustrated after a day of watching the kit but pauses at the sight of L'ren hiding behind me. "Is that..." He looks at me, shocked. "What is that, K'thar?"

"It is a female," I tell him proudly and put a fist to my chest. "Listen. I resonate to her."

His mouth falls open in surprise and he jiggles the kit against his chest as it wails again. "I do not understand. How? Was she hiding with another clan?"

"I do not think she is from a clan," I tell him, stroking her hand as she clings to me. "I found her in an egg with another female. R'jaal took that one."

"What? Why?" He gives me a betrayed look. "Why did you not bring another female here? Both N'dek and I do not have mates either!"

"I know this, brother. But R'jaal arrived on the shore at the same time I did." I quickly tell him the story of the strange egg and the females inside. "It seemed better to share than to fight."

He nods thoughtfully even as Fat One pushes off his arm, fluttering over to my shoulder and landing there with a thump. Behind me, L'ren makes a startled sound as Fat One starts to sniff her. "Did R'jaal resonate to the other?"

"Not that I saw."

J'shel's eyes gleam. "What clan was she?" He tries to peer over my shoulder at my female.

Now is the time I must explain to him what my L'ren is...but I am not entirely sure I know myself. "She is of no clan, like my female."

And I pull away from L'ren so he can look at her face.

LAUREN

I am going to straight up murder K'thar for introducing me to his buddy while I'm freaking topless!

He moves away from me, leaving me without a human(ish) shield to cover my nudity, and I bite back my scream of irritation and cup my hands over my breasts. "Little warning next time?" I bite out at him.

The newcomer's eyes go wide at the sight of me. He looks like K'thar, I think, with a similar build. His hair is in one long braid whereas K'thar's is loose around his shoulders. And he's better looking than his friend, but I'm biased, of course. My cootie ensures that.

The new guy gestures at me and begins spitting a stream of syllables at K'thar. Probably a lot of "who the hell is she?" I can relate. I want to say the same thing, except no one understands me. They begin talking in low tones, and as they do, I study my surroundings.

We're still high up in the trees. Not my favorite place to be, but it's quiet up here, I guess. New sounds are coming out of the jungle with the night, and it doesn't sound entirely safe, so for once I'm glad we're not close to the ground. This place is odd, though. It's a big tree, fat and broad, and looks as if it's been hollowed out. The inside glows with a faint greenish light just like the little bowl that K'thar holds in front of him. I guess that's the nighttime light source.

Makes sense not to have a fire being that we're in a tree and all.

Something squawks—like a chicken with more bass in its voice—and then hops from K'thar's shoulder onto my bare arm. I fight back a screech of alarm because this has to be a

pet. Farli had a big furry, ugly-ass pony. It makes sense that someone here would have a pet. I'm just not entirely sure what this thing is. The face looks a bit like a cross between a lizard and a cat, and its wings are hairless. There's no tail and it has a tiny crest arching back from its pointy little head. It has big eyes that gleam like a cat's in the dark, but it doesn't have feathers or fur. The feet clinging to my arm remind me of a bird, though. And it's round and fat and gazes up at me like its expecting to be fed.

Weird.

"Kki," K'thar says, and makes a clicking sound with his tongue. The thing makes another rumbling sound of protest and then hops back over to K'thar, abandoning me in favor of moving to his shoulder and preening against his ear. It's like a bird, and for some reason, it warms my heart.

He's got a pet bird. Sure, there's no beak or feathers, but the way it flutters its wings? Bird. The claws that dug into my skin without breaking it? Bird. The way it's cooing at him like it expects treats? It reminds me of my own sweet bird that I left behind. I'm hit by a wave of homesickness that leaves me teary.

K'thar moves forward mid-conversation, waving off his friend. He touches my face, noticing my distress, and then glances at the way I'm cupping my hands over my boobs. He says something to his friend, who adjusts the baby in his arms. A moment later, K'thar has the leather wrap and offers it to me.

Oh.

I smile at him through my tears and take it, turning around and wrapping it around my torso. I'll take a makeshift tank top. Already I feel better, and when I turn around, my tears are drying and I'm able to concentrate a little more.

Both men are staring at me, the newcomer tilting his head as if he's trying to figure me out as he holds the baby under his arm. K'thar's gaze is an entirely different sort of stare. It's hot and possessive and speaks of all kinds of dirty things that make me want to press my thighs tightly together.

I am so having dirty dreams tonight. I just know it.

The new guy gestures at my tits and then the baby. He picks the child up and holds it out in my direction.

Oh, hell no. “Just because I have boobs doesn’t mean I get the kids,” I protest, edging toward K’tar.

He shakes his head at his friend and taps his chest, then points at my heart. I know what that means. Resonance.

The other protests, gesturing at my boobs again and then the baby’s mouth.

It hits me. “I’m not nursing! I just resonated! That means I can *have* babies, not that I have all the babies, you doofus!”

K’tar scowls at him and takes the baby from his friend’s hands and tucks him under his arm. He says something to his friend and the other guy rubs his face, tired. They talk for a little longer, and I realize that neither of them is probably the parent of the little guy. They don’t seem to know what to do with him, and as the baby shoves one fist (of four) into his mouth and sucks on it, I wonder where the little one’s mama is. K’tar holds him awkwardly, and after a moment, I decide to step in.

“Come on, now. Even I did a lot of babysitting when I was a kid,” I say, moving forward to take the baby from him. I’m surprised at how solid the kid is. He’s a heavy little thing, and the four arms immediately wave in utter delight as I tuck him against my side and rock him back and forth. Three fists immediately pull on my hair while the other pats my jaw. Well, that can’t be helped. He’s cute, though, all roly-poly baby fat and light blue skin. As I pick him up, he immediately changes colors to match my skin and gives me a happy, toothless little smile.

Okay, that’s cute. “Where’s your mama, little guy?” I bounce him on my hip. “Is she coming up here?”

He coos at me and tugs on my hair. Can’t be more than a few months old, this little guy. I bet he’s a handful. I glance over at the other two, wishing I could understand their low conversation. It doesn’t seem like anyone else is coming up,

and I eye the tree again. Sure looks like a big home for just two guys. Well, two guys and a random baby. I feel like I'm missing part of the story.

No surprise since no one speaks my language.

The newcomer gives me a tired smile and says something to K'thar, then heads back down into the tree.

K'thar moves back toward me, and I guess we're alone again. Well, except for the baby we inherited. I keep holding the little guy, and a weird thought occurs to me. Is the kid being left with us because...because it belongs to K'thar? But that can't be. He resonated to *me*.

I'm ashamed to say I feel a stab of irrational jealousy for a brief moment. It's silly. The khui in my chest tells me the truth. It's that same khui that's making me feel jealous over a guy I met earlier today.

In my heart I know I'm being ridiculous. If I sit and think logically, I know this isn't his baby. It's been explained quite clearly to me how resonance works and if he resonates to me, he won't resonate to anyone else, ever. Resonance is very much a one-and-done. Now if my hormones could just chill out and realize that, everything will be great.

Except...my hormones really aren't that great at chilling out. K'thar takes the baby from me and begins to rock him, soothing him in the way that someone fairly experienced in such things would. The baby fusses for a bit and K'thar makes soft clucking noises with his tongue, then produces an enormous egg from one of the baskets propped up against the base of the tree. He carefully punctures a hole in the top of the egg and offers it to the baby like it's a bottle. I'm a little unnerved to see the little guy take it in his hands and suck the contents out, but if there's no mom around, I guess they don't have a lot of feeding options.

If there's no mom in the picture, that also explains why it's a couple of guys taking care of a baby. I shouldn't criticize, because the baby looks fat and healthy and K'thar smiles down at him with a fondness that makes my ovaries do another flip.

“What’s his name?” I ask softly.

K’tar glances up at me, curiosity in his eyes.

I point at him. “K’tar.” Then myself. “Lauren.” Then I point at the baby.

Recognition dawns on his face. He gives the child a jiggle and then sits him up, patting his back. Like any other baby, the little guy squirms and then belches. “Z’hren,” K’tar tells me. It’s so slurred together and said so quickly that I’m sure I won’t be able to pronounce it right, but I try anyhow, and earn a pleased nod from K’tar.

Little Z’hren waves a fist at K’tar, smacking him in the jaw and babbling. K’tar immediately reaches into a basket and offers him a little seed pod. The baby sticks it into his mouth and sucks on it, eyes closing sleepily. Is this the jungle version of a pacifier? K’tar offers me one and I take it, because I’m curious. The inside tastes a bit sweet and milky, and it makes my stomach growl.

I’m starving, and I’m just now realizing that I haven’t eaten anything since I was on the icy shore with the others this morning. It feels like a lifetime since that happened, but it’s been less than a day. Jeez.

Less than a day and everything in my world has gone upside down.

Again.

With the baby tucked under one arm, K’tar gets to his feet and moves toward one of the baskets stacked near the hollowed-out bole of the tree. He digs through the baskets, finds the one he wants, and then offers it to me. I take it and peer inside. There are several fist-sized brown nuts of some kind, and K’tar takes one and cracks it open with his teeth, then offers it to me. Inside, the meat is soft and when I dip a finger into it, I realize it tastes like peanut butter.

Amazing.

I pig out on nuts as he rocks the baby to sleep, and by the time Z’hren is passed out, my stomach’s full and I’m licking the last of nut butter off of my fingers, content. I’m given a pod

filled with cool water and I drink it down while K'thar gets to his feet and sets the sleeping baby down in a basket lined with plant leaves and fluff. It's wedged in a hollow between two branches, and he tests it to make sure that it's safe before settling Z'hren in. I want to protest that a basket in the trees is not the safest spot for a baby, but who am I to judge? I'm sitting on a woven platform, after all. I don't know this place like they do, or I'd have dressed a little better for the occasion. I pluck at the heavy leather leggings and my top. I'm grateful to be covered, but with the steamy heat of the jungle, I feel completely slick with heat and the leather isn't helping.

K'thar returns to my side and puts a hand to his mouth, indicating that I should be quiet so as not to wake the baby. I nod.

Of course, then the man pulls out a knife and sits down next to me. "Um," I breathe, doing my best to keep my voice down. "What exactly are we doing with that thing?"

He reaches for my leggings and angles the knife as if he's going to cut.

I slap his hand. "No," I whisper. "Bad idea. I need pants. Just because you're naked doesn't mean I want to be." Well, he's not completely naked. He's wearing a leaf thong of some kind. I always thought something like that would look ridiculous, but he's so big and brawny that he works it really, really well.

"L'ren," he says, and there's patience in his voice.

"K'thar," I say back, mimicking his patient tone. "No."

He gives me a low growl as if telling me to stop it, and reaches for my pants leg again. When I slap at his hand once more, he snags it in his grip and then uses another hand to continue cutting. Well, fuck. You can't get into a slap-fight with a four-armed guy. I squirm, quietly protesting as he continues to cut up the leg of my pants, destroying hand-stitched leather seams. "Seriously? What are you doing?" I hiss at him. "I don't want to be naked."

The big alien ignores my angry words and continues to massacre my pants. He stops close to my waist, and a lot of

my panic subsides when he does. At least he's not stripping me naked. When he begins to cut across, I realize he's making me shorts instead of pants. Oh. Well, that makes sense. My skin immediately feels cooler and I breathe a deep sigh of relief when the heavy, sweaty leather falls away. Definitely much nicer.

K'thar pats my knee when he's done and releases my hands. "I know," I tell him. "Thank you. That was thoughtful of you." All communication issues aside, he's trying to help me. And he's right about the shorts being a lot cooler. They're cut to the top of my thigh, and while I'm not really into the whole "booty short" look, it's not like there's fashion police on this island. No one can see my cellulite but him and his buddy and the baby. I guess that's okay.

And Marisol, if we ever find her. God. I feel overwhelmed instantly. Have I abandoned her? Is she gone? Could I have done more to try and find her? I press my hands to my forehead, frustrated to tears. I'm so tired and I feel like I've failed her.

"L'ren?" K'thar touches my arm, stroking it gently.

I lift my head to look over at him. His khui-bright eyes glow in the darkness, and other than the glowing moss, it's the only light in the very dark jungle. I can't look for her tonight, no matter how much I might want to.

Tomorrow, then. I still feel like the world's worst jerk, but even I know it's not smart to wander down there at night, not with all the weird noises starting to surface in the jungle below.

"I'm okay," I whisper to him. "Just a little overwhelmed."

Wordlessly, he hands me the long lengths of leather he's cut off of my pants and gestures at my top. Right. I can make a top out of all this leather. I'll do that tomorrow.

I nod again. "Thank you."

He grunts acknowledgment of my words and then gestures, indicating I should wait here, and walks to the edge of the platform. I'm not entirely surprised when he leaps off, because

that seems typical of him. I don't know where he's going, though. He returns a brief moment later with armfuls of long, leafy fronds and then begins to stack them neatly, making a bed. Ah. Well, that makes sense, too. Even though the inside of the tree looks like it's got several hollowed-out ledges and cubbies that would probably make good "nests," it's too hot to sleep inside. Out here at least there's a breeze.

He settles onto the leaves and then lies down, propping up on an elbow and watching me expectantly.

Okay, so what am I supposed to do? Make my own bed? I hesitate, then shrug. When in Rome and all that. I turn and before I can step away, he grabs my ankle and shakes his head, indicating I should lie down with him.

Ah.

So he made a bed for both of us. "Gee, you shouldn't have," I murmur dryly. Part of me likes the idea, because while this platform is a good size, it's also not so big that I'm not in danger of rolling off the side in my sleep. At the same time... my cootie's going crazy. I know if I lie down with him, he's going to assume I want to have sex with him. And while my body might be screaming yes, my head is firmly in the "no" camp right now. I barely know the guy. I'm not ready to jump that far ahead just yet.

Even just thinking about sex makes my cootie purr even faster, though. It's so loud that I know he can hear it, and I can hear his responding. Gosh, this is awkward.

"L'ren." He pats the bed again.

I don't know what to do. Of course, my mind is spinning a mile a minute. What happens if I don't lie down with him? Is he going to drag me there and force me to sleep with him? Then again, what's to stop him from bearing me to the ground and having his way with me anyhow? He's much, much stronger than me and the fight over my leggings showed me I don't have a chance of standing up to him if he wanted to push things. I shiver at the thought, worried.

He tilts his head, watching me, and the expression on his face isn't a cruel one, or a frightening one. He looks a little tired—like me—and a little frustrated. Again, like me. I'm going to have to trust at some point, I guess. After another moment of hesitation, I move closer and lie down next to him. Not super close, of course. I leave at least a foot between us and keep to the edge of the leaves. Hopefully that will give him the hint.

K'thar grunts and immediately pulls me against his side, burying his face against my neck.

So much for hints.

He nuzzles my neck, rubbing his skin against mine. I have to admit it feels pretty good...and a little terrifying at the same time. "No," I say softly to him and shake my head. "No."

He studies my face for a moment, and then nods, easing his grip on me and lying back. He closes his eyes and I breathe an enormous sigh of relief.

No rape. Thank god.

I close my eyes and relax...and carefully scoot back to the edge of the leaves again, just in case.

K'thar growls low in his throat and pulls me back against him, one hand anchoring at my waist and keeping me pinned at his side. All right, then. I might be hardheaded but I can take the hint. We get to snuggle despite the heat of the evening. I pat his hand in acknowledgement and close my eyes once more, determined to do my best to sleep.

It's surprisingly easy to drift off, despite K'thar's nearness. Or heck, maybe it's because of it. I don't even know. All I know is when he slides an arm under my head and pulls me against him, I decide there are worse things than having him as a pillow and keep my eyes closed. His hand remains locked around my waist, and I feel his thumb stroke the sensitive skin of my stomach. I ignore that, too. Truth is, he's rather nice to lie against. I feel a little warm, but not overly so. Instead, I feel safe. Protected. Like nothing's going to happen to me because K'thar's got me. I like that a lot more than I should.

Then, his hand slides over the center of my belly.

Little curls of excitement flare through my body. It's silly, but it makes things feel a bit like we're teenagers trying to make out without anyone noticing. I could push his hand away, give him another firm no. But I'm so relaxed and he's so nice to lie against that I let it slide. If I'm honest with myself, I'm curious if he's going anywhere with this.

I get my answer a few moments later, when his fingers dip into the waistband of my shorts and then he's brushing his fingers over my mound.

Well, that escalated quickly.

I bite back my gasp of surprise. He gives a little playful chuckle under his breath, and when I put my hand on his wrist, he stops. He won't go any further if I push him away. He knows he's pushing the limits.

And I'm pretty sure I'm a terrible person because for a brief, shining moment, I don't want to push his hand away. My cootie's humming, but more than that, I'm attracted to his playfulness, his strength. I haven't been touched in so long that I'm tempted to see where things go. I don't want sex. He knows I don't want sex. But...this isn't really sex, is it? It's just touching. Exploring. Petting.

God, I *love* to be petted.

Affection isn't something I thought I'd feel again, oddly enough. Ever since we've landed on this planet, one thing after another has been thrown at us. I've had to be strong and calm. I've taken Marisol under my wing and tried to be a leader and an example for the others when they were feeling afraid. There's enough panic in a scary situation, I've always reasoned, and the best way to get through one is to help. I knew at some point my cootie would kick in, but I thought I had a long, long time to go.

Now, I'm being confronted by the fact that my cootie's interested and it's reminding me that I like to be touched. I've had boyfriends in the past, but I've never had sex. It was never the right time, or he was never the right guy. Gosh, I am so tired of being level-headed. For once, I want to get my freak on. I want to know what it's going to be like if he touches me

and I let him. For a moment, I want to release control and let someone else handle things. I want to be impetuous and wild and not think about tomorrow.

Not too impetuous, of course.

But maybe just a little.

I ease my grip on his wrist with a little sigh, giving him silent permission.

My name is a whisper on his lips as he pushes his hand a little lower. He touches the curls of my sex, stroking them and petting them. I realize that they must be different to him, because when I saw him naked—in the quick glimpse that I had—he was all bare blue skin. I don't remember seeing any body hair, actually.

I hope he doesn't find mine offensive.

"L'ren," he murmurs again, his breath hot against my brow. I'm tiny, pressed up against his massive, muscular body, I realize. I probably weigh half of what he does and I know I'm a good foot smaller than him. I feel dainty and petite in his arms, and it's a rather delicious feeling. My cootie purrs with pleasure and I relax against him, even though my heart is racing with anticipation.

How far are we going to take this, I wonder? Why does that make me so very breathless?

K'thar rubs one large finger up and down the part of my folds, leaving me gasping with want. He doesn't explore deeper, just moves that finger back and forth, stroking me over and over and making me crazy with need. I can feel how wet I'm getting just at that small touch, and my cootie's going wild in my chest. His is loud, too, but he doesn't seem to be paying a lick of attention to it—his focus is entirely on me. I can feel his mouth pressed against my hair, his grip tight on my waist, but the only thing he moves is his hand.

Stroking me.

Just when I'm ready to go mad and push his hand to the right spot, he pushes just a little deeper, stroking between my folds and slicking through their wetness. I whimper and hold tight to

him, clinging to his bicep as he strokes me, exploring my folds and murmuring my name ever so softly. His hand feels enormous as he touches me, and when he grazes the entrance to my core with one fingertip, it takes everything I have not to bear down against him and have him take me like that.

But then he moves his hand away again and continues his maddening caresses.

I nearly explode when he brushes up against my clit. I've never felt anything so intense. So good. The breath sobs out of my throat, and I can feel him stiffen next to me. It's almost like he's surprised. Has he never touched a woman before? Or is human anatomy different? It doesn't matter, because he continues touching me, rubbing one large finger back and forth against the little nub of sensitive flesh and making me writhe against him. The breath seems to leave my lungs.

He gives this deep, sexy chuckle and then teases my clit again, and I clamp down on his hand, gasping as I hit my release. That was...fast. And intense. I've never come so hard, not even on my own. It feels like my body has tensed into this big knot that slowly, pleurably unravels as I come and come and come.

By the time I catch my breath, I realize what I've done. Oh man. So much for holding my ground and not letting a stranger touch me. Of course, K'thar doesn't feel like a stranger. I know some of that is just the cootie talking, but I feel like I've known him for a very long time. He feels familiar to me. Comfortable.

And his hand on my pussy? Kind of feels like it belongs there. Which is also messed up.

I let out another soft little sigh that turns into a yawn. I'm a little scandalized by what just happened, but I also feel really good. Like it was the perfect thing I needed after a stressful day, which is also ridiculous. Some of the tension starts to return as I lie next to K'thar, waiting to see what happens next. Is he going to demand reciprocation? Push for us to have sex? Move his hand off of my pussy so I can sleep?

He does none of these things, though. He just nuzzles at my hair like he's pleased and relaxes against me. I furtively try to pull his hand away since he's still cupping me between my legs, but he only growls low in a warning and ignores me.

Well, all right, then. I wait a moment or two longer, unsure, and then relax, little by little. Exhaustion overtakes me and I lean in against him until my body is pressed against his. We'll talk about his possessiveness in the morning.

For now, I'm too tired to protest.

K'THAR

I have never been so pleased in all of my days. After the death of the Great Smoking Mountain, I thought mine would be a joyless existence, to hunt and care for those that were left until we disappeared, one by one. That there would be nothing but more sadness and frustration in my life. But now? With my mate next to me, her pleasure-scent covering my hands and her soft body curled against mine?

There is hope once more. And there is joy.

With a mate, my tribe has a chance. It will be difficult, of course, to rebuild to what we once were, but with a resonance female at my side, at least we have a chance. Before, we had none.

She is not yet ready to mate, though. That is all right. As long as she lets me hold her and touch her, I am content to wait until her arms open up to welcome me.

It will not be long, I think. L'ren sleeps heavily against me, her breathing steady. My hand remains on the curls of her cunt, and I want to touch her again, give her more pleasure, watch her twist in my arms with her need and hear the little pleading sounds she makes. That will wake her, though, and she needs her rest. I will wait until morning.

But until then, I will hold her.



I DO NOT GET until morning, of course. Z'hren wails in his basket and wants to be fed before dawn. It is my turn to tend to him, so I reluctantly leave my mate nestled in the leaves and care for the kit. Once he is fed and burped, he wants to play, and so I let him sit in my lap while I weave leaves together for a new loincloth, then work on one for my mate. The leather she wears will be damp and hot in this heat. Leaves are much cooler and can be discarded when needed. I will have to teach her how, because it is clear she does not know how to take care of herself. I do not mind, though. I look forward to such things.

Just as dawn begins to lighten the skies, the mountain lets out an angry grumble. The ground shakes and the leaves of the trees rustle wildly. I move to my mate's side and with the kit under one arm, I hold her close, ensuring that she will not fall off the platform.

L'ren gasps and clings to me, her eyes wide with fear.

"It will not last long," I promise her. "It shakes to let us know it is mad and then it will eventually stop." I hope. As long as it does not come with smoke and liquid fire, it will be all right. Most of them do not.

"S'rthqk?" She says, worried. "Shdwi gtdwn frmtris?"

The shivering of the world stops, and just like that, everything is quiet once more. Nothing calls from the trees and even the leaves that normally rustle in the breeze are utterly silent.

"It is done," I tell my mate and get to my feet and offer her a hand. "Come. We will get you something to eat."

"Bb hokay?" She repeats this and plays with Z'hren's little hand, and I realize she is asking after him.

"He is used to the earthshakes," I tell her. "Probably more used to it than I am. They have been more and more frequent." I worry they have something to do with the fact that the jungle grows steamier by the day, but I can only worry over that

which I can control. I am pleased that she worries over the kit, though. She will make a fine mother to our young.

L'ren looks upset, so I do my best to distract her by offering her the loincloth I have woven for her this morning. To my surprise, her face colors the pinkish shade again. The look she gives me is shy, though, and her voice grows soft. When her khui begins to sing, I realize she is thinking of last night and how I touched her.

And then I cannot stop grinning, because I plan on doing so again tonight, and every night for the rest of our lives.

She makes a gesture with her hands and indicates I should turn around. Her insistence is puzzling but I do as she asks. As my back is turned, she takes off her leathers, and I wonder at her people. They do not camouflage, but do they cover their pink bodies in heavy, sweaty hides like she does? Or is this strange habit L'ren's only? It makes no sense. She calls my name and I turn around, pleased to see that she is wearing the loincloth I've woven for her. It hangs loose on her hips and I move forward and pull at two of the fronds to tighten it so it holds properly. "You look very fine, my mate." I do not point out that she could get rid of the leather wrapped around her torso. She will in her own time.

"Fl nkkid!" L'ren smiles at me and then pats at her chest. "Cn mk onfr mitop?"

One to cover her teats? "Of course." I am happy she asks.

She takes the kit from my arms and keeps him busy while I gather more leaves and weave them quickly into a flat, square surface to cover her front and weave a second smaller chain to loop around her neck. I offer it to her, but she only holds the kit and bounces him, frowning at me.

"Issa plaesmat? Nottatop?"

"Clothing," I tell her. "For your teats." And I gesture how she should put it on.

She makes a humming noise in her throat, clearly undecided, but then hands me Z'hren and puts it on, slipping off the length of leather once the leaves have settled over her swollen

teats. Then, she pulls her long mane forward and pats it in place atop them, and seems satisfied.

“Hungry?” I ask, miming food. I know she must be. At her eager nod, I gesture that we should descend lower in the tree, through the hollow.

Her movements are uncertain, but L’reu follows me down through the tree until we reach the lowest level. Even though it is still a good distance off the ground, the platform is widest here. This is where most of the stored food is kept, and where N’dek has been living ever since his leg was hurt.

He is here this morning, still lying on his mat of wilted leaves, staring off into the jungle. Fat One sits on the lip of a nearby basket, waiting to be fed. He squawks and flutters his wings, indignant at his hunger. The noise rouses N’dek and he glances over when I descend with Z’hren, and then sits upright, eyes wide, when he spots L’reu.

She gasps at the sight of him and moves behind me again. I automatically camouflage at her alarm, and the kit in my arms camouflages as well.

“How are you this day, my brother?” I ask my tribesmate as I set Z’hren down on the leaves next to him. I move to the baskets nearby. They have been looking rather flat lately, and I worry we are running out of food. The island is much smaller now with the death of the Great Smoking Mountain, and the game has been scarcer, nuts and eggs not as plentiful. With only myself and J’shel able to go hunting, there are long periods where we do not have the time to gather anything, and it has taken a toll on our supplies. I cannot complain, though. Not to N’dek, who has lost all of his leg below the knee. I am healthy and whole, and I have a mate. Truly, I am the luckiest of males.

My female clings to my side, her hand stealing into one of mine for reassurance. I give her a reassuring look and then open the lid on one of the baskets. Nearly empty, the only contents a half-rotten bit of fruit. I fish it out and offer it to Fat One, who snatches it from my fingers with an indignant trill and then flutters over to L’reu’s shoulder to roost.

She gives a happy little laugh, and her expression is clearly pleased at her new companion. Her tight grip on my hand eases and I relax, glancing over at N'dek before opening the next basket. "J'shel leave early this morning?"

N'dek nods slowly, his eyes wide. He cannot stop staring at my female, and I feel a possessive urge to step in front of her and protect her from his gaze. "He babbled about you and a female but...I thought he was talking nonsense to cheer me up. You know how he loves to make up stories."

