



AMANDA MILO

**THE PET PROJECT:
UNNATURAL
SELECTION**

Pet Project: Unnatural Selection

By Amanda Milo

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DEDICATION

To R. We've been through the weirdest stuff together, but you know what? *We made it through.* I love you!

***This story is set in the Pet Project universe. Not to worry if you haven't read that one! You can still enjoy this book entirely as a standalone. Want the link to the original *Pet Project* anyway? Here you go! =D

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CHAPTER 1

“Dog!” the male spits at me.

Dog. He’s never even seen a dog. Nobody has. Dogs were companion animals that the First Elders, before the First Elders died out, used to tell tales of. These long-ago animals were kept when our people lived as their own rulers on the planet Earth.

Now the word ‘dog’ is a derogatory term. One does not hurl it at another person, not unless they want to verbally slap them with a slur. Because it’s said that dogs were blindly loyal; creatures who would do whatever their master told them to do.

But here’s the thing. We (creatures formerly known as humans, but we now go by whatever name our owners’ peoples refer to our species as) *have* to do what our keepers tell us to do, or we’re not worth keeping.

And culled humans...

You don’t want to be a Cull.

Besides, why make life harder than it needs to be? If your keeper is good, why wouldn’t you be happy in their keeping? Why would you pay them back with unseemly behavior when it will only displease them and thereby make you miserable? So yes, there are those of us who loyally obey our masters. Some of us behave because it pleases us to please our masters.

My owner is an alien from a race we humans refer to as ‘Whistlers.’ Tall, much taller than us, they tower over us like the keepers they are. They have rigid, bony protrusions covering much of their skin, with some parts of their bodies fitting together with rock-like plating. My keeper has large, dark eyes that shine with intelligence, making his face (when viewed from his cheekbones and up) very sweet-looking.

The rest of a Whistler’s face though... I can see why some humans find them sort of unnerving. Where their mouth is, they have two flat lips that look normal right up until they swallow. When they do that, sometimes two little feelers pop out of either side of their lips, sweeping away any stray moisture. I’ve grown up with Whistlers all my life—yet still, on occasion when their feelers make an appearance, I get an instinctual urge to shudder. The impulse is so strong that, no matter how close I feel to my

keeper, the sight of his feelers is sometimes enough to tighten all the muscles of my back.

The Whistlers seem very cerebral, always observing, always training and testing. We refer to them as Whistlers because that's how the aliens communicate: by whistles. They whistle at us too, and I'm not talking just a note or two—they entirely communicate by almost... songs. Unfortunately, by contrast, us humans can only manage a small range of notes. Although we can largely understand them, we can't converse with our keepers. It's not possible for us to make the sheer number of sounds that they do in order to successfully chat. And if you're one of the unlucky humans who for the life of them just *can't whistle* period—then you're as good as a mute companion to your keeper. You might as well be making animal grunts whenever you try to relay a need or concept to them. And, well... to an extent, that's probably how most keepers think of our sounds as it is. They watch everything and they can understand a lot of our needs just by observing us, but communicating with them is nothing like two humans trying to converse. It will never be as easy as that.

But back to the human male who just spat the slur at me: I'm supposed to have sex with him.

We've been paired together for the sole purpose of procreating.

Except that he's miserably mean, and even if he wanted to get near me at this point, I wouldn't let him touch me. I guess the only good thing about our predicament is that he's staying as far from me as he can, literally pressing his back to the bars of the cage wall opposite me.

Yes, we're in a cage.

In the bitter cold season, our keeper houses us indoors, and I, as a female, am allowed to roam loose in his home. But in the lovely summer season, we're housed in the garden, surrounded by trees and vegetable beds and water sculptures. It's a beautiful place. It's a very peaceful place.

Today is the exception because of this male with his wretched temperament.

"I'm not a dog," I mutter to him tightly, deciding to pace my half of his pen.

When I get too close to the area where his sleeping den is, he bolts to his feet and strides aggressively to block the entrance. He's completely

naked, his cock swaying with his steps, and I notice that it's engorging, despite his earlier verbal rejection.

He's clearly territorial, and I don't want to make him mad. I don't want inside his den; I was only trying to stretch my legs. I back up quickly and decide that my legs can get cramps. It's not worth getting attacked over.

At that moment, my keeper emits a warbling trill at me in a pattern that means *undress*.

Gritting my teeth, I do as Keeper says... which makes the mean male scoff.

I take off my dress and fold it carefully. I find a decent-sized jut of stone along the floor of the enclosure to set it on where it will stay free enough from sand and substrate.

Now I'm naked save for my collar. It isn't a regular collar—not one of the light command collars like Tranq wears, or the thick, severe correction collar that Avox wears.

My collar is made of fine metal links, centered on my throat with a heavy ruby-colored jewel. There's a ring at the back of it where a lead can be clipped, but there's no mechanism to deliver punishments.

I could misbehave, but this collar in itself is a freedom and I don't ever want to lose it. Plus, being corrected when I try so hard to be good would shame me.

When I face the mean male again, his eyes don't stray from my face. In fact, he keeps his gaze very firmly planted on my face—and he scowls at me like it's my fault I've got no clothes on.

I glare at him. "You don't have to be so angry. You're not the one who has to be on the bottom, taking a penis."

Eyes flashing, he curls his lip at me in response.

Firm whistles from our keeper are aimed at the male now. Clear *be nice* whistles. Whistles that this mean male ignores. He doesn't even glance at our keeper, who stands behind a blind panel screen outside the pen. It gives us the illusion of privacy while lending protection in case a breeding does not go to plan.

Like this one, for example.

"You're going to get in *trouble*," I whisper to the male furiously. "Doesn't that bother you? I would feel terrible if I ignored him."

"Ha," the male says. "Dog."

“Is that the only word you know?” I ask, intensely disliking him.

He doesn’t answer. Thankfully, he doesn’t leap at me either. He doesn’t move at all, sitting with his back to his sleeping den’s doorway, his knees to his chest, his frame blocking the entrance so that I can’t get inside unless I want to try climbing over his rigid body.

I’ll stay outside, thank you.

Knowing already what I’ll see but having nothing but time, I take a look around his enclosure. It’s no different than I expected. I’ve sort of seen it from the outside; he’s being housed in a gazebo-like structure as elegant and stately as anything else in our gardens. There’s a sleeping box den with what looks like a comfortable pallet, and the substrate is a mix of soft sand, which warms nicely in the sun, and moss, which is easy on the hands and feet and knees.

I know this from experience. I’ve been down in a lot of moss.

Somewhere in here, there’s also a water drinking feature. I can hear it trickling prettily.

All in all, it’s a beautiful setup. A little smaller than my family-sized unit, but more spacious and better decorated than the average stud pen. It’s just as thoughtfully set up as any of the pens on the other side of the hedge.

That’s where my family is.

Soon, they’re going to be having a lunchtime treat. I’m certain that Keeper will still give me my portion of treats, even if I’m not bred today. After all, I did my best. I’m not the one who outright refused to make this easy and pleasant. I wonder if this ornery male will get special food. Keeper is very fair, but he also likes to be obeyed. Sometimes Avox has gone without treats as a punishment—and where food and Avox are concerned, withholding is a severe punishment.

When I make the mistake of glancing at this male’s food dish to see what he’s been given so far—he growls at me. He also barks, “*Stay away from my food!*”

“Now who is the dog?” I ask, feeling peevish. But the word tastes bad on my tongue. Heat stings my cheeks. It’s a terrible thing to say, and I’m glad my children are too far across the garden to hear me. At their age, they’re mimicking everything they hear. Which Keeper encourages. He’s

desperately hoping to teach them how to whistle full sentences to him and he's delighted whenever they succeed at copying any part of his phrases.

Thinking of my babies makes me want to check on them. I can't, of course, not really. I suppose I could shout in their direction and hope I can hear them well enough to understand what they shout back. It's not that we're so terribly far apart; it's that the garden is full of lots of lovely leafy things and sound is muted nicely, care of the endless foliage.

I might be able to return to my family tonight if this male initiates a polite mating.

I try to study him out of the corner of my eye. To say I'm curious about him is an understatement. He's not like any male I've ever seen. He's... an extreme Ornamental.

Ornamentals come from closed herds where the keeper practices close inbreeding. My parents explained that the closer and closer the relations, the more and more recessive genes get doubled up. Freckles, height (dwarf lines and giant lines are both wildly popular, for example), hair color, skin tone, everything from our facial structure to the coloration in our eyes—if there's a variety to be had, someone is raising a herd of them somewhere. When mutations occur, if it's desirable to the keeper, they'll selectively breed for that specific trait.

That's why there are albino herds, odd-eye herds, herds with extra fingers on their hands, blue-skinned herds, werewolf herds, and so on. Of the last two mutations, the blue-skin is caused by a blood disorder, so they tend not to live as long as a regular human. But oh, how some keepers adore them for their interesting color. The werewolfism isn't really werewolf hybrids. We know they don't exist, it's just that telling stories, including horror stories, is a time-honored tradition among human herds, and fables about these furry creatures are well known. When a mutation in humans produced babies born with thick black hair completely covering their faces, ears, throat, neck, shoulders, back and chest—werewolf babies were what some humans called them. The line faces some problems; some werewolf gene-carrying mothers have been known to reject their babies if they're bred to a werewolf male, because it always produces a werewolf 'pup,' with full furring. It's better to breed a furred woman to either a furred male or a male carrying the gene because, when a fully furred pup is birthed to her, that mother accepts the features of her offspring as normal.

And keepers love their werewolf-people. But then, keepers are wild to create all sorts of new variations of us.

I turn enough that I can get a clearer peek at the male I'm locked in with. *This is supposed to be the father of my next baby.* He's what some elders would have called 'grotesque.' Younger generations of us humans are more accepting—we have to be. With so many of us designed, it's nothing to us to see specially bred individuals.

This male's grey-green eyes are set under impossibly hooded brows. Triangular ridges swath the area above his eyes, creating wedge-like cranial overhangs. His forehead and his nose bridge form a convex swell. His nose bridge is thick and domed, in such a way that his construction appears artful, like he was created with heavy artistic license, sculpted not with a thought to the normal laws of nature but of a fanciful sort of whimsy. His jaw is wide and square like a box. The overall effect of his face... It looks... unnatural.

His limbs are long, and I noted when he was rushing for me that he's quite tall, impressively so, and he has muscle wired onto every part of his body. He's striking and unusual and there's a strange sort of beauty to his form. He *looks* created, like a living sculpture if keepers could play with clay and turn it into a living being.

And in a way... I suppose they did.

I've heard very few good things about the extreme Ornamentals, but I'm not put off by his appearance. If he hadn't been rude to me, I wouldn't have turned him away.

Although, it isn't really as if I have much choice. I'm here to be bred, and he's here to cover me.

I try to imagine what a child with him would look like. Every baby I've ever seen is beautiful. Of course, my own three are my favorite, and while none of them look like an Ornamental of this male's type, I imagine I'd be just as in love with a fourth baby, should I have one (no matter how mean the man), no matter what line of selective-breds he descends from.

Since Keeper hasn't unlocked the door and led me out, I try to make conversation since I'm stuck in here. "Have you sired children before?"

A crown of dark brown hair cropped short was my focal point while he kept his glare at a point near his feet. At my question, his head

whips up and his gaze latches on mine, searing me where I dare to stand. “I’ve been studded out since the day I was old enough to ejaculate viable semen. Do you want to know how many children I’ve cursed to being born a freak?”

I don’t know what to say to that. “Sorry...”

His glower on me has the power to make me wince.

He doesn’t release me from his glare, so I avert my gaze and resume the tiny amount of pacing I’m allowed. But eventually, this gets so tedious, I think I’d rather brave the angry man I’m locked in a pen with than do absolutely nothing in the face of this miserable tension that sits thick in the cage between us.

I drop until I’m sitting down, my legs folded under me.

The male’s eyes lock on my breasts as they bounce with the movement—but it’s like he catches himself and it makes him angrier. His nostrils flare and a muscle jumps in his jaw.

Uncomfortable with nudity for the first time in a very long time, I fold my arms over my chest and clear my throat. “I have three babies. Ava, Quinn, and Molly. Four summertimes, three summertimes, and two summertimes of age, respectively.”

“Good for you,” he utters caustically.

“I’m Theresa.”

He says nothing. But he’s finally turned his glare away, pointing it at a spot beyond me now. Which I appreciate. I’d swear my lungs operate better when he’s not aiming his killing look in my direction.

“We call this the Garden Sanctuary herd.” When he still doesn’t acknowledge what I’ve shared, I decide there’s no harm in saying more. “An elder taught me—taught all of the children born at my birthplace facility—basic science, math, letters. I’ve never fully grasped the ability to write, but I can read some letters. I haven’t seen anyone write anything since I left my birthplace. It’s not a skill I need, but it’s one that I hope to pass down to my children when they get old enough to learn.” I catch my bottom lip between my teeth, shoring up the courage for the question that could get my head bitten off. “What’s your name?”

My breath catches when angry eyes full of fire lock on mine.

“What’s the point of getting to know me?”

I frown. “If things were going according to Keeper’s plan, we’d be pretty well acquainted right now. Your name is a small thing compared to...” My eyes try to drop to his lap, but I manage to raise my gaze right back up to his.

He sneers. “Don’t waste your time making a connection. I won’t be here any longer than it takes for my cum to plug your cunt. They’ll whip me until I cover you, then they’ll shuttle me off to the next farm with open bitches. They’ll never stop using me. Don’t you know that? I’m ‘special.’ They will use me and use me until the day they can’t possibly use me anymore.”

Keeper whistles something that sounds like it’s supposed to be soothing, but it doesn’t calm the male down, and frankly, I barely register it either.

“Want to know why I’m here?” the male continues, speaking through gritted teeth, and a ravaged, angry face. “Too many Ornaments in my line are starting to birth babies with health problems, so they want to breed back to the orig-stock. His eyes rake down my body like he’d rather spit on me than touch me. “Guess that’s you.”

CHAPTER 2

I'm silent for so long that even the mean male must get tired of the quiet. "Aren't you dreading it?"

"What?" I ask, wondering if he means the sex. "As long as you're courteous..."

He snorts. "Not the fucking."

I flinch.

He doesn't so much as pause. "Doesn't it bother you? You'll be giving birth to a freak's baby."

"You're not a freak," I finally disagree softly. "In your own way, you are very beautiful."

His scoff is ugly and harsh.

"You are. Keeper thinks you are or—"

The male's hands fling out, and his voice snaps so hard I almost feel it physically. "*Don't*. Don't try to convince me using your precious keeper—because once you resort to a keeper's definition of beauty, you've lost your argument. They're playing with us. Don't you see that? They design us! *Look* at me."

I look at him, bewildered. "And so what if they are? It makes them happy."

He shoves to his feet, and he's the one pacing now. "Do you *hear* yourself? I said look at me! Your baby could come out as disfigured as *me*."

I try to proceed very carefully, and not without an alarmed glance or three at the blind that I know Keeper is still observing us from behind. "You're not disfigured," I start carefully, measuring my words. "You're designed. And I love my babies. I love all my babies."

He stops pacing to stare at me. "You're a zealot."

I feel more exposed with him standing above me, even though we're technically both naked. I also feel like standing may present him with a perceived challenge, so I remain sitting and even crouch over to appear a little smaller. "I'm a realist. This is our life. Is it really such a bad one? Are you hurting? Does your physical body pain you from their selective tampering?" My fingers clutch my bare sides, still tightly covering my chest. "I'll bet it doesn't. They don't like to see us hurt—"

Finally, the male breaks our gaze so that he can roll his eyes.
“That’s right. They only like to ruin our lives in other ways.”

“How is your life ruined? You’re fed, you’re sheltered, you’re cared for. Keepers care about us. What would you rather have?”

“Not to be warped like this,” he slams his open hand against his chest for emphasis.

“Designed,” I correct, the word so quiet it’s almost uttered under my breath.

He swings away from me, a look of frustrated fury streaking across his face. “Dammit!”

Maybe I can’t understand his position because my life experience is not his. As he pointed out, I *am* from the ‘orig-stock’ line. A human who looks like what our people more or less looked like when they existed on Earth, roaming free with no care to what ‘type’ they should strive to pair with, no ‘look’ for anyone to achieve. My line isn’t special because of any certain way our bodies are formed, but because we’re the small remaining line of wild-bred humans.

I’m not angry about my lot in life as a kept creature. I don’t miss those days where my ancestors roamed free on some tiny planet in a far-off galaxy, because I’ve never been there. This life is all I know. I was born from a union of love, I was raised with love, and I’ve always been treated with affection and care.

I’m happy.

My babies are being raised exactly the same.

And maybe I’m not horrified to be paired with this male because I was raised in a herd that incorporated some Ornaments. Simpler designs, like special colorations or color patterns that shaded certain features, but they were still deliberately designed individuals, the products of a considerable amount of specialized breeding nonetheless.

This Ornamental is pacing away from me, his gait jerky—not due to any issues involving his locomotion, but more because of his turbulent emotions. He’s clearly frustrated that he can’t change my viewpoint.

I’m sad for him that I can’t help him be less bitter about his.

In a valiant bid to thaw him, I try to share more about me, about life here, now that he’s joined us. “The other two males here are selective-

breeds.” When he says nothing to this, I soldier on. “Tranq is from the ‘Gentle’ line.”

“*Tranq* as in *tranquil*? That’s witty.”

I don’t say anything to this, because his tone is unnecessarily acerbic, and in the face of his undeserved anger, I’m not sure what *to* say.

But yes, his guess is correct. Tranq is short for Tranquil. The keeper who raised his mother’s herd named him, and his mother could have called him anything but she chose to translate the keeper-whistled word into our common tongue, which, after all these generations of human cultures being melded together, is a bastardized mix of every old Earthen language. All barriers have a way of being removed when we’re all behind the same fence. And it may not be very witty, but it really fits him. You’ll never meet a more peaceful person.

Well... Unless you meet any of the rest of his line. They’re bred that way.

My mother, who heard the story from her mother’s mother, who heard it from *her* mother’s mother, told me that the keeper who founded the line of Gentles took the gentlest male human in his care and bred him to the sweetest women. When the resulting babies’ personalities began to emerge, the keeper separated the mothers who had the quietest, softest-hearted babies. If they showed a flash of mean-spiritedness, the keeper moved the child and their mother to a different cage on the other side of the property. Not cruelly. No, he was simply—and very clearly—looking for a certain ‘type.’ A special sort of personality, if such a thing could be bred for.

He proved that it could. Tranq is a seventh-generation Gentle-male-to-Gentle-female breeding, and he is the kindest creature you’ll encounter, ever. He can get excited, and does, but his baseline is devoid of active aggression. He has never attacked a keeper—or anyone else, for that matter. He has a ‘mutt’ look, because his line was not bred for special hair (although his hair is very nice) or eye color (although his eyes, sweet as they are, are lovely all on their own), or body breadth (yet he is a sturdy male, tall with ropes of muscle even if he isn’t bulked with it like Avox, who hails from the fighter-type line). Tranq’s skin color is not the color of a sensual purple midnight or the blinding white of sun-bright snow. He’s just... a mid-everything mutt. Not too big, not small, not special in a surface way like other prized varieties are but he is exceptionally good-

natured. And to be exceptional at such a thing is only plain on the surface if you aren't paying attention. Because Tranq has a presence that soothes a room. He's powerfully, irresistibly *kind*—and he's kind in a way that spreads warmly and wraps around you.

You can't help but love a man so warmhearted.

And I do love him. In fact, if it were up to me, I would never have left Tranq's cage after we were introduced. Despite being with Tranq for some cycles, I hadn't yet become pregnant. Perhaps Keeper thought the addition of a rival male would somehow stir Tranq's sperm into rising up in challenge. What it *managed* to do was get me pregnant by the rival male during the very first round of coverings. The rival male—Avox—was quite worked up to be housed so close to a competitor for my affection.

The day that Avox arrived was the first time I'd been passed off to another male. It was eventful. Keeper knew that I was new to breedings, and thankfully, he didn't just toss me into Avox's cage like a midday snack. He set the male up one cage away from us so that we could see each other for a few hours, talk. Tranq and I had looked at the newcomer, but I hadn't so much as approached the fence by evening meal. Keeper cackled softly (his version of a chuckle) and physically had to retrieve me.

Tranq had been reluctant to let me go—but he didn't growl a warning like males do. He had made a pleading sort of whine, but he didn't *fight* to keep me.

This nearly hurt my feelings. But, as I was led away, I realized as I stared back at Tranq, that he's so incredibly gentle, he wasn't *capable* of throwing himself into a violent rage over the loss of his female... and Keeper was *pleased*. Any male would be forgiven for becoming incensed at the removal of his mate—but for Tranq, instinctive violence against Keeper was simply... not in his makeup. For Keeper, Tranq's non-aggression was a success to be celebrated. (And he did celebrate. He passed out food rewards to Tranq, and gave me to a female-hungry Avox for a lusty celebration of a different sort.) Tranq's quiet reaction was a testament to the care that went into selecting the temperaments that made up his line.

The Ornamental male's voice startles me out of my thoughts. He surprises me when he asks, "Is Tranq the oversized one?"

"That's Avox." I pick at a flower that's peeping up from the grassy section of his substrate. One of the little blue flowers that pop up in the

shade-covered portions of enclosures. They aren't extravagantly ostentatious like the flowers that are arranged deliberately in the healthy, sunny areas, but they're lovely and all the more surprising for growing amid not much else. "He's a fighter type."

"Figures," the Ornamental mutters.

Not sure what to say to that either, I offer, "I have one daughter with Tranq." When he doesn't make any further contribution to the conversation, not even to mutter something barbed, I blather on. "She's as mellow-spirited as her father. It was a shock for everyone once their personalities all started to emerge, because my first and youngest babies are Avox's, and Tranq's daughter seems darn-near narcoleptic when you see her side by side with her half-sisters. They're energy tsunamis." I smile ruefully. "We all stay together, on the other side of the hedge—" I realize I'm raising my hand to point out the hedge that he can't have missed. It's a wall of towering green in front of us. "There are three enclosures in a row so we can raise our family together. My pen is in the middle, Tranq is on my left, and Avox is on my right. This garden we're in? Keeper takes great pride in it—"

The mean male interrupts. "You're not allowed to stay together?" There's a hard edge to his voice.

Hearing it, I hesitate. Many herds allow family units to run together—and if it were up to me, up to most of us, this is the way we'd prefer it. I'm sure this male instinctually feels the same way.

Still, Keeper brought him here, but didn't place his pen near us, and I have to wonder why this is. This male so far doesn't seem like he can be friendly enough to run together in a herd.

Then again, most males can't, not if they have to share their female. Free herds are usually made up of perfectly mated pairs, with no bachelors housed among them. Females who come to maturity are paired quickly or sold, that way there's no in-fighting in the main herd's pairs.

