

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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A woman with long braids, wearing a shimmering gold dress, is embracing a large, ornate bird-man. The bird-man has a dark face, a large beak, and is covered in green and gold feathers. They are standing in a lush jungle with a waterfall in the background. The scene is illuminated with a soft, ethereal light.

ENCHANTED
by the

BIRDMAN

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Naomi

“May I offer you something to drink?”

The lucky bride and groom paused their whispered conversation and looked in my direction with huge smiles on their faces and their eyes glistening with the love that they had for one another.

“The violet-layered drinks are called cosmic Champagne cobbler,” I said, motioning to the flutes with flashing ice cubes that made the alcoholic beverage look like a space battle. “If you’re looking for something non-alcoholic, the pink and orange beverages are called solar burst because they abruptly change from sour watermelon to a sweet pink lemonade flavor and are packed with a caffeinated kick.”

“They both sound good.” The bride laughed, licking her lips as she clutched her groom’s arm. “Why choose between the two when I can have both?”

“Do you think you’ll be able to handle both?” the groom joked, chuckling as he wrapped his arm around her waist, making her squeal. “You’re going to need all of your energy for what I’ve got planned for us tonight.”

“Ohhhh... Really?” She tucked her hair behind her ear and leaned into her new husband’s embrace. The bride squinted her eyes. Her red-stained lips curled into a devious smirk as she gazed inquisitively at the lucky male. “Who said I didn’t have something in store for you?”

“Only time will tell.” He leaned in closer, pressing her body against his while smirking mischievously and bouncing his brows. “They say you can’t hear screams in space.”

“But you can’t breathe either,” I deadpanned and flinched, immediately regretting my snarky remark. “Neither of you need to be concerned about that.”

I needed to stop correcting others, especially when I was on the clock. The last thing I needed was to get reprimanded and forced to work a less dazzling job behind the scenes away from the guests. I had worked too hard to get this lavish bartending position, beating out many others who would have given anything to travel the stars on the *Stardancer*, the first space cruise ship.

“I apologize; I should not have said that.” With a bright smile on my face, I tilted my head and jerked it toward my pre-made mixed drinks sitting neatly on the countertop. “Sometimes my mouth speaks faster than my mind can keep up. Please take whatever you want.”

“Don’t worry, hun,” the bride reassured, reaching for a flute with a violet-layered drink and raising it to her lips. “There is no need to be embarrassed. I do it all the time.”

“You’re downplaying the truth, love,” the groom teased as he kissed the top of her forehead. “You’re forgetting to mention that your mouth tends to get you in trouble, especially when you’re pissed off.”

“Hey!” The bride elbowed her new husband and gave him a glare. “You always said you liked how feisty I am.”

“More along the lines of what you can do with your—”

Gasps suddenly filled the air, drowning out the music.

With the instincts formed from dealing with rowdy guests at my previous bartending jobs, I leapt over the countertop and landed gracefully on my heels, thanking my mother for forcing me to take all those ballerina classes my entire life. Without missing a beat, I stepped in front of the newlyweds, shielding them with my body because I didn’t want their first night to be ruined by some loud and obnoxious guests.

They’d have to go through me before ruining the magic of their wildest dreams, because I was living through the bride, knowing that I might never get the chance to meet someone and marry on a space cruise like this.

My mouth fell open in shock at the source of the problem.

The dancers had come to a halt and looked out the window, revealing a nefarious fleet surrounding us.

Screams of dismay erupted over the loud murmurs of the guests.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” the bride muttered in disbelief. “This had better be some kind of special effect. We’re being pranked, right?”

“Don’t worry, love—”

Bright green missiles erupted from the vessel, striking our cruise ship. Everything shook as I almost fell over in my high heels and came dangerously close to colliding with the newlyweds.

My world suddenly felt like I was on top of a volcano about to erupt, shaking constantly on uneven ground, unsure of what was going on or where to go for safety.

The patrons screamed. Most scattered around the room, looking for a way out, while others were frozen in fear, like a deer in headlights, their gaze fixed on the fleet firing at us in disbelief.

I’d seen enough space movies and shows to know that shit was about to hit the fan.

The floor shook more than a cruise ship in a hurricane. I abandoned my initial efforts to protect the newlyweds, knowing there was nothing I could do to protect them from this unexpected emergency.

We were under attack for some unknown reason, and the happy newlyweds’ wedding day had just taken a turn for the worse.

As I turned toward my bar countertop to tell the couple what we needed to do next to make it out safely, the fleet of ships launched another volley of green missiles, rocking our ship once more. My ears rang from the screams and loud noises from our ship being bombarded.

Thousands of people’s lives were now in jeopardy, and I needed to guide the guests to the escape pots.

Looking up at the ceiling, I prayed under my breath to every deity I could think of, hoping that it would be enough for one of them to get us out of this situation alive.

“What’s going on?” The bride screamed and grabbed my arm with both hands. Her skin was as white as her gown. Her pallor washed out her makeup completely. “Please tell me this is a simulation. An elaborate prank. That we’re not going to be blown to smithereens by aliens!”

“I’m in the same boat as you in terms of not knowing what the fuck is going on right now.” I snaked my arm around the bride’s waist, helping her maintain her balance as I peered at the groom over her head. “This is way above my pay grade, but I’m not going to stand here and do nothing.”

“We will no longer question you.” The groom gave the fleet a quick glance before kissing his bride on the forehead. “Get us out of here!”

“Assist her in taking off her heels. We’re not going to get out of here without spraining our ankles.” Releasing her, I quickly slipped mine off and tossed them beneath a nearby table, pleased to see the groom helping his bride with hers. “Follow me if you want to live.”

I dashed toward the bar flip-up countertop, lifted it to allow the couple through to the employee door, and scanned the banquet hall, frowning at how full it still was.

The guests were fighting with each other as they tried to get away. As everyone tried to get to the main exit, the crowd pushed and shoved each other as hard as they could. The elderly and better-dressed individuals stood in the back, waiting for their turn, knowing they had no chance against those in front of them.

“Soraya!” the bride screamed, somehow louder than others around us. “Soraya! Where are the others?”

A pretty woman with shoulder-length red hair and a short gold bridesmaids dress snapped her head our way.

Her eyes widened before narrowing as she scanned the room, looking like a super heroine on a mission, ready to kick whoever she needed to. Soraya yelled something incomprehensible to the crowd in the distance, then pointed in our direction.

Soraya dashed over, swerving through the frantic guests like a warrior on a mission. Her hair swayed with her fluid movements, highlighting the gold and emerald details in her accessories and jewelry.

Four additional bridesmaids, all dressed in golden bridesmaid dresses identical to Soraya’s, made their way to us by making their way through the cluster of people hanging in the back of the crowd.

“What’s going on?” Soraya shifted her gaze to the bride before snapping her head in my direction, her blue eyes locked on me. Her voice demanded answers. “Could you explain what’s going on?”

“My guess is as good as yours,” I grumbled, then cast a glance at the unfamiliar fleet outside our ship. “But, in case it wasn’t obvious, we are under attack. It’s most likely because my overreaching chain of command ignored the possibility of encountering other lifeforms when they decided to leave our solar system.”

“That wasn’t originally advertised as part of the itinerary...”

“No shit.” I surveyed the wedding party, taking in their worried expressions as they peered at me as if I knew all the answers. “I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to leave this place. Hopefully there are a few escape pods that haven’t been damaged by their shooting.”

“Wait.” The groom’s face scrunched in confusion as he scanned the crowd of women surrounding me. “Where are my groomsmen? We can’t leave them behind.”

“They abandoned us on the dance floor as soon as those ships started shooting,” Soraya growled, crossing her arms. “I guess it’s every man for himself, because our friend group means nothing to them if they don’t think twice about leaving us behind.”

“Then forget them,” I snapped, uninterested in their friend group drama. “Take off your heels and follow me.

“I’ve stayed behind for far too long, risking my life to try to help you guys, that I no longer care what your decision is. One thing is certain. I don’t want to stay here and see what those alien motherfuckers have in store for us.”

“Understood. Neither do I.” Soraya nodded to the others and leaned over to unhook her stilettos. She quickly removed them and gripped them by the bridge of their soles. “If I come across any, I’ll use my heels as a weapon. They’re in for a surprise if they think they can take me down without a fight. I didn’t take those defense courses for no reason—”

“I thought it was because you thought the teacher was hot.”

“I admire a confident man who knows what he’s doing.” Soraya smiled at the bride. “It appears that they are the only ones who can handle me.”

The ship shook as a loud metallic groan echoed through the walls.

“No one is going to handle any of us if we don’t get going.”

I dashed through the employee-only door, no longer waiting for them to decide what they should do or caring what happened to them. My patience and desire to help others had always gotten me into trouble in the past, and if I didn’t leave them to their own fate, mine would be cast alongside theirs.

I’d seen enough disaster documentaries to know that frantic people were unpredictable, and on several occasions, the person attempting to assist ended up being the one who needed to be saved—or worse, injured or killed.

Their cries to stop—to slow down—echoed behind me, but I refused to let them delay me any longer.

I waved my wristband over the scanner. Its light changed from red to green as the sliding door swung open.

Smoke escaped from the entryway, revealing a disheveled hallway filled with debris. Alarms blared throughout the ship, drowning out the echoes of distant screams.

As I charged down the corridor, I clutched a handful of my dress, covering my mouth and nose with it.

Dark smoke billowed from the raging fires along the sparking paneling, stinging my eyes and burning my lungs with each inhalation. Tears welled up in the corners of my eyes as I clasped the fabric closer, unsure if it was safe to breathe. By the way the sparks shot out from the exposed wires, the amount of damage done to the ship could have already destroyed the air filtration system. The smoke was thickening with each step I took.

The ship rocked slightly back and forth as an echoing thud vibrated along the hull.

In preparation for this exact scenario, we'd practiced the orderly evacuation of an unsavable ship dozens of times. Despite our training, nothing could have prepared us for clashing with an actual alien space shuttle, let alone an entire fleet of them! It was impossible to comprehend what we might face, especially without endangering ourselves by practicing.

The best chance of survival was to get to the staff escape pods and pray to whatever higher cosmic deity I could find that I would make it out alive.

With each step I took, the air became thicker, and the smoke obscured my vision. As I continued down the chaotic hallway, my instincts screamed for me to find better air—to get away from the warmth radiating from the broken walls.

I burst through the emergency exit and skidded to a stop when I saw what was there.

It was complete chaos as workers rushed past me, desperate to get to the escape pods first. A deafening boom erupted once more as the aliens fired another blast at the ship's hull, violently rocking it.

The smoke welled up, filling the corridor.

There wasn't much time for us.

"What now?" Soraya gripped my shoulder as she took a step beside me. Her worried blue eyes met mine as she lowered her fist filled with the

bottom of her golden dress away from her face. “Do you know how to use them?”

“In theory,” I muttered, licking my lips under the cloth as I took a deep breath, grateful for the cleaner air after running through the smoke-filled dangerous tunnel. “Simulations differ greatly from the real thing.”

“You know more than we do.” She scoffed, glaring at the passersby. “We were given a brochure promising an extravagant space cruise that we could only dream of—”

“It’s more like a nightmare, huh?” Looking behind us, I was relieved to see the rest of the bridal party, minus the missing groomsmen, but frowned when I noticed how they struggled to breathe in their tight dress outfits. “Let’s look for you a pod.”

Without another word, I scanned the large emergency hangar for any available pods. Most had already deployed, and the remaining slots were quickly filling up.

Across the room, off to the side, the double doors in the other entryway were sparking, sending trails of smoke to the high ceiling. It was safe to assume that it had malfunctioned due to the lack of people passing through it, and that there would be plenty of escape pods nearby for us to use.

“This way.”

Returning my dress to my face, I dashed toward the section where the workers hadn’t noticed—they obviously feared for their lives and didn’t want to take any chances by moving farther away from the working entrance, by selecting the first pod available.

We didn’t have the option of picking and choosing. Not after wasting time in the grand banquet hall gathering the others. Fortunately, for once, things were going our way.

As I weaved and dodged past the frantic workers scrambling to escape, time seemed to slow down. Faces I recognized from work and the training sessions I had to attend to prepare myself to live and work on this ship climbed into the escape pod, closing the doors before launching out of the hangar.

A small smile tugged at my lips as I realized that many of my coworkers with whom I had become acquainted were making a safe escape. We’d hopefully cross paths again someday.

Another loud boom reverberated along the hull, jolting me back to the present.

I wasn't sure how much more damage our ship could withstand before breaking up. But, if I had to guess, I'd say catastrophic failure was imminent, as was the death of the entire remaining crew.

I jolted down the aisle with the last remaining pods, knowing we had to leave—and we had to leave now! I wasn't prepared to die today—at least not in this way. My heartbeat pounded in my ears, drowning out the screams and explosions above.

As debris fell from the ceiling, my feet couldn't keep up. A large panel fell directly in front of me, igniting into flames. I swerved out of the way just in time, pausing only long enough to see that the wedding party had survived unscathed.

I stopped in front of the empty pods to take inventory of the available seating and quickly realized that my group would need to be divided up.

"These are designed to carry three passengers," I explained as I turned to face the group. "Sort yourselves out—and quickly."

"Can't we travel together?" the bride asked, tears welling up in her eyes.

They caused me as much pain as knowing this happened on the most important day of her life, and her white wedding gown had turned gray, was covered in soot and dirt, and was now shredded.

"Unfortunately, no. This is it."

"Reva, Nyra, and Soleii take one," Soraya ordered, taking command over her bride's despair. "Megan, Trent, and Jasmine take the other pod. I'll accompany the bartender."

"But—"

"No, Megan," Trent interjected, motioning her toward a pod. "All right, let's go. We can't keep stalling any longer."

"Listen to Soraya," I insisted, gesturing to the pods. "Enter the pods, lock your seats, and then press the orange button to seal the door and the red button to eject you."

Taking my own advice, I jumped into a pod and quickly buckled my seat belt. To my surprise, the wedding party had listened to us, splitting up the way Soraya had suggested as the fierce bridesmaid climbed into my pod.

When I took one last look at the emergency hangar, I couldn't believe how much damage the aliens had already done. Their technology was obviously far superior to ours, and we were severely outgunned.

Stardancer was like the *Titanic*, except instead of the creators wanting to push the envelope, it was our head of command. Many lives would be lost today as a result of their greed and need to be the first—the best—at everything.

I cast a glance at the brave woman who was willing to travel with me instead of members of the wedding party, her gaze fixed on the same damage I had taken in. “You good?”

“Get us out of here.”

Her gaze hardened as our pod’s airlock doors sealed shut.

A high-pitched hum vibrated my eardrums just as the pod violently ejected, jerking and spinning away from the ship.

Instead of being astounded by the sight of the *Stardancer* in space from afar, a sense of dread rocked through me as ice filled my veins.

Our space cruiser was surrounded by a vast army of ships... And, for some reason, none of the ships had separated from it to pursue us.

The army launched a barrage of missiles at the *Stardancer*, and then a bright light flashed, blinding me.

My vision blurred as defeat set in, as darkness crept into the edges of my vision, following me as I fell into oblivion.

Ixik'tryl

Humans.

They were a thorn in my tail, coming from an unreachable place I couldn't touch.

Why had they decided that now was the time to venture outside their sol system?

Whenever I'd answered my communications vidscreen, new reports of human emergency escape pods crashing onto planets across the galaxy appeared.

Thank the Four Winds that it wasn't my responsibility to gather all the information about them—that was the job of the junior council members—but it still hadn't solved all the problems caused by the mistakes the humans had made.

The Yzefrxyl were the most feral and territorial species within the Interstellar Protections Agency—IPA. They never caused problems for the council as long as they were left alone to do whatever they wanted on their forsaken cold planets covered in ice and snow. Their feral behavior and their attitude toward any species that they viewed less than them caused them to act first and ask questions later.

This aggressive mindset drove them to do anything to protect what was rightfully theirs, including shooting down a defenseless human colony ship as soon as it crossed their borders.

A LOUD CHIRP filled my commons, signaling yet another report, and I bobbed my head in response to the piercing, irritating sound.

“How am I supposed to enjoy my vacation days if they keep sending me reports at all hours of the day?” I looked at the pulsating green light on my communications vidscreen, ruffled my wings, and let out a long squawk as I flexed my talons and shuffled my feet to let out my frustration. “They know I had this scheduled before the humans built that forsaken vessel, so why do they think they can bug me now?”

“Unless an escape pod has entered Ekoiskra space and is on its way to crash on one of our settlements, or the Yzefrxyl has declared an outright war against the humans—which would necessitate the rest of the IPA intervening—I want to know nothing. The reports will still be there when I return.”

I looked out the window onto the ocean shore and noticed how the setting sun cast rich, fiery colors onto the violet water, making it look like it was on fire.

It would be the ideal time to soak in my personal waterfall while sipping on an alcoholic beverage made from the nectar of local plants. Anything to get me out of the chaos that was plaguing the galaxy.

If I had to choose between living in my remote mountainside villa and being trapped inside the galactic capital’s suffocating walls of metals and stones, I’d take this any day. Nothing beat waking up to the sun in the sky, feeling the wing along my feathers, and hearing the ocean waves crashing onto my private beach.

My villa wasn’t large, but it was substantial enough for me to live comfortably whenever I had time away from my duties. The jungle trees were tall and lush, with various types of fruits growing on them, while the animals lived peacefully under their shade, under Lyave’s supervision.

This place was peaceful, serene, and just what I needed after everything that had happened.

A loud chirp filled my commons, signaling yet another report, and I bobbed my head in response to the piercing, irritating sound.

“The reports will be waiting for me when I get back from my relaxing bath.”

I hurried through the double doors and onto the wraparound balcony, turning away from my window. The wind brushed against my wings and hair, sending shivers down my spine, and I could hear night birds happily

cooing in the distance, ushering in the night. I jumped onto the thick fence railing, which was sturdy enough to serve as a perch, and soaked in the last of the sun rays while admiring the natural beauty around me.

After securing my grip on the top of the wooden railing with my claws, I took one last look back over my shoulder to take in the breathtaking view of the setting sun before I leapt off.

My wings snapped open, and I spread them wide as I floated lazily down the path toward my waterfall-fed pool. The warm winds embraced me, giving me a boost that allowed me to soar.

I drew up, flapped my wings, and softly landed on the grassy ground, my claws gripping the rich soil.

The waterfall's thunderous sounds welcomed me, drowning out everything around me. It reminded me of home—of my Mother's home—and its soothing sound washed away all the stress I'd been experiencing recently.

There were palm trees, flowers, and ferns all around my private pool, and the waterfall that dropped right outside my villa's porch was the source of the water. Around its rim were rocky outcrops that sparkled like jewels in the twilight. The plants' vibrant colors took on an iridescence, and their bioluminescent markings shone brightly in the growing darkness.

The crystal clear waters were alive with various types of colorful fish that darted between the rocks while others rested within it, swimming close to the surface. I wanted to dive into this peaceful scene and stay there forever.

I walked slowly over to my resting spot, where a small roof protected a lounging cushion and a metallic perch long enough for many Ekoiskra to enjoy. I couldn't help but wonder when the day would come when my dance would attract a female and fill the perch with my flock.

As much as I enjoyed living alone in my mountainside villa when my council job permitted, companionship was always something I craved.

There weren't many Ekoiskra on this planet, and the majority of those who had a cliffside villa were already happily mated. This gave me fewer chances of finding an available female to perform my mating dance to.

I quickly unbuckled my bandolier, letting the crisscross straps fall forward, and slid the utility belt onto the perch, taking care not to drop it to the ground. I fluttered my wings, unable to contain my excitement as I dashed to the peaceful pond and leapt.

AS SOON AS I landed in the cool waters, I submerged myself.

It was refreshing and soothing, instantly washing away all of my worries. I sighed in relief, letting go of the tension in my body as the cool water washed over me.

My wings propelled me around as I circled the surface, gazing at the sky above, watching the last rays of light fade into night.

After a few moments of leisurely splashing around, I drew myself out of the pool with one hand and lay on a large rock, feeling the ripples of water drip from my body.

My feathers were slightly damp, but they would dry quickly due to their natural oils and the special blend I had added to them to help strengthen and protect them, as well as make them gleam like they were shiny and new.

I sighed deeply and stretched out along the warm stone, watching the stars twinkle overhead through the treetops, letting the soft sounds and gentle winds calm my soul.



A LOUD CRACK in the sky reminded me of thunder, and then the ground beneath me shook violently. My eyes snapped open as I jolted to my feet and instinctively flapped my wings hard to fly away from the jungle canopy that surrounded my waterfall oasis.

As I flew high in the air, I noticed a black tail of smoke deep within Lyave's territory.

A deep crevice sliced through the dense jungle, severing large trees and brush and forming an enormous crater. As a sense of doom washed over me, my feathers ruffled up as I studied the site of destruction.

