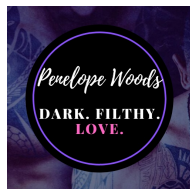


ALIEN BREED

A DARK SCI-FI ALIEN ROMANCE
PENELOPE WOODS

ALIEN BREED: A DARK SCI-FI ALIEN ROMANCE

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About the Author

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Penelope Woods is a top 100 Amazon author who writes dark sci-fi, horror, fantasy and uniquely gothic romance novels. When she learned about smut, it was like a light bulb clicked on in her head. She started writing in 2016 and has never looked back.



Prologue: Naomi Adams

Audio transcription:

*Hello? Testing. Testing.
I have little time to speak, so I'll make it quick. He found me, the wretched,
alien beast.*

*The alien you helped create...
All of this is what you wanted, wasn't it?
Congratulations. How did you know we'd fall for your sick plan?
How did you know he'd take me?*

[Muffled footsteps.]

Oh, God. No...

[Inhuman growl.]

*Shit. He's coming. I have to leave.
I'm sorry for everything. I failed the Avalon expedition. Worst, I've failed
myself. To everyone back on Earth: You don't know what's out here. What
they're doing to us...
If this gets leaked to the press, don't forget our names. We are Starship Tera-
Earth 373, the second team to land and die on planet Avalon.*

[Door creaking]

*Okay. This is it. There's nothing else left to lose.
He has me cornered.*

It's breeding time.

ONE

Naomi

SYSTEM ANNOUNCEMENT: WELCOME TO AVALON. PREPARE FOR
LANDING.

Year: 2093
Location: Avalon's Orbit

WE DISCOVERED PLANET AVALON IN 2065.

To most of Earth's population, it was just another rock, floating a million light years away. NASA published a new high-definition planetary photograph every month.

The discovery didn't make international headlines.

Within a year, it was the number one story. They unveiled more data, information that changed the course of history forever.

The planet's atmosphere conditions were fit for life. One hundred percent positive. This was a place we could establish a second Earth.

The entire world went through a consciousness shift over that simple, floating green planet.

There were tests, rover expeditions. Crude machines analyzed soil samples. With the facts confirmed and in the public eye, NASA received thousands of applications to arrive and build a base. People were ready to make the journey.

Glued to their tablet screens, we watched in awe as a team of competent scientists and engineers blasted through the cosmos. Earth celebrated. After experiencing so much strife, the entire world came together, unified toward progress.

There was hope of a better future. To infinity, eyes toward the heavens.

That was the first expedition. Our crew is the second.

We'll meet the others on planet Avalon. We'll drop off the supplies and start building a new tomorrow. Then, like the noble pioneers of the past, we'll watch the future grow.

The flight is just a routine expedition, added humans to start the construction of a new planetary habitat. It requires five of us to give up our lives for the greater good. No big deal. Just a standard twenty-year round trip...

We won't have to work again. We can retire in glory.

Surprisingly, none of us care about any of those things. The crew doesn't want infamy. We're all searching for something else.

I'll admit it. The mystery turned us on. We wanted to know why our lives were so difficult. We left because we wanted something other than ourselves.

That's not what we got. Space makes one introspective. It alters the perception of one's life.

We circle through Avalon's orbit. The only thing I'm wondering is why I ever signed up to do this.

It has been eight months, and the first half of our journey is finally coming to an end. We're nearly there. But are we prepared?

The closer we get to the green planet, the more I want to understand it.

In the final weeks before leaving, NASA revealed to us something remarkable. The first expedition found life. Microbiology. Things you can't actually see.

Nothing to worry about, they said. There are a team of scientists studying the samples.

There might be more to Avalon than meets the eye.

Leaning my head against the cold window, I stare in awe, eyes watering.

I've never experienced love. Not when I was younger. Not as I aged. I never gave it a second thought.

As Avalon pulls us inside, it's the only thing on my mind.

Who knows if I'll ever find someone who understands me? After this expedition, everything will be different. And that's only if we make it back in one piece.

Can a planet's atmosphere cause such an emotional disturbance in a human? No, I decide. I've been sleeping too much. That's the reason.

Everything is going to be fine...

Halloway, the captain of the ship arrives at my side. He's not a great leader, but he's a decent man. Still, I wish he took the time to bring the crew closer together.

"The cosmos is endless," I say.

"It won't be long until we land," he says. "You thinking about home again?"

"Somehow, I'm always thinking about home," I mutter.

"Well, you don't need to worry. Earth is the same place we left it. Doesn't matter how far away you are from home. Life goes on," Halloway says.

I nod. Life always finds a way.

Leaning over to look out the window, his eyes glow with wonder. "We should celebrate, right? We made it. Avalon... Look at her. Isn't she exquisite?"

To my right, Fassbender leans near the door, his blonde hair, combed back, gel glistening. There's a dark twinkle in his eyes, and his lips arch like horns.

"You're wrong, you know. Life doesn't just go on," he says. "Avalon rests near a black hole. You've felt it. Depression. Madness. We have all experienced it. Unfortunately for us, time works at a faster rate out here. One hour here is years back home."

My jaw drops. "You're not saying..."

He nods. "When we get back, it'll be the future. Our families will be dead. The institutions we hold dear will have changed or crumbled. Everything we have come to know and love will alter."

Well, so much for staying positive...

Next to him is Roy, another member of the weary crew. Running his hand through his peppered, unkempt beard, he gives a gruff laugh and shifts his weight to one side. "Good riddance."

My throat feels tight. "Does any of this matter?" I ask. "We lost communication to Earth months ago when our relay interceptor died on us, remember? We are one day away from touching base on Avalon. Whatever you think about time as a concept is meaningless to the job at hand. We have instructions to meet with the first team. We'll go over the briefing together."

"And what, pray tell is that mission, Naomi?" Fassbender asks.

The condescension in his tone is just enough to drive me crazy.

"Construction," I say. "We're building a new tomorrow. That starts with a heavy sample and land analysis. We have the chance to hold a deeper understanding of this universe. With our help, people will live on Avalon. They'll give birth and start families. Cultures will blossom. It'll be marvelous."

He can scoff all he wants, but it's true. We're the ones who are laying the foundations for the new world. Historians will write us into the history books.

Maybe that doesn't matter.

On Earth, no family waits for my arrival. I used to have people, but I let them all go.

At any rate, I like to tell myself I let them go. An accident stole them away from me. Nothing extravagant. Just a simple car crash.

I remember the impact. White powder caking and stinging my eyes. I remember blindly reaching out for my parents as a man pulled me from the backseat.

The flashing lights. The tears. The understanding that it was all going to end.

Our peaceful little family was in shambles.

The vehicle's steering chips malfunctioned. Impeccable automation led us right into oncoming traffic. It was a miracle I survived, but it felt like a curse.

I spent years in therapy. There wasn't a foster family that could understand my pain.

They tried, I'll give them that.

Everyone wanted to fix me, but there was nothing to fix.

The company recalled the vehicle and gave me a small relief fund. I was lucky enough to receive it when I turned eighteen. I had to fight real hard for that, but that's another story.

I used the money for school. Some of it went to other things I didn't need but wanted. A fancy dress or two. Things to make me happy. Things to make me forget.

I proved I could be the best in my class. I was going to travel to the moon and back.

I grew up. I flew to Avalon.

Today marks the twentieth anniversary of their death. It's not something I've told the others. Frankly, it's none of their business. It's something I bury deep within my chest.

From my peripheral, I can see Halloway staring at me. His eyes dart as soon as I motion my head.

"What is it, Captain?" I ask.

"It's nothing. Just pre-landing jitters, I suppose," he mutters.

He suddenly appears sick with dread. He's the captain, but he's not always so great at keeping his cool. Hell, I don't blame him. This journey has been difficult.

They won't write about space madness in the history books.

Halloway leans his head against the narrow window near his cot. It's not a good sign to have a captain worrying like this. He should be in the control center, preparing for the landing. I need to make sure he keeps his cool.

Outside our starship, the green planet rests next to its three moons. When we first saw them, we were in awe. Now, the monoliths haunt everyone.

The other four crew members of the Starship Tera Earth-373 have described an increase in nightmares. They attribute the affectation to the triple moons.

No one can be sure of anything anymore.

"You're hiding something," I say.

Halloway breathes forcefully. "Boy, do I wish that were the truth," he says. "Just a bad feeling, is all."

Great.

Roy jerks forward. "Halloway, don't fuck with us. Not now. Not this far into the mission," he says.

Halloway growls. "Hey, I'm the captain, remember? Everything I do is for the good of the crew. Just remember that."

Something is on his mind. Whatever it is must be big, but we don't have time to get it out of him.

Fassbender circles the room. A straw from his juice packet wags from his teeth. "Well, captain, tell us about this good," he says. "What exactly are we going to find when we touch down on Avalon?"

Fassbender is so intelligent, he is always one step ahead of the captain. He's a showboat, but overall, he hasn't been too much of a pain.

Captain Halloway wipes the sweat from his temples. He digs his thumbs into two pressure points, sighing with grief. "You tell me, Fassbender. You always seem to be one step ahead of me," he sneers.

Fassbender grins. "That's because I know how to do my job," he says.

Halloway's face turns a darker shade of red. "You don't have an ounce of respect for me, do you?" he asks.

I can't speak for the others, but I've never experienced tension between crew members. I've traveled through the outer atmosphere of our Earth to our moon, and I've orbited around the dead planet Mars.

I've received numerous awards for some short stints at the international space station. Not sure how many podcasts I've been on, but it's more than I can count on my fingers.

That's why we were picked for the job. We were the best in the academy.

"Turning on one another gets us nowhere," I interject. "We all have a reason to be here."

Fassbender is the computer guy. Roy deals with the mechanics. I'm a medical officer. Halloway is, of course, the captain.

And then there's Hugh.

Hugh differs from the rest of us. He's a little too overqualified for the job, but tragedy forced him into enlisting.

Four years ago, doctors diagnosed him with Guillain-Barré syndrome. It bound him to a wheelchair, paralyzing his body from the

waist on down. He lost his job, his wife, and every penny of his savings went toward paying his debt to the insurance companies.

He's a quiet hero.

Most of the time, he keeps to himself. But every Friday night, he likes to join the crew for a drink.

It's Thursday.

The sound of his wheelchair startles me. "What's everyone arguing about now?"

I nod over at Fassbender. "He was just about to announce the bad news."

Hugh rolls to the center of the room. Sighing, he tenses. "Without me?"

"Announcement?" I ask. "Guys, what's going on?"

I look from Fassbender to Hugh who both share an awkward glance.

"He would have missed it if it weren't for me," Hugh says.

Fassbender scratches his neck. His skin glistens with sweat. Tossing the plastic juice container on the ground near the captain's boots, he says, "All right, brace yourself."

"Trust me. We're braced," I reply.

He clears his throat. "I believe Discovery Base on Avalon has been destroyed. Must have happened a few years ago," he says. "There is no trace of survivors, but no evidence of death either."

Roy grabs a metal bar above his head, using it to sit up straight. "Bullshit..."

"Excuse me?" Halloway asks.

My face feels hot. He's wrong. It can't be true. "We receive monthly audio recordings from Discovery Base," I argue. "They are making progress with the samples. They're waiting for us to land."

There was one playback from a few weeks ago. They were making headway in the lab. Something about a new scientific breakthrough. The team sounded ecstatic.

"I know. I can't explain it either," Fassbender says, threading his fingers through his gelled hair.

Hugh scoots past him. "If the academy's top astronauts knew what this mission was really about, no one would have signed up," he says.

My heart races. "What's the mission, Hugh?"

"The mission is we die," Roy interrupts.

"I want none of that talk on my ship," Halloway warns.

Roy bites. "Jesus Christ, Fassbender. How long have you been sitting on these doubts?"

Hugh chuckles, but he looks terrified. "If it weren't for me rolling by at the right time, he'd have never brought it up," he says.

Halloway stands and leans over Roy's cot. "Fassbender is lying. End of story."

I glance over at Fassbender. He looks as freaked out as the rest of us.

"It doesn't matter. We'll breach the planet's atmosphere shortly. We'll find out soon enough," I say.

Halloway is frozen, but I can see his eyes twitch.

On a mission like this, I expected some minor disruptions. But this news changes expectations.

If what Fassbender is telling us is true, we're landing on foreign terrain with no added supplies. Within a few days, we'll run out of the necessities.

We'll all die.

I'm a medical officer. I don't know how to hunt.

This is like Robinson Crusoe times a thousand.

Fassbender glances at each of us. "Now's not the time for mutiny. That's not what I'm advocating, Captain. Trust me, I don't find pleasure in showing you my findings."

Roy grabs Fassbender's shirt, forcing him against the wall. "How long have you known about this?"

Fassbender chokes. "One day," he squeaks, palms out. "I needed to know if what we found was the truth."

The crew is silent except for me. "Show us what you found," I say. "Roy, set him down."

Roy smooths out Fassbender's shirt, but the two stare at each other like a couple of pit bulls.

With a careful look of trust, he jogs to one of the many screens. Leaning forward, he runs through a series of commands. He pulls up a group of photographs.

"The rover shots," I mutter, recognizing them from our entrance interviews.

Fassbender holds up his index finger, beaming. "Look," he says.

The first picture is a hazy portrait of the jungle terrain. There's a second picture of the astronaut team we're supposed to meet. Their faces are beaming with pride.

"I don't see anything unusual," I say.

There's a third photograph.

Hugh points, finger smashing against the tablet screen. "Stop scrolling. Look, right there. You see it?"

My eyes widen. Suddenly, the room feels like an ice box. I focus on two red dots in the background of the picture.

"Eyes," I whisper.

They're in the darkness of the trees, barely visible, but definitely there.

The timestamp on the photograph says: November 14, 2090.

"What is it?" Roy asks.

"You're asking me?" Fassbender replies.

Hugh shakes his head. "They weren't alone."

"Weren't. You're speaking in the past tense," Roy says.

"Well, where the hell do you think the team ended up, Tahiti?" Hugh asks.

"We don't know anything for certain," Fassbender says. "It could be a lens flare."

Halloway swallows and cups his hands around his face. "Dear lord..."

It all seems to hit us at once. Urgency.

"Weapons," I state. "Roy, get them ready."

"I'm the captain," Halloway hisses. "The weapons are my jurisdiction."

I face the captain. The fear in his eyes is cause for concern. "Collect yourself. You're sweating, Captain," I say. "Roy can handle this."

He checks his palm and breathes.

The starship rumbles. Appliances tremble against their holders. Trinkets crash onto the floor. Outside my window, the green planet appears to be swallowing us whole.

"Look, we've entered Avalon's atmosphere. We need to stay focused," Hugh says.

Reaching into my cubby, I toss Halloway a small hand towel. "I need you to land this ship, Captain. Roy can deal with getting the weapons."

Roy chuckles, enjoying his updated rank privileges. "Don't worry, Captain. I'm not going to hurt you."

Halloway straightens his back and swipes the towel against his forehead. "Fine. We'll do it your way," he says, trembling.

He slides past Fassbender and says, "If we turn on each other, it's to our detriment."

Fassbender gulps. "Maybe I'm wrong," he says.

"Perhaps," Halloway says. "Or maybe NASA lied to us."

A chill runs down my spine as Halloway leaves to prepare the ship for landing.

He shouldn't have said it, but it's the thought that's been on our minds this entire time. Why are we really here?

And what were those pair of eyes in the photograph?

Everyone is silent.

I was prepared to see some weird shit, but this fills me with a dread and loneliness one can little imagine.

Hugh reaches into the back of his wheelchair, revealing a large bottle of Hennessy. Upon opening it, he smells the contents and winces.

"It's not Friday," Roy states.

Hugh nods. "Tonight, we drink a day early."

Because who the fuck knows if we'll see tomorrow...

I left because I thought I had nothing to gain on Earth. But as I look out my window and see the landscape growing larger, I realize I had everything and more.

TWO

Naomi

System Announcement: Welcome to Avalon. Prepare for landing.

I KEEP MY EYES CLOSED AGAINST THE SIGHT OUTSIDE MY WINDOW, knowing that the landing will be far less triumphant than we planned.

Breathe, Naomi. You're doing good.

I open my eyes again. We're headed for water, but we're not slowing down.

Stick to the training. Remember what they taught you. You prepared for this.

I have to stay logical. We're not crashing. There are no aliens. The team of scientists will wait for us near the shore.

Our starship rips through the clouds, a burning star flying into Avalon's sky. Within thirty-seconds, I can see the ocean. It grows larger and larger until I can't take the sight anymore.

I shut my eyes and brace as the Starship Tera Earth slams against the top of the ocean. The impact throws me forward, but my belts keep me from flying through the ship.

We stabilize. The lights flicker on and off, but we're alive.

"Everyone good?" Hugh asks.

"All good," I groan.

We did it. We made it to Avalon. I don't know whether to clap or cry.

Roy grunts and rubs his forehead where a small welt has appeared.

"Some landing, huh?"

I force a laugh but glance out the window. Our starship rests on the surface of the sea.

"At least we made it in once piece," I say.

Roy hits a few buttons on his display tablet. He sighs. "Poorly designed piece of crap. The thrusters are shot to hell."

"No time to fix them," I say. "We'll come back tomorrow."

Fassbender remains quiet as he helps Hugh back into his chair. The lights are off now. Safety precaution, but it doesn't make me feel any better about the situation.

Captain Halloway stumbles into the room with Hugh's opened bottle of gin. He takes a swig and hands it to Roy. "Congratulations, everyone. You are some of the first people to step foot on a habitable planet."

Roy winces from the drink. "That's great, Captain. But can we get to land before we start drinking? Now that we're here, I'm feeling a little claustrophobic."

Halloway pulls the emergency door tab. The top opens, allowing a great light to pour over us.

I turn away from the bright light. It's been months since I've felt the sun against my face. It's miraculous I can even breathe.

It feels just like home.

Hugh smiles with a tear in his eye. "Beautiful, ain't it?"

I eye the box of weapons near Roy's feet.

"It is," I say.

Fassbender grabs the exit ladder and hoists himself up onto a rung. "Get those weapons ready," he says. "We need to stay prepared."

As Fassbender inflates a raft outside, we get all the supplies in order. Food, weapons, first-aid. The important stuff.

The crew steps out of the starship, but I lag behind. For the last year, this stupid starship has been my prison.

I'm free. But I can't let go of my past.

I grab a small picture of my parents before working up the courage to step onto my temporary home planet.

Outside, the water is beautiful. Crystal clear blue, warm, and, as Roy is demonstrating, very easy to swim in.

Roy does a backstroke away from the inflated boat, cackling with childlike glee. "C'mon, Captain. Take a dive. Water's perfect."

Captain Halloway reels him in by his leg. "Stop acting like a clown. Who knows what kind of creatures live here?"

"You see anything around?" I ask.

The region is tropical, but there are no fish. There is no coral reef. No plankton. The team before us said they found life. So where is it?

Roy groans. "Hey, Captain. Got a question for you. Have you ever said 'fuck it' once in your life?"

"Get in the boat, and I'll tell you," Halloway says.

Fassbender starts the small engine. A pistol rests on his hip. "Both of you, shut up and keep your eyes open for anything unusual."

The entire planet is unusual. Avalon is silent, except for the rustle of leaves. It's as if the only force on this planet is the wind.

Roy rolls onto the boat, soaking from his dip. "There's nothing out there, Fassbender."

"You saw the pictures," Hugh reiterates.

"It was a grainy photograph. Look around you. Listen to the world. There's no one here that will harm us. Hell, there's not even a bird in the sky," Roy says.

"And the other astronauts? Where are they?" Hugh asks.

Roy's lip twitches. "Taking a swim?"

Fassbender hands him a pistol. "This one is waterproof."

Roy doesn't bother to check it out. He simply slides it into the back of his pants and smiles at the sight of the beach ahead.

It's hard to believe we made it when we've been on the verge of collapsing for months. But we did it. We did the thing no one else was brave enough to do.

When we reach the shore, I'm struck by the beauty of this planet. Whatever dark thoughts I had yesterday are now forgotten.

This is a place out of one of my dreams. Untouched and innocent, it's a sanctuary where humans can start over. If we can aid in the construction process, if we can get this thing to really work, I could imagine myself staying forever.

I dig my boots into the sand and find a path into the surrounding jungle.

Roy points. "Look, a used trail. See it, Hugh? Tire marks. Looks like we're not alone, after all."

Hugh mutters under his breath. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Fassbender doesn't hesitate to push through the foliage. I follow close behind.

Holding a map against the sunlight, Fassbender compares the trails. I keep a look out for any sign of life, but nothing really out of the ordinary stands out.

It's odd, actually. There should be something. We can breathe the air, bathe in the sea, and nothing seems to hurt us. This planet has the perfect conditions for human life. Yet, no other animals exist here.

It doesn't make any sense.

We reach a small clearing. The trees are tall giants with a wide canopy of leaves. The jungle is darker ahead, and the trail has thinned out, but Roy is certain we're headed in the right direction.

"Slow down," Fassbender warns.

Roy is stubborn. I knew he'd be a challenge the moment I met him.

"It's like I told you all before, there's nothing we have to worry about," he says, almost willfully uncritical, as if to keep from diluting his courage. "We are life. The only life that exists."

"You don't believe in other forms of life?" I ask.

Strangely, one hand rests against the gun behind his back. "Naomi, if there were aliens, we'd have known about it by now," he says, glancing at the tall canopy that darkens the jungle. "As sad as the truth may be to an explorer such as yourself, we're the only beings that exist."

CRACK!

We hear a noise. It's the sharp noise of twigs cracking underneath a set of feet, followed by the rustling of some leaves.

The sound stops.

Fassbender cups his palm around my mouth. "Don't say a word," he whispers.

My heart pounds against my sternum, each beat reverberating my vision. Blood running cold through my veins, I stand as still as I can.

Hugh rests his finger against his lips. "Shh."

We all see it. There's no denying it. Even Roy looks shaken to the core.

An inhuman corpse, taller than any man I've seen has been staked to a tree. Half of its chest has been cut open, innards displayed on the soil.

This must be him, the alien from the photograph.

My eyes search for a clue, but nothing else remains. No footprints or other signs of life are visible.

Were humans responsible for this? Did the scientists kill it?

We pull our weapons. Captain Halloway weasels his way past Roy. "Stay close," he says.

I nod, but I want to walk in the opposite direction. I want to run back to the shore, to dive into that clear water and fly back to Earth.

Unfortunately, our fuel is limited, and I don't give up so easily.

We step around the alien corpse. A set of twisted horns have formed at the front of his skull like a sprouting potato.

Its eyes have started to rot.

I find the bravery to check out the carcass further. Reaching into my bag, I prepare a sample for my kit. "It's mammalian," I whisper. "But it's like nothing I've ever seen before. This has to be an alien, right?"

Roy shakes his head, confused. "Where the hell did it come from?"

Its canines are three inches, two in diameter. It's an amalgamation of every predator known to man.

"That thing could fuck up your day real nice," Hugh says.

Most of its body has rotted away, and I can't make sense of what it might look like on a normal day. "Look at the creature. Its biceps are massive, rectus femoris muscles designed to hunt and mate. A spinal column that curves upright. It's anthropomorphic," I say.

"It's disgusting," Halloway says.

"Wish the stomach was still in tact," Fassbender says. "We could see what it eats."

"We'll study it later," I say.

But one glance tells me enough. It doesn't have a stomach. It must get its nutrients from a different source. All too peculiar.

Fassbender chuckles, but not out of joy or any kind of happiness. He's scared. "Whatever it is didn't kill itself. Its hunter is still out there," he says.

He looks entirely too sure of himself.

"How do you know one of our guys didn't kill it?" Roy asks.

He's right to ask, but it's more likely there are other aliens. If I freak out, it'll cause a chain reaction. Even Roy looks on the verge of fleeing. "I'm simply being cautious," Fassbender says.

I need to stay calm.

I keep walking. "The plan for day one was to find the other scientists. Let's head to the sleeping quarters. After some rest, we'll make the trek to Discovery Base," I say.

"Keep your voice down," Fassbender says. "You want to get us killed?"

"She's right," Roy says. "I could use some rest after what I just saw."

"What, and get eaten?" Halloway asks.

"Nobody's getting eaten. Come on," I say, moving through the dense jungle.

The sun is setting overhead. In less than an hour, it'll be nightfall. I'm not too keen on this sleeping business, but we've got enough weapons to protect ourselves.

I do not want to find out what night is like on Avalon.

I push through a large bush and notice three flags in the near distance. One for NASA. One for America. The third is a symbol I've never seen before.

"Over here," I say, pointing.

"What is that?" Hugh asks.

It's a picture of Earth. Below it are other planets. One looks like Avalon.

"Beats me," Roy replies.

The sleeping quarters were poorly designed, to say the least. The small concrete homes are run down and deserted.

Inside every room is a single bed and a set of drawers for clothing. In the center of the compound is the kitchen. On the back end are the very primitive toilets.

"Gross," I mutter.

Roy chuckles. "Just as I thought. Not much better than the starship."

"Worse," Hugh says. "But we'll have to make do for now."

"Check the drawers inside the rooms," Halloway commands. "Who knows? Maybe we'll find something useful."

I walk into my room and nearly shit my pants. Carved on the wall is the word:

BETRAYAL

The crew runs to my room.

Roy jogs past me, shaking his head with confusion and fear. "What it mean?"