While Tranq is comfortable now with sharing me, Avox—no matter how hard he struggles with himself—cannot relax enough to come to terms with me being with Tranq too. He just cannot easily share me. "We raise the children together. They can pass through child-sized doors to visit their fathers. If I'm..." my face heats, even though this has never embarrassed me before. I venture the reaction has something to do with the thread of

scorn hanging in the air, "...on suppressants, I can visit either male's pen too."

My eyes fall on my dress, where a patch of sunlight is illuminating the colorful, gauzy fabric.

Keeper enjoys decorating us with outfits, but today, before he brought me to this new male's pen, he had me change outside behind the panel blind. The new dress was much shorter than I'm used to, with brighter colors, and wherever it covered me, it somehow showed more of my skin than it hid. My first thought was the top band was too tight and I'd have to shove it down to breastfeed. (Unlike my regular dresses that reach my neck and wrap my chest with layers that shift aside for each of my breasts to be freed as needed.)

This new outfit was clearly not for the purpose of wholesome breastfeeding. But if it was supposed to inspire great lust in this new male, it failed. I don't know if he even spared it a look.

I wonder if Keeper is disappointed. He has to be. He put thought and preparation into arranging this. Not just my dress but even down to our enclosures. Before I was led away, Keeper tied me to the outside of my cage, with my surprised and confused babies watching me from the inside. Keeper had smiled at them and opened up the walls of the enclosures to make one big pen, which allowed both males to roam and to mind our children as a pair rather than be separated by bars.

With me not an object to compete for, Avox's aggression wasn't triggered. Just his confusion, but that was the same for all of us. The males eyed each other warily.

Keeper had uttered a high-pitched series of vocals that sounded like *seeet sveet theeeet chikk*. What we understood him to say was, "*Behave. Mind the young together. Stay civil.*"

Avox became alarmed that I was being removed. "Don't take her. Please," he'd called to Keeper.

And I realized he was afraid that I was about to be sold.

I hadn't even considered the possibility. And I admit—I felt a bolt of shock so strong it made my stomach ill. I trust Keeper, and I know he cares for me very much, but Avox came from a herd facility that was not like this place, with a keeper who didn't consider the feelings of his humans. That keeper sold Avox's mother when Avox was only a little boy.

It was terrible for him—and terrible for his father, too. It was clear in that moment that Avox was afraid he was about to become his sire—mateless, heartbroken, and facing the task of raising his offspring without their mother.

Keeper had paused, his hands light on my lead, so light I didn't feel the pressure to move yet. He observed Avox for a long moment, then called him over to the fenceline kindly. *"No fretting. I'll bring your female back to you when it's time."*

Avox had exhaled the breath he'd been holding in, and his relieved eyes had met mine. He gave me a long look before grabbing up Quinn and tossing her over his shoulder, making her giggle, even as his own face stayed pinched with something that wasn't quite worry but certainly wasn't happiness either.

"I don't think he'll have me gone long," I told him. "Not with Molly not accepting enough healthy solid foods yet."

My youngest will eat anything if it's sweet, but it's breastmilk or nothing beyond that. And because of this fact, I expect I'll be returned to my enclosure before dark, whether I'm bred or not. Keeper will never allow the babies to cry. He doesn't like to see any of us suffering.

"So your precious zookeeper breaks up your family," the mean male says, like he's prompting me to agree with the way things are. But this is only the way he sees them.

"We can't really stay together as a full family herd," I try to explain. "Keeper has tried," I vow, championing him. "But when Avox sees Tranq with me in any way, even kissing, he reacts..."

"Like an asshole?"

"Aggressively," I correct.

The mean male makes a derisive noise. "Like all of his kind."

"It's his nature," I defend. "He was bred to—"

"Be a violent prick," the male says scornfully. "And it sounds like he is one."

"You don't know him," I defend again, *more*.

Yes, Avox was bred to have a body meant for meting out violence, but under the power, past the baser instincts, he's a normal man, a *good* man, and that part of him stretches a lightyear long. I stare at the Ornamental, searching for a way to explain this, but I don't see any chink in

his expression, no opening to give me hope that I can change his mind as far as how he's made it in regards to Avox, as if he can judge Avox by whatever of Avox's fighter-type kind it seems he's known.

I eye the male before me, taking note that so far, it seems he rushes to judge. He's also angry and spiteful and unpleasant—clearly, his line was selected for their looks and not their temperaments.

I have to wonder if I'm really the best female to pair him with. I'm *too* normal to correct the gap in his humanity. This Ornamental needs a female with Tranq's temperament: extreeeemely nice to balance out the sheer emotional infection curdling in him.

"Come on," he says somewhat nastily, only proving my point about his nature. "Defend him too. This I have to hear."

I marshal an even tone and manage to continue even under his irrationally aggressive scrutiny. "Avox is not a violent..."

"Prick," he supplies, goading. "You take pricks. You should be able to say the word."

I try to ignore him. "He's a good male and a great father—"

"Hmm, speaking of him being a father, let's hear you spin the story of how he fathered his offspring. How'd that go? Did he cover you like a gentleman? Or did he shove you down and make you take him while you squealed? Were you scared, that first time he attacked and climbed on top of you?"

"He didn't..." I swallow, face burning. He *did* sort of attack me the first time—and consequently, I *had* felt fear, because he grabbed me, wrapping his over-large, hard, heavy body around me, over me. His penis had been stiff and insistent, nudging my legs, the insides of my knees, leaving glistening trails of his pre-fluid—and when he grabbed my thighs and butt to lift me up, his swollen shaft had fit unerringly at my entrance, excitedly poised to surge in.

Thanks to Tranq, I hadn't been new to lovemaking, but this level of aggressive passion was unfamiliar—and so was the male who was about to get passionate with me. I'd been moved into the missionary breeding position with my thighs spread for him so fast, this unfamiliar male's strength and size was so immense, I was too overwhelmed to do more than cry out. It wasn't even '*Stop*,' or '*Please wait, I don't even know your name!*' It was just a startled, wordless sound.

For an overwhelming moment, my fingers had dug into the ridiculously developed muscles of his arms and all I could think was *Good gosh, Tranq is super polite*. I knew he was nice to me, but with nothing to compare him to, I presumed every decent male must be. The new male didn't seem mean, but he clearly cared about his pleasure and wasn't giving a thought to mine, whereas Tranq was Mr. Manners about sex. My experiences prior to this moment had been Tranq politely asking me if he could touch me, if I wanted him inside me. And then he'd ask if he could enter me. I'd just assumed this sort of extensive, gentle questioning was the same sort of whispers I'd seen other couples partaking in before they... well, coupled.

At my frightened noise, Avox had tempered his intensity right away though. He pulled back, really *saw* my face, and apologized, gentling his whole approach. He immediately turned to soft touches and quieter kisses and caresses, reassuring me. Getting me ready, getting me interested in him. And he was worth being interested in. He introduced me to teeth-clattering, powerful sexual desire, and he showed me that he could handle me with attention and skill. He only started out roughly because he'd been overcome with the excitement of being given a female. He's a primal creature who had never been given a mate before. He was eager, but he took the time to correct himself before any harm was done. After analyzing that first encounter, my confidence about my answer buoys. "He didn't attack me."

"No? Are you sure? Fighter-types are pretty famous for raping their conquests, and you hesitated there." The mean male's eyes are slightly squinted, and his smile is a cruel slant. "Maybe I have this wrong. Maybe you *like* it rough. Go ahead and tell me now. I can fuck real rough."

His body tenses like he's just waiting for my affirmative.

I don't move. For a moment, I don't even breathe. When he doesn't move either, I search his eyes. He's too far away to see their odd color, let alone his intention. I can only see that all of his attention is on me and he could literally be on top of me before Keeper could intervene. What if Keeper thinks I want it rough with this new male? Avox and I have given each other bites and bruises before, both of us conditioned to the heated brand of excitement that overcomes us now when he returns (often victorious) from a fight.

But I don't know this male like that.

I'm not excited for this male like I am when Avox and I playfully wrestle before we make love.

The mean male's smile has disappeared. He's just watching me now, and the silent intensity is equally alarming.

I inhale through my nose so slowly and shallowly you can't tell my chest even rises unless you were staring at it. But if I thought my sudden stillness would go unnoticed by the bully I've been locked into a cage with, I'm not paying enough attention to him.

"Scared?" he taunts. "Finally, you're getting smart."

Arranging my words carefully, I lick my upper lip and force my tone to sound calm. "Why are you trying to frighten me?"

He's in my face before I can process that he's moving. The grey is gone from his eyes; they've melded into a dangerous, snapping shade of green. They flash with furious sincerity. "Because you should be afraid."

At a loss for what to say to this, my mind wildly casts about for any topic to keep him talking, preferably a safe one. "Dog is a stupid word to use as an insult, you know."

His eyes flicker once before he searches both of mine. He doesn't lean back from me, but his voice is more controlled when he answers, "A dog would think that."

I can feel the heat radiating off of his body, and it makes my skin prickle. And I swear I'm not interested in sex at all, not with this male, not anymore, but having him hanging over me in such a dominant fashion is causing my lower half to turn warm. "Stop it!" I demand, meaning the effect his nearness is having on me, but I connect my demand to our conversation. "It shouldn't even be offensive. It should be the least offensive term ever. You shouldn't wield it to aggravate people."

His voice is very dry. His breath is surprisingly pleasant. Like a special spice that is made of fire-flavored tree bark. "You always do what you should, don't you?"

I ignore him. "Dogs were *good*." And they were. They were said to be faithful, wonderful creatures.

His brows jump the barest fraction, clearly unimpressed. "Again... says a dog."

"Oooh," I fume, scooting back far enough from him so that I can whirl around and give him my back. Not for breeding—just a very clear *I*

don't want to even see you gesture. Keeper is watching and he'll know what this means. He'll know I'm upset. I don't do this very often with Avox (and actually... I've never had cause to give my back to Tranq in irritation—he's a wonderfully easy male to live with) but when I am taking a break from Avox's company because I'm feeling irritated with him, Keeper always knows. And it doesn't make him happy.

Not that he punishes us—he doesn't. He's...

Disappointed. And *fine*, maybe it makes me a dog, but I don't like to disappoint him.

I'm not sure what to do about the current situation though. I'm disliking this new male so intensely that I don't want him near me now, let alone inside me—and I certainly don't want to create a *child* with him. I had sworn earlier that I love all my babies and I do, but I'd worry about his, about the temperament of any baby he helped create. Of his miserableness spreading.

He stays a wall at my back. I wish he'd leave and go back to guarding his stupid sleeping box and his food. Our silence crackles between us but neither of us breaks it.

The tension gathers in presence between us, a tangible, uncomfortable, itchy-biting thing, and just when I start to think I can't take it anymore, I'm thrown from all thoughts of the mean male entirely by a familiar but worrying cry.

“MAAAAAAAH!”

It's Molly, my youngest baby. She sounds like she's crying.

I'm up and at the bars immediately. My fingers are hooked through the metal weave of the fence, my nose poking out one of the holes, my eyes straining to see my children. But I can't. Because the garden has been designed to give this cage privacy. “Molly!”

I tell myself to calm down; she has to be fine. I haven't been gone long, and she has two capable caretakers available to her if she needs them.

“She'll be all right,” Tranq calls back reassuringly, voice raised enough to carry past the shrubbery acting as a block between us.

“She's only upset because she's never seen you taken away,” Avox adds, his voice tighter than Tranq's.

“Imagine how upset she'd be if she saw her mother getting bent over,” the mean male offers, his tone light but his words hitting like acid—

and he says it loudly enough I have to wonder if Avox and Tranq hear him. I wonder if my children hear him.

I whirl on him. “You shush!” I order sternly, giving him the same face I give my babies whenever they try to act out. It isn’t often (and never by Quinn, my ever easygoing baby by Tranq) but with all the practice from minding Avox’s daughters, by now, I should have the ‘*You behave!*’ look perfected.

And maybe I do, because the mean male shuts his mouth and takes me in—and his eyes leave my face and really sweep down my body.

I nearly cover myself with my arms at the shocking flare of his sudden interest. I manage to suppress the urge, and I turn my back to him again, forcing myself to ignore him. My voice comes out a little shaky, but I call back to my daughter. “I’m right here, sweetie. You play and be good and I’ll be back soon.”

“Unless our captor keeps you in here until I fuck you. If that’s the case, I can make you sit here for forever.”

My molars grind together. Keeper won’t leave me in here. But he hasn’t whistled any commands or reassurances recently, which seems odd. I turn my head enough to study the panel blind, because sometimes you can see Keeper’s shadow, but in this light, I can’t. The idea that Keeper *isn’t* watching over me fills me with an unfamiliar sense of panic.

I’ve never been alone before. Health check-ups, baths, breeding, birthing—Keeper is always there to monitor me.

Keeper has always made sure I’m protected and content.

I snatch up my dress and drag it on with jerky movements.

“What’s the hurry?” the mean male asks.

If Keeper isn’t monitoring us—which is unlikely—then he’ll observe us soon. He’ll take me back to my babies and my mates—my wonderful, wonderful mates who are nothing like this angry male.

Keeper won’t leave me in here for much longer. He enjoys watching all of our antics and keeps us as his entertainment as well as his companions. He’ll take me out soon, for a walk if nothing else. He walks me and my babies faithfully. *Which, admittedly, does make us sound like a bunch of dogs.* Curse this mean male for making me feel uncomfortable about the way I view the alien who gives us everything we need. I keep my face turned toward the cages where my family is waiting for me. Where

they're worried about me, because my girls aren't old enough to understand why I'm here.

I appreciate beyond measure that Keeper placed this new pen with this new male in a spot where we'd have privacy from the three little sets of innocent eyes. But now that I've met this male, I have to wonder if Keeper didn't only set this male apart for privacy, but if because he somehow had an inkling of how awful this Ornamental is.

Probably. Avox is taken out on a semi-frequent basis to be pitted in fights (a form of entertainment for keepers), and he always returns with stories, and he says that keepers talk. They buy and trade and swap humans, and I can just imagine that this male's last keeper told our keeper that he'd better keep this Ornamental separated, because he may be decorative on the outside, but he's jagged and dark and barren-souled on the inside.

I keep my eyes trained on the separating hedge, but no more sound travels from my family's pen, and I hope it's because everyone's settled and not because they heard this male's words, and are listening, angry or upset, to see if he says more.

As if on cue, he does say more. "Listen to that quiet. You're a good bunch of dogs, aren't you?"

"Shut up," I mutter to him, wanting to shout, but not wanting my family to hear, and also not wanting to provoke this male to anger. He isn't chained. He could hurt me if he wanted to. Keeper would punish him terribly, but still, this male is clearly not nice and feels no love for Keeper so it follows that it won't bother him to bring Keeper's wrath. I don't think Keeper knows how awful this male is or he never would have left me in here with him, never.

My thoughts stop dead as my eyes shoot wide—because Ava scampers around the hedge I'm staring at, loose and in full view of this pen, and waves to me.

I yelp—because I'm shocked that she's out—

"Did you just bark?" the mean male says to my back.

—and I'm scared, because how did she escape? And do her fathers not know that she's loose? They must not or they'd be shouting, and what will Keeper do? He's never punished us for escaping, but we've never *done* it either.

Tangentially, I'm extremely relieved that this male hasn't initiated sex with me because we'd be in the middle of an act otherwise, and I don't want my daughter to see.

Relief pillows me when Keeper suddenly strides around the hedge just behind Ava. *Whew!* She hasn't escaped. He's taking her for a walk. In each arm, he's carrying Quinn and Molly. To Ava, Keeper gives a sort of amused '*See there?*' gesture, tossing me a smile as he calls, "*Chipp-chip, you wanted to see your dam. Come see her.*" He lets the other two down, and they crowd the bars, babbling with excitement that they've been turned loose for a walk through the garden.

Maybe the mean male moves, because my three very excited offspring's chatter at finding me hiding in an unfamiliar place in the garden stops. All three of their stares fix behind me.

"Mom! Why does his face look like that?" Ava whispers—or she believes the level she asks this in is a whisper.

"Because he was bred to look like he does," I explain.

But the Ornamental male talks over me, his voice sharp, supplying his own answer. "Because our *captors* like to create freaks!"

My three startled children draw back, and when they do this, they instinctively huddle into Keeper, trusting him to shield them.

Keeper is no longer smiling, and his gaze is hard on the Ornamental. One of his hands strays to Ava's head, brushing over her hair, reassuring her, reassuring all of them as they crowd under his arms like eaglets huddle under an angry parent's wings—and it's very much like a this-world's eagle's piercing stare that he levels on the cause of the upset. "*Schweep cheee chikk woooo kippidee.*" Translation: "*You will treat females respectfully, or you will be punished.*"

I turn, finally looking back at the Ornamental. I'm surprised (and relieved beyond words) to find that he's affixed a loincloth over himself to spare my daughters from learning too much today.

He doesn't look at all sorry that he frightened them with his answer though. He looks defensive and angry. He shows his teeth—not a smile, more like a sneer, but with gritted teeth. It's a '*You haven't made me sorry yet*' sort of look.

My gaze swings back to Keeper—and I notice that my girls do the same, looking up at him with rounded eyes.

Keeper produces the controller that delivers unpleasant sensations to the bearer of a behavior collar, and he presses a button.

The Ornamental gives a full-body twitch, but he doesn't let his venomous expression change.

Keeper tilts his head.

The Ornamental's body jolts harder. His expression twists to a grimace, but it isn't a repentant look he's wearing.

"Wcheet," Keeper says. ("*Okay.*") His finger lifts off of the remote's trigger. He seems to consider the Ornamental more thoughtfully. His eyes then shift to me. "Reeep leep." *Come here.*

He opens the door and I rush for him and reunite with my girls. Keeper's arm leaves Quinn's little back only long enough to drag me in for a brief but comforting group hug.

I tense right back up when the Ornamental speaks.

"Look at you, so obedient. He tells you to come and you do it. Good girl."

I burrow my face into Keeper's arm, hoping he never brings me back here to attempt a breeding. I do not want this male.

Keeper sighs, his hand finding my upper back and drawing his fingers through the ends of my hair. Then he presses my girls to my front and steps back, moving away, moving towards the mean male's pen.

He strides into the Ornamental's pen and calls, "Reeep."

The Ornamental raises his square chin, his glare of contempt severe enough to nearly set the world on fire. But he doesn't move.

Keeper gives him one more chance. "Reeep." He doesn't wait for the male to disobey—the moment he gives the command and it isn't immediately obeyed, he presses the negative stimulation button on his controller, a strong enough blast to drop the mean male to his knees.

Keeper takes the temporarily stunned male by the back of his collar and pulls him to his feet, marching him out the door and past us. He stops him at a tree beside the hedge, where a stout chain is affixed so a trusted male can enjoy some roaming time.

Keeper attaches the chain to the Ornamental's collar.

I draw my daughters back out of the chain's reach.

Keeper notices, and the look he turns on the Ornamental is strongly disapproving.

Keeper doesn't like that I've been made afraid of the new male. He beckons me to follow him—well outside of the Ornamental's reach—and my girls rush forward more eagerly than the ladylike pace I set forward at, spilling towards him like a clumsy litter of pupp—

Er, like the exuberant children they are.

Keeper is pleased at their immediate response (and mine, even though I follow at a more dignified pace), and he fills us with treats as he moves to lead Tranq and Avox both out on lengths of chains.

“This is new,” Tranq comments, because although it's normal for them to be chained in the garden, they aren't walked together. Avox can be too territorial of me. He sees Tranq as a rival to battle; meanwhile, Tranq doesn't fight back.

Today, though, I am not the object of their attention, and Avox is not acting dominating or possessive of me. Guarding our girls with Tranq seems to have put him in a whole different mode; he's not bristling at a bewildered Tranq. He's eyeing the Ornamental's scowling face with great distrust, and he calls all three of my daughters saying, “Ladies, why don't you come play on this side?” He indicates the grassy spot on the other side of the path, even further away from the tree the Ornamental is chained.

“Don't worry,” the Ornamental calls to Avox with a baiting smile. “Your captor won't let me fuck your pretty little girls until they've at least had their first bleeding.”

Tranq's usually smiling face carves into extremely disturbed lines. “What's with this guy?”

“I'm going to kill him,” Avox warns in a seething tone.

Keeper glances between the Ornamental and Avox and Tranq. He may not follow our every word, but he's reading expressions well enough, and he doesn't look pleased.

As for the Ornamental... “I think he's just saying that to be mean,” I tell them. “He's angry,” I whisper, attempting to keep our conversation a little private.

Avox grunts. “He sounds like a dick.” He doesn't whisper. He doesn't care if the male overhears him.

Tranq makes a disgruntled noise though. “Little ears...”

“Sorry,” Avox sighs and glances around at our three offspring. Thankfully, the girls are thrilled to have all this interesting activity

happening. Both of their fathers are watching over them, both out on garden time in close proximity—and they have me back and we’re all in the garden together and they’re dancing around like they’ve never so much as played on the grass before.

Life is simpler when you’re a child.

Keeper walks my mates to the side of the hedge opposite the Ornamental, where there’s a twisting metal sculpture that erupts from the ground—a cleverly designed stake for chaining a full-sized male. It looks like art, and I suppose it is, but it has a function. Keeper affixes Avox’s chain, pets him, and gives him many treats. Avox looks surprised, but Keeper whistles praise for him behaving so well with Tranq.

Then it’s Tranq’s turn, and despite him never having an inclination to fight, Keeper praises and treats him for being so congenial about the situation too.

Tranq gets chained to another decorative stake that was planted in the ground near the middle of the hedge. There’s just enough space between each point that the males can’t kill each other, should they go mad and lunge for one another like animals.

Thankfully, my mates are civilized, and at least in this, the Ornamental seems to be too.

Keeper calls to me and our girls, and they trot on his heels. I follow too, but I also look back, watching the trio of males with apprehension.

“Fee-bee,” Keeper calls, and I turn to face him, walking quicker.

He smiles at me and beckons me to his side, where he drops his hand on top of my head and pets my hair.

He takes us to the garden shed, where he selects three human-sized shovels. The girls want to carry them, and laughing, Keeper lets them drag them haphazardly after us as he leads us back to the hedge. Our return trip would be quicker if Keeper just carried the shovels himself, but the girls are having fun helping, and Keeper is enjoying the simple pleasure of listening to three little girls express pure happiness and limitless exuberance as they play with the shovels all the way back.

We stop at Avox, and Keeper hands him a shovel. Next, he moves to Tranq—then he turns to the girls and tells them to stay, and he walks alone to the Ornamental and hands him a shovel too.

The Ornamental stares down at the shovel handle in his hands before slowly hefting it. That's when, even slower, he raises his head—and stares Keeper right in the eyes.