I had a feeling I knew what had just crashed landed, and if I was correct, it meant my vacation had ended before it had even begun.

The new visitors and their loud entrance to the planet, as well as the permanent damage they'd done, had discouraged even the Four Wings.

As the gray clouds swept across the landscape and gathered over the land, they became darker by the second. A cold breeze blew in from the sea, bringing heavy rains and lightning strikes that lit up the dark sky. Thunder

rolled through me, a clear indication that I needed to get out of the sky—and quickly—before things got worse.

I fought with all my might to stay aloft, beating my wings as hard as I could to reach the crash site. Another strike came down somewhere in the distance with every gust of wind that buffeted my feathers.

The Four Winds sent this storm to put out the fires and let the newcomers know they weren't welcome.

I needed to get out of the sky now before I became a part of the current problem. The last thing I needed was to be injured during this storm in the middle of the jungle, unable to defend myself from scavengers and predators looking for easy prey once the storm passed.

I dove toward the crash site at full speed, folding my wings and taking care not to hit any trees along the way. When I got close enough, I spread my wings and extended my talons to soften my landing.

As soon as my feet touched down, I dug them deep into the dirt beneath me, anchoring myself to the jungle floor.

A silver globe-shaped ship with no visible markings or windows sat upright in a clearing between two massive trees, one of which appeared to have lost all of its branches as a result of the impact. The ground was ripped up by the roots of nearby trees as they became entangled in each other, caused by a sudden crack in the soil as wide as the emergency vessel that had crashed landed.

The ship's rear hatch hung open, revealing nothing but darkness. As I approached cautiously, I couldn't see any movement from the inside of the vessel.

I cursed myself for taking off my bandolier to go swimming and not thinking to grab it before I took off for safety. Having my weapons and tools with me would have been extremely useful at this point, but I had assumed they wouldn't be needed because I was on vacation.

As an Ekoiskra councilor and representative of my species, I should have been prepared for anything, especially when dealing with humans.

This situation was beneath me in every way.

Why hadn't I returned to my villa and requested assistance? Instead, something about this vessel compelled me to deviate from my usual procedure and investigate the scene before calling for help.

My eyes scanned the surroundings, looking for anything I could use to help protect myself. I didn't need to fight anyone right now—at least not

unless it was in self-defense—but knowing how easily humans panicked, I wanted to make sure that if there was trouble, I'd be able to fend it off without getting hurt.

Aside from the heavy rain and dark clouds, the rest of the world appeared to be peaceful, calm, and quiet.

As I crept closer to the emergency vessel, the canopy overhead formed a solid blanket around the clearing in the forest, blocking my view of the sky and protecting me from the storm.

When a gust of wind passed, I felt a rush of air sweep across my wings. It was enough to knock me back a few steps, causing my claws to dig deeper into the dirt. My heart raced as another strong breeze whipped through the trees, snapping branches all around me.

I flinched every time something snapped nearby, fearful of being ambushed while searching the ship. There was no reason why I shouldn't get inside the craft; no one had asked for assistance or for me to leave the crash site.

However, the thought of stepping inside the ship defenseless made my chest tighten with fear and unease. Something bad must have happened to the occupants for them to land in this manner. The fact that I hadn't seen or heard any signs of life made me even more concerned.

Not wanting to be left outside, defenseless, in the middle of a storm with something lurking nearby, now wasn't the time to pause—when there were so many local dangerous creatures eager to devour a meal my size. I wouldn't stand a chance if anything got close to me—or if someone else found me.

Not with how drenched I was and how the wind kept catching my wings and tossing me around.

I slid inside, holding on to the doorway's edges and taking care not to hit my head against the low ceiling. With only dim lighting along the walls, it took several seconds for my eyes to adjust to the lack of light.

When my eyes finally got used to the darkness, I was completely taken aback by what I saw.

Two unconscious female humans, dressed in attire that barely covered their bodies, dangled from the ceiling by their safety harnesses.

I shook my head and pushed back my sudden confusion about why they were in such attire and barefoot—something that contradicted the IPA research on humans preferring to have their bodies covered, including their

feet. Now wasn't the time to try to piece together who they were aboard that 'space cruiser'—the type of vacation party vessel described by the humans who had been recovered—I needed to find a way to secure the entrance, to keep myself from being attacked from behind, before I attempted to free them from their confines.

The rain created a waterfall-like curtain, pouring over the door frame and onto the muddy ground.

I searched the main computer of the ship and discovered that the human craft lacked anything resembling my own internal emergency systems. Unsurprisingly, given how new humans were to space travel, their backup power source failed to power the cockpit, making it impossible to close the door until the storm passed and I could fly to my villa for assistance.

While maintaining my gaze on the entrance, I moved closer to the women in an effort to get a better look at them. My claws clacked against the metallic floor, echoing the sounds of rain hitting the vessel.

As I stood between the two unconscious humans, I observed one of the sleeping females and how her long red hair cascaded over her face, blocking my view of her eyes. Glancing at the other woman, I noticed how her arms hung limp above her head and her hair was pulled back in intricate braids, revealing her delicate face and soft lips slightly opened.

Their slow and steady breathing reassured me that they were both alive, although still sleeping—hopefully only knocked out by their vessel's system in an attempt to conserve resources for their journey. The more they had, the longer it could potentially travel while keeping its occupants alive.

As I was trying to decide which of the women I should attempt to wake first, another strong gust of wind swept through the ship. A loud bang echoed from the top of the emergency pod, and as a pair of vines gripped the doorway, I smelled something familiar—the exotic aroma of a long-time friend.

"Lyave?" My wings shot open, both surprised and relieved by his unexpected appearance. "It's about time you came here to help; I thought you knew everything that happened in your territory."

"How could I have missed my hometree's cries from the extensive damage this dreaded vessel has done to our land?" Lyave spat as he swung inside the doorway, his vines gripped to its sides to keep him safe from the strong winds. "How come you didn't warn us they were coming our way? I could have made something—"

“What could you have done to prevent this?”

I looked at my long-time friend, watching the raindrops trickle down his dark green leafy body. I felt a pang of sadness as I realized he didn't have any colorful flora that bloomed all over their bodies once his species, the Calyzis, mated, despite how hard he'd worked on his land to prepare in hopes of attracting one.

He, like me, yearned for a mate and desired nothing more than to take care of them and provide them with everything they required.

“Not even your hometree could craft something that would stop this,” I said gently, knowing how difficult my friend's future would be. “Instead of worrying about escape pods falling from the sky, you should conserve your hometree's energy and respond to any damage that has occurred on your land. Wasting precious resources that take a long time to accumulate on what-ifs isn't a sustainable practice, especially if you don't have a partner to help you tend to your land.”

“You honestly didn't hear anything about this ship or its crew until after it crashed?” he questioned angrily before exhaling a deep breath.

“I would've warned you if I knew about it, you know that.” I puffed my feathers in frustration, shuffling my wings as I tried and failed to recall any of the reports mentioning an emergency pod rushing toward X'thyrl. “Do you really believe I would have kept such a life-changing event from you and your people?”

“No, you wouldn't have,” he grumbled, frowning as his glowing violet gaze met mine. “You always keep me up to date on everything that happens within the IPA, especially if it involves my planet, including being on the lookout for human emergency pods. I just didn't think one would crash land here. It was incorrect of me to accuse you of anything else.”

He moved in closer, clasping my shoulder and nodding his head. His eyes widened as he looked behind me, and a gasp escaped his lips.

“What is it?” I turned around and followed his gaze to the unconscious redhead female.

“How?” Lyave rushed to her side, wrapping his vines around her limbs as his hands quickly unbuckled the female's harness. “I can't believe it.”

“Believe what?”

I watched him, perplexed and in disbelief, cradling the female in his arms as if she were the most precious thing in existence. His vines bound

her to his and held her head against his shoulder, preventing it from moving as he gingerly brushed her hair away from her face with his fingers.

“She’s mine,” he insisted, his eyes wide with awe. “I’m drawn to her, and I need to take her to my hometree to confirm our connection. You don’t have to be concerned about finding someone to care for her. I’ll sponsor her and take responsibility for her welfare.”

“She’s not even conscious to express her opinion on the matter.” I puffed my chest and raised an eyebrow at him, wondering why and how he thought the female in his arms was his. “We’ve been friends for a long time, and I will support you in your decision, but you know that human consent is one of the most important factors in the IPA’s rescue and victim-sponsorship program.”

“She’s mine. I feel it with every essence in my being,” he swore, his violet eyes burning bright with the passion that dripped from his husky voice. “Let me take her to my hometree and tend to her. When she is awake and well, you can fly over and ask her if she wants to stay with me, but please don’t prevent me from caring for her until then.”

Lyave had never asked me for a favor in all the years I’d lived in my villa on the cliff on his land’s outskirts. I owed him the most for keeping a close watch on my villa while I was away on councilor business. He always made certain that no creature decided to claim it as their own as well as making sure that it was ready for when I arrived.

Not only because of everything he’d done for me, but also because we’d been friends for a long time and I knew what kind of person he was, it would be wrong of me to say no to this one request.

“I can’t challenge your feelings because my kind don’t have natural instincts to tell us who is our match,” I quipped, clicking the top of my beak with my tongue and making a quick popping noise as I tried to think of how to say the next part. “It would be wrong of me to deny your request, especially since I know you wouldn’t take advantage of the situation any further than you already are.

“If I let you go with her, you must promise to keep me updated on her every day until she is ready to talk to me about her future.”

“By the Mother Tree, I swear I will honor your request and not abuse your trust in me and our friendship,” he said, nodding and then looking down at the sleeping female in his arms with a wistful smile. “Once she’s

well, I'll spend my time cleaning up this mess and restoring my land to its former glory."

"Should I stay here until you come back for the other one?" I turned and began to slowly unbuckle her harness with one hand while holding her body up with the other, surprised by how light she was in my grasp. "It sounds like the rain is starting to lighten..."

"I'm afraid I can't take her," Lyave replied. "Having another female within my hometree before I'm officially mated, and without my luwaeri's consent, would jeopardize everything."

"But they're the same species, and they traveled together," I grumbled, cradling the other female in my arms, her long braids dangling over my wings and pressing against my chest. "You can't separate them."

"I refuse to leave my female with you, especially since I just found her." He took a step back, cautiously eyeing me, as if I was about to take the red-haired female away from him. "With everything you have in your villa, you should have no trouble tending to the female in your arms—and it wouldn't have to be for long, not when I know you'll be reporting this crash."

"All you have to do is use your connections to send your female to the sanctuary you told me was just built for all the human refugees; I'm sure you can look after her for a few days until someone comes here to pick her up, and then you can spend the rest of your vacation in peace."

"I don't know anything about caring for a female, let alone a human who will be dependent on me." I took a step closer to Lyave, and he took one back, keeping the distance between us the same for each step I took. "Ekoiskra females are independent and fierce, willing to do whatever it takes to care for the nest; how am I supposed to work when she is incapable of flying and must be watched?"

"If you still want to have a flock, now is the best time to learn how to care for others," he teased, his violet eyes dancing as he shot me a cocky toothy grin. "My luwaeri is human, not a Calyzis, and I don't mind that she doesn't have vines, because the Mother Tree wouldn't entwine our roots if she couldn't live with me on this planet."

"But how am I supposed to—"

"Figure it out," he said as he stood in the vessel's doorway, extending a vine outside. "It appears that the storm has passed, and it will soon be nighttime."

“I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to be on the ground when the sun goes down. Even though I manage my lands, there are enough predators roaming nearby who will be scavenging for food after a day of bad weather.”

“Lyave!” I hissed, taking a step closer as I attempted to reach for him. “You can’t leave me alone.”

“You won’t be alone,” he said with a deep chuckle as he extended another vine outside. “All you have to do is strap her to your body, as your kind does for your younglings, and fly the short distance to your villa.”

“Wait! Hold on, Lyave.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t!” He yanked himself out of the doorway. “I’ll call you tonight to give you my first update!”

I dashed out the doorway and spun around in time to see Lyave swinging from limb to limb effortlessly with his redheaded female in his arms as he climbed his way to the jungle’s canopy. All I could do was stand there, dumbfounded by what had occurred.

I thought I was the politician, but he just talked around me to get what he wanted.

I’d deal with him later; for now, I needed to get this female safely to my villa and figure out what to do next.

Returning inside the vessel, I gently placed the female on the floor, leaning her back in the corner between the wall and the console, hoping she wouldn’t move and fall over while I was removing the straps from the two chairs.

I sliced at the fabric covering the chair backs with my claws, carefully detaching the restraints from both seats, unconcerned about how I left the chairs. They may not have been what my species used to train our hatchlings, but they would suffice for the short distance I needed to fly.

If she was awake, it would be easier to travel with her on my back because she was light enough for me to carry with no trouble.

Before picking up the unconscious female, I made sure the straps were secure by double-wrapping them around my joints, placing them around me like I would with my bandolier, and then ensuring that they were properly fastened.

I pressed her back against my body, wrapping one wing around her waist while the other buckled the straps around her limbs and torso, carefully securing her in place.

I cautiously moved my way outside the doorway, taking care not to smack the female human's body against the threshold. The last thing I wanted to do was injure her while attempting to save her. I refused to fail at taking care of her before she even woke up.

After disengaging myself from the vessel, I turned my attention to the sky and watched as the sun began its descent into the horizon. There was some truth to what Lyave said; the storm was over, and the night would soon be upon us. In a stroke of good luck for me, the winds had also died down, which meant that the flight would be considerably less difficult.

I spread my wings and took off into the air, feeling the wind rush past us. The female was securely fastened to my body, and she didn't stir as we flew.

I soared higher into the sky with each powerful flap of my wings, the sea breeze buffeting us. The woman's body felt light in her straps, but the weight of her unconsciousness weighed heavily on my heart. I hoped she'd wake up soon and wouldn't be afraid of me when she did.

I couldn't help but wonder if I could be like Lyave and care for the female in my arms. He wasn't concerned that his mate was a human, a species that didn't exist on this planet. But the more I thought about it, the more sense it made—his kind despised space travel, partly because they were dependent on their hometrees and needed to feed off the land, which was impossible to do on a spacecraft.

Lyave had found his mate, and now I was the one without a female companion. He was one step closer to starting a family, and while I was delighted for him, I couldn't help but feel jealous.

Knowing how isolated I was due to the demands of my job felt like a constant pecking at my heart, a reminder of how alone I was.

The wind whipped past us as I soared through the air, my wings beating furiously. I could feel the female's heartbeat against my chest, and I knew she was alive and well. I flew steadily, my destination in sight.

As I approached my villa, I realized it was even more beautiful than I remembered. It was built into the sheer cliff face, with balconies and windows overlooking the sea.

I landed on one of the balconies and carefully unstrapped the female from my chest. I knew she'd be impressed by my cliffside villa, and I couldn't wait to show it to her.

The human female would be safe there, I was sure of it.

I carried her inside and laid her down on a couch, admiring her delicate form. I grabbed a blanket and draped it over her before starting a fire in the hearth to warm the room.

As I observed the human female sleeping, I couldn't help but feel protective and concerned for this mysterious human, realizing I needed to check her vitals and provide her with a universal communicator so we could speak easily when she awoke. The last thing I needed was for her to be afraid of me and for me to be unable to comfort her with words.

I CAREFULLY APPROACHED her with my medgun and medcase, making sure not to wake her. My hearts were pounding with anticipation as I held the communicator in my hand. I knelt down next to her and injected the communicator behind her ear.

She stirred slightly, but didn't wake up. I stepped back, admiring my handiwork.

It was done.

Holding my medgun in my hand, I scanned her whole body, collecting basic readings on her, and breathed a sigh of relief that nothing appeared to be wrong.

She'd wake up with a minor headache and a few bruises from her emergency pod's crash landing, but everything else was fine.

After putting everything away, I stood next to the fireplace, needing some warmth after being out in the cold rain for the majority of the day.

It was impossible for me to fight off the feeling of exhaustion. My wings hurt because I'd been flying for hours. As I glanced out the window, the sun was just about to set.

To release some pressure, I stretched my wings. After such a lengthy flight, a good night's sleep was greatly anticipated. I walked over to the cozy-looking dish chair, which resembled a nest, and sat down, the warmth of the fire on my face.

As I shut my eyes, I felt a sense of calm wash over me. Having had a long day, I appreciated the tranquility of my cliffside villa.

The sound of the waves crashing against the cliff below lulled me to sleep.

Naomi

Strange sounds surrounded me, startling me awake. As I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes, I discovered I was in a beautiful villa rather than a spacecraft.

I sucked in a deep breath and scrambled to my feet, the blanket that had been covering me falling to the floor as I took in my surroundings.

Everything around me was exotic, made of expensive-looking natural materials like wood and cloth, but the walls housed many devices that put all those high-tech futuristic spy movies to shame. It was nothing like the neural network headpieces that the majority of the population used to work and play in simulations outside the real world.

No, this villa was a high-end, expensive property that was probably designed by an interior decorator with how everything flowed and went together. Every inch of open space I was in was filled with luxurious furnishings and decorations I'd never seen before.

I couldn't help but notice that some of the furniture was in unusual shapes that would not normally be sold in a store and had to be custom-made. There were some of those retro disk chairs from my great-grandmother's childhood, but much larger and tilted up like a nest.

What amazed me was how open everything was.

A long stone wall covered one entire side of the room, with a doorway leading into a tunnel and a high-tech fireplace built into the wall itself. A pair of stairways near the stone wall vanished into what I assumed was another floor or a hidden part of the house.

The rest of the walls were marble pillars that framed floor-to-ceiling windows. Three sets of double doors led to what appeared to be a wraparound balcony.

My mouth dropped open at the open view of bright skies over a calm ocean that greeted me.

A cool ocean breeze welcomed me as I stepped out onto a balcony, blowing the fabric of my dress against my body as the sounds of gentle crashing waves filled the air.

Looking over the tall railing, I realized the villa was perched on the edge of a cliff, with a sheer drop to the ocean below.

As I gazed out at the endless violet water, I felt a sense of awe and wonder. A bright orange sun shone down on the water, making the lavender waves sparkle against the vibrant depths.

A sudden wave of dizziness washed over me, and I placed a hand on my forehead and took a deep breath to try to center myself as I backed up, not wanting to fall over.

None of this made sense.

The last thing I remembered was having fun working behind the bar on the *Stardancer*, and then we were attacked by—what I assumed were aliens—and had to evacuate. And then, I led the wedding party of the winning contest couple to the emergency escape pods and boarded one with one of the bridesmaids.

Where had Soraya gone? Unless something happened to our vessel, she should've been with me when we were rescued.

I came to a halt, covering my mouth as dread washed over me as I tried to remember any detail of what had happened to me. The only thing I remembered was an army of dark spacecrafts launching a barrage of missiles at *Stardancer*, causing it to explode as the gas filled the cabin and knocked me unconscious.

I couldn't think of anything else from that night. We didn't even know where we'd landed or who had picked us up.

Why was I here and she wasn't?

My eyes welled up with tears as I tried to make sense of everything that had happened. Everything felt off.

I dashed along the balcony toward what appeared to be the side yard, the rest of the land on the ledge where the villa sat, hoping she had woken up in this place like I had and had decided to explore our surroundings.

One thing was certain: This wasn't Earth.

As far as my eyes could see, there was lush, dense jungle. The flora was unlike anything I'd ever seen. Even though it was midday, its vibrant colors reminded me of neon paint in a club under black lights, like those ancient golf-in-glow places my great-grandma used to force me to go to.

While the shape of the underbrush leaves appeared to be similar to those of the nearly endangered rainforest that had miraculously survived and was on the mend, they were much larger, as if fertilized. It was as if I had entered a simulation inspired by the classic film series *Avatar*, but there were no blue aliens to greet—or attempt to kill—me.

Everything around me appeared to be wild and untamed.

Only the warm air was so humid that I was forming a layer of moisture on my skin, dripping in places I didn't think could sweat, even in my gold bartending dress. My brow furrowed in perplexity as I inhaled deep breaths of the scent of damp moss and nearby flowers mixed with the saltiness of the ocean.

I sighed, my hand over my eyes, trying to see the sky through the thick leaves to see how far the cliff extended. The villa appeared to be perched on its own ledge, with its tree tops unable to reach the summit. The light peach cliffside was covered in thick vines, leading to the edge of a jungle at the top.

Loud bird calls echoed above. I couldn't find their source, no matter where I looked.

There was no evidence of our ship crashing, at least none that I could see. If Soraya awoke here with me, she wouldn't be able to get that far because there didn't appear to be any other way off of this ledge other than flying, at least none that I could see.

"Someone definitely has a lot of money if they live in a secluded place like this..."