I do. J'shel has tried his hardest to break N'dek from his depression, spending endless hours telling him wild tales to intrigue him...or at the very least, make him smile. He will be pleased that N'dek has shown interest in something this day, even if it is my mate. Of course he is interested, I reason. All hope for a mate for all of us left the day the Great Smoking Mountain died, along with most of the tribe and the island itself.

Nearly everything died that day. I think of the earthquake from this morning and my mouth flattens. It cannot happen again. Small shakes are nothing. They have always happened. We will not have another mountain death. There is no mountain left...is there?

I think of the smoke pouring into the sea at the far end of the land and frown to myself. I cannot worry about such things. I must feed L'ren and Z'hren. I will worry about the mountain later.

"What is her name?" N'dek asks in a soft voice. "Where did she come from? And...what is wrong with her camouflage?"

I chuckle because he has spoken more in this day than he has in the last turn of the moon. "She is mine, N'dek. We have resonated."

"I have ears," he says dryly. "I know this. But...how did she get here? Are there more like her?" Z'hren babbles and grabs at N'dek's braids, and the hunter absently picks the kit up, sitting upright in his bed. "I do not understand how she came to be here."

“Nor do I. Until she learns to speak our language, we will not know who she is or where her people are.”

“Another island, perhaps? With other clans? Ones that weren’t destroyed by the mountain’s death?” He looks hopeful.

“If that is the case, then it is a strange place where they do not need camouflage to protect themselves.”

He grunts. “It does seem odd.”

As if she realizes she is the center of our conversation, my mate steps forward with the nightflyer still perched on her shoulder and smiles at N’dek. “Hi’im L’ren,” she tells him, patting her chest.

N’dek looks at me, eyes narrowed. “Is she trying to tell me something?”

“Her name.”

“Oh. Of course.” He nods at her and touches his own chest. “N’dek.”

Her face screws up and she looks at me helplessly, then tries to say his name. “Naaaahdeckkkk.”

The look on N’dek’s face is pained, but he nods politely.

“Their language is strange,” I admit to him. “She cannot say my name either.”

“She is unusual looking,” he says after a moment, and when she sits down next to him, he flashes camo, as if alarmed. “Her hands are deformed.”

“I think that is how her people are. She uses all of her fingers, even the extra ones.” I find a basket that contains two eggs and a handful of sweet nuts. My stomach hurts at the sight, but I can forage for enough to fill my belly. My mate and the kit must be fed. I take an egg out of the basket, crack the top and offer it to little Z’hren. When the kit begins to eat, I kneel next to my mate and offer her the rest of the basket. “Eat, my heart. You need your strength.”

L’ren takes the basket from me and I sit down next to her. She frowns at the egg and offers it back to me.

“For you,” I tell her, gently nudging it back toward her. I am hungry—we all are—but it can wait.

“Perhaps her kind do not eat eggs,” N’dek suggests. He is eyeing the food with avid eyes himself.

When she offers it to N’dek instead of keeping it, he looks to me as if asking permission. I nod at him. While he cannot hunt for himself, I will ensure that he is fed. Perhaps soon he will be out of this sad, lonely state over the loss of his leg and he will realize he can still do much good for our tribe, however small we might be in number. He takes it immediately and cracks it, sucking down the contents quickly. Z’hren giggles, clutching his own egg, and L’ren reaches over to tickle him, smiling.

I nudge the basket toward her again. “Eat,” I say again.

“Eat,” she agrees, taking one of the nuts and cracking it like I showed her. She eats one and then offers another to me, and a third to N’dek. I crack mine and offer it back to her, but N’dek eats his. He must be hungrier than he has let on...which means there is even less in the supplies than I thought.

Fat One leans over L’ren’s shoulder and tries to snatch the contents of one of her nuts. I hiss at him and try to make him leave, but he only snaps at my fingers. “Spoiled flyer,” I mutter.

L’ren chuckles and offers the flyer a bit of her food, and I sigh inwardly. She does not realize how much the pet is fed already. I cannot fault her kind heart, though.

She finishes eating and licks her fingers, and as I watch her, my khui begins to sing. N’dek clears his throat and plucks the empty eggshell from Z’hren’s tiny fists, doing his best not to draw attention to us. “If you wish to take her out into the jungle with you, I can watch the little one,” he tells me.

I am surprised. It is the first time he has volunteered to help out with Z’hren since his accident. “If you wish. We will not go far.”

“Go as far as you like,” he says in a strange, mild voice.

I know what he is thinking—that we need privacy to mate. “I will take her gathering, nothing more.”

“Do as you wish. I will handle the little one.” He pauses and then glances over at me. “J’shel said there was another female with her? That R’jaal took her? Did they resonate?”

“They had not when I left.”

His eyes gleam with interest. “That is very good to hear.”

LAUREN

K’tar’s tribe seems very...small. I don’t see anyone else as we leave, and that seems odd to me. The big, hollowed-out tree seems like it could hold a lot more people, as there are platforms and platforms that go all the way up the enormous tree. They might even go all the way back up the canopy and it seems like a lot of space for three guys and a baby. Something isn’t adding up. Have the others gone out? Like the other tribe did when they needed to do some long-distance hunting? Or is there something else going on?

We head deeper into the forest, and I make sure to keep a hand on K’tar’s waist at all times. He’s got a long, flicking tail, but it seems weird to grab that, so I opt for his leafy loincloth instead. Of course, then I’m afraid he’s going to surge ahead and I’ll accidentally rip it off of him.

Well, okay, so I’m not really afraid of that. I’m more curious what would happen if such a scenario did occur, and I’m ashamed of myself for all the lurid thoughts running through my mind. It seems my cootie has turned me into an absolutely rabid hornball because I’m already thinking about tonight and if he’s going to touch me again.

The pudgy little hairless bird accompanies us, riding on K’tar’s shoulder and chirping in his ear. He ignores it for the most part, occasionally plucking a large beetle-type bug off of a leaf and handing it to his buddy. I think it’s cute. I guess I’m a sucker for a guy with a soft spot for animals.

As we walk deeper into the jungle, K'thar points at objects and speaks. It takes me a moment to realize he's trying to teach me their language. I do my best to repeat after him, but I'll be the first to admit I'm a terrible student. I keep getting distracted. Not just by our surroundings, or the fat bird-thing that perches on his shoulder, but the movements of his body as he strides ever so slightly ahead of me.

Is it weird that I'm getting turned on by a guy with four arms and skin that camouflages? I feel like I should blame my cootie, but it's not going to affect my thoughts, is it? Because I keep thinking about him with the baby and how he grinned when it would laugh at him. At how he absently tends to the bird on his shoulder and carefully picks me up when the terrain gets rocky and would hurt my bare feet. He's thoughtful and he's kind. I don't know if Lo-cootie cares about that, but Lo-human finds it pretty sexy.

He cocks his head, and for a moment, I worry he can hear my thoughts. The bird-thing on his shoulder—Kki, whose name I really can't pronounce—chirps, and he reaches up and puts a finger against the thing's muzzle and it goes silent.

I go quiet as well, waiting.

K'thar pulls Kki off his shoulder and transfers him onto mine. The little claws dig into my skin and I wince, but give him a curious look. He puts the finger to his lips again, and then pulls me nearer to the closest tree. When he's satisfied with where I'm standing, he drops his basket, pulls out a knife that looks as if it's made from a wedge of flint and grins at me. That's the only warning I get before he camouflages to the same color as the shadowy leaf patterns on the ground and in the next moment, his leaf loincloth drops. He stalks away, naked, and my eyes cross from trying to follow him. All I can make out are shadow-mottled buns and the flex of his arms before he disappears into the greenery.

I...guess he's hunting? I pick up his discarded loincloth and the basket he left behind. Kki nudges at my cheek, as if begging for treats, and I wish I had something to give him. I scratch his head instead, and he closes his eyes, clearly enjoying the touch.

Distracted, I jump when the bushes a short distance away rustle wildly. Kki gives an alarmed squawk of surprise, flapping his wings and hissing in my ear. I yelp again as the thing's claws tear into my skin and he climbs atop my head, digging into my hair as he tries to find purchase. Even though he has wings, he doesn't seem to be big on flying, preferring to walk all over me. Greaaat. I'm a bird owner, though. I know that if I calm down he'll calm as well, so I do my best to go still and hope that the thing crashing through the bushes a short distance away wasn't a predator.

"L'ren," a voice says to my side, and I jump again. This time, Kki coos and flutters back to K'thar's shoulder, which is just now turning back to its normal blue shade. He's standing to the left of me, slowly blending back into his regular color and as he does, I can make out every rippling muscle.

"You startled me," I tell him, all breathless. I can't help but look down, since he's without a loincloth and I feel a little bolder after what happened between us last night. Or maybe I've just decided to give in to my inner ho. Whatever it is, I stare. A lot.

He's definitely hairless. And he's definitely equipped similarly to human men in that he's got a penis and balls. But that's about where the similarities end, because he's got way bigger equipment than I'm pretty sure any human male does. It's long and thick and rests against his thigh. His sac is full and a darker shade of blue than the rest of his skin, and he's got a strange protrusion just above his cock that makes me wonder if I'm not seeing things. It looks just like...well, just like a particular knob on my favorite vibrator.

It does explain why all the other girls are so damn happy and smiley to be stranded here, though. No one's complaining about resonance because they're getting boned by the gold standard in dicks.

Annnnd I'm staring. Shit.

I jerk my gaze up to his and give him a bright smile, noticing for the first time that he's panting, sheened in a light coating of sweat that makes his muscles gleam, and he's holding a rather

large lizard...thing in one hand. The thing drips blood onto the leaves from a cut in its belly and I realize K'thar's spattered in blood as well.

"Um...did you kill it?" I ask, feeling all breathless. "That was a stupid question, wasn't it? Of course it's dead." I'm all distracted, my cootie throbbing so hard it feels like the thing's going to tap-dance its way out of my chest.

He just gazes at me, heat in his eyes, and I can feel my skin prickling with awareness. I can't help but glance down and—

Yep. He's hard. And bigger. And Jesus, I can't help but pay attention to that. There's no getting around the fact that he's enormous. Of course he is. The guy's twice the size of me, but did he have to be twice the size *everywhere*? I swallow hard, feeling flushed.

Kki squawks and taps his beak on K'thar's cheek.

The spell is broken. Well, sort of. I squeeze my thighs tightly together and hug his basket to my chest, very aware that he's naked and I'm wearing what equates to a fern thong. "Are you okay?" When he just continues to stare at me, I grab a leaf from a nearby plant and then approach him, dabbing at the blood spattering his skin. "Tell me this isn't your blood."

K'thar glances down at his chest, where my leaf is swiping at his skin. Oh gosh, we're standing awfully close together. Any closer and I'd be introducing his Mr. Happy to my belly. He realizes what I'm doing and says something, then gestures at the dead lizard in his hand. I assume it means "All good" because he looks relaxed.

He gestures that I should follow him, and I do, keeping a careful step or two behind him. It's getting harder and harder not to stare at his butt, especially now that it's naked and he seems to not care. Either that or maybe he wants me to admire it? Surely he knows it's some prime ass, though.

Surely. Mine feels positively doughy in comparison.

A horrible thought occurs to me. Next to him I'm short, pasty, and distinctly un-muscular. I only have two arms. Does he think I'm...unattractive? Gross?

I shouldn't care, but the thought is a rather distressing one. I'm getting more and more accustomed to the thought of a permanent mate with every hour, but I'd like for him to be attracted to me because I'm me, and not just because his cootie demands it.

He kneels down at the base of one of the large trees and drops his kill, then gestures. "Chkat."

I peer over his shoulder and see what looks like a gigantic hollowed-out nest filled with broken bits of leaves and twigs. Large oblong eggs are clustered together and I realize this must be where they get the eggs from. "Oh. Are we gathering these?" I point at them. "Eggs? Food?"

He takes one and offers it to me, gesturing that I should eat.

"Oh no, not me." I put up a hand, shaking my head. There's something about sucking down a warm, raw egg that makes my stomach turn. I know it's a good source of food, but I also know I'm not quite that hungry just yet. He pushes it toward me and I nudge it back toward him. "That one's all you."

He sits down and cracks the top of the egg, then throws his head back and sucks it down with big, hungry gulps. It takes him no time at all to finish it and he closes his eyes, sighing heavily. Jeez, he must have been starving—

I pause, studying him. Every time I turn around he's offering me food, but this is the first time I've seen him eat since I met him. I think back to the meal earlier today with the nuts. He refused the eggs, and when I offered one to his friend, I thought he seemed a little over-eager. And when I gave K'thar one of the nuts, he cracked it open for me and handed it back.

Are they...are they starving?

Is that why he was so excited to get this kill? "Are you hungry?" I ask him, picking up another one of the eggs and offering it up to him.

He studies it for a long moment and then shakes his head, taking the basket from my hands and filling it with the eggs. I'm pretty sure I hear his stomach growl.

I knew it. Son of a bitch is rationing. I poke his side. “I heard that.”

K'thar gives me a sheepish look. He pauses and holds up an egg. “Z'hren.” He touches the next one. “Z'hren nakt.” Then the next. “Z'hren nakt nakt.”

Ah. He's saving these for the baby. I bet “nakt” is alien for tomorrow. He's definitely storing food because he worries there won't be enough. I put my hand on his wrist and before he can place another egg into the basket, I steer it toward him. “K'thar,” I say gently. “Not Z'hren, K'thar. You're no good to anyone if you starve to death. And I can't have you dying on me. Not when we're supposed to be mated, remember?” Now that I look at him, I see the signs of hunger. Did I think his muscles were extremely well-defined? It's because he's got no fat left for his body to use. I can see his ribs, and his belly is so flat that it makes me worry.

I don't remember the other tribe starving. Ironic that we're surrounded by so much greenery and yet there's not enough to eat. Seems like there's something wrong with that. Maybe the volcano or the earthquakes are scaring away all the game. I wonder how long it's been since the thing erupted.

And how long it'll be before it blows again. I remember the wall of thick steam bubbling from one end of the island and shudder. “This place is warm, but it's kind of a death trap, if you ask me,” I tell him.

He offers me the egg again. I shake my head and when he insists on pressing it into my hand, I crack the top with my knuckle and then hold it back out to him.

K'thar gives me an exasperated look, as if saying *look what you did*, but he drains the contents and rubs his mouth with the back of one hand. He studies me for a long moment and then pulls me close, burying his face against my neck.

It's a hug. Kinda.

It's sweet.

It's also really, really making me aware that we're both pretty naked. And my woven bib of a top isn't doing much to hide

the fact that my nipples are hard at that small touch.

I look down and I see I'm not the only one affected. I hold out his loincloth. "I think you forgot this."

K'thar looks down at it, then throws back his head and laughs.

K'THAR

She's clever, my L'ren.

I teach her words as we bring our kill and the eggs back to camp. She remembers more of them than I thought, and this makes me proud. I want so badly to have a conversation with her, to find out more about her and her people. To learn what she likes. To hear more of her laughter, see her smiles.

I want to know everything about her.

We take our haul back to the camp, even though we haven't gone very far. The sviket was a lucky find, and the nest luckier still. The meat will feed us well this night and the eggs will ensure that Z'hren will not starve. And my clever L'ren realized I was not eating and insisted that I have a second egg. Even now, I feel stronger after my meal, and it is no chore to dig a pit a short distance away from the tree and start a small fire. Only a small one, of course, and then I let it burn down until it is mere coals, and layer it with leaves. I skin and gut the carcass, cover it with more leaves, and then leave the pit to smoke for many hours. By the time it will be ready, the suns will be below the horizon and the day over. Until then, there is more to do.

So I take L'ren back into the jungle with me. This time, we go after our true goal, the thick, meaty ground nuts. It is easy to

get sick of their taste during times of plenty, but lately they have been the only food that is easily findable. I show her what to look for, and we spend the afternoon gathering nuts and teaching her my words. Even though speaking to each other is proving to be a challenge, I enjoy her company and I love nothing more than making her laugh with delight.

We pause for a small meal of nuts and fresh water when we make it to the stream. I wash quickly, getting rid of dirt and blood off of my skin, and I notice that my mate tries to wash with her clothing on. She is strangely shy, my L'ren. I do not understand it, but then again, I do not understand many things about her. I enjoy the thought of learning all that I can, though.

L'ren sits on the edge of the water and lies back on the bank, closing her eyes and sighing heavily.

"Tired?" I ask, though I know she will not understand me.

She opens her eyes and gives me a pensive smile. "Jsthkn." She studies the basket of nuts next to her and picks one up, holding it up for my gaze. "L'ren," she says after a moment, and then sets it down on the ground. She puts another one next to it. "L'ren, K'thar," she says, pointing at first the original nut, and then the new one. She adds a third, smaller nut. "Z'hren." And another. "J..." She looks at me, waiting.

"J'shel," I tell her, pointing at the new nut. I see where she is going with this. It is a naming game of some kind. I add another nut and place it next to J'shel. "N'dek."

She nods, excitement in her eyes, and picks up another nut. "Mrsl."

"No, that is all of us," I say. "Unless you want to count Fat One." I pat the nightflyer, who has his claws dug into my shoulder.

She shakes her head and holds the nut up again, going down the list of names and pointing at each one. Then she gestures at the one in her hand. "Mrsl." She takes it and puts it next to "her" nut. "L'ren. Mrsl." She moves the L'ren nut away and places a new one by it. "L'ren. K'thar." Then she gestures at the leftover nut. "Mrsl?" There is a question in her voice.

Realization dawns. I point at the leftover. “Is this the human female that was with you?”

Her brow furrows and she studies me, trying to understand.

“Female,” I point out, then gesture at my chest. “Teats. Kit.”

“Yes,” she says excitedly in my tongue. “K’tar, yes!” She makes the same gestures with the nuts again. L’reu with Mrsl. L’reu then K’tar. “Mrsl?” she asks, tapping the leftover once more. “Mrsl no?”

I see the worry on her face. “Mrsl yes. She is alive. She went with R’jaal.”

“R’jaal?”

I pick up another nut. “R’jaal. He is of the clan Tall Horn.” I take the cluster of nuts that represent my tribe. “This is clan Strong Arm.” I grab a few of the new nuts and place the one that represents R’jaal with them. “This is Tall Horn. R’jaal. T’chai. M’tok. S’bren. And your friend, Mrsl.”

Her eyes get wide. She points at the cluster. “S’nudder grp ppl?”

“Tall Horn,” I tell her again. Then I take another cluster and use them to represent Shadowed Cat, on the far end of the island. “I’rec. O’tek. A’tam. U’dron. That is all that is left of Shadowed Cat. Our people are no longer many.” I think of the great gatherings when I was a kit, of dozens of people gathered to share food, to compete in games, and to visit family. I think of the proving games, when males would go out into the jungle to work together and bring down a skylaw with no weapons but their bare hands.

I was in my own proving game when the Great Smoking Mountain died. All of us that are left were in the proving game. It was only the fact that we were on this side of the island that kept us alive. The rest of the land sank with the Great Smoking Mountain and took with it almost all of our people.

My jaw clenches with the grief of that time. I study the nuts before us. So few and there were once so many of us. Even now, our hunting territory is but a tiny slice of what it used to

be. I remember days of travel to reach the gathering grounds. Now, I can cross all of the territory to Shadowed Cat's lands with a day of travel.

It does not seem right.

A snuffle catches my attention. I look up and see that my mate is weeping, swiping tears from her cheeks.

"What is it?" I ask her, reaching out to caress her jaw. "Why do you cry?"

"Mrsl," she says, lip trembling. "Mrsl nnt ded. Shsalive." She clasps my hand in hers and gives me a pleading look. "Hft tk mi tuhr."

"What is it you want, my mate?" I need to concentrate on her words, but she holds my hand dangerously close to her swollen teats and it distracts me.

She repeats herself, and when I shake my head again, she looks down at the nuts and then taps a finger on hers. "L'ren." She picks it up and moves it next to the one for her friend. "L'ren Mrsl."

She wants her friend. Of course she does. If it were me and one of my clan disappeared, I would be unable to rest until I knew he was safe. Is that what this is? Does she feel responsible for her friend? I nod. "I will talk with my clan and see what they think."

Her smile is brilliant and my cock aches at the sight of how lovely she is. How did I ever think her strange? She is delicately made, but I have never seen anything better than her face when she is happy.

Fat One hops down off my arm and L'ren glances down, then giggles. "Fat One eat K'thar."

Sure enough, my fat little nightflyer has eaten the nut representing me. I mock-growl as the flyer waddles toward my mate's "nut," shooining him away.

Some things are not to be touched.



J'SHEL IS ELATED at my find that evening. He has come back with nothing more than a few small shell-walkers, and even those are scarce, he tells me. The waters near the beach grow warm, and the fish have left the shallows. I do not point out that the jungle seems to grow warmer by the day.

There is no point in alarming anyone, not when there is nothing to be done about it.

That evening, we sit together and enjoy our meal. I am happy to see L'ren eats as much meat as any of us, though she wrinkles her nose at the sight of J'shel gnawing on a leg. She grinds up a tender bit of meat between two stones and squeezes the juice from her share into a bowl, and then offers it to little Z'hren, who loves the mush when it is rubbed against his gums.

"I am surprised we did not think of that," N'dek admits.

I am, as well. But we are hunters. We are not mothers. I watch as L'ren plays with the kit. I'chai is gone, dead this past moon. Her mate V'den died not long after they resonated. I remember how lucky I thought V'den to have resonated to the very last female of our kind. That was the last of his luck, and now his kit is here with us, motherless. I watch L'ren as she cradles Z'hren in her lap, feeding him the mush and nibbling on bites of her own food. My clan is so small that all of us matter.

What if her clan is no one but her friend? Her Mrs! She deserves to see her. She deserves to have her at her side. If Mrs! has not resonated to R'jaal, she should come home with us.

I will have to fight him, because he will not want to give her up. But for my mate, I will do anything.

"My L'ren asked about her friend today," I tell J'shel and N'dek.

"She spoke?" J'shel looks surprised, tossing his long braid back over his shoulder. "She learned our words that quickly?"

"She told me in words and gestures. She wants her clan at her side. I must go tomorrow and take her to see Mrs!, her friend."

L'ren looks over at me in surprise. "Mrs!?" There is excitement and hope on her face.

I nod at her. "Tomorrow. I am taking her to the clan of the Tall Horn so she can see her friend. And if she has not resonated to one of their clan—"

"Then you will bring her back to see if she resonates to one of us?" J'shel asks, rubbing his hands eagerly and glancing over at N'dek, who seems equally enthusiastic.

"I will see if she wants to," I warn them. "If she wishes to stay with Tall Horn, I cannot force her to leave."

"Shall I come with you?" J'shel asks. His excitement is palpable. "I can carry Z'hren on my back."

N'dek immediately glances away. I know what he is thinking—that J'shel will get to see the female before him because he has two good legs, while N'dek must remain behind, forgotten. It seems unfair. "No," I say slowly. "They will be suspicious if I bring someone unmated. For now, it will just be myself and my mate."

L'ren looks at me with hopeful eyes, and when she gazes at me like that, I would fight every male on this island just to see her happy.

I hope it does not come to that.

LAUREN

The men talk for a time after dinner, making plans in low voices. I don't follow any of it, but I occasionally hear my name and that of Marisol. Every time I speak up, K'thar just smiles at me and nods, and I have to trust that he is actually going to take me to my friend. I don't think he would lie, but I'm also hoping I'm not completely misunderstanding things.

When the suns go down, J'shel takes the baby and heads up to his sleeping spot and N'dek prepares his bed with fresh leaves that K'thar's gathered for him. They don't seem to be big fans of fire here, so when the light is gone, it's pretty much bedtime. That leaves just me and K'thar to retire to our spot high up in the tree.

Bedtime. I can't help but think about last night and I get all flushed wondering what tonight is going to be like. Not that I should be thinking about stuff like that.

Not that I haven't thought about it every hour the entire day. I blame my cootie for my rather singular thoughts. I knew nightfall was coming. I just didn't know if I'd be coming with it.

Ha.

But I can't deny that I want to be touched again. Last night's orgasm was nothing short of earth-shattering and I'm curious to see if he plans on taking control again. He hasn't pushed me all day, but I've caught him watching me. I know he has to be thinking like I am—his cootie has been just as noisy as mine all day.

If he doesn't touch me tonight, though, I'm not sure if I have the guts to ask him to. Part of me thinks no one would care—no one in this tribe anyhow—but there's another part of me that still thinks like the awkward Earth woman who wore glasses and sat on the sidelines at the club instead of dancing. I'm not abandoned. I don't think I'll ever be that person. The closest I'll ever be to that carefree person is who I am right now, the one in the grass bikini in a jungle of naked people. I'm the one that tries to be helpful, the peacemaker. It's hard for me to ask for things for myself.

It's especially hard to think about asking someone *Hey, would you diddle me again tonight?*

K'thar gestures at the hollowed-out bole of the massive tree that they call home, and he indicates that I should try climbing it for myself tonight. I appreciate that he's not going to throw me over his shoulder and haul me around, but I worry that I'm going to be really bad at this. "I'm not the most athletic," I tell him, grabbing a handhold and looking up. "So no laughing."

"L'ren, up," he tells me in his language.

Right, right. I'm looking forward to the day we can have a real conversation. I use the handhold and pull myself up, reaching for the next one. It's not very big and my fingers slip, and then one of K'thar's big hands cups my butt, helping me up.

I can't decide if this is awkward or arousing. I'm definitely aware that he's inches away from my girl parts and it makes me squirm and reach up for the next handhold so I don't sit on his hand for too long and get far too many ideas. The ledges carved into the inside of the tree are fairly big overall, though. I'm guessing it's because alien hands are much larger than mine. They're spaced rather far apart, so moving to each one is a challenge. I concentrate on traveling up the tree, and I'm

panting by the time we pass all of the other platforms and make it up to the very top of the tree. I crawl out onto the woven platform and flop down, panting. “Next time maybe you take the first floor instead of the penthouse,” I complain to him as he squats at my side, looking at my winded, sprawled body with amusement.

“L’reen, yes,” he says, and touches my cheek with one big finger. I think he’s trying to tell me that he’s proud of me.

I give him a tired thumbs up.

He smiles and then moves away, and I sit up on my elbows to watch him as he disappears off the ledge with a hop, and then returns a few moments later with a handful of leaves. Fastest gatherer ever, though I suppose he has an advantage with four arms versus my puny two arms. He fluffs them into a nice, comfy looking pile and then casts a heated look in my direction.

And I feel a full-body flush move through me. I can guess what that look means, and it’s making me tingle with awareness. My cootie begins its song again, reminding me of exactly what it wants, and with every hour, it seems a little harder to argue with the darn thing. Why am I fighting this again, exactly? Because people that don’t know that I exist anymore won’t approve? Because Earth morals say it’s a bad idea to jump into bed with a guy you’ve just met?

Do those things really apply anymore?

I get to my feet and move to the edge of the bed. He sits down on one side, keeping between me and the ledge, and then waits on me.

I’m not sure how to play this. Do I try to be sexy? Standoffish? What do I want? Torn with indecision, I thump down onto the bed and lie flat on my back, adjusting my placemat-bib-shirt over my boobs. God, I am the worst at seduction.

K’thar just chuckles, as if he can hear my thoughts, and lies down next to me. Not flat on his back, but propped up on one arm and facing me. Watching me. I feel another hot prickle

move through my body at that realization, and I'm glad twilight is falling, because then maybe my headlights won't be quite so noticeable.