For a blinding moment, I'm afraid he's going to swing it at him. A cry of warning builds up in my throat... and dies, because Keeper's gaze is keenly on the Ornamental's face, and he purposefully backs out of range when he moves away, rather than turning and offering the Ornamental an easy opportunity to attack.

Keeper instructs the three males to begin digging up the hedge.

Tranq and Avox look surprised, and I'm surprised too. Keeper chooses his garden greenery with a great amount of care—right down to the safety of the flowers he plants, just in case the girls ingest any leaves before we can correct them. And he also places his decorative topiaries—like this hedge—precisely where he wants them to be. He's absolutely mindful of design.

But he gave the order, so Tranq and Avox drop their shovels into the ground with grunts.

Tranq seems hesitant, but soon, he's moving with surer movements, once he's certain that this is really what Keeper wants them to do. He even starts to show enthusiasm. He likes being given a task.

Avox is glad for the workout. His muscles swell, like he's ready for a fight right here in the garden, and it isn't more than a few minutes before sweat begins to sheen on his body. He and Tranq are wearing loincloths just as the Ornamental male is, and I have to say, I'm starting to grow warm just from watching my mates work.

The Ornamental male, though, he does not raise his shovel. He stands, his hands fisted at his sides, glaring at everyone, and this earns him punishment.

It earns him a lot of punishment.

I edge the girls further away, so they don't grow upset watching it. The Ornamental makes no sound when his collar receives a stimulation—but he grits his teeth, and Keeper's face is uncharacteristically expressionless. A Whistler can make their face as emotionless as a mask.

I'm glad Keeper has never looked at any of us like this.

I can tell that despite his resolve to correct him, Keeper doesn't like having to punish the Ornamental; it upsets him, and I know this because he

brings his knuckles to his lower lip. I've only seen him do this when one of us has been in pain. I doubt the Ornamental knows Keeper's tell, though, because it is slight.

Finally, the male takes up his shovel, glaring mutinously at all of us before beginning to dig too.

Dig... or stab. He hacks at the ground with a berserker fierceness—which is probably good. Clearly, he could use an outlet for his rage, and this way, he's also doing something productive with his anger.

The sound of soil being cut and dumped goes on until the light wanes. Avox and Tranq mutter softly to each other, even laughing once or twice. When the hedge roots are nearly all severed, Tranq drifts a little, digging a more purposeful trench around the length of the hedge to loosen the soil. It will make it easier to lift it up for replanting, but in doing this, he's nearing the Ornamental.

Without warning, the Ornamental stops digging and swings his shovel at Tranq's skull.

CHAPTER 3

I think he would have missed because of the way Keeper spaced out their chains, but we'll never know, because before his swing can finish its trajectory, the Ornamental drops from the ferocity of his collar's correction.

Tranq blinks and shifts his weight, glancing towards Keeper for a cue, his shovel handle held solidly in his hands in the 'dig' position. At Keeper's still uncharacteristically chilly expression of resolve, Tranq shrugs and goes back to digging, calmly raising his shovel handle before forcing it down to sink his blade into the dirt again.

Keeper appears beside him, finally smiling, quietly pleased. He turns his hand and in it, there's a treat, which he offers to Tranq. It's of Tranq's favorites, and Tranq takes it with a low-level enthusiasm appropriate to the moment—because it would feel rude to jump up and down and cheer when a fellow human was just punished until he collapsed. And Tranq hates to be rude.

Our daughters break away from the circle we had been playing in—because they spied the food, and they want treats too. I scold them for rushing Keeper. They know better; they know to sit and wait for commands.

But Keeper indulges them. He gives me a sheepish smile as I roll my eyes, because he knows what he's doing is only fostering bad habits that he'll have to break later—and he will have to be firm one day, otherwise he's going to have three grown women on his hands who leap up on him and guests, acting like they're starved.

Keeper also doles out treats to Avox and me. And then he walks back to the Ornamental and offers one to him too.

Keeper's smile is gone, but he holds out the offering.

The Ornamental glares at him, refusing to take it.

Careful not to take his eyes off of him, Keeper lowers himself to a crouch and sets it on the ground.

When Keeper steps back, the Ornamental male lunges for the treat with his shovel and hacks at it, clearly furious.

The girls gasp—and honestly, I'm not sure if it's because of the unexpected ferocity... or the fact that he's destroying a precious treat.

Once the food is good and savaged, the Ornamental stands, panting, and the girls turn their attention to Keeper, circling him like hungry little monsters.

I scold them, and Keeper lets my rule stand firm this time. He's got his knuckles halfway raised to his lip, but he doesn't intervene, and he doesn't undermine me by feeding them more treats.

Instead, he avoids the temptation to soothe their bruised feelings with food and taps the hedge. "*Lift this,*" we understand him to whistle at the males.

Avox takes one end of the greenery, Tranq finds handholds in the branches along the middle, and the Ornamental scowls at them and at us and at Keeper, but without a correction this time, he takes hold of his end of the hedge too.

Working together, they pick it up, but of course they can only move it so far because of their chains. This is a nonissue because, once it's free from the ground, Avox is strong enough to pivot his end, able to drag the whole thing by himself, and he follows Keeper's commands as to where it should be set.

The sod is replaced (with the Ornamental stomping his sod down with murderous crashes of his feet), the girls dance on the dirt between Tranq and Avox, I groan as they get filthy, and Keeper's mouth-feelers pop out—it happens sometimes when he tries to hide a smile.

I give him a knowing look, barely registering the shiver that travels down my back at the sight.

Keeper smiles full-out at my glance and comes over to ruffle my hair—and give the girls each a hug. "*Bathtime later,*" he announces, and the girls gasp in dismay.

Keeper chuckles outright, a raspy trilling series of sounds.

He returns each of the males to their pens, hoses them down to get the sweat and grit off, and when the girls and I are done taking baths in the house, we too are placed back in our pen.

And it's beyond strange to look out and have no decorative privacy barrier any longer.

Thankfully, the Ornamental keeps himself turned away from us for the whole evening, not sparing any of us so much as a sneer.

This peace does not last long.

CHAPTER 4

In my pen, our sleeping box is large enough to fit me and a passel of little ones. Probably three times as many little ones as I have. It's lavish and comfortable—and it also comes with a locking arm on the outside of the door so that when dark falls, I can leave my brood and lock them in to ensure no one wanders out and surprises her parents during any nocturnal activities.

It's been days spent without any intimate relations with either of my mates. With the hedge removed, I haven't felt comfortable enough. But tonight, I need them. I *want* them. It's time to lock the babies in and bond with their fathers.

I can ignore the Ornamental.

The light reflecting off of the pair of moons can be bright at night, but thankfully both moons are currently in the waning phase. It bothers me that I feel a need for modesty just because the Ornamental can see us if he chooses to look. I shouldn't *care* if he ridicules us and says more hateful things than he already has. I mentally tell myself this every time my nape prickles with the sensation of being watched as I give a blow job to Avox. When he finishes, and I swallow, I swear I hear a whistle. It isn't one of Keeper's whistles, but one made by a human.

I ignore it.

I go to Tranq, who's been working his shaft, watching us and waiting patiently for his turn (something Avox does not do so well—*patience*—and more, being given his mate's attention second), and Tranq is nearly ready to spill by the time my lips wrap around his impressive length.

I don't know why I glance over. As soon as my head starts to turn, as soon as Tranq's penis bumps the inside of my other cheek, I tell myself *not* to look.

But the moment I do, my eyes collide with the Ornamental's.

He doesn't look malicious right now. He's meeting my gaze with something almost like hunger chasing over his expression as I try to time my breaths with Tranq's polite but insistent thrusts.

I turn all of my attention back to my mate.

When I swallow Tranq down too, both he and Avox want me to come for them, something I didn't start with tonight. Normally we begin with them licking me through the bars.

On any other night, I love this. I get attention from both of my men, and they tease and we flirt and I get to come at least twice, sometimes more.

But tonight, I don't feel comfortable enough. I feel like we're on display, and I don't like it. So instead, avoiding Tranq's plaintive call and Avox's disapproving growl, I unlock my den and crawl back inside.

CHAPTER 5

It's mid-afternoon, and naptime for Ava, Quinn, and Molly. I normally nap with them for a little while but I'm too keyed up to sleep. I'm taking turns pacing the length of Avox and Tranq's cage sides, walking with them, exercising together.

Avox is in the middle of murmuring all the dirty things he's going to do to me when he's allowed to have me again when Keeper appears at my cage's door.

He groomed me and the girls this morning, and we're not due for any health check-ups. Those are the only other reasons he might appear at midday. He likes to keep a regular schedule, and to arrive at an earlier time to see us means he'll have to work until later in the evening: not ideal.

Still, even on those late evenings when he returns to us exhausted, he faithfully takes at least me and the girls out to play. He'll wearily sit on a garden bench and beckon me to sit beside him while he tosses toys for the girls to retrieve and giggle over.

When he doesn't tell me to wake them, I grimace. That he's home early and taking me out alone probably means he's here to reintroduce me to the Ornamental male.

Catching my expression, Keeper gives me an amused look and chucks me under the chin. He leads me out, but doesn't open up the cage walls for Tranq and Avox to mind the babies together—and this tells me that Keeper doesn't plan to keep me away long enough for my children to wake up from their nap.

I relax.

Keeper does indeed walk me to the Ornamental's pen, where he stands me beside the door and tells me to wait.

Keeper enters the cage and calls to the Ornamental.

Casting a confused glance at me, the Ornamental grudgingly slinks to him, teeth bared, eyes slitted—but he obeys.

Keeper attaches a leash to the Ornamental's collar and leads him out.

“What the fuck are we doing?” the Ornamental grouches.

“I think we’re walking,” I answer grimly, but I do it with a reluctant smile. “It’s not so bad, you know. The garden is really pretty this time of year. New flowers blossom just about every day, making everything look a little different from yesterday. And wait til you see the fruit trees. You can’t catch a glimpse of them from your pen, but if Keeper takes us on the left fork of the path, it’ll go right by them, so I think he’s hoping to show you. The color of their bark grows in like a rainbow. It’s amazing.” I’m warming to the idea of a walk, growing a tiny bit optimistic about the short journey on account of the male beside me not being mean to me in days.

The Ornamental does not share my little ray of enthusiasm. “You think he’s hoping the sight of some trees will make me want to stick my dick in your loose cunt?”

I can’t help the shock that takes over my face. I stumble to a stop. To hide my reaction from him, I turn my head away.

Keeper, behind Ornamental, hand firmly gripping his leash, stops because Ornamental has stopped walking too.

From the corner of my eye, I see the Ornamental’s hand fly up to his neck, and I guess that Keeper gave him a correction. It doesn’t stop him from continuing his cruel invective. “By now, how much dick have you taken? And I’m not just talking number. That Avox guy’s cock is bigger than your arm. After lying under him, what can’t you take up there, you know?”

This is such a crude thing to say that I turn wide, disbelieving eyes to the Ornamental and slap him.

Right across the face.

Keeper makes a noise, and I flatten.

Prostrated on the cool and slightly damp rocks of the garden path, I’m intensely aware that Keeper might feel I deserve punishment, because physical fighting is not permitted. If I have to wear a correction collar after this, I’ll be so mad that I’ll want to *strangle* Ornamental, not slap him. I will feel utterly humiliated. And *punished*.

But when I brave an apologetic look up at Keeper, he orders me to get to my feet and come to him.

“Now hit her,” Ornamental taunts.

Against my will, I brace for exactly this, even though Keeper has never hit me. I’ve never had a keeper so much as *swat* me. Inwardly, I

cringe even as I think it, but I've been spared because I'm a *good girl*. I don't do things that would make keepers feel forced to take negative action towards me, and I hate the Ornamental for deliberately baiting me to this point.

But Keeper's tone as he whistles to me is infinitely gentle, crooning even, and instead of correcting me, he draws me in for a soothing hug. I bury my nose in his chest.

"You've got to be kidding me," the Ornamental mutters.

I tense.

Keeper's wrist flicks—and I turn and watch as the Ornamental jerks forward a step, hands flying to his throat where his collar received the stern tug rather than a shocking correction. He shoots a murderous glare at Keeper and then turns an uglier look—if possible—on me.

"Don't turn that accusatory stare here!" I try to say levelly—but my voice is tight and shakes a little. "You don't have to be horrible to me. I'm *not* an enemy. Here, you don't *have* any enemies."

The Ornamental's mouth slashes up, but it isn't a smile. "You're this alien's bootlicker and you don't even feel embarrassed to be. You should be ashamed of yourself."

For this comment, he receives another negative correction by collar. Keeper may not catch the nuances of what was said, but he can see that it upsets me.

The Ornamental, though, takes his punishment looking justified.

We pass the trees.

I sort of wish we hadn't taken this path, because seeing them doesn't instantly fill me with joy or wonder. Instead, the very fact that they're standing so beautifully in the sunlight feels spoiled because the Ornamental could not look more contemptuous when he sees them.

Still, at least he's behaving.

I no more than have the thought when the Ornamental suddenly explodes forward, arching his neck and jerking his leash hard—pulling it right out of Keeper's hand.

Keeper hasn't let himself become complacent during this walk though. What the Ornamental doesn't seem to have realized yet is that

Keeper watches everything—evidenced now by the fact that he’s neither startled nor surprised that the Ornamental has done this.

With a swift grab, Keeper catches the Ornamental before the male can attack or run or whatever he planned to do in his outburst.

Keeper’s mouth is a firm line as he grips the lead in an even tighter hold and turns us around to return the Ornamental to his pen. When we reach the cage overhang, Keeper has to drag him through the door because, rather than walk, he’s thrashing and fighting.

Biting my lip and glancing at Tranq and Avox, who are gaping at the wild male, I stay well back.

Keeper’s expression is blanked when he locks the Ornamental’s door and he turns to me.

I eye him apprehensively, feeling sad that he’s not happy.

Sighing, Keeper shows me his hand, where he has two treats resting in his palm. He offers them both to me.

When I approach, I lean against his side, in case he’d like a little affection.

His arms close around me.

“What the *fuck*,” Ornamental calls from behind us, his voice a detonation of hostility. “Do you even know what self-respect is? You’re letting an alien coddle you! Hell, I didn’t even touch you—why does he think you even need the damn comfort?”

I shake my head, my hair clinging to Keeper’s hard-plated body. “He doesn’t,” I tell him. “You’re not paying attention.”

Keeper lowers his arms so that I can see around him and converse better with the Ornamental.

Even this polite concession by Keeper makes the Ornamental’s lip curl. A contemptuous smirk twists itself across his lips, and he opens his mouth to speak.

I cut him off. “He’s comforting *himself*. Keeper has feelings too, you know. He has us for a reason.”

Teeth bared, the Ornamental scoffs. “Yeah, he likes to treat humans like animals.”

Heat flares in my chest. It’s frustration, and anger, and an unwelcome whisper of agreement that I’m so deeply tamed by my keeper, my captor, essentially the human enemy.

But what's my other option? Should I fight like the Ornamental is fighting? He doesn't seem happier for his path in life.

Renewed in my conviction, I meet the male's anger-darkened eyes, frowning at him. "He doesn't know any better! And he cares about us! He does the best he can, and he tries to learn." Keeper pats my back during my speech, a soothing motion, but delivered with a hesitance that tells me he's a little confused about what the Ornamental and I are discussing. "You can be obnoxiously wretched, or you can try to make the best of it, but you aren't going to change his mind that you're *not* a dumb animal by acting out like this."

Disgust is written all over his face. "Right. Because crawling into an alien's lap like you're an old Earth spaniel is so much better. You're really showing him you aren't his trained little bitch."

I suck in a breath, fury and—worse, so much worse—a slap of shame stinging my face.

Keeper's arms tighten around me.

"You're a sellout," the Ornamental continues.

I swallow, recognizing that many, many of my ancestors probably would think the same. "And you're an abysmally unhappy individual who is throwing away a chance at a good life."

The Ornamental's green eyes almost bulge he's cranked his lids open so wide. "'Individual?' You can't even say it, can you?" He grits his teeth. "I'm a person. You're a person!" he howls, sounding more like an angry animal than ever. "*We're people! Dammit, we're people!*"

Keeper utters a melodic series of notes, all of them low and rich and meant to be soothing.

The Ornamental doesn't respond. In a rage, he starts beating his fists on his sleeping box and yanking futilely at the bars of his cage.

I hug myself.

Keeper's fingers tighten on my back, and he strokes my hair behind my ear, then keeps drawing the pad of one finger there softly, his touch affectionate. Reassuring. When I glance up, he's watching the Ornamental, his gaze focused, his face intent, clearly studying the male. Keeper senses my gaze and glances down at me, his eyes searching mine and then my face. His expression turns thoughtful and he brushes his fingers through my

hair, dragging his short claws along my scalp as he combs the strands out once, twice, three times.

It feels nice. It always makes me melt a little.

Which makes me want to catch his wrist to stop him. Because I don't want to give the Ornamental any more fuel to attack me with. And usually, Keeper likes to give me a scalp massage by literally inviting me onto his lap sometimes. If he wants to pet and hold me on his lap now, in front of the Ornamental...

You're really showing him you aren't his trained little bitch.

At the replay of the Ornamental's words, I flinch.

Keeper's hand stills, and my eyes shoot up to his. His gaze bounces to where his fingers are still in my hair.

He drops his hand.

After the shortest beat, he skates his touch over my still-hunched shoulders, before lightly tracing my face. His expression tightens and he casts a glance at the Ornamental before looking back to me. He withdraws his hand, setting me away from him and straightening his shoulders.

"Ooooh, did you disappoint him by not going belly up?"

Ornamental taunts. "I'd be careful if I were you. If you don't please the master, he might start taking out one of your daughters instead. They'll be his new favorite. That'll burn."

Keeper procures another treat, offering it to me. It's a hefty bar made of multiple types of grains held together by a sticky, sweet substance. These are my favorite kinds of rewards. My absolute favorite. I accept it from him, and tell him sincerely, "Thank you."

Then I turn and hurl it at the Ornamental.

It sails through the bars and hits him square in the forehead. He jerks back from the cage bars in shock.

To my astonishment, instead of yelling something else ugly, the male bursts out laughing.

I cross my arms and stare at him—but then my eyes go wide and I cringe a little as I peek up at Keeper.

To my relief, Keeper isn't angry. But by his raised brow ridges and slightly quirked lips, I can tell he's surprised. He makes a whistling noise that I've never heard before. It's a quiet shred of air, not piercing, and maaaybe, *maybe* it sounds a tiny, tiny bit awed.

CHAPTER 6

The next day when the girls lie down for nap time with me, I stay with them, lying quietly for as long as I can stand it. When my eyes refuse to shut, even to doze, I give up and exit the sleeping den.

A sense of foreboding hits me as soon as I do: Keeper is at the door of my cage.

Standing with his hands folded behind his back, he smiles when he sees me emerge. He brings his fingers up, gesturing to indicate that he expects me to come out for a walk. Again.

I sigh and trudge for the door, and Keeper whistles his easy chuckle.

Hearing his mirthful sound makes me smile even though I'm dreading another visit with the Ornamental. I'm dreading it even more than I do the visits with the Whistler who does our dental work.

I'd actually *rather* spend the day with the dental-keeper. At least he's nice to me.

Keeper's arm falls around my shoulders and I realize I'm grumbling this out loud. I manage to stop the noise and ease my weight against Keeper's hip, defeated but still trudging along with him, and this makes him whistle an encouragement as he rubs my back.

Against all odds, this makes me feel an itty bitty bit lighter.

When the Ornamental sees Keeper leading me to his pen again, his dark laughter fills my ears.

Keeper stops us at the door, drawing his arm from me, and he procures the Ornamental's leash. He opens the Ornamental's door and calls Ornamental out.

Smirking, Ornamental prowls to him, an arrogant, disdainful stare aimed straight into Keeper's eyes—but he still walks right to Keeper today, with no further prompting. I'm sure Keeper is noting this little slice of progress.

Ornamental's smug look freezes when he gets close enough to see two little innocuous-looking sets of metal strings dangling from Keeper's hand.

On one string is a rubbery piece of... something. I don't know what it is, but the whole of the intricate rigging almost looks like some sort of odd jewelry. I'm about to break my self-imposed rule that I made up on the walk over here (where I promised myself I wasn't going to speak to the Ornamental today, not a word, and certainly not listen to a word *he* spews at me if I can help it) but I'm really, really curious what we're looking at. But before I can ask, Ornamental whips around, throwing himself forward to flee.

Keeper's hand closes over his collar, halting his escape. To my shock, Ornamental starts spitting curses, shouting horrible, ugly things at Keeper, growling, and—and he even twists and tries to *bite* Keeper!

Keeper nimbly avoids the teeth aimed his way and stoically affixes the delicate top chain of the thing he's holding over the bridge of Ornamental's wide nose. He catches Ornamental firmly by the nape to hold him still in order to fasten the strap that anchors at the back of Ornamental's head—and then he draws the lower chain down against Ornamental's bared teeth.

He waits.

"I think he wants you to open your mouth," I suggest.

Ornamental spits, "You'd open your mouth for him, wouldn't you! *Cun—*"

While Ornamental's mouth is forming the insult he's about to sling at me, Keeper takes advantage and yanks the chain between Ornamental's teeth.

Ornamental's eyes cut to me, so full of spoiling hate that I wince.

Keeper snaps a tiny second leash to a ring dangling from the side of the face chain where it rests along Ornamental's cheek. And during all of this, Keeper's expression isn't angry or triumphant. He's looking calm and determined.

"Yeww biiichh," Ornamental manages to spew at me.

Keeper flicks the tiny leash, and Ornamental's head jerks to the side, the noseband tightening in what looks like a painful pinch. His jaws jerk open, forced by the mouth chain on which the strip of flexible rubber sits—and with the tension on the leash, the rubber clamps over his tongue.

"Oh no..." I whisper, not even meaning to speak out loud, but unable to help myself. It's just so... extreme.

Deserved. But... extreme.

Ornamental's gaze narrows on me and he spits a furious, "Fffuk awwff yew—"

Another light twitch of the chain snaps his jaws open and pinches his nose, as well as locking up his tongue.

Ornamental tosses his head, his hands flying up to the base of his skull where he can probably free himself if he can blindly work at the fastener.

Flick goes the tiny chain.

Ornamental's hands lower. But then they surge up again.

Twitch-twitch goes the chain.

Ribs heaving, Ornamental's hands drop to his sides. He's not glaring at me anymore. He's not glaring at Keeper either. He's facing away from us, and he stays that way.

"Good," Keeper says. "*Let's take a walk.*"

We walk.

After a protracted silence in which even the new blooms in the garden can't occupy my mind, I blurt out, "You looked like you knew what your face contraption was." My voice is hushed from shock. "Have you seen one before?"

Ornamental rolls his eyes at me like he thinks I'm stupid. "I've *worn* one before." He grits this through his teeth. Then his shoulders tense, possibly expecting a correction simply for speaking, but Keeper seems able to read his tone somehow, or maybe he's reading my responses (in this case, my non-reaction), because Ornamental isn't corrected for this statement that he managed to deliver without any slurs or insults.