"Credits, power, and connections," a shrill voice proudly replied in front of me as I stood there. "Achieving such a feat is extremely difficult, and most never even come close to accomplishing it in their lifetime."

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, attempting to calm my nerves.

Working as a bartender had taught me a lot about cocky business owners and politicians, and how little they cared about anything other than themselves and what they could do to get ahead.

“All of that and you couldn’t buy yourself a better personality.”

As I opened my eyes, I removed my hand from my face and looked at the arrogant male. I gasped and took a few steps backward.

An avian creature that appeared like a cross between a man and a giant bird stood in front of me, clutching a collection of leather-like material belts in one of his hands, which he carried at the end of his large wings.

“Other than Carth’aiq and his Sah-Rah, I’ve never had someone talk about me like that.” The birdman cocked his head at me, his beady eyes fixed on me. I was frozen in place, feeling a mix of fear and curiosity. “Is this a common human trait? Attempting to insult others for amusement.”

My mind was racing as I tried to make sense of what was going on, and all I could do was stand there with my mouth agape, at a loss for words.

The cocky male birdman stood before me, his amber beady eyes intently studying me as he ruffled his feathers. The green details and gold tips of his black feathers gleamed in the sunlight, as if he were encrusted with jewels.

I couldn’t decide which was more surreal: waking up in this strange place or understanding this avian monster.

“Am I being Punk’d?” I slowly spun around, searching the sky for drones and the jungle brush for hidden cameras, and frowned when I couldn’t find any. “Or is this some kind of simulation? Did I get carried away during my time off aboard the space cruise ship, and this is some new living story?”

“I’m not sure what ‘being Punk’d’ or a ‘living story’ are.” The birdman whipped two of the straps over his shoulders, catching them under his wings and clasping them in a crisscross formation. “Perhaps you hit your head too hard in the crash landing because you’re not making any sense.”

He examined his strange belt chest armor, adjusting and inspecting each device sheathed in it with his hands. In his attempt to adjust how the belts sat on him, he fluffed his feathers, making himself appear less intimidating and more like an overgrown rooster tangled up in something.

I put my hand over my mouth in an attempt to stifle the laughter that was about to escape, but I was unsuccessful.

As I considered how ridiculous it was that I was speaking to a cocky chicken, fits of laughter began to flow through me like water gushing out of a broken dam. I couldn’t stop laughing as I thought about how ridiculous this whole situation was.

He squinted at me, his amber orbs narrowing as he let out an angry, sharp chirp.

“I’m not sure what’s funny,” the avian creature grumbled, flattening his wings against his body. “You’re the one whose ship trespassed into Yzefrxyl territory and was retaliated against. Thanks to your government, I was put in charge of leading the program to assist human refugees, while my brother manages the sanctuary’s construction.”

It was as if a bucket of ice had been dumped on me, silencing my laughter as I gasped, my attention riveted on the unknown creature.

Were my foggy memories real?

Glimpses of memories flashed through my mind for a brief moment before the cocky bird narrowed his eyes even more and gave me another of those nasty scowls, clicking his tongue on the top of his beak, clearly unimpressed with my reaction.

The question was obvious—if he wasn’t joking, then everything about my situation was very real... and I was conversing with an alien, which could only happen in dreams, simulations, and the media.

“How do we understand each other?” My hands dropped from my face as I scanned his body, my gaze falling on the blasters on his belt armor. “Were you a part of the army that attacked us?”

“I implanted a universal communicator behind your ear.” He squawked and flapped his wings before lifting one to point to the side of his head, where an ear would be if he were human. “And, by the Four Winds, no, I am not a Yzefrxyl. I’m an Ekoiskra councilor, and I was enjoying a much-needed vacation until your emergency pod crashed landed nearby, disrupting everything I worked hard for.”

“Was it you who rescued me?” I gazed behind him, hoping to see Soraya farther down the stone pathway he was standing in front of, and frowned when I couldn’t see the pretty woman with shoulder-length red hair and a short gold bridesmaid’s gown who had joined me in the escape vessel. “Where is my companion, Soraya? What happened to her? Why isn’t she here?”

“Oh good, you know her name. I’ll include it in my report and notify Lyave when he checks in with me later.” He shifted his gaze down the walkway, his tongue clicking on the top of his beak. “Yes, I was the first to arrive on that dark and stormy day. My friend arrived shortly after I did. It

was getting dark, so he offered to take your Soraya home with him, claiming she was his—”

I jerked my head in his direction, throwing up my hands, and took a step closer to him, glaring in his face, unable to believe what he was saying.

“What do you mean by him claiming Soraya was his?” I growled, not caring who or what he was. “How can you lead the program that was supposed to help us after we were attacked when you allow your friends to take whoever they want home with them?”

“What, not even a ‘thank you?’ ” He let out a series of non-vocal sounds, almost like a loud growl, and flapped his wings aggressively, as if he was offended by my anger at him for not doing his job. “Would you rather have me allow you and your friend to hang there unconscious until one of my junior council members came to collect you and take you to the sanctuary? I did what I thought was best for you both.”

“Your ‘friend,’” I stabbed him in the chest with my fingertips, taking in how soft his feathers were on top of hard muscle, “claimed Soraya. That’s what a barbarian would do in a story, probably swinging her over his shoulder and carrying her off to his cave. And you don’t mind because you’re on vacation.”

“He claims she’s his luwaeri. Males of his species worship those they believe are their fated mate, bestowed upon them by their Mother Tree.” He grabbed my wrist in a flash before it touched his chest and leaned forward, his amber eyes burning with the same amount of rage as his voice. “Lyave would slice every vine from his back if that would make her happy, and would gladly sacrifice his life for her if it was needed.

“I don’t like how he took her away without going through the proper registration sponsorship process declared by the refugee program designed for this disaster, but I know that she’s in the safest place she could be in the universe.”

“I won’t believe it until I see it.” I frowned, my gaze drawn to his hand around my wrist. “From the way you’re treating me, I can only hope she’s getting better treatment.”

“I’ve been nothing but honest with you.” His eyes widened as he dropped my wrist, as if my skin had caught fire and I had burned him. “Just because you don’t like my responses doesn’t mean I haven’t looked after you. In the middle of a storm, I carried you to my villa and placed you on my lounging bench near the fire to keep you warm. I even gave you a

universal communicator so that when you awoke, I could console you, knowing what happened to your vessel and how your species isn't a member of the Interstellar Protections Agency. If that's me not caring about your well-being, please tell me what it is."

I stood there speechless, unable to respond. All I could do was stare at him, absorbing his delicate yet masculine features as I took in everything he said.

He was right—he had been nothing but forward with me since we met. I had no idea what he'd done to save me from my crash site, and now that I knew, I felt like a jerk for assuming the worst.

"I'm sorry..." I yanked my hair from my shoulders and fiddled with the beads in my braids, embarrassed by how I'd misjudged his personality. Normally, I had a better sense of my customers' personalities... But he wasn't human, and I'd taken my previous knowledge for granted when assuming things about him. "I appreciate everything you've done for me... for both of us."

"I only did what was right." He shuffled his wings and rolled his shoulders, adjusting how his feathers lay. "I wouldn't be doing my job if I hadn't helped you, whether I was on vacation or not."

"Well, thank you." His amber gaze shifted to my hands, then to my braids, as he watched me with interest. "I promise to listen to what you have to say and try to make this experience better for both of us."

"And I'll keep reminding myself that everything is new for you and the other humans who are currently lost in space." He clicked his beak and turned toward the villa, lifting a wing behind me as if guiding me away from the stone walkway. "Let me show you around, and we can talk over some refreshments. Hopefully, by then, Lyave will have reported back to me with an update on your companion, Soraya."

I sighed and nodded, relieved that he seemed to be looking past what had happened between us.

"I would love that."

Ixik'tryl

“You are welcome to use this room for the time being.” I opened the door to the first-floor guest room, which overlooked the stone pathway to my side garden. “I figured you’d prefer this view to the open ocean, knowing you wouldn’t be able to see anything resembling ground due to the height of my cliffside villa.

“I know from my reports that your species is generally afraid of heights. Which makes sense, given that you lack the necessary wings to fly, and your body structure prevents you from surviving a large fall. If I made a mistake, please let me know, and I’ll gladly give you the other guest room on this floor.”

As I stood in the doorway, I watched her walk into the room, her head held high, and her gaze fixed on the window, as if I didn’t exist. I tried to follow her gaze to see what she was looking at, but I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

She radiated an elegant aura that demanded my attention, as if she were the councilor, and I was a civilian, hoping she would fight for my cause.

“There will be no need.” She nodded slightly and slowly turned around, her gaze tracing the furniture in the room. “This is more than enough. In fact, this is far superior to what I had on the ship.”

“How is that possible?” I shook my head, attempting to clear my mind of the sudden fixation I had on her and return my attention to the task at hand—attending to her needs. “Are you a high-ranking official?”

Her shoulders dropped as a frown formed on her face, draining all the joy from her brown eyes as they locked on to mine. “Unfortunately, I was

only a bartender hired to work special events.”

““Only a bartender?”“ I clicked the top of my beak in thought, not understanding the upset inflection in her voice. “We call them mixologists. They are highly regarded throughout the galaxy for their beverage art, especially when they specialize in rarer and more sought-after ingredients. Something that is fine for one species would be lethal to another.”

“Beverage art?” She chuckled, and then her gaze sharpened, fixed on mine, as if she was testing me to see if I was lying. “Only a few people think like that. Most people ignore the fact that we have to go to school and master our craft while distinguishing ourselves from the competition.”

“I admire a skilled beverage mixologist.” I nodded and shuffled my wings to help calm the sudden nerves that shot through me. “It’s always a letdown when I have to order something from the drink dispenser at a meeting.”

Something about having her here ruffled my feathers.

My encounter with Sah-Rah had demonstrated that I was not only bad at conversing with females, but also with humans.

I had purposefully removed myself from the management of Earth and its sol system’s protection from the rest of the universe, wanting to focus on the galactic economy and new business ventures the Ekoiskra could undertake.

Before the Yzefrxyl disaster, departments like mine had to put everything on hold to search for the human escape pods, cataloging where they were discovered, and deciding whether to enroll in the sponsorship program or relocate to the sanctuary that was being built.

“I completely understand that feeling.” She drew her arms across her chest and rolled her eyes. “I’m not even going to get started on how difficult it is to find a bar that isn’t full of robotic bartenders, let alone work for one, which is why I was so excited to work for Cosmic Connections on the *Stardancer*.”

“It’s unfortunate what happened.” I shuffled my feet, unsure what else to say to console her. I wasn’t a disaster relief worker, dealing with people in need after a traumatic event, but rather someone who worked with numbers, credits, laws, and products. “We attempted to stop the vessel by hailing it, but your crew’s leaders did not respond. I even sent a scout to Earth to find someone to speak with them, but they were too late.”

“We were like the *Titanic* in space, but instead of colliding with an iceberg, we were attacked, all because the people in charge wanted to push the limits.” She sighed, dropped her arms, and took another look around her new room. “The one thing I’m thankful for is that I didn’t have to fight anyone to survive on a door, even though now I’m here, unsure what I’m supposed to do next.”

“I’m not sure what a door has to do with anything...” I cast a glance at the doorway, curious about her obsession with them. “But if you want, if you’re hungry, we can talk about your future over the evening meal... If not, I should show you how to use the food dispenser and where to find the raw ingredients in case you get hungry.”

“I’d like that.” She nodded and shook her head, scanning my body up and down before pointing to my bandolier. “I’m assuming your kind doesn’t wear anything else? Or do you happen to have something for me to change into?”

By the Four Wings, they were definitely testing me. I should have known she needed clothing. While humans could live in a variety of demographics, they needed a wide range of clothing to keep cool or warm, depending on where they were.

And yet, I stood there, bare naked in front of her, and it wasn’t because I was trying to seduce her into mating with me—that was the purpose of my dance.

“Until I contact my junior councilors to send a team here to clean up the wreckage, all I have available for you to wear are my councilor robes.” I clicked the top of my beak, a nervous habit I had when I was unsure about something. “I can also ask Lyave if he could craft some clothing with his hometree for you in exchange for some credits. If that’s what you want, your companion, Soraya, should be able to help him with the task.”

“Robes?” Her eyebrows rose in surprise. “Would you happen to have any robes that I could wear here?”

“Yes, I do have robes with me here.” I ruffled my feathers and shifted my weight between my feet, trying to figure out if there was an underlying meaning to her question. “I always keep a variety here in case I have to host any unexpected guests. Sometimes when the Calyzis learns that I’m staying here, they’ll occasionally send a few representatives to my villa in the hopes of getting an update on IPA matters and requesting things they want me to support and bring up at the next meeting.”

“But could I borrow some?” She snatched her dress’s golden fabric from her thighs and yanked it away from her body, rubbing the fabric between her fingers. “My dress isn’t something I would feel comfortable wearing daily. When I’m not working, I like to wear sweats and a hoodie, but I’d overheat if I wore those here. Until you can provide me with adequate clothing, I’ll wear whatever you have available here.”

“They were custom designed for me...”

The frown on her face cut short my words, making me regret what I had been about to say and realize how much of a dimstar I was.

“I apologize.” I took a step back, clicking the top of my beak and retreating toward the threshold. “I meant that my robes were of high quality, and I would be honored to let you borrow them until I could provide you with clothing more appropriate for you.”

“Thank you.” Her voice was lighter, her shoulders relaxed, and she smiled softly at me. “I swear I’ll look after them.”

“It’s the least I could do until I can either persuade Lyave to make you clothing from his hometree, or have the cleanup crew sent to the crash site to bring something for both you and your companion—”

Hostile sounds rumbled from deep within her. I jumped back outside the guest room, my wings spread wide, unsure what I’d done to make her so angry with me.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t better prepared for guests,” I squawked, knowing how aggressive females could be if they didn’t have their necessities. “If you want, I can page Lyave right now and pay him some credits to rush—”

“There isn’t any need.” She squeezed my hand tightly as she cradled my wing between her two hands. She shook her head, a wide grin on her face, and a series of trill-like sounds escaped her lips. “It’s just my body expressing how hungry it is.”

“Your body has an alarm that tells you when it’s time to eat?”

“Sorta.” She cocked her head and looked down at my stomach. “I’m assuming you don’t have anything similar?”

“No, nothing at all like that.” Looking down at our clasped hands, I rubbed my thumb lightly over her skin, being careful not to scratch her as I felt how smooth her bare skin was compared to mine. “We only have to be concerned about the condition of our feathers, and missing meals causes them to become weak and unhealthy for flight.”

“Which is important for the survival of your species,” she mumbled, guiding me to tilt my wing as her gaze studied its feathers. “I can’t believe I’m standing here speaking to a birdman in his bird house. I know a lot of people back on Earth who wish they could fly and would be jealous that I’m here with you.”

“I’m not a bird man, and this isn’t a bird house,” I squawked as I yanked my hand away from hers. She dropped her arms and opened her eyes in shock as she let go of my wing. “My species is far smarter than any bird. We are Ekoiskra, a highly respected avian species in the IPA.”

“I apologize for offending you...” She yanked her braids over her shoulder and combed them with her fingers while biting her bottom lip. “I didn’t mean to do it. It’s just a quick way for me to describe your appearance to any human I come across. I’ll make certain that I never refer to you as such again.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just don’t do it again.”

“How about we start over?” She extended her hand to me, her brown eyes meeting mine. “My name is Naomi, and I used to work as a bartender at the *Stardancer*. I like to read my favorite stories while wearing sweatpants and hoodies and drinking my favorite coffees and teas.”

Glancing down at her hand, I slowly reached for hers, understanding it was a gesture of agreement and greeting in human society.

“My name is Ixik’tryl. I am an Ekoiskra councilor, a trade department member, and a member of the Western Wind Clan.” I gave her hand a gentle squeeze, not wanting to inadvertently harm her. “I enjoy long peaceful swims and unique art experiences, such as watching mixologists perform and sampling their drinks.”

Naomi

“What am I going to do? “ I muttered to myself as I stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the beautiful sunset against the calm violet ocean water. “Regardless of how I look at it, I am dependent on... Ick-Sick-Troll... Ugh, I don’t know how I’m going to be able to pronounce his name remotely correctly when I don’t have a beak and can’t make the trilling sounds that he makes.”

No matter how hard I tried to think of alternatives to my current situation, I kept coming back to the conclusion that this was my new reality. The sooner I accepted it, the more efficiently and successfully I could plan for my future.

I felt like the rocks, constantly battered by the forces of the universe, like the waves crashing against the cliffside.

If my avian rescuer—more like a dark-feathered angel in the flesh—was telling the truth about my profession being something valued on this side of the galaxy, then maybe he could help me find a way to gain the experience I needed to get employed.

Being a part of a refugee sanctuary as a resident was not an option that interested me in the least. I refused to knowingly and willingly allow myself to continue becoming dependent on a system that had its origins in a catastrophic event.

What would happen if they stopped funding and supporting us? Would they willingly send us back to Earth? Or would they use us for more nefarious means?

The sounds of the sliding door echoed throughout the room, and I turned to face my host, eager to see what he had brought me.

“I’m sorry it took so long.” His amber gaze met mine as he peered over a mountain of robes piled on top of each other that he was carrying. “I tried to choose a variety of colors, materials, and cuts because I didn’t know what you’d like, but I believe I accidentally grabbed almost my entire collection.”

“Oh my.” I covered my mouth, suppressing my laughter. “You shouldn’t have.”

There was something endearing about this large, feathered avian alien, who held such a powerful position within the galactic government, being overwhelmed by the task of selecting clothing for me to borrow.

I dashed over to him and grabbed the top half of the robe pile, not waiting for him to decline my assistance. I’d met plenty of men in my life who were immediately offended when I offered to help them, as if having someone help them, especially a willing woman, was a blow to their ego.

In fact, one of the groomsmen threatened to report me to the wedding planner because I offered to deliver a portion of his large drink order to his table, believing that I was questioning his balance abilities and preventing him from flaunting his “impressive” skills to the available women nearby.

I couldn’t stop laughing when I saw him tripping on a chair leg and spilling brightly colored drinks all over himself.

“I appreciate you bringing all of these to me here.”

I looked down at the jade-colored robe draped on top of my pile, taking in the silver and gold leaves and black trim along the edges. It reminded me of a cross between a Japanese kimono and a tank top. They were quite large, had no sleeves, and were made of a thinner material, which made sense given that his species needed to be able to fly on the spur of the moment.

“You may use whatever you want.” He bobbed his head as he approached the far wall and turned to face me. “Let me demonstrate how to open your closet door.”

He tapped his clawed foot against the bottom of the wall, and a wall panel slid open, revealing a screen and two large clear bins.

“My villa has an electric storage system for everything—my clothing, food, and other supplies,” he explained, tapping his wing’s elbow against the screen, allowing the larger bin to open. “You place any of your clothing

and accessories into this container and the system will organize and catalog them. Every article you deposit will be displayed once it has been entered into the system and stored, allowing you to easily select what you want to wear.”

“What do you do with your dirty clothes from the day?” I asked as I watched him toss his robes into the bin, and then I did the same. “Can it tell what’s dirty and what’s clean?”

“Of course it can,” he replied, as if offended that I had asked him such a question. “If the system detects any foreign material on the object, it will cleanse and sanitize it before storing it.”

“Wow. Where have you been all my life?” My excitement quickly faded as I stared at the screen and frowned at my inability to read the symbols displayed. “How can I use this if I can’t read what I’m selecting?”

“You’ll be there in time.” He made a popping noise with his beak before pressing a few buttons on the screen, which transformed the symbols into images of the robes. “Until I am able to integrate your native tongue into the universal system, the best thing I can do is keep it in display mode.”

“Will I experience the same problem with the other electronics in the villa?” I cocked my head toward the door, knowing that the kitchen and cleansing room were just outside my door and were full of devices I had no idea how to use. “Or will I have to come to you for assistance every time I want to do something?”

“I understand the problem, but we’ll have to make do with what we have until our communication engineers come up with a solution.” He waved his hand over the screen and stepped away, as the panel door slid into place. “I’ll try to put all the electronics in the same display mode to help you learn what things are by looking at them.”

“You’re doing so much for me... I’m not sure how I’ll be able to repay you.”

“I’m just doing what comes naturally to me. I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night knowing that two helpless females had crashed and were stranded in the middle of the dangerous jungle during a storm.” His amber eyes were piercing as they swept over my body, and for some reason, I felt a bubbling heat just underneath my skin wherever his gaze traveled. “Females, regardless of species, are precious and should be worshiped and treasured. Without them, the future of their species and the contributions they make to society would be lost forever.”

“Do you mean you’re only helping me because you think I’m some feeble female who crashed nearby?” I narrowed my eyes as I took in his emerald feather mohawk and golden accent feathers. They sparkled among his raven-black feathers that glistened in the natural light. There was something lovely about the way they framed his face, making his sharp golden beak and piercing amber eyes even more lethal. “What if I were a man in need of assistance? Would you have left me to fend for myself?”