Hugh rolls back. "Guys, what more proof do we need? Something went down here."

"Yeah, but what?" Roy asks.

I run my hand across the carving in the cement wall. "Do you think they turned on each other?"

A horrendous scream echoes in the far distance. A chill travels down my spinal cord, and I suddenly don't want to know the answer to any of this.

I don't care what happened here. I just want to go home.

The captain rolls his shoulders forward. "My gut tells me we'll find out."

Fassbender turns. "Sunset's in less than thirty minutes. I don't know about you, but I don't want to get caught in the dark. I know it's not ideal, but the beds are fine. We can sleep here."

"Well, I'm not dying on this planet, bud," Roy says.

Halloway swallows. "We'll take shifts. It's the only logical thing to do," he says.

"Agreed," Hugh replies.

"Sure. Whatever gets us to day number two," I say.

Fassbender nods and pulls a pistol from his hip. I notice that he's not shaking like the rest of us. "Good. I'll take first shift."

I choose a room far away from that one. Mine still has clothing in the drawers. Someone's wallet, too.

Sitting on the narrow cot, I go through each pocket. He was a man named Steven N. Grubber, a doctor in psychology. A photograph of his wife and two children rests in the last pocket.

I glance over at the window near the door to my new room. Outside, the stars are visible. I used to hate those stars, but the vastness of the universe is comforting.

Standing below them is Fassbender. He cocks his head back, notices me, and waves. I wave back before lying down.

The scream that we heard sounded like it came from a terrible beast in pain. Although it terrifies me, I find my curiosity take over.

What betrayal led to the death or disappearance of the first crew?

Predatory aliens? There are more of them. How many, I am not sure.

I close my eyes, holding the picture of my parents.

I wish I could have saved them.

I wish I was with them again.

THREE

Naomi

"GET UP. WE FOUND ANOTHER BODY."

Those are the words I hear as I wake, and the first thing I see is Roy's ugly face peering over me. "Come on," he says. "It's urgent."

With my clothes still on from the night before, I lower from the cot and stumble past Roy. I have to blink my eyes to find my focus.

Once I'm outside, I'm fully awake. Another corpse has been nailed to a tree. It rests in the center of the compound.

My adrenaline spikes. My head spins. There's a darkness to this fantastic planet, and it's following our every move.

Roy turns and holds his nose. "Lord have mercy," Roy mutters.

I catch my breath. "It's been dead for a while. It's just the last one we found," I say. "Fassbender, you were on night watch. What happened here?"

Fassbender eyes the alien body. He doesn't seem to know what to say.

"Hey, pal. Lady's talking to you," Roy says, shoving his shoulder.

Fassbender snaps out of it. "The alien is playing a game with us," he says.

Hugh sighs. "What game is that? The one where you fall asleep on night duty and get us all killed?"

Fassbender whips around, stuttering, "He must have snuck right past me."

"Worthless son of a bitch," Roy mutters under his breath.

"What was that?" Fassbender replies, heated.

"You had one task to watch over the grounds. The beast could have murdered us," Roy says.

Roy's right, but it doesn't change us not getting killed. Something else is at play here, but I can't quite wrap my mind around it.

"He didn't kill us. He wanted us to see this. He planned for this," I say.

And that means, he must be watching us right now.

I spin, eyeing the dark green surroundings. The crew does the same. There's nothing. Fucking nothing.

He could be hiding anywhere.

Fassbender declares a state of emergency. "Get your weapons out. Discovery base isn't far. We have to keep moving."

We walk until we find another trail. More walking leads us into denser jungle. Another trek toward disaster, coming right up.

Captain Halloway sighs. "Why?" he asks, out of nowhere.

"Why, what?" Roy replies.

"Those weren't human bodies. Why would they kill their own?" he asks.

"Because they're sick fucks," Fassbender says. "What other reason could there be?"

In the monthly audio recordings from Discovery Base, they never mentioned anything about a group of humanoid aliens. It sounded like their stint on Avalon had been relatively peaceful.

None of this is adding up, but I can't make a judgment call until I get to Discovery Base.

Fassbender is the first one to point out the massive structure. The jungle has grown around it, but the second story is visible. "See it? Right past that ridge."

The laboratory is trashed. I can already see the broken windows. We're not going to find the team of scientists there. I can feel it in my heart.

Halloway's right there with me. "Anyone else feel like turning around?"

A strange mixture of curiosity and lingering cortisol spike keeps me walking toward the abandoned building.

Once at the sight, I can see that it's even worse than I thought.

The front door rests near the entrance. All of the windows are broken. The structure barely stands.

With caution, we step inside the building.

Halloway steps over a large pile of glass. "Maybe the network here hasn't been disrupted. We received those audio pings some weeks ago, correct?"

"Fat chance," Roy says.

Someone has damaged everything, including the computers inside.

As make our way through another room, I see that the network has been disabled. Some of the wall has broken near the stairway, a perfect imprint of someone's back. It's lucky this place is still standing.

I examine the damage. This is not normal decay. "There was a fight here," I say.

Fassbender nods. "I pray they didn't get to the sample room," he says.

The stairwell is dark and bleak. Although the building feels and looks empty, we can't be sure we're alone.

With my hands around my pistol, I slowly put one foot in front of the other. We arrive at the second floor. It has been ransacked.

No samples remain. The equipment has been destroyed.

I turn to Hugh, feeling my emotions get the best of me. "You were right," I say.

His smile wilts. "I wish I wasn't."

"What do you propose we do?" I ask.

Fassbender lowers and opens the gear box. There are more weapons inside. "I think it's obvious what we have to do."

He counts the clips of bullets and continues. "We get out there and kill the thing that murdered our team," he says.

But Roy disagrees. "I want more time to search the place. Maybe we can find some clues as to what happened."

Fassbender is against staying, though we have all the time in the world. He says, "I don't give a fuck what happened here. I care about Earth. And I'll kill the bastard that did this."

"We need to find fuel," Halloway says. "But before we can use it, the ship is in need of repair. If we're going to get off this planet, we need to stay one step ahead of whatever's out there."

This is worse than I thought. Everyone has their own ideas for what should happen. I agree with Roy. There are documents strewn across the floor. There could be something of worth here.

Roy scrunches his face and shakes his head. "With all do respect, Captain, you're not sending me back there alone," he says.

I have to speak up. "Listen to Halloway, Roy. Getting the fuel back to our starship won't be easy. We'll need the thrusters ready for takeoff."

Roy calms. "Fine. I'll go. But if I die, my blood's on your hands," he says.

The captain swallows, fearful. "The other team has the extra fuel in their starship's cargo hold. We just need to find where they landed," he says.

"I didn't see it on the shore," I say.

He nods. "I noticed that, too. It was the designated drop-off point for both parties."

"Must have been moved," Fassbender says.

I sigh. "It could be anywhere."

Fassbender lowers a rifle over his shoulders, adjusting the strap. "The beasts couldn't have moved it far. The jungle is too dense. You can't taxi a starship through massive trees. No, it must be near."

Roy edges away from the group. He walks with his head tall, but I can tell he's scared shitless. "I'll see you on the flip side," he says, glistening with sweat.

"Be careful," Halloway mutters. "Keep your guard up."

"Ay-ay, Captain," he says, saluting.

When Roy leaves, Fassbender breathes a sigh of relief. They haven't been getting along for a while now, but they've reached their breaking point.

I reach out to him, trying my best to appear constructive. "Give each other a break. We need to stick together on this," I say.

He turns to me, eyes intense. "Maybe you should stay out of this," he mutters.

His anger surprises me.

Though I don't need it, Hugh comes to my aid. "Fassbender, what's going on with you? Ever since we landed, you've acted like this is your mission," Hugh says. "Halloway calls the shots. It's kind of in the job title."

Fassbender shares a glance with Halloway. He frowns and ignores Hugh. "We'll head back to the sleeping quarters," he commands.

I'm irritated. "So we can get killed again?" I ask.

Fassbender groans and walks toward the door. "Don't trust me? Fine. You'll take first shift. Sound good?"

He doesn't wait for my response.

Night watch isn't what I thought I'd be doing tonight, but I need to find out what's going on.

I'm not staying in the compound. I'm going back to Discovery Base.

I know how insane that sounds. Morally, it's wrong to leave the crew alone.

I believe there is evidence in that laboratory. There has to be something that can shed some light on what happened.

Roy may be an asshole sometimes, but he's right. We need to figure this one out.

So I leave. I walk miles to Discovery Base.

The darkness is not my friend. I can't see a thing. Every few seconds, I trip over something new. As I'm nearing the facility, I half expect myself to turn back to the starship.

The only weapon I have is a pistol, and I'm not a trained shot. This will be interesting.

Stepping inside the building, I immediately crunch my boots against some broken glass. The scraping, cracking noise echoes throughout the laboratory.

I pause, pulse racing. Luckily, no alien appears.

As I move further into the compound, I step into a hallway we passed by earlier. Inside, there are many doors. I open one to see a gruesome sight, something I should have been expecting to see but wasn't.

On the wall, words are smeared in blood:

SUBMISSION

Papers are scattered on the floor, caked in a sticky, unknown substance.

“What is it?” I wonder aloud.

I pick up a sheet, holding the dry edges up to my flashlight. I read:

His sex drive is insurmountable. Yesterday, we had to separate Turin from the other scientists. The others are demanding mates. His counterpart, Zakar is no better. We fear they might plan an escape. Have we gone too far? We were just obeying orders. I think of our home every day. I wish I never left.

*Dr. Grubber
April 17, 2090*

I take a step back and drop the paper. I want to head back.

We were lied to. The whole goddamn program was a lie. We weren't starting a new world. They must have known about the aliens.

Before I can run out the building, a dark, massive figure appears at the other end of the hallway. His skin has a slight blue glimmer to it, just like the corpses we found earlier.

The alien sniffs, grunting and choking on air. His eyes grow red and threatening. Quickly, his biceps swell and solidify.

I choke on fear, paralyzed and disgusted by what I see. He's a monster, a predator with no care for human life.

“There were experiments,” he growls.

I should scream, but nothing is coming through my vocal cords. I back against the wall. Without appearing as a threat, I kneel and act docile, bowing my head.

"I won't tell them you came here," I say. "Just tell me where the other team is."

His laugh is dark and menacing.

"Please," I beg. "We didn't come to hurt you."

He twists his neck and roars toward the ceiling. Hatred emanates from him, and I'm all out of ideas.

I'm going to be the first to die. I should have known.

Faster than a speeding bullet, he lunges from the darkness. In that moment, everything appears to slow down.

His abdomen ripples and swells. His thighs protrude. But what's most horrifying is that he's naked, and his cock is bigger than the galaxy.

I close my eyes and brace for the impact that never comes. The only thing I feel is the harsh wind, followed by his breath against my ear. "Leave this planet as fast as you can."

Finally, I scream. But it's too late. The alien beast is gone.

I hear footsteps running in my direction, but they're much lighter. Fassbender comes into the building, rifle aimed with precision.

He lowers the barrel when he sees me.

"Naomi," he cries. "What happened? Where is he?"

But as much as I try to understand what just happened, I can't. He could have raped and killed me, but he chose to let me live.

I look at Fassbender, tears building in my eyes. "I don't know what to believe anymore," I say. "One thing I do know is a massive wrong happened here. I'm going to get to the bottom of it."

FOUR

Turin

I AM NOTHING LIKE THE HUMANS. I AM AN ALIEN, A CREATURE UNIQUE to myself and one other. I have been betrayed, but they did not win their cruel war.

Let's leave it at that.

I can feel Zakar's presence behind me. The elusive brute lights a match, illuminating the starship's dingy interior.

Moss has grown along the walls. The metal has rusted. But for now, it's a better home than their sleeping quarters.

Besides, the smell of human males makes me sick to my stomach.

Zakar kneels beside me. I cock my head and warn him. "Don't mess with the new recruits. Let them find their own demise," I say.

"I've led them on a little chase," he says, laughing to himself.

I don't share in his joy. Life isn't a game to me. It's torment.

Humans get to love. They get to connect with one another.

Humanity handed our kind a life of torment, so I understand Zakar's resentment. But killing them won't get him what he craves. It won't find him a mate, and it sure as hell won't save our damned souls.

"I'm not interested in your games, Zakar," I say. "I just want to know one thing. Did you find their starship, and is it in working order?"

"This is more fun," Zakar mutters.

"We don't have to kill them to leave this planet. We have the necessary fuel," I argue.

It's not that I care for the humans. I don't.

Zakar growls and clenches his fists. "Remember what we said? Every human being must bow their heads, and the women must take our seed. That was what we were designed to do."

"You're fueled with a great anger. They have weapons this time. Is it really worth dying over?" I ask.

Zakar stands and grabs a bar above his head. He hoists himself to a second layer, folding inside of a vent.

His words echo above. "Ten atrocities. Ten lives they tortured and killed. Humans are evil. They smile and tell you what you want to hear, but they only look out for themselves."

We were the survivors. We were the bastards who revolted.

I start walking through the corridors of the ship. Above, I hear his footsteps follow. "Even so, why risk captivity again?" I ask. "I do not understand."

"There is a female," he mutters.

I stop.

My body flushes with a strange warmth, and my skin glows. I can feel my cock harden, and a great desire washes over me.

I am a weapon, the perfect symbiosis of fuck and fight. They designed me to procreate and proliferate.

They designed me to destroy.

I saw her last night. The female bowed her head. She wasn't violent. She was docile.

She was nothing like the others.

I tried to warn her.

"She is fertile," he says.

I feign ignorance. "A female?"

I can still smell her, an opulent, sweet musk. I should have rutted her when I had the chance, but I heard the others coming from a mile away.

One look was enough to know I needed her.

Zakar continues. "She has the softest flesh I've ever seen."

I swallow, trembling with obsessive craving. Possession of her pussy is impossible with Zakar stalking me, and the other humans pose an even more detrimental threat.

"What's your point?" I ask.

He drops back to the lower level. "We were designed to breed with any life form of our choosing," he says. "We'll kill the men and take the woman. As we make the journey to Earth, we will breed her. It is better this way."

"Perhaps."

He continues. "Once on their planet, we will find others like her. We will mate with the entire female population. We will decimate the entire human race."

I nod. His plan is sound, but it requires sharing the female.

I'm just not sure I can handle that.

Zakar rests his hand against my shoulder. "We need each other. We're the only beings in the universe with perfect genetics. We are the one true alien race, destined to rule over the cosmos. Will you not join me?"

I swallow. "What is she like?" I ask, avoiding the question.

"She is the most succulent creature I have ever laid eyes on," he says.

He will betray me if I follow him. I need to spill my seed before he does.

He points to the exit of the starship. "Go on. See for yourself at the sleeping quarters. Once you see what I've seen, you won't be able to control yourself."

That's what I'm afraid of. If Zakar feels this way, he'll try to kill me too. Once he gets what he wants, he won't need me anymore.

He continues. "It's in our DNA. We are by their design, so why not give in to what we are made to do?"

I walk toward the exit, listening as his snickering follows my footsteps.

"The fun begins," he hisses.

Through the jungle, I find their sleeping quarters. An older man without all his faculties guards the compound. It's easy to slip by him, and all I have to do is follow my pulsating cock to her.

Her pungent smell is everywhere.

I'm led to her bedside, where she sleeps like a baby. Unlike mine, her dreams must be peaceful.

As she rests, I touch her hair. I ride my lust, edging until I can't take it anymore. Hand gripping my thick flesh, I stroke the skin tight.

I give in to my primal urges.

A warm and vibratory pressure builds between my legs. I cup my hand around my mouth as I grunt and stumble back.

A deep pleasure rises inside my balls. My cock bobs against my thumb as I spill my seed on the floor.

I can't turn away. She's perfect.

She's an angel, the one I need to breed.

FIVE

Naomi

I SIT BACK AGAINST MY COT, EYEING THE CHALKY-DRY STAINS ON THE floor.

I can smell him. The monster was here, watching over me while I was sleeping.

He was doing unspeakable things.

Everyone surrounds me, demanding answers I can't give to them. I shouldn't have gone back to Discovery Base. Suddenly, I've become a suspect.

"What the hell was it, Naomi? Will you speak?" Halloway asks.

I try to catch my breath, but all I can see are its red eyes. The only sound I can hear is his voice, growling next to my ear. I can feel the power of his lunge.

With my trembling hand, I hold the picture of my parents. I don't know why I have it out. I guess when I get scared, I take it out. For protection.

Maybe it's stupid, but I need them now more than ever.

"It was a giant," I whisper. "Its body had a shine to it."

I stop myself, wondering if I'm remembering things correctly.

"He was naked," I say, stuttering. "I think... I think they're designed to..."

Again, I stop myself. What are they designed to do? The document I found said something about them desiring mates.

Do I really want to say that out loud? I glance at the men's hardened faces and hold back this sliver of information.

"They're predatory," Fassbender says. "I heard it. It had the snarl of an abominable beast."

Hugh adjusts his chair, panicking. "We have to get off this planet," he says, shifting to face Holloway. "Captain, you've waited on the sidelines ever since we landed on that shore. When will you take charge?"

Holloway struggles, but he has an answer. "When Roy gets back, we'll find the other starship. In the meantime, maybe we can fix the network and make a call to NASA."

Hugh laughs. "So we still believe NASA has our backs?"

Fassbender stands nearby, threading tranquilizer darts into a small rifle.

Hugh rolls and snags one dart from his hand. "Tranq darts? I thought we want to kill the alien, not keep it alive."

With a sour face, Fassbender yanks it back. "Careful, Robocop. We need every kind of fire power available," he replies. "Besides, if we can study the alien, why not keep it alive?"

"We don't know anything about it. For all we know, those won't put him to sleep," Hugh argues.

Footsteps sound from behind. I turn and see Roy. He's soaking wet, frantically running toward us.

Holloway smiles. "Aha! The man of the hour. Did you fix the thrusters?"

Roy catches his breath. "Thrusters are a go," he says. "And I managed to fix the network on our starship. The computers are back on-

line. Of course, without the planet relay running, it doesn't make much of a difference."

Fassbender pushes past me. "You don't have the command passwords," he interrupts.

Roy faces him, right heel planted for a fight. Something is wrong.

"I've been on Starship Tera-Earth for over a year. You don't think I haven't memorized your password by now?" Roy asks. "I've got a strong memory, pal."

Fassbender grabs him. "Bastard," he grunts.

"I know what you're hiding," Roy shouts. "I know what NASA hired you to do. I saw everything on your precious tablet. I know all about you, Mr. Military."

Fassbender reaches for his gun.

Quicker than I can react, Hugh aims his pistol at Fassbender. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," he says.

Fassbender backs away. He puts his hands in the air.

I walk near him, taking my own pistol out.

"What's this about the military?" Hugh asks.

"So now you all know," he says, grinding his teeth. "Guess you were going to find out, eventually."

"Find out about what?" I ask.

Roy's eyes are buggy. "He's not a scientist. He was sent from the military," he says.

Fassbender's eyes shift toward mine. Without warning, he grabs my wrists. Forcing them down, he kicks upward, knocking my head back.

He takes my gun and forces it to my head.

"Everyone back off. I have strict orders to get the alien back to Earth for further analysis," he says.

Fassbender's arm bars my neck. The brisk barrel sends chills down my spine. Pain strains my shoulders as he subdues me.

I feel weak. I feel powerless.

And, somehow, all I can think about is the alien.

Roy clenches his fist and shouts. "No fucking way."

"You betrayed us," Hugh says, eyes watering. "You knew we were walking into a trap."

Fassbender forces the barrel against my temple harder. "We all have our orders," he says. "Now, lower your weapons. I have an alien to catch."

Their eyes fall on mine.

"Just do what he says. Let him leave," I say, panicked.

Hugh lowers the gun.

Roy drops his.

I clench my hands around the photograph of my parents. "Fassbender, they dropped their weapons. Let me go."

Fassbender laughs and forces my hair back. He throws me to the ground, gun pointed between my eyes. "You shouldn't have done that," he says, grinning.

He's going to kill me.

I try to move, but his finger tugs the trigger. Eyes shutting, I hold the picture near my heart.

I hear the firing pin strike, the blast blowing out my ear drums.

But I don't feel the bullet enter.

I roll my head to see the indent in the ground near my ear. He missed.

But as my vision adjusts, a massive brute walks to edge of the compound. Within a split second, we lock eyes.

Holy shit...

He lunges toward me, roaring with the might of a thousand storms:
“NO!”

He takes me by the legs, lifting me into his arms. With his free hand, he forces Fassbender across the compound.

Fassbender’s back hits a tree, and he slumps forward, groaning.

“Naomi!” Roy shouts and aims.

He fires and misses. He fires again, and the bullet grazes the alien’s shoulder.

The beast lunges away, obsessively holding me.

I can’t escape. I can’t scream for help.

The last thing I see is Fassbender stand. He aims the tranq, but he hits me instead. Then, he turns and fires once at Hugh, another at Roy.

The captain runs as both men fall limp.

“No,” I whisper. “This can’t be happening.”

But it is happening. This is reality.

As I’m dragged into the darkness of Avalon, I lose the photograph of my parents. The wind carries it into the night.

Everything goes black.

SIX

Turin

HUMANS CAN'T HELP THEMSELVES.

Acting as savages, they deceive their own kind.

Fear is their weakness. Once exploited, a group will turn on itself.

That's their evil; They are a virus.

I couldn't let them taint her purity.

Now we must hide from Zakar. I have taken the woman to a second facility. Together, we sit inside the old greenhouse downstairs.

Zakar is invested in killing the men. If we stay much longer, he'll find us.

For now, I have her. She's mine.

Mine.

Her body is supple. Thick and curvy, her hips demand a creamy filling. I lean over her as she sleeps, nose against her neck, breathing in her scent.

Her tits rest against her crossed arms. Hungrily, I exhale and trace my finger over her spine.

I try to imagine the first thing I'd do to her. Bend her over on her knees, spank the evil out of her, or tie her up and eat her pussy until

she's shaken and begging to stay by my side.

It's one or the other.

If Zakar wasn't around, I could keep her as my slave for an eternity. I could fuck her and have the entire planet as my vessel to procreate and expand.

And if Earth came back with more of their ships, I'd hunt them all to keep her safe with me.

My cock grows. It turns so hard it presses against her backside. She does not wake. Every ounce of instinct tells me to rut the woman.

But I don't.

I hold back.

She's a delicacy, and I want to savor her.

When she wakes, she finds me stroking my cock in the room's corner. She startles, eyes widened with fear, hands clawing at the wall.

I must look like a monster to her. Maybe we are both victims of human cruelty. Maybe that's why I want to possess her.

I don't analyze those thoughts too much.

She glances at the exit of the building, but I'm two steps ahead of her. I am built for the chase, and my instincts have kicked into overdrive.

She tries to make a run for it, but I easily subdue her. I coil around her, locking her arms until she stops making a fuss.

She screams, but it doesn't matter. We're in the basement level. Zakar has good ears, but he won't hear us down here.

Taking her wrists, I lower her to the ground. I force my forehead against hers, skin glowing from want.

I growl, eyes focusing on hers.

She freezes.

"You shouldn't have come here," I say. "This place isn't what you think."

Two single tears fall from her eyes. It's as if she is too scared to cry. "What are you?" she whispers.

Her breath quivers. I breathe her air in my lungs.

I can taste her. I can feel her.

"Do you really want to know?" I ask.

She gulps and nods.

I remember the first days of my life like it was yesterday. I woke up in a tank, a bright light shining against the glass. Men in full-body suits analyzed me. When I tried to move, they alerted the facility.

They took me out and strapped me to a surgical table.

There were others, but they were all different from me. On my left, a monster with a massive body and horns lay with his tongue extended. He was dead.

To my right was Zakar, clinging to life.

Like the woman I have taken, I bucked. I roared and twisted my body. The surgical bed fell to the floor.

I couldn't escape.

They injected me with drugs. They tested on my body. They kept us in a monitoring room for years without telling us what their master plan was.

But we found out.

"The humans you are looking for designed us," I tell her.

"You aren't an... alien?" she asks.

"That word means nothing to someone like me," I reply. "Earth found the formula to mix Human and outside, or alien, DNA. They created many beings, but most were failures. They died. I survived."

I walk away from her, startled by my anger. To them, I am alien. But to me, they are the outsiders.

They brought me to life.

Her eyes shine with innocence. "Why did they do it?" she asks.

I cock my head. "They wanted to create a weapon," I say.

"The bodies we found," she says, sucking back more tears. "Were those corpses the other aliens?"

I nod. "They were murdered by your kind," I say, breathing intensely. "The human race must pay for their crimes. They must all die."

I'll start with her ass, splitting her in two. I'll break that pussy in and make her beg for more.

She falls to her knees. "I can't imagine what you're going through, but I didn't come to hurt you. I wasn't briefed on any of this. I'm a victim, too," she says.

My muscles flex. "A victim," I repeat, facing her again.

I take hold of her shirt, mouth near hers. "I'll show you what it feels like to be a victim."

She cries. It's pathetic.

I'm never going to let her go.

Never.

"Please, spare me. I just want to go home. I want to abort this mission."

Her pheromones are off the charts. It takes every ounce of strength to hold back from taking her pussy.

I turn and punch through the concrete wall behind me. I feel my bones break, but my body mends its wounds. The pain keeps my desires occupied.