After a moment where his gaze stays glued to the side, where he's fixed the angriest of wary looks on Keeper, Ornamental's shoulders drop and he rubs at the bridge of his nose. He's rubbing where the chain sits, and I try to imagine even lightweight links of metal resting in that spot on my own face. Such a sensitive area. It would drive me crazy, the unfamiliar weight of them. Not to mention the implied punishment.

"It's a stud chain," Ornamental mutters.

I blink at him. "A what?"

Seemingly against his will, his lips curve up at the corner. But the genuine touch of humor is fleeting. "Yeah. It's typically used during a

breeding.” At my nonplussed look, he adds, speaking carefully so as not to chomp on the metal resting between his molars, “I’m surprised with your fighter that you haven’t seen one. They have to wear them all the time during breedings. Otherwise, they tend to tear up whatever bitches they’re given.”

I chance a glance at Keeper, wondering if he knows that one of those words was sort of rude.

Keeper though is looking right at me. He raises his brows slightly, as if he’s asking me a question.

I shake my head quickly and turn my gaze back to the path ahead of us.

Keeper’s soft, whistling chuckle (*‘Seet, seet, seet!’*) floats to my ears, and Ornamental sends me a side-eye.

It isn’t a mean look this time.

We walk in silence for half the distance we did yesterday when Keeper asks us to hang right at the first path fork. Doing this will send us back in a loop. I’m surprised, but I don’t question it. In fact, I’m relieved; we’ve managed a civil walk where nothing bad happened.

This seems to be Keeper’s entire goal, ending the short adventure on a positive note, because he praises Ornamental lavishly as he returns him into his pen. He releases him from the chain and leads, offering him a profuse array of treats.

Jaw set, Ornamental selects two—then he seems to think better of it, and he sweeps all of the treats off of Keeper’s palm and catches them in midair, clutching the treats in his fists. His head drops, and his breathing is labored like he’s wrestling with himself, hard.

Keeper gazes on him a moment, then pets him once on the head... which makes Ornamental’s scalp tighten, his ears notching back a fraction. If he had emotive ears like an animal, they would be flat right now.

Keeper doesn’t push more contact. Instead, he backs out and latches Ornamental’s door.

As Keeper returns me to my cage, I’m also offered treats (my favorite multigrain sticky-sweet kind), and he plies me with enough for the girls too. Which is good, because as I enter the pen, they’re sleepily emerging from the den.

Keeper is about to give out treats to Avox and Tranq but the girls see him and rush the fence, rubbing their eyes and crying for his attention like they didn't get to see him while he brushed their hair and played with them this morning.

Keeper huffs a laugh and enters our pen, feeding Tranq and Avox through the walls of the cages and letting the girls hang off of his arms and legs like growths. He doesn't treat them like nuisances; he's chuckling—and he even gets down to play with them, letting them climb on his back and ride him like *he* is some sort of animal.

They *love* to do this. They shriek and clutch at his shoulders and sides, and beg for him to keep pretending like he's some kind of alien pony.

I'm smiling and feeling happy to see my family so happy. I don't know what makes me glance over my shoulder. Maybe I feel his gaze. But my eyes collide with Ornamental's.

He doesn't shout at me. He doesn't make any obscene gestures. His gaze drifts to the girls as they order Keeper around, and he watches as Keeper good-naturedly complies with their demands.

Keeper seems happy to stay and play. The giggling sounds roll around and around us until his wrist beeps.

(He wears a device that calls him away sometimes, and this is one of those times.)

The girls begin to moan and Ava even starts to cry.

Keeper pretends to gasp and twists to catch Ava, dragging her from his back and pressing his face to her soft belly, where he blows air on her tummy and makes her shriek. Of course, her tears dry up. He pats her, hugs Quinn and Molly, then stands, brushing himself off. He sends Quinn to the small door that will allow her access to Tranq's enclosure, and Tranq, smiling easily, gets down on all fours to take up the game where Keeper left off.

Avox does the same and calls to Ava and Molly (the latter taking wobbly steps but manages to triumphantly make the distance), and the girls split up to play with their fathers.

Keeper brushes his hand over my hair before he goes—and I waylay him for just a second longer to throw my arms around his hips and give him a quick hug.

He squeezes me back, and then he leaves.

CHAPTER 7

Bathtime for the girls and me happens in the house because Molly, Ava, and Quinn won't tolerate being sprayed down.

I can't blame my daughters because, frankly... they 100% get this from me.

Keeper thought it was precious that they inherited my dislike of being cleaned off in the standard way, and he never forced them to stand for a spraying.

I loved him even more for that.

Keeper was further amused when he found that they will, however, take every opportunity to play in his garden sprinklers. He experimented with simply bathing them this way, by making it a game, but he found that this doesn't get them adequately clean. His goal is to get Molly in particular less afraid of water because, even when using an indoor bathtub with her, each bathtime is a struggle.

So today, he's trying something different. He's carrying Molly under his arm, Ava is hanging off the back of his neck for dear life, and Quinn is on his leg, and he makes funny screeching noises as he clumsily walks them to the edge of a waterfall feature tucked into a profusion of gold and burgundy flowers.

The girls all adore his beautiful plants, and they love to look at the waterfall, so at first, they think this is an exciting trip. Soon, they're begging to put their toes in the water, and they're thrilled when Keeper swings them feet-down into the shallow end of the waterfall's basin to splash and play. They're having wonderful fun with him.

Right up until he opens the shampoo bottle.

Suddenly, his gently-raised ladies are gaping up at him like he's an alien creature ordering them to drown themselves.

My turn. I'm wearing my shortest dress as I step over onto the smooth river-rock bottom of the pool and call them to me.

Keeper turns the spray power down on the waterfall feature so that the water isn't crashing on us.

I ease back into the deeper portion of the pool, and Quinn follows me but Ava and Molly are apprehensive.

Keeper steps in and by silent agreement, we play with them in a way that guides them to float on our hands. They even test out swimming, which they've never really had a chance to do before. Once they realize they aren't sinking, they *love it*, and when Keeper opens up the shampoo bottle for another try at hair-washing, there's only a little whimpering. Unlike the struggle during bath time, the swim-play keeps smiles on their faces even as their hair gets coated and rinsed free of suds.

I'm enjoying myself just watching their happiness. I even tune out Ornamental when he calls, "Look at you, training your puppies to swim *doggy-paddle*."

He doesn't say it in a biting tone; he doesn't sound mean at all. But referring to my children as reviled dogs is no joke to me.

Keeper's eyes narrow slightly and he glances back at Ornamental, but when he sees I'm studiously ignoring the male, Keeper lets the comment go and returns to splashing handfuls of water at the girls, who are begging him to splash them more. It's a surprisingly breezy day, but the sun is fantastic and keeps the water plenty comfortable for them. They laugh, shriek, and play.

They're especially thrilled by the soap bubbles that have filled the fountain.

"*This worked*," Keeper announces proudly as the girls spend a good hour popping bubbles, not wanting to *leave* the bath for the first time in their lives.

Hours later, in the middle of the night, Quinn wakes up sobbing. She's holding the side of her head. She says her ear hurts.

"What's wrong?" Tranq calls from his pen.

Avox asks, "Is that Quinn? Did she have a bad dream?"

Sometimes when the girls have bad dreams, they want to see their dads for additional comfort. Quinn is our easy baby to soothe.

Whatever is wrong now though will take more to treat it than a snuggle in strong, protective male arms.

I carry Quinn out, bringing her from one side of the pen to the other. "She says it's her ear. She must have an earache from playing in the water today."

"It was probably the breeze," Ornamental calls.

I try to make him out across the garden, but all I see in his pen are shadows.

“I get earaches if there’s a cool breeze when I’m sprayed down,” he shares. “You’ll have to see if you can plug her ears during bath time next time.”

His advice is devoid of heat or hatred, and in my concerned state, as I carry my sobbing daughter, I appreciate the respite from his more typical comments.

Keeper appears at our door, dragging a hand back and forth over his face, bleary-eyed and looking troubled. He enters, and he motions for me to give him Quinn. I pass her to him and she melts into his hug, but when he whistles to her, she clutches her ear and cries harder.

The sharpness of his vocalizations have hurt her worse.

Keeper is distraught. He waves me out of the pen, retrieves Molly and Ava from their beds, and takes us right to his house.

CHAPTER 8

I yawn.

“You look like shit. He kept all of you in an exam building overnight?” Ornamental asks. “Did he split you up or did you get to stay with her?”

I send him a tired glare.

“What?” he asks, looking genuinely curious. “Seriously. What happened after he took you away?”

We’re walking abreast of each other on a garden walk. Keeper arrived to lead me out for the excursion, saw how tired I looked—and told me to stay and rest. But I told him I was fine to go. I’m caught in that weird loop where I’m too tired to sleep. I’m hoping that after I stretch my legs, I’ll be able to drop next to the girls and finally nap. If nothing else, I should sleep well by tonight. To Ornamental’s question, I sigh and respond, “No. He kept us in the house.”

“The fuck you say.”

I shrug. He doesn’t have to believe me. “He does anytime one of us gets sick.”

“With three little kids pissing everywhere?”

I toss him a bewildered glance. “They don’t piss every—haven’t you ever been housetrained?”

He snorts around his stud chain. “*No*, I’m not a damn dog.”

It’s my turn to finally be able to send a smirk at him. “Yeah? Humans used to live in houses too you know. They would have had to train themselves—”

“‘They?’ Did you just refer to your own species as ‘*they*?’ I think you mean ‘we.’ At some point in history—you’re right. *We* must have.”

Damn. I ruined my smirking opportunity. Thus, I don’t respond to his correction. I train my eyes ahead and try to enjoy the scenery.

“So... an alien let a baby cry in his house?”

If he didn’t sound so genuinely perplexed, I wouldn’t deign to answer. But he really sounds flabbergasted. I rub at my tired eyes. “Once he put medicine in her ear, she stopped crying and fell asleep.”

“Why didn’t he take you back out to your cage then?”

“Because when she woke up not too long after, she started crying again. Since he was right there, he was able to administer another dose of medication immediately. It was a good thing he didn’t return us because, unfortunately, the pattern repeated for what was left of the night.”

“Huh.”

“But no matter what the reason is for taking us in at night, he always lets us stay the rest of the night. It’s just easier with children to let them sleep once they’re down rather than shuffling back and forth.”

Ornamental looks like he’s deep in thought over this. Lots of things seem to be turning him quieter, more thoughtful. For example, Keeper surprised us a few hours ago by arriving at midday. His movements seemed rushed but he wasn’t brusque with Quinn when he motioned—rather than whistle-called—her to him and administered her medication. He gave us all treats—even trotting all the way across the garden to Ornamental and handing him a treat too before he left for wherever he goes.

Ornamental actually took the offered treat right from Keeper’s hands today without being sullen about it—he drew it from Keeper’s fingers slowly and thoughtfully. He still stared at Keeper with a wary mistrust, but it sure appeared like a step in the domesticated direction. At least I thought so—and it’s apparent that Keeper considered it to be too, because he smiled and used an unfamiliar word in a praising tone.

He uses it again now, even reaching out and placing his hand on Ornamental’s head. “*Schweeeet*.”

I bite my lip when Ornamental tenses—then slumps a little and sighs.

“I’ve never heard him say that word until he called you it today,” I share. “I think he wants it to be your new name.”

Ornamental sends me a sharp look. “I don’t care what he wants. I’m never going to answer to *schweet*.”

I can’t bite back my smile. “It really doesn’t fit you, does it?”

Ornamental huffs, almost returning my smile. But then he sobers and moves his gaze forward as we pass low hanging foliage. “Normally they don’t name me unless they’re planning on trying to keep me a while.”

His shoulder brushes mine, and where I might have jerked away at any other time, right now, I must be too exhausted to care.

“What’s your real name?” I ask.

His jaw turns hard, and I wonder why. “I don’t have one.”

“Someone must have called you something...” I prompt.

He stares at another tree like it spit on him. “Freak. I was raised being called ‘Freak.’”

I wait a beat, until I realize he’s serious.

He must catch my shock. His jaw works, making the ring of his stud chain lightly bounce against his cheek. “I was raised by a surrogate. I don’t know who my mother was. I don’t know if she got sick or died or if she just flat out rejected me, but I’m alive because a half-Ornamental wet nurse fed and raised me, but she hated me because her baby was sold so that I, the more valuable full-Ornamental specimen, could be kept as a future breeding male.”

I’ve heard about farms that, due to limited funds or space or interest, cull their stock hard, keeping only the humans who will contribute in some way to the keeper’s selective breeding program.

When raising livestock, this method is understandable. When raising people, it’s a lot harder to come to terms with. “I don’t... I don’t know what to say. I’m so sorry.”

He doesn’t say anything more, but I can’t let this go now that I know he has no real name. “What do you want to be called?”

Thankfully, he lets a burst of humor color his eyes once more. “I don’t know, but I sure as hell don’t trust this guy to give me anything decent. He tosses his head derisively, making his face gear jangle.

“He’s normally good at it,” I point out.

“You would say that. Yours is like...” He trills almost a perfect imitation of Keeper’s name for me.

The sound means something like *obedient, refined young woman*. It’s a term of endearment keepers often use with young females (as well as elder females that a keeper wants to compliment) but Keeper called me by the endearment so often, I realized it had become my name here.

The imitation of the sound is so incredibly executed that Keeper comes to a complete stop, amazed—which causes Ornamental’s stud chain to tug his head sharply to the side.

Keeper actually *screeches* an apology—rushing forward and bending down, catching Ornamental by the face, patting his cheek in regret. He instantly attempts to stuff a treat at his mouth.

Ornamental tries to shake him off. “Get off me. It’s fine. Sort of funny that you fucked up this time, not me.”

But Keeper isn’t satisfied. It’s clear he feels he needs to make amends for correcting Ornamental by accident. He reaches for the clasp behind Ornamental’s head and takes the chain off of his face.

Ornamental looks stunned, his hands hanging in the air where he’d started to push Keeper away, clearly not expecting to be trusted with freedom.

Keeper offers him a treat again.

This time, Ornamental takes it.

“What about Tarzan?” I ask.

Ornamental had just taken a bite of his food. At my suggestion, he chokes on it. “*Hell* nowf.”

“Well, you have been kind of wild.”

He swallows the rest of his treat and stares at me like I’ve turned lunatic.

“What’s your favorite color?” I ask him.

“Suede brown, like your eyes,” he returns.

I frown at him.

“What?” he asks, scowling at me. “You asked.”

I roll my eyes and turn my attention to the path ahead of us again. “I’m waiting for the insult. Let me guess, you’ll say it’s more proof I’m really a dog?”

He glances at me sharply. “No. I mean it. I’m not trying to be a dick. I like that color. That’s it.”

This answer seals my lips.

“Come on,” he prompts. “You asked me for a reason. What names did you have in mind when you asked for my favorite color?”

“I figured you’d say black, and I thought Obsidian was a cool name.”

His nose wrinkles and his lip even starts to curl.

“But okay,” I say quickly, “you said you like brown, so what about Pecan?”

He rears away from me, actually startling Keeper.

Seeing Keeper’s reaction, Ornamental laughs. But then he shakes his head at me. “How the hell did you name your own kids? You get lucky

with decent names three times in a row, or did your husbands pick?”

Stung, I tsk at him. “You’ll have to forgive me. As you pointed out, I have girls, and I’ve only ever named girls.” (Although yes, Tranq and Avox chose the girls’ first names and they *did* tease me about my wilder choices. Thus, we agreed that I got to choose whatever I wanted for all of their middle names—information I do not share with Ornamental.) “I don’t have any practice at picking boy names.”

“That’s pretty damn obvious.”

“What about Kory?” I try.

“Kory?” he asks, looking perplexed. “Where’d that come from? How’s that a color?”

“Like Hickory,” I explain. “You know, a shade of brown? Hickory. Kory.”

He grunts. We walk all the way back to our pens, and Keeper is returning him to his when Ornamental calls over his shoulder, “Kory’s fine.”

CHAPTER 9

It's normal to start the day with Keeper grooming the girls and me, since our hair is longer and takes more care than the men, and because Keeper likes to groom us. It's a pastime he takes enjoyment in every day. But once a week, when he doesn't have to run off to wherever he has to go for work, he takes his time grooming the males' faces too, and trims their hair, keeping it short. Although, in deference to my personal preference, he keeps Tranq's a little longer. Tranq has the softest hair, and before we had three children who needed to be shielded from adult activities, there were many occasions throughout the day and nights where I found myself grabbing his hair like handholds. I sigh wistfully at the memories, before smiling at the results of one such indulgent day.

I ruffle Quinn's hair, making her grin and glance up at me before returning to the toy Keeper gave her to play with.

Anyway, after so many years, I can trust Keeper's trimmers. He knows how I like my mate's hair to look.

Avox is the last male to be groomed today, and rather than it taking place inside of his pen, he's taken out, leashed to his cage's wall, sprayed down, shaved until his head and face are smooth, and his body gets fitted for a fight. He wears dark pants that fit nicely at his hips, the material relaxing as the fabric travels down his legs. They're almost shiny, with a surface slick enough that no one can easily grab onto it and use it as much of an anchor during matches. His chest and arms stay bare.

"Good luck," Tranq calls to him as Keeper finishes up last-minute preparations before leading him away.

"DAD!"

"Dadddd..."

"Dah!" the girls call, lining up along the wall of the cage, trying to see Avox around the privacy blind that he gets washed and dressed behind.

He steps from behind the blind and waggles his fingers through the bars. "Right here, ladies."

"Be safe!" the girls tell him, which they've heard me say, and Ava and Quinn wish him good luck, parroting what they just heard Tranq say.

Avox stretches the length of his lead to reach in and hold them to the bars, like hugs, telling them to be good and that he'll see them tomorrow morning—and then he does the same to me—but he drags me right up for a kiss through the fence.

The girls giggle, Tranq whistles—which always makes Keeper jerk and start—and then Avox releases me. Keeper waves to us before he leads Avox to the transporter that will take them to a fight.

It's night when Avox returns sweaty, breathing hard, and pacing his transport crate like he's just barely able to stop himself from ripping his way out of it.

If I were on suppressants like I usually am, Keeper would leave Avox where he is, peek his head in my sleeping den to make sure the girls were out cold, and then he'd lead me to the crate and unlock the door. Avox would drag me inside with him where we'd mate like wild animals.

Tonight though, Keeper lines up the transport crate's door with Avox's cage door so that my mate has nowhere else to go but inside his pen.

Avox charges out and leaps on our joined fence.

Keeper sighs, shaking his head when he sees some of the bars have bent from the force of being hit.

Avox isn't sparing Keeper a thought, let alone the damage he's wrought. His stare on me is piercing, hungry—no, *starving*.

He's always worked up after a fight.

His primal need for me always drives me wild. As Keeper breaks down the transport crate, folding it in on itself for storage elsewhere, I'm being wooed by a beast of a man. It's not long before Avox has me sucking on his fingers while he uses the fingers of his other to caress between my legs.

Meanwhile, Avox is going mad with not being able to reach me. He pulls his fingers from my mouth and orders me to turn around. When I do, he tries to grab and position my hips so that he can force his swollen penis through the bars for a fence breeding.

"Avox, no!" I warn breathily. Not because I don't want him—ohhh, I do—I would really, *really* like him to drag me up on my toes and jerk me

onto his length, make me ride him despite the metal barrier that stands between us—but Keeper has us separated for a reason.

Avox grunts and releases my hips.

I throw a look over my shoulder, knowing what—who, rather—made him stop. Keeper hasn't even had time to get behind a privacy blind. He's in full view, arms crossed, the half disassembled crate at his feet—but his face isn't marked with disapproval or even surprise. He knows how excited fighting makes Avox.

And breathing heavily, Avox is rubbing his neck—because to stop him, Keeper corrected him. Unfortunately for Avox, a regular collar's corrections don't have enough of an effect on him. When his blood is up—which he says happens when he's fighting or fucking—he needs the sort of strike that could stop a train. The collar he wears is oversized and 'packs a punch'—therefore, I know this means what he just got hit with was painful. And all he wanted was me. His mate.

Him getting a correction makes me sad.

"Here," I say softly, getting to my knees.

"I cannot wait to sink myself inside your pussy," Avox vows.

He groans when I wrap my mouth around him instead.

I have to pull back twice to remind him to be quiet, which only makes his growls more guttural, his soft curses sound more deadly.

When he comes, I lick him clean, and then I stand, shaking the pins and needles feeling from my feet.

"Dress off, precious. And put your sweet ass against the bars," he orders.

I glance at his still-hard cock apprehensively. Keeper is still right here.

"I'll only lick you," Avox promises.

Dimly, I'm aware that we surely have a voyeur other than our keeper—a human one, which for some reason feels more intrusive—but I choose to focus on my mates. I draw my dress over my head and place it folded on the roof of my locked sleeping den before returning to Avox.

I present myself to him for feasting as he ordered.

When I'm bent over, muffling my cries with my hands, my breasts swaying, Tranq's groan floats to my ears. He's watching me with Avox, and

he's working his shaft with a punishing grip. "I miss you so bad, Theresa. It's been too long, baby."

"Agreed," Avox purrs into my pussy, making me shiver. His tongue spears inside me, mimicking the act he wants so desperately. Then he begins lapping me, long hungry strokes until he gets enough control to focus on my clit.

When he's wrung an orgasm and a half from me, I move to Tranq, planning to finish him off—but he reaches out and catches me, yanking me forward for an inflaming kiss before dropping down to press his face to the fence, burying his nose in my curls.

He growls and the sharp scent of his cum tells me I won't be working on him next. He's so excited to taste me, he came on his own.

My fingers catch in his hair, and I gasp as his hands cup and knead my upper thighs and cheeks.

I'm unaware that Keeper has entered my cage until his hand closes over my nape.

It isn't a rough or punishing hold—not that it ever is, but I'm still taken by surprise. Keeper doesn't interfere when we're enjoying sexual intimacy.

Tranq's fingers tighten, gripping my butt. It's oddly stimulating, especially when Keeper begins to draw me away and Tranq—*Tranq*—shows me he's reluctant to let me go by uttering a low, "Please don't take her..."

Keeper makes a conciliatory whistle, but keeps a firm hold on my neck, guiding me.

Avox is even less happy to see me drawn away. He snarls when I'm led out of my pen, because he knows that I'm headed for the Ornamental's cage. To *Kory*, I remind myself, determined to give him a proper name.

The march across the dew-covered grass is quiet beside Keeper. I get the sense that his attention is wholly focused on what's ahead.

Kory watches us approach. His penis is dripping because he's so excited. Well, his *body* is excited anyway. From the stark shadows cast by his cheekbones, I doubt he's thrilled to have me presented to him for servicing.