“That’s ridiculous, and I’m offended that you think so little of me.” He made the same clicking noise with his beak as his emerald feather mohawk expanded, shooting itself tall like a flag in full display on top of his head. “I would have helped whoever was in your escape pod, regardless of gender or species. It would have been easier for me to find someone else to care for you if you were male—”

“I am not some damsel in distress.” I growled, tightening my fists and locking my gaze with his. “Just because I’m a female doesn’t mean I can’t take care of myself if given the chance—”

“Do you want to be like your companion?” He squawked, grabbing my forearms with his soft—yet strong and powerful—dawn-feather covered hands. “Being claimed by a stranger of a species unknown to you, who believes you are their fated one? The Calyzis, the planet’s native species, are attempting to rebuild their population after a plague nearly wiped out not only their hometrees but also their females.

“If they found a female alone in their jungle, they would keep her locked up safely within their walls in the hopes of discovering who she is meant for. Is that what you want?

“If you were male, they would not have shown such interest and would have handed you over to their representatives to notify the council of their discovery, making the entire rescue process easier for everyone involved.”

“What are your intentions with me?” I spewed while refusing to back away from his unexpected grasp. I wasn’t afraid of him, and I knew deep down that he didn’t want to hurt me. He wouldn’t have gone out of his way to show me around his villa and lend me his fancy, exotic robes if he wasn’t interested in something other than caring for me until he was told what to do with me. “Are you going to hand me over right away? Or will I be able to choose what I want to do with my life?”

“It’s entirely up to you.” He shook his head, his eyes widening as he let go of me and jerked away. “I apologize. I should not have done that.”

“It’s okay,” I whispered, my hands uncoiling as my rage faded. “Things got a little heated, but everything is fine. You’re correct. I’d rather be here with you, given the chance to choose my own future, than trapped with some desperate male, hoping I’d have all the answers to their species’ population problems.” I shuddered at the prospect of becoming a breeding mare for not only a stranger, but also someone of another species, which could lead to pregnancy complications. “However, I need to know what your plans are for me.”

“I gather from your line of questioning that you do not want to be transported to the human sanctuary.” As he watched me, his feathered mohawk lowered like a deflating balloon and lay pulled back like a ponytail on top of his head. “What would you like me to do to help you with your plans?”

“How difficult would it be for me to use my bartending experience to train to become a galactic mixologist?” I took his hand, enclosing it between both of mine, and forced myself to remain calm. “I don’t want to become reliant on a system that could be taken away from us in the future. I’d rather use what I have to carve a place for myself in the galaxy because I believe returning to Earth will be nearly impossible for the time being.”

“It shouldn’t be that difficult once I am able to install your written language into the communications vidscreen. By then, I should be able to find an expert who is willing and capable of virtually teaching you, as well as a supplier for all the ingredients you require for your lessons.” He ruffled his feathers, puffing himself nearly twice his size as a growling purr rolled through his chest and he peered out the window behind me. “You are correct in that you and the other human refugees will have a difficult time returning to your home planet. Before the council even considers transporting everyone home, your government must be contacted and an introduction into the IPA must occur.”

“And even if all of that happens in my lifetime, it doesn’t mean they’ll welcome us back with open arms.” I frowned as I realized I wouldn’t be able to see my friends and family for the rest of my life. “Even if I returned to Earth, I know how interested the government and private specialized sectors are in studying us and learning about everything that happened to us. There is no way they will let me live in society right away without conducting a thorough investigation. I’d rather stay here with you and learn

to survive in the galaxy with what little knowledge I have than be forced to be under scrutiny and not be able to return to the life I once had.”

He jerked his head in my direction, his piercing amber eyes staring down at me. “You want to stay with me?”

“If you would allow me,” I said slowly, studying his reaction—or lack thereof. “You were the one who told me how much my profession was respected and how much you valued a good mixologist. If you are willing to invest in my future, I will repay you once I have a job.”

“You must accompany me on missions and travel throughout the galaxy if you want me to be in charge of your education, protection, and well-being.” He slowly lifted his free wing and waved it, as if painting the wall with the tips of his feathers. “While I would love to be able to work remotely and live in this villa permanently, I am only here on vacation. Hopefully, when things settle down within the IPA, I will be able to fulfill my dream, but for the time being, the future is unknown, and I must do what is expected of me.

“If everything I’ve said sounds good to you, I have no objections to your wish.” He reached the strap of my dress, the back of his dawn-feathered hand brushing against my shoulder, sending a shiver down my spine as our gazes remained locked. “I’m wealthy and haven’t invested any of my credits in anything. Spending what I have in your future would be beneficial once you achieve your goals—not only for you, but also for other humans. You will become an example of what your species can offer the galaxy and demonstrate that humans are capable of coexisting with other species within the IPA.”

“When I was on my home planet, I never traveled much because I lived in the city and spent most of my time between work and my apartment. I’d be a fool to turn down the opportunity you’re offering me. I know that becoming a specialized mixologist will take a lot of time and effort, but I’m excited to be able to learn more about my craft and travel the galaxy by your side.”

“Then it’s settled.” He let go of my strap and looked toward the door panel, where we had hung the robes in the closet system. “Change into something more comfortable. I’ll begin preparing our evening meal. I haven’t fed you yet, and I know you’re still hungry. We can discuss the details over some food and drink before going to bed. Hopefully, Lyave will

keep his promise and contact me while we are still awake, so you can speak with your companion.”

Ixik'tryl

What had I gotten myself into?

Something about Ni-O-Me, the female human, awoke an instinctual need deep within me—something I hadn't dared to do anything other than fantasize about. It was unusual for another individual, especially a female, to challenge me and my decisions, but my guest had done so effortlessly and without hesitation.

It was a commendable trait that I had no idea I was drawn to until it happened.

She was everything I wanted in a mate—a life partner—and for some reason, I wasn't bothered that she wasn't an Ekoiskra. There were numerous interspecies relationships among members of the IPA's species.

The problem was that she was human, from a planet that had only recently taken its first major steps in space travel outside their sol system, which had resulted in their unwelcome demise and had put the crew in their current situation.

The majority of the population mistakenly believed they were the superior species in the galaxy, when in fact they were the polar opposite on the space faring scale. If they had to learn anything from their ship being attacked, I hoped it would be their true place in the universe.

The Interstellar Protections Agency—IPA—had had its eye on them for a long time. It was hard to witness an intelligent species continuously struggle to advance beyond their own planet. It'd been so painful at times when my fellow elders in the council would place an order to interfere,

nudging their most advanced civilization forward with a solution to their problems about every one thousand human years.

Only to become disheartened again whenever the humans' progress shortly declined or plateaued.

We had spent many millennia watching humans grow to be the dominant species of their water world, at times horrified at how they were damaging their home planet with their primitive ways. From what we gathered, humans were always too busy fighting amongst themselves to tackle more essential tasks like unifying their species, saving their environment, and trying to explore space outside their star system.

Their inferior technology demonstrated that they had just now learned the basics of space travel, having ventured slightly outside their star system only a few times before deciding to explore with the colony-size vessel that had unfortunately met its demise. Several failures along the way had stunted the growth of their space program, which was why they hadn't met us—or any member of the IPA—until now.

What bothered me the most was that they were missing out on the wonders a universal language could do to a planet. Never in my life had I come across a species with so many languages and dialects on a single home planet. I was surprised to discover they hadn't even invented universal communicators, which added to my frustrations while planning our initial meeting.

It would have been extremely difficult to communicate with Ni-O-Me if it hadn't been for the universal communicator. There were still a lot of things we needed to discuss in order to prepare her for the future. Without the device, she'd probably still be afraid of me because of our communication barrier.

I'd be a dimwit if I thought I'd already earned her trust.

I would give her all the time she needed to adjust to her new life and assist her in her quest to further her education in mixology.

Her determination to adjust to her new life was something I admired. It was a strength that humans were known for, and it should've propelled them to the top of the galaxy if it weren't for their inability to unite.

How humans had survived thus far never ceased to amaze me. Their disarray made it easy for us to survey their planet undetected, cloaked from their technology. Even so, unfortunately, our communications engineers were incapable of deciphering their written language, which had become

their highest priority now that we were rescuing humans and trying to integrate them into becoming registered citizens with the rest of the galaxy.

Our researchers had studied their media and discovered how humans as a whole viewed what they called aliens. Any species that came from space was considered hostile, determined to destroy or enslave Earth. A minority of humans did like the idea of meeting, interacting with, or even romancing an alien, but none fulfilled a leadership role within their society, thus making contact with that minority pointless.

Out of all the species the agency was prodding along a technological timeline, humans were the most resistant—and resilient—to change.

The leaders of the Four Winds clans had gradually grown resentful of the funding required by the departments to keep the galaxy's lesser species from being conquered. They'd joined the Yzefrxyl leaders' thought process of wanting to focus on their own borders and people, rather than assisting those who had no idea other species existed outside their planet.

While I understood their point of view, I also knew that if we didn't protect those who needed it, the galaxy's current established governments would launch a galactic war, conquering anyone who was weaker than them.

We wouldn't be that far from what humans were doing on their home planet, only on a much larger scale. Something I knew the majority of citizens and their leaders would prefer to avoid. For many years, we had maintained peace within our agency, which aided in the funding of scientific research that improved everyone's way of life.

"Maybe I'll learn something with this whole experience," I muttered to myself, as I placed the last of the sampling dishes onto the table. "Just like her, I will take each day one at a time. It's not often I get to play host, especially to a female."

"That makes two of us."

Every fiber of my being froze as I cursed myself for being so foolish by speaking out loud. I was so used to being alone in my villa that I was caught talking to myself and, more importantly, about my feelings toward my guest and her species.

My mother would be ashamed to have laid my egg and then spent her precious time nursing me until I was ready to crack open my shell and enter the universe.

“Please forgive me,” I begged, turning to face her. “I wasn’t saying that —”

The words I wanted to say caught in my throat and were forgotten in the wind as I took in her beauty.

Something about seeing her standing outside her guest room in my jade-colored robe filled my chest with a mixture of primal and pride, bringing my mating instincts to life.

Somehow, she had awoken a hidden need in me that I had pushed to the side in order to concentrate on my prestigious career. I yearned for a mate to come home to after work and stand by my side for all eternity—until the Four Winds took my last breath.

The silver and gold leaves matched the beads in her braids and beautifully adorned her natural features. Her dark skin glistened like the moon reflecting off the depths of the ocean as she walked with the grace and confidence of a flockmaster, radiating power that made me want to worship her if she demanded it.

I couldn’t believe how much she looked like she belonged in robes—my robes—and it almost made me want to dance for her right now, and let her claim me worthy enough to be her mate.

“You have the beauty of a thousand suns, attracting everyone’s attention with your very presence,” I uttered, raising my wings and bowing from my hips, my gaze fixed on her brown eyes. “I’m afraid that if I get too close, your touch will turn my feathers to ash, forcing me to succumb to my fate.”

“Does your species have a poetic reputation, or is this all you?” As her eyes danced with delight, she covered her mouth with the back of her hand and let out a small trilling noise. “It doesn’t matter which is true; it’s all flattery. I’ll take whatever compliments and sweet words you have to offer.”

“I speak the truth; my kind tends to offer such words to beautiful beings so that they may continue to grace them with their presence.” I straightened myself, closing my wings and adjusting my feathers, ruffling them until they fell into their place, as I couldn’t take my eyes off of her the whole time. “Being locked up in metallic walls for so long while working on the space station dulled everything. I missed having the freedom to fly whenever I wanted. I’m learning how much my body missed being surrounded by beauty and life by being here, in my villa, and now with you. It’s as if something dead inside of me has been reawakened, and I have to thank you for being a part of it.”

“I understand what you mean,” she said quietly, concern on her features as her hand dropped from her worried face. “After growing up in a thriving meta-city and then traveling in the space vessel, I understand the trapped feeling that grips you and won’t let you go.

“Most of my friends could afford to take vacations to exclusive, exotic locales like your villa and this location.” She walked to the window-wall as if she were flying, her head level as no sound came from her feet, and stared out at the twilight reflecting off the oceanic waters. “It’s almost as if everything about this is a dream, and for the first time, I’m afraid of waking up.”

“You are welcome to stay here as long as you want, until I am called away on a mission.” I walked over, my talons clicking with each step, making me self-conscious about how loud I was in comparison to her earlier steps, and stood beside her. “You don’t have to worry about credits or working for your stay. Just concentrate on recovering from such a traumatic experience and studying for your lessons once I find a teacher willing to work with you virtually.”

“What will happen if you are called away?” she muttered, drawing her gaze away from the window and looking over her shoulder at me. “Where will I go?”

“Given the galaxy’s current state, I may be required to present myself as some sort of ambassador, especially if any more escape pods crash nearby.” In frustration, I clicked the top of my beak and fluttered my wings. “If my brother is unable to handle the humans who have already been discovered at the sanctuary he oversees, I may need to travel there to assist him.”

“Is your brother in charge of the sanctuary where everyone is sending my ex-crewmates?”

“Unfortunately,” I grumbled. “My family has a strong political line and is distantly related to the flockmaster’s royal family of the Western Wind Clan. It’s only natural for him to hold a position of power within the government, whether it’s Ekoiskra or the IPA.”

“Are you a prince?” she exclaimed, her gaze darting around my villa, taking it all in. “Is that how you’re able to afford everything?”

“No.” I shook my head, trying to think of the best way to explain it to her. “My ancestors have no claim to the royal throne. My councilor job pays well, but I don’t have a mate or flock to spend it on. Instead, I’ve invested a

portion of my funds in this villa and saved the rest for the future—and whatever my family may require.”

“Are you single?” She took a step back, glancing down at her robe, and then scanned my body, her intense gaze burning my feathers. “How is that possible? You’re appealing to a... avian monster... alien—”

“Ekoiskra.”

“I can’t say that word either.” She tapped her mouth quickly with her hand. “I don’t have a beak like you do. In fact, I’m not sure how I’m going to say your name correctly without offending you with my mangled attempts.”

“Ixik’tryl is a powerful name passed down from my ancestors.” I clicked the top of my beak, trying to think of another way for her to say it. “I won’t be offended if you don’t say it correctly. To be honest, I’m having the same issues with your name.”

“How about we agree to use nicknames for each other to make communication easier?” she suggested, placing her hand on her chest, beneath her neck. “Like, if you don’t mind, I can call you Axel, which is easy for me to pronounce, and you can call me something simpler for you to say with your beak.”

“Ami,” I said quietly, enjoying the way it felt on my beak. “You can call me Axel if you prefer... But is it okay if I call you Ami?”

“What a lovely nickname.” She looked away with a bright grin, as if she was suddenly shy. “Ami and Axel. I still don’t understand how you’re single.”

“Most females do not want politicians as mates, especially if they will be forced to spend the majority of their time away from planetside and outside Ekoiskra borders.” I joined her in watching the moon reflect off the waves against the calm sky. “Those who do so are only interested in advancing their own position... forming a power mating designed to advance both members’ careers... which usually results in them being in a loveless relationship with no hope of expanding their flock.”

“And I take it that’s not what you’re looking for?”

“I’d rather be alone than in a mating centered on advancing my career,” I replied, feeling as if a large boulder had landed on top of my two hearts, putting abnormal pressure on them. “Once it’s time to retire, I would have nothing but credits and a loveless mating. What’s the point of living like that?”

“I saw many people in those types of relationships on a daily basis at my old job,” she said quietly, her voice suddenly melancholy. “I never understood people who lived in the moment rather than planning for the future, living on the high of instant gratification.”

We stood there in silence, side by side, as the weight of the conversation fell on us.

I couldn't believe how much understanding and worldly knowledge Ami possessed, and I kept wondering why the Four Winds had placed her in my life and allowed our flight paths to cross at this time.

Naomi - Ami

As I slowly untied the satin-like thick tie from my hair, the bright sun burned in the morning sky. It wasn't the sleep caps I was used to wearing, but I was fortunate to find something among the clothing he'd given me to protect my braids while I slept.

If what he said was true, I'd like to have something more dependable made... along with other necessities.

My golden gown had a built-in bra, so unfortunately, I didn't have anything to hold the girls up beneath all these robes. I could try to tie my breasts up with some of Alex's robe belts in a shibari-style design, but it would only be a temporary solution.

It was in my best interests to get used to going completely commando underneath the robes until I was given more appropriate clothing for the occasion.

I had no right to complain about what I had been given, especially after learning how Soraya had been taken to live in a tree. A tree!

I couldn't believe Axel let some alien Tarzan kidnap her just because he was friends with him. The fact that he hadn't called us last night, leaving us to go to bed without saying anything, was concerning, but Axel was unbothered.

I would be worried about Soraya until I spoke with her.

Flipping my braids behind my shoulder, I checked myself in the bathroom's floor-to-ceiling mirror and spun around to ensure the robe was securely tied in place. Even though Alex was freely walking around the villa naked, I didn't want to flash him.

I wasn't a prude... I just couldn't trust myself around him.

Something about him spoke to me, as if we were similar beings from two different walks of life who had met in such an unexpected way.

He was a gentle—and lonely—soul who desired nothing more than to be understood, to settle down with someone and spend the rest of his life alongside them as they raised a family.

For some reason, I felt compelled to be everything he had ever desired: to look after him while he looked after me.

I couldn't believe he was willing to use his own money to take me in, provide for and protect me, while also assisting me in furthering my education so I could support myself. He never asked how I planned to repay him and simply took my word for it.

That made him even more appealing.

When I walked outside my room last night, his words made me feel strong and powerful... like I was some goddess. He appeared to be in a trance as he watched me with his piercing amber eyes... it caused something deep within me to bubble with a sudden arousal.

Maybe it was all the paranormal romance books I'd read about aliens, monsters, and shifters that made me less afraid of and more drawn to the unknown. There was something about exploring the unfamiliar while making a deeper connection that made outward appearances irrelevant.

If I was going to survive away from Earth, I needed to keep wrapping my head around the fact that humans weren't the only intelligent beings in the universe. If that meant that all of my friends and potential partners weren't human, that was the sacrifice I would make... because, in the end, what was on the outside didn't matter. I'd dealt with enough customs and traditions with my friends and coworkers on Earth to be comfortable adjusting to and respecting their cultural norms.

I'd take my time getting to know Axel and learning from our interactions, hoping that our connection would blossom into a friendship one day.

Sighing, I looked down at my skin, unable to believe that the cleanser—his high-tech version of a shower—could clean every part of my body—hair, teeth and skin alike—and provide it with all the nutrition it required to survive the planet.

He'd explained how they were programmed to be able to care for all species within the IPA, including humans, rendering shampoos,

conditioners, and lotions obsolete for selfcare. They were regarded as exotic, a form of art performed in establishments that sounded similar to day spas.

It astounded me that everything that was automated still existed in the universe, given how expensive such a cleanser was to obtain and how programs were in place to keep the products and their supply chains intact.

Hearing this news only fueled my desire to begin my lessons and establish myself as the first human galactic mixologist.

Walking out of the refresher, I was greeted by the view of Axel speaking with an emerald colored plant-like humanoid with bright violet eyes and long grass for hair. He stood in a 3D projection on top of the display table where we'd had dinner last night.

There were two trays of various meats, nuts, fruit, and a couple pudding-looking blobs, as well as a few small dishes to allow us to choose what we wanted to eat and then place the individual food portions in front of us on the table.

It was as if he had called in the middle of breakfast about to be served.

"Do you call yourself Lyave?" I approached the table, and the sound of my voice startled Axel. "What have you done to Soraya?"

"Your companion is well taken care of, much like you," the male projection replied smoothly, scanning my robe. "She's currently enjoying the Giving Pool and what my hometree can offer her."

"I'd rather see her for myself than take your word for it," I replied, jerking my head. I refused to appear weak to the male, especially since I didn't know him and had no connections to him other than Axel's friendship. "I was told how you took her away from the crash site and claimed she was your fated mate. She deserves to be able to live her life as she sees fit, rather than being tethered to a tree for all eternity."

"She is free to do whatever she wants," Lyave snapped; his vines flared up behind him, ready to attack, resembling a peacock's tail in full display. "Until she tells me she wants to leave my hometree, she will remain here with me by her side. The Mother Tree entangled our fates, and I refuse to let anyone take my chance to mate with my luwaeri. You're brave to make such demands on my land."

"She doesn't know better," Axel squawked, sounding more like a growl as he puffed his feathers to make himself appear larger. "But she's allowed

to worry about her companion. You know what they've been through, and my Ami deserves to be able to request confirmation about your luwaeri."

"You're absolutely correct." The plantman nodded and pressed his lips together. "Please give me a few moments to visit the Giving Tree."