She weeps and watches my body heal. She now sees what she's up against.

In the corner, she sits, tears ruining her beautiful face. I leave her alone as she hurls insults.

"You're a monster," she says.

I stay silent, sitting at the opposite end of the room. The scientists at the facility would call us worse. I've heard it all before.

I don't enjoy doing this to a potential mate, but time heals all wounds. If she doesn't want to obey now, she will later.

She needs to realize she doesn't have too many options.

Minutes pass. Her cries dwindle. Soon, she is silent, spare some wet sniffles now and then.

She raises her chin. Her eyes are as red as mine. She glances around the room. "Just tell me where we are," she says.

"A second facility they built to keep us locked inside. This room is where they used to grow their food."

She drops her head in despair.

I may be horrifying to her now, but she doesn't understand how bad the alternative would be if she ran. Zakar would expel her to a life of rape and impregnation. He'd give in to his true desires.

He would kill her, and his bloodlust would only grow.

I give her the chance that I never got. I speak to her as an equal.

"Once I saw you, I knew I needed you. It was like tasting the stars. I couldn't let Zakar have you to himself. That's why I saved you," I say.

She drops to her butt and curls into a ball. "Zakar? There's another still alive?"

"Yes, but we can't trust him," I say.

"What about you? Can I trust you?"

I take a step closer to her, cock in plain sight. She knows what I want. What I crave.

What I need.

“Don’t worry. I’ll go easy on you,” I say.

She blubbers. “No...”

I walk toward her. My cock hardens as pleasure guides my pace. I wish she could understand. “I was born to seed. And I need to have you,” I growl.

I take her face into my palm, squeeze her porcelain cheeks. Her skin is as soft as Zakar promised. I can feel the odd sensation of my pupils expanding as endorphins rush through my cock.

I know she can feel my hard flesh rise against her. I trust she knows what I want.

“You sick fuck,” she grunts and kicks me in a frenzy.

I barely feel her punches. My lust is much too overwhelming.

A sharp grin forms on my face.

She cowers. “You killed them all, didn’t you? You murdered the scientists. Where are they?” she asks.

I grab her ankles and drag her toward me. “You know nothing.”

“I won’t let you have me,” she says.

It’s the most naïve statement I have ever heard. Yet, it satisfies me in the strangest way.

I let her go.

I try to understand her, even if it’s impossible. The other humans – they fought us hard from the start. But she’s different. She cries...

The others didn’t cry.

I walk toward the exit, bending to pick up an emergency bottle of water I took from the starship while she was dreaming.

I wait for her to accept it.

"How long were you asleep?" I ask.

She takes the bottle. Hesitating, she sucks the liquid out. She seems parched. I could fix her woes if she just trusted me.

I lower to her level, handing her a cloth. She shrugs and wipes her eyes.

"You were out for sixteen hours," I say.

"Not surprising. Fassbender tranq'd me right in the neck," she mutters. "Roy shot your arm, but I guess you've healed, right? That's one of your tricks?"

During our flee, someone nicked my arm with a bullet, but my body regenerated within seconds. Yes, it's a part of my being, my curse.

"I'm not invincible," I say. "If the bullet entered my body, it would have weakened me. A few shots, and he could have killed me."

She exhales, long and depressed. "You took that risk just so you could take me here?"

I think about what she said. For a long while, there's silence.

Irritated, she raises her voice. "Hello? I'm talking to you."

I tell her the truth. "I didn't save you just so I could have you," I admit.

"Then why?"

"I couldn't watch him kill you," I say.

My maker's made one mistake. When they made me, they gave me the ability to learn empathy. If they wanted a weapon, they should have cut that part out.

Zakar was made differently, but I'm a breeder. I live to spill seed. And I need empathy to procreate.

She raises her eyes, glaring into mine. For the first time, she doesn't flinch. "Thank you," she says. "I guess..."

I glance at the exit to the stairs. "That man, Fassbender has hurt your crew," I say. "He will search for us, too."

She swallows. A vein on her neck shows how fast her pulse raises. That man worries her more than I do.

She's beginning to understand. There are bad men out there. They seek only to destroy.

I point toward the staircase. "If you want to leave, be my guest. But they'll be looking for you."

I'm the only shot she has left, and she knows it.

"Fassbender betrayed us," she mutters. "He knew about you from day one."

"It was a suicide mission. After your crew dies, they will send others. They will die, as well," I say. "And when Zakar leaves to Earth, he'll ravage the planet like a parasite."

He wasn't designed to create life. He was designed to destroy it. I guess we're the perfect fucking duo.

She stands. "If he gets to Earth, our armies will kill him. You said it yourself. You're not invincible."

I shake my head. She cannot understand the complexity of the situation. "Zakar cannot die."

"But--"

"He was the last alien they could create, and his synthesis was more powerful than any scientist could have hoped for. But they didn't have the proper weapons to subdue him. Every bullet that hit him, his body encapsulated. Nothing could destroy him," I say.

"Nothing?" she asks.

I pause. "There is one thing that affects him that does not affect me," I say.

She takes my hand, squeezing, but within seconds, she pulls away. "Please. For my sake, tell me."

“Noises,” I say. “He has a keen ear.”

“Noises,” she repeats.

“Not just any noises. Certain frequencies seem to hurt him,” I say, recalling an instance where he was at his most vulnerable.

I tell her. “When we escaped, we went to disrupt the network to Discovery Base and home planet. When we reached the inside, the alarms went off. Zakar went berserk. He cut the cables to the power, but I’ve always wondered what would have happened if he didn’t.”

It was the only time I have seen Zakar scared. Yes, something happens to him when he is near certain frequencies.

But that’s all I know. It’s not a science. It’s just one observance, and I could be wrong.

She sighs. “Well, the network is shot to hell. The cables are frayed. The only guy I trust to fix the power has turned against us.”

“Then we must escape before Zakar does. The fuel is in the first team’s starship. We must be careful.”

We’ll leave tomorrow morning, early.

She glances at the exit to the upstairs, but she’s smart enough to know the stakes.

“If I stay, you’ll protect me? You promise to keep me alive?” she asks.

I move closer to her. Caressing my palm underneath her chin, I look into her eyes. “If you stay, I will do anything for you.”

She brushes my palm away, but she stays near.

I look like a monster because I am a monster. But she will learn to love me.

As much as I want to fuck her pussy into submission, I need to make sure we can survive.

I want to save her, but Zakar’s greed is stronger than his genetics.

He will find us.

And when he does, I'll find a way to end him for good.

SEVEN

Naomi

SPENDING THE NIGHT WITH A POSSESSIVE ALIEN IS NOT WHAT I PLANNED to do when I got to Avalon.

No, I did not think I would have to nuzzle against this beast's chest to find warmth in the middle of the night. I sure as hell didn't envision that same alien to be butt-ass-naked.

I didn't expect him to be so... chiseled.

And warm.

And... okay, he's not that bad. For a killer, he's actually kind of nice.

I can't believe I'm thinking any of these things. It's the obvious wrong choice of words, but they flow on their own accord.

Yeah. This caught me off guard. Between Fassbender's betrayal and this, I'm not sure what to think.

Part of me is terrified. Another part of me thinks this is the smartest route to take.

I mean, honestly. Fassbender has the crew hostage. Holloway ran away, and I really have to wonder if he's coming back.

If that alien didn't save me, I'd be dead.

"I had no one growing up," I mutter.

His eyes are closed, but I can sense that he's a light sleeper.

A groan reverberates from his massive sternum. "Hm?"

"On Earth. I never really had a family," I say. "I'm not what you think I am. I'm not like everyone else. My experience was different, too."

I don't know why I'm telling him this. I don't need him to understand who I am and have become. Besides, he's been through worse. I wasn't created in a laboratory on a remote planet.

I was just a girl who got caught up in some bad luck. That happens to many people.

He takes my hand, and I try so hard to hold back tears. I hate him for our predicament, but it's not his fault.

I'm stronger than this. Over the decades, I've built a fortified wall. I did it to protect myself. I did it to move on with my life.

News flash: no one moves on from the bad things in their life. They just learn how to deal with it.

I can deal with this alien. It's just another thing that caught me off guard.

He rolls and sits up, and I can't help but stare at his rippling abdomen muscles. He truly is a specimen to behold.

"You are different," he says.

"You believe me?" I ask.

"Because of how I'm built, my eyes process information much faster than any human. One look, and I knew you weren't like them," he says.

But there's a punishment for being so good. I can't leave. Well, technically, I can. Except, Fassbender and Zakar would find me in hours.

It doesn't matter how free I am, something always stands in the way.

He rises. His body towers above me, naked. His flesh is solid as a rock.

On Earth, of course, his outfit would be unacceptable. Here, life is savage and untamed. Naked is what he's used to.

I'm not sure my body knows how to react. My eyes can't stop staring. How can I want to run away from something so bad, yet be so curious that I stay?

I know the consequences, but they don't seem to matter.

He chuckles and offers me his massive hand. I take it, and he hoists me off my feet. "I am Turin," he says.

Carrying me up the stairs, he holds me with ease. "I'm, uh, Naomi," I say.

Quietly, he carries me to another room. Once inside, he sets me down.

"This room is where they kept and observed us," he says.

In the center are two beds. The rest of the room is empty and white. Near the cots, a large glass tablet lay shattered on the floor. I bend and trace my fingers over the pieces.

He says, "They showed us violent images. Movies from Earth, cut to teach us how gruesome your species can become. They made us tap into our predatory mind. After years of this torture, anger became our core emotional state."

I stand and face him. "I don't like this place," I say.

"Come, I'll show you more," he says.

Again, he leads me into a room nearby. Inside are tablets that are still barely running. "Spare battery power," he says, tapping against the transparent screen.

He pulls up footage. Violent footage. The scientists who came before us were no scientists at all. They were paramilitary. Trained to antagonize and abuse.

Oh, God. Is Fassbender part of the same group? Did he bring us here, knowing he'd need our expertise this time around?

My first instinct is to look away, but what I'm seeing is real.

Far too real.

The paramilitary thugs beat the aliens. Every last one of them. They ridicule and torture them. Wearing masks, they shock them with electrified rods.

"I can't watch anymore," I say.

"I'm sorry for showing you," he mutters. "I wanted you to know what your people have done."

My heart is flustered. "Can we go, now?"

But before he can react, his head jerks toward the hallway. His lips twitch, showing sharp teeth.

He turns off the display and whispers, "Someone's here."

I don't hear a thing, but his ears twitch as if he can hear miles away. "What do we do?" I ask.

He grabs my arm and pulls me near him, searching. Together, we run through the hallway, past a series of rooms. We're near the main hallway, but I can hear them now.

They're close.

"Shit," he curses.

We run and find a door that leads into a narrow compartment. As the footsteps grow louder, we hide.

Someone is coming.

The door creaks, and the light tap of a heel sends off all alarms in my body. They're in the hallway.

They're walking toward us. Their movements are slow and deliberate, as if they are doing this to torment us.

I'm terrified, and I'm cowering up against Turin's chest again. Without thinking, I lean my forehead against his abdomen and clench my eyes shut.

In the center of the door is a small, rectangular window. Anyone can see inside if they look in our direction.

I'm freaked out. Nauseated and holding back tears, I bite my cheek to stay quiet.

The footsteps stop. Only for a moment.

Silence, spare the dripping noises coming from the damp ceilings.

But as soon as I calm, a sharp clicking noise issues from outside our door. It's Zakar, the alien Turin has been hiding me from.

He grows louder, growling. Finally, he bellows out, "Turin!"

The urge to scream is too strong, but Turin is two steps ahead of me. Wrapping his massive palm around my mouth, he restrains the noise.

Zakar's nose is going wild. He drops to sniff the floor, following our footsteps in the other direction. "I'll find you," he growls.

Another voice interjects. "Turn around," Fassbender says.

Tears run down my eyes. It's hard to put into words, but when you've been lumped together on a ship, charging through space, it's hard to grasp how someone can turn against the group.

This mission united us, but it's apparent now that this mission was compromised from the start.

I suppose he was just a dishonest actor, trained for combat. Roy knew all along. Hugh was lucky enough to catch him.

We should have listened.

I can hear Zakar's footsteps, but I don't want to turn and look. In fact, when I open my eyes again, all I see is Turin's massive body. All I feel are his biceps as he wraps his arms around me.

And despite the fear that wrecks my nerves, I feel good. I want him to ease my pain.

I fall into a feeling I haven't felt since, well, maybe puberty. I'm not sure what it is. It's just a feeling, a connection to something higher than myself.

Am I actually turned on by an alien?

I relax into his protective muscles and keep quiet, bending my head to see as much as I can without getting caught.

Zakar is not the same species as Turin. His skin is spotted, red and grey. His teeth hang from his lips, sharp as nails, and his eyes are more wicked than the devil himself.

When Zakar does not answer him, Fassbender walks until he's near our door.

I press my spine into Turin's chest. I can feel his heart. It's steady. How the fuck is he so calm?

I can hear Fassbender's hurried breathing. His face is as white as a ghost. He's worried. More worried than I've ever see him.

Zakar hisses. "You will be a fun kill," he says.

Using the tranq gun, Fassbender opens fire. Three darts fly into Zakar's neck and chest, but the alien laughs and tosses them to the ground.

"Your weapons are useless, human," he growls and leans low.

He looks like he could strike at any moment.

Fassbender stumbles back, even falls to the ground, but Zakar allows him to stand and take out a pistol.

He fires once and pauses, trembling. He fires again. When the third bullet enters where Zakar's heart should be, Fassbender drops his arm to his side.

He swallows, sweat building.

And then he turns. He sees us.

His pupils dilate, pinholes to fear. Before he can scream, Zakar pins him to the ground. Roaring into the air, he nearly blows my eardrums.

"You are sick," Zakar screeches. "Your mind is diseased."

Fassbender stutters. "We are your makers. Stand down."

Zakar traces his fingernails across his skull. "It would be so easy to crack your head open."

He lifts Fassbender by his cranium.

"Easier than cracking an egg," he says, slurping his tongue.

He throws Fassbender across the room, through an unbroken glass window. Fassbender coughs and tries to move, but Zakar lunges on him, clicking.

His fangs extend, a row of teeth, unhinging his jaw until his mouth opens as big as his entire head.

It's the most horrifying thing I've ever seen.

"No!" Fassbender screams. "No, I can't die—"

Zakar laughs and steps off of him. "Run while you can."

Given the chance to live, Fassbender stumbles and runs into the jungle for cover.

At this point, Turin grabs my attention. Pointing toward a vent, he nudges me up. I grab the frigid metal, and he hoists my ass upward.

I expect him to give me a set of instructions, but he simply closes the vent. I tap against the exit, but he ignores me.

Zakar cackles. "I can smell you, Turin. I know you're hiding. I let the bastard go because I wanted to share his death with you. Come outside."

I don't want Turin to leave this closet, but he does what he thinks is best.

He steps out of the narrow area and growls. "I smell her," he says.

Zakar sniffs and turns, laughing again. "Where is the cunt? I thought you'd have found her by now."

"I did, but I only caught a glimpse of her fair skin and plump ass," he says.

I swallow and close my legs. A combination of shame, embarrassment, and excitement creeps through my core.

He saved me twice.

I want him. I want that alien to fuck my brains out, but I'd never admit it. Not even to myself.

He continues. "The traitor started shooting at me. He hit me in the arm and stomach, but I got to safety. I've been here, healing," he lies.

Zakar grimaces. "You are not as strong as I am. You must learn to be careful."

"You're right," Turin says. "I learned my lesson today."

Zakar slithers around him. "But you saw our prize, yes? Are you overjoyed?"

The truth comes out. "As soon as I saw her, I knew I needed to breed her. I wanted her as my forever."

Breed? His forever?

I back into the vent a few inches and feel every muscle tighten around my bones. Is that all he wants from me? To impregnate me?

Whoever gets the girl first wins – Is that the game?

Zakar's face contorts, and his nostrils widen. He inhales and huffs. "I can smell her on you. Are you sure you did not take her?"

"I was so close, I could taste her," Turin says.

Zakar clenches his fist with excitement.

"I trust you will find her and bring her to me. We'll meet after I hunt this pitiful creature," he says. "Are you sure you don't want to join me?"

"I can't risk her dying," Turin says.

"Good," Zakar grunts. "I must go. I have injured the male prey. It won't be long before I tear out his spine."

Turin's laughter drops off as soon as Zakar leaves.

I wait until Zakar is long gone before dropping from the vent.

I don't know what to feel. On the one hand, I appreciate Turin's protection. It doesn't change the words that just came out of his mouth.

I am not here to be bred like a dog. That will not happen.

When Turin sees me, his skin glows luminescent. At first, it startles me. Then, I remember the first time I saw him. It brightened then, too.

"What do you want with me?" I ask.

He traces his fingers through my hair. "You know what I want."

He turns and starts walking. I'm a little stunned by the response.

Attempting to change the subject, he ushers me back downstairs. "Are you hungry?" he asks.

"Hungry? Are you kidding?" I ask.

He walks over to a crate and pulls out a few Twinkies. My stomach betrays me.

Turin wags the bags in front of my face. "You sure you're not hungry?"

I grab both of them and tear open the bags. Within seconds, my mouth is stuffed.

He chuckles. "It's fun to watch you eat those," he says.

I stop chewing. "Shit. I should have saved some for you," I say, mouth full of the treat.

He sits. "Don't worry. I do not eat. I absorb," he says.

I remember the bodies we found. They didn't have stomachs like we did.

"Absorb? You mean like..." I try to find the words, but I quickly realize that I have no reference point to start on. He's anthropomorphic, has huge muscles, and a similar system to ours. How can someone like him not eat?

He cracks his neck. "I am a highly adaptable organism built to be advantageous over most foes. If I hunger, I can absorb another life-form's cells."

"So... when you touch something, you take a part of them," I say.

"I become a part of them," he corrects me. "It does not hurt the other. It simply gives me a benefit."

His body is as strong as a tank, but he is built for more than killing. He is built for understanding. It might be the only thing we can rely on.

As I stare at him, he glows. I know what that glow means.

He wants me. It's no secret. But it's more than strange lust. It's a real tenderness.

Odd, coming from a predator.

"What about me?" I ask. "Are you going to absorb me, too?"

He now looks over my body. His finger curls around my collar bone.

"Only if you want me to," he says.

I know it's bat-shit-crazy.

I understand how illogical and stupid, and terribly wrong it is. I know all of this.

But I do want him...

I want him to absorb, real bad.

EIGHT

Naomi

THERE'S ONLY ONE THING ON MY MIND. I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT IT for hours. "Why did you tell Zakar you would... breed me?"

My lower lip twitches. It's not a question I ever expected asking anyone, let alone a six foot tall alien.

"I was telling him what he wanted to hear," he says with a dull smile. "Maybe it's what you wanted to hear, as well?"

I turn my head and stare at the metal floor of the facility. If I avoid eye contact, all of the awkwardness will go away. Right?

Wrong.

He's here, and he's not going away. His cock is a throbbing masterpiece, but I'm just a normal woman, and dear God, I can't think!

He chuckles and caresses the back of my head. For a second, I wonder if he'll kiss me. He teases me instead, whispering delicate words against my ear. "Admit it. I make you wet."

My legs seize up and close. I suck in my lips and breathe through my nose. He nailed it. I'm wet, but I can't let him know.

His cock would tear me to pieces.

"You want to know what I think?" I ask him.

He lowers his eyelids and grins. "I do."

I push past him, nearly knocking him over. "I think we need to find that fuel," I say.

A slow growl rolls from his throat. "Fine. Follow me."

We leave the facility.

The surroundings of the jungle are eerily quiet. I understand that nothing lives here, but the silence still gets to me.

This is a "tropical zone," whatever that means out here. I should be complaining about all the alien mosquitos biting my neck. In an ideal situation, I'd be fighting off jungle hogs and catching fish for food.

But something is off with this planet. When I first saw it, I thought it had a life of its own. Now, it's almost like it doesn't really exist.

I need to get out of this headspace.

I wonder how it must be for Turin. I guess he has Zakar to worry about. I can't even imagine what that must be like...

On the way to the other starship, we cross through a threshold of green and yellow leaves. The air cools. In front of us rests a small hot spring. The water is light blue and milky, and inviting.

It's like it was waiting for us to enjoy.

Heat emanates from the surface. I run to dip my hands into the water.

"We should go for a swim," I say.

Turin looks around before wagging his head. "Maybe for a few minutes," he says.

I take off my boots. Then my socks.

I turn, biting the center of my top lip. "Um..."

"You have seen me," he says. "All of me. Why are humans so scared to show their skin?"

My eyes drop. He thumbs the underside of his shaft until it solidifies. To him, getting his cock hard in public isn't a violation of any-

one's safety or privacy. It's just what you do on planet Avalon.

I'm a target. His target. And I want to give in to his need.

So I give him everything I've got.

I keep my butt toward him as I roll my shirt over my head. Closing my eyes, the chill air wraps around my shoulders and ribcage.

I click my bra off.

Behind me, I can hear him walking toward me. I can smell his manly scent, an oaky, sharp herbaceous musk of power and protection.

He wraps his arms around my chest, cupping his palms around my breasts. Tweaking my nipples, he smells up my neck. A warm sensation fills my heart, spreading down to my pussy.

A sensation that opens me up and makes me vulnerable.

My neck hurts from being so uptight, but he seeks to ease my pain.

He kisses the curve of my neck. Tongue tasting flesh, my nose inhales his heavy pheromones.

Just as he was designed to take me, I was designed to take him. I just didn't know it, yet. If I'm being completely honest, I still don't know it, but I'm not telling him to stop.

I shiver as his hand slithers past my navel, molding into the folds of my crotch. He unhooks my pants and forces the heavy fabric down.

One push. Another push. By the third, my ass and panties are hanging out. He pushes me to my knees. I splash into the water, and he pulls them off my ankles like a brute.

"I thought you said we only have a few minutes," I say, heart racing.

I'm on all fours, hands, arms, and legs pressed into the shallow lake's soil. The warmth surrounds me, but I can't stop looking at his size.

I've been with some "big" guys, but his cock defies logic. No pussy could fit that thing.

This is dangerous, and not just because I know how much this is going to sting. One loud noise could tip off our hunters.

What are we doing? We are giving into the inevitable lust of the jungle.

"You will do what I say," he commands.

I like that he makes me feel small. I like how he holds me, groping me like he needs my fuck to survive.

Kissing down my spine, he stops near my ass cheeks, spreading wide.

Clenching my eyes shut, I hyperventilate. His hands form around my ass. Fuck, his hot mouth is folding over the center of my panties. His tongue scrapes the fabric.

The warm wetness of his hunger drives me into a dizzying frenzy. Regaining some confidence, I ease back onto his face. As I drive my hips up, he tears my panties to the side.

I grind down and really feel him. And as soon as I do, I know I won't regret this.

I flew across the universe for this treatment.

Tongue snaking through my lips, he lingers inside me as his mouth closes around my clit.

I let out an exalted moan and clench.

He gives me one finger, easing it in and out. It feels like three.

I breathe. I can do this.

I can take his cock.

My body gives way to his pleasure, and I come to terms with the fact that he knows my pussy better than I do.

As I grind against him, his mouth closes and suctions to me like a tentacle. His hot breath wafts against my lips.

He eats me like ice cream.

He rolls my hood back and swivels the edge of his tongue. Licking, sucking, and kissing my taught bead of pleasure.

The final cherry on top of sensual cream.

He's got me locked to him. I swell. I ache. I grab onto the root of a tree, but my body gives up on me. I'm about to fucking come.

"What. Are. You?" I stammer and choke.

Hot, wet pleasure. His mouth feeds my pussy an orgasm I'll never come down from. He curls two fingers inside me and pulls like an anchor.

"I'm your master, human," he moans.

Blast off.

His words make me come faster than a comet flying through the night sky.

Rolling his fingers against my spot, he massages. Tenderly, at first. Then, deeper. The pads of his fingers feel dense. A dull ache of satisfaction vibrates within.

I can't believe it.

I try to hold it all inside. The emotions hit so hard, and they cause me to spasm in a not-so-sexy way.

He doesn't give a fuck about any of the awkwardness.

My eyes are locked to his, and he's looking at me like I'm the entire galaxy. I don't get it. I'm no one special. But to him, I am.

I'm so special he wants to own me.

He slides in a third finger, through my hole. I lurch back and forth, trembling from twisted delight.

He takes his hand from me and kisses the back of my head. "Mm. Good."

"You—You--"

I don't know what to say. I'm stunned, but my entire body is filled with excitement. Needless to say, it has caught me off guard, but I've become as obsessive and feral as him.

I need more.

I roll and wade back into the water. The milky blue liquid feels so good around my flesh. His skin is glowing brighter than ever.

Turin follows me into the hot spring.

He takes hold of my hips, pulling me back to him. I can feel his cock bob against my inner thigh, searching for my pussy as if it has a mind of its own.

"I want to come inside you," he growls.

I let him hoist me into his arms, steam rising around both our bodies. I want to believe this makes sense.

It doesn't matter if it does.

My entire life I've tried to make sense of how things went. I worked my ass off. I strove to be the best, but what or who was that work for?

They lied to everyone. The American people. Earth. Fucking everyone.

Maybe living a life that "makes sense" doesn't make any sense at all.

"You want to... breed me?" I ask, gulping.