As Keeper ushers me inside Kory's cage, I brace for a cutting remark.

Instead, the door clangs softly shut behind me, and suddenly Kory's hands are on my waist and he's jerking me against him.

His calloused hand brushes down until he reaches my leg. Expertly, he slips a gently-seeking touch to the inside of my thigh, sliding up, searching out my slickness. When he encounters the excitement gathered between my legs, he looses a growl into my hair, right beside my ear. His arms tighten around me, holding me in a surprisingly strong... *hug*, I'd call it, if it were anyone else.

His touch inside of me is confident, and maybe knowing that I haven't been allowed to couple with either of my mates since his arrival, he stretches me with his fingers, stroking his fingers along my front wall until I'm gasping and clutching onto his shoulders.

He catches me by the jaw and raises my face for a claiming kiss.

I don't close my eyes.

He does, sound rumbling from his throat as he tilts his head and nips at my mouth until I give him the access he wants. He dances his tongue over mine, but I don't play.

When he pulls back, he licks down my throat, and presses his mouth over my collarbone, sucking a welt on my skin, marking me.

That done, he's not as gentle as Tranq, but he doesn't hurt me as he guides me down to the soft moss floor of his cage.

I feel like I'm moving underwater as I twist my head around, checking for Keeper.

He's on the other side of the bars, not quite far enough back to be blocked by the panel blind. He's got a stare on Kory that is surely catching everything, every action being dissected and catalogued. Although he's dedicating a severe amount of concentration to the male beginning to cover me, when Keeper feels my eyes on him, he drops his gaze to mine, his expression turning softer, offering me reassurance.

Reassurance that keeps me quiet as Kory's knee knocks mine apart.

I'm on my back, with him positioned between my thighs. He hooks my knees over his shoulders, raising my rear end right off the ground, presenting me at the optimal angle for his entry.

All at once he's forcing his way inside me. Thanks to Avox and Tranq's loving play of me, my body welcomes his unfamiliar one. His penis should be an intrusion, but I've been so starved for sex, and I've been so

well primed tonight, that I'm gasping at the relief my insides feel, my muscles fluttering around the hard length of his cock.

He draws out and grits his teeth, his eyes squeezing shut before his return thrust scrubs my shoulders and back into the moss, almost knocking the breath out of me.

He pulls out without warning, making my mouth fall open, my head dropping back—then he slams himself into me again, and my teeth clatter together.

I don't know if he feels big because he's thicker or slightly longer or if I'm only reacting to the shock of being entered by this male who I don't really know, who doesn't even like me—but this sexual encounter is different than any other one I've had.

I try to make a connection with Kory by meeting his eyes. His are slitted, his gaze moving from my breasts to my face, his teeth gritted, and as he pumps into me again, I suck in a breath and try to adjust to the shock of him.

His hands squeeze me where he's gripping my hips and he hisses, "So fucking *tight*."

And suddenly, all I can hear are his contemptuous words. '*By now, how much dick have you taken? You think he's hoping the sight of some trees will make me want to stick my dick in your loose cunt?*'

"Fuck, Theresa, you feel incredible," Kory groans with a deeper, slower roll of his hips into mine.

But I shove at his shoulders to separate his already sweat-slick skin from my body. "Get off me."

Panting, he sits up on his knees so that his chest raises off of mine and he's not quite as hulking over me.

"No, I mean get *out* of me. Let me go," I order.

His grimace of entry-ecstasy contorts to a look of stunned surprise. "You... want to stop?"

"Yes! I want you out of my *loose cunt* and I want you to let me go!"

Guilt flashes in his eyes and his mouth closes. His fingers flex where he grips me as I shove his chest, but he barely budges back.

"Theresa, I'm sorr—"

"Get off me!"

Keeper is suddenly *inside* the cage with us, catching Ornamental by his collar.

“Wait!” Kory says tightly, his neck arching back because of the force Keeper is using to peel us apart, but his hands don’t release my hips. “Just—fucking wait, Theresa. I shouldn’t have said that before, I was just trying to—”

“Hurt me, I know,” I say furiously, squirming out from under him, from *off* of him as Keeper helps me out by hauling Kory backward. When the throbbing penis inside of me finally pops out, I scramble for the door and I don’t stop once I’m out. On swift feet, I beat a path for my own cage.

Keeper’s voice halts me. “*Fee-bee.*”

Breathing heavily, I stop. But I don’t turn.

“Theresa! I’m sorry,” Kory calls urgently to my back. “*Look at me.*”

I don’t. And when Keeper takes my elbow, he doesn’t make me look at him either, but instead of guiding me to my cage where I would like to hide for the rest of the night, he swiftly turns me to the path that will take us to the exam room.

I move with him, but I can see that Avox and Tranq look worried and murderous, and I can’t explain why I’m upset in any succinct way I can think of, so I call a woefully unconvincing, “I’m fine.”

They don’t look like they believe it. They turn glares in Kory’s direction. Avox’s muscles are swelling.

I think about stopping Keeper and trying to explain that there’s nothing wrong physically, but I don’t.

He guides me to the medical room, where almost all our procedures are performed. I’m well acquainted with the space. I accept Keeper’s help to get on the exam table, and I let him thoroughly search me for internal tears or a rash or whatever possible issues he’s ruling out one by one as he gently examines me from the inside out with his small scopes and forceps and swabs.

I also take the generous plethora of sticky and sweet multigrain bars that he plies me with before he rolls back his chair, staring between my legs with disquiet.

I clap my knees together, which brings his startled gaze flying to my shins then around to my face.

I swallow a mouthful of fruit juice to clear my sticky treat out of my mouth. “If you’re going to do the absent stare, you have to look at a wall or something,” I tell him, waving to the walls with their colorful murals. The walls used to be bare, but he found that Molly, Quinn, and Ava get nicely distracted by bright colors and paintings of the animals on this planet. And Keeper does everything in his power to make our lives as pleasant as he can.

On that thought, I sigh. “Kory didn’t hurt me physically,” I try to explain.

Keeper’s eyes narrow on my lips. “*Repeat that.*”

“Kory,” I repeat for him. “I named him Kory.”

For some reason, my words lighten something on Keeper’s face. One of the deep worry lines between his brows eases. He pats my crossed ankles, then offers me a hand to help me sit up.

With a thoughtful air, he returns me to my cage for the night. He looks over when Kory calls out to me, his voice rough—but I don’t. I don’t look at anyone.

Tranq knows me well enough to know I’m not ready to tell him what happened yet, and Avox knows too but he’s still growling under his breath, promising me that if he gets the chance, the Ornamental is a dead man as he paces and snorts like an angry animal.

Keeper escorts me right to my sleeping box. But when I unlock the door, his elegant hand is suddenly blocking me from going inside.

When I look up at him, and see the concern on his face, I can’t stop the tear that falls from the corner of my eye.

Keeper’s arms close around me and he holds me, just holds me, and I relax into his embrace, absorbing his almost paternal comfort.

I grit my teeth, thinking that Kory is surely seeing this and he’s probably judging me for this open display of affection too. After all, more than ever, I’m proving that I am this alien’s glorified pet.

But Keeper is a good keeper. It matters to him that I’m feeling unhappy—it matters very much to him—and if Keeper doesn’t love me, then it’s something very close to it. And I’m not ashamed to admit that I feel something a lot like love for Keeper too.

CHAPTER 10

Keeper takes Kory for the next evening walk alone.

Or, he *starts* to.

Kory drags him over to my cage. I'm absolutely certain that Keeper is strong enough to subdue the Ornamental male—Keeper walks *Avox*, so this male who weighs a good fifty pounds less has to be easier to control. Thus, I surmise that Keeper is allowing this interaction, but as they near my fence, anyone can see Keeper is doing it reluctantly.

Avox grips his cage bars and warns, "Turn around, and walk away."

Kory snaps, "Fuck off!"

Tranq's voice is firm. "No cursing in front of the girls, *please*."

His 'please' has teeth. For Tranq, that's like an ear-splitting shout.

Even Keeper's eyes are a little wider than before. He tugs at Kory's lead—attached to a collar at his neck, not a stud chain, which explains how he was able to manage angling Keeper in this direction at all.

Kory glances down at the girls and quickly licks his lips, his eyes flying back up to mine. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You *did* hurt her!" Avox growls, taking this as confirmation that I was injured, even though I told him I wasn't. He starts to swear creatively as well as foully, aiming threats of genital dismemberment at Kory.

Tranq grunts to Avox. "No cursing." He wraps his big hand around the weave of his bars and points to Kory with a shocking amount of irritation. "You need to leave. You're upsetting everyone."

Kory's face darkens and he spreads his hands to indicate the distance between me and him. He opens his mouth—

But Tranq is the one to cut him off again. "If you care about her at all, you won't push it. You're just making us mad, you're scaring the girls, and Theresa doesn't want to see you right now. You should go."

Kory turns to me, but I pretend not to see him as I call the girls further away from the fence, trying to keep their attention off the tension that's filled the air.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as Kory hangs his head, his shoulders lowering from the level of his ears to a dejected slump.

This time, when Keeper tugs on the lead, he follows.

When Keeper and Kory return from their walk, and Kory goes back into his pen, our door is opened, allowing the girls out.

I choose to stay inside by Avox and Tranq. Keeper watches me watch the girls as they race around the garden until he takes them for a walk on a path well away from the direction of Kory's pen.

CHAPTER 11

Unfamiliar Whistlers arrive in our garden. They're assembling a new, smaller gazebo cage right atop where our privacy hedge sat.

Ava, Quinn, and Molly are thrilled to see new keepers, and they perform all the tricks they know, hoping for attention.

(Keeper doesn't take them out to play for these Whistlers—which makes me feel relieved. I'm sure they're perfectly nice, but *I* don't know them, and I don't want them handling my children. I know Avox feels the same with the way he has to be reminded by Keeper to cut the growling. Tranq, as always, is perfectly content with the proceedings, not showing anxiety about the presence of new people—but Keeper let him out when the Whistlers got here, and he's kept himself between the front of our cage and the workers, acting as a living wall of placid but imposing-looking discouragement against the newcomers if they had any ideas about approaching the fence.)

When the new gazebo's sturdy frame bars are installed, the Whistlers leave. Keeper moves Kory into this closer, smaller enclosure, making all of us frown in confusion.

He's so close now that we can't pretend *not* to see him whenever we're out of our sleeping boxes, and the same for him.

We'll be staring at each other all the time.

Tranq wraps his arm around my shoulders through the fence and pats me on the butt. That's when I realize that *I'm* the one growling.

Avox laughs at the shock on my face.

Right in front of Keeper, Kory tests the confines of his new cage by climbing to the roof of it, using the bars as handholds, his body dangling, threatened by gravity.

The girls shriek in delight at seeing him perform this feat.

Kory is so startled that he drops down to the ground.

Ava and Molly scream and screech as he falls—then all three burst into cheers and start clapping when they realize he's unhurt.

"Again! Again!" Molly garbles excitedly.

Quinn and Ava squeal the same requests, albeit less easy to understand—because they make their pleas in *whistles*.

Keeper gasps, hands clapping to his exposed mouth feelers, delighted.

Almost as if it's against his will, Kory's lips twitch. At the girls, or at Keeper's delight, I'm not sure, but Keeper breaks out the treats and asks the girls to whistle words again, and they do, asking Kory to climb to the sky again.

Kory shakes his head slightly, but he begins to climb again.

The babies clap and shout his name like a chant. Molly is saying Kory, but Quinn and Ava are whistling Keeper's name for him, '*Schweeet.*'

At one point, Kory has to pause and catch his breath because he's snickering hard enough to have trouble holding on.

Even I'm smiling now.

He reaches the top and finds he can shake the smaller double roof of the octagon, but he can't raise it high enough to escape.

He climbs back down, dropping to his feet and raising his arms above his head to the raucous cheers of the girls.

He's *grinning*.

It changes the look of his whole face.

He bows to his amazed crowd of Ava, Quinn, and Molly who promptly go out of their minds.

Kory looks right at me, the smile melting off his face, an intent look replacing it.

I brace, expecting him to want to talk, right here and right now...

But he looks down at my girls, then he looks at Tranq, still loose and standing at my side by the fence, his thick arms crossed, looking relaxed but with an unnatural tension clearly stringing his frame.

Then Kory looks at Avox, and finally Keeper.

Keeper is watching Kory and me avidly.

Instead of grimacing or scowling, Kory licks his teeth and nods to himself. Then he waves to the girls and checks out his new sleeping den.

Every day, Kory uses his cage bars to do pull-ups. The girls try to do the same, and Avox grudgingly begins doing cage pull-ups too—to show them how, for one, and also because...

...because of the way I had gaped at Kory's muscles flexing as he worked his body.

Now I get to watch them both.

And the girls are exercising in a new way, so they're thrilled.

It was also one of these sessions where our three girls were busy being taught by Avox, while Kory worked out, and Tranq cupped his hand over my mouth and drew me against the fence next to his body so that he could finger me under my dress until I came, muffled by his hand.

No one saw, and this is such a welcome intimacy with Tranq that I'm back beside him today, and he's rumbling to me about nothing as the guys begin working out and the girls are busy watching, and they're none the wiser as Tranq's hand steals under my dress.

He is so getting his knob enthusiastically polished later.

Even as I'm thinking this, my eyes dart over to Kory's cage—and our eyes lock.

He's got his chin raised above a roof bar, his arms curled as his gaze hits mine—and then he sees what's happening to me.

He watches me come.

He hangs there, stunned for a second before he falls off the side of his cage.

Luckily, the grass is lush and pads his drop, and the girls are startled and completely absorbed in that commotion, so they're none the wiser about what Tranq and I were doing.

Avox is grinning and he throws us a knowing look. It's nice to see that he's not jealous—no, this just made his day. He finishes his last pull-up, throwing me a wink.

CHAPTER 12

Quinn and Molly are with Tranq, and Ava is with Avox. The girls have been raised by both men, and my mates love all my girls, whether they sired them or not. They play with each of them the same, not showing favoritism for their genetic contributions. Today the girls are wrestling with their dads and learning to throw balled-up socks that Keeper deemed too small or too worn to be used for the coming winter months. Sock wars keep the girls' attention for hours.

Watching Tranq and Avox freely interact with our children seems to make Kory morose and sad. I wonder if he's thinking of his own babies, whom he never gets to keep. The thought breaks my heart.

When Keeper returns in the evening, he lets Tranq out with the girls, letting them play. Rather than simply running the garden like they usually would, the girls rush to crowd around Kory's new cage.

Outwardly, Tranq appears unworried about this, but I'm glad to see that he moves close to them.

Kory can't seem to help himself from being mean to my poor, sweet mate. "Look at her other match." Kory tips his chin to indicate a pacing Avox, whose eyes are glued to Kory's proximity to the babies. "His instincts tell him it isn't safe to let his offspring wander to a rival male's pen. But you, you poor dog, look like you don't have a care in the world. Every scrap of aggression has been bred out of you, hasn't it? If I reached through the bars right now, I could snap their necks."

To everyone's shock, Tranq's arm shoots through the bars, and *he* grabs Kory's neck. He drags him close, but his voice carries perfectly. "Don't mistake my lack of aggression for a lack of protectiveness." His fist tightens where he grips Kory's throat, making the caught male thrash. Tranq's easy expression never changes. "And next time you call me a dog, consider that a dog doesn't have to get angry to kill his next meal. I could crush your throat and gut you where you stand without raising my heart rate."

And with that, Tranq opens his hand, letting Kory fall to the ground.

The girls are startled and beginning to get scared, now that they see the males are not playing. Molly begins to make a small worried wail.

Before the sound can intensify to a full-blown cry though, Tranq kneels and catches all three of them in one of his easy, loving hugs. “Hey ladies. I saw that Keeper added fish to the fountain. Do you want to go watch them?”

Their fear vanishes as they race to see the fish.

Kory stands, his hand still at his throat—but he keeps his mouth shut as Tranq gives him one last long look before he follows our girls.

CHAPTER 13

Keeper hasn't been bathing the girls every day, on account of it taking longer in the fountain than it does in the house. Today is a bath day, and we're back in the fountain—with earplugs again for Quinn, which seem to be working well. She hasn't had an earache since.

What I don't like is that the fountain is much closer to Kory than it was before. I keep my back to him as I wrangle my daughters, and with Keeper's help, get them washed.

The girls are distracted today, wanting to play more than get clean, but Keeper doesn't get angry or short with them. As always, he bribes with treats and gives rewards to reinforce good behaviors.

Ava whistles at him, making his face light up. She said the word *fish*.

The fish fountain is further down the path, and Keeper checks his wrist device, grimacing. He whistles back to her, "*I promise we'll see them first thing this evening. Let's get you back to your enclosure—*"

Molly hops out of the waterfall basin and begins racing for the fish fountain.

I'm about to go after her but Keeper catches my hand to stop me. He patiently calls her name, which she ignores, but then he whistles the word "*Treat!*"—and this word is the golden word of recall.

Molly whirls around and runs for him.

"Little fool," I hear Kory mutter sadly. "Now he'll beat you."

I don't say anything, because my own mother would have given me a spanking. My home-keeper preferred that the humans do the disciplining of the children.

Keeper glances at Kory, maybe wondering what he said, but then he smiles for Molly, praising her, and he gives her a treat.

As she's eating it, Keeper takes her chin and raises her face so that she's meeting his eyes. She may not understand all of his whistles, but she gets the gist as she's made to meet his stern stare: '*When I call your name, you COME to me, all right?*'

Keeper waits a moment, watching her face grow chagrined, properly apologetic. When it's clear his lesson has been heard, he releases

her face and pets her hair gently.

Kory stares at the pair in consternation.

His head jerks back the minutest inch when Keeper turns and looks right at him.

Kory studies Keeper before giving him his back and moving to the far side of his pen, staring off into the distance, at something in the garden none of us can see.

Keeper stays long enough to brush and braid the girls' hair with me. He always stays for this, even when his wrist device beeps at him. He looks somewhat exasperated at the way the girls dance around him today, turning everything into a silly game rather than holding still properly, but at the same time, Keeper is obviously loving the fact that he has the girls to tend to. He snuggles them after, then turns his attention to me. He loves to be the one to brush and style my hair, just as my home-keeper did for me, for my mother, for the males he kept too. Grooming us is part of the appeal of raising humans, I guess. Which is good, because Avox and Tranq grow some gnarly face bristle, and I love rubbing up on them right after Keeper face-grooms them.

Today, Keeper also takes the time to meticulously remove Kory's face bristle.

And rather than avoiding the shaver or baring his teeth at Keeper, for the first time Kory stands nicely, and Keeper is very pleased. He doles out a last round of treats and leaves for work in a rush.

Hours later, I'm not surprised at all when, as the girls drop to sleep after watching the fish with Keeper until near-dark, Keeper beckons me to follow him to the medical building. His internal exam is brief but must be promising. I find myself being led to Kory's cage.

Before I go in, Keeper takes my chin, his eyes searching both of mine. He busses his mouth feelers over my hair, making me shudder, something that always seems to puzzle him when I can't squelch the reaction. For him, this is obviously affection, and he knows I like his other ways of displaying affection. Giving me a bemused smile, he sends me inside the cage.

My warm feelings die when I walk in. Kory is watching me warily.

I keep my dress on as I get down on my hands and knees. I don't want a face-to-face breeding.

Kory's exhale isn't loud, but I hear it. I very stoically stare between my planted hands.

He's hot as he moves over my back, his hands softly skating over my sides.

His nose nudges my hair, and he nuzzles my neck (which I like), and he whispers, "I'm sorry. I was an ass. I shouldn't have said what I did, shouldn't have attacked *you*. I'm sorry. Will you let me make it up to you?"

He waits, and finally, I glance over my shoulder, coming face to face with him.

His eyes are impossibly green.

He could have serviced me without any attention to me at all, but he's offering to make it enjoyable.

I nod.

He eats me out.

Twice.

I'm a shaking puddle of need by the time he's done, so swollen and ready that I'm not feeling conflicted about how badly I want him to mount me.

He grabs my hips and begins stuffing me full of his engorged penis.

His fat crown nudges in for a deliciously slow entry that feels so good my forehead drops to the tops of my hands.

The friction as he glides out is just as jaw-dropping.

Pumping faster, he begins to ride me, his grip on my shoulders bruising in the best way, his hands chasing down my sides, fighting with my dress to fondle my breasts before latching onto my hips and waist. I can feel his culmination coming, his balls feeling tighter as they slap against me, his thrusts more frenzied.

But just before he spills, Kory growls... and pulls out.

Rather than seed me—rather than even spending *on* me, he spills on the ground.

Keeper's whirring whistle of dismay cannot be missed.

I jump when Kory's fingers bump me between my legs. To my shock, he finishes me off a third time.

It feels weird not to have cum dripping down my legs after a male pulls out of me. I still feel sloppy wet, but it's just my own excitement, and it isn't as sticky. I should be glad, but perhaps only because I know what the lack represents, it also somehow leaves me feeling... empty.

Kory gets to his feet behind me, and maybe I'm in some sort of sex shock because I don't move. I just stay on my hands and knees, processing.

Kory returns and covers me with the blanket from his pallet.

This startles me. And when he gets under the blanket with me, tugs my dress back up over my breasts and *holds* me, I'm stunned.

"Do you know how badly I've wanted to touch you?" he whispers to the back of my ear. "I've wanted to fuck you and taste you and talk to you."

I lie still in his arms, thinking. *You wanted me?*

"You know why I don't?" he asks, nuzzling into my hair, nosing it aside, kissing my nape. "Once they have what they want from me, they'll take me away. And I like it here. I like you. I like your family, even your asshole mates. I know your alien won't keep me, but for now, he needs me and he won't sell me as long as he has hope that you'll get pregnant."

His logic is heartbreaking.

I think—I hope—he's also underestimating our Keeper. Rather than telling him so, I turn in his arms, tucking my chin over the strong muscle of his shoulder, and wrapping my arm under his arm, clutching his back.

I mean to comfort him, but soon, we're kissing and I'm taking advantage of having my hands on him when he isn't being mean or hateful, and he has a beautifully muscled body.

When he fits himself inside me this time, sex is slower, and because we're facing each other, staring into each other's eyes, it becomes more emotional, much more.

Against my lips, he breathes, "I'm glad I was taken to this place. I've never been happier in my life than I am here with you." He punctuates his next words with the gentlest, sweetest kiss as his fingers tease between my legs, making me come apart in his arms. "I *like* you, Theresa."

And he pulls out again.

CHAPTER 14

I'm not pregnant. Keeper has had me visiting Kory nightly for weeks (and sometimes when the girls are napping, if I'm not making up time with Tranq and Avox) and Keeper gave up on examining me post-breeding because Kory consistently—and with surprising effectiveness—withdraws.

Every. Single. Time.