"I'll leave the comms open."

The projection shimmered and dissipated into the display table in an instant, leaving only the food and dishes on top.

"That was your friend?" I directed my attention to the table where the projection had vanished. "And we're on his territory?"

"Yes, that was Lyave." Axel turned to face me, his feathers still poofed up on his body as he gazed down at me. "I wished the two of you would've been introduced to each other in a better way than what happened."

"As I've previously stated, this villa is entirely mine, but it is on the outskirts of his domain. I make certain that he is compensated in credits for watching over it while I am away, and in exchange, I represent him in off-world trades, and he receives any products he desires and requires from the galactic trade center, as he is unable to leave the planet."

"It's a fair trade, especially since his species lives in trees, and he had no need for the cliff ledge I'd chosen."

"So he was just being arrogant..." I scowled. I despised people who liked to puff up their chests and glorify something in a white lie just to look better. "It just makes me want to take Soraya away from him even more."

"He was simply being protective. It will be much worse if she agrees to seal their fate and mate with him. He would give everything he had if it meant protecting and caring for her."

"I'll take your word for it." I sighed and sat down, picking up a handful of nuts. "I'm hoping he'll let us meet soon because we're practically neighbors."

"I'm sure he will if she demands it." Axel sat across from me and grabbed some of the fruit, placing it on a dish in front of both of us. "Before he returns, I want you to know that I asked Lyave if he knew of a mixologist who might be interested in teaching you for credits. He stated that his brother's luwaeri enjoys researching mixed drinks, alcoholic beverages, and teas from all over the galaxy. She's become reclusive since being injured by a pafeldae, and Lyave's brother is concerned about her well-being."

“When we called them, she agreed. Before you entered the room, I was going over the list of items you needed with Lyave.”

“Really?” My mouth dropped open in surprise. “How did you manage to find someone so quickly?”

“Because of my position, I have contacts all over the galaxy.” His chest poofed up, as if he was pleased with himself for using his resources to surprise me. “I figured I’d start close to the planet and work my way out. Sutol lives on the other side of the planet, making it difficult for you to travel there, but she is willing to work virtually. I’ll pay her for your lessons, and Lyave will provide you with the materials.”

“What will happen when you are called elsewhere?”

“She will continue to teach you,” he said, expanding his emerald mohawk. “I will have to make sure I always have a supplier wherever we go, or pack up enough supplies before we leave until I can find replacements. My vessel’s storage system is capable of preserving perishables for extended periods of time.”

“That’s it, huh?”

A loud ding rang through the room, echoing along the walls, as the projection came to life once more, this time with Lyave sitting on the ledge of a large indoor pool, with Soraya in the water, leaning against the ledge in a shell bikini, giving her the appearance of a mermaid.

“Ariel, is that you?” I teased, shoving a handful of nuts into my mouth.

“Don’t ‘Ariel’ me, Miss Queen,” Soraya joked, splashing me with a small wave. “I was relaxing in this warm pool when Lyave said my friend was inquiring about me.”

“I didn’t want to take their words for granted, and I wanted to hear from your mouth that you were okay before I let Axel off the hook.”

“I don’t quite understand what a luwaeri is or everything a hometree is capable of, but other than that, I am doing perfectly fine for someone who just survived their ship being attacked and then crashed landed on a planet. We were just taught that aliens existed and that we were not alone in the universe.”

“You’re right,” I said as I looked up at Axel, who was sitting across from me. Maybe it was the way the sunlight was streaming through the window-walls, but something about him had changed—he was suddenly very attractive. “We are no longer alone.”

Ixik'tryl

“I need to talk to Sar-Rah.”

“What business do you have with my mate?” Carth'aiq demanded, gripping his chair's arms.

The golden-haired female sat on his lap, dressed in a revealing blue gown, her legs draped across him, her feet dangling over the edge of the chair.

“Let the birdman speak, Carth-Eek.” As she pressed her hand against his chest, a ring of laughter echoed within the confines of my office. “Not everyone hailing our vessel has a business relationship with you.”

“I'm the ship's captain.” He growled, his hot gaze fixed on her as he wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her closer to his chest. “So if he wants anything related to *you*, he has to go through *me*.”

“You can join Loki in the storage bay if you want to play that game with me.” She cupped his cheek and tilted his face, giving him the wildest grin with glinting eyes I'd ever seen. “I thought we were a *team*, dear.”

The Chusezri scout was covered in a coat of thick fur marbled in shades of brown and black. His heavy mane had grown thicker since he'd been mated, and the braids and beads in various shades of blue had been added recently.

Mating somehow had made him fiercer... which made sense, since humans were a fragile species when it came to natural defenses, and he needed to make sure he could protect her from the nefarious forces in the universe.

“Fine.” He huffed, and pulled his head away from her hand, turning to shoot a glare my way. “What can we do for you?”

“I need your assistance with a human escape pod that has crash-landed on X’thyrl—”

“That is the planet where your villa is located.” Carth’aiq frowned, his brow furrowed. “Did anyone tell you about its crash course before it hit? Why are we being hailed for assistance now?”

“I did receive warnings about it, but I read them too late.” I ruffled my feathers in annoyance at how the situation played out that day. “However, because I was on vacation, I ignored the hail and spent the day swimming in my private pool.”

“So, why do you need us?”

“Carth’aiq, I need you to assemble an excavation team to gather their escape pod,” I informed the scout, then turned my attention to his mate. “And I need Sah-Rah to speak with the female humans to make sure that they want to stay planetside, and offer to take them to my brother’s sanctuary. They will also require any necessities that cannot be easily created or replicated, which I am hoping you can assist with.”

“Consider it done.” Sah-Rah nodded and then smacked her mate’s chest with the back of her hand. “We’ll get to work right away.”

“Thank you.” I slightly bowed my head in gratitude. “Please notify me when you are less than a day away.”

“I will keep you posted,” Carth’aiq replied, his gaze fixated on his mate. “May the wind lift your wings.”

The communication vidscreen instantly went black, and the default IPA’s map of the home screen appeared, ready for me to make any additional hails as needed.

After a full day of meetings, which I shouldn’t have had to attend because I was supposed to be on vacation, I was ready to call it a day and see how Ami was doing in her first class.

I stepped down from my perch and descended the stairs to where Ami was learning.

Her brown eyes were fixed on the ingredients in her hands as she mixed them in a metallic octahedron device. She stopped swirling and poured the bright pink drink into a thin cylinder glass with a wide smile on her face.

She positioned the octahedron mixer on its stand and held the beverage up to the light, admiring its purple and orange sparkle.

“That’s a fantastic sparkle, especially for your first time.” Sutol’s older female voice filled the room. “For your next attempt, add the ingredients slower into the mixer to allow the drink to heat evenly. The more stable the process, the more gleaming the final product.”

“I will.” Ami nodded, her gaze fixed on the beverage in her hand. “I’ve never mixed a drink in a mixer with that shape before, so I was unsure how I should use it.”

“Everyone has to start somewhere,” Sutol reassured, her gaze fixed on her student. “Now comes the important part. What does it taste like?”

Ami brought the bubbly drink to her lips and took a long sip. When she pulled the thin cylinder glass away from her face, she let out a long gasp.

“That’s good!”

She had a natural aura about her that was brighter than the drink she was holding.

Something within me demanded that I do everything in my power to protect that very glowing presence—the inner strength capable of commanding armies and defeating foes with a few slicing words over a communications vidscreen.

Ami was a female determined to carve out a place for herself on this side of the galaxy, regardless of whether others were ready for her presence or not.

One thing was certain: I would stay by her side and provide her with sufficient guidance and support to allow her to reach her full potential.

If that was the only thing she would let me do, I would accept it graciously and serve as an example to all of what a sponsor should be.

Since she was so talented and eager to learn new things, I had no doubt that her name would soon be famous throughout the galaxy for her drink art. I was so excited to see her beam with self-assurance and satisfaction at what she’d accomplished, and I couldn’t wait to catch a glimpse of it.

Naomi - Ami

Days flew by, and Axel and I settled into a comfortable routine.

After breakfast, or what he called first meal, he would go to his office and deal with whatever problems were assigned to him, while I spent the entire day in my mixology classes.

Sutol was a kind and fair teacher who never hesitated to correct me and who nurtured me whenever I did something right.

Life felt easy, and conversing with aliens felt like I'd spent my entire life around them.

If my lessons ended before Axel finished his work, I would hail Soraya and talk to her about life—which was really just me checking in to see if she was still happy, and it was nice to have another human to talk to.

I wasn't going to lie: I missed my friends and family on Earth, but I also knew there would never be a safe way for me to return without being harassed, tested, and studied.

What I was doing was for the betterment of my future, and I knew the ache would fade away with time.

I would never forget where I came from or who had entered my life.

A smile formed on my lips as I heard the soft clicking sounds of Axel's talons as he approached my nesting chair.

"How did your lessons go today?" Axel asked softly as he stepped behind me, his hands gripping the back of the chair. "Did you discover anything new?"

"I discovered how to use local fruit peels as a natural filter." I pointed to the pitcher of sweet and tart juice on the side table, as well as a pair of

glasses I had set out for the two of us to drink when he finished work. "It tastes like a cross between two widely available drinks on Earth."

"And what are those?"

Axel reached for the pitcher and poured a glass of the pale green beverage for the two of us, offering me one. I nodded and accepted his offer, flashing him a quick grin.

"It tastes like a cross between lemon-limeade and strawberry soda." I brought the drink to my lips and closed my eyes to enjoy its distinct flavor. "It's low in calories but high in nutrition."

I looked up and was surprised to see Axel staring at me so intently. He brought the cylinder glass to his beak and tilted his head back, gulping down the entire drink in one take as soon as he noticed I was watching him.

As he pulled the empty glass from his beak, he let out a loud twirl.

"That was amazing!"

"Really?" My chest swelled with pride, knowing I had created something he enjoyed.

"Yes," he replied, grabbing the pitcher once more and pouring another glass of the drink for both of us. "You should make a big batch of this one morning so I can drink it all day."

"I can do that if you can convince Lyave to have his hometree produce more of the ingredients required at the root station."

"There's nothing a few credits can't fix." He took another sip of his glass while staring out the window at the ocean's waves. "Especially after I tell him that the excavation crew will be arriving tomorrow to remove your emergency pod and help repair the damage to his property."

"Tomorrow?"

"Correct." He peered down at me. "I'll fly over to meet the crew tomorrow, right after morning meal."

"Do you think I could accompany you?" I got up from the nesting chair and wiped the wrinkles out of my robe. "I haven't been away from your villa since I arrived here. I'd like to know where I landed, especially since I've been trapped inside for the majority of the time."

"If you really want to, I could take you." He made his clicking noise on the top of his beak, which I discovered he did when he was deep in thought or annoyed by something. "Only if you don't mind riding on my back. However, you must first cancel your Sutol lessons."

"I can do that right now."

Naomi - Ami

“I want you to take this with you.” Axel handed me a futuristic-looking gun as we stood inside his villa’s hanger, which was hidden behind a hole in the stone wall. “The jungle is a dangerous place, and even though you will be surrounded by many armed workers, I want to make sure you can defend yourself if necessary.”

“But I already said I’d stick by your side and not run off to investigate something that caught my eye.” I accepted his offer with a frown, tilting the tiny weapon in my hand. The silver gun was smaller than my fist and looked like a child’s toy, especially given how light it was in my hand. “I appreciate you giving it to me, but I assure you that it will not be required. I don’t want to jeopardize everything I’ve worked for simply because ‘curiosity killed the cat.’ ”

“I’m not sure if Sah-Rah’s horrible creature will be there,” he replied earnestly. “But I assure you, no matter how annoying her pet is, you can’t kill it because he did something you didn’t like.”

“Wait.” When I realized the name was familiar, I shifted my attention away from the weapon and toward the avian male I’d grown to trust after spending days, if not weeks, in his company. “Are you implying that another human will be present?”

“You are correct.” He ruffled his feathers as he shifted his wings, clearly bothered by something related to her. “She is mated to one of my scouts, whom I had assigned the task of finding someone who could speak with your ship’s captain. Unfortunately, by the time he discovered her and they

were on their way to make contact with your ship, you had already entered Yzefrxyl's territory."

"So I'm not the first human you've encountered." I couldn't help but frown at this new information.

It was as if something special had been ripped away from me, and I knew it was a foolish notion to have, but I couldn't shake the feeling from gnawing at my soul.

"No, you're not the first human I've met," Axel replied, gently gripping my chin and tilting my head up to lock our gazes. "But you're the first human let into my private villa. I'd met her at a home owned by my family while visiting my brother when her mate thought she needed medical attention.

"Sah-Rah meant nothing to me before she was mated to Carth'aiq, other than she was the answer I hoped would've prevented everything that happened to your vessel.

"But those were different times, and the Four Winds have chosen for your fate to cross paths with mine for a reason." His piercing eyes held a hidden meaning, one that I wished I knew, as his voice washed away all the doubt that had gripped my heart, leaving me to wonder what feelings I had developed for this avian male. "We have plans to carry out, and meeting with my excavation crew is something I wish I could avoid, but I have to."

"How long will they be here?"

"Only for today." He looked toward the opening of his hangar and watched the waterfall plunge beside its entrance and into his private pool below. "Fortunately, your escape pod is small in comparison to most, and the crew is extremely skilled at retrieval and terraforming."

"Wow, that's unbelievable," I grumbled as I looked down at the silver toy-sized gun in my hand. "Your technological prowess never ceases to astound me. It reminds me how ridiculous humans are for believing we are the most intelligent species in the universe."

"Don't feel bad. Almost all species feel this way until they meet galactic officials and become established within the IPA."

"That's reassuring." I noticed the crevice where the end of Lyave's hometree's root sat above the platform, surrounded by the small pool of water, and how it was bare from the supplies for my lessons. "I believe Sutol told Lyave that I didn't need anything for today because my daily ingredients weren't waiting for me."

“Almost certainly.” He followed my gaze. “The Calyzis are capable of communicating with each other through their hometrees with a mere thought. He’d probably prefer not to waste any of his stored energy on something you might not need tomorrow.”

“That makes sense,” I said as I looked down at my robe and stuffed the gun into one of the side pockets before buttoning up the top. “How are we going to get to the clearing?”

“I had a riding saddle and reins made for me to wear and for you to use, so you can sit comfortably on my back while I fly.” He walked over to the group of straps along the wall and hooked the device on his back, much like the bandolier he liked to wear on occasion. “This gives me full access to my wings, so I don’t feel restricted while carrying you on my back, but it also keeps you safe in case we hit some rough air while flying.”

“How can I...” I licked my lips nervously, unsure of his entire plan. “Climb onto you?”

He bowed down in front of me, lowering his front half until it was parallel to the ground, and tilted one of his wings toward me for me to use.

“Jump on and use the straps to secure yourself,” he instructed, tilting his head toward me. “Once you’re down, you’ll feel as if you’re sitting inside a backpack.”

I took a deep breath and took a few steps away from him before running and leaping onto his back, propelling myself forward with my arms. My legs straddled his back as I scooted myself into his saddle with my hands. Once everything was in place, I buckled each strap and double—and triple—checked the clasps to ensure they were secure.

“I think I’m all set.”

“Okay.” Slowly, he stood in an upright position, and the saddle adjusted itself, allowing me to sit alongside him. “Are you ready for me to take off?”

“I believe so,” I muttered, wrapping my arms around his neck. Even though I felt secure in the saddle, some instinct in me demanded that I grip him tightly with all my might. “Please be gentle with me.”

“Always.”

He dashed toward the hangar’s entrance, past the root crevice and his private vessel, and began to beat his powerful wings. He jumped off the cliffside entrance with a huge leap, and the ground vanished beneath us.

A scream ripped through my throat as I leaned forward and tightened my arms around his neck as we gained altitude, flying over the waterfall’s

pool and alongside the large cliffside.

As we climbed higher and closer to the jungle trees, I had to will myself to keep my eyes open so that I could watch the waves of the ocean crashing against the rocks below us.

For some reason, I wasn't afraid and felt like I could do this for the rest of my life.

I felt safe and secure on his back as we flew over the dense jungle trees and foliage, feeling the strength of every pump of his powerful wings.

It was as if I knew he wouldn't let anything bad happen to me.

Seeing the land from above, I noticed the rainbow-colored plants and how they seemed to both shimmer in the sun and glow with bioluminescence in the shadows.

There was a clear-cut in the thick vegetation, and I was able to tell that it was the location where I had crashed landed.

As we got closer, I was able to make out a collection of ships that had landed in a haphazard half-circle around the deep cut that had been made in the land. Several trees had been uprooted all around the entrance, and there was a craft in the shape of a silver orb sitting in the middle of the mayhem.

Axel slowed his flaps and then folded his wings, sending us plummeting toward the chaos below.

As I squeezed my eyes shut and clung desperately to my own life, I let out a scream that seemed to last forever as I awaited the end.

He jolted his wings out and then snapped his body in the opposite direction, quickly flapping his wings and slowing our descent.

As soon as I felt his feet touch the ground, I opened my eyes, let go of the iron grip I had around his neck, and scrambled to unbuckle the straps that were holding me to his saddle.

I dropped to the ground, falling onto my hands and knees as my body began to shake uncontrollably.

"Are you all right, Ami?" Strong, dawn-covered hands gripped my shoulders. "Please talk to me."

"I'm fine," I spluttered out, my voice hoarse from the screaming as I tried to catch my breath. "Please don't do that again, or I might have a heart attack as a result of your stunt."

"I thought you'd enjoy the rush," Axel explained as he picked me up off the ground and carried me in his wings. "I promise you I won't do it again. I don't have the medical training to care for you if you have a cardiac arrest."

“Thank you.” I closed my eyes as I pressed my head against his chest’s soft feathers, allowing him to calm me.

“Hey, birdman! Is she all right?” a loud female voice inquired, her voice sounding like someone who had frequented a coffee shop. “With the way you descended, I thought you were in trouble.”

“I’m an Ekoiskra, and I’m perfectly capable of carrying Ami,” he snapped, pressing me closer to his body. “My species can easily handle the weight of another, because that is how we engage in mating flights and help our offspring learn the limits of their wings.”

“Don’t yell at my mate, councilor,” a deep rumbling voice growled. “You summoned her, and she is permitted to be concerned for her fellow female human.”

“Sarah?” I slowly opened my eyes and turned my face toward the bright female voice. “Are you Sarah?”

A tall, angry-looking feline alien held a long blonde haired woman in a blue revealing gown. They were polar opposites of each other, with her exuding joy and excitement and her mate appearing deadlier than Axel.

It was as if he had missed the casting call for the most recent remake of the Cats musical, or perhaps they were the stars for a modern *Beauty and the Beast*, with the black cat on his shoulder, the reimagined Toto.

“Yes, I’m Sarah,” the blonde woman said, stepping forward and offering her hand. “And this is my catman, Carth-Eek, and my accomplice, Loki. Yes, he was named that way for a reason.”

“How about we leave the two females alone to talk while I catch you up on what’s going on?” Carth-Eek inquired, his gaze fixed on Axel. “I’m sure they have plenty of female human things to talk about without our presence.”

Axel cast a downward glance at me, his amber eyes scanning mine. “Is that all right with you?”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine,” I said, casting a quick glance around the area. “Plus, you won’t be too far away.”

Axel lowered me to the ground slowly, his hands lingering on my sides, as if he wanted to ensure that I was stable on my feet.

He brushed the sides of my robes, as if trying to straighten the wrinkles caused by our flight.

“Thank you,” I said quietly, putting my hand on his and stopping his movement. “It’s fine. Don’t let me distract you from your work.”

He nodded at me before pulling his hand away and casting a quick glance at Sarah. "If you need me, I'll be at the crash site."

"My Sah-Rah, keep an eye on her." The furry male gave his mate one last hug before walking away, his gaze fixed on Axel. "Let's take a look at what's been done and what still needs to be done."

In silence, the two of us observed the two males walking toward the escape pod.

Sarah shook her head as they reached the top of the dirt pile. "I never expected to see my catman walking alongside his birdman boss."

"Axel doesn't like being called 'birdman,' " I corrected her, trying not to offend her. "He requested that I never refer to him as that."

"It's probably because I keep calling him that, and it reminds him of me." She burst out laughing. "We didn't have a good introduction, and I felt he was rude with how he treated me. To be honest, I'm surprised by how he's treating you."

"He's been nothing but respectful and kind to me." I felt compelled to defend Axel, especially after everything he'd done for me. "He offered to help fund my education and to let me stay at his villa."

"Wow, that's unexpected." She frowned and tilted her head as she studied me. "Are you sure you aren't keeping anything from me? Are you delaying telling me something?"

"No." My brow furrowed in perplexity as I tried to figure out what she was asking. "Should I be?"