Placing his thumb against my lip, I close my mouth and suck. He slides against my tongue, slowly reaching the back of my throat.

Patiently, I hold him there without gagging.

"I need to impregnate you," he says.

I look into his eyes. He's serious, I know that. But this is a big deal.

This is something I never thought I'd allow. A baby. Another chance at losing a family.

I can't handle the thought of losing another.

He nudges his forehead against mine, noses gliding together. "Give me what I want," he commands. "Give me what I crave."

"What if I lose you?" I ask.

Am I really thinking about letting him do this?

"See my skin? It had never done this before I found you," he says.

He's still glowing, and he's not letting me go. The more he holds me, the more I lower myself down. I can feel the crown of his cock press against my lips.

My jaw drops.

"Kiss me," he whispers.

We kiss, tongues absorbing taste like a sponge. His lips glide against mine, and we away back only to fall forward even harder.

His cock edges inside me. He tries thrusting, but a splitting pain forces me back.

I tense and pull away, tears swelling my eyes and sinuses. He moves me across the water, easing back. "I won't leave you," he says.

My throat closes. "What did you just say?"

"I won't betray you like the others in your life," he says. "I was designed to fight, so I will fight for you."

My chest swells with both pain and adoration.

I'm still learning how to feel natural with someone new. In this moment, I have someone who's on my side. It's different.

It's good.

It makes the pain fade into pleasure.

I relax and throw my arms around his eminent body, hugging his shoulders. I kiss his neck as he thrusts upward.

I'm filled with him. His magnificence owns me, but his eyes tell me he needs more.

He rests both hands around my hips. The inches tug against my walls, but as he gets deeper, there's no way to stop him from driving in all the way.

I take every single inch.

"There you go, sweetheart," he says. "You hear me? You did it."

I let out a pained grunt and breathe.

His hands clench tighter. "Feel me," he says.

"I don't know if I can do it," I mutter, pushing my ass back.

He bucks forward and forces me against the rocky wall of the hot spring. "Take me," he growls.

My body spasms. "Oh, fuck."

He starts to fuck me. Without warning, he uses the rocks to force my legs apart. With smooth, sensual thrusts, he whispers, "See? It's not so bad. You are adaptable."

I absorb him.

He uses me, directing my body to fit his needs. As soon as I give in to his ruthless fuck, the pain fades into twisted pleasure.

He eases on me, sliding out to grab the ledge onto land. He lowers his hand. "I need to mount."

He hoists me from the hot spring. The stagnant, humid air tempts me to be filthy.

It invites me to act primal and savage.

I lower onto the grass and crawl toward him. He stands, observing, silent and bold. I take his cock, tracing my palm across the throbbing shaft. I spit and spread my saliva across him.

I spit again, making sure he's covered in my fluids.

Leaning my bag against a tree, I spread my legs and show him my pussy.

"I wish you could see what I see," he says, gruffly.

"I'm not that groomed," I say, face turning hot with shame.

I've tried to maintain it, but there didn't seem to be a point. I grew it out, and now, I'm embarrassed with how I look.

He reassures me this not just what he needs. This is what he wants, too. "You are so fucking gorgeous," he growls.

Gripping his cock, he strokes and spills pre-cum.

He lowers over me like a panther, licking and tasting my nipples. Kissing my stomach, he reaches my pelvis. He bucks forward and slides his shaft through my pubes.

"You drive me crazy with lust," he moans, biting his lip as the pleasure seems to him.

Did I mention the word primal? With him, I don't have to give a fuck about any standards. I can be whatever I want.

He eases up and down, dropping his face to kiss mine. I grind my hips up, feeling the bark scrape against my back. The earth cakes underneath my ass, and his hands grab my dirty skin, spreading mud.

This is something I would never do. This is filth.

I live for it.

He forces my legs open, abdomen pressed against mine. His arms wrap around the base of the tree, trapping me.

One dark look in the eyes, and he whispers, "I will breed you, tiny one."

My jaw falls open.

Help?

He penetrates me.

His thick and prodding head, growing larger as desire brings us together, forcing me open. There's nothing I can do except hold on for the ride.

I trace my palms across his impressive abdomen, feeling every single ripple harden underneath my fingertips.

His biceps tighten around me, chest pressed against my cheek. Driving into me, he quivers and stops, cock bobbing inside of me.

"No," he growls. "Not, yet."

He pulls out and pinches the head of his cock, breathing.

My pussy is throbbing.

"Please," I beg. "Give me what you promised me."

This is all so reckless, but I've weighed the pros and cons.

Pros: A superhuman badass baby.

Cons: A pregnancy with a possessive alien.

This is just a fantasy. We don't know if this will even work. He was designed to breed, but it was not tested on any humans.

Maybe he shoots blanks.

I open my legs and run my fingers through the hair above my pussy. Spreading my lips, I beg him for what he was designed to expel.

"Breed me," I demand. "Give me all of your seed."

His chest rises and falls as oxygen courses through his lungs. Baring his teeth, he drops back down and bites my clavicle.

I shiver and force away as the sharpness of his teeth draws blood. It feels so good, I take hold of his muscular butt and use both hands to guide him back inside me.

It comes quick, the subtle vibration of his cock against my walls. He pumps me, harder now. His muscles bulge as he grunts near my ear. "You're my treasure," he whispers.

"You're my alpha," I say. "The man I've been praying for years to come save me."

I don't mean to say it. It just comes out.

The end just always feels so good.

He bucks one more time and slows. I nod and open wide. His pupils grow with satisfaction. His eyelids droop.

"I'm going to fucking come," he mutters.

His blood warms his cock, and his head thickens. He's close, and I fear he might give our location away with one single roar.

I place my hand over his mouth. "Shh," I whisper. "We have to be quiet. They'll hear us."

His hips stutter back, but I clasp my legs around his waist, holding him near me.

Finally, he closes his eyes and moans into my palm.

He loses all control. Every bit of perfection written in his genes comes out.

He relinquishes hot cum.

Pump after pump, it shoots across my walls, in waves. He holds himself in, arching his back up, forehead scrunched. His seed spills down my thighs, spreading into the dark earth below.

It's the biggest load I've ever received.

Kissing me, he comes down from his godlike experience. I can feel his heavy heart pumping against me as he forces me into a cuddle.

It's not the ideal place for some tenderness, but I needed this. It's the one time I could disassociate from trauma.

He gave me that chance.

As we lay, Turin's cock scrapes against my hole.

He's still hard.

I can't believe it.

* * *

Do I regret my actions?

For the last thirty minutes, I've laid in the arms of an alien, exploring his massive body. Only, I'm not seeing him for what he is. I've come back down to reality, and I'm just not sure of anything anymore.

Was this a good idea? Probably not. Did I do it? Absolutely.

Sometimes, my heart feels at peace. Other times, I wonder if I'll ever get it to stop sinking. Love is a bitch, but liking someone, someone so different from me almost feels worse.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

I laugh and look into his eyes, observing the red of his pupils fade. His skin has no glow to it anymore.

"I'm just thinking," I say.

"Uh, oh," he replies.

I kiss him, taste him, and spoon my backside closer to him.

"You aren't thinking about what could happen?" I ask.

"It is all I think about," he responds. "But it is because I am... falling for you."

I swallow, chest resonating with a troubling pain. "So what do we do?"

Edging his forehead against mine, he sighs. "I can see so much that humans cannot. Yet, I can't predict the future. I can't pretend to know the answer to such a question."

A deep melancholy washes over his face. He pauses. "I just don't know."

And that's just it. The big problem. There's no clarity.

But are we that different to think this can't somehow work?

I wish we could lay here in our own little Garden of Eden, but something always gets in the way. This time, it's the mid-tone noise of someone yelling in the near distance. I recognize the voice instantly.

"Fassbender," I say.

Our own snake in the grass.

His voice picks up volume. He's screaming at someone, and it can't be Zakar.

The crew!

Maybe he didn't kill them. It's possible he kept them alive to convince them his plan is the virtuous one they should take.

They wouldn't believe a lie as heinous as that. However, they bore witness to my captivity. Turn was just trying to save me, but I'm not so sure Roy or Hugh would see it like that.

I jump up and throw my clothes on. "Let's check it out," I say.

Turin grabs my hand, pulling me back into his grasp. "I've been thinking of a different plan," he says.

"Yeah?"

"Eventually, one party will kill the other, correct?" he asks.

I groan, knowing where this is heading. He got one taste of me, and now he wants to keep going.

"Sure," I say. "Someone might have to die. That's obvious. I'd rather it not be my crew."

He tries his best to get me to relax by massaging my neck and shoulders. It does feel great, but it's not exactly changing my mind.

"The planet is big, Naomi. Maybe it's smarter to stay hidden in the jungle. Zakar or Fassbender will win the hunt. If it's the human, we will have an easier fight ahead of us," he says.

As tempted as I am to follow through with being lazy, I can't accept it. I've seen the horrific body of Zakar. I've seen what he can do.

Without any extra supplies, Fassbender will have to think of other options. I have no doubt that Fassbender will lose this fight.

I pull away from him, jogging through the forest. Reluctantly, Turin follows.

As we reach the yelling, I lay in the tall shrubbery and feel my stomach tighten when I see that ugly bastard's face.

The more I think about it, the more I think Fassbender is the worst person I've ever come across.

He has found another facility, unfinished and rundown. Roy and Hugh have been tied to a tree.

Fassbender paces like a man who is about to get caught.

I listen to his insanity. "He couldn't have gone far. The man is an imbecile," he says, tone dropping to butter them up.

He tears the gags away from Roy and Hugh's mouths. "You saw where he ran," he says. "Tell me. Where is he?"

Roy's face is covered in dark bruises. Welts have formed around his eyes, and his nose looks broken. Despite his physicality, he chuckles. "Go fuck yourself," he says, annunciating each syllable proudly.

Yep, he's the same Roy I knew. Nothing about him has changed.

Hugh hangs his head. He's older and disabled. That doesn't make him weak. In fact, he's one of the toughest guys I've gotten to know. But even he looks defeated.

"Look," he says. "You need not worry about Halloway. It's Naomi you need to worry about," Hugh says.

My heart flashes. Turn grabs my hand and squeezes. "All right, let's go."

"Not. Yet," I mutter, teeth clenched.

Fassbender leans over Hugh. "The bitch is dead," he says. "Raped, killed, her body used as a sock puppet."

"Lies," Hugh says.

Fassbender raises his voice again. "You think I've betrayed you, but I'm the only one you've got," he says. "These aliens are the cockroaches of the universe. I was trained to stomp them out, and I'm going to do everything in my power to do that. But I need my crew to stick by my side. I need to know the captain isn't going to bust out of the leaves with a semi-automatic. You hear me?"

"I hear you," Hugh says. "But you know the captain. He's not well-trained in the art of survival. If Naomi is dead, he'll be dead, too."

Throughout the year, I've gotten to know Hugh pretty well. He hasn't turned on us. I wonder if, he's working out an escape plan. The thought gives me hope because if it's true, we might have a shot at winning this thing.

Fassbender turns and rests his hands across his forehead. Whispering something to himself, he looks into the jungle.

He's never looked so scared.

He's staring right at me, though he has no clue. The vegetation provides enough shield, but it doesn't stop my stress levels from skyrocketing.

When I get back to Earth, I'm booking a long session with a psychiatrist.

"Well, you have given me no choice," he says. "If you can't do anything to help move along our mission, I have to keep you locked up."

Roy spits. The saliva splatters Fassbender face and lips. "Scum bucket," he sneers. "I hope he ruts you to death."

Fassbender wipes away the thick phlegm. Afterward, he nods as if he's made a final decision. "Tonight, I will leave you here."

Hugh's face lights up with panic. "What?"

"I'll leave you here as bait, and when the disgusting lizard arrives to eat your bodies, I will take him out," he says.

Hugh raises his voice. "But you've shot him three times. You said it yourself. You can't beat him."

Fassbender stiffens. "I will find a way."

Flustered, I fall back against the flora. I try to land on my palms, but my elbows hit a few twigs.

Crack.

Turin's face is horrified. "Get into my arms. We need to run," he states.

He picks me up and lunges throughout the forest.

Eyes open, I watch Fassbender realize I'm not dead. I'm very much still alive, and very much still a threat.

Fumbling his weapon, he takes aim. This time, it's not a tranq gun. It's a Glock pistol.

He fires once, and his aim is true. The bullet rips through the air. It hits Turin in the back.

Turin roars, but he doesn't slow. He just keeps running.

Fassbender fires again. It hits near Turin's spine.

Stumbling, Turin growls and grunts, holding me tight against his beating chest.

"Just hold on," Turin mutters, voice dragging.

Fassbender fires a third time.

"No!" I scream so hard my vocal cords tear.

Tears fall from my eyes.

It's almost like everything is silent. Except, it's not.

I'm in shock.

The sounds I hear make little sense. Everything is muffled and far away.

What's happening?

Turin rolls across the ground, injured but still able to move.

I look back. Fassbender is reloading. We still have time to escape, but there is so much blood.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, face losing its blue shine.

"Don't you dare say sorry to me," I cry.

Slowly, the bullet holes close, but not fast enough. I try to stop the blood from pouring through his flesh.

He can't die. He just can't.

With the last ounce of energy he has left, he stands, roaring from pain. Stumbling into the dense jungle, he keeps me close.

We find a cave.

When we're safe, he falls to the ground, huffing and moaning like a wounded animal.

I don't know what to do. I'm as weak as I was on the day of my family's car accident.

I didn't know it until now, but I think...

I think I love him.

NINE

Turin

"IT'S OKAY," HE MURMURS. "I'LL HEAL. GIVE IT TIME."

She wipes an endless stream of tears from her eyes. "You look like E.T. when they find him in the ditch."

I smile because, even when I'm this close to death, she's cute as hell. "Who?" I groan.

A shock wave of pain leaves me floored. I clench my teeth and moan, holding her to get through it.

"Never mind," she says.

For an hour, we sit in the cave. She talks about Earth. She explains to me entertainment. Movies and books. My creators taught me, but I can't understand many of their customs. Earth sounds like a carnival ride into Hell.

Our rest is a little like earlier, except without the hard, fast pleasure. Our talks are deeper. And though I'm injured, we don't worry too much. We just keep on pushing.

After some time, she stops crying. "I'm sorry," she says.

I arch my neck to see my wounds. They're almost healed.

"It's not your fault. You didn't know he'd gun me down," I say.

"No, that's not what I mean," she says.

“Hm?”

She wipes the sweat from my forehead and kisses. I close my eyes and feel cared for. It's probably the first time in my life I've ever felt anything like this.

“I'm sorry for being so fearful of you. I'm sorry for hating your species,” she says. I'm tense.

“You were right about humans,” she continues. “We are evil. And I'm just like them.”

There's one thing I might never disbelieve. Humans are evil. I can't get my head around that, but it doesn't change the fact that this woman is different.

Is my biology clouding my judgment?

I have enough strength to sit up and take her wrist. I trace my finger over a small cut that has healed.

“You're nothing like them,” he says.

A million traits point to her goodness.

“You are kind, unobtrusive, and your core desire is to trust people. You have had the world taken from you, but you still hope that you can right those wrongs. That takes selflessness. That takes goodness,” I say.

It actually pains me to say it because it goes against my core belief that humans will do or say anything to get what they want. Although I was designed to kill and breed, I wasn't designed to go against the truth.

Interesting... She has taught me.

Her empathy has bled into my subconscious, altering my brain to house more of it. I have absorbed it. I have changed.

Oh, fuck.

She listens to all of the traits I list off, and I can tell she still doesn't believe she is a good person. It is hard for humans to be honest.

She's still finding herself and the inner strength she possesses.

She will learn.

She throws her arms around me, nuzzling her cheek against mine. Laughing, she says, "You left out the part that describes me as an unstable and unavailable spinster," she says.

I don't understand the reference, but I imagine this spinster is someone who spends her life in a downward spiral.

I touch her lips, soft and thick. Pink as berries. "Maybe that's why I want you so badly," I say.

Leaning forward, I caress the back of her head and kiss her. Tongue snaking through her warm lips, I swallow and acknowledge how close I have come to death for her.

She wipes the blood from my body, using a spare towel from her back pocket. "I almost lost you, didn't I?" she asks.

I nod. "Almost," I say.

But she didn't. I'm still here, and I'm ready to fucking kill that son of a bitch.

She kisses the top of my chest. Kisses where my heart lay beating. Kisses my abdomen, past my pelvis.

She kisses until there's nothing but the inevitable to suck.

Slowly, her hand twists around my shaft. I can't believe it. I almost died, and she still wants this.

That's how I know she's in it for the long haul.

"I just want to feel good with you," she says.

Today, at the hot spring, was more than I had imagined. It was unsafe and idiotic, but she gave me the pleasure I craved. It solidified how much she meant to me.

I'll die if I can't keep her.

My flesh hardens inside her small palm. Her eyes widen. "Better use a second," I say.

She spits and turns nasty, arching her ass as she rolls the saliva over my balls and shaft. It's dark in this cave, but I've got the best view in town.

"How bad do you want to please me?" I ask her.

She rubs her pussy, breath quickening. "You have saved my life twice now," she says. "I want to save yours."

My seed is strong and binding. Though she has mentioned nothing of it, Naomi is now pregnant. In less than a month, my child will have solidified in her womb.

And in nine months, she will be the first human to give birth to an alien, a better version of ourselves.

I should be worried, but an alien like me thrives on that risk. As I watch her ass wag like a chew toy, I block out all worries.

"I think you know how to save me," I say.

Sitting up, I spread my legs so she can play with my balls as she strokes me harder. She massages and treats me like a king, as if I'm deserving of so much more from her.

I tilt my head and moan, but I can't just sit back and enjoy this without feeling her curves. I bend and glide my palm across her spine, fingers gliding through her hole.

I spank her ass and thrust.

A devious and shocked smile forms across her gorgeous face. "Yes," she moans with a devious smile. "Spank me harder."

I wind back and spank, listening as the loud noise echoes throughout the caves. I want to paddle her all day, but we need to keep quiet.

Naomi clenches her legs together, squeezing her palm against her pussy. "Fuck," she moans.

Before I rise back up, I feel her tits and sigh with absolute pleasure. I tell her what I want.

“Suck my cock.”

Her warm breath wafts around my crown as she lifts my shaft in front of her mouth. But instead of gagging on my pole, she glides her tongue even lower.

She reaches my balls. They’re about as big as her mouth, but she’s not afraid to get a little dirty. She’s seen the joy it can give a woman.

She laps around my strong bearers of seed, creeping closer and closer as she grows accustomed to me.

Before this mission, I don’t think she spent a lot of time with men. It makes the experience even more right.

I nudge the back of her head until my sack rests on the bed of her tongue. Using my other hand, I stroke and tell her to suck, spit, and lick.

“Softly,” I say.

We can go hard later.

“Mm,” she moans, mouth full.

When I know she’s ready for more, I ease back and give her some air.

She catches her breath, salivating all over her pretty, little face. I wipe the spit with my thumb, spreading it onto my tongue.

I swallow and bring her in for a deep kiss. “I want to get real disgusting with you,” I say. “If we weren’t in this jungle, I’d commit unspeakable acts to your body.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

Her ass is begging to be fucked, but I’m saving her cake at the end of the party.

“Open,” I command.

Her wet lips part, tongue draping out like a drawbridge for cum, cock, and groping fingers. Slowly, Naomi wraps mouth around me like a baby to a bottle. She sucks, bringing me in deeper.

"Tell me what you'd do to me," she begs.

"If I had it my way, I'd chain you up and throat fuck you to kingdom come," I say.

"That's it?" she whispers.

I force her head down, and feel the warmth of her throat almost instantly. I hold myself there until I hear her gag. Then I hold her there a little longer.

The pleasure swells between my thighs. I'm ready to fucking burst, but I bite my tongue and think of unpleasant thoughts to hold myself back.

I want to edge with her. I want to spend days like this, holding my seed back until I spray like a fountain.

And when I get my satisfaction, I want her to stay chained up as I eat her, giving her orgasm after orgasm, after fucking orgasm.

That's what she deserves, a partner who tortures her in the right way.

"I'd tease open your asshole until you could fit me," I moan.

"Oh, God. I want that so bad," she admits, cheeks turning red.

The image races inside my mind. It's not enough that I have her. She'd actually let me do it, no questions asked.

This woman was made for me.

"You are a nasty girl," I say.

She blows me, stroking faster, with a rhythm I can't keep up with. My eyes widen as my balls grow hard.

"I can be nastier."

I'm going to come. "Fuck," I say, tensing. "Just keep stroking, honey."

Tongue spooning my crown, she licks me like a lollipop, smiling because she knows she has me. In this moment, she has me by the balls.

And I love it.

She slides her mouth over me. Stunned, I watch as her esophagus expands. I touch the front of her neck and feel my cock swell against flesh and bone.

I can't take any more of the heat. Feeling my cock give way to waves of pleasure, I expect her to pull and spit me out. Yet, as soon as I blow my seed against her warm, wet tongue, she swallows.

All of it – she laps it up like a kitten.

I'm shocked to the core, shivering with dark delight from a lust that has finally come to fruition. Except, now it has turned into something deeper and unimaginable.

An alien can't fall in love with a human. That's not in our source code.

My creators showed me videos of religion, and I always scoffed. But now I can see why humans spend so much time worshipping the idea of "love."

It's real, and it's transformative.

Lips rolling up my shaft, I jerk and let out a gruff moan. "Woman, you never told me NASA trained you to suck an alien so well," I joke.

She smiles and catches some cum that falls toward her tits. Fingering the rest into her mouth, she lies back and spreads her legs.

"No training. I'm just a natural talent," she says.

I insert three fingers with ease and growl with pride. "You're not scared of my fuck anymore," I say.

She's practically glowing. "Maybe I'm just good at hiding my fear," she says.

I wag my fingers against her soft spot, and she twists away from me, giggling.

"Come back here. I want to feast," I demand.

She slithers against the wall of the cave, pulling her ruffled panties up her thick thighs. Her entire body was designed for child rearing, and it's driving me fucking crazy.

It doesn't matter how many times I come. I just can't get enough.

Joke or not, she need not hide her fear with me. I know she understands how to be a team player. No, what she needs to learn is how to let go of whatever happened to her.

That's not something that's so easy to do. Once you've been let down for long enough, you live inside the eye of fear. It becomes the center of your world.

Her eyes appear to analyze mine, perhaps trying to see through to my inner thoughts. "What's wrong?" she asks.

"Everything and nothing," I say. "I've found a gem, but I need to figure out how to keep it out of sight."

"I'm assuming I'm that gem," she says.

"As much as I want to love on you, we are near the fuel you seek. This might be our only chance to get off Avalon.

"I'm worried," she says. "What if Zakar intercepts us? What if this was part of his twisted plan?"

I kiss her cheek. "Then we had a good run," I say.

It was another joke, but the truth hits me right in the fucking gut. The starship is just past the trees. We're closer than ever before.

I take her hand. Both of us keep low and quiet as I find the path to the starship. Around the corner is the rusted metal of my home. But it's not just my home. It's Zakar's, too.

He could be anywhere.

Lucky for us, when we get near the entrance, I don't sense him.

"Do you think he's here?" she asks.

I shake my head. "I can't be sure, but Fassbender has been too boisterous for his own good. Zakar won't be able to hold himself back."

It's crunch time. As fun as the games are to my brethren, they will run their course. With time, Zakar will succumb to boredom.

Once that happens, things might get a little messy.

A gunshot echoes, almost right on command. Zakar's roar follows. However, none of the sounds are coming from the direction of Fassbender's camp.

We both look at each other, confused.

"Keep still," I say.

More gunshots, followed by an eerie silence.

"He's far away," I say.

For now. He could be here in less than five minutes if he ran fast enough. I leave all that out because I can tell she can't take any more bad news.

"Come," I say, pulling her into my arms. "Let me show you my home."

I tell her the history of this place. As the starship hit Avalon's atmosphere, their system coordinates malfunctioned. The maps totally cut out, leaving them flying blind.

They crashed into the jungle, smashing through the giant trees. Lucky for them, there were no casualties. The ship, however, was ruined.

Decimated.

All of this happened before I was made, of course. The scientists never brought it up to us, but Zakar's ears picked up on it with

sharp precision. We pieced together the facts, and we slowly figured out they had no way to leave this planet.

Like the beings they designed, they were stuck. They weren't happy about it either.

Many relay calls to Earth were rejected by the spotty network. The calls that went through were met with hesitance.

NASA couldn't do a damn thing about it. They were beholden to their donors, a massive defense contractor industry that refused to risk profit over human life.

After years of trying to come up with a good enough reason to get them out of there, they found one. The alien subjects escaped. We were a threat to their weapons project. If we won this fight, trillions of dollars in investments would be destroyed.

They'd lose everything.

Naomi lives in fear, but I was born in it. Decay is all I've ever known. But I've always welcomed death, if it ever came.

The one thing I've never done is sacrifice for another. I wouldn't do that for Zakar. Hell no.

If it ensures that Naomi lives, I would sacrifice for her.

She paces the starship control center, running her hand across the broken tablets and computers. Quietly, she examines the trinkets that the earlier scientists left behind. There is sadness in her eyes, but she must understand my side. I never killed any of them, but they were not good people.

They knew what program they were signing up for. They had paramilitary training and everything.

"How could someone sign up for a program so cruel?" she asks.

"I don't know," I reply.