I've had my bleeding once, and Keeper offered me the chance out with almost a despairing air, as if he felt it was futile to let me be bred during that window of time, but was letting me have trysts with the one male allowed to cover me anyway.

It's been nearly two weeks since then. The sexual encounters between Kory and I have become... lovemaking. Kory has never had a keeper so patient with his refusal to complete a breeding, and he appreciates it. He shared that well before this time, he'd be beaten and force-bred to a female, strapped down on his back with the terrified female ordered to ride him.

Rather than do that, Keeper let us grow close naturally, and we have.

But Kory isn't relenting. It isn't only that he wants to stay with me. It isn't only the fact that once his service is performed, his term will end. He's adamant that he does not want to father children who will have the life he's had... or worse.

He doesn't know it yet, but our Keeper is infinitely patient. He has much kinder ways of getting exactly what he wants.

Tonight, rather than simply leading me to Kory's pen, Keeper dresses me in a colorful, revealing outfit that I'd find ridiculous, but I can tell by Kory's pacing and rising loincloth that it's also apparently alluring.

Then Keeper calls out Tranq.

Kory stops dead.

Tranq isn't one to question Keeper's orders, and although he gives Kory a wince—he doesn't let Keeper change his mind. He's out and wrapped around me the moment Keeper unlocks his door.

Keeper lets us reunite for exactly the length of time it takes before Tranq's hands start roaming my body.

Tranq is chained to the outside of his cage, his line extending all the way to Kory's pen.

Kory glares at him—then he transfers his glare (rightly) to Keeper.

Tranq is handed a stretchable sleeve, and we're instructed to fit this contraption over his penis. To manage this, I'm instructed to excite him to full hardness so that he can be sheathed.

I pinch the odd thing we're to use between us. "I've heard of something like this... Do you think this was what the Elders used to call 'condoms?'"

Tranq nods. "He's using me as a teaser," he marvels, his hand straying to play with my nipples as I kneel between his feet, my gaze lowering to his thickening shaft. "He wants the new guy to go nuts watching you take another male."

I bite my lip, hating that I feel my loyalties straining. But these are all my males, and Tranq has been mine from the very first of them.

"It's fine, Theresa," Kory says tightly, relieving me of my guilt with a genuine grant of permission, despite his unhappiness at Keeper parking Tranq and I so close he can't avoid the show.

"Eh, it's not so bad," Avox calls to Kory, surprising everyone. "It's still great material to jerk to."

"Thanks," Kory says flatly.

Tranq's hands smooth over my shoulders, digging into the muscles until I'm no longer tense. "Ignore them," he whispers to me. "They'll be fine. In the meantime, let's have the filthiest playtime they've ever seen."

I raise a brow at this. "I don't think we can top Avox."

Tranq's smile is without any jealousy whatsoever. "Fair enough. Then let's have fun being filthier than we've ever been before."

I gaze up at him, thinking he's really, really sweet. "I'd like to have this be fun."

He bends down and nudges my nose with his before planting a kiss on my lips. "Then darlin', let's do this."

I gather my hair behind my shoulders, and Tranq helps me by fisting it into a tail, holding it out of my face as I move in to kiss and hug

the head of his penis with my mouth. He gives a long groan as I suck him hard enough to hollow my cheeks.

I pull back, and we attempt to fit the condom-like item... but Tranq deflates.

“Hang on,” I tell him, and start again.

The cycle repeats twice more.

“This is singularly uncomfortable,” he murmurs, voice a little ragged.

I pop off.

“Not you,” Tranq groans, his hand cupping the back of my head more firmly—not shoving me at his penis, but very gently guiding me to please stay near.

His manners, even in the middle of his passion, make me smile.

“Fuck,” Tranq utters, shocking me with a rare curse. “Theresa, please.”

I suck his tip into my mouth, widening my jaws, keeping my lips over my teeth as I work the underside of his crown with my tongue again, stroking up his heated length with my fist, bracing my other hand on his twitching thigh.

“More,” he pleads. “Take it all, sweetheart. You’re perfect at this.”

Early into matehood, Tranq taught me to deep throat him. It’s easiest when we’re in a sleeping box together and I can lie back on a pallet, but we’ve done lots of experimenting—and a whole lot of visiting through the fence. I can take him while I’m down on my knees like this. Gazing up the length of his hard body into his sex-maddened eyes, his need for me plain all over his face and in every one of his tense muscles, I decide I’m going to very much enjoy getting him hard enough to *stay* hard enough even through a sheathing.

Telling myself that I have no reason to feel self-conscious as I perform this act, I try my best to focus on Tranq alone as I lick along his shaft, lubricating it enough to take down my throat.

Tranq’s fingers slide into my hair and he begins to thrust into my mouth, over my tongue and past my swallowing reflex. “Oh, that’s a good girl,” he declares, his voice rough as he holds my head in place for his use. “Damn, you’re incredible at this.”

I gaze up at him, meeting his eyes and smiling as much as I'm able to around his fat cock.

He makes a sound that's nearly a growl and pumps his hips faster.

Before there's too much danger of him spilling in excitement, Keeper catches me in a light hold at the back of my delicate collar. Knowing this is my cue to get Tranq's penis out of my throat, I move to extricate him, which makes him moan my name, his big body nearly trembling as he stands above me.

Keeper hands him the sleeve, motioning for him to fit himself.

Tranq does, and success! He stays wonderfully rock hard as he covers his member.

Heaving a relieved breath, Tranq eagerly maneuvers me onto all fours, hulking over me. "Shoulders down, sweetheart," he orders, and when he brings my hips up where he wants them, with my back at an arch that makes the spot between my legs sing, he angles himself in.

He slams into me hard enough to make my ass cheeks feel spanked. Tranq isn't normally an aggressive lover, and I wonder if the presence of another male right beside him, even closer than Avox has ever been when Tranq and I couple, is driving him to claim me more roughly.

I'm not complaining.

There isn't one part of me that's complaining.

Although, the begging whimpers I'm trying to stifle sound like I'm being tortured. My fingers splay, my short nails digging into the soil, releasing the smell of crushed greens to my nose as Tranq uses me for his vicious pleasure. That Tranq is treating me roughly excites me; he feels wilder—*is* wilder—with me than ever before.

Grunt, grunt, grunt, slap!

I wasn't expecting Tranq's hand on my thigh. He has never been one to dominate me this way and the unexpectedness of his wild reaction makes me shout in heated surprise.

"Shut up," Tranq growls, and the fire that's been licking at my belly ignites in a blaze.

"Ohhhh!" I cry, a thousand nerves lighting in a dazzling explosion. My insides clamp down on Tranq's thick length, making him curse and squeeze my breast and clutch my hip as he stiffens—then he's pounding

into me with rapid-fire strokes that have my forehead digging into the ground until my chin touches my neck—and he bellows as he comes.

“Shit, be a little louder. I don’t think the kids all heard you yet,” Avox murmurs from his cage, his cock hard as he watches us.

“Sorry,” Tranq pants, sliding his hand up and down my back.

“Do you hear them?” I whisper to Avox. “Did they wake up?”

Tranq holds his breath and we all listen, even Keeper—but the sound deadening quality on the inside of the family sleeping box is exceptional for largely this reason, and Avox lets out a relieved breath. “Not a peep from them. They’re still out cold.”

Tranq sinks on top of me, relieved.

Keeper kills his relaxation by whistling instructions: ‘*Sit up, pull out, pinch the sleeve at the base of your length*’—and he also reminds him to keep it on himself until he’s well away from my body.

“How’d you like it a little rough?” Tranq asks me, his breathing returning more to normal.

I’ve crumpled to my side, my pussy feeling licked by the cool drafts of air where my wetness has seeped over my labia and upper thighs. “I loved it,” I assure him, my eyes warm on his.

He grins. “Thought you’d like that. That was me pretending to be Avox. I think I played him better than he plays himself.”

“Fuck off,” Avox’s voice floats over.

Tranq wheezes a short laugh.

“And Tranq, how did you like playing Avox?” I tease.

“Keep it up,” Avox warns. “When I get you back, I’m going to fuck you so hard, you won’t remember his name.”

Tranq pretends he doesn’t hear him, scratching his chest as he answers my question. “I feel a little used,” he tells me, but before I can worry, he grins. “But Keeper can use me with you any time.”

Keeper reaches down for my elbow, helping me up, and Tranq pretends to help too, but he fondles me more than anything, making Keeper chuckle and brush his hand away before guiding me to follow him.

He takes me to Kory’s door and gestures for me to go inside.

Kory meets me, his hands cupping around my face, his mouth taking mine in a bruising, possessive kiss.

He pulls back, his palms skating down my arms until he's got my elbows trapped in his grip. His gaze is locked on mine. "That kinky fucker knows what he's doing."

"Thank you," Tranq says, lying on the grass on his back, just feet from the door. He's hard again already, and the sleeve is gone, discarded beside him.

"I was talking about the alien," Kory says, eyes darting to where Keeper watches us from behind the panel blind. "Do me a favor?" he says, gaze flitting back to Tranq. "I want to pretend you're not even here."

"Best of luck with that," Tranq says, wrapping his fist around his swollen length, pumping it as he gazes at my profile, sending me a lazy grin.

Kory growls and uses his hold on my elbows to drag me further away from the front of his cage. He tries to draw me right into his sleeping box but Keeper whistles, "*No.*"

Kory freezes and then bares his teeth.

I try to soothe him. "Kiss me." When he still stands rigid, I get up on my toes and tilt my face to his. "Please, Kory."

At me using his name, Kory spins us so that his back is to everyone, blocking them from his sight—and thanks to his big body, they're blocked from my sight too.

He roughly plants his mouth on mine, devouring my lips. He releases my elbows only to grab me by the shoulders and drive me down. Thinking he wants me to give his penis attention with my mouth, I reach up for it, but he catches me by the fingers, and instead, he drops down onto his back beside me.

He orders, "Get on my face."

My mouth drops open. "On top of you?"

Kory's head tilts. "Have you..." He sees the stunned wonder all over my face and his grin is triumphant and blinding. "Thank fuck I can do something for you that no one else has yet. Come here, Theresa." He smooths his palm up my thigh, the friction from his calloused skin exiting all my nerves. "Lift this leg for me, and put it here," he taps his ear.

Careful not to knee him in the head or anywhere else, I tentatively mount his face.

“That’s it,” he praises. Then he uses my Keeper-given name, whistling it so perfectly I can’t mistake his use of it. It’s a term used to praise a woman for behaving commands like a lady, and it’s never, ever been applied in such a dirty way. It shouldn’t, but it makes my body even hotter. So does his next order. “There’s a good girl. Come on, get that pussy up here so I can taste it.”

His words cause a flood of wetness and my thighs instinctively try to close—which only makes Kory more elated. “Mmm, you like dirty talk? Too bad my mouth’s going to be too busy eating all your honey to shock your pretty little ears.”

I gasp and clutch onto his hair when he begins to eat me out. I’m afraid to hurt him, so at first, I try hard not to move on his face, but his hands stroke up and down my buttocks, lifting and adjusting me and then bouncing me—encouraging me to move. To use him for my pleasure.

I love this.

He pulls back with a long lap from my inner lips to my clit, and says in challenge, “Dance on my face. Come on, Reesa.”

“Damn, that’s hot,” Tranq offers. “We’ll have to do this next time, Theresa.”

“I get to do this to her next,” Avox snarls. “Keeper—please?” he asks.

Kory’s eyes, molten with excitement, turn to twin pools of black rage.

I squeak and grip his hair, thrusting forward until my body rocks my clit into his nose.

“Oh!” I cry breathily.

Kory’s hand smooths up my spine, his touch hot and heavy as his tongue laps perfectly right at the spot I need him. I babble about his greatness at this, meaning every word, and Kory forgets Tranq and Avox and eats me like a starving man as I sob and writhe, perched above his mouth.

I come twice and I’m yelping in pleasure, begging to be released from the grip of Kory’s hands at the same time I’m begging for him to finish where he’s building me up for a third go when I hear a loud metallic snap and my collar strains at my neck.

“Awww,” I whine, my body humming, my insides fluttering, begging for more from Kory than simply his tongue.

Kory stops lapping at my slit, his chin so coated in my juices he’s been sliding against me with every pass—and he sees why I moaned sadly. He sees Keeper above me, above him, and he goes still as a stone statue.

Keeper tugs on my collar and orders me out.

I almost gaze up at Keeper sadly, but he wouldn’t tell me to follow him unless he meant it. And I have gotten to cum my brains out. It’s Kory who didn’t get to finish-finish.

“Sorry,” I whisper to Kory, and on shaky, useless muscles, I try to rise off of his face.

“NO,” he snarls, flipping me to the side—carefully—and rising over me.

Keeper draws on my collar again, tensing my neck, shocking a surprised exclamation out of me—not because it hurts, but because I’m unaccustomed to being treated like this. Normally, he’d simply reach for my hand and pull me to my feet. With Kory being possessive, I guess he doesn’t want to risk getting that close and would rather lead me out the least hands-on method available.

At my cry though, Kory is incensed. “*Let her,*” he snarls, “THE FUCK! *GO!*” He grabs the chain of my finely made collar where I’m clipped to the lead, and he *snaps* it.

“*Fee-bee! Reeep!*” Keeper whistles sharply, a demand implicit in the sound. “*Come out now.*”

Tranq sounds worried. “Theresa? Come on, baby. Keeper sounds upset.”

“No, dammit!” Kory contends, hauling me back by my hips.

“Hey, asshole!” Avox shouts, and I’m worried our girls will hear him, or worse, this spectacle with me and Kory. “She’s getting punished for you holding her up! Why don’t you let her go to Tranq? Keeper gave you an order.”

For Avox to be the voice of reason during any sexual encounter is pretty shocking.

More shocking is how Kory snarls into my shoulder, folds himself over me, his chest shoving down my back and suddenly, his cock is forcing its way between my swollen, excitement-soaked lips.

I mewl into the moss pillowing my face. In this moment, I don't care that Keeper wants me out, and that my mates are trying to help me leave. Kory's penis is perfect—thick, hard, long, and hungry after he worked so hard to excite and pleasure me.

He's sex-starved and excessively worked-up, panting and grunting my name under his breath along with phrases I can't make out, shaking my body with the force he's using to ram into me, and I'm blissed right out of my mind.

...And he explodes inside me so hard that my orgasm is triggered and fed along by every one of his hot expulsions. His cock bucks and spits inside of me, making me bite my lip in ecstasy and pleasure.

Keeper whistles in praise to both of us, and when I sluggishly roll my neck, I catch him setting two treats down near us before he backs out of the pen and locks me in with Kory.

Kory's fingers grip my sides tighter. "That wily fucker," he mutters in horrified awe.

"Squishing me," I wheeze as his weight relaxes on top of me.

"Shit. Sorry." He rolls us over so that I'm on top of him, looking down at him from the vantage of his wide chest. My nipples perk up as they graze against his chest hair, and I try to ignore the reaction as we stare into each other's eyes.

"Are you okay?" I whisper.

He gazes up at me, nonplussed. He draws a long, thin fern stem out of my hair. "Shouldn't I be asking you that question?"

"You didn't want this."

The corner of his mouth kicks up, all ruefulness. "I wanted you though—damn, you don't know how badly I've wanted... just *want* you. You've been driving me crazy since we first met."

I scowl down at him skeptically.

Seeing my expression, he winces. "I know I was an ass, but it's true." His eyes beg me to believe him. "When you stepped inside my cage that first day, you were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, and whatever you were wearing was designed to make a male want to bend you over and fuck you until the only arms you'd ever want to be in were mine."

His thumb brushes over my lower lip, and the playful side of me makes me tap it with my tongue, enjoying the way his pupils dilate. They'd

just started to shrink back enough to see the green of his irises. His gaze fixes on my teasing mouth, but he keeps sharing. “And believe me, I’ve wanted to cum inside you and mark you as mine.”

He presses his lips together and smooths them over my forehead before he explains softly, “What I don’t want is to curse yet another baby with my genes.” His arms tighten and his forehead comes up to touch mine. “I also don’t want to leave. Like I’ve said before, once your keeper has what he wants from me, I’m gone.” His jaw muscle flexes. “I’ll never get to know the child we create together.”

The horror of this has me planting my lips over his, a comforting touch. A sorrowful meeting of my mouth to his.

That’s what I intend.

Instead, the innocent kiss incites Kory to kiss me back with force. He takes over completely, albeit slowly. But he gets hungrier and hungrier, until we’re sharing breaths and he’s growing hard against my stomach.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him.

His fingers wrap around my back, his thumbs fitting into the indents of my pelvis and easing me down until we line up. “For?”

“I was trying to comfort you,” I tell him.

His strange brows draw together, and he gapes at me. “That was *comfort*?” He rolls his eyes, and to himself he mutters, “No wonder you’re normally kept on suppressants. You’d have a dozen kids otherwise.” His hand snakes in between us, and he notches himself at my entrance. “Ready for more?” he asks, his eyes both grim and heated.

Rather than answering him in words, I spread my legs to welcome him into my body, and he enters me in a slow, slick glide that has my eyes falling shut and my mouth falling open.

Kory takes advantage and steals my lips again.

His hands slide up my back, rubbing my shoulders, before languorously stroking down either side of my spine. He gently begins to knead my body even as he pumps up into me.

This time, when he comes, it’s not frenzied. It’s the lovemaking I’ve become accustomed to with him, what I’ve come to *enjoy* with him, and it leaves me feeling closer to Kory than ever before.

The thought that he’ll be taken away overwhelms me with sadness.

When Kory feels the burning heat of my teardrops seeping against his skin, he flinches and raises my head from where I've hidden my face in his throat. "Hey, what's the matter?"

"I don't want you to go," I say through my tears.

Kory swallows, and the rims of his eyes redden. "Me either." He wraps me in a hug, his body still connected to mine, our fluids sticking us together, and our sweat drying rapidly, making me feel chilled even in his warm embrace.

"Talk to me," Kory whispers.

I shake my head, unable to speak.

"Fine. Then I'll talk."

I like the sound of this, so I nod, my nose brushing up and down by his flat nipple, making him jump and swear. His thumb swipes the spot, bumping my mouth. "Fucking tickles," he explains, then out of nowhere, he says, "I'm surprised you're not covered in tattoos."

I raise my head to stare at him.

He shrugs. "This is me making conversation. You have a topic you want to cover, feel free to jump in any time."

When I still only stare at him in consternation, he drops his arm over his eyes, chuckling under his breath.

"Why," I ask, "would I have tattoos?"

He raises his arm slightly, peering at me from under it, checking to make sure I'm serious. "Keepers freaking love to tattoo us. Where did you come from?"

"I came from a herd owned by a Whistler." I shrug, not able to narrow it down more than that. "We called it Cherry Tree Farm, not that anybody knows what Earth trees really looked like anymore, but the fruit the trees produced was small and magenta and sweet." I lay my cheek over Kory's heart, soaking up the way his fist tightens possessively in my hair. "The keeper there was a good keeper too..." I share, trailing off for lack of anything else to say.

Kory uses his hold on my hair to raise my head, turning me to look at him so he can search my eyes. "That farm and this place are the only two facilities you've ever lived?"

"The only two places I've ever been," I confirm, tucking my hands up under me—with the secret benefit of warming my cold fingers on his

chest.

His skin jumps and he covers my hand with one of his own—and how he can be so hot when he barely wears anything at all is a complete mystery unique to the male body that I'll never understand.

Once my digits are thawed, Kory compares the size of his hand to one of mine, murmuring, "I've seen humans tattooed from head to toe, and I don't exaggerate when I say that. They're living canvases for alien art. Pretty much the same with hair alterations. Extensions, or shaved in patterns—they love to design everything about us." He frowns. "Your fighter hasn't told you about this kind of stuff? He would definitely have seen this. A lot of fighters are marked." His gaze travels in Avox's direction, probably wondering why none of us, not even Avox, are marked or adorned in any way.

"I guess Keeper likes us as we are," I say with a small shrug.

Kory's gaze locks on me like he's memorizing each and every one of my features. "I like you exactly as you are too, Theresa."

He flips me under him, his mouth covering mine to catch my startled scream. Then he claims my body, hot and rough.

Dawn is touching the fountains in the garden when Kory's chin drops heavily to the top of my head, my hair pillowing his face. Softly, he asks, "Do you know that other planets have outlawed the breeding of extreme Ornaments?"

I reach up and stroke his jaw, which has some serious spines and quills trying to come in. I feel like my thighs are raw from where his shadow of facial hair scrubbed my skin off.

As I wriggle my loose-limbed body that's been languorously licked to orgasm—repeatedly—I make zero complaints.

On top of me, Kory goes still—but he lets me explore his features.

I slide out from under him and sit up, and when he doesn't snap at me, I put my other hand on him, learning the feel of his forehead, his nose, his cheeks, his chin. I take his jaw in my hands and look deep into his eyes. "I'll talk to Keeper. I'm going to ask him to let you stay."

Kory's gaze goes flat. "You can't be serious."

I draw back. "Why wouldn't I be?"

His eyes are sad. “He can’t communicate with you.” He shakes his head and catches my nape, angling me for a kiss. Before he bestows it, he imparts, “Don’t get your hopes up, and don’t kid yourself either. He has no idea what we want, and at the end of the day, I know you like him because he treats you pretty well, but I’m here to tell you, he probably doesn’t even care.”

CHAPTER 15

Keeper arrives in the garden a little earlier than his usual time, and I know that this is so he can get me cleaned and set to rights before the girls wake up.

He takes one look at my hair—and his face, which can be next to inscrutable sometimes—is a perfect capture of an alien utterly appalled.

“That bad?” I ask him with a sleepy smile.

He trills a high-pitched affirmative. With a disbelieving shake of his head, he motions for Kory to let me up so that he can tackle his morning makeover project.

Kory’s arms loosen, but when I sit up, he throws himself around me and hugs me like he never wants to let me go.

I wrap my arms as tightly around him as I can, whispering, “I’m going to talk to him.”

To this, Kory doesn’t say anything.

To me, Keeper whistles and says, “*The girls will be awake soon. Let’s go.*”

I’m led to Keeper’s house for a bath, and I stifle a laugh at the dubious look he casts at the dried sweat (and other things) and moss bits coating my body as I enter his extremely clean domicile. I take the solar system’s quickest clean-up, and Keeper does his best to be gentle as he combs out the knots from my fist-tangled hair.

As he works, I try to think of a way to relay the wants and needs of Kory—and me—when what Kory said is absolutely true: I can’t exactly talk things out with Keeper, especially not such a complex issue.

Keeper is absently handing me a dress as he gathers the supplies he needs for the girls’ morning grooming sessions, but I catch his hand, startling his eyes down to mine.

“Kory,” I say, and point in the vague direction of Kory’s pen on the grounds. Then I point to my stomach. “I could be pregnant with his baby, right here.”

Keeper’s eyes drop to the area of my womb, and he nods slightly, indicating he got what I said, at least the general idea, and I should continue.