"L'ren," he murmurs.

"You can call me Lo," I whisper. "All my closest friends do. I think you qualify." I put a hand to my chest. "Lo."

"Llloh," he manages, rolling his tongue in a way that it almost sounds like he's purring my name, kind of like his cootie is purring at me. And gosh, that should not be nearly as sexy as it is. "K'thar Llo."

Is he saying I'm his? I get covered in goosebumps at the thought. I shouldn't want a guy to be all caveman on me, but it's hard to deny that I want it more than anything right now. More. Than. Anything. "That's me. All yours."

He gazes down at me with those glowing blue eyes and then puts a hand between my thighs, right over my leaf-covered pussy. "K'thar Llo."

I bite back a moan. Boy, this guy doesn't play around. "That's yours, too."

The look he gives me is one of fierce pleasure.

Well, two can play that game. Maybe it's time for me to be a little bolder, myself. I reach over and grab him in the same spot he has me, right on his cock. I'm not entirely surprised to see that he's hard already. "And this is Lo's K'thar."

"Yes," he says thickly, pressing against my hand.

Okay, I'm going to have to be bold more often, because his response to my caress is almost as exciting as when he touches me. These leaves don't hide much, and I can feel something very big and hot underneath.

He leans in, groaning low under his breath, and then oh-so-casually rips my leaf skirt off of me. No pretending with this one—he's declaring me as his and staking his territory. And god help me, I love it. A little cry escapes me and I don't even protest when he tears off my top, either. I guess that's the good thing about leaf clothing—easy access.

K'thar gazes down at me, his expression as hungry as I feel. Without breaking eye contact, he rips off his own loincloth and tosses it aside.

Oh boy, now we are both really, really naked. I shiver at the realization. There's nothing stopping us from going all the way with this mating stuff. Am I ready? Does it matter?

I bite my lip, full of aching uncertainty as he stares down at me. He's not moving to touch me, just watching. I wonder if I'm doing something wrong? Something that's making him hesitate today, unlike yesterday.

He looks down at my breasts, then touches the curve of one, watching me.

The fuck? He's staring rather hard at my face and not my boobs. I frown. "What was that about?"

"Hurt?" he asks, using one of the words he's managed to teach me over the last few days.

"No," I say slowly. Why would they hurt?

He must see my confusion, because he chuckles and rubs his chin, looking a bit sheepish. He gestures at my breasts and indicates that they're big, and then points at himself and shakes his head.

Does that mean females of his kind don't have boobs like I do? Or he thinks mine are enormous? I put a hand over my breasts to cover them, feeling a little uncomfortable.

K'thar snags my hand and pulls it down with a shake of his head, then lightly runs his fingers over my nipple. "K'thar Llo."

Oooh, so we're back to that sexy game. I approve. I get all breathless, especially when he continues to trace my breast with his fingertips. "Yes."

My cootie's rumbling fiercely, so strong it feels like it's shaking the trees. Down below, Kki lets out a raucous squawk, and I realize that it's not just my cootie that's shaking—it's the entire tree.

I jump to my feet, terrified. "K'thar—another earthquake!"

“Llo,” he says calmly, getting to his feet as well. “No.”

“Don’t tell me no! I know what I heard! I...” I pause, because I realize it’s already stopped. It was just a tremor, nothing more, but it’s the second one today. Each one is terrifying because I wonder when the volcano is going to blow its top. We’re right in the danger zone, perched on the edge of the caldera.

He grabs my waist and pulls me back against him, and then all of a sudden I’m standing flush against a big, warm, sexy barbarian and my naked skin is pressed against his naked skin.

And for a moment, I forget all about earthquakes.

K’tar holds me tightly against him, and I can feel his cock pressing into my back. My body prickles with awareness and my nipples are hard, and I hold my breath, waiting to see if he releases me.

He doesn’t, though. Instead, one big hand goes to my pussy and he strokes my curls there. “K’tar Llo,” he murmurs against my hair.

I shudder with need, leaning back against him, giving myself up to him. He wants me to be his? I’m all his to do with as he wants. “Yes.”

He groans low in his throat, and I can feel the deeper rumble of his khui in his chest. As he calmly slides one finger between the folds of my pussy, he reaches up with another hand and caresses one of my breasts again.

I suck in a breath, because the dual sensations are maddening. Did I think a guy with four arms was weird? I take it back, because he’s got so many more ways to touch me that I’m getting wet just thinking about it.

“Llo,” he says again in a deliciously husky voice, and drags that big, thick finger along the wet seam of my pussy. He moves it back and forth, then begins to lightly rub against my clit. Oh fuck, he remembers that from yesterday. Of course he does.

I cling to his arm, writhing against him and panting as he rubs my nipple at the same time he pets my clit. This is so unfair.

It's too much for me to take in. It's overwhelming, and amazing, and oh my god, I'm going to come so hard if he keeps touching me like this. The breath wheezes in and out of my throat and I whimper, trapped in the cage of his arms as he holds me tight against him and strokes my body like it's been his for hundreds of years and he knows just how to touch me. So unfair.

So *good*.

I come a moment later, crying out as a swift orgasm overtakes me. I've never come quickly before, but it seems that every time he touches me, I just light up and explode. I sag against him as he continues to pet me, murmuring my name.

His hand lifts from my pussy and in a daze, I watch as he raises his wet fingers to his mouth and tastes them.

Then, K'thar groans. Hard. "Llo," he rasps.

In the next moment, I'm back on the leafy bed, on my back. He's swift, so swift that I can barely tell what's happening before I realize that he's pushing my thighs apart and his head descends between them.

Ohgodohgodohgod. "K'thar, wait," I whimper. "I need to come down. I'm too sensitive—"

But he doesn't understand me. Of course he doesn't. Or maybe he doesn't care. Arms locked around my thighs to anchor my hips against him, he leans down and licks me with a long, slow taste.

I bite down on my finger to keep from screaming out his name. Sensation rockets through me, and I feel like my entire body is turning inside out. I've never felt so *much* all at once. I want him to stop, and I want him to keep going. He licks my folds and my toes curl. My hands go to his hair as he hefts one of my knees over his shoulder and begins to use his tongue with even more force. He takes his time to explore my folds, and then pushes the tip of his tongue against my core.

My moans turn into gasps, and I cling to him. I feel a sliver of disappointment when he moves away from my core, leaving me aching and hollow. But a moment later, his tongue drags

over my still-incredibly-sensitive clit, and then he begins to feast on me.

This time, I can't help the loud cry that escapes my throat.

One hand—god, he has so many—reaches up and he presses his fingers against my lips. I suck on them, whimpering, because I'm so full of need. I can't help my body's reaction to his intense licking—my hips buck against his face in my urgency. I can feel him chuckle, but he doesn't stop. He only licks me harder, his hands tight around my thighs.

And then I'm coming all over again, wet and hot and all around his face. My body arches like a bow and still he doesn't stop licking me, not until I've shuddered and cried out a third time.

I stare up at the dark forest canopy overhead. I feel...replete. No, more than replete. It's like all of the strength in my body has been drained, and it was sucked right out of my pussy by the alien between my thighs. I lift my head to glance over at him and his eyes are shining, the look on his face smug and pleased. Yeah, he should be pleased. I'm pretty sure every bird, reptile, and alien in a three-mile radius just heard me coming my brains out. That is definitely going to make breakfast tomorrow rather awkward when I see the others.

Three orgasms, one after the other. I'm going to need to take up cardio to keep up with this man's tongue. My legs feel like they've run three miles and all they've done is clench his head between my thighs. Gah.

Of course, I can't complain. I'd be a fool to complain. That was amazing. Hands everywhere, tongue everywhere...my toes curl just thinking about it again.

"K'thar Llo," the big guy murmurs and licks his tongue along the inside of my thigh.

I shiver, because I can see the heat and need in his eyes. "Wait," I breathe, wriggling my way out of his grip. An idea has hit me and I'm rather excited about it. I want to turn the tables on him.... If he liked my reaction to his touch, I'm sure I'll enjoy his reaction to mine. I put a hand to his chest and

slide away, closing my trembling thighs. “Enough with Lo for now. Let’s talk about K’tar.”

He reaches for me, but I shake my head and caress his face, smiling at him. “My turn. Lo’s K’tar.”

His eyes narrow and his khui purrs even louder. Yeah, he likes that idea.

I get to my feet and take his hand in mine, indicating he should do the same. He does, and then I get to gaze at all delicious six feet plus of the guy. I put my hand on his pectoral, feeling his heart beat and his khui “sing,” and it feels like a magical moment.

He blew my mind, now it’s my turn to blow his. The thought’s an enticing one. How many times has K’tar looked at me with hot eyes and held me for a little bit longer than he should have? It’s my turn to pay attention to his need...and to thank him for four very, very good orgasms.

And, well, have a little fun myself.

The thought of touching him any way I want to is exciting. It makes me press my thighs together with anticipation and my body flushes all over again. I can tell he’s excited, too, though it’s not hard to see that. He’s panting, his massive shoulders heaving, and his fists are clenching at his side, as if it’s taking all of his strength not to reach out and grab me and throw me back down into the leaves again for another round.

Much as that round would be amazing, I want him to have some amazing, too. So I smile up at him. “I’m going to teach you how to kiss first. Can we do that?”

He tilts his head, and I can tell he’s mentally sifting through my words, trying to match them up with the bits and pieces of each other’s language that we’ve learned.

“Kiss,” I say helpfully, and slide my hand to the back of his neck, then press my body up against his. My breasts push against his chest and one of his arms goes to my waist, locking me against him. I shake my head, keeping my expression playful. “My turn to run things, sweetheart. And we’re starting with a kiss.”

“Ks,” he agrees, and puts his hand behind my neck, just like I’m doing to him.

I want to close my eyes and lean against that big hand, because he can cup the entire back of my head in his palm, and it’s a strangely erotic feeling. I can’t get distracted, though, and he’s the very best at distracting me. I lean in, tugging him toward me. “Kiss,” I whisper again. “It’s my favorite.”

Well, it was my favorite before oral. I might have a new favorite. But this one can be a classic. I’m good with that.

He watches me closely, his eyes open even as I move in and put my mouth on his. He goes completely still under me, as if trying to figure out what I’m doing.

So I lean in and lightly press my lips to his. It’s clear he doesn’t know how to kiss. He purses his mouth and waits, as if trying to figure out what I’m doing so he can mimic it. That’s oddly sweet and kind of funny at the same time.

Of course, his reaction just makes me want to do more. I want to shock him. Push his limits—or even just see what they are. I lean closer and lick him, right on the mouth.

The breath hisses from between his teeth. “Ks?”

“Not quite,” I murmur, my voice throaty with the power I have over him. “Let me finish showing you. Kiss,” I say again, and then press my mouth over his. This time, I make it a deeper kiss. Instead of caressing his lips with mine, I slant my mouth over his and flick my tongue against the seam of his mouth. When he opens up for me, I stroke against his, sliding my tongue along the side of his. Then I slowly break away and give him a breathless look. “Kiss.”

He growls low and his arms lock around my waist. One hand cups the back of my head harder and then his mouth is on mine again, and we’re kissing with all the intense passion I’ve been hoping for. K’thar’s a fast learner, because he takes over the kiss, and what he lacks in finesse, he makes up for in enthusiasm. God, is there ever enthusiasm. He’s kissing me so fiercely that I can feel my body responding, my cootie humming its pleasure. Every lick into my mouth feels as if

he's licking me between my thighs again and it's as maddening as it is incredible. I've lost control of the kiss, but I don't mind.

When we finally break apart, my mouth feels like it's tingling and we're both panting hard. He gazes down at me and skims a thumb over my lower lip. "Ks."

I nod, dazed. "Yeah, that's what it is." Though calling what we experienced just now a mere kiss seems inadequate.

I want to do more, before he completely distracts me. I slide my hand down his chest and then even lower, boldly caressing his cock. "Kiss here?"

K'thar's eyes grow hooded and I can hear the barest groan escape him.

"That's not a no," I whisper, and slide to my knees, kneeling in front of him, my hands still on his cock. "In fact, that just might be a yes."

"Yes," he murmurs thickly.

Yup, thought so. I feel an intense sweep of pleasure over the control I have right now. I'm the one on my knees, but I'm the one in charge of the situation. It's a heady, intense feeling and I can see why people get so addicted to being in charge. His reactions to my touches make everything twice as pleasurable.

I gently cup his sac, exploring him with my fingers. His skin is soft here, and impossibly hot. As I gaze at his body in the shadows, he seems to be turning the same color as my skin. Fascinating. Is he camouflaging to me because I'm touching him or because he's trying to please me? Either way, I'm into it. I wrap my other hand around his length and squeeze, learning his body. His cock is incredibly thick. Not that I've had a lot of experiences with cocks (as in, none) but watching porn online didn't prepare me for the size of an alien boyfriend. When I squeeze, my fingers don't close all the way around him, and the length of him is larger than anticipated.

But all of the other humans stranded here are blissfully happy and pregnant, so I'm guessing alien dick is big in the "yay" sort of way instead of the "oh crap" sort of way. And with that

knob on top, I'm pretty sure he's going to hit me in all the right spots. That's...kind of exciting.

Okay, a *lot* exciting.

First, though, it's my turn to have some fun. I glance up at him and notice he's watching me with intent, focused eyes, as if nothing else in the world matters. I smile up at him, and then reach out and casually lick the head of his cock. I've never given a blowjob before, but there are things you just know at your core, and I guess I know how to be a tease.

"L'ren," he breathes, caressing my face.

My cootie's rumbling like a lawnmower in my chest, and his is so loud I'm surprised no one's yelling up at us to keep it down. Then again, if my screaming a few minutes ago didn't wake anyone up, I'm guessing that they're pretending not to hear. That works for me, because I'm not stopping until this man—alien—comes.

I know that blowjobs involve sucking and stroking, so I try to figure out the best way to do both. With my hands, I explore his length, feeling along his skin. He's scorchingly hot here, and the faint, spicy musk of his scent fills my nose. I like the smell of him, and I don't think I've ever said that about a guy before. Probably the cootie, but I don't care. I just know that so far, I like everything about him. I lick along the head of his cock, exploring him with my tongue. Pre-cum slicks the head, and I lap it up, over and over again, but there's always more. I like his taste, though. He's thick and smooth along his shaft, but there's a hard ridge along the top of his cock, as if the skin is thicker there. It's unusual and I'm pretty sure it's not standard in Earth equipment, but what is?

I think I'm doing pretty well at pleasuring him, though. The noises K'thar makes are those of a man about to lose control, and his hand keeps touching my face, my hair, anywhere he can. He whispers things to me that I don't even pretend to understand, and all the while, I love on his cock with my mouth and my hands.

"L'ren," he pants, and pulls me away from him when I try to suck on the head of his cock. "L'ren."

“Are you going to come?” I whisper, taking his length in my hand and rubbing my face against his length. I just love touching him. It doesn’t matter how, just that it’s pleasurable to do so. “Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

He shakes his head and pulls away, and I can feel the tension in his body. He doesn’t want me touching him? I reach for him again. If I can come on his face, he can come on mine. “K’tar,” I murmur, my voice throaty and soft. “Yes.”

K’tar closes his eyes and groans as if tormented.

I decide to take the initiative. I reach out and caress him again, moving my fingers up and down his length in a light, fluttery caress.

The breath hisses from his throat and then he grabs one of my hands, wrapping it around his erection and then pumping his length with it. Fascinated, I watch as he works my hand over his cock, up and down. In a matter of seconds he comes, and hot, sticky semen glazes my hand, the proof of his release. He closes his eyes and breathes my name again, his pumping slowing to a languid stroke. Then, he releases my hand with a deep sigh and gives me the most sleepy, satisfied look I think I’ve ever seen on his face.

I love seeing that expression on him.

He pulls me to my feet, takes a handful of leaves, and carefully wipes my hand clean. Then, with a caress of my cheek, he lies back down on the leaves and indicates I should join him.

I guess...we’re not mating tonight. I’m surprised, but I’m also pleased he remembered that I wanted to wait.

Of course, in a few more days, I might not want to wait at all. Then again, I’m enjoying the bedplay we’ve done so far that it feels like there’s no rush. My cootie purrs, reminding me otherwise. It still wants a mating.

As K’tar pulls my exhausted body into the circle of his arms, I realize that my cootie’s probably going to get its way sooner rather than later, and I’m pretty okay with that. Sure didn’t take long.

Just...not tonight. Even now, my eyes are sliding closed. The last thing I notice before I drift off to sleep is that K'thar puts a hand between my thighs, cupping my pussy.

Right. He's holding on to what's his. The amusing thought carries me off to sleep.

K'THAR

I am up before my mate the next morning, and set about making her a fresh loincloth and a cover for her teats while she sleeps. I watch her as I do, pleased at her soft little sighs. Does she dream of me and the way we touched last night?

I have never known such pleasure as what she did with her mouth. Just thinking about it now makes my khui rumble, and I want nothing more than to push between her thighs and lick her cunt until she cries out with her release. I do not, though, because the day will be a long one and she will need her strength. She cannot camouflage, so our travel must be through the branches of the tall trees. Too many kaari stalk the ferns and bushes, as hungry as we are for game that can no longer be found. The canopy will protect us from skyclaw, so it must be the trees. My L'ren only has two arms, and weak ones at that, so our travel will be slow. If I were by myself, I could make it to the rocky cliffs of the Tall Horn camp, but I will not leave my L'ren, not even for a moment.

An earthquake wakes her up, but it is a small one and gone as quickly as it arrives. She dresses in silence, obviously worried, and I cannot resist pressing my mouth to hers in this *ks* she likes so much. That brings a smile to her face.

We eat a few quick bites and then say our goodbyes to the others. N'dek has Z'hren this day so J'shel can hunt for them. His color is good and he sits up, his bedding fresh. He still has not left his platform, but hopefully in time he will find a way to walk or move about without his leg. Others have done so in the past. It is encouraging to see him being active in our small tribe once more, and I know that L'ren's presence gives him hope.

N'dek and J'shel have both wanted mates for as long as I have, and I suspect they have high hopes for L'ren's friend. We shall see.

I am not entirely surprised to see that Fat One stays behind with N'dek and Z'hren. The nightflyer enjoys perching on my shoulder, but lately he has been hovering around the kit, probably because of all the crumbs and bits Z'hren drops when he is chewing on a root or a bit of smoked meat. Even now, the flyer watches the kit suck on his egg hungrily.

I cannot blame him. The kit is the only well-fed one in the tribe. I pretend to eat my dried meat, but slide most of it in into my leather carrying pouch for later, when L'ren will need more food. I have been hungry before and I do not mind being so again. She will need her strength today...and she will need it when she carries my kit.

Just the thought fills me with intense pride.



MY LITTLE MATE is as fierce in her own way as any sakh female. She is not a good climber, not by any means. But she tries, and she tries hard. She does not complain even though the day grows hot and the jungle is so steamy I can see plumes of mist in the air. Her hands sometimes slip on the branches, but I am there to help her, and when the space between trees is too great for her to leap, I carry her on my back.

That does not make the journey easy for either of us, though. By the time we make it to the curve of the island and the cliffs that belong to Tall Horn, we are both exhausted. I am glad to see the old stone ruins of the ancestors, where R'jaal's clan retreated to when their lands sank into the sea with the Great

Smoking Mountain. I see the walls of their strange homes when we approach, and the leafy, browned thatches of their roofs. It is nothing like our open, airy platforms amidst the trees, but they are close to the water and spend much of their time fishing in the shallows as they did in their old territory.

L'ren makes an exclamation of surprise at the sight of their huts. "Rdosehowsis?"

"That is where the clan of the Tall Horn lives," I tell her, gesturing at my own normal-sized horns.

She nods, recognizing my words. "Tall Horn," she repeats, and then adds, "Mrsl?"

"Yes. Come." I put a hand to the small of her back and guide her forward along the shore.

The camp is deathly quiet. My senses prickle because there should be more noise. Someone repairing flint tools, someone tanning a hide, or fishing with nets. No one comes out to greet us, and there are no fires lit. The woven covers over each flap of the small dwellings are down, and it would be sweltering inside at this time of day. It makes no sense. Either they are all out hunting at once...

Or they are hiding from us.

I growl low in my throat, angry.

L'ren immediately grabs my arm and moves behind me. "Wht? Wtizzit? K'thar?"

"It is all right," I tell her. My frustration is not at her. It is at R'jaal and his tribe, who have guessed that we would be coming and have hidden themselves. They do not want to give up their female. Unsurprising. Would I not do the same in their situation?

Of course, just thinking about my L'ren in the arms of another makes my temper spike. I put an arm in front of her, shielding her from their view. "Come out," I call out to them. "I come to talk, not to thief."

Not unless the female wants to be stolen, of course. That is another matter entirely.

There is no response. Now they are just being ridiculous. “Tall Horn,” I bellow, cupping a hand to my mouth and yelling so loud that my L’reen jumps in surprise behind me. “My mate and I have journeyed all day to speak with you. Come out.”

I wait, but there is still nothing.

“Yes?” my mate asks in a quiet voice. “Mrs! yes?”

“No,” I say heavily, beyond frustration. I wanted this for my mate. She has traveled long and hard this day, and to be met with such a response makes me want to grab the nearest tree and rip the branches off. “They hide from us.”

I am not sure if she understands, but she makes an indignant noise in her throat and pushes past my arm. “MARRRRSOOOOOL,” she yells out, so loud and piercing that it makes my ears hurt. “YAAAARRRYUUUU.”

Her voice sounds desperate and unhappy, and I feel as if I have failed her. I want this for her, but to storm into the closed huts of the others violates clan laws. I have come to their home. If they will not welcome me, I cannot enter. “Come, my mate. I know you are disappointed. I—”

“LOOOORN?” There’s a shrill cry from the tidal caves in the distance, just beyond the huts. “SATCHOO?”

My L’reen gasps with delight, clasping her hands against her teats and giving a little hop of joy. “YS!” she cries out. “SMEE!”

There is movement in the shadows of the cave. As I watch, a Tall Horn hunter steps forward, only to be shoved aside by the dark-haired human female that races past him. Then both females are making happy cries and racing toward each other on the long, sandy beach.

They reunite, arms locked around each other and hopping. The other members of Tall Horn slowly emerge from the tidal caves, one by one.

None of them look happy to see us.

LAUREN

In between laughing and crying with sheer joy, I notice Marisol is buck-ass naked. She's burned a slightly deeper brown from the sun, and her dark curls are a mess, but the smile on her face is brilliant and she seems happier than she has been in a long time.

It feels like an enormous weight has been lifted off of my shoulders.

"I wasn't sure if you were okay," she says, squeezing me tightly again before stepping back to study me. "*Are you okay?*"

"I'm fine! It's you I've been worried about. I didn't know what happened to you because when I woke up, I was alone with K'thar. But he told me the other tribe had you and I wanted to come and see for myself."

She glances over my shoulder and her eyes widen. "He...he doesn't look like the others." She edges a little closer to me, as if alarmed.

"He doesn't?" I frown at her reaction.

"Is that...four arms?" she whispers as he moves closer to me. She immediately backs away a step.

"Um, yeah. Everyone has four arms, don't they? I thought all the aliens on the island did." Though now I'm wondering.

Someone approaches from behind her, and I pause, because now I see what she meant. This guy looks similar to K'thar in many ways, but he's got two arms and he's not as bulky with muscle as my guy. Instead, he's got an enormous set of horns jutting outward from his brow and sloping back. They remind me of an antelope's horns with their enormity and I turn to look at K'thar. His horns are small, finger-length, and easily lost in the wild waves of his hair. There's no losing these horns. "Okay, this is weird. Do your guys all have horns like that?"

She nods slowly. "And I guess all of yours have four arms?"

“Right down to the baby,” I agree.

“There’s a baby?” Marisol looks surprised. “There are only four guys here. I think their tribe has been wiped out. I get the impression there used to be a lot more people here.”

K’tar’s as well. The uneasy feeling prickles over my skin. “I know. K’tar’s people live in a big tree home, but it’s nearly empty.”

Marisol looks worried. She moves forward and grabs my hands again, speaking in a low voice. “Lauren, we have to get out of here. Do you know what this island is?”

“A volcano caldera,” I tell her, nodding. “And we’re right on the edge of what’s left.”

“It’s not dormant, though. It can’t be. There are parts of it that are still smoking,” she hisses, worry lining her face. “And the ground shakes every day. It’s like this thing is just waiting to explode again and go all Krakatoa on us.”

“Kraka-what?” It sounds familiar, but I can’t place it.

“Do you remember your history? Krakatoa was a volcano that was so big that when it exploded back in the nineteenth century it could be heard from thousands of miles away.” Her hands tighten on mine. “And it took the entire island and all its inhabitants out with it.”

I feel faint. “Oh. That’s really, really not good.”

“We have to get back to the others on the mainland,” she tells me. “I’m trying to talk to T’chai about it, but he won’t listen to me.”

“Is he the one that kidnapped you?” I get angry on her behalf. “We’re here now, Mari. Let us help protect you. K’tar is a good guy, I promise.”

But she shakes her head, growing impatient with me. I’m surprised at her reaction, especially when she pulls her hands from mine. “R’jaal is the one that took me here. When I met the others, though, things changed.” She puts a hand to her naked breastbone. “I resonated, Lauren. Can you believe that?”

“Yes, actually,” I say dryly. “I did the same.”

Her eyes widen. “You did?”

I nod. “To K’tar. And you did to R’jaal? The one that stole you?”

She bites her lip and winces. “Actually, no. I didn’t resonate to him. He brought me back to the group and I resonated to his buddy. It’s been...an interesting few days.”

I eye her nakedness. “Is that why you’re going nude? Did we interrupt something?”

She laughs and her cheeks turn dusky. “No. Everyone here goes naked. It just seemed weird to demand clothing and they wouldn’t have understood it anyhow.” She moves forward and takes my hand again, smiling. “You want to come eat lunch? It’s like a constant sushi buffet around here. Lots of raw, fresh fish.”

Even as she leads me forward, a big, lean guy with massive horns comes forward and stands behind Marisol protectively. She ignores him, beaming at me, and a moment later, K’tar comes to my side. “I’m not sure we’re welcome, Mari. They don’t seem thrilled to see us.” I eye the guy behind her. He crosses his arms over his chest and scowls at us, his gaze flicking to Mari and then back to myself and K’tar.

Mari glances behind her and then shakes her head, dismissing him. “That’s just T’chai. Ignore him. He follows me like an angry puppy ever since we resonated.”

“Angry puppy” is not how I would describe the glowering man, but I’m just glad Marisol has found her courage. For the first time since we got to this place, she doesn’t seem utterly terrified. I’m not sure what caused the transformation, but I welcome it. It’s one less thing to worry about. Seeing her happy and healthy makes me feel so relieved I could drop to the ground right here and just cry with exhaustion. I didn’t realize until just now how much the stress of her fate was weighing on me. “So you resonated to him,” I say slowly, trying to think my words out. “Are you...happy?”

“I’ll be happy once we get off this death trap of an island,” she says to me, taking my hand and leading me towards the other rather irritated-looking members of the small tribe. They all have the enormous horns, I notice, and don’t look thrilled to see K’tar...though they’re all staring at me with unabashed interest.

K’tar notices this too and moves to my side, putting a proprietary hand on my shoulder. I should be annoyed, I guess, but I’m actually pretty happy about that possessive touch. It reminds me that he’s here and he’s watching over me, and it sends a warning to them.