"What I don't understand is why they sent us. We weren't trained for combat. Only Fassbender was taught how to do that," she says.

I take a deep breath. "I haven't told you everything," I confess.

She steps forward, concerned by the mystery. "Tell me," she says.

"You aren't ready," I tell her.

I'm worried that the fear will spread. I'm worried that, if she finds out the entire truth, she'll shut down. If that happens, we'll both die without experiencing what our bond has created.

Our child...

"I'm fucking ready," she says, hurt.

The truth will sting a lot more. But just because it's coming from my mouth, doesn't mean I was the one who fashioned this. I don't want her to hate me.

I decide honesty is the best policy, so I come out and say it. "Your crew was chosen because you were easy to manipulate," I say.

Her face turns red, and she turns away. I can tell I've hurt her more than ever, but she will most past this. Once she sees what they have done, she'll find her strength again.

She has to find it...

"Now you're just being mean," she says.

"Planet Avalon wasn't discovered, Naomi. It was chosen," I say.

She turns and looks, eyes red from roughly edging her knuckles against her tear ducts.

I continue. "It was chosen by Earth to be terraformed," I say.

"But that technology doesn't exist. They're trying to develop it, but I can't tell you how many articles I've read about how the technology is far too advanced for us to understand," she says.

I fix my eyes on hers. She knows I wouldn't lie to her. "Tell me, why are there no animals?" I ask.

"I—" She cuts herself short.

"They built a planet that could house life. Microbiology. Whatever life they wanted to design. They could have left the planet alone, but the accomplishment wasn't enough. Humans wanted more. They craved control. After all, if they could create life on other planets, others would be able to, as well. Soon, they would be overrun with competition," I say.

There would be intergalactic war, unforeseen catastrophes, and death by the billions. In a way, I can see why they went the extra mile with this mission. But it was at the expense of their own people.

And me.

I step forward, stroking her shoulder. She's tense.

I say, "They wanted to build a weapon, the perfect soldier they could use to do their universal bidding. They called the new project Earth Federation. E.F., as they often referred to it as in reports, would invade and colonize planets, decimating any civilization that stood in their way. They are the gateway to the next crusades."

"You still haven't explained why they used us," she says, sniffing.

"They would leave you behind. Once they took us back for testing, they would use you to make more of us," I say, bending my head toward hers. "They didn't know the extent of the damage. They thought there might be other survivors, hiding. But there are not, and Fassbender doesn't know what he's gotten himself into."

She turns and hugs me, but after giving me a few seconds of warmth, she pushes away. She's tormented by this, and I know why. It's a hit to the heart, a devastating car crash one can't come back from.

If your own planet is against you, can you really pick up the pieces and move on?

"I don't believe you," she touts. "Maybe they designed and tortured you. Maybe you were made to be their secret weapon. But Earth wouldn't take the risk to colonize other planets."

She's not listening, so I move around her, toward the run-down console. If her ears won't believe it, maybe her eyes will.

I tap the power on a small tablet, the only one to run. Although the video cuts in and out, she can hear enough of it.

A general stands before a camera. Instead of looking stern, he appears excited, even happy.

He clears his throat and begins speaking:

Welcome to Earth Federation. If you're watching this, you have just landed on Avalon. She is a work of art you can enjoy at once. If you are worn out from a hard day, try relaxing for a day at the beautiful, private beaches. Perhaps you need some time to yourself? Go hike the tallest mountain in the region. There is much to do and discover on planet Avalon.

Hands planted firmly behind his back, the man clears his throat again.

So, let's get down to brass tacks, shall we? We have discovered a cluster zone of life, hundreds of light years from Earth. From what our intelligence has gathered, there are complex life forms. Aliens. Yes, I know how difficult it must be to hear, but we have assigned you to this project to create a bio-weapon. In time, we will perfect this weapon, and before all predecessor nations, we will use variants of this weapon to attack and control the galaxy. You are the first team to build a path toward victory.

There's more, but Naomi quickly shuts it off. "Okay, I get it," she cries.

Colonization. That's been the game from the start. Whoever controls the land gets the resources. Once you have those, you can make demands.

"I didn't know it was this bad," she says.

"They hid it from everyone on Earth," I reply. "And even if they hadn't, there was nothing you could do. I don't understand the con-

cept of money, but I do understand power. Those who have it crave more."

Zakar...

Fassbender...

Earth Federation.

She falls back into my arms, weak and trembling. Recanting her words, she whispers, "There's a part of me that always knew. I was selfish. I wanted to leave Earth so badly I turned a blind eye to the possibility of failing this mission. I never thought I would ever be involved in something so..."

She swallows.

"So evil?" I ask.

She nods. "Yes," she states. "I'm a lot of things, but I'm not evil."

Evil exists on the peripheral of one's imagination. It comes to you when you least expect it. The most vulnerable are the ones who claim to be good.

She has claimed no such thing.

"You are not evil," he says. "You were hardly given a choice. You did what you had to do. Human authority does not reveal its intentions until long past their crimes are put on display."

She shakes her head, smearing tears against my chest. "But I could have done more. Days ago, when we landed, I had the chance to stop Fassbender. I sensed something was wrong. I could have alerted Hugh or Roy, or even the captain. But I didn't. I kept it to myself."

She is thinking about this too much, which is exactly what I worried about from the start.

"None of that matters now. You need to move on from what you cannot control," he says.

I can give her all the advice in the world. I'll never understand what it's like to be in her shoes. I'll never know how it feels to be betrayed

by my own kind.

My own kind does not exist. There are other versions, but they are all lab-made mutations. I guess that makes me a freak, too.

I stand down, feeling depressed for the first time in ages.

Naomi's eyes are glittering with tears. "Don't you get it? I can't control anything. None of it. But if let myself accept that truth, it means turning my back away from the universe. It means giving up to chaos," she says.

I hold her as she spills more tears. It's been a hard day. A sad day of revelation. I've had many of those, but never under these circumstances.

Initially, I wanted her because of a primal hunger, but my desire does not stem from the same depths as Zakar's subconscious.

I wanted her because I so desperately wanted to be free of this world and the dark mark that humans gave to me. I thought by taking her, I could find freedom.

I wasn't wrong.

But that very idea had me chained up more than I was willing to admit. I never wanted to hurt her. I never wanted to see her this broken.

Now that I have her, I can't let her go, emotionally, physically, or mentally. What binds me in further is the idea of leaving Avalon. Where will we go?

Will Earth welcome a freak like me with open arms?

I stroke and pet her hair. "You hold a lot inside that heart of yours," I say.

"Yeah, well, there's a lot I haven't told you either."

I kiss her temple. Her scent holds me like a mother to child. "Forgive me," I say. "I've told you so much about me. I haven't given you a chance to tell me about you. Tell me what happened to the people in the photograph you dropped."

From my chest, she glances up. "Do you really care?"

I lean forward, nuzzling my nose against the side of her head, breathing her in. I place her hand against my chest. Heart thumping, I say, "We are together, now. You feel this?"

She exhales and nods, scared but ready to let me in.

"This is real," I say.

"There was a car crash," she says. "We were coming home from Sunday lunch at Susan's Diner. Dad used to call it Sunday Funday. I used to hate that. This time, though, everything was a little different. You know, just odd... Everyone was quiet, and I just remember having this feeling of absolute love. I was just so happy to be alive with the people that raised me."

She hesitates and wipes more tears. I can't cry. I don't have the tear glands. But I'm listening and hanging on to every word she tells me. "I was going through a hard time, I guess. I was young and afraid. School was a nightmare," she says. "But at that stupid diner, I was just in awe of what my parents made."

She swallows and looks at me with the utmost earnestness. "And then my dad set his coffee down on the table, said we had to go. That was that," she says.

"You don't have to say anymore if it hurts," I say.

She shakes her head. It's okay. She wants to keep speaking. "My little sister died that day, too," she says, hanging her head. "I've never told anyone that. Not Roy. Not Hugh. Definitely not Fassbender. Even before this mission, I kept it to myself. She became my ghost."

"I'm so sorry," I say.

She rocks against me. "She's not in the photograph," she says. "It was taken before she was born. But I kept it anyway. It was my punishment. I didn't protect her. I couldn't keep her safe."

Events happen in chaotic fashion. There is no rhyme or reason to why things exist, but the effects of every event have long lasting implications.

They constrict our souls.

"You are stronger than you know," I say.

"I tried to harden myself with these missions. Every award I received for my work was another nail on my cross. I used to think to myself, if I just do one more, I can finally get there. But I'm not hard. Deep down, I'm soft."

I hug her close, make her feel protected, and then I let her go. "I know who you are," I say. "Hard or soft, I like every bit of you. You are deep and caring. Your strength, believe it or not, knows no bounds. You traveled across the universe. Who else has done that?"

"Yeah, I traveled across the universe just to fall apart," she says. "Can't you see? I'm broken, Turin. You're falling for someone who is a total mess."

"I love a good mess."

I expect her to have an epiphany and leave, but she does the complete opposite. Coming back to me, she takes off her shirt. She glides her hands up my chest and kisses me.

Tongues rediscovering, I feel her goodness sweep into me.

Maybe I can be like her. Maybe it's not all for nothing.

"I want you," she says. "Forever."

"I love you," I say.

I didn't know what that phrase meant until now. It's something connected with the beat of the heart, the rhythm of the body that allows one to flow outward into the universe. It's a freedom, but it's binding oneself to another.

It comes with its own sorrow as outside forces threaten its sanctity.

No, I won't let them have her. No matter how many fleets Earth Federation sends our way, I won't let them. I need this feeling in my life.

I finger her pants button, edging it through the hole. I unzip her and pull.

"I want you," she says.

"I need to put another child inside you," I grunt, cock growing.

But we don't have all the time in the world. Those outside forces I was talking about? They're all around us.

If we let desire get in the way, we become targets.

Heavy healed footsteps echo from the entrance. We both freeze and look at one another.

Stationary, I motion to let her know I will check out the area.

The footsteps stop.

I slither through the long, dark corridors, listening for any sign of Zakar. The entrance bay has a new set of muddy footprints.

"Human," I growl.

"Hands where I can see them." A voice. A mealy, weaselly voice.

I turn. The man is shaken. "Captain," I say, grinning.

He can barely hold the gun, he's so scared. "I said, stand down!"

Taking the risk, I inch toward him. As soon as he takes one step back, he stumbles.

I grab the gun, mid-air, and crush it into two pieces.

"Don't kill me," he whimpers.

I laugh. My biology urges me to kill him, but this love that I found allows me to think through these desires.

No, I won't kill him. I might need him.

Behind the trembling, crying, and begging captain is Naomi. "Halloway? Is it really you?" she asks.

He twists and lets out a terrified yelp. "Naomi, you're alive," he says.

"I have kept her safe," I say.

He looks back at me, sees my body. His eyes trail down, until he stops and gasps. My cock is a sight for sore eyes.

“Oh, no. Naomi, no...”

The look on his face is priceless.

TEN

Naomi

SWEATING PROFUSELY, THE CAPTAIN WIPES HIS FACE AND GULPS ON A mouthful of saliva. He looks sickly. "Let me get this straight. You two are... you two had... you two..."

"We fucked," I say, crossing my arms. "And it was the best sex I've ever had."

We also talked and connected in a way I never thought would have been possible. It was possible, and now my entire worldview has shifted.

The captain is not going to fuck this up for me.

"I'm assuming an alien doesn't use protection," he says.

"Stop berating the woman," Turin growls.

Turin starts for him, but I hold my arm out to block his steps. This is my annoying battle to fight.

"I will be honest, Captain, we don't have a lot of time to discuss this before Zakar or Fassbender come looking for us," I say.

"Fassbender," Halloway whispers, shaking his head.

"What about him?" I ask.

"When he took hold of my crew, I ran. It was cowardly, but it was the only choice I had," he says.

"Get on with it."

"I went back to the starship to find out the truth. Roy fixed the network. All the documents are on display. It's so much worse than we thought, Naomi. Earth has betrayed us," he says.

I inhale and lick the edges of my lips. "We know," I say. "Found out about Earth Federation yesterday."

"Fucking defense contractors," Holloway curses.

"There's nothing we can do about that. We just have to get off this planet," I say.

Turin growls. There's only so much I can do to hold him back.

"Listen, Captain. Do you want to keep your life? Turn around and pretend you never found this place. Tell the others that Naomi is dead," he says.

The captain looks at the entrance, breathing too fast for me to watch. "I can't go back out there. He'll find me again. It'll be night in less than an hour," he says.

Turin groans. "Not our problem. If you die, that's more time for us to escape."

"But—"

"You still got a gun?" Turin asks.

"Yes, but I only have three bullets left," he says.

I glance back at my alien and sigh. Taking the captain's side, I say, "Nothing will happen to you because you're staying with us."

Turin's wide-eyed glare of dissatisfaction is to be expected. He can't always have me to himself.

"What are you doing?" Turin whispers. "He will get us killed. What we have made, our child, will die."

Our baby. I look at my stomach. I feel the weight of the universe coming at me, a million light years a minute.

I know he's just trying to protect me. After all, if the captain stays, it complicates our safety. But I can't let down one of my own like that. I'm not like Fassbender. I follow a code.

I try to ease Turin's anxiety. "Look, I know he looks weak, but he's more than meets the eye," I say. "Up there, on the flight deck, he's the best captain there is. I need you to trust me on this."

I've never taken control. I've accomplished many things, but I prefer to hang in the wings, watching for the moment things go wrong. Or right – though, that rarely ever happens.

It's probably a coping mechanism, but frequently it has saved my life. This time, I need to take action.

Turin inhales. "Fine," he says. "I'll trust you. I have to, right?"

"I'm not like the men who made you," I say.

He nods, but I can tell there's still that fear inside him.

He just needs to trust me.

"Halloway, are you cool with this? With us, together?" I ask.

The captain nods, but he scrunches his head and neck like a caught rat. "Do we have to bring him back?"

I drag my molars together. "Yes," I say.

"But how will that work?" he asks.

I bend my neck and try to stay calm. "It doesn't matter how it will work. We're doing it, and that's final."

We don't know what Earth will be like when we get back. For all we know, Earth might not even exist anymore. Plenty of civilizations have wiped themselves out. Are we that special?

The odds are stacked against us, but that's what makes us strong. We keep pushing, no matter what the cost.

That's love.

Turin steps forward. "We don't know, yet. But it's a gamble we're willing to bet on."

I can't use his protection as a crutch forever. Soon, very fucking soon, I'll have to take matters into my own hands. Fully.

I'll have to be the one to get us off this rock. I'll be the one to bear and rear our child. For someone who never wanted to be a driver of the ship, I've really jumped headfirst into this whole thing.

"I'm sorry," Holloway apologizes. "I'm just worried."

Turn laughs anxiously. "You're worried? Zakar could be right around the corner."

"Impossible," Holloway says, eyes beaming. "I shot him. Three times in the head, and he went down. I even felt his pulse."

For a moment, Turin just stares at him. Then, after going over everything in his head, he looks at the hallway leading to the cargo hold.

Something's wrong.

"What is it?" I ask.

He throws a finger to his lips. "Shh."

Cautiously, he looks around the rusted corridors, sniffing gently. When he comes back, he looks worse off than before.

"You've led him here," Turin says, chest rising.

"I've done no such thing," Holloway argues.

Turin takes my hand. "You've brought him here to kill us," he says.

The captain swallows and looks erratic, but not necessarily guilty. He backs against the console as Turin steps toward him.

"No," he says. "That's not what—"

"You idiot. He cannot die," Turin states. "Zakar is playing with you. He will have followed you here."

Holloway catches his breath, looking inward. "What have I done?"

We should leave this place. Logically, he could be anywhere. This starship was built to house a lot more crew members. It's massive.

"We have to get out of here," Turin says.

Of course he's right, but my stubbornness for control is too much for me to hold back. We need the fuel, and the cargo bay is just a few corridors away.

"No. I'm not leaving without that fuel," I say.

Turin steps in front of me and lays his hand around my ribs. I pull away. "We're not going to keep running," I say. "We've risked our lives for a lot less. We're getting that fuel whether you like it or not."

"The barrels are big," he argues.

I smirk. "Well, it's a good thing you have strong arms."

He can groan all he wants. In less than twenty-four hours, he'll be thanking me for this.

As we stand and argue, I eventually notice that the captain is missing. "Wait," I say, holding off the dispute. "Where did he go?"

Turin clenches his fists, skin turning a deep shade of red. I've never seen him like this before, furious to the point of breaking into a panic.

"Don't," I say. "He's a good man."

"He will betray us," he cries.

"Look, we'll just check out the cargo hold. He's probably near the fuel barrels," I reason.

The truth is that his appearance does worry me, but all of this worries me. I don't believe the captain has it in him to betray his crew. He doesn't have the wits, for one. Two, he's just on that kind of a guy.

"Come on. We'll check it out," I say, taking hold of Turin's large index finger.

He doesn't move. His eyes share the deep inner workings of his mind. "Wait," he says.

"I thought you said we don't have time," I say.

"We have time for this," he says.

Turin reveals a photograph. It's the one I dropped.

I open my mouth, but I'm stunned. "I don't know what to say," I whisper.

"Take it. You don't need to forget these memories," he says.

I grab the edges, half afraid I might drop it again. Usually, when I look at this photograph, I feel a deep pain resonate through my heart. This time, however, it's almost like I can feel them watching me.

If they were still alive, they'd be proud of her. If her sister was by her side, maybe things would be different.

But that's how life works. The unbelievable happens, and you're sent on a trajectory through space and time.

These events shaped who I am today, and they led me to Avalon and Turin. I can't be one hundred percent certain that it's a good thing, but I have to believe that things will go my way.

"They were good people," I say. "Decent people. People you could depend on."

Turin holds her. "You are lucky to have had them."

I might've once resented a comment like that, but it's true. I was lucky. I am lucky.

"You know, Earth isn't what you think it is," she says. "The good outweighs the bad. Maybe it doesn't seem that way to you, but the good is everywhere."

"I want to believe," he says.

I lean against him, knowing that we have limited time. I make it quick. "Our days here are much longer than those on Earth, and to get here, we had to travel part of the way at the speed of light. When we get to Earth, it'll be a different decade, a different time period altogether. Maybe it'll be even better. Maybe Earth Federation will have failed."

"I hope so," he says. "Because without you, life is not worth living."

"I won't let them hurt you," she says.

He laughs, muscles bulging. "You'll protect me?"

My face heats, and there's a major part of me that just wants to be alone. I can't explain the emotions that I'm feeling. Love conquers all, but sometimes, it feels hard to breathe.

From the corner of my eye, I see the captain hobble back from the inner corridor. He stands in the shadow, breathing in huge, loud gulps of air.

He starts to weep.

"Captain?" I ask. "Where did you go?"

Without a word, he stumbles into the starship's hazy blue interior light. He's shaking, dripping with a luminescent slime. "I don't mean to interrupt, but—"

He gulps and vomits on the floor.

I try to run to his aid, but Turin grabs me. "Don't touch him," he roars.

I struggle against his tight hold. "Captain, what happened to you?"

Halloway stands and takes two steps toward them. Turin growls, "Stay back."

"The fuel is gone," he says. "The barrels were empty. I thought I could find more, deeper in the cargo hold, but something struck at me. It was an alien. He opened his jaw. I thought he might bite right through me, but he sprayed me with this... this goo."

Turin whips around. "Zakar. He's here."

I clench my mouth shut. Suddenly, I'm trying to move away from the captain. I search for a second exit, but I'm not familiar with this particular starship model.

Turin's body glows red like hot magma. "Leave the starship, Naomi," he says. "Do as I say. Now."

Is he crazy? He wants me to leave and end up alone in the jungle? Hell no. I'm staying.

"I'm not leaving you," I say.

I hear wild and tapping footsteps. They're coming from above, and within seconds, the sound has nearly caught up to our position.

It's Zakar, and his hurried, screeching reverberates throughout the starship. Suddenly, I'm thinking Turin might be right.

I should leave.

The brutal alien drops from the ceiling, landing right in front of me. As soon as he opens his mouth, I can smell his rotting, putrid breath. Up close, his teeth are horrifying, but his eyes are even worse to look at.

"Pretty pet," he whispers, sniffing near my neck.

I take one step back, but he just follows my lead. "Pretty, pretty cunt," he says, voice growing louder.

I keep walking back until I sense a wall. I'm stuck. "Pretty, pretty worthless princess," he shouts.

I may be a lot of things, but I am not worthless, nor am I a princess.

I shut my eyes, trembling. I can feel the tears betray my outward strength.

His face is so near mine, I can almost feel his lips against my cheek. "I will rut and kill you, worthless whore."

Okay, so now I'm a whore. Noted.

I open my eyes. Turin is standing right behind him.

"Don't touch me," I say.

Zakar takes my chin and squeezes, forcing me closer. Rolling his tongue out, he licks my face upward.

I lean all my strength away from him, but his sharp talon-like nails dig into my kidneys.

I twist and fall into his grasp.

I lose all the control I once had.

"You are not his," he says. "You are mine. Everything on this planet is mine."

"Not Turin," I mutter.

Zakar slaps and throws me to the floor. "Turin is my bitch, too."

Turin's red glow grows strong, illuminating the entire room. He roars so loudly that the entire jungle echoes. "This is your time to die," he screams.

Notified of his presence, Zakar turns to fight, but it's too late for him to act. Turin tackles him through a panel in the wall. Amidst the thick mass of cables, they roll.

Turin gets his leg around Zakar's waist, subduing the evil beast. Using this moment of weakness to his advantage, he hammers his fist across his face, shattering his nose.

Instantly, his nose reshapes. The blood dries and disappears.

Wide-eyed, Turin searches for a weapon. I toss him the first thing I can find, a big ratchet. He winds back and smashes Zakar's teeth. He hits him so many times I have to look away.

I fell in love with the alien that opened up to me. Not this.

Bloodied, Zakar does not move. As Turin stands, breathing like a total maniac, he turns. "I'm sorry you had to see that. You're safe now."

Zakar rises, head reassembling. A sharp grin cuts across his face. "Safe? No one is safe."

Zakar drives his arm forward. His hand digs into Turin's flesh, subduing him.

Turin falls to his knees. "Naomi. GO!"

I don't want to leave. Every second away from him would be spent wondering if he made it out alive. It would kill me.

Zakar throws Turin to the ground. "You have turned on your own kind?" he sneers.

"Fuck you, Zakar. We both knew this day would come."

I make a split second decision. I turn to the captain, and I don't cry. I take charge.

We run out of the starship, into the setting sun.

I have no sense of direction. All I know is that I'm running away from the alien I fell in love with, and I have no idea how to cope with that.

Everyone I've ever loved has been taken from me. Everyone.

He promised he wouldn't leave.

ELEVEN

Naomi

I'M ALL TWISTED AND TURNED UPSIDE DOWN.

One of the many weird things about this place is that, at night, the stars are not visible. Everything is black.

So when we cross through the jungle, we really have no idea where we're headed.

There's no seeing through to the horizon. No north star to guide us as our compass. The canopy above our heads is thick, which causes our flashlights to only be of use a couple of feet away.

And, if I'm being honest, the captain isn't the best person to be paired with.

"It itches," he says, referring to the goo that has dried and solidified around his skin.

"We need to get the crap off you as soon as we can," I say, angrily.

We keep walking. Every so often, Halloway tries to break the silence with some optimism, or a joke to keep the mood less serious.

None of it is effective. I'm pissed. I'm irritated I was lied to, and I'm angry that they couldn't hire a captain with some balls.

But I guess that's just what they wanted, right? They wanted to assemble a team of idiots. Yes, a team of dip-shits that could be manip-

ulated into playing their silly little game.

Well, they were wrong about me. And the rest of the crew members, as weird as they might seem. They were wrong about them too.

They were wrong about all of us. Fassbender will be outsmarted. We may be at our darkest moment, but that doesn't mean that hope doesn't exist.

Finally, the captain steps in front of me. "Will you please just talk to me?"

"I find you completely pathetic," I say. "In fact, every time I look at your face, I just want to smear more of that goo into your pores."

"Thanks," he says, hurt.

I swallow and remain indignant. Eventually, I just start to feel bad.

"Don't listen to me. That's not entirely true," I admit, sighing. "Every time I look at you, I feel my heart sink and shatter into a million pieces. I see Turin suffering. I want to blame you, but I know you were only trying to survive."

"Listen, I'm not weak. I will right these wrongs. You'll see," he says.

Now I feel even worse. "Halloway, it's all right. You don't have to do anything except look out for us from now on."

"You have my word."

Noble, but how can I sure he's being truthful? As I get used to the idea that everything could fall apart at any second, we reach another clearing in the woods.

I recognize where we are. This is the spot we saw Fassbender with Hugh and Roy. This is the danger zone, and I've run right back into the heart of it.

"Shit," I whisper, glancing at Halloway's fearful eyes. "Just keep your voice low, okay? This place isn't safe."

"What do you mean it isn't safe?" he asks.

"Fassbender," I hiss.

Cautiously, I walk into the grounds. In the center, Hugh and Roy are still tied to a thick post. Sitting in chairs, they sleep.

They look terrible. Bruises, blood, and head wounds. Fassbender has really done a number on them, but he doesn't look to be anywhere nearby.

I check out the half-constructed property, peering in each room with a thin flashlight. There's nothing of importance.