I hold my hand slightly away from my face, spreading my fingers like a mask. Then I point to my face, and down to my stomach. “Kory doesn’t want to pass this on.”

And I swear I see a glimmer of understanding in Keeper’s deep, dark eyes.

“He doesn’t want to curse babies with his,” I make a mask-face again and shake my head. And then I clutch Keeper’s hand in both of mine. “And Kory doesn’t want to leave. Everyone sells him once they have his babies—but he can be happy here. He’s finally learning what being happy is *like*.” I implore Keeper to understand me. “He wants to stay for good.”

Keeper’s wrist device beeps, and I lose his eyes as he checks it. He tries to draw his hand from mine, but I clutch him tighter, begging, “Please! Do you understand?”

Keeper pauses, seeing my distress and clearly not liking it. He gathers me into a hug, whistling tunes I’m not familiar with—but his hug and assurance is quick, maybe only meant to comfort me into releasing him, like he does with the girls when they want him to stay and play even though he has to leave for work.

With a heavy sigh, and an even heavier heart, I trod after him when he beckons me to follow him so that he can begin the morning rounds.

CHAPTER 16

It isn't two days later when Keeper ushers a new Whistler into the garden, right to Kory's cage.

"NO!" I shout—scaring Quinn, Molly, and Ava, who had been playing hopscotch in the soft sand Keeper had installed when he saw that they were playing and falling on the woodchip substrate our pen had formerly sported on half of it. Then, like always, Keeper was thoughtful and swift to action in changing things for us for the better.

I know, I *know* he'll always do what he can to make sure his humans are given the best he can offer, and keeping this new member of our herd would be no hardship for him—he just has to understand what we're asking for first.

"Please, don't take Kory!" I beg, and Keeper is frowning. He says a few words to the other Whistler, whose brows are raised and his mouthparts are showing because his mouth is hanging open.

"*Ack.*" I spare a shiver, then buckle down. "Keeper, please!" Keeper is already on his way to me. "Kory wants to stay here, just—"

"Theresa," Kory calls sadly. "Give up."

"No—no," I argue, shaking my head even as Keeper trills at me to come up to the bars. I do come, and I reach for him, gripping his arm.

Before I can say more, Keeper lays a long finger against my lips and lets loose with a series of flute-like sounds that I only half understand.

Meanwhile, the other Whistler has opened Kory's pen, and Kory has flattened himself against his sleeping box, keeping his back glued to the box defensively.

The Whistler calls Kory out.

"Stop him!" I snarl—and Keeper's chin drops by the minutest of degrees. I think I've shocked him.

The other Whistler moves closer to Kory and crouches, calling to him in a pleasant tone.

Kory attacks.

CHAPTER 17

“Are you wearing a *diaper*?” Avox asks in horror.

“Fffuuk awff,” Kory replies with a bizarrely lazy drawl.

“You’re back!” I cry, tears springing to my eyes.

Kory is walking between Keeper and the other Whistler, who has an odd sort of paper smock around his midsection, like the type our dental-keeper wears when we have our teeth cleaned.

I try to peer at Kory. “What did they do to your mouth? And... why *are* you wearing a diaper?” I ask, concerned.

“I bit the doctor,” Kory explains, sounding out of it. “I bit the doctor a *lot*. They tied my jaws apart.”

I gasp and clutch at my collar. (A new one, given to me with a larger jewel than my Kory-damaged one that Keeper had to replace.) I’m glad the girls are down for their afternoon nap. They actually went to sleep easier than ever today, unsettled all morning because I’ve been upset ever since Keeper and the other Whistler took Kory away.

“And the diaper...?” Avox prompts, sounding flummoxed.

Kory tries to gaze down at himself but stumbles, requiring Keeper’s quick reflexes to keep him on his feet. “I think they used to call them vasectomies,” he says with an unworried wave of his hand. “I think they fixed me.”

“They chopped off your *nuts*?” Avox half-shouts.

“Hey, could you bro-panic a little quieter?” Tranq calls from his side. “Otherwise, we’re going to have three little girls waking up and asking what nuts are in about five minutes.”

“Sorry,” Avox mutters quickly.

“I still have both my balls,” Kory assures. “I checked. My dick still works too.”

“You... checked?” Tranq repeats, sounding stymied.

“Enough,” Kory confirms. “They stopped me before I could do much testing, but I think they just snipped a cord or two so that my swimmers don’t knock up Reesa, if she’s not knocked up already.”

My gaze flies to Keeper, and I don’t know if he’s caught any of our conversation, but I’d swear he knows exactly what’s going on—and I really

know that he has to grasp enough when he tilts his head to me. It's sort of like the alien version of a '*You're welcome*' nod—but characteristic of Keeper, it's lacking in any sort of smugness or arrogance.

“You fixed him,” I breathe.

Keeper's smile is slight—but it's a yes.

“You're going to keep him,” I keep breathing.

Keeper's smile grows.

“Yeaawp,” Kory agrees, throwing his arm out to catch Keeper's shoulder, but missing and knocking his chest instead. “I've heard it's important to tell your woman that she's right, and Reesa—guess what? You were right! This alien's not all bad. Normally, I wouldn't want his friend's hands anywhere *near* my junk, but this is good.” He nods slowly, too many times. “Thanks, guys.”

The Whistler helping Kory back to his cage starts snickering—making my jaw drop open—and Keeper starts chuckling too.

The pair gets Kory to lie down in his sleeping box, and then they dose his water with something from a small pipette and leave him some (probably drugged) treats for when he wakes up.

When Keeper and the other Whistler exit Kory's pen, Keeper makes his way right to me. He reaches his hand through the bars and cups my face, his thumb brushing stray tears off of my cheek. “*He's all yours, Fee-bee,*” he tells me.

And then, he adds something that puzzles me. “*I knew you could make him happy.*”

CHAPTER 18

More Whistlers arrive in our garden to rearrange our enclosures, expanding each of them, but really focusing on mine and the girls' pen.

By the time they're done, our cage is almost triple the size that it was—and there are now two separate sleeping dens.

"Please, please tell me that's for me and you," Avox whoops.

"You are such a dreamer," Tranq responds, shaking his head, his arms through the bars of the cage wall we share, his hands crossed at the wrists, relaxed.

Keeper ushers the worker-Whistlers out, and when he comes back to the garden, he leads Kory to my pen.

Tranq snorts. "Told you."

"You lucky bastard," grouses Avox.

"Hey, you both could volunteer to get snipped," Kory offers, grinning. He doesn't look at Avox when he suggests this; his gaze is all for me.

Avox grumbles and sighs and eyes Kory like he's considering exactly that request.

"But the follow-up visit was pretty awkward," Kory warns. Then he grins at me. "Has Reesa told you about it?"

My face heats to the temperature of live flames.

Because over the last week and a half, Kory and I have been ushered to the medical room where I'm to dress in a full bodysuit with no genital opening, and I'm instructed to bring Kory to release again and again and again.

Then Kory gets examined for any issues from... well, *issuing*—and all told, he must have ejaculated with me nearly twenty spends since his recovery.

Kory and I figure that Keeper wants to be sure that Kory's system is empty of sperm.

Kory declared after our last session: "You've been very thorough." *Ass-squeeze*. "You've sucked and humped my balls bone dry."

I wasn't without rewards. Kory pleased me thoroughly and creatively, on account of him not being trusted with actual access to my

genitalia.

Kory's hand wraps around the back of my neck, bringing me into him for a kiss. When he pulls away, he keeps his eyes glued to mine, sharing his sincerity with me. "I think this is where I tell you that you were *so* fucking right."

"Cursing," Tranq reminds him, voice low.

"Sorry," Kory says with a grimace, glancing towards the girls, who are curious about having this man they've seen but don't really know now living with us.

I take his hand.

Kory gives me a squeeze, then looks over his shoulder, at Keeper, and he utters a heartfelt, "Thank you."

Keeper reaches forward and catches him unexpectedly by the collar and makes his most serious Whistler-faced direct eye contact. He instructs Kory, "*Be gentle with the babies.*"

Kory nods once, a vehement movement. "I will. You can trust me."

Keeper doesn't let him go. "*Don't fight with Avox or Tranq.*"

Kory, eyes solemn, vows, "I'll be good. I won't give you a reason to regret this... Keeper," he adds.

Keeper's expression softens, and he smiles. "*Very good, Schweet.*"

Kory sighs. Keeper lowers his hand from his collar. "You know what? Fine. You can call me whatever you want. Thanks, man."

"Awww," Avox teases. "Aren't you schweet?"

"Shut up!" Kory tells him.

"*Little ears,*" Tranq reminds them with so much emphasis it's nearly an exclamation.

I duck from under Kory's arm and leap into Keeper's, hugging him hard around his neck and sighing deeply when his hand pats me gently on the back.

CHAPTER 19

MANY MONTHS BEFORE...

KEEDEEL (a.k.a. Keeper)

The creature stares back at me, looking utterly proud—as it should. It's magnificent.

"Have you seen these?" I call.

My friend Uteep is walking up from another row of Y-Dax for sale. He's a fellow enthusiast of the Y-Dax creatures our planet adores. While some quadrants of the galaxy are arguing about the morality of keeping these sentient creatures, our section of the universe takes them at face value: these aliens are intelligent, but they can't talk. (No matter that some of us have seen evidence enough to believe otherwise.) Therefore, they are our beloved pets.

We call them Y-Dax because that's the name of the far-flung quadrant where the creatures were collected. We Zweynolarphians didn't do the original collecting, but we purchased as many of them as we could from the Cryptops who did. We were instantly enamored; the new aliens are like nothing anyone has ever seen before, or since.

It's been two hundred solars since our planet began breeding and raising the creatures, with new morphs being selectively bred for all the time. The stock we're currently perusing, for example. "They're lovely," I say, reaching out my hand to stroke a flank, making the creature shift and toss its mane of hair. "And rather interesting-looking. If it weren't for the length of its mane and the slight prominence of its mammary tissue, I wouldn't immediately know that it was female," I confess to Uteep.

"Racing types," he says with confidence. "They're built slim but muscled. And when they're young like this, the females are fast." He turns to me, expression stern. "If you get a female, you can't breed her until she retires."

"Why not?" I ask, genuinely curious.

"Because once you breed a race-type female, her career is over. She'll never run the same."

I've not heard that, but then again, I've done no research on the variety, either. "That's a shame," I say with a little sadness, because my own pets love to run, be they female or male.

"Even after she's produced offspring, she'll still run and play," Uteep answers, correctly diagnosing the origin of my dismay. "She just won't be able to achieve the speed to compete anymore." His mouth sets. "You know what I like most about this variety?"

It doesn't look like he likes whatever he's thinking at all right now, but I don't say so. "No. What?"

He crosses his arms. "There's the unexpected benefit that, when you buy a racing female, you can almost be certain the breeder took care never to let her sire—or any other male—ever force-breed her."

I grimace. Uteep had been thrilled to purchase a family unit of Y-dax who displayed a congenital physical anomaly which caused them to be born with additional fingers on each hand. They were very interesting-looking.

Then one night, Uteep was passing the herd's monitors and found something strange. The sire of the unit was not with his mate. She was sitting up, alone. When Uteep went out to their enclosure to investigate, he found the sire breeding one of the juveniles—*his own daughter*. Genetically, this might at first appear to be a sound decision, because this would perpetuate more of the same anomaly should the pairing produce offspring, but Uteep shares the same sense of disquiet with the idea of pairing too-close relations that I and many other Y-Dax owners do. And no matter what, the juvenile female was too young to be bred, too young to have possibly been interested in being covered—and she certainly wasn't finding pleasure with her sire.

That the sire left his mate at all is odd. That he wanted to couple with such a young female, let alone when she was his own get... It's markedly unnatural.

It haunts Uteep to this day, but he killed the sire in a rage, right in the sleeping box of the children, right in front of the depraved male's offspring.

Thankfully, JoAayn, along with the rest of her litter, has grown into a confident adult who doesn't seem to suffer any ill effects from witnessing his execution. She did, however, have difficulty accepting a mate. Uteep

thought she'd never take one, but she surprised the entire herdmaster community by taking a Hunter-line Y-Dax. Uteep still marvels at the patience of the male's pursuit. He kept all the recordings of their interactions and likes to replay them, because the dance was subtle and so intricate that Uteep didn't know the male had marked JoAayn for his own until he went back to watch for clues on how the male managed to win her at all.

Since we're stopped by them, and they do look so very nice, Uteep motions for one of the racing Y-Dax's mouths, asking it to show him its teeth. "Anyway, back to the original topic." He shakes out his shoulders and forcefully draws his maxillae back into his mouth where they belong. His voice still contains a strong thread of tension though. Just the *mention* of a case of a juvenile being introduced to mating too early can set him into a fury for days. "If you're making an investment in a running-line tender," he says as he clears his throat, patting the creature on the shoulder when he's finished examining it, "then you ought to have them perform how they were bred. It's in their blood. They love what they were born to do."

"Hmm," I say. And it's possible that he's onto something. My male from the aptly named 'Rage' line loves to fight. Everything he does is more aggressive, even down to his breedings. It's simply his nature.

I check my wristport. "Well, Uteep, it was nice visiting you, but I should return home."

"You didn't come here with the intention to buy any of these, did you?"

I smile because my old friend knows me well. "I came for you. And if I may point out, you haven't purchased anything either."

"My garden is too full," he claims.

"So is mine." Really, Fee-bee needs no other males, and her daughters, Chipp-chip, Moctavia, and Loula—all named after famed Zweynolarphian princesses—won't be ready for their own mates for solars and solars.

Uteep checks his own wristport. "All right. I'm calling this done too, then."

We head for the exit, and I've stopped looking at the Y-Dax on display. I really don't need more, as I'm perfectly satisfied with exactly what I have at home.

I don't know what makes me notice the male. But I know when I stop walking because Uteep runs into my back.

"Keedeel?" he asks. "What is it?"

I'm staring at the puffed-looking creature huddled on a podium. Unlike the other Y-Dax on display, this one is behind a small circlet of bars.

As he draws his lips back from his teeth and utters a growl of warning at me, I decide the bars are less for his protection, and more for mine.

Uteep shoves past my shoulder in order to see what has my attention. "The Embellished?" he asks, something dark in his voice.

"He's incredibly designed," I say—and it's true. The male's features are like no other Y-Dax I've ever beheld.

Uteep draws me back. "That's one of Ledahlt's Embellished. You need to walk away."

I don't let Uteep take me far. "You wanted me to buy something. You were making somewhat of a big deal over it."

Uteep catches my shoulder when I try to start forward. "Not from him."

I glance at this Ledahlt he mentioned. "Ah, bad seller?"

Uteep widens his eyes like these two words don't scratch the surface. "He's a stud renter, not a seller. But he's terrible to his stock. I feel so damn sorry for them."

Stud renters have their place, at least in theory. It's expensive to own Y-Dax, but it's necessary to keep genetics as open as possible. For small herd keepers, renting a stud for their females once a year makes top sense. They can easily rent out a new male to further open genetic diversity the following year. In a perfect world, it's a sensible system.

We don't live in a perfect world.

I'm grateful that I have the means to keep the studs that I have. I can play with some genetics—not as intensively as others, but I still enjoy the benefits of raising a small herd of Y-Dax for my pleasure. And I know exactly how my studs are treated and trained and cared for. It's worth it to me to have this peace of mind at the sacrifice of 'unnecessarily' housing males year-round.

Meanwhile, stud renters keep vast numbers of male Y-Dax of prized lines, and to make profit, they often keep as many males per

enclosure as they can fit in a cage, and feed them as little as they must while still keeping them active enough to breed. The fighting among males is vicious. If males are unwell or unwilling to breed when they're taken to a farm to cover females, they're goaded with severe punishments.

I wince and look to the Embellished again, noticing now the numerous little mars and welts on his skin. "Why doesn't—"

"Anyone remove his stock from him?" Uteep asks. His jaw works, his maxillae popping out in his extreme agitation. "Because technically, it's a free planet, and he makes sure all their needs are met. It's just his morals that are an issue, and unfortunately, you can't fine a man or take away his pets for that alone."

He flexes his fingers, trying to work them out from making fists, and I realize I'm in a precarious position. Leave with my friend before he does something that will land him on a prison planet, or save this poor Y-Dax's life.

A Jgrovan, a species similar to ours, approaches the Embellished's cage. Not bothering to heed the *Do Not Pet the Y-Dax* sign, the Jgrovan wiggles his fingers inside the bars, smiling at the male on display.

The Embellished male snatches the Jgrovan's hand and sinks his teeth into it.

The Jgrovan howls, and Ledahlt—I assume—rushes over, a controller in his hand. He frantically begins pounding the correction button for the collar that the Embellished wears, but the Embellished only hunkers his shoulders and bites down with more fervor.

Ledahlt hastily unlocks the small cage and tries to yank the Embellished off of the potential buyer, but the damage is done.

The Embellished spits out the Jgorvan's severed fingers.

I start forward.

Uteep scrambles after me, trying to drag me back. "You're insane!" he hisses. "Keedeel! Did you not see what that creature just did!"

I stop and speak low to my friend. "You see the way the Embellished hardly reacts to pain?"

Uteep grimaces, staring at the still-twitching fingers that lie on the ground as the Jgrovan shouts obscenities and kicks at the Embellished's cage. "I did notice it seemed rather ineffective."

“That happens when they’re punished too often and too harshly. You know that.”

Uteep’s face is a mask of disquiet. “I know that some creatures can’t be saved. Born or mis-nurtured that way, they’re mad. Anything from Ledahlt probably falls into that category.”

I shake my head and approach the furious seller.

“You’re an idiot,” Uteep groans from behind me.

“Sir,” I call firmly to the seller as he shakes the Embellished by his collar. “*Sir.*”

The man turns to me, looking harried. His mouth parts are out and stabbing angrily at the air. “What?”

I motion for the Embellished—and then I simply reach forward and twist his fingers from off of the Embellished’s collar.

Ledahlt knocks my hand away and tries to shove me back. “Who do you think you are?” he asks belligerently, whirling to fully face me.

I stop his furious tirade with eight words. “The Zweynolarphian who’s going to buy your Embellished.”

“You can still walk away,” Uteep cautions under his breath as Ledahlt scrambles to find the necessary paperwork. It seems the vaccination record for this male is missing, along with his health record and a doctor’s seal of approval—the seal that everyone must present to sell their Y-Dax.

How curious that he managed to set up here yet can’t provide any of the necessary forms. Then again, he’s been a long time renter of high-grade selective-bred studs. Nobody wants to lose the opportunity to have lines like he’s offering without having to make the commitment to keep the stud after he’s served his purpose and is no longer necessary. Therefore, it seems officials look the other way where he and his unfortunate Y-Dax are concerned.

But to not have basic health records on hand? Not even a back-alley inoculation clinic’s stamp? Has he truly sent this male to any and every farm with no concern for his wellbeing?

“I’m not leaving the Embellished,” I murmur back, holding the creature’s lead. He tried to fight me at first, but after thrashing himself tired, he let the line go slack. I haven’t gone lax in my vigilance though; I can see

him eyeing me. He's only biding his time. I expect another attempt at escape, or at the very least, a vicious grab for my fingers.

Uteep sighs. "You're about to buy yourself a headache."

"Then I buy myself a headache."

This concession doesn't settle Uteep at all. "You think you're saving this one, but you're only encouraging Ledahlt to breed more. He'll tell you whatever he thinks you want to hear if it will make a sale and you can believe just about none of what he says is the truth. This is such a bad idea." Uteep takes me by the shoulder, shaking me as if I have no sense. "There are good breeders—support *them*."

I brush him off. "I know there are. You're one of them, and you know I know it. However, I want to save this one."

"You're a massive fool, but your heart is in the right place," he allows. Then it's like he can't contain his disquiet any longer. "I'm going to search the records myself. Ledahlt is claiming this male won the *Decoration of the Fancy* award in 75843 of the common era of the universe." He makes a rude noise as he types rapidly in his wristport. "I doubt it. I highly doubt it." Then he goes silent. "Well. I'll be damned."

"I take it you found it?" I ask.

He groans. "He was the youngest juvenile to ever be shown, at least until that year, and yes, he did win the competition for *Most Decorated in the Fancy*. It says here that as an adult, he's proven that he throws his strong facial structure in his offspring, and it's his face that won him the honors. However, a disqualification arose due to the number of open wounds that were later determined to be sores covering the youth's body."

Anger burns inside me at this news, and Uteep is biting down on his maxillae, their ends poking out from under his upper lip. Finally, he manages a civil-sounding, "Wait here. With Ledahlt scrambling like he is, I can be sure to put all the right pressure to get you a good deal." He takes another look at my Embellished—who, I realize, isn't sitting on the end of his lead, exhausted—he's *chewing* through his lead, or trying to.

Uteep takes a deep breath that seems to have no end. He just inflates and inflates and inflates. "He's going to need so much taming," he finally says, releasing his long-suffering breath.

Carefully—minding my fingers—I reach for the Embellished and tug the spittle-coated lead from his mouth. He lunges for me and I block

him with the flat of my hand. I shake him off quickly when he tries to grab onto me and bite. "I have the perfect female," I assure Uteep grimly. I think of my sweet Fee-bee, who has no idea what's about to be in store for her. But I heard a wise piece of advice once, and I believe it to be true: you don't tame the male. You tame his female. And my Fee-bee is perfectly, wonderfully tamed. "If any male has a hope of being domesticated, it'll be by her."

Uteep has turned away, but he shouts over his shoulder, "You better hope you're right!"

EPILOGUE

KORY

FIVE SOLARS LATER...

“Dad, is it a special day?” Dean asks.

I’m crouched in front of him, my hand on his freshly buzzed head. It’s short on the sides but a bit longer on top.

He told Keeper that he wanted his hair cut just like mine.

My son was somewhat of a surprise, considering I tried like hell not to contribute to his conception.

Keeper obviously had other ideas, and his efforts to get me to fire on target just prior to him conceding to my sterilization ended up being successful.

Theresa gave birth to Dean nine months later.

He has her beautiful eyes.

He has my face.

His features aren’t as overdeveloped as mine; his nose isn’t as prominent, nor are his brows quite as pronounced. But his jaw is all me. All his other features, to some extent, we share them—and strongly.

So whenever I look at Dean, now I get what Theresa means when she says she finds me attractive. It’s the love talking. Because my son’s face is not monstrous.

He’s my son. He’s perfect.

Still, if it had been up to me, he would have inherited Reesa’s bone structure, not been afflicted with mine.

“Evidently, it is a special day,” I finally say in answer to his question.

Dean’s gaze is sharp as it roves over my features, reading me.

“What’s wrong, Dad?”

Inhaling hard, I wrap my arms around him and squeeze him tight. I don’t tell him that I’m worried for him. I don’t give in to the urge to haul him so deep into the garden that nobody finds him.