One of the others comes forward and says something short and harsh sounding to K’tar. My guy replies with a cool retort and someone else calls something angry sounding.

I pause, and so does Mari. This doesn’t sound like a very welcoming situation, and I’m not entirely sure what to do. I’m tired from the day’s travel and I’m hungry, but I also don’t want to stay here if it’s not safe. Worried, I look over to K’tar.

He steps in front of me and angrily points at one of the others striding forward. I notice that Mari’s mate moves in front of her, and then the beach is filled with arguing aliens, all making their displeasure known in harsh tones. I figured that because of K’tar’s reluctance that we wouldn’t be welcomed with open arms, but I never expected this. I can tell Mari’s shocked, too.

“What’s going on?” she whispers.

“If I knew, I’d tell you,” I murmur back. I don’t know why these guys don’t seem to like each other much, but it’s clear that this visit isn’t a super-friendly one. All of the men are practically bristling with anger as we stand here on the beach and they snarl at each other. I look at the faces of each one of them—there are four all told, and Mari. Not many. Is this little group as small as ours? I can’t help but feel that we should all be working together, considering that there’s not much food to eat. If there’s as much fish here as Mari says, why doesn’t everyone move here? Why—

A shadow flies overhead, momentarily darkening the sands.

Immediately, all of the men camouflage, changing colors to match the dark sands. Before I can wonder at what's going on, a loud, inhuman scream pierces the air.

In the next moment, I'm tackled to the ground, the breath slamming out of me. My head spins. Through a haze, I hear Marisol screaming and someone else shouting in the alien language.

The animalistic screech rings in my ears again and I try to lift my head, but K'thar's body covers mine. "No!" he shouts, so loud that it makes my head hurt. "No, L'ren."

No moving? I stare at him, wide-eyed, and he covers my mouth with a hand, his weight pressing down over me. I'm caged under his arms and I want to protest, but the wildness in his eyes makes me stop. He flattens his body even harder atop mine and I want to protest that I can't breathe, but a shadow falls over his shoulder and the head of a massive lizard-bird peers down at the sands, then screams again.

If that thing's head isn't the size of a car, I'll eat my shirt. Terrified, I shrink under him. I realize what he's doing now—he's hiding me with his camouflage since I have none.

I hold my breath and the thing stalks a short distance away, nosing at the sand.

If Godzilla had wings, I think he'd look like this bird. No, I mentally correct myself. I love birds. I hate this thing. It's not a bird—not really. It's closer to a dinosaur, with a pointed, long snout and tufts of foul-looking fur on its throat and body. The wings are thin membrane like a pterodactyl, but the sharp, jagged teeth that catch my eye are like something out of a nightmare. The thing is perched on long, taloned feet and his body seems impossibly long. I've seen city buses smaller than this thing, and it's all joint and sinew and fang attached to a barrel body. There's nothing graceful about it...or the fact that it wants to eat us.

Off to one side I can barely make out Mari's hair and her terrified eyes, her body covered by her camouflaged alien. The

monster wanders closer to them, nosing at the sand once more. It's like it knows we're here but it can't see us, and the thought is terrifying. What if it doesn't go away?

One of K'thar's hands slides between our bodies, and I see him grab his stone knife. It's about the length of one of his big hands and that doesn't seem like much of a weapon against such a great creature. His body tenses over mine as the thing swings its head back in our direction.

"No," I whisper to him, grabbing a long length of his hair before he can get up. "Don't leave me."

His attention isn't on me, though. It's locked squarely on the menacing creature nearby. I know he's just waiting for the right moment to attack. And that terrifies me. Am I going to lose him now?

I've just gotten him. It feels like my life, however crazy it's been lately, started the moment my cootie began to purr. The realization hits me like a brick and I gasp aloud.

The creature starts, lifting its head at my noise.

Fuck.

K'thar flings himself off of me, yelling. Before I can scream a protest, he's launched himself at the monster and swings one knife at it, then another. As I watch in horror, he manages to grab all four of his knives with speed and swings at the creature, drawing its attention. He brandishes his blades, arms spread, fierce and ready to attack. He looks like he could be eaten in one gulp by the beast, and I'm terrified.

Then the thing glances over at me, still sprawled in the sand, and I feel a different kind of terror. I sit up and skitter backward a half-step, the breath gone from my lungs.

K'thar gives a war cry and launches himself at the thing's head a moment before it lunges toward me. As I watch, frozen, three other aliens fling themselves at the thing, armed with spears, and the fight becomes a strange, warp-speed dance of men flying at the creature with weapons, being flung backward, and then lunging in once more.

It looks like it's going pretty well until a second one flies low and joins in. Mari's scream alerts all of us to the newcomer, and then blood flies as one of the horned warriors is raked across the back. He falls to the ground, and the new monster—slightly smaller than the other—lands on him and begins to attack him with beak and teeth. I can't look away. He's handspans away from me but all the others are battling the bigger one. It's too horrifying, and Mari's screaming goes on and on, and I realize that the alien trapped under the thing's feet is her new mate.

Someone has to help him.

I get to my feet, grab a handful of sand, and fling it at the second bird's face. "Shoo!"

Mari follows my lead, grabbing sand and flinging it at the thing's face. "Go away," she sobs as I fling another handful.

The thing looks up and hisses at us. That's the only warning we get before it snaps its beak at us and lunges forward. I pull Mari backward, out of reach, but it abandons its prey and comes after us, snapping again.

Oh, fuck. I look around for a weapon, but there's nothing. I push Mari behind me, trying to protect her as the thing advances on us, shaking its head to clear the sand from its eyes.

My life's about to flash before me, and I watch as the thing recoils, ready to snap again—when K'thar leaps on its beak, pinning it shut with his arms. One knife saws at the creature's eye and he yells something at me.

I don't need to be told twice. "Run, Mari! To the trees!" I point at the distant canopy. "We'll be safe there!"

"I'm not leaving T'chai," she sobs, breaking free from my grip and trying to steal toward him.

Of course, getting toward him means getting past the creatures on the blood-spattered sands. I grab her arm again and haul her backward with all my strength. "You can help him a lot more if you're alive!"

She twists in my arms and then reaches up and slaps me across the face, furious. “No!”

It feels like my lip explodes and I can feel blood gush from my mouth and trickle down my chin. I ignore it, though, and dig my fingers into her arm, dragging her with me. After a moment, she relents and moves with me, sobbing the entire time.

We make it to the edge of the trees and move behind the trunk of a large one and wait. I can’t hear much over the sound of Mari’s crying, and I’d shake her with frustration if I didn’t feel like crying myself. I can’t stop shaking. Those things were so large. They could have eaten us in one gulp. I think of the alien pinned beneath the thing’s claws and shudder. “Please, be safe, K’tar,” I murmur under my breath.

My cootie starts revving up, the purr growing loud and throbbing in my chest. I put a hand to my breast and turn to peer out from behind the tree.

K’tar stalks toward me, bloody knives still gripped in his hands, the expression on his sand-and-blood-spattered face fierce. As I watch, his color slowly melts back to its normal ice blue. He’s scratched and gouged on his skin, upraised welts on his arms, and his leaf loincloth is long gone—

But he’s alive and whole.

With a cry of joy, I race out from behind the tree and stumble toward him across the sand.

He hauls me into his arms and holds me close, and I don’t care that his skin is sticky and sandy and he smells like sweat and god knows what else. He’s alive. I can’t stop weeping with pure joy and relief.

Those things didn’t eat him.

“L’reu,” he says in a low voice as he sets me back down on the ground. One hand cups my cheek and he brushes his thumb across my stinging cheek. “Es ket?”

He’s asking if I’m all right. I nod. “Just a bit of hysterical punching between girls. It’s okay.” I touch his arm, where blood has scored across his skin and wince. “You? *Es ket?*”

He nods and caresses my cheek again, looking far more worried over me than his own wounds. Sweet man.

There's a broken sob behind me and then Mari races past, heading for the churned-up sand. I notice that there's not a lot of movement on the beach. The corpses of the two monsters are massive, and as I watch, one man limps out from behind one of them. Another slits one creature's gut and then holds a hand to his side as if it pains him. I don't see the others.

"T'chai!" Mari screams, pushing forward.

"I have to go to her," I tell K'thar, worried. If her mate is dead, she's going to be a wreck, and she'll need a friend to lean on. I gesture at my friend.

He checks me over one more time, as if my safety matters more than anything else, and then reluctantly lets me out of his arms. "Yes."

LAUREN

T'chai's not okay. I knew he wouldn't be, but I also didn't know how bad it'd be. His midsection is completely torn up, and he's unconscious and losing blood. Both Mari and the infamous R'jaal work on T'chai, sewing up his wounds and cleaning them and making him comfortable in one of the huts. To my surprise, Mari's been extremely calm. It's like the moment she saw how bad her mate was, something snapped in her mind and all the hysteria went away.

Whatever the reason, her calm is good, because there's so much to be done at the beach camp. Two of the other aliens—M'tok and S'bren—are badly wounded and covered in blood. M'tok limps and S'bren is favoring one of his arms, clutched against his chest. They're still doing their best to work, carving up the carcasses of the dead animals so they can be dragged away from the beach. They can't stay because every scavenger known to mankind—or alienkind—is going to show up to get a free meal. Even I know that.

My K'thar pitches in to help the others immediately. Despite their differences, it's K'thar that helps R'jaal carry the gravely wounded T'chai back to the hut. Then, he helps the two others in hacking up the creatures, even though they all look exhausted and want to do nothing more than collapse.

But they can't. There's no one else to do it.

The realization strikes me hard. The work never ends here on this planet, because there's always going to be more that needs to be done. If you're in danger, all you've got is your own two hands and that of your friends. It's a sobering thought and it makes me step forward to help. When the next hacked-up hunk of creature is cut free, I head forward before the badly limping M'tok can move to take it. "I can grab this one," I say.

"L'ren," K'thar says, a question in his voice.

"I'm okay," I promise him with a smile. Of course, the smile hurts because Mari busted my lip, but what's a split lip compared to what the others have going on? I've got four good limbs at least. "I know where you guys are taking this. I can do this."

He hesitates and then nods.

It's easier said than done to help, though. There's no handhold on dead animal flesh, so I grab it as best I can and haul it down the sand. The thing's heavy, slippery, and unwieldy, and I end up dragging it most of the way. The huts are located at the edge of a tiny cove, and we're dragging this stuff to the other side. If predators come by looking for a free meal, they won't be close to the huts and the wounded. I drop off my bundle and grab more, and then it seems like the rest of the day turns into hauling chunks, over and over again.

I've never been so relieved when the last one is done and there's no more to drag away. K'thar takes me to the water's edge and we both splash ourselves clean of the worst grime, and I check his wounds. His are mostly scratches. A few gouges look nasty, but when I try to fuss over him, he reassures me with a few words and gestures that he's all right.

We head away from the beach to check in on the others. They look just as wrecked as I'd thought, and T'chai is unconscious and burning up. Mari holds his hand tightly in hers, unmoving from his bedside. The three others in their little tribe look grim and battered.

Out of all of them, K'thar and I came out of this the luckiest. It's also clear to me that Mari isn't going home with us.

It's also clear to me that if we leave these guys, they're going to struggle. Mari and T'chai are inside one hut. R'jaal has moved out and checks on the other two men, but they all look ready to fall over exhausted. I feel the same, and I'm hungry and thirsty to boot, but it feels wrong to ask for something like that.

A wounded arm and a bad knee are one thing, and I'm sure that the guys will manage to survive. But T'chai is going to need a lot of help, and I know from my time with K'thar that there's a lot to be done around every camp. What if they need water boiled for T'chai's wounds? That's a fire and water to be retrieved before it can even make it to his bedside. What about food? Drinking water? There's so much work ahead of them that my heart hurts.

"We can't leave," I murmur to K'thar. I don't know how to say it in his language, so I try again with the few words I do know. "K'thar, L'ren no go? Help?"

He studies me and caresses my face again. "Go back Z'hren, J'shel, N'dek."

I understand what he's saying. He's going to get the others. This tribe is going to need everyone's help to survive for the next while, and we're all stronger together. I nod at him. "L'ren stay here. I can help."

R'jaal moves toward us and studies K'thar. He says something to my mate and they speak in low, hushed voices. I don't catch most of what they're saying, but the occasional word slips in. *Here. Food. Females.*

Both of them glance at me, as if trying to figure me out.

"I'll stay here," I say again, gesturing at the beach and the huts. "I can help with Mari. Help with food. I'm strong." I lift an arm, flex a muscle, and pat my bicep. "Strong."

R'jaal's lips twitch as if he's doing his best not to laugh.

K'thar just looks proudly at me. He steps forward and cups my face in his hands. "K'thar Llo," he murmurs, voice husky.

Oh gosh, now I'm getting all worked up and it is not the time. "All yours," I whisper back to him. "I won't forget. Lo belongs to K'thar."

He looks over at R'jaal, then back at me, and then leans in and gives me the fiercest, most toe-curlingly amazing kiss I've ever had. It's a possessive, branding kiss, his tongue stroking into my mouth as if he's claiming it for his own.

I'm left breathless and panting when he breaks away. He glances over at R'jaal again, touches my cheek, and then storms towards the trees.

I feel a bit like a fire hydrant that's just been marked as territory, and I can't stop laughing at the thought even though I want to cry at the sight of him leaving. So soon?

But I know it's necessary. I know he can't leave the others for long and he can't stay here. The only thing to do is to bring the two broken tribes together and hope we can all support each other.

Doesn't mean I won't miss him, though. I touch my throbbing mouth and sigh.

LAUREN

*T*ell myself that a few days without K'thar isn't so long. After all, I survived twenty-three years without him. I can do a few more days. And the people in the beach tribe need help. Mari's a mess and won't leave the unconscious T'chai's side. She keeps asking me things like, "The cootie's supposed to make him heal faster, right? It's going to make him better, isn't it?"

I want to tell her yes, because that's what I was informed of, as well. But I don't know how the cootie deals with things like a destroyed midsection or possibly punctured organs. I don't know how it handles sepsis or an infection or any of the gnarly things that can happen in a primitive place like this. The cootie may keep its host strong, but it can only do so much. But I only smile brightly and pat Mari on the shoulder and reassure her that he's strong.

What else can I do?

The horned tribe—as I've come to think of them—is wrecked from the attack. M'tok keeps trying to walk on his knee that looks worse and worse with every hour that passes, until R'jaal sits him down and forces him to rest. S'bren—the one with the wounded arm—does what he can to help around the camp.

That leaves myself and R'jaal to take care of everyone. It's a little awkward at first because I don't know many of their words and he's not as patient with me as K'thar. Through a mix of gestures and bitten-out words, he gives me tasks to do. It doesn't matter that the twin suns are going down and I'm exhausted from walking all day. There's water to be gathered and a fire to be built. I guess they like fire here on the beach.

By the time it's fully dark, I'm exhausted and ready to crawl into bed. I don't even mind when R'jaal points me into the second hut and I have to sleep across from M'tok and S'bren. It's clear to all of them that I'm K'thar's and no one's going to touch me. I fall asleep atop a pile of leaves instantly.

The next morning, I wake up to a hiss. I rub my eyes and glance over and see that M'tok's lancing his swollen knee. He hisses again as a river of pus dribbles down his leg, and my stomach heaves.

"You should really rest that thing," I tell him faintly before retreating out of the hut.

I'm aching and sore and I want to sleep for a million more hours, but when I get out of the hut, R'jaal is already in the waters of the bay, casting out nets. I can't sleep while there are people in need, so I work on stoking up the fire again. I know how to do this thanks to Liz and Harlow, at least, and I set one of the giant conch-like shells into the coals and fill it with fresh water from a nearby stream that trickles from deep within the rocks. While I'm waiting for that to boil, I grab one of the spears resting against the huts and join S'bren in gathering some of the big nuts that fall on the ground. He's slow with only one arm, which suits me just fine because I'm not very skilled. There aren't many, of course, and half of the ones that have fallen have rotted away. He gestures at the tall trees, indicating I should climb and get some, but I know I'm not that skilled. If K'thar were here, it'd be different.

But he's not, so I'll do what I can. I suck up my fear, find the shortest tree to climb, and somehow manage—slowly—to get over to the tree with the nuts and shake a few down for S'bren. By the time I get down, my knees, the insides of my thighs, and my hands and feet are scratched up and sore. Lovely.

We head back to camp and I see R'jaal dragging in a heavy net in the water, straining to pull it in. S'bren drops his armful of nuts and starts to go after him, but I put a hand on his arm and indicate that I'll help. Of course, R'jaal doesn't like the way I try to help him and ends up snapping and barking incomprehensible words at me as I wade in and try to help him out.

By the time we get to the shore, he looks furious, half of the fish inside the net have probably swam out my side, and I'm exhausted. It's barely dawn.

R'jaal snatches the net from my hands and says something biting to me, and I hit my breaking point. I slap at his hands and bare my teeth at him in my best feral alien imitation. "I'm trying to help, motherfucker! Either let me help or leave me the fuck alone!"

He looks surprised at my vehemence, and then throws back his great horned head and laughs. A quick pat on my shoulder tells me that all is forgiven and then he spends the next while showing me how to grab the net and haul it so the fish don't get away.

Between keeping water boiled for Mari so she can nurse T'chai and helping R'jaal with nets, the day flies past. I snag a meal of the occasional tree nut and a bit of fish. Most of the fish in the nets are tiny, nothing but mere mouthfuls. I notice that most of the fish is saved for myself, Mari, and T'chai. The others don't seem to be hungry, which tells me that they're as low on food as K'thar's tribe.

I go to bed that night exhausted, but thinking hard. The ground gives another faint tremor, then goes still. It's the third one that day, and everyone ignores it.

But it reminds me that we can't just think about day-to-day survival. We need to get off this island.

We need a plan. All of us—big horns and four arms and humans—need off this island. The mainland, however distant and however cold, had plenty of game, and I know that the others were never hungry. Not like this.

So I try to think of a plan. Mari's in no shape to do so, because T'chai's been delirious with fever and his abdomen tight and swollen. I have to remind her to eat, so she's definitely not planning ahead. And the others? I suspect this is the only world they know, so they're not going to be thinking of a way off the island.

But it's all that's on my mind lately—escape...and K'thar.

Because I'm not leaving without him.

My affection for the big, four-armed alien is the only thing that makes sense in my world right now. I have to call it affection because I can't be in love. It's far too soon and my body and mind are far too influenced by my cootie at the moment. I'm trying to be practical, even though just thinking about him makes me want to giggle like a schoolgirl. I think about him all the time. I miss him an insane amount, and I watch the trees every chance I get in the hopes that I'll see him hop down and stride toward me with those gorgeous, fluid steps of his and I'll fling myself into his arms and he'll pull me against him and our cooties will sing together and...

And yeah.

He needs to come back, and soon. I wonder how long it'll take him, and I can't stop thinking about it as I gather wood and debris to tend the firepit while R'jaal casts his nets out.

Someone does come back, though, but it's not K'thar and the rest of his small tribe.

It's another group. This must be the third tribe that K'thar mentioned to me back when he was telling me about his peoples. I'm surprised to see a small cluster of men walk toward our huts, and R'jaal moves protectively to my side, standing in front of me. He calls out a warning to the others, who call back to him.

These don't have large horns. Nor do they have the strong four arms that K'thar's group does. They're definitely different, though. As they approach, I can see that when they talk, I catch a hint of fangs. Their fingers are tipped with fierce looking claws, and they're the first aliens I've seen that have

facial hair. Each one has a beard and a sprinkling of chest hair. Fascinating. So many different traits for so few people. How did this come to pass, I wonder?

The men gesture at me, and my skin prickles with awareness of just how little I'm wearing. My grass bib and my loincloth are getting pretty ragged due to days of wear, and I've been stuffing more leaves into the weave to try and make it last, but they're going to fall apart pretty soon. Everyone else is naked, of course, but I feel naked with how much they're staring at me.

R'jaal talks to them for a moment and I hear K'thar's name pop up. Immediate disappointment crosses their faces.

All right, R'jaal is going to remain on the Christmas card list, I decide. He's telling them that I'm mated to K'thar. Whew. The looks they send my way are a lot less interested and one bearded guy casts me a glance of pure disappointment. I hear Mari's name, and then T'chai, and then K'thar's name again.

The newcomers turn away and discuss quietly amongst themselves, then settle a bit farther down on the beach, at the edge of the trees. I can't figure out what they're doing, so I go back to working on the fire. When I look up, I see one of the newcomers wading out to help R'jaal, and another brings me a stack of firewood. The other two work at the edge of the woods and I realize that they're making their own shelter.

I'm surprised...and a little impressed. These guys act like they don't like each other, but when someone's in trouble, they pitch in to help, no questions asked. It's clear they showed up to see me and Mari, but they're staying to help.

All right, then. The escape plan has to cover fourteen people. We all have to leave. When I get time to myself, I'll work on a plan of some kind.



TIME TO MYSELF arrives that afternoon. I'm putting fresh water into the conch shell I use for boiling when one of the bearded newcomers grabs my arm and hauls me away from the freshwater trickle. My protest dies in my throat when a

shadow crosses over the encampment, and then I race hard to one of the stone huts. I huddle inside with Mari while the others camouflage into hiding.

They chase the thing off with spears and this one doesn't even land. I'm guessing that as predators, those giant birds are very sight-based and so the camouflage keeps the aliens safe. Since Mari and I can't camo, I have to spend the rest of the day hiding in one of the sweltering little huts with her. She sits at T'chai's side, gently washing his wounds and stroking his brow while he sweats with fever. It's like I'm not here.

I don't mind that. I wouldn't know what to say even if she paid attention to me. I'm not good with comforting. I'm good at being stoic and practical. That part of me (the stoic part) wants to shake her and tell her to sleep, because I don't think she has since he got wounded. But I understand how messed up she is. I've been worrying about K'thar non-stop since he left.

My cootie's been rather silent, too. I hope that doesn't mean anything awful. I don't think I could stand it if something were to happen to the fragile bond between us. We haven't even had a chance to explore it much.

I really, really want that chance.

So we have to leave this death trap of an island, and soon, because all these little quakes just tell me that a big one is on its way.

By the time that K'thar returns the next day, I think I have a solution, too.

K'THAR

I have been away from my mate for days, and never have I felt the absence of another so keenly. It makes my temper short and my mood irritable. This is not a good thing when you are traveling through the jungle with an injured tribesmate, a kit, and a nightflyer that refuses to leave his favorite perch: my head.

The weather is hot and feels more humid than before. The food is scarce, and the only nuts we find are withered. The eggs must be kept for Z'hren, so we eat nothing but a few leaves and tender shoots as we walk.

J'shel carries N'dek on his back and we keep to the ground. There are hungry kaari about, but we are safe with our camouflage. I carry all of our small clan's goods on my back in a woven pack—stored eggs, our few nuts, and scraped leather hides. Flint tools. And I carry Z'hren, who wiggles and fusses and wants to rest. I give him an empty nut pod and let him chew on that to soothe his tears, but we are all weary and the travel is slow because we cannot move quickly. Not weighed down as we are.

Fat One screams his delight as we approach the shore and the stone huts of the clan of the Tall Horn. He flaps his wings and digs his little claws into my mane, and Z'hren giggles and reaches for him.

“I see the huts,” J’shel calls, N’dek on his back. “Almost there.”

Even though I am tired, I am more than ready to see my lovely L’reu again. These days without her have been far too long, and I crave her more than my belly craves food. I know she is wise to stay with them, where she can help Tall Horn recover, but I ache for her. Even more, I worry they have not kept her safe...

I am not prepared to see the hide tents of the clan of the Shadowed Cat at the edge of the jungle, though. We pass them by and I exchange a look with J’shel, a growl low in my throat. Shadowed Cat keeps to themselves on the far end of the jungle. I can only think of one reason why they would come to Tall Horn’s territory.

They have come to claim a female. Or both.

Bitter anger flows through my mind and I have to fight back the snarl in my throat. L’reu is my mate. It does not matter that I have not claimed her yet. Her khui sings for *me*. Her body yearns for *me*. I am the one that will fill her cunt with my seed. I am the one that will plant a kit in her belly.

Mine.

Z’hren notices my mood change. His small face screws up and then he blasts my ears with a sharp wail of anger. Against my hip, I feel his leaf wrap get wet and I bite back a sound of disgust, yanking it off of him and tossing it into the ferns.

His cry catches the attention of others, though. In the distance, I see several hunters in the shallows, pulling at nets, and two more lingering by the fire. I do not see my L’reu or her friend, and my heart thunders in my breast with fear.

Then, the woven cover to one of the huts lifts and a figure comes racing out. I recognize the dark brown mane, dark like rich earth, and her warm skin, her two small arms and her delicate body. L’reu races toward me with welcome on her face.

My khui, so quiet these last few days, begins to sing loudly at the sight of her.

“Yrbk!” she cries at the sight of me. “K’thar!”

She comes to my side, all smiles and happiness. I gently cup her cheek and when she tilts her face up to me, I sense she wants another ks. I am pleased, and I give her a light brush of my mouth over hers, a hint of what is to come. “My L’ren,” I murmur, examining her face. She looks well, her swollen lip healed from the last time I saw her days ago. Her skin is darkened from the sun, but she does not look thin. R’jaal and his tribe have been taking good care of her, it seems.

My mate takes Z’hren from my arms, cooing at the kit, and smiles up at the sight of Fat One, still perched atop my head. “Ybrotrryun?”

“Someday I will know what you say, my sweet mate,” I tell her with a sigh. “Come. Let us go to the camp.” I gesture at the fire ahead.

She greets J’shel and N’dek as we walk, but I only have eyes for her. She wears the garments I wove for her many days ago, though they are looking tattered, and she has fashioned coverings for her feet, of a sort. They are made out of leaves and only cover the bottoms. Peculiar. Is she shy about showing those around the others as well as her teats?

The humming of my khui reminds me that I have not yet mated her. It grows stronger and stronger as she walks beside me, and hers joins in song with mine, as if our hearts are pleased we are back together, as well. L’ren gives me a sideways glance full of promise and I think, perhaps, that I am not as tired this day as I thought.

I get rid of my packs by the fire and as I do, Fat One hops down and moves to settle on L’ren’s shoulder. She has a bowl of food—naturally—and offers the kit a soft bite and then gives a bit of raw fish to the nightflyer. She pats one of the stones near the fire and indicates that N’dek should sit with her. My heart feels as if it will burst with pride—she is such a good mate. She thinks of others first.

My cock feels as if it will burst, as well.

A'tam, one of the hunters from Shadowed Cat, comes to my side and offers an arm clasp in greeting. "It has been a long time since I have seen you, my brother."

Are we brothers, then? It is an interesting choice of greeting, but a welcome one. "Our small clans have not had much reason to hold a challenge gathering," I admit, greeting him. "But I am glad to rest my eyes upon you this day. Your clan has come to help Tall Horn?"

"We came to help ourselves to your females," he admits baldly, his grin wide. "But when we found out what had happened, we stayed to help out."

I grunt, biting back the possessive snarl rising in my throat. It will do no good to snap at him. L'ren is mine and her khui sings to me. It does not matter that A'tam is perfectly made and has a well-formed face that I'chai exclaimed over many a time. At least, I hope it does not matter.

I glance down at my mate, seated nearby, and she jiggles Z'hren on her knee, making him laugh, and then reaches up to caress my hand, as if she needs reassurance that I am there. And my heart grows warm again. There is no need for jealousy.