I run toward Hugh and Roy, dropping to the soil as I make it to their knees. Immediately, I untie them.

Both startle as they wake.

"No, not again," Hugh mutters.

Roy groans and rolls his head forward. Blood drips down to his thighs. "Naomi? That you?"

I try not to get emotional, but as much as they are Halloway's crew, they're also my crew. For a long and hellish year, they were my family.

"Yes, it's me," I whisper.

At first, Roy laughs, excitedly. But as soon as he's free, he turns morose. "You shouldn't have come back for us," he says. "There's no telling where Fassbender ran off to this time."

I help Hugh into his chair. He seems to agree with Roy. "We don't have much time. Did you find the fuel?" he asks.

I drop back and glare at Halloway. It's not his fault, but my subconscious blames him.

"Not yet," I say. "We'll find it. Soon enough."

Roy sighs and rubs a gash on his head. "I can't believe you're alive," he says. "How'd you do it? How'd you kill the alien?"

I swallow and feel my cheeks turn hot. It's one thing to tell Halloway, but the other guys... will they understand our love?

Will anyone, except for us?

"I need to tell you something, but I can't take you two freaking out on me," I say.

Hugh rolls toward the Captain. "Hey, Halloway, what in God's name is all over you?"

Roy looks back and forth, from the Captain to me. He pieces it together faster than I thought he might.

"You didn't," he says.

"I don't know what that's supposed to insinuate," I say.

"You befriended the alien," Roy says, appearing to know it all. "I mean, how else would you be here right now? It's either that, or you killed the beast, but I highly doubt you'd take that route."

"And why would you doubt that?" I ask.

"Because you dropped your gun back there. And I know you, Naomi. I know what happened to you. You aren't a killer," he says.

Rage. Sadness. Pain.

I'm getting hit from every direction. My love has been taken from me, forced into torturous submission by Zakar. All of this is just a little too much to handle.

I'm trying.

But it's breaking me.

"I'm pregnant," I blurt out.

All eyes focus on me. Even the Captain is staring with his mouth open.

Roy steps away from me. "You're... what?"

"Pregnant," I repeat, staring at the ground.

The night is a warm blanket I wish to drift and disappear into forever. If only there was a way to turn back time. But then I wouldn't have found him.

Hugh sharply exhales. "Whoa, boy," he mutters to himself. "Why on Earth would you let something like that happen?"

"Who said I let it happen?" I growl. "Who said I didn't fight him off? Listen, guys, we're not on Earth. We're on Avalon. Things happen. Missions go wrong. But we have one last task to finish. We have to find that fuel and get back home."

Roy shakes his head. "You're infected with it," he says. "You're infected with a bio-weapon."

"You don't understand," I say.

They close in on me. "No. What are you doing?" I ask.

Roy grabs my arms. Hugh blocks me from behind.

Halloway takes out his pistol. "I don't want to use this," he says.

Fuck. Turin was right. All of them have turned on me.

"You're making a big mistake," I say. "Turin is the only one who can save us."

"Shut your mouth," Roy says.

Quickly, they sweep me off my feet. They take me deeper into the jungle, eventually reaching a trail. "You're taking me to Discovery Base?" I ask.

"I said, shut up," Roy mutters. "I can't trust you. Can't trust Fassbender. It's just the three of us on this one, and you know what? I'm okay with that."

I beg. "Roy, I came to save you."

"That's exactly my point. You came to save us, knowing full well you were having that savage's kid. You're more harmful to this crew than you know. I can't trust your judgment anymore," he says.

It feels like my brain is going haywire.

Error. Can't compute.

Is this really how it ends? I got to experience love, and that's that?

"God, my skin," the Captain groans.

Both Roy and Hugh stop, still bracing my body over their shoulders.

Roy clicks his tongue, confused. "What about you, Captain? What's on your skin?"

The Captain backs away, but trips into the mud. "I must have brushed against some tree sap."

"Ain't those kind of trees out here," Roy says, gruffly.

I bite Roy's shoulder, and he drops me to the ground. Rolling away, I back against a bush. "He's compromised," I shout.

They stand over me. "There are two aliens. The other sprayed him with that stuff," I say.

"Two aliens?" Hugh mutters.

"One is good. He was designed as a weapon, but he can feel real emotions. Empathy, Roy. I'm telling you, he's on our side," I say.

Well, he's on my side. But if I can get the others to help save him, maybe he'll repay the favor.

"You know how crazy you sound?" Roy asks.

"I'm not crazy. I know a hell of a lot more than you," I say. "On the other starship, there was a tape."

"You went to the other starship?" Hugh asks.

"I've seen the video footage. The entire mission is a sham. But it's not just Fassbender you have to worry about. It's the entire government. They're trying to colonize space, Roy. They're building an army."

"An army you are bringing back to Earth," he says. "What makes you so sure this isn't the reaction they planned for."

"He loves me," I say.

All three of the men groan. Turin was right. All humans do is think about themselves. They can't stop to think that maybe love could actually transcend all boundaries.

"I've been fucked with for too long out here. I can't take this anymore," Roy says.

"I say we take both of them," Hugh mutters.

Roy glances at the Captain. "Something is wrong with him," he says.

The Captain scratches the boils on his skin. "It really itches," he says, nails cutting through dense blisters.

He twists, and I glance at the bubbles that have formed over his flesh. One pops, and he lets out a shrill whimper. "I'm going to die out here," he cries.

No one can deny how alarming he looks. He's injured, but without Turin, I won't be able to help him. It's pretty clear Hugh and Roy are against me, so all bets are off.

I just hope Turin can find me before Zakar or Fassbender.

Roy bends over the Captain to get a better look, but he quickly darts his nose away. "Jesus, you smell like death," he says.

Halloway groans and pulls out a pistol. His eyes shift, turning a dark red. His mouth tremors, teeth growing inches.

"He's turning into one," I say.

"I'll kill you if you touch me," he growls, body mutating.

I stand and put my hands in the air. "Let me go. I'm not here to hurt you," I tell them.

He twists his head in agony. His ligaments pop and extend over his growing set of bones.

He's turning into a monster, something far worse than Zakar.

"You all left me to die," he shouts, voice echoing throughout the forest.

"Guys!" I yell. "We need to get the fuck out of here."

The monster fires his weapon, but luckily, his aim isn't too sharp because his hand has started to... grow.

I grab Hugh's wheelchair and push. "Follow me."

One more shot rings out, and I feel the chill air whip as the bullet rockets near my ear. I keep running, but I brush my face to see if I'm hit.

"Everyone good?" I call out.

"If good means alive, I'm good," Roy says.

Hugh exhales and looks up at me. "I'm sorry for turning on you back there."

My feet hit the ground, mud splashing across my pants. "Are you sure you aren't going to do it again?" I ask.

Roy cuts across the trail.

"Roy," I say, attempting to stop him. "Swear on your life that you won't turn on me if I get you out of this mess."

He wags his head. "Honey, do you think I have a choice? Captain is one of them, and I can't fly worth a damn to get us off this rock. I could kill you, but it wouldn't do a damn thing for me."

"Hey, you went to flight school, right?" Hugh asks.

I grab him and pause. "Guys, I can't fly one of those things. It's nothing like the old rockets. The entire system control panel is different."

"Exactly," Hugh says. "You won't have to work as hard. The new systems are a piece of cake to operate."

I think back to the car crash. Suddenly, I feel the wind whip through the open windows. I can see the steering wheel shift toward the curb

of the freeway.

We're moving too fast.

"Mom!" I scream.

We're flying through the barrier.

"Dad!"

Our car doesn't have thrusters. There are no rocket engines attached to this hunk of metal. We're going down, and it's nothing like the videos they show in school.

It's nothing you can imagine.

When our car hit the concrete, my life didn't flash before my eyes, but the talcum powder from the air bag did.

And then there was the screeching metal, the crash that blasted like a cannon against my eardrums. I felt all of that.

It became a part of me.

I remember expecting to hear screams or sirens, anything to shoot my adrenaline into the sky. But once it was over, I just sat there with my seat belt on.

I looked straight ahead at the damaged seat in front of me. Blocking out all of the bad, I found a way to become numb. I acted like nothing happened.

I'm not going through that again.

"I can't fly our starship home," I say.

"Why the fuck not?" Roy asks.

"Because I..." I take a deep breath and exhale. "I'm not strong enough."

Roy bites his upper lip. "Well, I will need you to be strong for me. Otherwise, we die."

I'm falling back into that numbness again.

“Naomi? You hear me?” Roy asks.

Ever since I left to help the crew, everyone has expected the world from me. I have been questioned, held against my will, and interrogated by my own people.

Yes, Turin took me. But he saved my fucking life.

I miss him more than I’ve ever missed someone before. Maybe even more than my family. It’s hard to quantify. I built a bond with Turin. A real bond.

I nod, but I’m not sure I can fly us out of here. Not without fuel. Not without proper training. If Turin doesn’t find a way back to me, I’m not sure I’ll want to leave.

I’d stay for him.

“You’ll do it?” Hugh asks.

“Sure. Whatever you want,” I say.

Peering in the dark entrance of Discovery Base, a strong feeling guides me in. I didn’t understand why we’d ever need to come back to this place again, but I think I get it now.

The sun will rise in just a few hours. In the light, we’ll be an even easier target, but that’s okay with me. That’s what I want.

This is the way I win.

This is the way I get my love back.

TWELVE

Turin

IN THE STARSHIP, ZAKAR CROUCHES, EYES ANALYZING FOR A MOMENT OF weakness. His pupils are as wide as coins, and large veins protrude against his skin. It has been some time since I have seen him act this way.

His tongue flails as he talks. "Bow your head to me, brother."

"I am not your brother," I growl.

A soft and cunning chuckle comes with a threat. "I could have taken her," he says. "I gave her to you. I let you have her first. You should be kissing my feet."

We both circle the opposite ends of the room. "I can't do this anymore, Zakar," I say.

"You have no choice," he sneers. "We are connected to our pain together."

"Maybe you feel that way, but they have blessed me with faculties I never knew could exist," I say. "I am different from you. Much different."

"You are weak."

"Empathy is stronger than your systemizing brain can handle," I growl.

"You are weaker than her," he continues. "You have let a woman control you. A whore. You let her convince you that humans are docile, innocent creatures. That they would do anything to give you a better life is a storybook lie."

"Maybe they wouldn't. But she would," I say.

"You will never have a better life, Turin. This is your blessing. Avalon. But if we work together, we can get to Earth," he says.

If we work together. I've been hearing him say that for a long time. Listening to him has gotten me nowhere.

I raise my voice. "She will get me there."

"She will destroy you. Do you remember what happened to Doctor Grubber?" he asks.

I circle around a large beam, hoisting myself up to the second floor, away from his attack span.

"What about him?" I ask.

I remember Doctor Steven Grubber. He was one of the scientists who experimented on me. Before we escaped, he promised me my freedom. He told me he realized the error in his ways.

He told Zakar the same, but it was all a lie, a betrayal of the highest order. It was a test to see how well we could see through a lie. Zakar tested positive. I tested negative.

He has hung that over my head since it happened.

"You remember," he says.

Zakar killed the doctor as the man was begging for his life. If I can recall, he had a wife and children. A family.

Zakar was filled with so much rage that he carved the word, "betrayal" over his bedpost.

Those are days I dread thinking about. Naomi put those memories out of my mind. Zakar is forcing me to relive them.

“We are what they did to us. We always will be,” Zakar hisses.

One by one, the memories flash through my eyes.

There was my birth. I don’t remember everything. Just bits and pieces. I floated in a large tank, sustained by the nutrients floating through a plastic umbilical cord.

I remember my body growing. A great pain consumed me. I roared and screamed, and tried to pull out my tubes, but the scientists remained calm. They took notes. They gave me sedatives to keep me docile when they needed, and they gave me other drugs to induce rage.

It took me three years to grow to my full size. It takes humans an average of eighteen.

As soon as they pulled me from my tank, I knew the humans were weaker than me.

I thought of a plan to escape Discovery Base, but they moved us to a second facility.

Suddenly, I could move freely. They let me stay in the small observation room.

I waited. I watched. And I learned their habits.

There were others, but I don’t remember them anymore. I can’t recall the sounds of their voices. I can barely remember their expressions or reactions. They are like ghosts to me now.

When they made Zakar, the perfect alien specimen, it was all over for everyone. He was the one weapon they thought they could count on.

He was pure carnage.

It took them a month to harness him in. He resisted most of their drugs. And when given any amount of pain, he took it in stride. All of the abuse just made him stronger.

When they tested on us, I avoided him at all costs. I wouldn’t even look him in the eyes.

The truth was I used to hate everyone. Humans. Aliens. Every damn thing that lived was an enemy, as far as I was concerned.

Eventually, the pain from their treatments weakened me. It was evident I wasn't like Zakar. I could only withstand so much.

Once that was out in the open, Zakar knew he could take advantage of me. He used my weaknesses to persuade me to team up with him. He was going to get us out of there.

Of course, I had to follow him. But I shouldn't have trusted him.

Now, I need to find a way to beat him.

I run through the long corridor, lights flashing around my face and body, throwing me off balance. I grab the railing and suck in a large breath. I have to keep moving.

I can't stop thinking about Naomi. She could be in danger, and I can't do a fucking thing about it.

It's tearing me apart.

"I don't give a damn about the doctor," I yell.

I can hear his footsteps following mine from below. "They are all the same, programmed to lie for their own good. Programmed to enslave."

I jump up to a third level, ignoring his words as much I can. "Where have you put the fuel barrels?" I ask.

His laughter reverberates throughout the ship.

"What have you done, Zakar? Tell me," I say.

I turn left into a second, smaller corridor. I bend and crawl inside. At the end of the tunnel is the escape hatch.

"I dumped the barrels into the ocean," he says.

I keep crawling. He has to be lying.

"You fool. We won't be able to leave," I say.

And then the truth hits me. This was his plan all along. The games he played with the crew led me to follow Naomi. Once I had her, it was game over. He had me cornered.

He knew her pussy would lock me in, and he used it against me.

He never wanted to leave planet Avalon.

"You bastard," I mutter. "You got rid of the fuel because you want to keep us here."

"You weren't playing by the rules," Zakar says.

I'm close to the escape hatch. Reaching out, I can almost touch the metal bar to the outside. I'm so fucking close.

Nearby, a red emergency lever catches my eyes.

Zakar continues. "You were doing everything she told you to do because you couldn't get enough of that addictive sweetness."

"You're a monster," I grunt.

I throw my weight toward the escape hatch. I grab the metal and start to twist, but it's so rusted that it feels locked in place.

"And you're too stupid for your own good," he says, voice coming from the platform below me.

He knows this ship like the back of his hand. He's coming to get me.

Using all my strength, I turn the bar. It moves an inch but seizes up again. "Come on," I growl.

"Earth Federation will not let themselves lose this fight so easily. There will be a third starship. And if that mission yields no endowment to our cause, then we will wait for the fourth," he says.

He's coming closer. I can hear every footstep grow louder.

I bare my teeth and twist another inch. It loosens, and the rust chips away.

I push harder, throwing all of my weight into it. It turns a full one hundred and eighty degrees.

"Come on," I scream.

Finally, it turns the entire way.

I unlock the hatch door, and the morning light pours in.

He's right behind me now. I can feel his hands hit against the corridor as he ducks inside.

Zakar leans forward, teeth glistening against the light. He says, "Eventually, we will make it off this planet, and when we do, we will be unstoppable."

The fuel we had been storing for years was so important. I never thought he'd be so stupid as to toss that into the ocean. I should have known he'd sabotage everything.

It will take ages before Naomi and I can escape and build a life on Earth.

Earth might never send another convoy again. This could have been the only way out.

"Let me leave," I say.

"And go where? Back to her? Back to Discovery Base, the place where you were violated and tortured?" he asks. "I told you, the fuel is gone. She can't save you."

She already did. She saved my heart. But he wouldn't know anything about that. He doesn't have a heart.

"Perhaps," I say. "But I can sleep easy knowing that no one will be here to save you."

"I don't need saving."

I pull the red emergency lever and stare him dead in the eyes. "Go fuck yourself, Zakar."

A siren rings out, so blaring it sends Zakar back. "Turn it off!" he screams, twitching.

The frequencies won't be enough to harm him permanently, but they'll buy me some time.

I pull myself out of the escape hatch and jump through a set of large trees. "Naomi!" I shout and listen for a response.

There is only the sound of Zakar's footsteps pounding against the soil. She could be anywhere.

She could be in the cave we hid out inside earlier. She could be back at her starship, waiting for me to arrive with the fuel that's long gone.

It's possible she's back at Discovery Base. But why would she go there?

I need to act fast. Zakar's saliva contains enzymes that cause a person to mutate. Eventually, Holloway will die, but for now, he is highly dangerous. She doesn't know how cruel his condition will turn.

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe she has already seen a mild glimpse of the monster he has become.

I ravage through the thick leaves, eyes focused on a set of footsteps. They lead me to the small encampment we found Fassbender, along with the rest of her starship's crew.

No one is around, but the prints in the mud lead me to believe that something happened here very recently.

I search the camp. There's a small case containing male clothing. It's nothing of importance, so I toss it aside.

Lowering to the wet ground, I find some frayed rope. Near to the rope is a piece of torn clothing. I recognize it as the pattern on the bottom of Naomi's pants.

Her scent lingers the air. This is where she came. She must have rescued the others, but that doesn't explain where Fassbender or the Captain are hiding.

Something happened here. Someone hurt or tried to hurt Naomi. Whoever that someone is will pay.

I keep off the path, heading deeper and deeper into the jungle. Fully primal, I use my scent to guide me. Somehow, I end up back at the sleeping quarters.

Slowing down, I reach the door of the first room. With caution, push it open.

The room is empty, but there's the message scrawled on the wall. Betrayal. Now I recognize where I am. This is Dr. Steven N. Grubber's room.

Nothing about this is shocking to me. Yet, I can't shake the feeling that something is different about this place. I walk inside and sit on the cot.

On the dresser is a wallet. I open it and flip through the strange plastic cards, all numbered systematically. I pause when I reach a photograph of the man who lied to me.

It's a family picture, and everyone is smiling. He is with a partner he loves.

I set the photograph back down and bite the inside of my cheek.

Do bad men deserve to die? Or do they deserve some compassion and understanding? I cannot pretend to know the answer.

But as I sit and think about this man, and the impact he had on my life, I start to let go. And once I do, I can remember things a little more clearly.

I remember looking into his eyes as he lay dying. His hands were cold, and his pupils looked like the storm clouds in the sky.

He told me, "We need to get to the servers."

Zakar pulled him away, said I needed to follow his lead.

At the time, I thought the doctor was talking about his crew phoning Earth. Now, I'm not so sure.

How can I make sense of this?

My head is throbbing. I press my thumbs against my temples, but the pain won't pass.

The doctor meant something by those words.

"The servers at Discovery Base," I whisper.

It's been a long time since those servers ran. The cables are worn, but maybe there's a way to turn them back on. I have a feeling Naomi won't be too far.

None of this solves our problem with the fuel, but if we can phone Earth, maybe they can send another ship to save Naomi.

They'll kill me, but that's okay. I'd do anything for that woman.

I run back to the trail toward Discovery Base. I try to put together all of the pieces inside my head. The servers – was the doctor simply trying to warn Earth of our escape?

I stumble through the wilderness, thoughts confusing my general direction. Pausing to take a breath, I kneel and shake my head.

I've been followed.

Twigs crack underneath Fassbender's boots as he limps around a corner. His right leg is bleeding, flesh torn by a set of sharp talons. He breathes and stares me down.

My nostrils flare. I inch away from him. "Leave me be," I say. "I don't want to kill you."

Fassbender calms and raises his pistol. "Stop moving, alien."

Slowly, I raise my hands to show him I won't strike. "I told you. I am not hunting you," I say.

He waves the gun from my chest toward the ground. "On your knees."

I drop and feel the mud cave around my kneecaps.

I can't believe it. The bastard got me.

* * *

"I've finally found you," Fassbender says, carefully inching forward. "You sick beast."

If his plan is to take me back to Earth to be studied, he's in for a rude awakening. "The fuel is gone," I say. "Zakar drained it in the ocean. There is no going back home. Please, I can help you and your crew."

I'm willing to talk this out in a very diplomatic way, but I'm not getting very far. Fassbender keeps the barrel pointed at my solar plexus.

"Zakar will be looking for us. We can work together," I lie.

Fassbender merely laughs. "Subject 04. I named you Turin."

I try to reason with him. Anything to keep his mind occupied, so he doesn't pull that trigger enough times to end me.

"You don't know what you're doing. If we don't stop Zakar, everyone will die, including you," I say.

He takes another step forward, confidently edging his heels into the mud. "I think I know what I'm doing. I know all about you," he says.

"You only know what you've been told. What you've read in those reports is not the entire truth," I tell him.

Fassbender's face shifts into a mysterious glare. "I watched your birth," he says. "All the way in tiny, tiny Kentucky, I watched them make you."

I lower my hands.

"You were just a microscope sample. A splash of human. A dash of alien. Incubated and ready to go," he says, breathing in deep through his nose. It reminds me of Zakar.

My heart pounds, and I feel a great weight fall over my shoulders. "Lies," I say.

He keeps speaking. "You grew up so fast," he mutters.

Enamored, he lowers his weapon. This is my moment. I should attack, but what he's telling me is so mind blowing that I can't react.

Tears of adoration fill his eyes. This man is crazy. I cannot reason with him.

"I wanted to get a good look at you," he says. "It's been so long since I last saw your face. Oh, if you only knew what I went through to get here. Forged documents. Convinced the higher ranks I could get the job done. I did it all just to get to you," he says.

My muscles twitch. "You disgust me," I say.

"Say what you must. Every son rejects his father at some point or another," he says.

"Son...?"

I swallow and tremble with rage building inside me.

"You were my pet project. My baby," he says.

I don't know what to say. Suddenly, the air feels too thick to breathe.

He takes another step forward, close enough to reach out and touch me. "I know you believe you're a failure, but you aren't. You are my design, perfect in every way," Fassbender says.

His design...

"My fate isn't yours to design," I say.

The urge to kill takes over, and before I know it, I'm lunging through the air at him.

Fassbender is quick on the draw. I feel the bullet. The hot, twisting metal pierces through my skin, dragging all the way through my insides.

I stumble and growl, placing my hand above my face, a half-assed attempt to shield any more bullets coming my way.

He steps over me. "You may be perfect, but don't think for a second you're not expendable," he says. "I know your strengths and your weaknesses."

My blood trickles down my chest, warm and unsettling. Circling my finger around the wound, I inhale as I dig the bullet fragments out.

I cough out more blood. "What am I?" I ask.

Fassbender's lips twitch. "A creature that can absorb the best qualities life can offer. A creature that can soak up empathy. More important for me and Earth Federation... you are a creature that will breed for us."

I feel weaker than ever. "What are you talking about?"

"We needed a weapon. Zakar served that function well, but his anger impeded other important functions," he says.

"Meaning?"

"He needed help with sexual activity. His sperm would not fertilize any egg. We had to concede that he was not a breeder," he says. "So I came up with a proposition. I wanted to make one. I wanted to create an alien that would breed the bio-weapon right into the host. That way, we could build an entire army of predators."

"But you made me first. I remember it," I say.

"We kept Zakar out of sight until the proper time came."

"Why did you come to this planet? You must have known your bullets wouldn't kill him," I say.

His brow furrows. "I will reason with him. Eventually, he will listen."

"You're out of your mind. He's built to destroy," I say.

"If what you say is true, about the fuel... it doesn't matter either way," he says. "From here on out, there is no rhyme or reason. It's all a game of chance."

More games. Great.

I think of the child Naomi and I will make. I think of the love that child came from. And then I think about Discovery Base, and all of the horrors that went on there.

That's no love. A father and son bond doesn't come from a computer screen a thousand light years away. It doesn't come from a team of paramilitary torturers or the wallet of a galactic defense organization.

Love comes from within. Love changes you. If he doesn't get that, he can't comprehend what life is all about.

He doesn't just remind me of Zakar. He is exactly like him. Except, Fassbender doesn't have the same killer gene inside him. He just wishes he did.

I stand, ready to rip this man's throat out. "You're not my father," I scream and throw him across the jungle.

He shouts in pain as he collides against the ground, ass digging into the soil, deep. He takes one final shot, and it hits me in the heart.

I stumble, face first. My teeth drag across the soil as I too hit Avalon's floor.

NASA fooled me. Just like the crew, I was double-crossed and lied to by everyone.

Even Zakar lied to me.

"Take me to him," he says. "I need to talk to Zakar."

"You know where he is," I whisper.

"I need more than his location. I need you to talk him into following reason. I am required to take him home with me to Earth," Fassbender replies.

"Then you will destroy Earth," I say.

He inches his pistol closer. "Take. Me. To. Him," he mutters.

He's a fool. Zakar will kill him, no questions asked. And then he'll kill me.

My heart turns to stone. "Fine," I mutter. "Let's go to Discovery Base."

This is bad. Real bad. If Naomi is at Discovery Base, Zakar will be there, too. He'll be watching from afar, searching for the right moment to strike.

The walk to the base is cold and silent. Everything feels off, like I'm not quite inside my body. Something is happening to me. Something I can't explain.

I push the leaves aside and peer through to Discovery Base. And then I see her, and it's like time completely stops.