"Look." She took my hands in hers and squeezed them together, her hazel eyes locked with mine. "He asked me to come here, and asked if I could speak with you to see if you were interested in going to the sanctuary, or if you were truly content to stay with him as your sponsor."

"He requested you to be here?" I shot a glance at where he was located, and noticed both males staring at us and how we were holding hands. "Why would he do that when I'm happy to be with him?"

"Are we talking 'be with him, be with him?' " Sarah cocked her head toward him, her gaze bouncing between the two of us. "Or is there something else going on between you two?"

"To be honest, I don't see why it's any of your business."

"Because it's your future we're talking about," Sarah replied, shaking my hands. "I've visited the sanctuary. It's a beautiful location. You are not required to remain here."

“But I want to.”

Ixik'tryl - Axel

The flight home was silent, as I took a leisurely flight path to the villa, not wanting to repeat Ami's reaction.

If we were at my family's house, where there was a full staff—including a medic, chef, and housekeeper—I would have dared to take a chance and flew along the ocean's waves at high speeds, so she could enjoy feeling its mists on her skin and filling the night air with laughter.

I was curious as to what happened during her conversation with Sah-Rah to cause her sudden change in demeanor, and wanted to do everything that I could to cheer her up.

During the time that I was having a conversation with Carth'aiq and surveying the work that the excavation crew was doing, I couldn't take my eyes off of Ami who was standing in the distance across the open field. It took everything I had to keep delegating and doing my job when all I wanted to do was fly to her side.

As soon as we were finished, Ami appeared distant, and she barely spoke unless someone directly addressed her.

The woman who, over the course of our time together, I had come to love and become familiar with was nowhere to be found.

Had Sah-Rah said something to Ami that made her angry with me? And what could I possibly do to fix everything and restore her usual radiance?

I slowly tilted my wings and began a lazy spiral down to the villa below, taking care not to make any sudden movements as I attempted to keep our descent as gentle as possible in the oceanic winds.

As we approached the wraparound balcony, I leaned back and flapped my wings hard to ensure a safe landing. My talons wrapped around the railing, securing us in place as I folded my wings and leapt onto the balcony.

I opened the door to the gathering room and rushed to one of the nesting couches, not wanting to spend any more time outside in the wind. I hoped that by providing her with a soft spot, she would be able to relax and catch her breath once she unbuckled herself from my saddle.

As soon as I turned my back on the furniture, I felt her come to life, as her hands unclasped each strap, and she lowered herself onto the soft couch.

“Are you going to tell me what happened during your conversation with Sah-Rah?” I mimicked her actions by removing the saddle from my body and gently tossing it onto a nearby chair. “And what happened to the female with whom I’ve been cohabitating?”

“She was fine.” Ami huffed, crossing her arms and staring out at the ocean. “With how energetic she talked, she reminds me of those girls who spend all of their time at a coffee shop, or maybe even as a princess character at one of those theme parks. She could probably turn a funeral into a fiesta with how overbearing and upbeat she was—which is a perfectly fine characteristic to have, but too much, too sudden.” She rolled her eyes as she looked over her shoulder at me. “But after spending all of these nice quiet days with you, it was a shock for me and something I needed to adjust to.”

“You’re trying to keep something from me.” I took a step closer, opening my wings and placing my hands on the glass to keep her from fleeing before she could respond, but leaving enough space between us for her not to feel trapped. “Tell me what Sah-Rah said that caused you to become so distant. Did she tell you something about me that caused you to act this way?”

“Why did you ask her to come here?” she whispered, her voice so low that I would have missed what she said if it hadn’t been for my sensitive hearing. “How come you had her ask me if I wanted to leave? Do you regret promising me everything, including an education and a place to live?”

“Never,” I squeaked, slamming my hands on the window, furious at myself for being such a dimstar. “I wanted to give you the option of leaving if you truly did not want to accompany me wherever I went. I wanted to

make sure you didn't feel trapped, and that you weren't only agreeing because you hoped it would ensure your survival, rather than because you wanted to.

"I figured if you spoke to a female of your own species, you would feel comfortable enough to open up to her and accept her help, if you wanted it. I had no intention of making you feel unwanted or desired.

"I want nothing more than to continue what we had, as if nothing happened today, but I'm afraid I've ruined everything we've built together over the last few weeks."

Silence engulfed us, but I was afraid to move because if I did, we would never be able to mend whatever rift had been sliced between us.

"I understand why you did what you did, but I can't help but feel raw from the whole thing."

She turned around and looked up at me, tears dripping from her eyes—something I learned from Sah-Rah happened when humans were angry, hurt, or upset. Concern washed over me not only because she was crying, but also because I had no idea what kind of crying she was doing.

"What can I do to repair the damage I didn't intend to cause?" I begged, locking my eyes with her rich brown ones as I pressed myself closer to her, to feel her warmth radiate from her body as I covered hers with mine. "What is upsetting you?"

"What do you see in our future?"

My hearts began beating rapidly as my mind raced, trying to figure out what she was referring to and what answer she was looking for.

In another time and place, I would have tried to flirt with her, wanting to do what humans do to those they like and kiss those lush lips of hers. It didn't matter that she didn't have wings or a beak, or that she had flat, five-toed feet that lined up in front, leaving her heels bare.

She was beautiful to me despite our differences.

Something was preventing me from testing the air, discussing my species' mating practices, and asking her if she wanted to unite with me for all eternity.

She would be the first to join my flock, and perhaps once everything in the galaxy had calmed down, all the missing humans had been found, and the threat of war had passed, we could discuss expanding our flock.

Only if she wanted them at the time and we could conceive, because we'd be at different stages of our lives, and she might just want to keep

working on her career.

“I see you.” I took a deep breath, hoping I wasn’t making another mistake.

“Can I touch you?”

How could a simple, innocent question sound so... erotic.

Thoughts of her using her soft hands to touch sensitive places raced through my mind before I was able to shut them down.

When her gaze shifted to my wings, I knew I had failed.

I tightly closed my eyes, not wanting to witness the disgust she may have felt from me being aroused by her four words as I trapped her against the window with my body.

“Is something wrong?” Her voice was laced with concern, not malice, as she cupped my cheek with her hand, her thumb tracing the side of my beak, and I knew from the tone of her voice that her gaze was fixed on the glowing shimmer my wings were emitting. “Should I go get help?”

“No! Please,” I begged, shooting open my eyes. “There’s nothing wrong. It’s normal... Well, as normal as can be.”

“Why are your feathers glowing?” Biting her lip, she flicked her gaze to them once again. “They didn’t do that before... in fact, I’ve never seen them glow.”

“How?” I jerked my head back as I stared at her in shock. “Don’t humans have similar displays?”

“Displays of what?” she deadpanned, rolling her eyes. Then, suddenly, she leaned herself against me as she used my body as support to place her free hand against my forehead, pressing it all over with both sides. “You don’t feel like you have a fever.”

“I promise you, I am fine,” I swore, closing my eyes once again as I tried not to think about how her breasts were pressed against my chest, nor her leg wiggling at my crotch. It was as if she were oblivious to how seductive she was, unintentionally trying to care for me as her thigh kept trying to rub my pouch. It was a miracle my sheer panic over not wanting to spook her hadn’t made my cock burst out.

“It will go away soon... I hope.”

I cursed myself for accidentally saying the last part, and as Ami removed her hand from my forehead, I knew she must’ve heard it too.

Leaning back, she looked at me with concern before squeezing our joined hands. “Can you please tell me what’s wrong, so I can know not to

be so concerned in the future?”

“Do you honestly not know?”

“I wouldn’t be asking you if I did,” she said, and I didn’t miss the hurt in her eyes.

“Can you promise me you won’t run away?”

She peered at me skeptically but didn’t make a move. “I promise.”

“Ekoiskra’s feathers glow for multiple purposes.”

“And they are?”

“Whenever an Ekoiskra is aroused, their feathers will glow. Some say they are beacons to let each other know when they are horny and interested in mating.”

I winced from my lame confession, but she wasn’t running away screaming, so I could take that as a good sign. Hopefully, I hadn’t totally blown up what we’d built since she’d been here.

“You are attracted to me?” she said, studying my glowing feathers intensely. “And aroused?”

“If you had continued to press against me as you checked my temperature, you would’ve been able to confirm it yourself,” I confessed. “I was trying my hardest to prevent you from unintentionally rubbing my pouch with your leg, knowing full well that I wouldn’t be able to hide its hardness from you when it springs out.”

“But you’ve been alone with me, and you never even attempted to flirt or attempt to seduce me.” She shook her head as if she couldn’t believe what I had told her. “Do you even want me as a mate?”

“Ami, of course I want you,” I begged, palming her cheek with my free hand as I directed her to look at me. I didn’t miss how tears had continued to fall from the corners of her eyes, nor the trembling of her bottom lip as she stared at me, lost and confused. “I wanted to get to know you, and see if we could coexist within the same villa in harmony. Over time, I’ve developed a deep respect and care for you.

“I didn’t want to overwhelm you, especially since you’d just been through a traumatic experience that changed your entire life. I haven’t tried to flirt with you, but because you deserved peace after what happened to you. The best thing I could do was serve as your unofficial sponsor and provide you with everything you required. I didn’t think our bond would develop into what it has.

“I can assure you that I couldn’t get you out of my mind since we met. Knowing how your leaders failed their crew... how your government officials fail your species, drives me insane. I’ve been staying up all night wondering how I can prove to you that you should stay by my side, not knowing if you would prefer a ‘birdman’ over remaining alone, filling yourself with self-love, and maybe one day moving to the sanctuary to live amongst your fellow ex-crewmates, to build a life there.

I only wish for the best for you. If you want to reject me, that’s fine. I’m not going to force you to be my mate. We have our entire lives ahead of us to face whatever the future holds for us... as friends—as sponsor and beneficiary.”

“Is what you said true?” she sobbed, her voice cracking at the end. “You want to be with me?”

“As true as the feathers on my skin.”

“Then I accept you—all of you.” She pressed her hands against my chest as her gaze flicked to my beak as she licked hers. “Can I kiss you?”

“You never have to ask.”

Ami closed her eyes, and she pressed her lips to my bill.

Instantly, I felt it.

The cosmic sensation burning through her lips to beak as my feathers came to life, glowing as brightly as the plant life outside. One peck became two, and suddenly she pushed her body onto mine. Her other hand found my crest, entangling her fingers with my feathers as she held me close.

I didn’t dare move my wings in fear that I would pull her out of the moment. So instead, I let her take control, as I was hers to use the way she saw fit.

She yanked my feathers, making me gasp as her tongue took advantage and dived into my beak. Moaning, my tongue joined hers in its erotic dance, as every part of my body she touched was brought to life.

Slowly, she pulled away and pressed her forehead against my own, peering deeply into my eyes.

“Wow...”

Such a simple word held so much meaning when it came from her lips.

“Indeed, wow.”

“I need you, now,” she demanded. “I don’t care that you’re not human... I want you for you. You’re everything I want in a partner.”

I couldn't deny that I wouldn't mind settling for being her friend, but I needed to be sure that she truly wanted me.

"I want to be more than a partner," I vowed, pressing my forehead against hers. "I want to be your mate."

"Who said you couldn't be both?" She gripped my thigh and leaned toward me with a seductive smirk on her face. She placed her lips against the side of my head, near where my hidden ear was located. "I need to feel the warmth of your feathers all over my body."

"You want to go to bed?" I squawked. I could feel my cock strain against its pouch, ready to pop out with one slight wrong move. "You want to be intimate with me?"

"Yes to both." She leaned back until her face was a few inches from mine and tilted her head. "What do you think?"

"Of course," I shuddered. "I would be honored to."

She took her hand and placed it directly over my pouch. A soft moan ripped through my lips as she began stroking it.

I knew I was too worked up from her needy scent hitting me full force to stop her. I needed to build a nest—and fast—because I refused to grant her wish here against the window for our first time.

I snatched her hand from my pouch and carried her into her room, tossing her onto the bed.

Naked. She needed to be naked.

Swiftly, I untied her robe and pulled the fabric off of her as if it was on fire, not caring where they landed.

It was my job to pleasure her, protect her, and worship her. To give her everything she demanded.

I gripped her ankles, and she let out a shriek as I pulled her to the edge of the bed. As I pulled her legs apart and was welcomed by the scent of her need.

Without hesitation, I placed her legs on my shoulders and dove in. I began rubbing my beak through her drenched slit and thrusting my tongue in and out of her pussy before she could even register what was going on.

A groan ripped through me at the cosmic taste. "I love the way you taste."

Moans of passion escaped as her hands found my crown's feathers. Her legs tightened around my head but didn't deter me from my mission.

I snaked my hand around her leg, covering her with my wing, and discovered her clit. Using the fluids that drenched her, I rubbed circles around her button, determined to please her.

“Let me know that I’m doing this right,” I said as I rubbed her slit with the top of my beak, enjoying the sensation of her grinding against it in her passion.

She yanked my crown feathers hard every time she shrieked with pleasure, and a fresh wave of her slick gushed over my tongue.

Knowing that she would soon be begging for my cock, I needed to make sure she was prepared, for I didn’t know if and how she would be able to take it.

As one hand rubbed her clit, I used the other to gather all the extra slick and coat her entrance, to make sure she was prepared as I could make her.

She yanked my hair hard as she chanted my name. I pulled my face away and gulped in fresh air.

“I need you! I need you! I need you!”

I understood. She needed my cock to fill her.

I stood and flipped my begging female over onto her stomach. Leaning over, I placed a pillow under her head and combed her long braids away from her neck to ensure she was comfortable and able to breathe for what we were about to do.

Gripping her hips, I pulled her up and positioned myself behind her.

She started bucking against me, her smooth ass cushioning my pouch as if she was willing my cock to life while whimpering about needing it in her.

Finally, unable to hear any more of her demands, I slammed my pouch against her entrance and held her in place, letting go of all my restraints.

My cock flew out of its pouch and slammed into her with full force, filling her up to the brim as I let out a boastful shriek.

I hadn’t been with a female before.

Nothing could have prepared me for the feeling of her walls clenching around my cock as if preventing me from retreating. I couldn’t get over how amazing she felt. How wet, warm, and snug she was.

“That’s right, you’re doing a good job,” I cooed, lightly petting my hand along her spine. “I didn’t know if you were going to be able to take it all, but you did.”

“Whatever you’ve stuffed in me, I need you to move it,” she mumbled, glancing up at me over her shoulder as she wiggled her ass against me, trying to force me to move. “I need you to cause some friction, just like you did earlier.”

Unable to resist her demands, I slowly drew my cock out, gasping as I felt her body squeeze onto it as if refusing to let go. I pushed the rest of my cock back, not wanting to lose the wonderful snug feeling of her walls.

She screamed as an orgasm ripped through her as my pelvis met her ass cheeks.

“More! More! More!” she whined as she clawed at the sheets. The sound of her pleading voice urged me not to leave her disappointed.

I couldn’t stand how tight and hot her pussy was as it tried to milk my cock. Her body instinctively drew my cock deeper, which surprised me given how many books on how to please female humans I’d read for research.

With a growl, she wrapped her legs around mine, flipped me onto my back, and spun herself around to straddle me.

In the shock, I let it happen, not wanting to anger her any further, and wanting to make sure she could get the pleasure she wanted from me.

“I’ll be better prepared next time,” I swore, looking up at the radiant female above me. “I promise.”

“You get enough credit for eating me like you’re starved.” She chuckled as she readjusted herself and wiggled her ass into my pelvis, closing her eyes and exhaling a gasp.

She moaned as she lowered herself slowly onto my cock. Once she was fully seated on top of me, she placed her hands on my chest and began to bounce.

I was in shock, unable to determine if I had somehow failed her or if she just wanted to be on top to control the pace. All I could do was lie there and stare in awe at Ami riding me. I couldn’t believe she desired me as much as I’d desired her.

I reached up and cupped her breasts in my hands, needing to feel them. She let out a moan and closed her eyes in unspoken approval. It was as if she only had one mode, and that was to fuck. I was being used for her desires.

I didn’t know how much longer I could last with her on top of me. I was beginning to feel myself get close.

I gripped her nipples and began squeezing them between my thumbs and forefingers. She moaned in pleasure as I pinched hard, and she collapsed onto my chest.

Her hands found my face, and she leaned in, tilting her head to kiss me. Our tongues danced as she continued to slowly ride my cock.

This moment felt right—like we were two souls enjoying our time together.

But as much as I was enjoying myself, I needed to make sure she was entirely pleased before my climax hit me.

Releasing her breasts, I wrapped my arms around her tightly and rolled her over. Ami gasped as her eyes shot open.

I rubbed my beak along her neck as I hooked my arms under her knees and began fucking her hard. She moaned and thrashed about in pleasure while I pumped into her. Her walls tightened around my cock with each thrust.

With each moan that left her lips, I fervently sought the next, hoping it was enough.

Shuddering, I couldn't hold my climax back any longer.

She screamed with pleasure as she gripped my crest feathers, the pain only adding to the rush of my climax. I growled into her shoulder as my cock erupted inside her.

Her scream died down to a moan. Her hands released my feathers. I carefully dropped her legs and rolled over with her in my arms with the last of my energy.

My eyelids grew heavy as I squeezed my female in my arms.

Naomi - Ami

A faint trilling filled the air as I awoke to a soft blanket of warmth covering me.

As I slowly opened my eyes, I was astounded to discover that Axel had fallen asleep beside me on my bed and that he had a wing draped over my naked body.

My mind was flooded with memories of the passionate moments we shared together, which immediately jolted me out of my dazed state.

We had sex.

We'd made it work, no matter how awkward our kissing was or how his cock fit in me... which made me feel full. Almost too full.

But none of that mattered to me because he filled gaps in my life that I had no idea existed.

"Did I wake you?" Axel asked, his voice deeper than usual, as he rolled over and sat up, removing his wing from my body.

"No." I shook my head and rolled to my side to watch him get out of bed. "I was already awake."

He fully extended his wings and then ruffled his feathers, folding his wings to allow all of them to settle neatly on his body.

"How are you?" He scanned me with his piercing amber eyes, looking for signs of injury. "Did I hurt you?"

"Not at all." I stretched my body on my nest-like bed, and then rolled onto my feet. "I could ask you the same thing."

"Do you have..." He made a nervous clicking noise with his beak. "Any regrets?"

“None, other than questioning your intent in involving Sarah,” I admitted as I walked over to the closet panel and opened the door. “But the more I listened to you and thought about it, the more I realized that you were correct in making sure I didn’t feel trapped here, or that I owed you anything for rescuing me.

“But you weren’t doing any of those things. You were attempting to look after me.” Axel bent over and picked up my discarded robe on the floor and placed it in the drawer bin before I could grab it. “Just like you always do, even with small things like putting my dirty robe away.”

His gaze softened. “And I’ll continue to look after you if you let me.”

“Do you have any regrets about me?” I licked my lips nervously. “How about us?”

“What would I regret?” The emerald feathers on his crown popped up and bobbed. “You have everything I look for in a mate.”

“I don’t have wings.” I spread my arms wide. “I can’t fly.”

“I don’t care,” he replied. “I spend most of my time inside, and if we need to fly somewhere, we can use a shuttle, or you can ride on my back.”

“I don’t have any feathers, a beak, or talons.”

“And I don’t have any hair, smooth skin, or luscious lips.” He took a step forward and grabbed my hands, enclosing them in his. “None of that matters to me. A partnership involves listening, caring, taking, and giving. It is a bond formed between two souls that is filled with trust and mutual understanding.

“It begins with a seed—the first meeting of two beings. Our moment was you crashing in the nearby jungle and bursting into my life. And then, with time and care, it blossoms into an unbreakable love.

“If you want to make us official, I’d love to perform a mating dance—an ancient Ekoiskra tradition that invokes the Four Winds to bless the couple and bind their souls together for all eternity.” His voice was strained, almost beseeching me to accept him. “If you say yes, and after we seal our fate, I will officially register you as my mate in the galactic citizen roster, earning you an additional layer of protection on top of mine.”

Something about this felt like a wedding proposal, but without the ring and in an incredible setting. He was still giving me his heart, partnership, protection, and soul as if it were a universal sacrifice.

When it became clear that I would not be going back to Earth, I realized that I would have no need for a ring. That was a human custom, but it was

heading in the direction of extinction. A sign of ownership that was not well received by individuals of younger generations, and something that would get in my way at work.

“Yes, I want you, and only you.” “Yes, I want you, and you alone.” I nodded and leaned in, pressing my face against his soft dawn-feathered chest as his hands let go of mine and he wrapped his wings around me. “I want to make our relationship official, under your traditions and through the government. What do I need to do to prepare?”

“Nothing really.” He squeezed his wings tighter around me and placed his head on top of mine. “I could perform it for you right now if you want.”