L'ren is mine in spirit and in body.

"Your luck is a stream that has run dry, my brother," I tell him. "Both females are claimed."

He sighs heavily and hangs his head. "I know. My luck is a dry riverbed indeed."

"You do not say how you knew of the females, though," I point out.

His mischievous smile returns. "We like to keep an eye on the other clans. You never know what you will find out."

Indeed.

"T'chai lives," A'tam continues, glancing back at one of the huts. "Though he has been ill with fever and has not yet awoken. His strength is gone."

I nod, though I am pleased to hear he yet lives. We cannot afford to lose more. Not after the loss of I'chai. "He will recover. He has much to live for."

"More than some of us," A'tam agrees wryly. "And yet we carry on." He glances down at L'ren. "Do you know where she is from? Are there more like her?"

"Our words are limited," I admit to him. I have not thought much about where she came from. All that matters to me is that she is here at my side. For a moment, I feel ashamed. Perhaps I should have asked more. Perhaps there are others missing her in some distant place. Perhaps she wishes to return there.

The thought makes me clench my fists. She is mine. If she leaves...my spirit will die.

"Well, we are all here," A'tam says, spreading his arms wide. "It is much like a challenge gathering, is it not?"

It is, indeed. But a challenge gathering is to celebrate, and there is not much to celebrate this day. A'tam is a male of high spirits, though. He reaches down and takes little Z'hren from my mate's arms and tosses the kit high, making him giggle.

"Eezggnabrf," L'ren says in a warning tone.

"What does she say?" A'tam asks, tossing the kit again. Z'hren howls with laughter, delighted. One little hand goes to his mouth, and in the next, he spits his dinner all over A'tam's smiling face.

I burst into laughter. "I think she was warning you of that."

"Too late," A'tam says, chuckling and handing back the kit before wiping his face off. "I go to bathe in the shallows, my lesson learned." He gives us a rueful grin and trots off to the water's edge.

"Here, I shall take him," N'dek says, reaching for Z'hren and pulling the kit into his lap. N'dek wipes his face with a leaf and then gives the little one a shiny shell to play with.

L'ren touches my arm, and when I glance down at her, she looks thoughtful. "What is it?" I ask.

“Talk?” she asks, and then gestures at her mouth in case I did not understand. “L’reu talk K’thar.”

“Go on,” J’shel says. “We will settle ourselves in.”

When N’dek nods as well, I allow my mate to drag me by the hand to the water’s edge. She sits me down and then gestures that I should wait here. As I try to figure out what she wants, she races off towards the huts and returns a moment later with something in her hand. I am even more surprised when she gestures that R’jaal should join us, though he seems equally confused.

She sits down in front of me, her leaf-wrapped item in her lap, and clasps her hands, clearly trying to think. After a moment, she takes a deep breath and smiles at me, an unspoken question in her eyes. With her finger, she begins to trace patterns into the sand.

“What is she doing?” R’jaal asks, squatting next to me in the sand.

“I do not know,” I admit, trying to figure out the pictures she makes. Once again, I am frustrated by our inability to communicate properly. I want nothing more than to have a conversation with my sweet mate, but we do not share enough words yet.

She has drawn something that looks like...a wing? A half circle of some kind? A slice? L’reu draws a tiny circle on the slice and points at it. “K’thar. N’dek. J’shel. Z’hren.” She draws another tiny circle at the tip and then points at it. “T’chai. M’tok. S’bren. R’jaal.”

Then, she gestures at the entire slice and gesticulates at the jungle nearby. “Salldis.”

I study the picture, wanting desperately to understand. The look on my mate’s face is intent, and it is clear this is important to her. She is trying to tell me something. But what?

Frustrated, she points at the first circle on the slice again. “K’thar.” Second circle. “R’jaal.” She thinks for a moment and then points at the far end of the slice. “I’reu?”

She speaks of our clans. I study the pictures she draws, and when she gestures at the jungle again, it dawns on me. I tap the “slice” on the sand. “Is this the island? Our home?” I point at the inside. “Water? Sea? And this here is the interior? The jungle? Island?”

Her eyes shine with excitement. “Yes! Island!” Her words are repeated in my language—badly—but it is clear we are making progress. She looks so pleased at me that my khui starts rumbling a song.

R’jaal makes a noise of impatience in his throat, clearly irritated.

Her hands flutter and she starts to gesture again. Instead of just the slice of land that is the island, she drags her finger along in the sand, completing the circle.

“How does she know?” R’jaal asks, his tone low and worried. “She speaks of the land that disappeared when the Great Smoking Mountain died.”

I do not know. If my L’reu was here somehow...but no. My clan—all clans—know every leaf on this island. If another people had been here, we would know.

She pats the center of the circle. “Hot,” she says in my language.

Perhaps she has forgotten the word for sea. I tap the center. “Water.”

L’reu shakes her head and looks frustrated. She makes a strange noise with her mouth and then flutters her hand. “Hot.”

When we continue to watch her curiously, she makes a puffing sound with her mouth and flutters her fingers outward. Realization comes to me. “I think she speaks of the Great Smoking Mountain.”

R’jaal frowns. “But it is gone.”

I rub my chin, thinking of the steam that pours constantly into the waters at the far end of the island. “I am not so sure.” I tap the circle. “Great Smoking Mountain? Much fire?”

“Fire! Yes!” She looks excited. “Big fire.” She gestures at the ground. “Move.”

“Is she saying the fires cause the earthshakes?” R’jaal gives a snort of disbelief.

I want to dismiss it, as well. The ground shakes because that is what the ground always does, just like the wind shakes the leaves. But I am curious, though. My mate knows strange things. I point at the far end of the “island” in her drawing, where the smoke burns against the sea. “Fire here.”

She shakes her head and circles the whole thing. “All fire. All here. Vol-kay-noh.”

I do not understand her last word. “The Great Smoking Mountain is gone.” I try to smooth away the rest of the circle she has drawn. “Gone.”

She shakes her head again, emphatic. “Fire. Much fire. Tomorrow?” She shrugs. “Tomorrow tomorrow?” Shrugs. “Much fire.”

I nod slowly and turn to R’jaal, who still looks confused. “She says that there will be fire again. She does not think the Great Smoking Mountain is dead.”

“All vol-kay-noh,” she repeats, and circles her entire picture again. “All fire.”

I frown. “Great Smoking Mountain was here,” I tell her, pointing at the far side of her picture. “Gone.”

She shakes her head. “Not gone.” She circles the entire picture again. “Vol-kay-noh. Here. Here. Here.” She points at different parts of her drawing. “All here.” She cups her hands. “Fire in vol-kay-noh.” She makes a gesture of the cup overflowing.

I feel a chill move over me and I am reminded of those horrible days of smoke and char and death so many moons ago. “She knows of what she speaks,” I tell R’jaal. “And if she is right, we are not safe.” My mate keeps gesturing, indicating that her cupped hands are the inside of the circle, and I realize what she is saying. “The entire island is part of the Great Smoking Mountain,” I tell him, my mind churning with the realization. “We are on the side of it.”

“Bah. If that is the case, where is the rest?” R’jaal seems unconvinced.

“It is hiding. Or it is under the water, where the fire steams as it meets the shore.” I rub my jaw. “If she is right, we are not safe. Nowhere in our world is safe.”

“Safe,” L’reu repeats, picking up on a word she knows. Excitement flashes on her face. “Yes! L’reu home safe.”

“Where is your home?” I ask, fascinated.

She thinks for a moment, and then draws a long, long line in the sand. “Water,” she says, and repeats the word as she drags her finger. Then she points to a spot a short distance away. “Here.”

“Across the waters?” I ask.

She nods and then shivers, making a big gesture of it.

“Cold place across the water?”

L’reu looks pleased and nods again, her smile growing. I love that I am able to understand her, even if R’jaal is giving both of us skeptical looks.

“If there is such a place,” R’jaal asks, “Then how do we get there?”

My mate pulls an item off of her lap. She holds it out to me. “Rft.”

I examine it, but I am puzzled. It looks like a few sticks with grass weaving the ends together. I am not sure what she wants with it. After a moment, I hand it back.

L’reu makes a frustrated noise and then takes it from my hand. “Rft.” She puts it on the water, and as I watch, it floats and bobs on the gently rolling tide. “Rftouttsee.” She picks up a small shell and holds it up. “L’reu.” Puts it on her bundled wood. Picks up another shell. “K’tar.” Puts it on the wood. “Allgo.”

“You want us to float there?” I ask her, surprised. Our people have never crossed the water. It is far too dangerous. “There

are many creatures that would attack us.” I make a show of fangs and mimic claws. “Many serpents.”

“Big rft,” she agrees. “Big big. We go.”

“Dangerous,” R’jaal states with a shake of his head. “We would be risking our lives to what? Try and cross the great waters of the sea atop floating wood and hope we do not get eaten?”

L’ren clasps her hands under her chin, giving me a hopeful look. I will follow her anywhere, but I do not know if I can convince the others. Unless...I study my mate’s pleading expression. She desperately wants me to listen to her. “Your clan,” I ask my mate. “Many females?”

R’jaal goes still, all attention.

Her eyes flash with understanding and a smile curves her mouth. She nods. “Female. Female...” she holds up her hands, counting. “Female.” After a moment, she holds up four fingers. “Male.”

“Sixteen females to four males?” R’jaal makes a sound of astonishment in his throat. “Their clan is smaller than ours and they have so few males. How can they survive?”

“Perhaps they are in trouble, too,” I tell him, thinking. Before the death of the Great Smoking Mountain, all of our tribes combined numbered over a hundred and there was food and game for all. Now we are fragments of what we once were. Maybe it is the same for her clan. “Perhaps she came to our land looking for help.”

“Food,” L’ren emphasized. “Females. We go.”

“Their females might need mates,” R’jaal says slowly, as if he wants to convince me. “We should consider this.”

I just grin at my clever female. She knows just what to say to convince R’jaal, it seems.

Myself...I will follow her anywhere.

R’jaal gets to his feet. “I must talk to the others. See how they feel about the idea of going to a strange, dangerous land. They might not feel the females are worth it.”

I hold back my snort of derision. To have a mate and give her kits is the greatest thing a hunter can hope to achieve. To have a full belly as well? They will endure the cold, and gladly. “You should go and discuss it with the clan of the Tall Horn. I know Strong Arm will follow my L’ren. They will trust her because I do.”

“You would risk their lives to cross the waters?” R’jaal looks surprised.

“Are we not at risk here?” I ask him. “If what she says is true, every day is a gamble. If my L’ren can come here, we can go to her people. Two shattered clans can make one great clan.”

“Mmm.” He gazes down at L’ren’s hopeful face. “We shall see. I will talk to my clan, and to Shadowed Cat.”

“Good,” I tell him, getting to my feet. My tail flicks with an eagerness I cannot seem to conceal. I extend a hand to my mate, and she puts her fingers in mine trustingly.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

I pull L’ren against me, inhaling her scent, feeling her soft, fragile body against mine. Our khuis sing louder, their song insistent. “I am going to claim my mate.”

His eyes narrow as he gazes at us, and I see envy cross his face. “Very well. Take her far enough we do not hear her cries and mistake her enjoyment for pain.” It is clear he does not wish to hear our mating.

“I know of a place,” I tell him. “We will return in the morning.”

R’jaal grunts and heads off, away from the beach and back towards the small cluster of huts and the fire there. He is jealous. That is fine. I want that jealousy to fuel his choice. If what my L’ren says is true—and I have no reason to doubt her words—then we are in danger here, and her land of lonely, mateless females will be eager to have us arrive.

It is an enticing thought...for them, perhaps. My L’ren is all that I need. I cup her face and brush my thumb over her full, soft mouth. My sweet, clever mate. How I have longed for her these last few days. The taste of her cunt still haunts my

dreams. “Do we mate this night, or do we tease once more?” I murmur.

She leans in to my touch and nips at the tip of my thumb with her teeth, eyes full of hunger.

It is time to find out.

LAUREN

I have so many emotions racing through my body now that K'thar is back, but the biggest one is excitement. Some of that is because I'm hopeful that they'll pay attention to my suggestion to raft the hell out of Dodge, and some of it is just simple relief that everyone's back together.

Most of it is sheer joy that K'thar is back beside me.

I slip my hand into his as we go walking along the beach. The big attacking birds haven't been back in the last day or so and I feel safe at his side. He'll protect me. We move to the treeline and he pulls me closer, brushing aside a long fern frond so it won't touch me. My cootie's singing non-stop and my entire body feels like it's about to join the chorus.

I'm just so...*happy* that he's back.

He's been gone for all of three days and it's felt like an eternity. There's been a lot to do around the new camp, but that doesn't mean I haven't ached for him every second of every hour. Now he's here and giving me looks that make my toes curl. My cootie's going wild and all I can think about is that steamy kiss he gave me right before he left. It felt like a promise.

Now that he's returned, is it time to make that promise a reality? God, I hope so. With him gone, and seeing the situation that Mari's in with T'chai, it makes me realize that there's no reason to wait. What am I waiting for anyhow? Some sort of "yes, go ahead" from the universe? Isn't that what the cootie's for?

And with every earthquake, no matter how small, it makes me realize even more that this might be it. We might never get off this island.

Why not grab life by the horns? Or the four arms, as the case might be in this situation.

K'thar chases Kki off before he can roost on his shoulder, and the bird-thing lets out an indignant squawk and flutter-hops his way back toward camp. My alien leads me deeper and deeper into the jungle, even though it's getting dark. For the last few nights, I've slept inside the stone huts over on the shore, staring at the ancient carvings in the stone. The symbols there hint at four-armed ancestors that settled this place, and staring at them makes me miss K'thar even more.

The others can say what they want about their cooties, but mine's a damn good matchmaker. "I missed you," I tell him, even though I know he can't understand me.

He glances back at me, blue eyes glowing, and there's a smile on his face that makes me feel warm and sweet...and a little squirmy as well. He keeps walking, and the jungle keeps getting deeper and darker. How far are we going, I wonder?

Where are we going?

I'm not entirely surprised when we stop at the base of one of the big trees. K'thar points upward, and I see another one of the big woven platforms stretched between the branches. Of course there's another platform here. This one's high in the trees, though, and there's only one. I wipe my hands on my grass bikini, eyeing it. It's going to be a tough climb.

Before I can put a hand on the trunk of the tree, though, K'thar puts a hand to my waist and hauls me against him. I make a startled sound at being drawn tight against his chest, my palms

on his pectorals. Our bare skin is pressing together, and it's making me lose track of the world around me. "Um."

He takes my arm and puts my hand behind his neck, then pulls me closer. One hand hitches against my ass and then he's holding me tight as he climbs. I bite back my cry of surprise and latch on to him, my eyes closed. I guess tonight I'm not required to climb. I am, however, incredibly aware of my thighs squeezing tight around his waist. How can I not be? I'm turning into a raging ball of hormones around this man.

We make it to the top and he gently sets me down, and I glance around. It's not quite like the other tree, where the platforms are roomy and large, intended to move around on. This one's narrow and hugs the tree itself, a bit more like a ledge than an actual balcony. Maybe it's a lookout post of some kind. Whatever it is, there's not room to lie down or set up a bed. Maybe I've mistaken why K'thar's taken me into the trees—

In the next moment, he pushes my back to the enormous tree and then I'm pinned between him and the trunk of it. I gasp just as his mouth covers mine, and then I melt against him.

His kiss is just like I remembered it. Hot and urgent and so good that it makes my entire body come alive. His tongue slicks against mine as he strokes it into my mouth, and his arms cage me against him.

We don't need a lot of room, I realize. All we need is privacy and safety, and this little treetop roost will do it.

I meet his kisses with equal fervor, showing him how much I missed him while he was gone. My cootie sings and purrs in my chest, and I know just how it feels—I'm going wild for this delicious alien man as much as it is. I drag my fingers through his thick hair as we kiss, our tongues thrusting and pushing and sucking as if our mouths are fucking, and god, that just makes me so wet between my thighs.

"L'ren," he murmurs against my mouth between kisses. "Llo."

I haven't forgotten. "I'm yours," I whisper back. "Lo K'thar."

He growls low in his throat and then buries his head against my neck, kissing there as his fingers rip at my grass skirt. It's held together surprisingly well over the last few days, but at his tug, it tears and flutters to the ground. I can't say I'm sad. I don't care. All I know is that in the next moment, his hand is between my thighs, cupping my pussy, and I'm gasping with the intensity of his touch.

His hands are all over me, stroking and caressing, and he pulls off my top, casting it down to the ground below. I'm naked against him in the steamy jungle, and with a single quick tear of his own loincloth, he's naked, too. I've seen a lot of naked on this island lately, because the aliens here don't seem to wear much clothing. It's steamy hot all the time, the air thick and muggy, and so I don't blame them for letting the breeze cool their bare skin. But seeing strangers naked is different than having K'thar naked and pressed up against me, his body as urgent as mine. I can feel the hard length of his cock pressed up against my belly, and I remember how it felt in my mouth.

I can't stop the moan that rises from my throat, and I reach for him automatically.

He captures my hand before I can touch him, chuckle rising, and presses another kiss on my throat.

"Oh sure, laugh at a girl in need," I tell him, then whimper when he lightly bites at the side of my neck. That should not feel nearly as good as it does. I wrap my arms around his neck, holding him close as he flicks his tongue over my skin. Warm hands caress the sides of my breasts, and then he pushes one between our pressed-together bodies so he can tease my nipple.

And oh god, does that feel amazing. I throw my head back and moan, arching against his hand as he caresses the tip of my breast. I never thought a simple touch could feel so good. Then he lowers his head and kisses down my front until he's over my breast and gives my nipple a gentle lick.

I nearly come off of the tree. "K'thar! That is so unfair! I want to touch you, too."

I'm panting with need, and he's got his hands all over my body, caressing me and touching me like a starving man. One hand moves between my thighs again, cupping my pussy. He pushes one big finger through my folds, seeking my wetness... and his breath hisses as he discovers just how wet I really am. I'm so hot and needy that I can feel my juices slicking my inner thighs, and he groans against my breast, rubbing his face against it before kneeling and going lower.

Oh, yes. "Boy, you just get right to the point, don't you?" I press my hands against his broad shoulders as he lowers his head to the juncture of my thighs and then pushes his mouth right against my pussy. I have to cling to a small nearby branch when he pushes my thighs wide and then hitches one over his shoulder. It's a good thing he's supporting me because I don't think I'd be able to stand on my own.

His mouth is amazing. There aren't words to describe what it feels like when he drags his tongue through my folds, lapping up my wetness and exploring me with his lips. His fingers stroke what his mouth can't get to, and I gasp in surprise when I feel him push into me. K'thar's finger feels impossibly huge inside me, but it also feels so, so good.

I quiver against him as he nuzzles against my clit, going right for it and licking, slow and thorough and tender. No woman was ever so lucky, I decide, as one hand steals up to tease my nipple. He's working me in ways that are impossible for human men—touching my breast, thrusting a finger inside me, and holding my thigh all at once while still keeping us anchored to the tree.

I'm glad he's holding on, because I can't. Every muscle I have is focused on riding his face, pushing my pussy up against that glorious, insane tongue of his. He knows just how to move it to make me crazy, and as he drags it along the side of my clit, I can feel my body tightening like a bow. I'm losing control, and the more I whimper and moan, the more determined he gets. He groans low against my folds and I swear I can feel that noise against my skin. His finger pumps inside me, thrusting hard and fast, and then I'm riding his hand even as I'm arching

my hips to push my clit against his mouth, and when he pinches my nipple—

I'm done.

I cry out, gasping with the intense force of my orgasm. My entire body feels as if it's drawn up into one tight muscle, and then just explodes. It's completely unglamorous to think about, and I can feel how wet my release was—and I can hear the slick sounds my body makes as he touches me. K'thar doesn't care, though. He just keeps licking my folds and tasting me, determined to wring out every bit of that orgasm from my body.

Eventually I catch my breath and shudder, pulling his head away from between my thighs. If he keeps licking there, I might fall right off of this tree. "Please," I pant. "I need a break, K'thar. Let me rest."

"Llo K'thar," he murmurs thickly, and rises to his feet with fluid grace, as if we're not perched on a platform high in the trees. Sure, it's a few feet wide, but it doesn't feel big enough for two people intent on what we're about to do. He moves up against me, his big body dragging against mine, and I feel every inch of his suede-soft skin against mine. My nipples feel like diamonds, they're so hard, and when he starts to play with them again even as he licks his fingers clean of my release, I whimper.

A man with four hands. God help me. I don't have enough body to keep him occupied. It's the best kind of problem for a girl to have, I think, as he palms one of my breasts and teases it, fascinated by the way my nipple responds.

"L'ren," he whispers, cupping my face and kissing me gently. I can taste myself on his mouth, and it's fascinating. I'm lost in his kiss, twining my arms around his neck once more. I've never felt so good, so sexy.

He hitches one of my legs around his hips and holds it in place there. My thighs are open for him, and I feel exposed as he presses his cock up against my folds. He rubs his length up and down against me, and I can't stop the frustrated noise that builds in my throat. It feels amazing...and yet I feel hollow

and aching in places I've never ached before. I want him inside me, but he keeps teasing me with each drag of his cock against my pussy, between my folds.

K'thar's skin feels insanely soft against my own, which is strange given how hard and muscular he is. I want to stroke and pet him, but he captures my hand and pins it to his chest. His intense gaze captures mine and I'm breathless as he watches me.

My eyes are locked to his as he reaches between us and in the next moment, I feel the head of his cock press against my entrance. I suck in a breath, waiting. Will he take me fast? Or will he go achingly slow? Will it hurt? Or is he going to stop altogether and leave me wanting again, like he did the other night?

In the next moment, I have my answer as he cups my chin with a hand and then pushes ever so slowly into me. My breath hitches in my throat as I feel his length press, inch by inch, into my core. He feels impossibly large and yet at the same time, I can feel my body yielding to his. It's a tight fit, and I'm afraid to breathe for fear that something somewhere is going to stretch too tight. I'm overwhelmed by the intensity of sensation, though, and a small whimper escapes me.

"Shhh," he breathes, and presses a finger to my lips. He gestures below the platform and before I can ask what it is, I hear it. Something big and heavy crashing through the ferns below. "Kaari," he murmurs.

I remember kaari. They're the big crocodile-like lizards that are four times the size of any normal crocodile. Awareness and fear prick through my body, and I give him a wide-eyed stare. Should we stop? Move higher?

K'thar just rubs his finger over my lips and pushes deeper inside me.

I bite back the moan building in my throat. Must be quiet. Must not make noise. But that is more difficult than it seems. I feel pinned to the tree by his weight—and his cock deep inside me—and nothing in me wants to move in the slightest. I'm still adjusting to the sensation of his body piercing mine.

And then he moves his hips, thrusting against me.

Everything in my body lights up. I inhale sharply, stunned at the sensations that ripple over me. I can feel him deep inside me, but more than that, I can feel the knob above his cock, moving against my clit when he thrusts. Oh Jesus. Is that what that's for?

Unfair...and magical.

His tail winds around my ankle, keeping my one leg locked at his hips. It's not like I could move it anyhow. I'm wedged between K'thar's big body and the tree, and every time I move a muscle, I feel it deep in my pussy.

It's making me crazy.

His eyes seem to glow like beacons as he watches me, finger still pressed to my lips. I can hear the big kaari below crashing away, but it doesn't matter. Nothing matters outside of K'thar and the way he touches me. My cootie's singing so hard it feels as if my entire body is shaking, and when my alien thrusts again, I prickle with the intensity of the sensations.

So good.

A moan builds again, and he pumps into me once more. I can't tell what's killing me more—his cock or the knob that pushes against my clit, teasing it when he thrusts. He starts a slow rhythm, his hips rocking against mine, pushing into me in shallow, maddening little thrusts that feel like a tease more than satisfaction. I need...something. Something more. I don't know what, but each time he pushes into me, I feel a little more unsettled, the pit of my belly curling with a slow-building sensation. It's maddening and frustrating and I lift my hips to meet his, to make each thrust a little stronger, a little rougher.

His eyes gleam. His hand shifts and then it's his thumb that rubs against my mouth. I part my lips, take the tip of it and then suck on it, like I would his cock.

He bares his own teeth and I can tell that little movement excites him. K'thar's cock slams into me, harder. The next thrust feels as if it's hollowing me out, it's so deep and good. I

whimper against his thumb and suck on it, our eyes locked as he pounds into me.

It feels like his cock's the only thing anchoring me into my body. My world has stopped existing beyond the relentless pounding of his cock into me, the thrust of my back up against the bark of the tree, the feel of his tail coiled tight around my ankle...and arms holding me everywhere. There's one on my butt, one pressed against the tree, one anchored at my waist, and one hand on my jaw. I feel enclosed in his warmth, like I've become part of him.

It's incredible. I've never felt so...loved. Cherished. Even in the midst of a sweaty, rough fuck against a tree, I've never been held so tenderly.

I've never been so mad with lust.

I bite down on his finger, thrusting my hips against his as his movements become fiercer. Our bodies are slamming together, and the tree is shaking. I don't know if the kaari's still below. I don't care. All I know is that his cock is deep inside me and his knob keeps sliding against my clit and if I don't come in the next few moments, I'm going to lose my mind.

He growls low in his throat, and I think it's my name. Fuck, that's so sexy. I swipe my tongue over his fingertip and then suck on it harder, showing him my need. I want this harder, and faster, and—

And oh god, I'm coming.

I close my eyes, the breath escaping me as my entire body locks up with the force of my orgasm. My heels dig into his lower back and I feel my spine arch, my nipples tingling as my everything seems to come apart. He growls my name again, and then he's pumping into me harder, his movements jerky and uncontrolled. Instead of letting me come down from my orgasm, he spirals me into the next one, and then I cry out as it hits me.

Through the haze of pleasure, I realize dimly that he's come as well, that his movements are slowing down, and that when he pumps between my thighs, our bodies are slick with release.

Oh. Oh boy. He came inside me, and there's not a single condom on this planet.

I wonder if that means I'm pregnant now.

I'm too tired to even go down that line of thought. He leans in and presses a kiss to my forehead, and I'm too dazed to do more than cling to him. "My muscles are dead," I protest with a whisper. "I'm not gonna be able to climb back out of this tree."

"K'thar Llo," he murmurs, rubbing his nose against mine.

"Okay, good. I'm glad we've got that covered," I tell him, patting his chest. "Just keep holding me." I lock my arms around his neck and rest my cheek against his chest. His cootie's still vibrating a mile a minute. Come to think of it, mine is, too. Wasn't resonance supposed to end after we had sex? Maybe we have to do it a few times. I should have asked more about my new alien biology.

K'thar smooths my hair back from my face and keeps one arm tight around my waist as he pulls our twined bodies away from the tree hollow we've been rubbing up against for the last few minutes. He murmurs something and walks along the platform, our bodies still joined, and every stride he makes just reminds me that he's still deep inside me, still big and somewhat hard, and I'm still really, really sensitive.

I squirm against him, my nipples rubbing against his chest. "Maybe we need to go again," I whisper. I thought I was wiped out, but the idea has a lot of appeal, and my pussy seems to give a throb of agreement.

His tail locks tight around my ankle again and he holds me against him, and then he leaps—oh god—to the next tree. I nearly orgasm again, thanks to that knob that's still rubbing me in all the right places. If he didn't have me held against him, I'd have probably splattered on the ground in a big, limp, happy puddle.