No matter the danger, I feel lucky to be alive.

Fassbender presses the barrel against the back of my neck. "Don't move. Wait for them to react. I want to know what they are up to."

I'm not moving. I'm just staring at the curves of her hips, the hump of her ass, and the shine of her hair.

I need to feel her again.

I need to feel the warmth of her pussy, enveloping me, shrouding all of the bad, giving me everything I have ever asked to receive.

This man can't win.

Naomi is near the entrance, discussing something serious with the rest of the crew. As she waves her arms emphatically at the men, her skin turns flush.

She is the most beautiful creature I have ever laid eyes on. To this day, I still get the same feeling I felt the first time I saw her here. That feeling's not going away.

No, it's here for good.

I lean forward and listen to what she's telling them. "The Captain," she says. "He isn't well, but we can't leave him here."

Roy scoffs. "Isn't well? Is that what you call it? I'm pretty sure he turned into a fucking monster back there."

Hugh agrees. "The Captain is not our captain anymore. He's gone, Naomi. There's no way we'll get him back to normal now."

She paces, eyelids creased with concentration. I wish I could reach out and tell her that she can do it. She is the captain they always needed, and she's strong enough to jump into the role.

Just as I need her, she needs me. When we are separate, everything falls apart.

"I can't be your captain," she cries, voice much louder than it should be.

Both Hugh and Roy stare at her.

Roy leans back on his heel. "You gave us an oath," he says.

Sighing, she shakes her head with high velocity. "Okay," she repeats. "I'll do it. I just..."

Roy finishes her sentence. "You want your alien back."

"I know you don't understand, but he's become my world," she says.

I close my eyes and exhale, heavily. I glance at Fassbender and grunt.

"Stay still," he tells me. "Let's listen to your little love story."

Naomi continues. "He's misunderstood, yes. Frightening, maybe to some. But to me, he's strong. He's willing to learn and absorb one's feelings. He may be an alien to you, but he's the love of my life," she says. "The cherry on top is that you need him to help you."

Roy is far too cocky with the assumption he's about to bring to the table. "I'm not too worried. We have enough ammo to kill Zakar," Roy says.

"He can't die," she says.

Hugh wipes his forehead. "Excuse me?"

"He's not like Turin. He was designed to kill and absorb all that comes his way. He's cunning, too. Without Turin's help, he'll outsmart us," she says.

Roy sighs. "Well, if you know where he is, now would be a good time to tell us."

Naomi bends her neck, scratching awkwardly.

"That's what I thought," Roy says.

I'm right here. I won't let you die.

I want to scream those words in her direction, but I keep my mouth shut.

When Naomi doesn't speak, Roy tries to take charge. "We will stay here and search the premises until we find something that might be able to help us get off this planet."

That's his plan? It's no wonder they got stuck in this mess. This team can hardly manage themselves.

There is nothing in that facility that can help them.

"Wait," Naomi says, pausing. "There is something."

"What do you mean by something?" Roy asks.

"Frequencies," Naomi says. "Sounds."

"I really wish you'd just quit it," Roy groans.

"Elaborate," Hugh says.

"Turin told me that an alarm went off once here. The frequencies seemed to hurt Zakar, but it didn't damage him enough" she says.

Hugh nods and bites his bottom lip. "I don't know. We can't rely on noises to hurt the bastard. We need some real firepower."

"I'm serious," Naomi states, confidently.

Roy meanders toward her. "Well, then, sweetheart. Why don't you tell us where we can find these magical frequencies?"

She stands tall. "The relay network," she says.

"The what?" Hugh asks.

Even I'm scratching my head.

Naomi makes her case. "The servers tied to the network. Zakar destroyed them for a reason. At first, I thought it might be because contact was a threat. But then I realized how little that made sense. If Zakar thrives on killing, he would want more humans to arrive. The more that show up, the more they could breed and populate Avalon as a planet of war. But instead, he cut up the lines. Why would he do that?"

"You're asking me?" Hugh asks.

Roy chuckles. "Because he's a senseless, insane brute," he says. "Look, there's not much point to analyzing these things. The alien went crazy. That's all."

"Maybe," Naomi says. "But then I remembered our network server room, downstairs in the starship. They needed a lot of power to be able to contact Earth. Do you remember how loud it was down there?"

Hugh laughs. "That's right. They made you wear that whacky ear protection because it busted up some workers' eardrums."

"The power of the network creates a hum, a frequency that hurts the alien," she says.

"Yeah, but will it kill it?" Roy asks.

"We have to try," she states.

Of course. The doctor's words make sense now. He was telling me to fix the cables and reconnect the servers.

People live double lives. They act and privately reflect on decisions made. Maybe that doctor had a conscience. Maybe he was trying to clue me in on Zakar's weakness.

"The servers," Fassbender whispers near my ear. "That's the weakness."

I grimace. "Great. You got what you wanted. Now can you let me go?"

"Are you kidding me? We're getting closer to what we need," he says.

"Quit saying we," I say.

When he gets what he wants, he'll kill his crew. He'll take Naomi away from me for good. There's no formula to make a woman like her. She'll just be... gone.

He probes my back with the gun again. "When they enter that facility, we'll move with caution. If you even try to fuck this up, I'll..."

But his voice fades. At first, I'm confused, but as soon as I look down at palms, I notice that I'm glowing.

My vision shakes. I feel a power growing inside of me.

Fassbender's tone changes. He jams the gun into my back, demanding answers. "What's going on? What are you doing?"

I hold my hands in front of my eyes. The blue glow illuminates brighter.

"You're the one who designed me. Don't you have all the answers?" I ask.

Fassbender scrambles back as I illuminate the entire jungle. He shoots once, but the bullet doesn't even make it through the glow. He shoots again with the same results.

"No," he whispers, doubling back and falling into a thick pool of mud and leaves. "This can't be happening."

I stand and lean over Fassbender, forcing my hand around his brittle neck. Squeezing, I lift him in the air. The more he chokes and kicks, the harder I squeeze.

Before I can crush his bones, a tranquilizer dart rockets by. It hits Fassbender's chest. He groans, eyes drifting to sleep.

I turn and see Roy, aim fixated on me now. "Don't shoot. I have no qualms with you or your crew," I say.

Roy doesn't put down the tranq gun. "I've heard a lot of things in my day. Been given a lot of promises that weren't fulfilled."

"I am not a human. I do not lie," I say.

"This was a mistake," Fassbender says, slurring his words. "This project should have never happened."

I drop him to the floor.

Roy drags his heel forward. "What's wrong with your skin?"

The glow around my skin dissipates. "I saw Naomi," I say.

She saved my life.

Naomi steps in front of Roy, holding her arms out. "If you shoot him, you shoot me," she says.

Roy bucks his head and sighs, lowering the weapon.

Naomi runs toward me, and I can finally breathe again. We're not out of the muck, but I'm in it with the person I love.

She leaps into the air, colliding against my chest. Her legs straddle my hips as she kisses me. "I thought he killed you," she cries.

"No one's going to kill me when I have you to fight for," I growl.

The taste of her brings me back to a special place. As I close my eyes and caress her ribs and hips, I catch glimpses of our time at the lake. Our fun inside the cave.

Breathing in her scent, I don't want to pull away. I want to keep rolling my lips around hers, snaking my tongue into her sinful mouth.

But I can feel Roy staring a hole right through me. He hates me because I'm not his kind. Because I'm taller, stronger, and better able to pleasing a woman.

He hates me because I am what he has always denied existed. And that's okay. Once we kill of Zakar, he'll see my loyalty to her.

We'll get to Earth, somehow. And when we do, we can start a real family.

She pecks my cheek as I pull away. Rude by human standards, my cock protrudes into the air, pulsating for her lust.

I cough awkwardly. "We need to do something with his body," I tell Roy. "He'll wake eventually."

Roy nods. "I can't believe I'm actually about to trust an alien, but... Do you have any rope?"

I pull out the frayed rope I found at Fassbender's encampment. It's not the toughest material, but it's all we have to use. "Found this back a little ways," I say.

Roy takes it and chuckles. "Well, he used this on us. It's only fitting we use it on him."

"We'll tie him to this tree," I say, pointing at a large and sturdy trunk.

Roy nods. "Sure, but we have to make a promise we'll come back to him. I don't trust he won't escape."

Together, we carry his body toward the thick trunk. After making sure each knot is secure, we stand back and leave.

Naomi runs and grabs my hand. Leaning her head against the side of my chest, she kisses more. "I've missed you so much," she says.

Words can't explain how much she's been on my mind. Every waking hour feels like destiny. She is my purpose.

"Are you hurt?" I ask, eyeing her frayed clothes.

"No," she says. "I'm okay. Did you find the fuel?"

I suck on my teeth and look at the ground.

"The fuel," Roy repeats her words. "Don't tell me it's missing."

"It's not missing, it's just—"

Hugh has stayed silent for most of this, but he promptly interrupts. "Gone," he says. "The fuel is gone."

"Maybe we can find another way," I say, grasping at straws.

Naomi lets go of my chest. She wanders away, melancholic and distant. All I wanted was to make things right...

"We're stuck here then," Hugh says.

"No. No fucking way," Roy growls.

Naomi keeps walking until she gets to the shattered doorway. Bending down, she grabs a piece of glass, staring at it. She looks catatonic.

"My entire life, I've tried to find someone who could make sense of me," she says, holding the piece of glass in the air so we can see it. "Someone who could put the pieces together."

"I've failed you," I say, bowing my head in shame.

"But you haven't. We'll get off this planet. Whether it's tonight or years from now. We'll get back to Earth. I have faith."

Nearby, the bushes sway. All four of us look as a large body rises and stumbles toward us. "Captain," Roy says, reaching for his tranquilizer gun. He shoots his neck, but the monster rips it out with ease, roaring.

"Shit," he hisses. "That was my last round."

"Everyone run inside," I growl. "Now!"

The beast leaps and swings his fist. An animalistic punch sends Roy flying into the hallway.

I drop back, but the monster is reaching for Naomi.

I lunge into the air. "Naomi, watch out!" I yell.

Naomi's dark hair whips as she turns her head. Her lips quiver before her eyes widen with horror.

This can't be fucking happening.

Before I get a chance at revenge, the disgusting brute takes her and dashes into the facility. A deep, blood-curdling scream reverberates from his slobbering mouth.

He drags her out of sight, into the place that formed all of my nightmares.

I don't hesitate. I just keep following her lead.

Naomi is just too important.

THIRTEEN

Naomi

HIS HANDS DIG INTO MY RIBCAGE, FINGERNAILS DRAGGING ACROSS MY skin as he drives through the hallway.

Screaming out for Turin, I look back at the entrance. Before we round the corner, I see Roy on the ground, knocked out from the Captain's blow.

How did this happen? How did it get to this?

The Captain reaches the end of the hallway and stops, slobbering over my face. "Captain, please remember," I plead. "I'm Naomi. I'm not here to hurt you."

His grin widens. His eyes lower and turn inward.

Roy was right. This isn't the Captain. He is just a body to use by Zakar's venomous goo.

He holds me near his chest, screaming and digging his nails in deeper.

I feel blood trickle.

He's going to squeeze me to death.

"Help," I yell. "Turin..."

In my hand, I squeeze the piece of glass I picked up on the outside of the premises. I can't strike. He has my arms bound.

A second roar echoes in the distance. I recognize it as Zakar.

Hanging my head, I breathe in silence. Between the Captain, Zakar, and the missing I don't think there's a chance of survival. All of this has come to a head, but I never planned on dying.

I planned on coming back with the alien I discovered and fell in love with. I planned on a family.

Heavy footsteps shake the ground. "Turin," I grunt and try to pull away from the Captain's monstrous hands.

The Captain swings, knocking my head so hard it throws out my neck. "Turin," I repeat.

He hits me again. This time, I feel the blood fall down my cheeks and nostrils. My sinuses swell with hot pain. "Turin, I love you," I mutter.

I feel dizzy. My eyes are closing. In my peripheral, I can see the Captain raise his fist one more time. One last punch to knock the last light out of me.

I smile.

I smile because I see Turin run around that corner. I see the determined look in his eyes, and I sense that everything will be all right.

He dives toward us, muscles bulging like large cannonballs. Before the Captain can smash my brains in, Turin wrestles him to the floor.

"Run!" he cries.

I slash the Captain's face and run to the other end of the hallway.

Turin takes a clean hit to the face before I turn the corner. "Just keep going. Don't worry about me," he shouts.

He's right, but I want to know he will be okay. I need to know that all this is for a reason.

The server room. I'm so close. It's just a few more doors ahead of me.

I trip and catch my balance against the wall. My muscles hurt. I can barely breathe, let alone see. I'm wet with my own blood.

But I'm not weak.

I slide around the corner and see the door. Quickly, I make my way toward it. Every nerve tightens as I twist the handle.

I open the door to see Zakar, crouching like a leopard.

Faster than my heart can beat, I slam the door against his face and run into the first room I can find.

Gently, I close the door and turn off the lights. I crouch and crawl toward a thin, blinking red light.

I can hear him, his nasty breathing. His feet slap the ground, stopping near the room next to mine.

I hold my breath and try to find another way out.

If I squint my eyes hard enough, I can make out an audio panel. It's a large sound mixer. The only time I've ever seen one of these was back in college when I dated an engineer, but I recognize it almost instantly.

This must be what they used to send us audio.

I know what to use it for.

I reach behind the system and flip on the power switch. To my surprise, it illuminates.

Zakar is coming for me. Every step he takes sends a jolt through my heart. "C'mere sweetie-pie. I won't hurt you," he croaks.

Leaning forward, I grab the sides of a large recorder. With tears falling down my cheeks, I whisper my final goodbye.

"Hello? Testing. Testing. I have little time to speak, so I'll make it quick. He found me, the wretched, alien beast. The alien you helped create... All of this is what you wanted, wasn't it? Congratulations. How did you know we'd fall for your sick plan? How did you know he'd take me?"

Zakar's footsteps grow louder.

"Oh, God. No..." I whisper and wipe the snot away from my nose.

Zakar growls and gulps, choking on air.

"Shit! He's coming. I have to leave. I'm sorry for everything. I failed the Avalon expedition. Most of all, I failed myself. To everyone back on Earth, you don't know what's out there. You don't know what they're doing to us."

The door creaks open. My skin prickles with goosebumps.

I swallow my fear and find the courage inside of me to face this other monster. "Okay. This is it. There's nothing else left to lose. He has me cornered..."

I shut the recorder off and press the send key, knowing that no one will be there to receive it. The network is damaged, and with no one near to fix it, I can't hope to be heard.

But still, if I die, and others like us are sent here, I want them to understand how bad this place is. They need to be warned.

Zakar creeps into the room. I turn and edge against the computers, heart racing. "Zakar," I say.

His lips form into a wicked grin, exposing his disgusting teeth. "You know my name," he says.

"I know more than I care to," I reply.

Inching to my right, I slide behind the computers. He follows, circling around me.

I duck out of the room, back into the hallway. Not too far off, the Captain and Turin still fight.

He slides behind me, so I turn around, placing my hands in front of me. I've already been beaten. He must know he has me.

I reach behind my back to feel the door handle to the server room.

"You know why I'm here," he says.

“To kill me,” I say.

I try to swallow, but my mouth is so dry that my uvula sticks to my tongue.

“To rut,” he says. “To impale you with my cock.”

With extra caution, I turn the door handle, slow as a snail.

“That won’t do you any good,” I say.

Sweat falls from my brow, momentarily blinding one eye. Zakar uses the moment to move closer to me.

He sniffs the air before my face, dropping his nose toward my chest. “And why not?”

I turn the handle and stumble onto my butt, landing into the server room.

He leans over me, fingers stretching.

I kick his hands away. “I’m pregnant,” I bellow.

I nudge against the corner of the giant black box that houses the servers. There are cables everywhere, ripped out from the backside. I try to smooth out the frayed edges.

Zakar edges his chin forward and makes a gagging noise. His entire jaw unhinges. His teeth extend outward, near my lips. “I need you,” he hisses.

I brace and reach into my pocket, grabbing some spare electrical tape. While biting my tongue with horror, I attempt to patch the thick bunch of cables.

“Need you so fucking bad,” he says.

I plug the cables back into the server.

But nothing happens. The servers don’t turn on. I don’t know why I thought they would. The lights didn’t work in the hallway. There’s no power here.

I gasp, tears and saliva flying across his face. All out of options, I convulse with fear.

My heart has broken into million pieces.

It feels like life, or God, or whatever force exists above, never wanted me to find happiness. My end, believe it or not, comes with the price of death.

And the worst part about it isn't that I'm going to die by the hands of a ravenous alien. No, it's what comes right before that is the hardest. It's facing the pain and truth, knowing that the loneliness I've always felt in my heart will never disappear.

It will follow me until he digs his cock into my pussy, teeth latching into my neck.

"I'm going to take you and that baby of yours," he whispers.

I close my eyes and turn my head away from him. His hot breath lingers as his hands form around my neck.

I swallow, and he grips even harder.

My throat is caught. I can't breathe. Bucking forward, I grab his wrists and try to pry him off me, but his arms feel like concrete.

The light fades from my eyes. I twist my head, able to keep awake for a moment until dots fill my vision.

I see Turin standing in the doorway, covered in blood. He's injured, but he looks like a warrior.

Am I dreaming? Did I already die?

"Zakar," he says.

Zakar lets go of my throat and spins, hissing. He lowers his head and drives against Turin's body. His back caves in the wall.

Turin spins away, swiping at Zakar's ankles. He tackles him into the cement base. The facility sways from the blow, and half of the roof crumbles.

"She's mine!" Zakar screams, scratching Turin's face with his long talons.

Turin stumbles. Blood forms in parallel rows on his cheek.

Slowly, he heals, but Zakar rushes him again, throwing him into a pile of glass.

Falling to the floor, I latch onto my neck and suck in impossible breaths, dry heaving. Quick and hot, my head burns as my vision comes back to me.

I don't know if I can keep doing this. I'm at the edge of what I can take.

Zakar pins him against the wall, dragging his talon across his chest.

I cry out in horror. "Zakar, let him go."

But the wicked alien places a talon against his throat and slices, slow and methodical.

Panicking, I think of my body and the life that has started to grow inside me, and I feel the courage to scream.

"You're pathetic," I say.

I look down, and I still have my palm around that jagged piece of glass. My hand drips with blood, but I can't feel a thing.

Zakar pauses.

"Worthless," I add.

Numb, I'm ready to end this. I'm ready for anything.

Zakar turns, and I leap up to rush him. His mouth opens to bite, but he's taken by surprise. I drive that piece of glass into his mouth, through his throat, and I make sure it cuts right through to his spine.

The alien falls to the floor, limp, but slowly regenerating.

"Naomi," Turin mutters. "You... you..."

I collapse against him, wet with sweat and blood. I have no tears left to cry. I'm just so exhausted.

"I couldn't get the servers to work," I say.

Zakar twists in agony on the floor, choking on his own blood and bits of glass. As the seconds pass, his wounds heal.

"Then we keep running," Turin says.

Hugh rolls around the corner and stops. In his hand is a small cable and power generator. "No," he says. "Enough running."

A smile slowly forms across my face.

Turin breathes. "Do it," he says.

He flips the switch on the generator. The entire facility makes a vibratory noise. One by one, the lights turn on.

Zakar slides against the floor, away from the server room.

"No," he whispers, weakened.

The servers turn on next. A solid hum generates. The noise shifts in frequency as it searches for a connection.

Zakar twists in agony, screaming. His teeth shoot out of his mouth, biting the air.

His eyes are wide with fear. His head grows large and small. "I can't die," he croaks.

The sound grows louder. I cup my hands around my ears. "Eat shit!"

I can see the moment before he dies in his eyes. There is horror and anger, a true resentment toward humanity. But it does not last.

Turin shields his body around me.

His head explodes.

Yeah, his entire head.

Sometimes, the truth is hard to believe. What I know to be true? I'll be having some interesting nightmares after this.

FOURTEEN

Turin

"IS IT OVER?" NAOMI ASKS, UNSHAKEN.

She stares away from the carnage that is Zakar's undoing. Nudging her head into my abdomen, she sighs. "Is it really over?"

It's hard to trust that it's over and done with, but it is. Zakar is dead. I did what I had to do to the Captain. There are no enemies to face anymore.

Wait...

"Fassbender," I say.

Roy groans and rubs his back. He can barely walk. "Oh, shit."

As Naomi runs through the cracked hallway, the rest of us follow.

When we're outside, Naomi is stopped near the trail. "Guys," she says.

Fassbender is standing at the other end, wielding a knife. "It doesn't matter what you do to this place," he says. "You'll never escape."

Naomi inches back. "Fassbender. Zakar is dead. We have the weapons. You have no choice, but to give up."

Fassbender heaves another breath. "There are more, you know," he says. "More missions like this. Earth Federation isn't just a project. It's the next stage for mankind."

As long as I've been held a prisoner here, I've never given that a thought. Perhaps selfishly, I thought we were the only intergalactic experiments. If he's telling the truth, we have no chance at besting them.

Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe I can't change the universe, but I can choose to change my life.

I can choose to live a normal life with Naomi. And if Earth goes against us, I'll die knowing I found something real in a universe filled with so much deception.

"You failed the mission," Roy says. "Earth Federation might've fucked us over, but they'll never accept you back now. Not after all you've cost them."

A screeching noise goes off in the distance. Naomi glares at me. "The Captain?"

I did what I had to do to the Captain. Meaning, I subdued him with some tranquilizers.

I let him live, so Fassbender could have the match he yearned for.

I take a deep breath and smile. "Goodbye, Fassbender," I say, snatching Naomi into my arms. "And good luck. You will need it."

Fassbender shivers as he drops his knife.

We walk away, headed toward the shoreline.

"You kept the Captain alive. Why?" Naomi asks.

"Because he was a part of your crew. And maybe he wasn't a good leader, but he tried his best. I just wish he heeded my warnings," I say, sighing.

"Is that why you let Fassbender live?" she asks.

"Fassbender won't be a problem for us anymore. He is injured," I say.

He was the man responsible for my life. But he was not my father. He was a fool who made two devils. A devil I once trusted would

lead me out of here. And me – someone able to see more. He thought we'd work together, but he was wrong.

All of us were used and lied to. All of us were treated like we were worthless. But in the end, this planet is ours.

And now we must say goodbye.

I take Naomi's hand.

"Why are you leading me to the shore? There's nothing over here for us," she says.

Pulling her toward a canopied area of the beach, I say, "There's something I want to show you."

The rest of the crew follows, silent and worn out.

They have been through a lot, and I feel it's worth showing them one more place.

I push through and hold the leaves away as they walk through to a small section of the jungle where the trees have been uprooted, and the land has been dug up.

Sizable piles of earth hide what is buried underneath.

This is Zakar's doing. It is the site of our shame and undoing, a place I never wanted to return to.

Yet, here we are.

The bodies of the scientists rest underneath the soil. These are the atrocities Zakar committed, hidden but never forgotten.

Zakar is not the only one to blame. I bare some of that, too.

I stood and watched as he murdered them. I could have helped, but my rage was too strong. I couldn't get it under control.

Even now, as I glare at the graves, I feel that rage. Except, it's starting to slip away. Maybe not fully. Maybe a part of that anger will always remain. But I'm learning how to ignore it.

I'm learning how to forgive.

Naomi squeezes my finger. "What is this place?" she asks.

"Avalon Cemetery," I reply without thinking.

There are two open graves where Zakar stole the alien corpses. I walk forward and look down to see the fuel barrels, stacked inside.

I can't believe it. Zakar didn't dump the fuel. He hid it here, thinking I wouldn't ever come back.

"It's the fuel barrels," I say.

Roy rushes forward, stopping at the edge of the open grave. "No shit. So, the son of a bitch didn't drain them after all?"

He reaches in and shakes one barrel. The liquid splashes loudly inside.

"Apparently not," Hugh says.

Naomi isn't staring at the fuel. She couldn't care less. Instead, her attention is fixed on the graves.

"So this is it," Naomi mutters. "The first astronauts to land on another habitable planet."

"Yes," I say.

She steps forward and kneels before large pile of soil. "You know, back home, these people were regarded as heroes. There were people who disagreed with the outward expansion into the cosmos, but they were generally thought of as crazy. Now, it's so obvious."

"I feel for them," I admit.

It's a tough pill to swallow, but I do it anyway. I have to move on from this. Otherwise, it'll haunt me forever.

All this pain, this endless suffering I thought would swallow me whole, was not all in vain. I met Naomi.

This was the path I was supposed to take.

Naomi gives me a queer look. "You really feel for these monsters?"

I nod. "They were programmed with behaviors, too. Everyone is."

Naomi's hands form a fist in the soil. She's shaking. "But they beat you, Turin. They tortured you to comply with their wishes and needs," she says. "They were evil."

"They did worse," I say. "And I still forgive them."

Anger causes her cheeks to turn red. "Why?"

I take her in my arms. Closing my eyes, I nuzzle my cheek against hers. "Because I found you."

She sighs as tears drench her face again.

"Stop crying, baby," I whisper. "It's okay. We're going to find home."

I know how afraid she is to do this, to leave planet Avalon. I was afraid once, too. Zakar kept me here for years, and it took one special woman to make me realize I needed to change.

She can do this. She's the best captain in the universe.