“I’d like that,” I muttered, closing my eyes and listening to his heavy heartbeats. “Therefore, no one could ever question our connection or take me away from you.”

“Let’s go to the pool, where I can wash you, and we can eat our morning meal along the shore while we dry off in the warm sunlight.” He let go of me and turned me around to face him. “Once you’re completely dry, I’ll make you wet all over again as I rouse you with a dance before the Four Winds.”

“That sounds like a plan.”



“ARE you ready to answer my questions while I prove my worth?” he purred, his amber eyes darkening, his purr sounding more like a series of chirps. “Tell me what I need to do to earn your claim. You were thrown into my life by the Four Winds, and now I must catch your gust of wind in my wings and soar with you for eternity.”

“I’ll answer your questions, but are you prepared to handle them?” I teased, sitting on the edge of the large peachy-white border, wondering what I had gotten myself into. “What kind of dancing are we talking about?”

“You’ll have to wait and see.” He spread his wings and extended his crest, as if he was displaying them for me to judge.

“You may begin,” I replied, motioning with my hand as if I were a queen speaking to an entertainer about to begin a performance.

“Your desire is mine.” He beamed, spreading his wings to their full extent and shaking them violently.

I sat on the large rock, my eyes fixed on Axel as he performed his mating dance. His feathers were a vibrant shade of black, almost iridescent in the sunlight, a similar coloring to ravens on Earth.

He strutted around, flapping his wings and singing a song that only he seemed to understand. He moved with such grace and precision, each step and gesture perfectly executed.

His body moved as it was a fluid bending to the wind; his graceful spins reminded me of the pinwheel seeds as they fell from some of the exotic trees back on Earth. Every time he turned, his piercing amber eyes would lock and hold onto mine as if he was dedicating his dance to me, letting me know that he wanted no other.

But it wasn't just the beauty of his dance that captivated me. As he moved, I could feel his eyes on me, as if he were performing just for me. I felt a warmth spreading through my chest as I watched, and I couldn't help but feel a strong connection to my beautiful, avian male.

It was clear that he was trying to seduce me, and I couldn't deny the pull I felt toward him. It was as if he was speaking to me through his dance, communicating something deep and primal that I couldn't quite put into words.

I felt my heart racing as he drew closer, his wings spread wide as he approached the rock where I sat. And when he finally reached me, he leaned down and brushed his beak against my cheek, sending shivers down my spine.

I couldn't resist the temptation any longer. I reached up and ran my fingers through his feathers, feeling their softness and warmth.

Without a word, he took my hand and led me into the dance, and we moved together in perfect synchronization, our bodies flowing as one.

The world around us seemed to fade away as we danced, lost in the magic of the moment. And as we twirled and spun, he wrapped his wings around me, and I knew without a doubt that I was falling in love, and I would always remember this romantic moment with Axel.

“Would you take me as your mate, swearing our union on behalf of the Four Winds?” he asked, his eyes begging me to answer.

“Yes, I do.” Tears flowed from my eyes, blurring my vision.

“I love you so much that I’d pull every feather from my body to prove it to you. I can only hope—”

“You already have my love,” I sobbed. “I’ve just been hesitant to tell you.”

“Are you still afraid?” he whispered, his melodic voice like a gentle caress across my skin.

Shaking my head, I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his bill, giving him a quick peck. “No, not anymore.”

He gripped the back of my head and surged forward, smashing his beak to my lips. He drilled his tongue into my mouth, twirling it expertly around mine like a mating dance.

His hands fell to my sides, guiding me backward until my back hit the rock. Placing his knee between my legs, he ground it against my juncture.

Pulling his face away, he combed back my hair and stared deeply into my eyes.

“Tell me, Ami,” he begged. “Tell me that I am yours, that you will join my flock. You are the only female I want to treasure for all time.”

“Yes, Axel.” I nodded, tracing his face with my fingers. “I love you and only you. There’s no one else I want by my side for all time.”

“I love you, Ami, and I’ll prove it to you every waking moment.”

Axel swiftly swept me into his arms. I felt a rush of warmth as he lifted me off my feet, carrying me towards our villa.

“Fledglings?” Axel inquired, his gaze fixed on the rocky path leading up the hill to the wraparound porch. “How many offspring do you want? And when do you want to extend our newly formed flock?”

“Ah... Not today.” My mind raced as I tried to think of a truthful response without offending him. “It appears that the galaxy is unstable at the moment, and I am enjoying myself with my lessons. I’d rather we didn’t try to bring any new life to the universe until there isn’t a war looming over us, and I’ve graduated and established myself with a career.”

“I share your concern.” Axel bobbed his head. “Having to raise offspring in a young flock will be difficult during these challenging times. I’d prefer to wait until things have calmed down before we revisit it.”

“How are we going to avoid an unplanned pregnancy?” I looked up at him, puzzled as to why he hadn’t felt the need to bring this up before we got this far. “Do you have any other dying questions for me?”

“I have a sperm production prevention implant,” he explained as he drew me closer to his chest. “The primary side effect is increased libido, which I will manage in order to keep our flock safe.”

“Are you saying you gave up sperm production in exchange for an increased sex drive?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “How is this a bad thing?”

“Correct,” he said, giving me a quick glance. “It’s a bad thing to be single and want to settle down with someone.”

That made sense, I supposed. I knew plenty of men in my life who were willing to fuck anything and were always looking for their next lay.

There was nothing wrong with it... as long as they weren’t messing with people’s hearts, spreading diseases, or getting anyone pregnant. The problem I had was when they did one of the three things and hurt someone else in the process.

“I don’t have any more questions at the moment,” Axel said as we entered the villa, walking past my room and upstairs. “During our dance, your soul told me everything I needed to know.”

He slid open what I assumed to be his bedroom door and crossed the threshold into the most elegant room in the villa.

With its raised cushioned sides and bowl-like shape, the large bed that took up half of the room appeared to be a monster hot tub shaped bed. There were two lounging chairs along two of the inner walls, as well as a perch on the nearest side.

It was a gigantic-cushioned nest, perfect for two.

“What’s mine is yours, and what’s yours is mine.”

“But what if I prefer my room?” I smirked, letting out a laugh.

Axel came to a halt, his gaze meeting mine. “Do you?”

“No!” I cupped his cheek and lightly tapped his face. “Not unless I’m having trouble sleeping on your nest.”

“That’s not possible.” His emerald crest bobbed up and down as he made a clicking noise. “It’s the best nest credits can buy, and it was custom-built using the finest materials.”

“That may be true, but when I wake up feeling like something stabbed my back all night, that’s when we’ll have to talk.”

“We will.” Axel gently lowered me onto the floor, and I felt the coolness of the black marble floor beneath my bare feet.

I couldn't believe it, and yet, I should have expected this opulence by the sleekness of the villa outside and inside.

He had made this vessel his home, his sanctuary—his paradise.

"Your beauty amazes me," my avian male purred, combing a stray braid away from my ears.

"Is a room like this common for your species?" I'd never seen a nest until I met him, and yet, here was a massive room with the most enormous bed I'd ever seen taking over a whole corner. There were two sets of sliding doors which I assumed led to a bathroom and his office. Except for a wall with multiple vidscreens and a window that took up the entire wall, the rest of the room was open. "I'm not sure what I imagined your room to be, other than a larger version of my guest room, but my room didn't have a nest like yours."

"If the flock isn't well off," he replied, turning me to face the long, floor-to-ceiling mirror beside the closet panel. "But if someone in my position hadn't provided you with a room like this, it would be an insult to not only you but to my character, too."

He leaned in and pressed his beak against the top of my head. I watched him through the mirror as he closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. A satisfied purr erupted from him as his calming scent of coconut and sunshine wrapped around me like a warm blanket.

"I highly doubt many others can afford something like your villa."

"Are you sure?"

His piercing amber eyes jerked open and found mine in the mirror. There was something about our position that I found erotic, but the tone of his voice—so guarded—as the question escaped his beak had stabbed a dagger of concern straight into my heart.

Had I offended him?

"What do you mean?"

"Almost every leader, politician, scientist, or middle-class businessman could afford a villa like mine," he explained, grabbing a few of my braids and focusing his gaze on the beads woven into them. "Up until the most recent events, the galaxy has been in a stage of peace for a long period of time, which allowed our citizens to build their estates and pass it down from generation to generation. Despite the fact that my location is unique, because I have a connection with the locales, there are many other homes that are much larger and have more features."

I stood there in shock, unable to move as I watched him watching me through the mirror.

“It astounds me how much everything has improved simply because every species within the IPA decided to live in peace.”

“You’re honestly not upset about not having the very best?” He was breathing heavily, waiting to see whether I would change my mind.

Yet how could I?

“Why should I be upset with you about that when I am completely satisfied with this villa?” I shrugged, already over the dark path of this conversation. “You’re the same kind and caring male, regardless of what you own. It makes no difference if you lose your position and we have to live in a tree to survive. I still want to spend time with you.”

“Thank you, Ami.” I watched him place his beak next to my ear through the mirror. “You’re too perfect for me.”

Leaning back, I pressed myself against him and enjoyed how we looked standing beside each other in the mirror.

“Are you ready for us to seal our fate?” His deep voice made his words sound like unspoken promises, making me shiver. “You know I’m more than willing for us to do it and make you scream my name in pleasure.”

A part of me wanted to be defiant and put him to the test to see what he would do, but I resisted. I’d play with him another day. Right now, I wanted him—and for us to complete our bond so that we could be considered married under his species’ traditions.

“Then do it, Axel,” I whined, not wanting to wait any longer. I could feel my arousal starting to pick up in the anticipation as wetness developed between my legs. “Claim me as yours.”

“Stand still,” he trilled, his eyes darkening as his tropical aroma engulfed me, setting my body on fire with need. “I want to savor you.”

I nodded, unable to speak as I watched him wrap his wings around my body without saying anything. His dawn-feathered hands pressed against me, one on my stomach, the other on my breast. His heavy breaths and tongue tickled my skin as he ran his beak along the juncture of my neck.

I watched him through the mirror as he squeezed my breast, and I could feel the familiar warm tingle of arousal shooting up my spine. My mind was reeling as my body responded to the stimulation. I didn’t know if it was his aroma engulfing me, flooding my senses with promises of pleasure, or the

thundering purr-like trill radiating from him wherever we touched, but I couldn't move.

All I could do was stand there and watch Axel's hands hypnotically massage my breast and rub gentle circles below my belly button. I wouldn't have known it could feel so good, but his comforting gesture kept me from becoming overwhelmed.

As I stood naked in front of the mirror, I watched in a trancelike daze as my avian male studied every inch of my body.

Holding my gaze through the mirror, he dragged his hand from my stomach to my chest and grabbed both of my breasts, shoving my bare behind against his feathered pelvis.

Slowly, he teased and caressed my increasingly sensitive breasts, and lightly pinched my nipples, causing me to groan and thrash against him.

I closed my eyes, unable to bear the pleasure radiating from my breasts and traveling down to my nether regions.

When one of his hands left one of my breasts and dragged it down my chest over my ticklish belly, he cupped my pussy with his fingers, and I shivered. I let out a loud moan as I pressed against his pouch, hoping to rouse his cock.

"You're so wet," Axel said, pressing his middle finger between my folds. "I can't wait to have another taste of you. I'm sure you'll taste as good as you smell right now."

Slowly, he started to grind against my ass cheeks while his middle finger began to trace softly over my nether lips. It took all my strength not to collapse to the ground, feeling keyed up and impossibly weak. There was nothing I wanted more than for him to place me on the edge of the nest and fuck me until I passed out.

If he was testing me, I was willing to do whatever it took to pass so that I could feel him inside me again.

"Let me show you how gentle I can be, so I won't feel as guilty when I rut you when you beg for it," Axel breathed, dragging his beak along my neck. "I promise you. It won't always be this way."

I nodded, too wrapped up in the overload of sensations that flooded through me. It was as if Axel had enveloped me within himself, and the only thing missing was his cock.

His middle finger pressed deeper and teased my entrance as the pressure from his other fingers parted my nether lips. He traced slowly in a circle as

if he wanted to memorize my shape before he started to press in softly, only to retreat and repeat the maddening process all over again.

Moaning, I tried to move my hips back and forth to force him to speed up and go deeper.

“You’re doing so well, Ami,” Axel chirped, sounding more like a purr, as he dragged his hand upward, spreading my slick in its wake, and his nimble fingers found my clit. “Just a little while longer, and you’ll get what you want.”

He licked my earlobe and began to rub circles around my clit, his skilled teasing sending shocks through my system. He worked carefully, reacting to my movements as I rocked against his pelvis, wanting his cock to come out and play, so I could grind against it while he played with me.

My slick had soaked my thighs. The cool air blowing against my legs countered the inferno emanating from his body.

His teasing fingers moved down to my entrance. Axel released his grip on my breast and grabbed my leg, hooking it over his arm.

I gasped, but before I was able to ask what he was doing, he swiftly pushed two fingers into me. The sudden movement took my breath away as I clawed at his legs.

“You look so beautiful in my wings,” he muttered as he thrust his skilled fingers in and out of my slick passage. “I can’t wait to see you come undone before me once again, but this time, in our nest.”

Every time he thrust his fingers in, his thumb would flick against my clit. He started to take me to new heights, building a pressure I had never felt before. Finally, my breathing became fast and shallow, and the rapid beating of my heart drowned out his cooing.

“That’s it. Keep climbing,” he soothed in time with his fingers. “I love the way you feel all wet and how you squeeze my fingers. I can’t wait to feel you wrapped around my needy cock, once it is all hard and ready for you.”

His erotic words, paired with the overload of sensations, ripped right through me. My eyes snapped open to take in my limbs shaking in his wings and my screams of pleasure. His fingers continued to work my pussy, and I rode the waves.

“You did amazing, Ami,” he whispered as he slowed down and removed his hand before lowering my raised leg. He wrapped his hands around my waist to prevent me from collapsing into a puddle on the floor. “I believe

I've prepared you enough to take me once again. You're wet enough, at least."

"I'm ready," I announced, my voice sounding raspy to my ears. "I want your cock inside me as you claim me on our new nest."

Picking me up, he nodded, turning serious. "Tell me how you want to do this," he bit out as he gently placed me onto the nest.

"Take me as hard and as fast as you can," I muttered, beyond ready to feel him. "Delay any longer, and I'll start to think you don't want this."

"You're wrong, Ami," he growled, gripping my legs as he yanked me to the edge of my new nest. "I want you so badly that I couldn't sleep last night thinking about how you clung to me, climaxing on top of me, and how I wish we'd done it the right way."

"It doesn't matter," I growled, shaking my head at the ridiculous male. "We're following tradition now, and we're about to seal our fate. Don't be regretful for what brought us here."

He grabbed my hand and placed it over his pouch without saying anything.

He let out a shrill screech as a long, angry purple cock burst out of its pouch, displaying itself. Its zig-zag, corkscrew-like shape stared at me, fully aroused and leaking as if begging me to milk it.

The display of virility restarted my arousal.

When I reached out to touch it once again, Axel gripped my hand and used the momentum to flip me over onto my stomach. He snaked a wing around my waist and lifted me up onto my knees using the other hand.

"This is your last chance," Axel cooed in my ear as his precum dripped down my inner thigh. "Tell me to stop, and I will."

"I want this." Gripping the sheets with my free hand, I raised my ass against his hard body, feeling its inferno of heat. "I want you to claim me as yours."

"You're not the one in charge." Squeezing my hand tightly, he released it and jerked back. "I am, and I'll make you mine."

I felt his cock trail up my leg until he placed it snugly between my nether lips. Gripping my hips, he slowly pressed in, spreading my walls ever so deliciously.

"I was right," he growled, see-sawing his cock back and forth, working my walls and stretching them out enough to take his cock's swirly shape. "You're ready for me."

He lunged forward and pressed his pelvis to the entrance of my pussy. I moaned. It was so hot and thick, and I was so desperate to have him in me, sealing us together. He jerked my hips back and grunted as more of his thickness entered me.

I whined as he pushed in a little more, rocking our bodies back and forth to widen me and allow more of him in. I could feel myself stretching open around the thick meaty base of his cock.

I felt so full and so hot. I couldn't believe my pussy managed to take him but loved how my walls were throbbing and squeezing around his thickness.

He growled and buried the rest of himself to the hilt, leaning into me. Finally, he was completely inside me, and while it hurt to be stretched like this for the second time, it wasn't as bad as our first—and yet, it was exactly what I had desperately desired.

He paused his rocking, and I could tell by the heavy panting in my ear that he was enjoying my hot, wet pussy shuddering around him.

Now that I had taken him entirely, I wanted to climax all over him and seal our fates together.

All I managed was a small whimper as I rocked my hips slightly, pushing back against him.

"I'm so happy you chose me to be your mate," he growled and gripped my hips, his fingers digging into my skin. "And now I'll make you mine for all eternity."

A shudder racked through both of us as he grunted and slammed into me hard.

Moans escaped me as he continued to pound deep into me. The thickness of the base of his cock rocked against my entrance as if he were trying to seal us together.

He shuddered, as an orgasm ripped through me. Wrapping his arms around my waist, he rolled us over until we lay side by side as his hot seed exploded from his shaft and filled me.

Combing my stray braids back, he peered down at me in awe.

"We began this day as two gusts of wind. Now, we are one."

Naomi

My entire body felt sore.

The good kind of sore that let you know that you had officially climaxed after a long session of foreplay.

Soft coo-like snores filled the air as I slowly opened my eyes to a bright, sunlit room. The room that was now mine.

I couldn't help but smile as I took in the sight of him, his chest rising and falling with each breath. I felt a sense of contentment wash over me, knowing that I was exactly where I belonged.

I gently ran my fingers through his crest feathers, trying not to wake him. He stirred slightly, but didn't wake up. I couldn't resist the urge to kiss him, so I leaned in and pressed my lips to his beak. He responded with a soft coo and wrapped his wings around me, pulling me closer.

We lay there for a few more moments, enjoying the warmth and comfort of each other's embrace. Eventually, Axel opened his eyes and looked at me

"Good morning, beautiful,"

"Good morning to you, too."

"How are you?" Axel asked, his voice rumbling through me like a deep purr. "I want to know if I took things too far last night."

"You didn't." I rolled my eyes as I turned around in his embrace to look at him. "If I didn't tell you to stop, believe that you're doing everything correctly. I climaxed, didn't I?"

"Yes, a couple of times," he said proudly.

"Then there's nothing to worry about," I explained. "And even if I hadn't, did it appear that I was having fun?"

“It was a lot of fun.”

“Then you have nothing to be concerned about,” I countered, knowing exactly what I needed to do to put his mind at ease. “Let’s finish what we started by completing the mating registry form and registering our union with the government.”

“We can’t right now.”

“How come we can’t?” I inquired, my gaze locked on his. “I expected that to be the next step.”

“It’s the next step,” Axel reassured, taking my hand in his and placing it on his chest. “But it’s something that will take more time to process, since I’m someone of rank. Before we complete the forms and submit them to the archives, I need my superiors to confirm their approval of our union.”

“What if they reject it?” I sucked in a quick breath as it felt like something gripped my heart tightly, filling my body with dread. “Can they do that? Will they do that?”

“Sah-Rah and Carth’aiq aren’t officially mated through the system,” he explained as he wrapped his wings around me. “They are registered as a sponsor and beneficiary, which may be all they need and want for the time being to be happy—but we know, and everyone who meets them knows, they are a mated couple.”

“However, Carth-Eek is a scout under your command,” I countered. “His relationship status wouldn’t be as important as yours. Wouldn’t it be considered beneficial for them to recognize our union?”

“Unless you are wanted for some war crime or mass murder, I have no doubt they’ll approve our union.” His amber eyes glowed with delight, mirroring the bobbing of his emerald crest as a series of trilling chuckles filled the air. “Is there something you’re keeping from me?”

“Only that I’ve poisoned whoever thinks mocking me is funny.” I gave him a toothy grin and chuckled when his laughter died away. “No, Axel, there’s nothing to be concerned about. The worst thing I’ve ever done was go home with one of my job’s aprons and then forget to return it to the establishment. They had already updated the style by the time I remembered, rendering all of their old uniforms obsolete.”

“Have you never tried to poison someone?” While he was looking at me, he cocked his head to the side. “Are you able to produce them on your own?”

“No!” I shook my head. “I was joking. I’ve never attempted to poison anyone, and the only time someone has accused me of doing so was when a customer ordered something they knew they were allergic to and then made a big deal about it, demanding free drinks and meals because they blamed me for the mistake.

When, in fact, they purposefully set up the establishment in order to make their entire check free by creating a large enough scene to make the other customers uncomfortable and want to leave.”

“Do humans do such things to one another?” Axel inquired, his tone of voice rising in shock. “Why would they do something like that?”

“I’m not sure.” I shrugged. “For attention, pity, or maybe to get free things... maybe a combination of all three.