Instead, I just lean in and press my mouth to his neck, licking and nipping at his skin.

K'thar stumbles, dropping to his knees on the new platform, and this one's slightly wider than the last. He manages to catch himself and sets me down gently underneath him, breathless.

"Oops," I say, in a tone that indicates I'm not very sorry at all. "Guess I shouldn't do that while you're climbing."

"Bad Llo," he rasps. I guess that's his way of telling me I'm naughty, because he doesn't sound all that angry.

I wiggle against him, and it makes everything in my lower half clench and tighten in all the best ways. "Guess I need a spanking."

I know he doesn't understand me, but I love his little needy growl, just the same.

K'THAR

My mate...there are no words.

I cannot describe how perfect she is. How incredible mating with her has been. There is nothing that would suffice. I am humbled by her sweet, fragile body and her touch, her smiles and the clench of her cunt around my cock.

No words can ever be enough to speak of her.

As sunlight streams through the leaves overhead, I stroke her sweaty mane back from her pale skin. Any other female would be automatically changing colors, camouflaging to match the shadows and protecting herself. My Llo is as strangely colored as ever, her skin flushed with exertion as she naps, her body curled against mine.

I would not change anything about her, I decide. She is different, but it does not matter. Where she is weak, I will protect. I am strong enough for the both of us, and my body is big enough to hide hers with my camouflage. All I need is for her to be at my side, to smile up at me like she did last night. To feel her small teeth bite against my neck with my cock deep inside her...

I am the happiest hunter on this island.

I knew resonance would be good. I did not imagine that it would be so...

There are no words for that, either.

Over and over we mated this last night, and my Llo was as insatiable as me. Every time I touched her, she met me eagerly. Every time I pushed my cock between her thighs, she was there to clasp me with excitement. Her body has welcomed me more times than I thought possible...and still we resonate with song.

Our bodies have not had enough. At my side, she naps, but I know that when she awakens, she will look at me with that hungry glint in her eyes, and her hands will move over my skin. I think she reaches for me as much as I reach for her.

It is a gift I did not think I would ever experience.

I hold her tight against me and she murmurs something sleepily and snuggles against my arm. I press my mouth to her damp hair and slide my hand between her thighs, cupping her cunt as she sleeps.

I will remember this night forever, I think. And I will do anything, go anywhere, and challenge anyone if they think to threaten her.

My Llo is the most important thing in my world. She is mine, and I am going to do whatever it takes to make her happy.

K'THAR

One full turn of the moons later

“No,” my mate says as A'tam and O'jek sit atop their practice raft. She sits between them, trying to teach them how to use the raft. “Look. Look.” As brave as any hunter, she snatches a paddle from A'tam's clawed hands and ignores his irritated hiss. “Look,” she says again, and shows him how she holds the paddle. She digs it into the water, and the little raft spins. She immediately flips the paddle and digs it into the other side, and then the raft straightens out and pushes forward.

O'jek shoots me a look of pure annoyance, but I only grin. My mate knows what she speaks of. If she is not soft-spoken and sweet to them like M'rsl, they can take it up with me. I like that she is bossy to them, as bossy as any clan chief.

But she should be—this plan is hers. It is she that has the vision for where we will go and how we will leave this place, so of course she must lead. The others do not like it so much. They do not trust her like I do, but they are willing to risk their lives in the hopes of mates.

After all, without mates, what do we have to live for? We have been existing for many long turns of the moons, but nothing

more. Not since the clans were destroyed in the death of the Great Smoking Mountain.

I watch, paring slices from a withered bit of ground fruit. The island has not been as bountiful as of late, and every bit of food is important. I slice away the bad parts and save the rest for my L'ren. I glance up as O'jek and A'tam try again with their paddles. This time, the small raft lurches forward, and I can hear my L'ren make a happy sound at their progress.

The earth shakes underneath my legs, making the rock I sit upon tremble. I immediately leap to my feet and race forward, tossing aside my knife and the fruit. The little cove that they practice rafting in is protected by thick corals from the large serpents that crawl through the seas, but they will not be protected from the crashing waves that an earthquake brings.

The other males know how precious my female is, though. They haul her off of the raft and carry her to shore. Waves crash and the raft tumbles and flips in the distance, a chilling reminder of how risky our upcoming journey will be. But for now, that does not matter because my L'ren is in my arms, her wet hair plastered to her lovely skin and her bright eyes wide.

"Shake?" she asks. "Again?" She pauses as the rolling ground stops at once, and a sigh of relief escapes her. "No more."

"No more," I agree. Her grasp of our language grows better every day. I pull her close and hug her body against mine. She seems less scared with every day that passes, but every time the earth shivers, I grow more and more concerned for her safety. I remember when the skies filled with ash and smoke and the ground tore away. I remember the distant screams.

I remember the deaths.

I never want that to happen again. As I hold my trembling mate in my arms, I vow I will return her to her cold land of plenty that is full of females and game. We will have our kit safely there and spend our days in happiness and without fear of the return of the Great Smoking Mountain.

But we must get there first.

“You are safe?” I ask my mate, cupping her head and pressing a kiss to her brow.

She nods, sighing as she burrows against my chest. I do not think she is scared anymore. I think she simply likes touching. My cock responds to her body pressed against mine, and my thoughts go to the distant trees, where we steal our moments together.

A'tam wades out to the raft, while O'jek just rubs his furry jaw and shakes his head at me. “I do not understand the practice. All we are doing is floating. Surely that is not hard.”

L'ren glances up at me, brows furrowed, a sign that she did not understand O'jek's words.

“It is necessary,” I remind him. O'jek is impulsive, for all that he is older than many of us. “The open seas will be dangerous. That will not be the time to learn how to steer the raft. That will be the time we will need to be confident in our skills.”

He snorts. “It seems like work to keep idle hands busy if you ask me. It is an endless delay, and there is no point.”

I scowl at him. His words are thoughtless. “You know very well that it is dangerous on the waters. Enough rafts and paddles for all of us to travel safely takes time. Have we not been cutting trees every day? Weaving ropes? Are our hands not blistered from wielding our axes? Do the huts not stink of quickly cured leather? It is all necessary. It is cold where she is taking us. We will need layers to protect our skin. We will need paddles for our large rafts, and rope to tie them together. We will need spears if one of the water serpents attacks us. We will need all these things.”

But O'jek merely crosses his arms over his chest. “What you say may be truth, but I will speak another truth. Would we have waited so long to go if T'chai were healthy? Or does he cost us time while we wait for him to rise from his bed?”

I growl low in my throat at him as L'ren gives me a worried look. Our words go too fast for her to pick up, but she does not need to hear these things. T'chai is not of my clan, but I would not leave him behind, no matter how weak he is. It is true that

T'chai does not heal from his wounds and that all are worried about him. His body holds a fever some days, and others he seems better. He tires too quickly to leave his bed for long. His skin has a sickly color to it, and his eyes are mere hollows with a dull blue light in his eyes. It is clear to all that he is living day by day. His khui is not strong enough to combat whatever damage the skyclaw did to his body, though it is trying hard. Even the temptation of a resonance mate cannot bring his khui the strength it needs to help him recover.

He will not survive until the rainy season, that much is obvious.

But because there is not much to do but work and wait, that is what we do. O'jek clearly thinks we delay in the hopes that T'chai will be strong enough to paddle, but it is clear to all that he will not be well enough to do so.

All I say to O'jek is, "The females in the cold place will not be going anywhere, O'jek. We can take a few more days to be ready."

He bares his fangs at me and storms back to A'tam's side, displeased with my answer.

L'ren looks up at me with curiosity. "Is okay?"

I have no answer for that, so I shrug. I am not interested in talking about O'jek at the moment. I take her hand and lead her into the jungle.

"Aha. Mating time," she says, a chuckle in her voice as I guide her forward.

She is not wrong. I flash her a grin as we head toward the trees. My L'ren knows me well. Living with three clans clustered together on the Tall Horn beach makes for short tempers. Add in the language barrier between the sakh males and the two "hoo-man" females, T'chai's injury, my resonance with L'ren, the endless task list for our upcoming journey, the fussy kit, the lack of food, and the worry over the earthquakes?

Everyone is on edge. Even J'shel, who is even-tempered and easy to get along with, has flicked his tail in anger more than

once. Sometimes all you can do is leave camp to get out of each other's way.

And because I have a mate, it is quite easy to find reasons to carry her into the trees. The beach is full of prying ears and curious males who listen to every sound my L'ren makes, and I do not want them hearing her cries of pleasure.

Those are for my ears alone.

So, like we have done so many times since our first mating, I haul her into my arms. She twines hers around my neck and begins to kiss my throat and jaw, her legs hitching around my hips. I carry her up into the trees, because climbing is slow and tiring for her. I want her strength for other things.

I automatically camouflage my body to match the tree I climb, letting my skin grow dark with shadow to mimic the play of sunlight on the leaves. She moans appreciation and slides a hand down my chest. "Color," she murmurs. "I like."

I am a vain enough male that I darken my colors, just a bit more, to please her. It has been a full turn of the moons since L'ren and I mated for the first time, and I have not grown tired of her touch. Our khuis have slowed their crazed song into a more pleasant one. Now, when I see her, my khui does not rumble with intense need, but sings with joy at the sight of her.

Just like my heart.

As I have done every other time we have hidden away in the trees, I take her to the top branches and find a solid spot to anchor my body against the trunk. I brace my feet and keep one arm on an overhead branch, and then I turn my focus on her.

Even though M'rsI chooses to bare her skin like the Tall Horn clan, my L'ren insists on wearing her leafy top as well as the loincloth that I prefer. I do not mind this—it gives me great pleasure to rip them off of her every time we mate. I do so now, grinning when she makes a small sound of protest, even as she nips at my chin with her little teeth.

"K'thar make new skirt, yes?" she demands, even as she grabs the braided waist of my loincloth and rips it from my body.

“Whatever you wish, my mate. You know I am yours to command,” I tell her, and slide a hand between her thighs. I cannot help the groan that escapes me when I find her cunt wet with invitation. Already she hungers for me, and I have not even begun to touch her. I caress her sweet folds until she is moaning and riding my hand, and then I adjust our bodies so my cock can sink into her warmth. A push of my hips, and then I am deep inside her.

There is no better feeling than the clasp of her cunt. She cries out softly against me, rubbing her teats against my chest. She likes the tips of them caressed, but even more than that, she likes the little bump between her folds rubbed while I am inside her. It makes her go wild with need. I lean in and capture her mouth with mine to smother her cries as I do just that. She bucks against me, and then I pound into her, each thrust pushing my spur against my fingers and the nub between her thighs. She is so wet that our joined bodies make the sweetest sounds, and it is not long before I can feel the tension overtake her, feel her cunt clasp my cock tight and squeeze as if she is trying to drain me.

It does not take long for me to come after that, and I empty my seed into her body with a joy that has not grown tiresome despite the many times we have done this.

I think I will never grow tired of her body. No matter if I have her a dozen times a day for the rest of our lives. When I am inside her, everything feels...right. Like this is the place I am meant to be.

Afterward, we are both breathing heavy and her skin is damp with sweat. I caress her cheek as she tucks her body against mine. “More shakes,” she tells me. “No good.”

“I know,” I say softly. The ongoing shakes worry me as well. They do not seem to be slowing down. If anything, they are more plentiful now than ever before. Yesterday there was one that seemed to last for the span of several breaths, longer than ever before. “It will be all right.”

She turns in my arms and gazes up at me. “Leave yes? Tomorrow?”

I am silent, because I do not know if we will be ready tomorrow. T'chai is fevered this morning, his body weak. R'jaal is afraid to push him. We do not know how long it will take for the rafts to cross the great water to the cold place, but if it takes too long, we might lose T'chai.

I fear if we lose him, we will lose M'rsi as well. She suffers at the sight of his pain. She has lost weight and there is a dullness in her eyes that worries all of us.

There are only two females. To lose one before she can even have a kit with her chosen mate seems unthinkable.

"I will talk to R'jaal," I say eventually.

"Tomorrow," she repeats, her voice pleading. I know what she is asking. She does not want to stay any longer.

Are we ready to leave? I do not have that answer. I wonder if we will ever be truly, completely ready to abandon our home.

LAUREN

“*H*ow is he this morning?” I ask as I enter Marisol and T’chai’s stone hut. It’s early and while the others are out starting the day, I’m not allowed to leave camp because I don’t have the protective camouflage the others do. I spend most of the day near the hut so I can be with Mari if she needs anything, and to help out with T’chai or N’dek and the baby. I don’t mind because I’m around to oversee the raft building or for people to ask questions, but some days it’s hard.

Like today. Mari’s got a dull look in her eyes and T’chai’s hand is clasped limply in her own. He sleeps, his skin flushed with fever. If it’s possible, he looks worse now than he did when he was injured. At least then, he was strong. Now it seems as if he’s wasting away to nothing, and he doesn’t even have the strength to fight anymore. The hand clasped in Mari’s grip is bony and thin. Some days he’s better, laughing and smiling at his mate from his bed. But then the next day, he’ll be listless and ill once more, all his energy gone, and it becomes clearer than ever that he’s not getting better. On these days, it’s hard to be cheerful and pretend like everything will be okay.

I don’t know that it will be. I don’t know how to comfort when there’s no good answer. But I try anyhow, because it beats sitting around and wringing my hands. I bend down next to

Mari, keeping the authoritative look on my face as if that'll help things.

She shrugs, her movement as limp as the man in his bed. "Bad day." Her voice is dull.

"Tomorrow will be a good one, then."

"Or it won't be," she says softly, stroking his hand. "And then he'll just keep sliding away from me." Her mouth trembles as she gazes down at him. "You know, his cootie's stopped resonating."

I get a sick knot in my stomach. "Maybe it's just gone quiet for the moment. Preserving its strength and all that."

"Or it's given up." She gazes down at his hand, tracing the prominent veins that stretch between his knuckles. "It knows he doesn't have the strength to mate and now it's just one sided. The song in mine changed, too. It's like...remember that news article about the blue whale that sings at a different frequency than all the other whales? It's lonely because it'll never find anyone. Maybe my cootie's like that. It's like the blue whale, singing alone, because it knows that its mate isn't out there anymore."

"You spent way too much time on the internet back at home," I tell her brightly, and give her shoulder a squeeze. "You can't give up."

Her slumped shoulders and lack of response tell me she already has.

Since I'm the one that tries to make everything better, I give her shoulder another squeeze. "We're going to be going back to the others soon, Mari. Very soon."

"And then what?" she asks, a bitter note in her voice. "He can die on the frozen shore instead of the warm one?"

I want to protest that. I want to tell her that it'll be all right. That maybe the others kept some of the ship's medical technology and they can whip something together that can fix whatever is wrong with T'chai. But I'm not even sure I believe that myself. If his cootie, which is supposed to speed up healing, can't fix him, what makes me think that a few

scrapped parts from a now-destroyed spaceship are going to do the job?

“Soon,” I promise her again. And because I know I’m not being helpful to her, I leave, so I can at least be helpful somewhere else. Maybe I can talk to K’tar. Being at his side always makes me feel better, even if it’s only to see him smile and feel his hand on my hair.

I’m shallow, I know. Sometimes I just like to be petted by my favorite guy.

The moment I go outside, though, I see that K’tar is far down the beach, directing M’tok and J’shel as they tie down a pontoon on the side of one of the rafts. No cuddling for me, I guess. I pause to admire his backside, covered in the leafy kilt thing he’s got working. I can’t see his buns—which is a shame, because they’re great buns—but I recognize the twitch of his tail as he stands there, instructing the others. I sigh dreamily when he flexes his shoulders. Maybe I can get him to steal away for a few hours this afternoon under the guise of fruit or egg hunting.

The guy makes me positively insatiable. I always thought I was a bit too level-headed to be one of those “nympho for your man” types, but I guess I was wrong about that. Just thinking about running off into the trees with him for a little while makes my pulse beat a little harder between my thighs in the most intoxicating way. I’m obsessed with him. He’s the first thing I think of when I wake up, and he’s the last thing on my mind before I go to sleep. I’ve never felt this way about anyone. Even the language barrier between us seems to fall a bit more every day. I’m learning him from his smiles and the way he holds himself, the sigh he makes when he’s frustrated...and the growl low in his throat when he’s turned on.

I shiver just thinking about that growl.

The guys on the beach look too busy for me to drag him away, though. This raft is the last one that needs to be finished. There are three large ones—one for each tribe—and the plan is to rope them all together so no matter if the current takes us off

course, wherever we land, we'll be together. It's taken some time to figure out how to make such big rafts float properly. I thought all we'd have to do is tie some wood together and we'd be good to go, but our early attempts flipped over a lot and I'm terrified of the thought of that cold open water full of slithering things and having a raft flip. N'dek won't be able to swim, nor T'chai, or the baby. We have to be as secure as possible, so it took a few more attempts to figure things out. Now, the rafts have extra logs crossing underneath to add more buoyancy, and we've added pontoons on each side to help with stability. N'dek's whittled enough oars for each person to have their own, and we've been tanning hides for days so we'll have warm clothes. The egg baskets are mostly full. Extra fish have been dried and smoked so we'll have something to eat as we journey. We're almost ready.

The thought is terrifying.

For weeks now, I've been banging the drum, insisting that we leave for the far shore that I've reassured them is there. That there are more people waiting, more females, more game, more everything. I'm supposed to guide them to the shore, because that's where I came from. Thing is, now that the time to leave is almost here, I'm afraid. What if the distant shapes I see aren't land after all? What if Mari and I strayed way, way off the path and I can't lead K'thar's people back to Harlow and Liz and the others? What if I screw this up and lead everyone to their deaths?

"No pressure, Lo," I whisper to myself. "This is when you do your best, when everyone needs you. So suck it the fuck up and get to work."

Strangely enough, bullying myself seems to do the job. A reminder that people are counting on me is all that my brain requires to kick into gear. Like I have for so many mornings, I scan the skies, looking for the gigantic predator birds. When I don't see any, I move to the cliffs and begin to climb, heading for the highest vantage point. The cliffs here are made of a soft sort of rock that crumbles easily, which means that grooved steps have been carved into the side of the cliff by constant

use, and that makes it so that even a graceless human like myself can climb to the top.

I make it to the peak, scan the sky again for danger, and then straighten. Up here, the breeze is stiff, the tops of the trees rustling below. This is one of the tallest places left on the island, I think, and it's a good spot to eyeball our journey. I move a rock that's holding down a curled bit of papery bark that I left up here yesterday. Without a lens, I don't know if my "telescope" is just more than a tube to look through, but I feel like it helps my vision regardless. I sit down on the rock and use my bark spyglass to study the waters.

It's very distant, but I'm positive I see mountains of some kind. Maybe not specific mountains that I recognize, but I remember there being mountains. That's good enough for me. It means there's land, and I can't imagine that Mari and I got that far off course. I imagine I would have woken up, wouldn't I? The last thing I remember is Marisol hauling me out of the water into the floating pod, and then nothing. I don't think I'd have slept for days, so it must be less than a day's journey back to the other side.

Which must be those mountains.

I hope.

God, please let me not be wrong. I know my eyes are better now with the cootie. I can see really long distances, but even I'm not sure just how far that land is from here. It's a mere sliver of color, a smudge against the backdrop of endless green ocean water. But the land has to be somewhere close nearby. It makes no sense otherwise. I sigh and drop my bark telescope, a little frustrated. If I could see just a little bit farther...

A shadow drifts into my field of vision overhead.

I've seen enough skyclaw in the last few weeks to know what a danger they are. Heart hammering, I drop to my knees and quickly crawl under the nearest fern, breathing hard. My hands and knees are scraped up, but it doesn't matter. If that thing sees me...

But the shadow drifts overhead and keeps on going. It doesn't stop. I wait, utterly silent, and watch the thing fly off in the distant skies. It's heading for those mountains. That just confirms my suspicion that there's something there at least. I'll deal with the skyclaw problem later. One issue at a time.

As I watch it glide away, to my surprise, I see a second form. Another skyclaw. A third joins it.

That's...odd.

Other than that first day on the beach, we've never seen more than one at a time. The two on the beach at once were a mated pair, but most of the time, I'm told, they hunt alone. Three together seems very, very strange. My skin prickles with awareness as another skyclaw joins the others.

It's like the entire sky is full of them.

What is going on?

"L'ren!" K'thar bellows nearby. "L'ren? ANSWER!"

I can hear the terror in his voice. He's seen them, too. "I'm up here," I call back. "On top of the cliff!" I don't know all those words in his language yet, but he can follow the sound of my voice. I'm not getting out from under the bushes until I know it's safe.

I pick thorns from my palms and watch the fleet of skyclaw in the muddy-looking sky. I've only been here a month, of course, so maybe this is normal, but it seems frightening to me. What could cause so many of the big predators to up and leave their hunting grounds?

Of course, the moment the thought crosses my mind, the earth begins to shake.

I bite back the scream building in my throat. Not again.

I close my eyes and hug my knees to my chest, waiting for the earth to stop trembling. Each earthquake is terrifying to me. I can't ignore them like the others do, though I try hard to pretend I'm not freaking out every time one happens. They happen more often than we eat, and yet I can't sit back and pretend they're not happening, that the earth isn't shaking.

That we're not perched atop the remains of an active volcano and that's why we're living in a steamy island paradise in the middle of iceberg country. Each earthquake never lasts long, though. I always brace myself, waiting for this to be the "one," but it never is. The world trembles for a moment or two, and then goes still.

Until today. It shivers and I count off the seconds. One. Two. Five. Ten. Eleven before it stops. Then it starts again, almost immediately. This one lasts for five seconds. A third tremor falls right behind, and then the world goes still once more.

It's so quiet I can hear my heart thudding painfully loud in my chest. That's too many earthquakes in too short a period. Something's wrong.

"L'ren," K'thar calls, and I scramble out from under the bushes and fling myself into his arms. I hug his neck tightly, and when I can finally choke down a breath, I point up at the sky, where the skyclaw are all retreating. "Look!"

He nods, a grim look on his face. "They go."

My alien sounds far too calm, and I shake my head at him. "You don't get it. They're fleeing. They're all fleeing this place! We need to go, too!" As if to punctuate my words, the earth shakes again in another quick tremor.

At that, K'thar gives me a grim look and nods. "*We* go."

Thank god. Finally, we're getting out of this place.

K'THAR

I do not waste breath asking my mate if she can climb down from the cliffs. There is no time. The ground beneath our feet shudders and shakes, and overhead, the skyclaw head away from the jungle in great numbers. They know something we do not, and like my L'ren has been trying to warn us, the Great Smoking Mountain is not dead.

I think of the time seasons ago, the way the world burned and the skies filled with smoke and the air clogged with ash. I remember it was so thick that we spit and wept gray for several turns of the moons, and it covered us like a second skin. I remember my camouflage was the color of ash for so long that when I turned blue once more, it surprised me. I remember the trees withering and dying and a season of starvation.

But mostly I remember the deaths. So many died. My parents. My father's brother and his kits. Our clan went from seven hands of people to just one in a mere heartbeat. The same with Shadowed Cat and Tall Horn. I remember the clan of the Long Tail, who chose not to send anyone on the hunter's challenge that day. None survived.

We must leave here before that happens again.

I fling my L'ren over my shoulder and climb down the side of the cliff with all the speed I have in my arms. For once she makes no protest and does not demand to go on her own. I make it down and then we race forward, meeting the others on the beach.

“We should not wait any longer,” R'jaal tells me, rushing to meet me. He holds a pack in his hands and waves M'tok forward. I see the Shadowed Cat clan dragging the rafts toward the water, and J'shel races past, bundles of supplies in his arms. Somewhere in one of the huts, Z'hren wails, upset. It is all chaos.

I nod to R'jaal, who seems to be the only calm one other than myself. “I will help those unable to get to the rafts on their own. Make sure the supplies are evenly distributed between all three tribes.”

He looks as if he will protest my order—R'jaal does not like to take direction from me—but bites back his protest and nods.

My mate slides out of my arms. “Z'hren,” she tells me. “Bb ndzsus.”

I nod at her. “You retrieve Z'hren, my mate. I will get T'chai.”

“Yes, T'chai,” she tells me, then grabs my hand and kisses my knuckles. She gives me a nod and a smile, then dashes toward the hut that N'dek and Z'hren have temporarily made their own. Even in this madness, she thinks of me. It warms my heart and my khui sings a gentle song of happiness. There will be more time for that later, though.

For now, we must all escape.

I move to the hut and see M'rs! there. She jumps to her feet, her cheeks wet with tears, and babbles something in her strange language. Unlike my mate, she has made no attempt to learn our words. I cannot judge her, though. She has tirelessly waited on T'chai both day and night. She will have time to speak our words when he is better. “Come,” I tell her, moving to T'chai's side. “We will go now.”

“Wt! Cntmvim!” She grabs my arm. “S'woondid!”

“We must go,” I tell her again calmly and pull her hand from my forearm. “Before the Great Smoking Mountain dies once more.” I move to T’chai’s side and kneel next to him. The male’s abdomen is bloated and looks discolored underneath the crisscross of angry wounds. His face is pale but covered in sweat, and his camouflage seems to have bled out of him entirely. He is not long for this world, and I hesitate at moving him.

Then again, none of us are long for this world if we stay.

I ignore M’rsl and her unhappy protests as I gently take him in my arms and carry him out to the rafts. She stops screaming at me when she sees the others, and races to his side, clasping his hand even as I haul him toward the nearest raft. Perhaps she has realized what is happening.

R’jaal meets me at the edge of the rafts. “Strong Arm will take the lead raft,” he tells me. “Since this is your journey.” His smile is thin. “And you have more arms than us to paddle with.”

Does he think we will lead them to their death? “My L’reu knows the way,” I reassure him, and set T’chai down gently on the second raft in the small group of three. Nearby, S’bren tests the ropes and A’tam lashes the supply packs down so they will not fall overboard.

I hear an angry squawk, and when I turn, I see my mate with Fat One perched on one shoulder, Z’hren in her arms. She keeps a protective hand over the kit’s head and scans the skies, as if she is afraid something will harm him from above. Behind her, N’dek limps out, leaning heavily on O’jek of Shadowed Cat.

If it were any other day, there would be much teasing of the three rival clans working together. But today, no one is laughing.

M’rsl points at the sky behind us and says something. My mate gasps.

I turn and look. On the far end of the island, where the smoke pours endlessly into the sea, black clouds of ash boil and

billow into the skies as if someone has lit a great fire. I remember this. It is dangerous.

Lives will be lost if we stay. It is decided, then.

“We go,” I tell the group sharply, pointing M’rsl to the raft with her mate and then gently easing my mate toward the first one. “Let us waste no more time here.”



WE PADDLE OUT, silent. For once, there is no bickering amongst our clans. Everyone is silent and gets to work. Since we are at the front of the raft chain, we have the toughest work ahead of us. Our paddles dig into the water and we head away from the shore as quickly as we can. Even N’dek, who has not put effort into anything since his injury, paddles with grim determination. My mate holds Z’hren in her arms and shushes him when he cries, causing Fat One to squawk angrily. I did not realize the flyer was coming with us, but when the animal settles on my shoulder with a flap of his wings, I cannot resist giving him an affectionate scratch. I am glad for his presence. It will remind me of home even as we leave it behind.