Because I’m trusting Keeper not to take him away.

Over the solars, Keeper has earned my trust.

Still, a threat to my only child—the only one *remaining* to me, the only one that I’ve ever been allowed to get to know—it’s a test of the bond Keeper has worked so hard to forge with me.

“I love you very much,” I tell Dean, bringing my forehead to his. “And when you get to be my age, you tend to get sentimental about things when you probably have no reason to.”

Dean pulls his head back from mine, and his nose is wrinkled comically. “What’s ‘senti...?’”

I give him a wry smile. “Sentimental.” I stand and spread my hand, my throat closing when his much smaller hand takes my fingers, clutching me. “It means I’m remembering every day I’ve been able to enjoy that you’re alive, and with me and your mom, and I’m feeling very lucky—”

Blessed.

“—to know you.”

Dean’s attention span wanders faster than a butterfly can close its wings. “Why do the fish in the pond have such long fins?”

A few years ago, my answer would have been bitter. Today, I’m a slightly less angry man. Perhaps it’s safe to say I’m a much less angry man. “Because they’ve been carefully bred to have longer and more fancy fins, that’s why.”

“Why?” Dean asks, glancing up at me.

“Because the people who raise fish...” I clear my throat. “They think longer fins are more decorative, so those are the fish that they keep. They think they’re more beautiful than regular fish.”

Dean leans his weight to the side, gripping onto my fingers to stay upright, but playing with gravity as he lets his body be dragged parallel to the ground. “Are they more beautiful, Dad?” he asks.

I stare down at my son. My son who is the product of generations upon generations of selective tampering that changes the shape of his bones. Never in his life has he been called a freak. He doesn’t know that there was a time, a very long time, when his own father hated himself and considered himself ugly, cursed.

I never want Dean to feel that way about himself.

And whatsmore, when I look at my son’s face, I don’t hate it. I don’t hate it at all.

“Sometimes,” I tell him, “they are.”

Dean smiles up at me, not having a clue that I mean him. “I think our fish are pretty too, Dad.”

I squeeze his hand in mind. “Good.”

“*Schweet*,” Keeper calls—and I can’t help it. I tense.

My gaze swings to Keeper, who is at the door of our cage, waiting for my son.

Beside him is another keeper, one I’ve seen before. One I sort of know.

He wants to buy Theresa’s and my baby. He wants Dean.

I stare at this keeper so hard, he should catch fire.

“*Schweeeet*,” Keeper warns—but he sounds almost amused.

“*Uteep won’t take Chekkers.*”

Checkers. In alien-speak, my son’s name is Checkers. He’s got a name that could belong to a lightly spotted spaniel. It’s like a cosmic curse for all the times in the real early days when I gave Theresa hell for being Keeper’s dog.

If I could go back in time, I’d deck myself. I was a miserable twat.

“He’d better not,” I say tightly, and Keeper beckons me to come closer, promising, “*Schweet—he won’t.*”

Taking a deep breath, feeling my son’s gaze bounce between me and the two keepers, I guide him to the side of the fence.

Behind Keeper, Theresa appears. She smiles at me, and then calls, “Hi, baby,” to Dean.

I relax.

Dean lights up at just the sight of his mom. Forget that he saw her an hour ago when his sisters were taken to the house for baths.

He would have been taken too, but he’s reached the age when he doesn’t want to be ‘babied’—and if I don’t go to the house for baths, then he doesn’t want to either. So he stood beside me as we got sprayed down with Avox and Tranq, all of the men taking our baths like men.

He could have gone inside. I wouldn’t have thought any less of him. No one would have. And yet, as he bravely stood to be washed and didn’t so much as complain as the water (warmer than usual, and at a much lower pressure) hit his body, I was so fucking proud of him.

“MOM!” Dean cries, and he tugs on my hand, racing for the door of our enclosure, trying to rush me along with him so that we can be reunited with Reesa.

Keeper’s got the door unlocked, so it opens for him and Dean races right past the new Whistler, and launches himself into Theresa’s arms.

“Ooof,” she huffs, catching him. Then she turns a smile on me. And I can tell she’s searching my expression, measuring to see how badly I’m stressing about this.

“Kory,” she says softly, her gaze so soft on mine.

I move to her, palming the back of her head and dragging her up to me for a kiss, squishing a squirming, laughing Dean between us.

Behind us, I hear the keepers twittering to each other, and when I give in to the urge to glance at them out of the corner of my eye, my nostrils flare. Because they’re looking straight at Dean.

Well, where he’s pinned between Reesa and me. Protected.

Reesa’s fingertips stroke down my bare side. All I’m in is a loincloth, like usual. “Uteep isn’t here to take Dean,” she whispers up at me.

I’ve locked eyes with Keeper, but I murmur back, “So Keeper claims.”

“It’s true. And Uteep is good. You’ve met JoAayn. She’s his human, and you know he treats her like his own daughter.”

This is true. Mentioning this was a wise move, because the memory of this keeper, Uteep, and his human JoAayn, makes me relax to the point that I’m no longer glaring at the alien anymore.

And Uteep can tell. His eyes smile. “*I won’t take Chekkers until he’s ready,*” he promises me, proving he either understands why I’m mean-mugging him, or he understood Theresa’s words. From behind him, he draws out a human.

A little girl human.

I was so busy fixing her owner with a killing look that I didn’t realize she was even here.

Uteep whistles to her, and she must have a really good grasp of Whistler-speak because she seems to follow his every word as he points out Dean to her.

She waves to Dean. “Hi, Chekkers,” she says.

I growl.

Theresa pinches me on the arm. “Don’t growl at her!”

“I’m not,” I murmur back, tempted to goose her right here for pinching me, because Dean wouldn’t know what I’m doing to his mother, and the keepers won’t care—but I don’t because there’s a human girl watching.

But if her attention wanders to somewhere other than us, my hand is meeting Reesa’s ass.

“I was growling at Keeper’s name for Dean,” I tell her.

Dean looks up at me from where he’s attached himself to his mom’s hip. “What’s wrong with my name?”

“Nothing is wrong with your name, honey,” Reesa assures him quickly.

“Chekkers is,” I would rather eat a live bug than say this out loud, “*fine*,” I tell Dean. “But we named you Dean. Dean is your human name.”

“And Chekkers is my alien name,” Dean supplies, unbothered about this aspect of his life.

“It is, buddy,” I agree, swallowing down my eternal grimace at Keeper’s choices. I mean, the alien calls me something that sounds like Sweet. *Me*, and I’m an asshole. I didn’t have much hope that he’d do any better with the next generation.

Smiling wryly, I ruffle Dean’s scalp fuzz. I keep my other arm wrapped around Theresa, and when I feel her eyes on me, I know she’s trying to gauge how I’m handling this. I slide my hand up her back and tug her in until I can buss her hair. Once there though, I rest my chin on top of her head and release a long sigh.

“You okay?” she asks into my throat.

“Better,” I tell her. “I’ll be doing great when the other keeper is gone.”

From behind us, I hear a soft chuckle. They can *so* understand us. Or at least they got the gist of what I just said.

“This is Dree-uh,” Uteep announces.

Theresa proves she’s the ambassador of our huddle, glancing around me and smiling warmly. “Hello, Dree-uh. That’s a very pretty dress you’re wearing.”

“Thank you,” Dree-uh answers shyly, trying to eke behind her keeper’s leg like he’s her protector.

Seeing her comfort level with him eases a good part of the worry gnawing a hole through my guts. “Hi, Dree-uh,” I say.

And proving he’s my little man, Dean parrots, “Hi Dree-uh...”

I hug him and then I squeeze my arm tighter around his mother, turning us so that we’re facing her instead of hiding Dean from an innocent little girl’s gaze... and the two aliens who are assessing both of the kids.

Because that’s what everyone is here for. The Whistlers are hoping to see if Dean and Dree-uh, who are similar in age, show any indication that they might like each other enough to bond as adults.

Honestly? I don’t know what they’re hoping to see. They’re *kids*. There are days when we have to stop Dean from shoving rocks up his nose. There’s no way he can look at a girl and recognize that he’s found his soulmate.

...Except, when I glance down at my son, he’s staring at her.

I mean, he’s *staring* at her.

My eyes fly to Keeper, to see he’s smiling. Even his weird mouth-part things are showing; he’s got them flexed out and up like they’re holding their own bated breaths.

When I flick a concerned look to Theresa, she’s got the sappiest smile in the world and she’s aiming it at our boy’s head. “Dean?” she asks, her voice like a song—not like a Whistler song, but just her naturally musical vocal pattern.

I’ve always thought her voice was soothing. Pretty.

Theresa pets Dean’s hair. “Do you think Dree-uh would like to see the fish pond?”

And when Dree-uh chirps an excited, “I’d like to see fish!” ...I watch my son respond the same way I’ve felt myself responding to the woman I love. He just lights up, watching the happiness on her face.

I gape between him and the girl.

And then I turn narrowed eyes on her keeper.

His gaze rises from Dean, to me, and he meets my stare, unflinching. Letting me take his measure. Uteep’s an okay guy; I’ve never had reason to dislike him.

This though, is a whole different matter.

“Dree-uh!” Another voice calls. A human woman’s voice.

I turn my attention to a man and a woman and a herd of kids approaching from one of the many garden paths. The woman I know: JoAayn. Uteep’s pet. She’s holding a human man’s hand. And as the man observes Dree-uh and Dean with an accessing, alert eye, I realize this must be JoAayn’s mate, and Dree-uh’s father.

A couple of the kids I don’t know, but I assume they’re Dree-uh’s siblings because they all share her coloring and features.

The rest of the kids are ours; Ana, Molly, and Quinn—daughters by Avox and Tranq and Reesa, but raised with love by us all.

“Um, perhaps you should have your Lee pause for a moment. I’m not certain how Schweet will react to an unfamiliar male in his territory,” Keeper trills to Uteep.

Uteep calls, “Lee? Stop there.”

The man does, and when he halts, he doesn’t let JoAayn’s hand go, and since he’s also holding the hand of one of their other little girls, she halts too, making the whole chain of kids stop in their tracks.

The man, Lee, watches me. And he reminds me of Tranq; he’s wearing the most relaxed expression—but he’s *watching* me. He’s not oblivious.

When I feel Keeper behind me, I don’t flinch. I don’t lunge away either. There was a time I would have attacked—him, *everyone*—but that time is long ago.

Keeper’s hand closes over my collar, and he makes formal introductions. “*Schweet, this is Lee. He’s only here as long as Uteep is here. Can I trust you not to be aggressive?*”

Letting out a silent breath as I keep my eyes pinned to the man across the garden from me, I nod.

Keeper releases my collar, and pats me on my shoulder.

Molly, Quinn, and Ava have spread out, playing games in the grass, and the gaggle of new children soon join them.

Theresa draws my hand into hers and takes Dean by her other hand and leads Dree-uh to see the fish.

I keep a cautious eye on everyone (*maybe* a touch suspicious whenever I cast a glance at the keepers), and I’m more than a little relieved to see the Lee guy is doing the same (albeit without the suspicion).

The keepers hang back, murmuring to each other, emitting little thrumming noises as they watch Dean showing Dree-uh all of his favorite fish, as if he himself caught them and raised them in this pond.

Dree-uh exclaims over them enough to make Dean's chest swell, and soon all the kids are here, and the keepers start handing out fish food.

The fish always act like they're starving, so this works out great for them, and the kids lose their minds feeding their ever-gawping mouths.

Dean's words float to my ears as he earnestly informs Dree-uh, "My dad says that the people who raise fish think the ones with fancy fins are more beautiful than regular fish—but I think they're all pretty."

Dree-uh smiles up at him, rolling her tiny shoulder. "I like the ones with fancy fins the best."

Reesa folds my arm around her waist, hugging me. I oblige her, bringing my front to her back, and we watch our son forge a beginning with the girl who could one day be his everything.

I hug Theresa tightly, and whisper in her ear, "I love you, you know."

She leans against me, and I can hear the smile in her voice when she sighs happily and declares, "I do know, but I love it every time you tell me." She rocks in my arms a little. "I love you too, Kory—and you should know," she tips her head up and winks at me. "Sometimes, you can be really *Schweet*."

I palm her ass under her dress and drag my freshly shaved jaw over her neck to punish her for teasing me until she's laughing and filling the garden with happiness.

THE END ♥

AUTHOR NOTE:

I **THANK YOU** *so much* for asking for more stories in the Pet Project universe. Your reviews for that book MADE MY YEAR!!! <3 I hope you had fun exploring a little more of this fictional world. Thanks for hanging with me! =D

If you're curious about JoAayn, the woman who Uteep rescued as a girl, she has her own story right here:

The Pet Project: JoAayn (Book 3) <https://amzn.to/2ybVHfV>
(*As you might have guessed, *Trigger Warnings with JoAayn's book.*)

(If you're thinking, "What the heck is this other Pet Project book?" Take a peek at the oddball story that spawned the one you just finished: <https://amzn.to/2UAU3ff>)

My wonderful readers, I deeply, sincerely appreciate all that you do. For caring, for enjoying fictional trips with me, and I can't tell you how much I appreciate your support.

I hope wherever you are that you're safe, and that you found the escapism that you were looking for.

With love,

Amanda ♥

Newsletter: http://eepurl.com/cR_CNf

<https://amandamilo.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/AmandaMiloAuthor/>

CARE FOR SOME TRIVIA BEHIND THE BOOK?

Tranq (and to an unofficial extent, Theresa) represented the population of humans who were the products of a species artificially selected for tameness.

In real life, there have been some neat studies involving animal domestication to Tranq's degree. In 1959, Dmitri K. Belyaev with the Institute of Cytology and Genetics in Novosibirsk, Siberia began selecting for hypertame colonies of river otters (!!), silver foxes, minks, and rats on the institute's experimental farm. The foxes in particular are, to this day, quite famous for their docility.

Next, the Max Planck Institute in Leipzig, Germany captured rats from the wild, and with each generation, they separated the rats into specific lines, breeding the ones who showed the most tolerance for being handled by humans. Within a few generations, they had a line of completely friendly, fully domesticated animals with "fewer anxiety-related behaviors."

Let's talk Kory's features! And allow me to start with this preface: any time a group begins to raise a thing with a serious intention for 'type'—be it plants or animals—the subjects begin to change. (I feel it important to note that I have no anti-breeder agenda—quite the contrary; I find the subject of selective breeding fascinating, and I love many animals who are the product of selective breeding, and I happily survive on a diet that includes selectively bred plants. So I'm not bashing the practice.) First up, take a look at the bullet-shaped face of the Bull Terrier we know today. Now search for the original foundation dogs who built the breed. **THE SKULL ALTERATION IN ONE HUNDRED YEARS IS CRAZY!** Seriously, there's a photo of a 1915 winning Bull Terrier and a 2016 Bull Terrier floating around the web—and the animals look like a different *species.*

It's the same for Pugs, Persian Cats, Oriental Shorthair cats (I love them, they look so alien—same for Sphynx cats), Dumbo rats, Hijazi goats (just LOOK at those ears! Just look at them! Speaking of, how about English Lop rabbits?), Damascus goats, Mini Cows, Kladruber horses,

scaleless ball pythons in every color under the rainbow—you name it. Whew, all that said to set you up for it being in the realm of believability that after many generations of pairing humans who have different features than the average person, a Kory could, in theory, happen.

There were a couple of celebrities with unique features that I used as light inspiration for Kory. One of which was Ilka Brühl, a model who was born with ectodermal dysplasia, a rare genetic disorder that affected her facial structure. Her message *"Remind the world that everyone is beautiful,"* seemed like something poor Kory would have appreciated hearing a little more when he was a boy. I thought of her as his mom, whom he never got to meet. Actor Ron Perlman's distinctive face and height inspired Kory's dad, although the character never got screen time.

Hmm, hmm, hmm, what else? Oh! Trivia bite on the werewolf babies: they're based on the real-life condition called hypertrichosis, where affected people have excessive hair growth on their face, shoulders, chest, back, and ears.

Remember the mention of blue-skinned people? Methemoglobinemia is a rare real-life blood disorder that turns the specimen (person or animal's) skin blue. There's some fascinating history of a Kentucky family in particular who was pretty affected. The following are links to photos and a news story of people still turning up blue and wondering about their origins and possible relation to the famous family:

<https://abcnews.go.com/Health/blue-skinned-people-genetic-connection-kentucky-fugates/story?id=15871929#.T1oUTMDIPCU>

<https://weeklyworldnews.com/headlines/44136/inbreeding-turns-appalachia-children-blue/>

<https://www.livescience.com/34410-blue-skin-argyria-methemoglobinemia.html>

~*~

Another thing: I wanted to add a footnote in the Kory zap scene, but I didn't want to interrupt the flow of the story: remember when Theresa is being touched by Kory as he gets an electric correction, but she doesn't get zapped with him?

Google answers were surprisingly all over the place on the topic of whether a bystander would receive a charge too, but guess what I'm so blessed to have? SOURCES FOR RANDOM CRAZY INFORMATION!

=D I had a fun conversation with my dad, texting him to pick his brain about what he knew, because he's a retired police officer, and he has experience with tasers.

He said the rule is you don't touch anywhere on a subject that lands between the two contact points of the taser. So if the subject is getting nailed in the back of his neck, you can grab his front and not get a shock.

He added that if he's in the water and you grab him, you might feel a tingle slam up your arm.

But otherwise, as long as you stay out of the taser's path, you don't get hit.

So what about an electronic collar?

Going to say that as long as you don't have your finger pressed between the probes delivering the electronic stimulation, you don't get zapped.

Is that true? Thankfully, this is fiction, and luckily I don't know firsthand. But for this book's universe, let's say it's true.

All right my friends! That's it for this story's trivia. If you don't swipe any further than this point, leave with my well-wishes for you to take care of yourself, and to do something that makes you happy. <3

Cures for A Book Hangover

Smoke Bitten by Patricia Briggs is live! I haven't gotten to read it yet, but I'm a long-time enthusiast of this book's sister series, and Mercy books are frequent comfort-listens in my audio playlist. Ebook:

<https://amzn.to/2xr4ERU>

Audio: <https://amzn.to/33LTovz>

Resonant Son by J.N. Chaney is a sci-fi I only just started, but I grabbed it because the audio is voiced by Mark Boyett, a narrator who is much loved by my ears.

And he. NAILS. The. Voices. He's so good at differentiating a full cast of characters!

So far, the story is a little bit like a futuristic *Die Hard*. If that sounds like it appeals to you, I hope you like it! <https://amzn.to/3bumZwu> is the ebook, and <https://amzn.to/2QKIjFI> is the audio.

I was innocently stalking narrators when I tripped on to Lani Lynn Vale books. I'm hopping between her biker series and her cowboys, and for audio lovers, check out her narrators. Teddy Hamilton, Erin Mallon, Sebastian York, Jason Clarke—oooh, la la!!!

I'm just going to send you to her Amazon page so you can browse her crazy-awesome-sized backlist.

<https://amzn.to/33M7kpk>

Ahhh, this was a delicious treat. *Entreat Me* by Grace Draven is a fairytale as only Grace could have penned it. There is an audio option, but I curled up happily with the ebook. Ebook: <https://amzn.to/2wtLcUR> Audio:

<https://amzn.to/3duGuqj>

If you grab any of these, may you have a fabulous time! <3

Books & Audiobooks by Amanda...

Want to check out what else I've written? YOU ARE SPECTACULAR AND I LOVE YOU. ♥. **Heart Eyes**

Arokh and Angie's story ebook: <https://amzn.to/2A6sH9T>

This book is also available in Audio, narrated by the talented Nick Cracknell: <https://adbl.co/2N7WXHF>

Zadeon and Callie's story ebook: <http://amzn.to/2EZEitg>

Audiobook voiced by Nick Cracknell: <https://adbl.co/2Nx8WxR>

(WARNING: This one has some Dark times. This couple's love is beautiful though, and they get their Happily Ever After.)

Brax, Tara, and Tac'Mot's story is here: <http://amzn.to/2FeuFGl>

Audiobook narrated by Teddy Hamilton and Callie Dalton:

<https://amzn.to/2zUkHWu>

(If you had to classify this one, it's *almost* Reverse Harem. This is an MFM book, which means there are two (alien) guys and one woman but it's not **quite** menage, because Brax is a Rakhii, and you know this means he doesn't share his female. Slight problem: his female is bonded to Tac'Mot.)

Dohrein and Gracie's story: <https://amzn.to/2Qn4lwo>

Audiobook voiced by Nick Cracknell: <https://adbl.co/2s6gN96>

Blind Fall, the standalone story that answers the question you've all been asking me: "Is the guide dog okay?"

Spoiler: She's MORE than okay. ♥ This is Breslin and Sanna's story. If you read this one, I hope you have fun.

<https://amzn.to/2PvoaAm>

Audiobook narrated by Teddy Hamilton and Callie Dalton:
<https://amzn.to/2WImX17>

Beth's Stable, a reverse harem romance for movie-lovers. Just trust me. ;)

<https://amzn.to/2ZFxyLx>

A fun side project *Not* related to the *Stolen* series:

Valos of Sonhadra Series

Alluvial, Book 1: <https://amzn.to/2OhfX33>

Tempest, Book 2, written by Poppy Rhys: <https://amzn.to/2uPfiyv>

Galvanizing Sol, Book 3, by Amanda Milo & Poppy Rhys:
<https://amzn.to/2AgxDZE>

Another side project:

Contaminated, a Cosmic Fairy Tale <https://amzn.to/36RFbhS>

(Erreck and Nancy's story, which features Simmi as a lovably gruff secondary character.)

Contagion: Simmi's standalone, germphobic HEA story
<https://amzn.to/2EIEVuk>

The Pet Project: <https://amzn.to/2UAU3ff>

The Pet Project: JoAyn (Book 3) <https://amzn.to/2ybVHfV>

And a random coloring book that I drew for fun :D
<https://amzn.to/2MSk3Pu>

About the Author

Amanda Milo is a collector of the randomest trivia. *Did you know that Kiwi fruit plants have separate genders? You need both in order to make Kiwi fruits happen. Isn't that cool??*

She's concerned about river otter bite pressure—she hasn't had a chance to test this out, but frankly, this is the part that's holding her back from appropriating and testing the relocation (aka wildlife theft) of a small family of adorable river otters.

...To the bathtub. (They're basically like slick-furred rubber duckies, but with lots of teeth, right? Right.)

Extended contemplation of this plan has led to the permission to adopt more ferrets, which makes her very happy. So does her extensive, wacky-patterned, thigh-high sock collection—though ferrets, it must be noted, do not play well with pretty socks. The crazy, clawed thieves!

She invites you to hang out with her in the *Amanda Milo's Minions* Facebook group. (She didn't name the group! XD Readers have great senses of humor!)

Thank you for picking up this book. Amanda hopes that you had a lovely time. ♥