“However, none of that is relevant, Axel. What I’m trying to get across to you is that a mixologist is capable of putting on a show by concocting the most incredible drinks. However, it is the responsibility of the customer to inform us if they have any allergies to particular ingredients or if their species are sensitive to a particular substance.

“I’ve been putting in a lot of effort to learn what is lethal to whom, but there are hundreds of space-faring species in the IPA, and it would be impossible for me to know everything. This is especially true when you consider that I’m still considered a novice and that I’ve only met members of the Chusezri, Ekoiskra, and Calyzis so far since I’ve arrived here.

“To answer your question about whether I poisoned someone, the answer is yes, but it wasn’t my fault. Every species and being is unique, and it is the customer’s responsibility to determine their tolerance to an ingredient. There is no way to prevent me from accidentally poisoning someone in the future if I am not warned, or if they order something they know is harmful to them.”

“That makes perfect sense,” Axel muttered, sighing deeply. “Part of the reason mixologists are respected is that their knowledge of mixed drinks is vast, especially when they specialize in rare and unique ingredients.”

“Are you still happy being my mate?” I teased.

“Most definitely.” Axel let out a long coo-like purr. “And right now, I want us to get bathed, and for you to get dressed while I prepare our morning meal. Once we are done eating, we can go to my office and fill out the sponsor and beneficiary forms and our union declaration.

“During my meetings this afternoon, I’ll present both documents to my superiors and request that I be allowed to work remotely from here, in our villa.”

“You will?”

“I believe that will be the best option.” One of my braids was tucked behind my ear by him. “Especially since the Calyzis and Makezu on this planet don’t have representatives at the capital, due to their species strict biological restrictions that makes space traveling extremely difficult, especially when they are off of their birth planets for a long time.

“It will allow me to be their voice while continuing to assist my brother in gathering the discovered humans and having them either become sponsored by their rescuer or gathered to bring to the sanctuary he manages.”

“And just because we live here permanently doesn’t mean we can’t leave our villa on side missions from time to time,” I added, hoping he’d use that argument to his superiors if necessary. “Also, don’t they want me to succeed so they can use my story to show others that humans can adapt to finding their place and living outside of Earth, especially without being surrounded by other humans?”

“Those are valid points.” His piercing amber eyes studied the beads and the weaving of the golden strands in my hair as he brought my braid to his face. “Now that we’ve mated, I have little doubt that they’ll reject my requests. Everything I own is already yours with the Four Winds’ blessing, so all we’re doing is making it known for others to see.”

“Let’s get out of our nest and start our day,” I said with a wide grin, dragging my hand down his down-feathered covered chest and enjoying the soft feel of him against my skin. “If we didn’t have a full day ahead of us, I’d love to spend the entire day touching you in our nest, but we have forms to sign for you to bring to your important meetings, and I have my lesson at the midday meal.”

“We’ll have to reschedule your exploration for tonight,” he cooed, his heated gaze catching mine. “Until then, I’ll be thinking about what I want to do with you.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Ixik'tryl

I was the happiest male in existence.

Nothing could ruin this moment. I would forever remember her declaration of love and pledge to join my flock. Our flock would only hold us two until all the dangers have passed, and she was comfortable in her career.

Then we could grow our flock with as many hatchlings as she wanted, if we decided it something we wanted at that time.

And if we never produced offspring of our own, I was sure we would be happy helping others with their own, as long as I had my Ami by my side.

I stepped out onto the porch of the villa, into the darkness of the night. Ami wasn't in our nest, and it was late. Since she couldn't fly, there were only a few places within the villa's grounds where she could be.

It appeared that I was correct, and there was some unrest brewing along the Yzefrxyl borders—but by the time anyone looked into the matter, all evidence had vanished. Missing ships lost cargo as a result of pirates, and rumors of a rebellion forming circulated, sparked by those in the black market furious at Yzefrxyl for shooting the Humans—their main source of entertainment for those who loved playing the game of “who could excel their civilization the most.”

Duty would call us away again, and soon, but we could relax knowing that we had been granted permission to make our villa our permanent residence.

The Yzefrxyl hostility toward the humans was something I couldn't shake.

The council didn't want war, but they would prepare because it was their responsibility to ensure that no battles came close to Earth or their star system.

There could soon be a time for me to require the Calyzis and the Makezu representatives to join me. I would rather have them on X'thyrl, leading its defense squad, but if a war was declared, I would need every experienced military personnel under their available in order for me to feel comfortable leaving Ami alone in our villa.

I was so afraid that something terrible would happen to her that I wouldn't even consider letting her stand on the front sidelines.

Keeping her hidden behind a strong defense at our new house would almost certainly ensure her survival, especially since we lived in a remote location within Lyave's territory.

I would not allow thoughts of war to distract me from the exciting news I had for my Ami.

Ami was leaning on the stone railing, gazing at the ocean waves crashing into the cliffside below, stray strands of her brown hair blowing in the gentle ocean breeze. The sheerness of her silver nightgown left nothing to my imagination.

She hadn't noticed me standing by the door, watching her. Slowly, I stalked toward her, not wanting to interrupt the view.

She sighed and looked up to the night sky, causing me to still my progress.

"You know you can't sneak up on me with your talons clicking every time you walk."

"I assumed you were too preoccupied with the scene below to notice me creeping up on you," I countered, stepping out of the shadows.

Ami stood and turned toward me, finding me effortlessly in the darkness. She pursed her lips as her wary eyes trailed me.

"What are you doing here?" She tilted her head, pursing her lips. "I thought you were working late tonight."

I stopped within arm's reach, her head reaching mid-chest as I stared down at her. Instinctively, I brushed back her loose strands of hair and tucked them behind her ears as she stared up at me skeptically.

"I could ask you the same thing," I retorted. "You should be all snuggled up in our nest right now. Not out here on this cold night."

She closed her eyes and leaned into my hand. I cupped her cheek and traced it with my thumb.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she breathed.

As I snaked my wing around her waist and drew her close, a rumble rolled through my chest. She grabbed my side feathers, and her chest pressed against my stomach.

“Tell me what ails you, my love.”

Resting her head against me, silence fell between us as I waited for her reply.

Having her in my arms felt right after being away from her all day.

“I don’t know what to do with one of my recipes,” she murmured. “I have a test at the end of the week, and I am still not getting it right.”

I traced her curves with both hands until they were resting on her hips. Grasping them gently, I enveloped her in my wings.

Ami stared up at me with her mouth slightly ajar as her deep brown eyes traced my face questionably.

“What is wrong with it?” I asked, searching her eyes. “Maybe I could help.”

She bit her lower lip and studied me. “I want to ask you—but...”

“But you’re afraid of getting in trouble for looking to others for answers and being punished if you’re caught.”

She sighed as she closed her eyes and nodded.

“I believe you can figure it out.” I picked her up and drew her against my body as she wrapped her legs around my torso. “However, if you need a taste tester, I will give up my body for the cause in order to help you pass, but first, I have exciting news for you.”

“What is it?” Her voice was tinged with curiosity. “It has to be important if you went out of your way to find me.”

“I spoke with my superiors,” I replied, watching her body straighten as the subject changed. It was something we’d been looking forward to for quite some time.

“And?”

“They approved our union, and my request to allow me to work remotely, here at the villa.”

“Does that mean we can call this place our permanent residence?” Ami inquired excitedly. “You will not be required to work within metallic walls if you do not wish to.”

“Exactly.” I agreed with a nod. “And you’ll be able to continue your lessons here without having to worry about finding the ingredients in different places.”

“And we can still travel to help others if necessary, but we’ll be able to return here once we’re done.” She snatched my face and drew it down to meet hers. “You always say the right thing, and this news just made my heart sing.”

She quickly pressed her lips to my beak.

I tightened my hands on her ass, my claws piercing her nightgown, making her growl in response as she ground herself against me.

Loud coos rumbled from within as I felt my cock burst out of its pouch, quickly lengthening and hardening from her neediness.

Ami yanked my crest’s feathers as she ended the kiss. I gently lowered her onto the railing, my gaze fixed on hers. Her dark brown eyes were wide with wonder as my erection remained trapped between us.

“Has your cock always been that large... and twisty?” she said on a breath.

“Every time it erupts from its pouch, it takes on a different twisted shape,” I explained. “The Four Winds biologically designed our cocks so that a pair could mate while flying. That’s why it bursts out of the pouch so quickly, and it’s why I can carry you so easily.”

She looked down at my hardness as it pressed against her nightgown, causing it to jump from her focus.

“I don’t remember it being so big, or you so forward,” she murmured.

I watched her move her hands toward my cock and steeled myself from moving. Ami bit her lips, her face scrunched in concentration as she slowly wrapped her hands around its girth, the softness of her hands intoxicating. It took all my strength not to bend her over and rut her, right then and there.

Her wary gaze locked onto mine, a slight frown crossing her lips as she released my manhood.

“Take me. Take me right here, right now,” she demanded. Her voice deepened, thick with need, as her eyes burned in the night’s darkness. “Make me forget about my problems and take me on this balcony as if we are flying.”

A loud squawk ripped through the air as I surged forward. My hands grabbed her sheer nightgown and yanked, effortlessly splitting the fabric in

half with my claws. The sound cut through the air, drowning out the sounds of the waves crashing below.

Ami gasped from her sudden nakedness as I removed the shredded fabric from my claws, allowing the pieces to fall aimlessly onto the balcony floor.

I swiftly grabbed her and placed her onto the railing's edge before throwing her legs onto my shoulders.

This was the location where I had imagined taking her at sunset. He'd designed the entire villa to fit the needs of my future mate, giving us multiple locations for me to make her mine, leaving the scent of our lovemaking in each area as we grew our flock.

I was taller, towering over her whenever we stood side by side, but it didn't matter in this position.

I groaned as I pressed my hardened cock against her wet folds.

Ami's eyes penetrated me as she gazed up at me.

She was magnificent.

Her dark braids hung behind her as I held her in my hands, her heavy breasts rising and falling with her rapid breaths, their nipples hardening.

My coo-purrs intensified as I lowered my beak to the juncture of her neck and nibbled along her skin. One hand kneaded her bare breast as my wing held her in place.

A moan escaped her as I licked her breast, pinching her pebbled nipple gently between my beak. I moved my attention to her other breast and switched hands, making her grab my long feathers on my head.

I sucked hard, causing her to yank my feathers as her growls matched my coos.

I slowly detached myself from her breast and lapped the valley between them, moving my way back up to her neck. Pressing my beak to her skin, I breathed in deeply, taking in her unique scent.

Instinctively, I nibbled on her neck as my wings wrapped around her, holding her in place.

Slowly, I moved back and forth, her essence soaking my feathers. Her wet lips felt delightful against my hard cock, driving my need to take her higher.

I suppressed my arousal and focused solely on her.

I wanted to pour all of my love into this moment, to prove to her that I was hers and completely devoted to her. My duty was to my Four Winds

leaders and higher IPA officials, and they could take me away from her whenever they wanted, but my heart and mind would always yearn for her.

I wanted—needed—her to understand that.

I lowered my hands and gripped her ass, kneading her firm cheeks.

A loud moan escaped her as she lowered her hands to my shoulders and dug into them hard. She raised her hips and tried to quicken my drags, making me chuckle against her throat.

“Axel... I need...”

Lifting my beak to her ear, I whispered, “Let me take care of you, my Ami.”

I drew away from her and looked down at my heavy cock, which was soaked between her nether lips. I squeezed her ass and aligned my pointy head with her entrance.

I watched as I slowly lowered her. My cock parted her lips, causing them to bloom over my cock’s head.

She groaned.

“It’ll be fine, Ami,” I reassured her, intensifying my coos in an attempt to calm her. “You’re doing an excellent job.”

I continued to coo as I remained still to allow her to adjust to my size.

As I looked up at her, I smirked at what I saw.

Ami’s mouth was wide open with her eyes closed as her braids hung behind her.

I took it as a sign and continued to lower her slowly onto my hardened manhood, resisting the urge to thrust all the way in. I needed to give her body time to adjust to my large size and not rush things.

Sounds of pleasure radiated from her, and time seemed to move slowly between us.

Finally, I felt myself bottom out, my shaft squeezed by her tight walls. Glancing down, I saw no space between us.

By taking my time with her, she adjusted to me fully and took all of me—something I was still worried about because of our size differences and the way my cock’s shape changed each time it burst out of its pouch.

“I feel so full.” She moaned. “It didn’t feel like this the other times either.”

I snapped my gaze to hers, and discovered her watching me with heavy-lidded eyes and mouth parted.

“That was because every time will be a unique experience.”

She closed her eyes and nodded.

Watching her face, I slowly lifted her ass and rocked back, pulling my cock out before plunging it back in. A groan escaped her from my swift movement. I lifted her again, rocking back and forth, only allowing a small part to slide in and out.

I was taking my time and not rushing this—she seemed to enjoy it more when I let her arousal gradually build into an inferno.

I let myself enjoy the smoothness of her warm, wet, tight pussy wrapped around my manhood, enjoying the sleek feel of her as I leisurely mated her. I could feel my cock explore every part of her pussy. Whenever my head hit a certain spot or when I ground against her clit, her pussy spasmed and tightened around my length as she moaned in pleasure.

My strokes gradually became longer and deeper, keeping my cock's head inside whenever I pulled out, only to bottom out again, hearing the sounds of our bodies rubbing against each other. Her needy scent thickened and surrounded us, making me dizzy and making it difficult for me to maintain control.

I impaled her completely once more.

She cried out as her pussy spasmed. I could feel her walls tighten around my thick length, sucking me deeper. Her body rocked against me as her legs tried to tighten around my body. She scratched at my shoulders, her fingers pulling at my feathers.

Slowly, her spasms stopped, and her arms fell from me. Her pussy walls released their grip on my cock. Selena had a dazed look on her face as she came down from her peak.

I needed to come.

I flipped her over and laid her down onto the railing. A gasp escaped her, her hands gripping its edge as her breasts pressed against the smooth stone.

I gripped her ass as I relished in the feel of her supple flesh. Slowly, I lined my cock up with her pussy and pushed forward.

I could feel her nether lips part slowly as my thick, pointed head forced its way in. She gasped slightly as her pussy accommodated me once more.

She was tight and wet from her essence. It felt like a warm and wet fist was loosely gripping my cock as I slid in farther.

I frenzied as soon as I felt myself bottom out again. My stride was quick and deep, wild with my desperate need.

Loud moans escaped from her, causing me to move my grip to her hips. I tightened my hold on her and savagely fucked her.

“Tell them... tell them all who is pleasuring you right now... do it, Ami... tell the whole planet.”

“Axel!” She moaned as I impaled her.

“Louder!”

“Axel!” she screamed.

Her voice called to me.

I squeezed her tightly, my claws breaking the skin as I rammed all of my cock as deep as I could. Each time I bottomed out, she scream-moaned my name for the whole coast side to hear.

Her noises drove me, called to me.

I was hers. She was mine.

Her walls clamped down on me, triggering my own release.

I screamed her name in ecstasy as my seed surged forward,

Her pussy milked my cock as it spasmed from her own second orgasm, the contractions rippling along my length as she continued to come.

After what seemed like forever, her spasms slowly calmed, taking in all I had to offer.

Ami collapsed onto the railing as her walls stopped gripping my length.

I glanced down at my hands and winced at the blood from the marks my claws left. Slowly, I pulled out of her and lifted her off the railing, her eyelids closed, and her head lolling when I cradled her body against my chest.

The scents from our mating flooded the area.

Opening the side entrance, I carried Ami inside and placed her in the middle of the nest.

Leaving her side, I walked to the refresher and grabbed a wet cloth and stepped onto the bed, feeling its softness under my talons as I carefully walked over to the clearing beside her.

As I cleaned our combined essences from her skin with care, I couldn't help but stare at my stunning mate in my nest and be in awe of the good fortune that had brought us together.

Ami was officially mine—finally.

I would never let anyone take her away from me—for all eternity.

Chapter Epilogue:

“They call this a cosmic sunset.”

I inhaled deeply as I handed Axel the five-layered drink.

Sutol, my teacher, watched us from her projection with a focused expression on her face, studying my mate for his reaction.

He gingerly picked up the flute and raised it to the window, his amber gaze fixed on the coloring, before tossing the entire drink back.

“What are your thoughts?” I asked softly, hoping I’d gotten the drink right.

“It tasted sweet first, then tart, then sour.” He smacked his beak, rolling his tongue along its edges. “And it has a fruity aftertaste.”

“Did it feel bubbly on your tongue or down your throat?” Sutol inquired, her lips pinched in an attempt to maintain a neutral expression.

“Yes to both.” Axel nodded to my teacher and then looked at me. “Is that what it’s supposed to do?”

“I am the teacher, councilor,” Sutol yelled, grabbing his attention. “Please direct your inquiries to me, not my student.”

“Understood.” Axel ruffled his wings and made a clicking sound with the tip of his beak. “Was the cosmic sunset supposed to have a bubbly sensation?”

“You are correct.” Sutol smiled and bowed her head toward me. “Congratulations, Naomi, you’ve passed the last Chusezri. We’ll start Makezu classes in a few days.”

“Thank you!”

I jumped into Axel's wings, and he spun me around, filling the room with his loud trills.

"I'm so proud of you!" he cooed.

About the Author

USA Today Bestselling author, Jade Waltz lives in Illinois with her husband, two sons, and her three crazy cats.

She writes character driven romances within detailed universes, where happily-ever-afters happen for those who dare love the abnormal and the unknown. Their love may not be easy—but it is well worth it in the end.

Jade enjoys knitting, playing video games, watching Esports, green tea and writing all the stories that live in her imagination.

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MF Alien Romance Series:

Catnapped By the Catman
Interstellar Protections Agency #1

Thick, silky and purrs for hours...

Always the bridesmaid, but never the bride.
That's what I'm known for amongst my large group of friends and family.

Arriving home alone from another wedding very much single not only sucked but only solidified the fact that I may never find love—and that I couldn't even afford to join the wedding party on the space cruise.

It's okay. I've learned to accept my fate in life.
All I needed was my best friend, Loki, who would never betray me....
Much.

Little did I know, my cat had plans for me...

<https://books2read.com/Catman>

MF Alien Dragonrider Romance Trilogy:

Across the Stars *Cosmic Threads of Fate #1*

Alien dragon riders. Fated mates. She would do anything to protect his world.

Mae's mission was to find a potential location for the next human colony, however, she finds something more...

After landing on a newly discovered moon, she finds what she figured existed only as myths and legends... Alien dragon riders who live in enormous trees.

When one of the warriors, Watai, attempts to teach her about his world, he declares that she's his cosmicmate, and that they share the same cosmicthread—a fated cord, which has destined them to be together. The more she learns about his home, the more she wants to protect him and his world from the very government that she works for.

Now she is faced with a difficult choice: To stay and embrace her connection with Watai, or to resist its pull, sever their thread of fate, and flee to protect everything she has grown to love.

Across the Stars is the **first** book of the *Cosmic Threads of Fate* trilogy, featuring the love story between Mae, a human starpilot and Watai, an alien dragon rider.

<https://books2read.com/AcrossTheStars>

RH Space Opera Alien Romance Series:

Found
Project: Adapt # 1

A failed human prototype. That's all she is...

Born and raised as an experiment, Selena's life has been filled with torture, betrayal, and distrust... but one night changes everything.

Sold, attacked, and on the run, Selena is picked up by a colony ship. Struggling to find her place on this ship and trying to understand the draw she feels toward two alien males, her already uncertain life becomes downright unimaginable when she learns new life is growing inside her.

Terrified her captors will find her and take her and her children back to a life of horror and captivity, she must learn to trust her saviors, and herself.

With the help of her two mates, Selena will fight for her freedom—or die trying.

books2read.com/PAFound

RH "Space Mulan" Alien Romance Trilogy:

Cosmic Valor Cosmic Honor #1

She wanted to bring honor back to her family's name and to save her
people...

Falling in love wasn't part of the plan...

When Jaiya takes her twin brother's place on a diplomatic mission to end a
war that's been raging since her childhood, she discovers how it all really
began.

Disguised as a young male diplomat, Jaiya meets Prince Idris—her greatest
rival in their space battles—his royal assistant, Erlyn—who never leaves his
side—and is assigned to be guarded by Raizxl—who blames humans for
losing his mate.

If she cannot convince her people and the enemy to put aside their
differences and choose peace instead of war, she risks returning as a traitor
to her race instead of as a hero.

The longer she's in their presence, the more she feels at home amongst
those in their space station.

Determined to save their people at any cost, something about them calls to her—and she does not know why.

When they discover the truth, will they be able to get past her betrayal to work toward peace? Or will it only add fuel to the fires of war?

Release Date:

May 4th, 2023

<https://books2read.com/Cosmic1>