The current fights against us for a time, but once we get farther out, it eases a bit and then we are carried along as if on a breeze. We rest for a moment and I scan the water. Never have I been this far out. The things that dwell in the water are fierce and hungry, but today they seem silent. Perhaps we are lucky, or perhaps they do not know what to make of our large wooden crafts. Either way, I will gladly take whatever luck we get. Time passes. No one speaks. The kit falls asleep in L’re’s lap and she shades his face with a leather blanket. The air grows cooler as we get farther and farther out into the water.

“Look,” J’shel says after a time. His voice is low, frightened. “Behind us.”

I turn, my paddle resting on my thigh, and glance behind us. I immediately scan the rafts of the others, but nothing seems amiss. Then I see it. Massive clouds of smoke, twice the size they were before, billowing out from the island. Not just in one spot, either. The gray of it stretches in a long line, and I realize the trees are burning.

Our home. It is being destroyed. The trees we carved into our new clan home will be gone, along with the kaari and all the nightflyers that live in their branches. The huts of our ancestors that make up the Tall Horn home will be gone next. The Shadowed Cat caves will be likely destroyed as well. Nothing will be left.

There is nowhere to go but forward. Grimly, I turn ahead once more and dig my paddle into the waters. My mate and my kit need safety. If that means the cold place on the far end of the water, that is where we will go.

LAUREN

It's near dawn when I wake up to Z'hren nuzzling at my top, trying to feed.

"Whoa, little buddy," I tell him in a gentle voice as I detangle my limbs from a sleeping K'thar's. Sometime in the middle of the night he migrated over to my side of the raft and held me away from the edge. I've ended up in the middle of the thing with the baby, and Kki perches on a basket nearby, ruffling his wings and looking indignant at his surroundings. I sit up and adjust the baby, handing him a chunk of an edible root for him to gnaw on. We should have prepared better for travel, I think. There are eggs, and dried fish, of course, but I feel reluctant to break out an egg when our journey's just beginning. What if this takes longer than we thought?

It's already been a day.

I glance up at the skies. It's dawn, or that dreamy, pale color just before the two tiny suns rise. The sky itself is an angry, cloudy gray and the temperature has dropped overnight. It's getting colder the farther we get from the island. I glance behind us to see how far we've come, but I can't see it. Sometime while I was sleeping, the island went out of view entirely. I turn to look at the distant mountains that we're heading toward. I can't tell if they're any closer, and that's worrying. Is the current taking us away? Or is it going

sideways when we should be going straight forward? I don't know if we can paddle such a long distance against the current if that's the case. I just hope something looks encouraging soon.

I worry I've led the others into a trap. Surely...surely it can't be that hard to lead people to the other side of the water, when we can see the purple peaks in the distance? I have to believe this will turn out well. Have to.

Z'hren throws the bit of root down and makes a fussy cry. I know how he feels. I want to get up and stretch my legs, but we're all piled onto this raft on top of one another and it makes everything tricky. You lose your modesty fast, but you also lose your temper fast. I make a clucking sound at him and pull him closer, even as his little fists grab at my hair. I wince—four fists mean lots of hair pulling. “Now, Z'hren—”

An earth-shattering boom fills the skies.

I fling myself on top of the baby in terror, and a moment later, I feel K'thar's big form covering mine. The raft wobbles as everyone scrambles awake. I realize a moment later that I'm screaming. My mouth is open, but I can't hear anything. My ears ring and I realize that I can't hear K'thar, or the baby crying underneath me. I can't hear the waves. There's no sound at all but silence and the endless droning sound in my ears.

The volcano—it's exploded.

K'thar touches me, and as I look over at him, I see he's camouflaged to match the raft. I watch his mouth moving, but I can't hear him, either. I've heard of people going deaf from a gun that discharges too close to the ear, and I hope to god this doesn't last forever. “I'm okay,” I tell him, or at least, I hope I do. I can't hear myself talk.

I sit upright, trying to comfort Z'hren. The baby's fussing, his face screwed up with anger, but there's no sound. I watch K'thar as he touches each member of his small tribe, making sure they're all right. Kki flings himself onto K'thar's shoulder and my mate—my sweet, wonderful mate—grabs the terrified bird and clutches it tight against his chest, stroking the wings

to calm it. I feel a jealous stab at him holding the bird, because I want to be held like that, too. But I've got the baby in my arms and he's busy checking on the others.

I glance down the raft line and the other tribes seem to be awake, everyone rubbing their ears and looking confused. Someone points behind us and I see that there's nothing but a black curtain of ash behind us where the island used to be. Thank god we got away.

A hand lands on the back of my neck, caressing it, and I glance over at K'thar, grateful for that small touch. Even though I can't hear my cootie, I can feel it thrumming in my chest. I'm so glad he's here.

I'm so glad he's mine.

I smile over at him, feeling weak and shaky. We're safe for now. We've got this, as long as we're together. I look over where Marisol is, and she's got T'chai's hand in hers, the big warrior still lying flat in the center of the raft. It's while I'm looking over at them that I see the surge of water heading our way.

Oh...oh fuck.

Someone else notices on the third raft and gestures wildly. I barely have time to grab on to the vine ropes and anchor myself and the baby in my arms before I feel K'thar's big body shield me again. I squeeze my eyes shut, holding my breath and bracing for the worst.

The raft surges and I can feel all of us lift up, like an elevator moving between floors. A moment later, we ease back down again, and when I lift my head, I can see the wave racing past. Oh.

I wish there was a way to warn the people on shore that a tidal wave was heading in their direction. I can only hope it won't be so bad by the time it gets there. For now, though, we have to worry about ourselves. A quick head-check shows that only one person was washed overboard—A'tam—but he was able to swim quickly back to the raft and climb onboard. He shivers

with cold and someone offers him a fur blanket. Everyone looks dazed and frightened.

I know just how they feel.



THE TIDAL WAVE, even just the tiny crest of it that we got, seems to have carried us a bit closer to shore. As the day wears on, I don't have to worry that we're paddling in the right direction. The purple peaks of the mountains, once so distant, are now in sight. They're still a far ways off, but now we know that we're heading somewhere and that it's not in my head, which is a relief.

My ears continue ringing for a few hours and I can start to hear the voices of the others again toward sunset. We're careful with our water and our food, rationing it just in case we run into trouble. K'thar paddles endlessly, as if he never grows tired, and I'm impressed with his stamina. I curl up next to him while the baby sleeps, and he keeps one hand on us, holding both of us protectively close. I feel tired and dirty and gritty from sea salt, and it's no longer temperate in the slightest. The air is bitterly cold and I watch my breath puff up in clouds. The others have taken to wearing the layers of furs that they laughed at me for insisting on, and I can see the shocked surprise in J'shel's face as he blows on his hands to warm them. I can't blame him for not believing me when I said how cold it was. The island is so warm and sultry.

Was, I remind myself. Was so warm and sultry. It's gone now, and nothing remains of it except the ringing in my ears, the choking black curtain at the far end of the sky that acts as a tombstone of sorts, and the ash that's started to fall from overhead. At first I thought it was snow, but a taste of it on my lips made me spit. Definitely ash.

All of this worries me, and I try to keep Z'hren's mouth covered as he sleeps, even though he fights me on it. We can't help breathing some of the ash, but it's dangerous to suck in large mouthfuls of it. Of course, everything's dangerous right now. I look longingly at the shore, still no closer than it was a few hours ago despite all the paddling.

To my side, K'thar shifts, and then I see his knives come out. He rests them on his legs, scanning the waters.

A prickle goes up my spine and I sit upright. "What is it?" I touch his arm in case his hearing is still wiped. "K'thar?"

He points to the center of the raft, indicating I should move there. I edge toward it and he hands me Kki. I've got my arms full of bird and baby, and I'm about to protest when he goes utterly still next to me.

"What?" I ask again, worried. "Is it the mountain? Something else?" When he gazes back down at the water, ever watchful, the hackles on my skin go up. "Is it something in the water?" I look back to the other rafts, the aliens sprawled out atop them. R'jaal has his spear in hand, and O'jek watches the water as well. I peer over the side as much as I dare, but I don't see anything.

A long, tense moment ticks past. I watch K'thar for clues, and relax when his shoulders ease from their tight position. Whatever it was, it's gone—

A silver coil reaches up and snags K'thar's arm, fast as lightning, and drags him over the side of the raft.

He's gone before I can even scream. My heart stops beating. I can't hear anything but the sound of lapping water hitting the edges of the raft. "K'thar!" R'jaal calls, moving protectively to the front of his raft. Mari cries out as the entire thing bobs back and forth, and I can feel their raft jerking on the cord that holds ours to them.

None of that matters. My K'thar—my mate—is gone. There's not even a hint of him above the water, not a ripple. I take a breath, and it feels like my heart is being torn out of my chest. No. No! This isn't real. This isn't happening. I set Z'hren down in the center of the raft and the bird with him, scrambling to the side. I'm going in after him. Maybe—

"No, L'ren," J'shel says, grabbing my ankle. I want to scream in his face, but then he flings himself overboard, knife in his teeth, and disappears under the water as well. He wasn't pulled in—he went in after my guy.

Z'hren starts wailing, and I pick him up, cradling him close. Oh god. Oh god. What can I do? The urge to go after him battles inside me, but N'dek and Z'hren can't be left on this raft alone. But if he dies...

I don't want to live if he dies. A sob breaks from my throat and Z'hren cries even harder. Kki screams his own protest in my ear, and it seems like the entire world is wailing with me. The water is so still, so very still that I can't stand it. Please, I tell the world around me. Please don't take him.

"K'thar!" R'jaal bellows, squatting at the edge of his raft, spear in hand. "J'shel! K'thar!"

"Look," N'dek says, and I realize dimly that he's at my side, two knives in his hands. He babbles something else I don't understand and then points at the water.

I see nothing, and then a head bursts through the surface. K'thar flings his hair back off his face, and I realize he's camouflaged to the same murky green as the ocean. J'shel surfaces a moment later, scratches clawed over his bloody face, and they both start swimming toward the raft.

I start laughing. Or crying. Probably crying. They feel like the same right now.

K'thar climbs onto the raft, wobbling the entire thing. I don't care. I give him my arm and help him climb on board, not caring that he's icy wet and his entire body shudders. All I can see is that as his camo slowly turns back to his normal color, he's covered in scratches and circular bruises that look like they came from tentacle suckers. J'shel is similarly beat up, with a colorful lash around his throat that speaks of the fight that happened under the water, too deep for even a splash to make it to the surface. Did so many minutes pass, then? Or was the fight quick and brutal?

It doesn't matter. All that matters is my K'thar is back. I grab him and hold him close, still sobbing with relief. I'm all emotional it seems. Gone is the Lo-will-take-charge mentality. I almost lost him, in the blink of an eye. All it took was a moment and then there wouldn't be a K'thar in this world any

longer. My calm is gone and I just cry and cry and cry while he rocks me against his wet chest and tries to soothe my tears.

“Llo,” he murmurs after a time, stroking my cheek. “Is good. All good.”

“I know,” I blubber, and then I just start crying even more when N’dek takes the crying baby from my arms and shoves a blanket into K’thar’s hands. I realize he’s freezing, ice in his wet hair and I haven’t been taking care of him. I should have handled that.

K’thar hands the blanket over to J’shel with a quiet word. Oh, J’shel. He saved my mate. I move to the other man’s side and make him bend down so I can kiss his cheek, weeping. “You are the best guy ever, I swear.”

“Llo K’thar,” my mate growls, pulling me back to his side. J’shel just gives me a bewildered look.

I don’t even mind that my guy is possessive. When he pulls a blanket around his shoulders and then pulls me underneath it, I plaster myself against him gladly. And I cry a little more, because I’m going to have this tiny mental breakdown, damn it, and then I’ll be calm.

Tomorrow, I’ll be back to myself. Today, I’m going to be a little bit of a mess and that’s okay.

LAUREN

The warriors are on high alert for the rest of the afternoon. Now that we know that the things in the water are aware of us, and that they're hungry, I see spears and knives out instead of paddles. K'thar and the others insist that Z'hren and I move to the center of the raft at all times, and I know they're being protective. I want to help out, but it's not worth the argument, so I move to the middle...and K'thar's tail stays wrapped around my ankle at all times, as if he's unwilling to let me go. I don't mind that in the slightest.

I never want him out of my sight again. I don't care if that's clingy. I'll happily cling to that alien's leg for the rest of my life as long as it means we're together, always. I'm crazy with love for him, and I tell him over and over again every time he touches me. I don't know that he understands the word 'love' but it doesn't matter. My touches tell him everything.

It's near sunset on day two when I see a tiny plume of smoke drifting against the pinkish golden sky. The mountains have loomed steadily closer, and that smoke on the horizon excites me. It's not enough smoke to be another volcano. It's tiny and thin, but I think it's just the right size for an encampment's fire.

They're still there at the beach. Thank god.

I point it out, and we start to paddle in that direction. It's against the current, but with four strong arms to each man on the raft, we're able to push ahead until we plow close enough to shore that the waves start to carry us forward. I can see the fire on the cliffs against the twilight, and I feel a bit of excitement—and worry—in the pit of my stomach.

Do the others—Harlow and her mate, Liz and hers, Vektal and Rokan and all the other blue aliens—think Marisol and I are dead? No one ever came after us, but they sank the only ship. Granted, it was a spaceship, but rafting over from the island—and K'thar's near death—tells me that the water's too dangerous for a lot of crossings back and forth. Even now I look at the dark waters around us with terror and dread. I can't wait to be off of this raft and back on shore.

I wonder—far too late, of course—if more mouths to feed will be welcome. I never stopped to think about if there was enough food for all. Surely there will be. And I wonder what's happened in the month that we've been gone. Has anyone else resonated? Have they built shelters?

Has Willa been found? Or is she...dead? I don't like to think about that.

I brush ash off of my arms as I lean forward on the raft. It's not like that will help things move along, but I feel the need to lean just the same. I'm eager to get back to the others, to bring K'thar and his people to shore. To get their bellies full of hot food and show them that yes, there are other people left, and they're good guys and we can all live happily together on the beach.

I hope. God, I hope. I've seen how the three different groups get along and they bicker and fight, but the three rafts strung together tell me that they're willing to work together for a common cause. I hope that my blue guys will feel the same about Harlow and Liz's blue guys. I'm so nervous.

Like it or not, though, there's no going back. There's no island to go back to. The ash falling on my arms and in my hair is proof of that. If they don't want us with them...we'll just go elsewhere. We can figure out how to catch food on our own,

and I remember a little how to build a fire. We'll manage. One step at a time, that's all it takes.

But then our rafts are sliding toward shore, carried in by the rolling tide. No one at the distant campfire has noticed us yet, as we're pretty far down the rocky beach. It's bitterly cold, though, and Z'hren makes fussy noises of distress until I wrap him tighter against my chest, snuggled under the layers of furs I wear.

Ignoring the cold, R'jaal and K'thar get out and wade to shore, then guide the raft chain in, tugging us forward. One by one, we step onto land, and my legs wobble with relief as I step onto the crunching sand. Thank you, sand. Thank you, mountains. Thank you, distant fire. Thank you for being here, because I'm mighty tired of ocean.

It takes a few minutes for everyone to pile onto the beach. Some of the others think to grab supplies, and M'tok and S'bren help carry T'chai forward, Marisol at his side. Everyone huddles in the cold, waiting.

Then A'tam clears his throat. "Is cold," he points out, his toothy grin bright in the darkness. "Fire?"

They all watch me, waiting. Oh, of course. I feel silly for making them wait. I've been the one demanding and fussing and pushing this entire time. I need to see things through until the end and not just hand over the reins on the beach. I gesture at the fire. "I'm going to go say hello and remind them that Mari and I are alive. Are you coming, Mari?"

She hesitates, then clasps her mate's hand. "I want to stay with T'chai." Her voice is wobbly, as if she's fighting back tears. "Just in case."

Just in case.... Is he that bad she worries he'll die at any moment? My heart aches for her and I nod. "All right, I'll go alone." I gesture to the others and hand Z'hren over to K'thar. "Wait here."

My big alien scowls at me and hands the baby to N'dek. Kki perches on K'thar's shoulder and he tries to shoo him off, but

the thing only flaps its wings, irritated, and stays. “K’tar go,” my mate tells me. “K’tar Llo.”

I can guess what that means—we’re a team, and we do this together. Even though I’m a little worried at how they’ll take the sight of a new guy—especially one that changes colors and has four arms—I’m glad that he’s going to be at my side. It seems right. I extend my hand to him. “Lo K’tar,” I agree. He’s mine and I’m his.

K’tar speaks quietly to the others and I see U’dron and I’rec drop their packs on shore, getting comfortable for the wait. I hope it won’t be long, but I don’t know how the others are going to react. I shouldn’t be worried—they accepted all of us humans with open arms. But a lot has happened in the last month on my end, and I can’t even presume to think of what’s happened on this beach while we’ve been gone.

But then my mate gives Kki to J’shel and turns to me. He takes my hand and pulls me under his furs, keeping me warm, and then we’re walking down the beach toward the fire, and toward our new home. It’s a short walk, maybe five or ten minutes, and the only thing I can hear for the longest time is the hum of his khui in his chest and the crash of the waves against the shore. As we move forward, though, I can hear... singing coming from the campfire ahead.

Really, really bad singing.

“I swear, you guys really are the worst,” Liz says, her voice rising above the others. “You couldn’t hold a tune in a bucket, Zolaya.”

A ripple of laughter meets her insult, and the one called Zolaya starts singing louder—and she’s right. He’s terrible. There’s more laughter, and then a gasp. Several people jump to their feet, staring into the shadows.

Staring at us.

I swallow hard and then step forward, pushing K’tar behind me. “Hi honey, we’re home.”

K'THAR

The urge to camouflage in front of all of these strangers is overwhelming. I grew up surrounded by more people than this, but they were not unknown to me. They did not stare at me with wide, startled eyes or look at me as if assessing whether or not I was a danger. But if I camouflage here, it is not a simple tearing away of a leaf loincloth and blending into the trees. There are no trees here, and if I fling aside the heavy leathers on my body, I am in great danger of freezing my tail off.

But my mate gives a happy cry as another female, heavy with kit, moves forward to hug her. And then another, and then they are all making excited noises and crying, and I think this must be good. One of the males comes forward, eyeing me, and says something to my mate.

She moves to my side, happiness in her eyes even as she weeps, and puts a hand to my chest. "Sis K'thar. Eezmimayt."

The big male's eyes narrow. He asks something in the strange hoo-man tongue and L'ren shakes her head, looking unhappy at the question. She mentions M'rsI and gestures down at the beach and indicates that there are more of us waiting.

The male nods and turns to one of the others standing at his side, a big ugly creature with two arms and twisted horns. "Go with them when they bring the others."

I pause, startled. His accent was strange, and the way he spoke our words odd, but...I understood him. I step forward. "You speak the tongue of the sakh?"

The male looks over at me in surprise. "I am Vektal," he says, moving to clasp my arm as he studies my face. "And I was not sure if you were one of us until just now."

I clasp his arm in greeting as well, and realize that I am camouflaging. Ah. I let my skin return to its normal shade and realize that even in the dark, I can tell that he is a much deeper blue than I am. There are other differences as well. His brow and his skin has thick, ridged plates. He does not have four arms, but we are of a similar height, though I am much broader, much bigger with muscle. His horns are as large as R'jaal's and I wonder if this is what the ancestors looked like before they met with the others and became four clans instead of one.

There is much to learn here, I realize.

"My clan waits on the beach," I tell him. "Our home is destroyed."

He gives me a curious look. "Where was your home? We knew Lo-ren and Mar-ee-sol were missing, but our trackers could not find them. We were waiting for them to return to the beach, but we never thought...that they would bring others."

The one called Vektal speaks their names strangely, even more strangely than how my mate says her words. I notice she watches us speak, her brow furrowed. She cannot understand our words and I feel another bubble of frustration even as there is relief that I can speak with the others here. Still we cannot share our thoughts as I wish. Soon, I resolve. Once all are safe, we will learn each other's language. For now, there are more urgent matters. "We lived in the green jungle, across the water."

Another nearby looks amused. His horns are curving and proud, but I notice there is a small broken kink in the tail that whisks back and forth as he crosses his arms over his chest. "An island? Jo-see still speaks of it. She swears there was one across the waters."

I nod. "It has been destroyed with the second death of the Great Smoking Mountain. Even now, it rains its tears down on us." I wipe a smear of ash off my arms.

Vektal grunts agreement. "You are welcome here as long as you pose no danger to us or our females."

"Never." I look at my L'ren. "I would never harm a female."

She smiles at me. "Eezagudgyy," she tells Vektal.

He asks her something.

"Oh!" L'ren says. "Firesaksident. Wsnchoo. WsMrsI, justmstayk. Datsall."

Vektal looks relieved. "Thotwsmeem," he says in her odd language. "Dat eyemist smthn."

"Newp. Sallgood." She beams at him and looks over at me. "Turntoutgrate."

My L'ren must speak pleasantly of me, judging from the way the others are staring. It makes me feel possessive and I reach out for her. She presses her cheek into my hand, nuzzling it.

Vektal looks surprised when I reach for my mate, and I realize why. My leathers have fallen back and revealed that I have four arms, not two puny ones like him. I can hear a startled murmur around the fire.

"I see there is much for our tribes to discuss," Vektal says to me. "More than just how you kept the humans hidden for so long." His gaze falls to my arms. "Many, many things to discuss."

It seems so.

LAUREN

It feels like the beach is ridiculously crowded. As people surge forward, making room for the newcomers near the fire, there's a ton of chatter around me and it feels overwhelming. I'm hugged and patted on the back, given fresh furs and food and a place by the fire. Z'hren's in my arms and he's cooed at and

offered treats, and several women put their arms out to hold him. After days on the raft in relative quiet, it feels overwhelming. I just want to be in bed with my K'thar, but I know it'll be a while before everyone calms down enough for sleeping arrangements.

Over the din of the crowd, I can hear Marisol's sobbing. "He's sick," I hear her say, and I know she's talking about T'chai. The others of his tribe are clustered around him, reluctant to leave his side even though I catch M'tok giving curious glances at the women near the fire.

"It will be well," a soothing voice says, and then I see Farli put an arm around Mari's shoulders. "Let us bring him to Vuh-ron-ca. She will be able to help."

"She will?" Mari sniffs, surprised. "How?"

I have to echo that sentiment—my memories of Veronica were of a plain, brown-haired woman with clumsy feet and not much else to call attention to her. Oh, and the golden-skinned guy she resonated to.

"Vuh-ron-ca is a healer," Farli says with authority. "We will bring your mate to her and she will make him better."

A healer? I'm surprised. Veronica seemed so...bland. "Wow," I murmur, watching as the group of R'jaal's men carry T'chai to one of the distant tents.

"I know. It's pretty impressive," Hannah says, moving to stand next to me. "I've seen what she can do." A funny look crosses her face and she turns away almost as quickly as she arrived. "I, uh, need to check on something."

As she races away, I see J'shel get to his feet on the other side of the fire. He has a hand over his heart, a shocked look on his face. Oh boy. I recognize that expression. A moment later, a smile creases his mouth and then he races after her. There's an intent gleam in his eyes and he heads after Hannah.

"Uh oh," Nadine says, moving to the spot Hannah vacated. Samantha is on the other side of her, and they both share a knowing grin. "Looks like someone got hit with the resonance stick."

“You think?” I glance at my mate, and he’s watching J’shel retreat, a pleased look on his face.

“Oh yeah,” Samantha agrees. “Look at Cashol racing after him. Every time someone resonates, they get a chaperone to make sure no one’s pressuring us into having sex before we’re ready. Poor Ashtar was going to murder Zolaya for shadowing them all the time. And the twins are fascinated with Angie, so someone’s always at her side.”

“Wow. I feel like I’ve missed a lot.” My head is spinning.

“Yeah, but I feel the same way about you,” Nadine says. She makes grabby hands at Z’hren. “Gimme the baby.”

I hand him over, tired. He weighs more by the minute, it seems.

“Look at how cute he is!” Nadine squeals, laughing when he camouflages to match her darker skin. “And four chubby little baby fists. Oh my goodness. I could eat you with a spoon.”

“Better carve one first,” Samantha says, and gives the baby an affectionate chuck under his chin.

I hear Kki make an indignant sound as J’shel disappears, and Sam gasps. “What the fuck was that?”

“Pet bird,” I say, putting my arm out as I see Kki doing his wobbling flight overhead. He’s scared but clearly wants to land. I know from my time with the others that Kki has a bad wing and can’t fly far, which is why he’s such a clingy pet. He immediately lands on my arm, crawls up my sleeve to my shoulder, and then buries his face in my hair. Poor thing. I pet his ugly little face. I know just how he feels. I want K’tar, too, but he’s still talking in hushed voices with Vektal, the chief, and they are both watching the others. Probably waiting to see if anyone else resonates.

“Are you sure that’s a bird?” Sam asks, wrinkling her nose.

“Or a bat. Whatever you want to call him.” I rub Kki’s nose. “He’s hungry, though. We all are.”

“Come sit,” Harlow tells me, a note of steel in her sweet voice.

Hands push me forward and then I'm at the center of the group clustered near the fire, and even farther from my mate. I give him a helpless look as he talks to the chief. He starts to push to my side, through the crowd, and people gasp as he moves to stand behind me, his hands on my shoulders, staking his claim.

I might be a little proud of that small movement. Just a little. I like being claimed by him. I put my hand over one of his, and Kki pecks at my fingers. Harlow appears at my side with a bowl of cooked meat and nuts, and I give Kki a chunk before offering some to my mate. The little creature's an omnivore and eats anything put in front of him.

My K'thar pushes the bowl back into my hands. "Eat," he says gruffly.

"You were the one paddling," I protest, trying to give it back to him. "I can wait."

He growls low in his throat and I roll my eyes.

"Uh, you guys realize there's enough food for everyone, right?" Liz appears with a second bowl, and then everyone is sitting down and getting comfortable by the fire with food in their hands. I don't eat until K'thar is handed a bowl, and then I nibble on my food, making sure that my mate is eating enough. I know it's his habit to give food to myself and the baby instead of eating on his own, but as I watch him wolf his food, I'm relieved. He needs his strength as much as I do.

I absorb gossip as people talk around us, and it seems that everyone can speak the aliens' language but me. I try not to feel left out at this realization, but when Ereven says something and my mate laughs, I want to know what it was. I pick at my food, unsure how to feel.

"So did you hear about Willa?" Nadine asks, feeding a bit of broth to Z'hren.

"No," I breathe. "Is she okay? Did they find her?"

"Oh yeah," Nadine says, a wry expression on her face. "She and Gren resonated. That pairing's a bit of a mess, because he won't come back to camp. It's all fucked up."

It sounds like it. “Poor Willa.” To think that my sweet friend is tied to that monster.

“Mmm, I wouldn’t feel too bad for her,” Nadine says, and Sam snickers at her side. “They make a lot of noise up the hill, if you know what I’m saying.”

I can feel myself blushing. I can only imagine. “I see.”

“Since we’re getting to the real meat of things here, I want to know about the four hands—” Sam begins before Nadine bursts into giggles.

“Yes, I wish to know about the four hands as well,” Vektal says, stepping toward the fire.

The two at my side giggle even more crazily, and I can hear Liz snickering nearby. My face feels like it’s going to catch on fire, I’m blushing so damn hard. “Uh…” is all I say.

“My ancestors did not have four arms,” Vektal continues, with a glance at my mate. “I wish to know how it happened.”

Oh. Now I feel like blushing even more because I was trying to think of a tactful way to tell Vektal that it was none of his damn business how K’tar puts his hands on me. Of course he’s asking something innocent. It’s just my mind that goes to filthy places. Filthy, filthy mind. “I don’t know—we can’t really talk to each other. I’ve learned some of his words but not enough.” I can’t quite keep the jealousy out of my voice, either. How unfair is it that Vektal can chit-chat with my man five minutes after meeting him and I’ve been with K’tar a month and I still can’t ask him basic stuff about himself?

Vektal frowns. “You did not receive the language from Mardok before you left, did you?”

“Nope.” There were plans to get it somehow, but now the ship is at the bottom of the ocean. Stuff just happened too quickly and there was no time.

“Come,” Vektal says. “He can fix that for you.” He looks at my mate and says something, and then K’tar takes the squawking Kki off my shoulder, handing him over to N’dek, who is seated nearby and shoveling food into his mouth as fast as he can.

He can fix that? Right now? “Really?” I ask, jumping to my feet. When K’tar touches my arm, I automatically grab his hand in mine and drag him behind me.

“Yes,” Vektal says, and gestures at the cluster of tents in the distance, where the encampment is set up.

I follow eagerly, not caring that it’s cold beyond the warmth of the fire. Who cares about a bit of cold when I will soon have the ability to talk to K’tar? Really, really talk to him? I’m so excited I’m practically dancing as we stride up the hill from the beach.

Vektal chats with K’tar as we head up the hill, and then gestures at one of the tents. In the distance, I can see a hint of candlelight and several people standing in the doorway of another tent while Veronica presses her hands on T’chai’s abdomen, an intent look on her face. We head past their tent and into one of the nearer ones, where Farli’s slinky-looking furry pony-thing paws at the snow and nibbles on something underneath it. Vektal scratches at the door flap, then waits.

Someone clears their throat and then speaks, and Vektal pulls the flap back.

It’s dark inside, but a moment later, a flame is sparked and I watch as Farli lights a candle. Her hair is disheveled and her mouth puffy, and Mardok adjusts the front of his leggings and turns his back to us as he moves toward one of the baskets in the back of the tent. “Language chips, right?” he says in English. “I can do that.”

Farli just looks busily at the fire, poking it with a stick.

“Did we interrupt?” I ask, feeling a little embarrassed. I squeeze K’tar’s hand. I guess it won’t be the end of the world if we have to wait until morning to talk.

“If we waited for these two to pull themselves apart, we would be waiting a very long time,” Vektal says, voice amused.

Farli just chuckles and gestures at the furs near the firepit. “Come have a seat.”

“This will not take long,” Mardok adds, pulling out something wrapped in leather. “Can you pull your hair back from your

ear for me?”

I do, a little worried. Vektal speaks in a low voice to K'thar, who grips my shoulder tightly as if he doesn't entirely trust what's going on. He growls low in his throat when Mardok steps forward, and the two exchange a few quick words. I squeeze K'thar's hand to let him know I'm fine, that I'm not worried about being hurt. Truth be told, I don't care how painful this is—if it means I can talk to my mate, I'm all for a headache or whatever this will bring.

I get a little nervous when Mardok pulls out a long, frightening-looking needle, taps in something, and then moves it toward my ear. I squeeze my eyes shut as he instructs Farli to bring a candle and hold it close.

“Be very still,” Mardok tells me. It's the only warning I get before there's a hot pinch behind my ear, and then a burning, piercing pain shooting into my skull. I can't stop the swift intake of breath and the tight clench I have on K'thar's hand.

“Are you hurting her?” I hear my mate ask, clear as day. The language isn't mine, but I understand it, just as easily as I understand English.

It's...amazing. And I start to cry all over again, because I'm just so emotional.

K'thar kneels beside me, shoving Mardok away. He cups my face in his hands and gazes at me with worried eyes. “Llo?” he whispers, caressing my cheek with his thumb.

“Hi there,” I whisper back to him, and then because I've wanted to say it for so long, “I love you.”

My alien breaks into a massive grin.

K'THAR

I do not know how the one called Mardok made my mate speak my language. Perhaps it is a magic that they can teach us. I do not care. All I know is that my L'ren is beaming up at me with bright, happy eyes even as she weeps.

"This is so wonderful," she says between sniffles. "I've been wanting to talk to you for so long, K'thar. You have no idea."

"Yes, I do," I tell her gently. "I have wanted the same thing."

"Oh. Right." She gives a teary giggle and then flings herself into my embrace, wrapping her small arms around my neck.

"I see it was a success," Mardok says in a pleased voice, putting his magic speaking tool away. "We will get M'rsi in the morning. I don't think she will leave her mate's side right now."

"You have my thanks," I tell them. "You all do." I am overwhelmed with this evening. So much has happened in the short while since we arrived that my head feels as if it spins atop my neck. I did not imagine that the others here would be sakh, or that they would be able to heal T'chai. Or that they would make my mate speak my words. Or that J'shel would resonate as soon as we arrived, and N'dek and Z'hren are safe with good food in their bellies and...

It is too much. My knees grow weak and I stagger, one knee going to the ground.

“Sit,” Vektal says with a firm hand on my arm. “You and your people have been through much today.”

“I will get more food,” the sakh female says, her voice pleasant. She gets to her feet in a fluid motion and escapes the tent, back into the cold. I am surprised that the people here—sakh people, for all that I cannot tell what clan they should be—wear very little clothing. The hoo-mans dress in many layers as we do. It is bitterly cold, like my mate said it would be, but it does not seem to bother these people.

Well, most of these people. Vektal wears leather boots and a loincloth, but the one called Mardok wears nearly as many layers as I do.

“Sit, bb,” Llo tells me, mixing some of her words with mine. She brushes my hair back from my face. “We can relax now. I promise. We’re safe.”

I nod and sit wearily on the ground. It is as if all of my strength has left me. We are here. We are safe. We can rest. I pull my Llo into my arms, settling her in my lap. I refuse to let her get an arm’s length away from me. Not just yet.

She does not seem to mind, though. She slides her arms around my waist and leans her cheek against my shoulder, and I wrap myself around her.

“Most stories will have to wait until morning,” Vektal says. “But before I go, I wish to know about your people. Are there more on the island?”

I shake my head. “All gone. We are the only clans that are left. My people are the clan of the Strong Arm. R’jaal’s are the clan of the Tall Horn, and O’jek’s clan is that of Shadowed Cat. We are the only ones to survive the death of the Great Smoking Mountain.”

“The first death,” my mate corrects, and I nod.

“But how did you get to the island?” Vektal wants to know. “And how are your people so different? The one you call

R'jaal looks very different from you, and some"—he pauses, gesturing at his chin—"they wear fur here."

"Many different traits," I agree. "It is how the clans are determined. If a kit is born with four arms, he would go to the Strong Arm clan. Keep the blood strong. Sometimes there would be a kit in our clan born with only two arms, and he would be given to a couple in Tall Horn or Shadowed Cat to raise with the people he belonged to."

"Recessive genes," Mardok murmurs. "From a common ancestor."

I do not understand these words, but my mate makes a sound of agreement. "That's probably it," she says. "It's clear you guys have a common ancestor."

I cannot get over how sweet her voice is as she speaks my words. I love the sound of it, and my khui begins to hum in agreement with my pleasure. "Perhaps," I say, since I am not sure of what they agree upon.

"But according to our records," Mardok continues, "Vektal, your people settled here when their spaceship crashed more than a thousand years ago. He's speaking Old Sakh, like we do, so his people must have come from the crash as well, but that doesn't explain the face pelt or the"—he coughs into his hand and looks a little awkward—"extra limbs."

My mate lifts her head, gazing at me with bright eyes. "How did your father's fathers get to the land?"

"There are old stories," I tell her with a shrug. "The ancestors came looking for good hunting grounds and they met the People."

"The People?" Llo asks, curious.

I nod. "The original People. They were few when my ancestors met them, but they formed strong clans together. Over time, it became four clans." I grow sad, thinking of how many of us there used to be before the Great Smoking Mountain's death. "Then...three."

"The recessive traits might be why he doesn't have sharp teeth, but O'jek does," Llo continues excitedly. "Or why

R'jaal and T'chai have horns as big as you guys." She gestures at Vektal and Mardok. "But all of them can change colors."

Mardok frowns. "Change colors?"

My Llo gives me a proud look, as if she is pleased I have such skills. "Show 'em, bb."

Now it is my turn to feel uncomfortable. Camouflaging is as natural as breathing, but to do it on command feels strange. I glance at the fire nearby and hold my hand toward it, letting the flames flicker near my skin. As they do, my colors change, matching the reddish glow of the fire itself, and the shadows with it. When I pull back, my color returns to its normal restive blue.

"Impressive," Vektal murmurs, arms crossed over his chest. "It is not a trait our people share."

Mardok makes a sound of surprise. "Maybe that's why our tracking only picked you up some of the time and didn't see anyone else on this world. I wonder if the camouflage itself somehow interrupts the signals the ship can pick up...or if the electromagnetic fields on the island were too much for our equipment. I'm going to have to study this." He looks excited at the thought.

"I do not know what you just said," I admit.

"I'll explain later, bb," my mate says in an affectionate voice.

This time when I hear it, I must ask. "What is this bb?"

Mardok chuckles. Vektal snorts with equal amusement. "I have heard this 'bb' many a time. It is a human term for a kit. They say it when they are pleased with their males. My mate calls me this word when she wants something." His hard expression softens. "And since we speak of mates, I must tell you that I miss mine, far too much to want to stay away from her much longer." He exchanges a look with Mardok and then glances back at me. "Which is why I am very curious about your people."

"Oh?" I am wary. Is he going to demand that we leave? My grip tightens on my Llo. I will not leave her side, whatever happens.

“Your arrival is either a new problem...or the answer I needed.” His look is serious as he moves to sit near us.

The female sakh reenters the tent with two steaming bowls of food and hands them to us. Even though we ate not long ago, I find that I can eat more. I will not let go of my mate, though. She takes the bowl politely but does not eat, watching me instead.

“You miss your mate,” I guess, and he nods. I understand this. When I had to leave Llo behind, it felt like I was in agony. I cannot imagine being parted from her for long.

“Mine lives in the stone village far from here, with our kits and the mates of my hunters. They have been without us for longer than a full turn of the moons, and the brutal season is coming. I miss my Georgie.” His hand clenches and goes over his heart. “More than anything, I want to look upon her face. I want to hold my daughters in my arms and hear their voices. But...I cannot leave this place if it means it will be death for your people and for the humans here.”

Mardok speaks up, then. “My mate Farli and I will stay for a time, and so will Taushen and his mate. The newcomers are still learning much, but the game is plentiful here on the shore and the weather is milder than inland. The brutal season will not bother us as much as it will those back in Croatoan village.”

My mate perks up. “Did you just say Croatoan?”

“Yes. It is a word the humans picked,” Farli says with a gentle shrug of her shoulders. “That is the name of our village. The humans of this place have chosen to call it Icehome.”

“Pretty,” my Llo says. “I like that.”

It is a simple name, but a fitting one. “The two clans wish to be apart?”

“For now,” Vektal nods. “We will be journeying back to our village, but others will be coming to teach how to survive and to be of assistance. But not all of us can stay. We have families and kits that need us just as much as we are needed here.” He

looks torn. “But we will not leave if the humans here will be in danger from your clans.”

In danger? I hold my mate closer. “Why would they be in danger?”

“No one knows you,” Vektal’s voice is blunt. “We do not know your customs, and our people have been attacked in the past.”

“And recently,” Mardok agrees. “Look at Willa.”

Vektal’s expression is grim. “Yes. That did not turn out as I hoped, but it was not a bad thing. She will calm him, if he can be calmed.” He gives a small shake of his head. “There is much to think about.”

“K’tar and his people are good and kind,” my mate says, sitting up against me. Her jaw firms in a stubborn expression. “He could have been cruel to me, but K’tar has kept me safe at all times, even at his own expense.”

“Llo,” I murmur, pleased at her defense of me.

She thinks I am trying to quiet her, though, and pats my knee to silence me. “It’s true,” she continues. “He fed me even when there was nothing for him to eat. I wanted clothing and he made sure I was covered up. They’ve taken care of an orphaned baby even though they don’t know anything about babies. And Mari has been treated wonderfully by R’jaal and T’chai and their tribe. Everyone has worked really hard to get here and I don’t want anyone thinking they’re a problem.” She sounds upset at the very thought. “These are good men and I trust them with my life.”

Vektal listens to her solemnly, and then turns his gaze to me. “And you? What do you think of all of this? We have a new ‘clan’ as you call it, of four males and sixteen females. It may sound wonderful to you if you have been living for a long time with no females, but that is a lot of mouths to feed. There will be resonances, and then there will be even more to feed over time. What will your hunters think of this?”

“My hunters knew this would be a change,” I tell him. “R’jaal and his clan, O’jek and his clan, my clan—we are fragments of

what we once were. When there was danger to the females, we banded together to protect them. When it was time to build rafts so we could escape the island and the Great Smoking Mountain, we all worked together. I see now that it is something we should have done many turns ago, when our clans were first shattered. Instead, we held on to the old ways...and that was wrong.” I hold my mate closer, stroke her soft cheek. “I am tired of many broken clans. We are strongest as one. If there is a chief of your clan, I will lay down my mantle of leadership and follow him, because it is best for all that we work together. I know R’jaal and O’jek will feel the same.”

Vektal nods. “This is a good answer.”

And my mate beams at me proudly, utterly pleased. “It’s because he’s so smart.”

In her approving gaze, I feel like the luckiest hunter ever.

LAUREN

*S*he others talk for hours and I lean against K'thar's chest, listening to the conversation but not really contributing. I'm too tired, and I'd much rather listen to Vektal and Farli and Mardok tell K'thar stories and hear his tales than share stories of my own. Human history doesn't matter here. It's all about the sa-khui—or sakh, as K'thar's people call themselves. I'm just happy to listen to the conversation and listen to my mate speak.

I love that I can understand him. I love the cadence of his speech, so different from the others. I love that I can hear the amusement when he speaks. Not that it wasn't there before, but now I understand *why* he's so amused and it just adds to my pleasure. I love snuggling up against him and just hearing the stories of his ancestors and the formation of the three (well, four) clans.

But it's been a long day and I'm full of good food and warm in K'thar's arms, and so it's not surprising to me when I jerk awake and realize I've nodded off. My mate only caresses my cheek and strokes my hair, and in his embrace, I fall back asleep again, lulled by the safety of his body and the low conversation.

I wake up again at some point when I realize I'm being lifted. I stir, a wordless question in my throat.

K'thar only nuzzles my forehead. "Sleep, my mate. I am taking you to bed. Vektal says we can sleep in his tent this night. Tomorrow, we will work on shelter of our own."

Sounds good to me. I shiver and turn my face against his chest when we go out into the cold wind. It's gone a short moment later, and then I feel K'thar settling me in a mess of furs. This feels oddly familiar, even though it's not all that warm, and I remember sleeping in bundles of furs back before I went to his island.

A moment later, my mate lies down next to me and pulls me against him under the blankets. His feet and hands are cold, and I squirm, waking up a bit more. "This isn't exactly what I'd call warm."

He chuckles, and I see his breath cloud the air. "There is no fire. We will warm each other, my mate."

"That works, too," I tell him, putting my hands on his stomach. For once, I feel like I'm the one that can provide, even if it's only body heat.

He murmurs approval and holds me closer against him. "I told them how I found you on the shore, but Vektal and Mardok have more questions for you in the morning."

"Okay," I breathe, his warmth intoxicating. The furs are heating up from our bodies, and I'm awake now. This is the first moment we've had alone in days, and the first time I feel I can truly relax since I found out the island was a volcano.

We're safe. Everyone's safe and there's nothing to fear.

I feel good. My hand slides down his shoulder, and I'm so... happy. Content. Pleased. I don't care if we have to live in tents or if it's cold. We're here together and we have people nearby to support us and help each other out. We'll figure out the best way to survive and we'll thrive here. We can thrive anywhere, as long as we're together.

As if he can sense my increasingly aroused thoughts, K'thar leans in and brushes his lips against my earlobe. "Vektal says he knows of a human female in their tribe that will take Z'hren in. He says she is too old to resonate, but she would love the

chance at being a mother again. He will bring her back here, along with her mate.”

I slide my hand along his neck, twining my fingers in his hair. I’m having a hard time thinking with his warm mouth on my skin. “Mmm. Are you okay with that?”

“He deserves a mother who will make him the stars in her sky. I do not mind this, unless you wish for us to take him into our family permanently?” He licks my earlobe. “I am fine with this, as well. He is a good kit.”

I think of little Z’hren, with his chubby cheeks and flailing fists. I love him, and of course it seems easy to say we will make him ours. But then I think of the baby growing inside me, and of the others that resonated, too. How must it feel to want a baby and never be able to have one, while everyone around you is getting pregnant? Sweet little Z’hren would be the stars in her sky, indeed. “I think he belongs to the tribe—the clan, as you say—but if she wishes to join us and be his mommy, I think that would be wonderful. He would be so happy, and so would the human woman.”

“You have a giving heart, my sweet mate.” His hand skims down under my clothing and when I part my thighs for his touch, his cootie begins to purr loudly. “And a giving body.”

“I’m just trying to do the right thing,” I tell him, and then the worries pour in. I bite my lip and sit up, looking at him. “K’thar, what do you think of all of this?”

He frowns at me, sitting up as well. “What is there to think?”

I make a frustrated sound in my throat. “I want to know how you feel. It’s a lot to take in and everything in your world has changed in the last while. It happened to me, too. I know how that can be overwhelming. Don’t bury it with trying to fix everyone else.”

“Like you?” K’thar asks, amused.

I’m surprised—and a little embarrassed—at his astute comment. “I do try to fix everything for everyone, it’s true. But when I really, really want something, I go after it. And I wanted you. And I wanted us to have safety together, where

we can raise our baby.” I take one of his hands and put it to my flat stomach. “But it doesn’t mean anything if you’re not happy. Do you think you can be happy here in a world of ice?” He’s silent, and I begin to panic. “I don’t want you to think you made a mistake—”

“Shhh,” he murmurs, reaching up and tracing a finger along my jaw. “My L’re, calm yourself. It is much to take in, this is true, but it is not a mistake. How can any of this be a mistake? I can speak with my mate and understand her words.” In the darkness of the tent, I see his teeth flash in a grin. “I have a full belly and a warm shelter.”

“Kinda warm,” I correct. “Only kinda.”

“It will be warm enough once my mate comes back to my arms,” he says, voice sultry.

Oh, that’s a cue if a girl ever had one. I move forward and climb into his lap, loving the feeling of all four of his arms wrapping around me. I snuggle against him with a happy sigh, though we’re wearing entirely too much clothing at the moment. We can fix that soon enough.

He holds me close and continues. “Soon, Z’hren will have a mother that will cherish him. J’shel has resonated. I think M’tok has as well. T’chai is under the hands of the healer even now. There are many females for our lonely clans, and there are kind hunters who will show us how to hunt these strange ice-loving creatures and how to make warm places to raise our families. This is a change, but it is not a bad one. I will take this over living in the shadow of the Great Smoking Mountain. And I would choose it a thousand times. Life has changed, but it does not mean that it is bad.” He strokes my chin, my cheek, my hair. “We will become one strong clan instead of many fractured ones. We will visit Vektal’s clan and share stories and perhaps even have challenge meets once more. These are all good things.”

“So long as you’re happy,” I say softly. “We risked a lot to come here.” I think of the sucker wounds on his chest and the scratches that cover his body, and shudder.

“I will always come back for you, my Llo. I will never leave your side.”

I squeeze against him tighter, holding him closer. “I love you. I love you so much.”

“Thank you, my mate.”

It’s not the answer I expect from a declaration of love, and I look up at him in surprise. “Er, thank you?”

“For giving my tribe new life. Here on this shore, and”—he touches my belly—“here, L’ren.”

Okay, now I’m going to cry again. Damn pregnancy hormones. I grab him and pull his mouth to mine, kissing him with as much intensity as I possibly can. He responds hungrily, his tail wrapping around my thigh and pulling my knees apart until I’m straddling his leg, our bodies entwined, our mouths together, tongues tangled. I caress that faint shadow on his jaw, the one that darkens his skin but won’t ever turn into a beard, not like those of O’jek’s clan. A recessive trait, just like the fangs and the big horns.

That’s all right, though. I wouldn’t change a thing about my K’tar.

He tears at the leathers covering my body, and I know he wants my bare skin against his. Our leather clothing is crude and hastily made, and I’m not even sorry when he tears the seams apart and rips the leather dress off of my body. A moment later, his hand moves to caress my pussy. “Is your cunt wet for me, my mate?”

“Very,” I breathe, shocked and more than a little titillated at his crude words. My mate just dirty talked to me. God, that’s fantastic. I press against his hand to show him just how wet I am.

He growls low with pleasure at that realization and two of his hands move to my hips. K’tar hauls me against his chest, and I know what will happen next—there’s too much urgency between us for long, drawn-out sex. No foreplay this time, just a joining of bodies. I reach between us to help guide him into me, and a second later, he’s pushing into me.

I gasp, my nails digging into his skin as he slides deep, and then he's seated to the hilt inside me, the nub above his cock slicking through my wet folds to land in place next to my clit.

And it's perfect. He holds me close and thrusts into me, and we move as one, our eyes locked. "My mate," he murmurs as he possesses me. "My Llo."

"Yours," I tell him in a soft voice, full of love and lust and pure joy as we slowly come to a climax together. I've crossed galaxies while I slept, crossed an ocean and back again, but none of that matters. I know where my home is—right here in his arms.

It's where I'll always want to be.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello everyone!

I feel a bit like Oprah as I close this book. I'm sad to finish Lo and K'thar's story, but I'm so excited to get to the others. You may have noticed there's a lot going on for our tribe. There's a lot of storylines going on concurrently, and if you know me and my writing, you know I intend on getting to all of them. Hence the Oprah moment: YOU GET A BOOK! YOU GET A BOOK! AND YOU GET A BOOK!

So if I didn't answer a question or highlight a particular pairing, it's coming! Next in Icehome, we'll circle back to a bit of what happened on the beach while Lo and Mari were having island troubles. We'll visit Veronica and her big golden Ashtar and see how things happened there. I've got other couples I'm setting up (muahaha) and of course, there will be a story about Z'hren meeting his new mommy...

But I hope this answers a few questions. If you've been reading IPB since the beginning, you'll notice that Josie saw a hint of the island way back in book 6. The island volcano erupted (destroying K'thar's, R'jaal's, and everyone else's tribes) with the great earthquake in book 9 that left everyone homeless and covered in ash. So, yes! There is ALWAYS a plan. I just couldn't get to it right away because so much was happening with the tribe then (much like now) and it took a few stories to get to my four-armed island people. They're descendants of the original village builders that left the murals. See! I have a plan!!!!

I drew my inspiration for the volcano itself from the historic eruptions of both Krakatoa and the one in Santorini (look them up on Wikipedia—fascinating stuff). When those volcanoes erupted, they destroyed islands and were so big that they could be heard from thousands of miles away. Yikes! At any rate, I thought it might be a fun thing for a character to live through...or at least fun to write.

I'm really enjoying the new direction of the series and I hope you are, too! Let me know what you think. I'm always curious and your feedback is important to me. I cannot stress enough how much fun I have with these books, and I hope you have just as much fun reading them. <3

All Best,

Ruby

PS - We're not done with the other tribe! I think Ariana's story will be next.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

The Island Clans

Clan of the Strong Arm

K'thar – Hunter, de-facto leader of Strong Arm, resonates to Lauren/Lo

J'shel – Hunter of Strong Arm, resonates to Hannah

N'dek – Hunter of Strong Arm, recently lost a leg in a kaari attack

I'chai – deceased female, mother of Z'hren

Z'hren – Orphaned child of Strong Arm

Fat One/Kki – nightflyer pet of the clan

Clan of the Tall Horn

R'jaal – Clan leader of Tall Horn

T'chai – Hunter of Tall Horn, resonates to Marisol

M'tok – Hunter of Tall Horn, resonates at end of book

S'bren – Hunter, brother to M'tok

Clan of the Shadowed Cat

I'rec – Clan leader

O'jek – Hunter

A'tam – Hunter, said to be the handsomest on the island

U'dron – Hunter

The New Arrivals (Icehome Tribe)

Lauren/Lo – Adult female at the beach camp. Once had glasses. Likes to be a problem solver. Resonates to K'thar.

Marisol – Terrified adult female at beach camp who is fond of hiding. Gets stranded with Lo on the island. Resonates to T'chai.

Hannah – Vektal's self-proclaimed assistant. One of the females at the beach camp. Resonates when the island tribes arrive.

Angie – Adult female at the beach camp. Pregnant with mystery baby. Focus of twin fascination.

Willa – Adult female with a southern twang. Lo's friend. Stolen by Gren.

Gren – Beastly, feral ex-gladiator male. Attacks on sight. Steals Willa away from camp.

Veronica – Newest healer on the planet. Resonated to Ashtar upon arrival. Bit of a klutz, otherwise bland.

Ashtar – Flirty golden ex-gladiator and former slave. Resonates immediately to Veronica.

Vordis – One of the red twins, ex-gladiators.

Thrand - One of the red twins, ex-gladiators.

Tia – Teenager at the beach camp.

Nadine – One of the adult females at the beach camp.

Callie – One of the adult females at the beach camp.

Bridget – One of the adult females at the beach camp.

Steph – One of the adult females at the beach camp.

Raven – One of the adult females at the beach camp.

Penny – One of the adult females at the beach camp.

Devi – Chatty adult female at beach camp. Ex-scientist.

Flordeliza – Adult female at beach camp.

Samantha – One of the adult females at the beach camp.

From the Old Tribe (Croatoan)

Vektal – Chief of the Croatoan tribe. Mated to Georgie (human) and father of two daughters.

Rokan – Hunter of the Croatoan tribe. His mate is Lila.

Bek – Hunter of the Croatoan tribe. His mate is Elly.

Raahosh – Hunter of the Croatoan tribe. Messed up horns. Mated to Liz and has daughters back in the village. Generally unpleasant to be around (except to his mate).

Liz – Snarky human mate to Raahosh. Her children are back at Croatoan.

Salukh – Hunter of the Croatoan tribe. His mate is Tiffany (back at the village).

Ereven – Hunter of the Croatoan tribe. His mate is Claire (back at the village).

Hassen – Hunter of the Croatoan tribe. His mate is Maddie (back at the village).

Zolaya – Hunter of the Croatoan tribe. His mate is Ariana (back at the village).

Pashov – One-horned hunter of the Croatoan tribe. His mate is Stacy (back at the village).

Cashol – Hunter of the Croatoan tribe. His mate is Megan (back at the village).

Rukh – Hunter of the Croatoan tribe and ex-outcast. His mate is Harlow and his son Rukhar is back in Croatoan village.

Harlow – Mate to Rukh, mother to Rukhar. She assists Mardok with technology stolen/looted from the broken ships. Very pregnant.

Farli – One of the few sa-khui females. Mated to Mardok, and has a pet dvisti named Chompy.

Mardok – Ex-soldier who has chosen to remain on the ice planet. Technology guru. Mated to Farli.

ICE PLANET BARBARIANS

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Thanks for reading!

<3 Ruby