I trace my fingers around her belly button. "I know you're worried. I know how hard it's been for you. But you can fly that starship," I say. "You just have to believe in yourself and trust that everything will end up as it's supposed to."

"I'm scared," she murmurs against my chest. "The system command differs from what I'm used to using. What if I fail?"

I lean forward and brush her hair from her eyes. "You won't fail," I say. "You are not what happened to you. You hear me? The accident is not who you are."

"Then what is it?" she cries.

"It's something that happened. Something you can't take back. But you can move on from it. There are things that make this life worth living," I say.

"Our baby," she whispers.

"Our darling child," I repeat. "And she will have it a hundred times easier than we did."

Her eyes stare into mine. "I believe you," she says. "Because I trust you."

"You can achieve anything, Naomi. Anything," I say. "I love you."

"I love you more than I can explain," she says.

This might be the first time I've ever taken something so serious. What we've made defies all of the expectations of life for an alien like me. It is a miracle, and now, my final journey will be to make sure that child comes to fruition.

I look up from the graves, staring at the three moons in the sky. It's daylight, but they are still visible. I will miss the site of them, but I'm sure Earth is a much safer view.

FIFTEEN

Naomi

THE SUN REFLECTS A GOLDEN HUE OVER THE OCEAN. ITS RAYS DIP BELOW the water, softly wavering away.

As we sail to the starship, we all sit in silence, staring at the jungle that will always remain an anomaly.

This place wasn't supposed to exist. We were used. There's a lot to come to terms with here, but we'll get through it.

At this point, I'm pretty sure we can get through anything.

I reach into my pocket, tracing my fingers against the rough edge of the photograph of my parents. I pull it out and gaze at it, unsure how it really makes me feel.

I used to think of it as my blanket. It was an object to house all my melancholia and frustrations, so I wouldn't have to keep blaming myself for what happened. It kept me safe. In the end, that blame still found its way inside me.

It made me do stupid things. It made me turn on those I trusted. Worst of all, it made me fear the unknown.

I'm still scared. I still haven't learned the lessons that I should have. We're leaving this hell-hole, and I'm worried that I'll pass my sadness and pain onto my child.

I have to make a choice to let the past go for good. I can't keep pretending to be better when it still feels like shit.

My sister isn't coming back. None of those people are. But they will always be a part of me, and I should be glad I had the chance to know them.

That day at the diner was the best day of my life.

I look away from the photograph. I let go of the corners. I watch as it flies away, and I feel a great weight lift from my shoulders.

There is a new day waiting for us back on Earth. And when we get there to see and experience it in all its glory, our wounds will be healed.

For the first time, we will be whole.

Turin massages my shoulder. "We're here," he says.

I blink my eyes and realize the entrance to the Starship Tera Earth-373 is right in front of me. Everyone is on board, waiting, except for Turin and I.

"Come on, Captain," Hugh shouts. "It's time to head on home."

Roy leans against the metal railing. "You sure you're ready?"

Fassbender is dead. The Captain is, well, he's somewhere deep in the jungle now. We've really lived through the unbelievable, haven't we?

I stand and salute, feeling prideful. "You have been the best crew anyone could have ever served beside."

Roy chuckles and salutes back. "Shucks. You too, Naomi."

We didn't complete the job. On the contrary, we failed the mission. But by failing, we actually won. We made sure they didn't get their way.

Maybe we didn't shut down all of Earth Federation's operations. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if Fassbender was right. But we did what we had to do, and we survived.

No one will remember what we did. It won't be written about in any great historical textbooks. Our story will end up as it should – forgotten.

We own this story, and that's the way we want it to be.

I step on board our ship. The door shuts behind us, and the interior lights with neon reds, blues, and greens. Finally, I can breathe a sigh of relief.

Back to the familiar.

"Welcome back," the control center states.

Cautiously, I step into the captain's chair. The seat automatically buckles me in. The hydraulics push my butt into the air.

The computer issues a pleasant tone. "System command on stand-by."

I glance back at the crew. They are weathered and weary, hurt from battle. None of this should have happened, but in a year, we'll be home. We'll stumble out onto Earth and breathe the oxygen we know and yearn for.

They buckle up and sit back.

Before Turin follows, I grab his hand. "Can I do this?" I ask.

He smiles and kisses my forehead, trickling his fingers down my back. "You're going to do so much more than command a starship, Captain."

I smirk. Because of his confidence, I believe in myself.

I take a breath and close my eyes for one brief moment. All of this will be in the past. Soon, we will be one among the stars again.

I exhale. "Okay, system command. Clear off stand-by. We're going home," I say.

The control panel lights with color, and all the ship's vital signs display on the screen in front of me. Everything appears to be normal.

"System command, ready for take off."

I hit the buttons to turn on the thrusters. I wait for the engine to roar before hitting the release on the rockets. "Ready for take off," I whisper.

A great, familiar roar resonates outside of our window. Suddenly, I can hear the light tapping of someone running toward us.

My chest tightens as I scramble to see what is outside.

Roy curses. "Shit, it's Holloway."

On the display, I can see the mutant running toward the ship. He dives into the water, out of sight but not out of mind.

Hugh starts to hyperventilate. "Naomi, get us off the water."

I try to remember the commands, but the system is completely different from what I'm used to working with.

"Ready for take off," I shout.

"System command, ready for take-off?"

"Dammit," I yell and turn to the crew for help.

"He's almost to the entrance hatch," Roy shouts.

The Captain jumps onto the hatch, screaming like an ape. He pounds and dents the metal, trying his hardest to get inside.

He runs to the side, drags his nails against the windows.

He's not the Captain I knew. He is infected.

I panic. "Turin, what do I do?"

Turin leans forward against his belt straps. "You're going to lead us out of here," he says.

That's not what I intended to hear, but as soon as he says those words, it clicks.

I ignite the rockets and feel the starship weigh forward before the velocity of its take-off pushes our bodies back against the seats.

The Captain screams and holds on as we soar across the ocean.

"He's not letting go," Roy says.

I glance at the camera display. The Captain flails his arms, punching the ship's exterior. The dents grow larger with every punch.

"Naomi, turn on the defense systems," Hugh says. "Blast him with an energy field."

My finger hovers over the button.

He's right. I need him off our ship, but he was once a person.

"I really thought he'd be coming home with us," I say.

"He's not one of us anymore," Hugh replies, voice solemn with grief.

I press the button.

An electrified stream of blue neon forms around the ship. The Captain screams as it paralyzes his body.

He drops back into the water, eyes open. Alive, but destined to die on a ghost planet.

I salute him, and feel the ship rocket upward. Soon, we're in the sky, tearing through clouds and rough atmosphere.

I follow the instructions the system gives me, and within a few minutes, we're blanketed by the darkness of space once more.

I disengage manual control and lean back, chest pumping sterile oxygen. Closing my eyes, I take a moment to not only reflect, but to withdraw from the experience entirely.

There are no more tears to shed. I've seen what I've needed to see. I met the alien of my dreams.

And you know what? That doesn't even sound weird to me anymore.

I feel his presence come behind me. His hand rubs and cups the back of my neck, fingers lightly kneading away all of my tension.

Opening my eyes, I breathe and smell his masculine scent. I love him, no matter what they do or say back at Earth.

"You did it," he says.

I laugh and ease forward, unbuckling. I wipe the sweat from my forehead and nod. "Only because you believed in me," I say.

"Your accomplishments have nothing to do with me. You were forced to make a decision, and you chose to lead," he says.

I stand and kiss him, pressing my head firmly against his. I nuzzle our noses together and look him in the eye. "We're having a baby," I say.

"Earth's bio-weapon," he says, smiling.

I frown. "Don't say those things."

He traces his palm across my belly, resting above my navel. I glance down and reflect on my body's growth. I hadn't really noticed it until now, but there is a slight bump.

"If it comes from us, he or she will be good," he says.

I feel my heart rush, and smirk. "She?"

"Anything is possible," he says.

We have one year up here. One year to decompress. One year to forgive.

We'll never forget what happened here. But Earth will. Probably already has.

Yes, we are the forgotten soldiers of a new tomorrow.

But love never forgets.

And I have him.

SIXTEEN

Turin

I HAVE MANAGED TO GET ALONG WITH THE HUMANS AS BEST I CAN.

For the first few months, it was difficult integrating with the males. I helped where I was needed. I kept out of the way when they seemed the most on-edge.

At the bottom of their hearts, they can't stand that I'm here, walking about freely, as if I'm one of them.

But I have them on one thing. I defended them against Fassbender, and I made sure they didn't die by the Captain's mutilated hands.

I did the opposite of what I was supposed to do. I saved their lives, and I realized their worth.

It has been over eight months of flying in the darkness, and we can now see Earth now, faintly glowing blue. And, as I've been told over and over again for the last week and a half, today is something called Thanksgiving. For the first time since the day we escaped Avalon, we're celebrating.

They've got everything set up. Dried pieces of meat, fruit, old space crackers, ice cream, and of course, a few bottles of champagne.

I can't eat or drink these things, but I can absorb what they feel. The joy they collectively experience is an honor to feel.

"Hey, don't eat all the ice cream. Save some for the pregnant lady," Naomi says.

Roy pops the champagne, and suds spray high into the air. Everyone cheers and runs to grab a glass.

Well, everyone except Naomi and me. We hang back, calmly observing the party.

Naomi is drop dead gorgeous. The most beautiful woman that exists. She is due at any moment, which has been worrying her, but she will be fine.

The radiation, she claims, can hurt the baby. I tend to agree. Fortunately, Earth isn't far off. If we keep traveling at this speed, we'll get there on time.

That's the plan.

Naomi grabs some dried ice cream, devouring it in one bite.

I chuckle to myself.

Cheeks full, she scowls. "Don't you dare make fun of me."

I kiss her plump cheeks, resting my hands around her belly. I roll the bottom of her shirt up and watch as our baby's hands press against her flesh.

It strains my heart, in a good way.

"Still think it's a girl?" I ask.

She bites her lower lip and shakes her head. "I think it's a boy."

"An alpha, huh," I say, pondering. "What makes you so sure?"

"He's fussy," she says. "Boys are always fussy."

I lower my head and listen to him. The subtle movements within her fluids create noises that are out of this world.

This baby is a part of us. It is connected to every experience we have ever owned. The importance of that didn't hit me until now.

Hugh rolls forward with an extra glass of champagne. One eye hangs, half-shut, and as soon as he opens his mouth, he slurs his speech.

"Just take one sip. It's Thanksgiving, Naomi," he says.

Naomi takes the glass, winking in my direction. "Okay," she says, playing with them. "One drink."

Hugh's eyes light up, and Roy stumbles over to watch. They're both too drunk to know left from right.

Naomi starts the count down. "Three, two," she says.

But she doesn't finish.

Pausing, she holds her glass in the air. "Before I drink this bubbly, I want to make a toast," she says.

Roy's gravity wavers from side to side. "Boo," he yells.

"Drink! Drink!" Hugh cheers.

Naomi ignores the buffoons. "Look, we've been through a lot."

"That's an understatement," Roy mutters.

"You're right. We lived a nightmare. All this time, we were traveling through space for nothing. We should be angry, but I want to point out something. We're not angry anymore. We are ready. We're celebrating a new day for us."

"And for Earth," Hugh says.

Emotional, she clears her throat and forces a smile. "I don't know what we'll find when we get back home. But I do know one thing. We were all leaders," she says. "And maybe no one will recognize what we did, but we'll always remember."

"Cheers," we all chant.

Hugh and Roy tip their glasses, and Naomi tosses the contents of her glass over her shoulder. "Mm," she says. "Cheers."

It's something else to see this unfold. Camaraderie like this is not natural. It is something unique to humanity.

They hold the ability to understand what one goes through, to think about their actions. There are those that turn a blind eye to their own evil. But there is always the way of growth.

On this day, I feel blessed.

While the three get together, laughing about the absurdity of life, I stare through the window of Fassbender's cot. I try to count the multitude of brilliantly shining stars.

The universe is endless, and light always finds a way. That is why love can never die.

Earth is wondrously blue, and the terrain is covered in small lights. Humans, signaling to the universe they are alive. They are here, and their stories will be heard.

Inside Earth's orbit is one singular moon, innocent compared to the three that orbit Avalon.

I stare through the window, and a month passes me by.

Before I know it, we've made orbit.

We made it. Mission accomplished.

A glowing energy beam wraps around the planet.

Roy shifts from being to sleep to kneeling on both knees, staring at the planet he once knew as home. "What in God's name? It's so different."

"We've gone intergalactic," Hugh says, also stunned.

"Welcome to the future," Naomi mutters.

Roy adjusts his headset. "Yeah, but what year is it?"

"Beats me," I say.

Hugh keeps his head near the window. "Whatever year it is good with me, just as long as the beaches are still swimmable."

Naomi stares in wonder.

I wonder if the crew will reconnect. After what happened, it makes sense to move on for a while. This was our tragedy. But it was a tragedy we could learn and grow from.

I feel ready. I know Naomi does too.

Our relay interceptor buzzes. "Earth Federation coming into Starship Tera-Earth 373. You are in a no-fly zone. Do you copy?"

Naomi grabs the interceptor and juggles it between her hands.

Suddenly, my own heart racing a million beats per second.

Naomi coughs. "Hello? Houston? This is Starship Tera-Earth 373. Preparing to head into orbit before landing."

"Your ship is an ancient model, but I see no record of it in our database. Are you sure you were authorized to land at this time? You cannot orbit without proper clearance."

This is different. They're answering as Earth Federation. That means...

My heart sinks.

Mind scrambles.

I think of a way out of this.

"Please," Naomi pleads. "We're with..."

I interrupt. "We're with Fassbender, Identification #382713," I say.

I can hear typing. He groans, lightly. "I'm sorry, but that badge number has expired two hundred and twenty years prior," he says. "And without any voice or visual identification, I can't approve your landing."

"He died," Naomi says, raising her voice. "He was killed on a mission led by your team. We just want to get back home."

More typing. "Please hold," he says.

Two hundred and twenty years prior. This isn't their home anymore. When we land, everything will be different.

We wait, slowly approaching Earth's atmosphere. Whether they like it or not, we're going to enter.

The voice comes back on the intercom. "Proceed to coordinates issued on your mapping systems. We'll process you there."

My throat tightens as Naomi steers the starship into Earth's atmosphere. Before we know it, we're headed down, flying through the air.

We're getting closer to the ground. I see the ocean where we're supposed to land. Small, white waves crash against the shore.

Naomi pulls up on the thrusters. We jerk forward as the back parachutes slow us down. Naomi makes a clean landing.

All of us cheer. Roy rips off his belts and jumps out of his chair, heading toward the sleeping area. When he comes back, he's holding the last bottle of champagne.

Hugh grins. "This one is special. Don Perignon. One thousand dollars, cash. I was going to open it up when we landed on Avalon," he says. "I know you can't drink, but Roy and I can help finish it."

"Customs officials are bound to give us a hard time. If you're going to have a landing drink, now's a good a time as any," Naomi replies.

As Hugh pops it open, I step back from the group. I can't stop glancing over at the entrance bay doors, wondering who will be the one to open it, and how they will treat me once they see that I am not human.

Naomi notices that I'm tense. She kisses my bicep and whispers, "What's wrong?"

I try to smile. I try to remain optimistic because I know how long they've been waiting for this moment. But at this time, I'm waiting to face the men that might try to kill me.

I'm in full predator mode, ready to defend the second chance I've been given.

I groan. "This is no time to celebrate. Earth Federation will check the interior. They will take me from you."

They'll test on all of us. Me, her, and our baby.

Hugh pours me a glass, but the contents taste sour.

Lost in their happiness, Hugh and Roy laugh and congratulate each other.

She holds me, vowing never to let go again, but it's not enough consolation. We are facing an army. No – we are facing an entire planet.

Everything we have gone through led us to this moment. I just can't bear to lose her now.

The starship's entrance bay opens. Standing on the edge is Earth Federation Customs officials. Their suits are dark black, and they wield strange weapons I've never seen before.

The officials step aside allowing for a tall, dark figure to walk through.

He is not human. He's an... alien?

He peers at us through small slits.

"Wait a second," I whisper.

"I need everyone's papers," the alien calls out.

Naomi digs through the interior, scrambling to find the old identification cards. "They're in here somewhere," she says. "Just one-second."

The men surround her, watching carefully as she pushes aside a box of old documents. Finally, she finds the five badges.

She hands all five to the dark alien and stare at his glistening scales, avoiding all eye contact.

For a moment, he is silent as he scans them into a small tablet. After a few minutes pass, he hands them back.

"There are five badges, but there are only four of you," he says.

"Our computer guy, Fassbender went missing," she tells him. "We believe he lost his life."

He looks at us with pleased disbelief. "What mission was this specifically? We have no record in our database," he replies.

Naomi gulps and stutters. "We were sent on behalf of Earth Federation in the year 2093. We were on a mission to find life," I say. "We landed on our destination, but everyone was dead."

Finally, the alien stares at me. Cautiously, he steps forward, mystified. "And this is your prisoner?"

This time, Roy raises his voice. "No, sir."

"Then who is he? I have never seen his race before," he says.

I keep my mouth shut. I'm not going to change his mind about any preconceived notions.

One of the other men groans. "Sir, let's just take them into processing before it gets dark out. I'm ready to go home."

The general puts up his hand. "Who is the alien, then?"

"He saved our life on behalf of Earth Federation," Naomi says.

"Is that true?" the alien asks.

I nod. "Yes, sir. They were thrown into a trap. I fought and saved them from another alien race."

The alien puts away his tablet and stands tall. "Are you aware of what year it is?" he asks.

Naomi shakes her head. "No, sir. But we were prepared to expect some changes."

The alien smirks. "It's the year 2313."

My jaw drops. I don't know what to say.

"We were gone for that long?" Roy asks.

The alien nods. "I'm sorry," he says, turning to his crew.

"I know of your mission. You were one of the early terraform cases, correct?" he asks.

"Correct," Hugh says.

He walks in the opposite direction. "You're lucky you survived," he says. "I'm allowing clearance into Earth on one condition."

I step forward. "Anything."

"Promise me that your story will never get out," he says.

I'm shocked. "Um..."

The general pauses. "Fassbender's record isn't something we want the press to find out about. Before you go, my men will lead you to my office. You will sign an agreement, and then I never want to see you again. Do you understand?"

"What about our stipend from the government?" Hugh asks.

The general chuckles. "This never happened."

I'm stunned. Shocked to my core.

Naomi shakes me, smiling bigger than I've ever seen her smile. "We did it it, Turin," she says, starting to cry. "We're going to make a home together. Right here, on Earth."

There are no words. I lower to the ground and kneel, clenching my fist. I've been waiting for this moment since they created me. Now that it's finally here, I'm left with a strange feeling of hope and possibility.

"It's going to be okay," she says.

Somehow, I believe it.

I grab her hips, wide and ready to burst with child. I lean forward and kiss her. "You're forever mine," I growl.

Playfully, she bites my lip and cocks her chin back. "I like the sound of that."

I hold no grudges. Regrets are for beings in need of an excuse for failing.

I only carry the love I have inside my heart.

Together, we walk onto Earth's soil, and I have to say, the weather isn't all that bad.

SEVENTEEN

Epilogue: Naomi

MY KID STARES AT ME, GLOWING A PECULIAR MAGENTA COLOR.

“What?” I ask.

“I don’t want to go to summer camp,” he growls, glowing brighter.

He’s angry. More than likely, he’s scared. I had a different upbringing, but all the books tell me this is a normal reaction.

Turin rounds the corner. “Hey, guy,” he says, voice booming. “Settle. Your mom has a lot on her plate today at the VA office. Give her a break, okay?”

“I promise you will have so much fun, Dax,” she says.

He scowls. “Mom, it’s school. There’s a math class.”

“There’s also paintball,” Turin says.

I groan. Why on Earth did I think this was a good idea?

“Look, I know you don’t want to go, but you have to understand, your father and I need some alone time, too,” I protest. “And if you’re good, maybe you’ll come home to a new game.”

Turin grimaces. “Naomi, the kid needs no more bribing.”

When you become a mom, you don’t expect to make deals with your kids, but sometimes they’re tougher to crack than some adults.

"Is Drake going?" Dax asks.

"Everyone is going," I tell him. "Drake, Arkanin, Holliana..."

His face turns red almost immediately, and his nose scrunches. "Holliana? They let girls go to this thing?"

Turin drops to the couch and chuckles. "Son, you'd be a fool not to go," he says.

The doorbell rings. It's Jessica, Drake's mother.

No one knows about what we went through. Not even Dax. Most people think we met on an intergalactic holiday trip.

It's completely crazy.

After briefly catching up with Jessica, I lead her into the living room to collect my morbid son.

"So," he says. "Drake agreed to this? He knows about the math course?"

Jessica snorts. "He's excited about the paintball," she says.

A paintball course is always a deal-breaker.

"All right. I'll go. But I'm not doing it for you." Dax huffs, but when he grabs his bag, he's smiling.

"Great," I say. "Go take the bull by the horns."

I used to get teary-eyed when our son left for any period of time. Watching him take the school bus used to shatter me for at least half of the day. Now that I'm used to it, words can't explain how fast I ushered that boy out of the house.

It's time for a little one-on-one action with the husband...

As soon as the door shuts, he grabs my waist. "I finally have you," he says.

I smile and kiss him. "You told him I had a busy day at the VA office. He knows I'm off work today," I say.

He grins dumbly and lifts me off my feet, swinging my body into his arms. "I think we put up with enough. He can deal with it."

He caresses my neck. "I just hope he has a fun time. These are good experiences to have," I say.

Nodding, he says, "I swear, sometimes it feels like time has gone by so fast."

I curl against him. "It has," I say, wistfully thinking about all we've been through together.

There was Avalon, of course. Then there was Dax's birth. We had no money, but we got through that tough period by sticking by one another.

Five years ago, there was an announcement by the President. We were to engage in four different planetary invasions, a series strategic strikes by Earth Federation to claim new territory and begin galactic expansion.

That was a hard pill to swallow. It brought back some old memories. But we got through that, too.

I signed up for the VA. I wanted to help others like me.

We've been through more than most couples, but life is inherently complex for every individual. It doesn't matter what time period you're from. We all feel the need to grow.

It helps that I have Turin. I don't know what I'd do without him.

He carries me toward a chair in the living room. Yes, the same living room with giant windows.

Carefully, he sets me onto my feet. "Take off your dress," he says.

I glance over at the windows. A neighbor drives through our street. About a block away, a couple is walking their dog. Is he out of his mind?

"There are people everywhere," I say.

He steps forward. His body is so much taller than mine, so muscular and solid it casts a shadow over me. "Do what I say."

My pulse races. I shouldn't be entertaining this idea. Our neighbors really respect us. But it's been a while since I've felt like this.

I crave the rush of risk.

Gently, I slide the dress off my shoulders. It falls to the floor, revealing my panties and bra.

I curl my toes, waiting for his next command, but he says nothing. He nudges his nose forward and smells me. Within seconds, his cock is probing my inner thigh.

A flood of warmth flows through my pelvis, an overwhelming feeling that it would be a mistake to deny myself of him.

His fingers graze my panty line. He drags two fingers, tracing an outline over the soft fabric until my body drips wet.

Hurriedly, he slides the cotton past my hips. A chill rushes my body as he spreads my lips apart.

He slaps my pussy with his shaft.

"You're so wet for me," he says.

I reach down and feel his cock. The hot bone throbs inside my palm, both soft and impossibly hard. I stroke him, and his balls rise.

"Yes, baby," he moans. "Just like that."

Falling back into the chair, Turin spreads his legs and waits for me to serve him like a king. I lower to my knees, and lick up his taint, tonguing over his strong masculine balls. They compact as his shaft grows against my cheek, dripping soft beads of lubricant from his crown.

I breathe out and roll my eyes to face his. Opening my mouth wide, I take all of him. Every inch swallowed with ease.

Twelve years of practice allows me to hold him inside until he's tapping and bucking to get away from me. "Stop, I'll come," he roars.

Smiling, I smear my saliva around his thick flesh. I slide both palms around him and pump.

Groaning, he grabs my wrists and leans forward. "You're too sexy, you know that?"

One sloppy wet kiss before he picks me up and turns me around, placing my ass over his lap.

I howl with excitement as he slides two fingers inside me, arching against my spot. If the neighborhood couldn't hear us before, they sure can now.

"You know what happens to sexy women like yourself," he says.

I lean over his lap, neck braced against his kneecap. Ready for his spanking, I close my eyes. I feel the wind of his palm smack my ass.

He grabs my flesh and grunts.

"Fuck," I moan.

Sliding two more fingers inside my pussy, he gives me time to breathe. "Tell me, sweetheart. How kinky are you? Do you get off acting like a dirty whore?"

I nod, tears of pleasure and pain swelling against my eyelids. "I want to be filthy with you again," I grunt.

He spans me, much harder than the last time.

Twisting my hair into a ponytail, he lifts my head. His eyes are dark and intense, possessive and dominating.

I fucking love it.

I've been thinking a lot about the time we first met. I was terrified of him. But once he showed me what he could do with his mouth and cock, there was no going back.

I was dirty, heated, and wet. I still am.

It's been a few years since our time on Avalon. We have a kid to worry about now.

But the one thing we make time for is sex. Tonight, I'm ready to push the boundaries.

"Tell me what you want," he demands.

There has been something.

"It's a little embarrassing," I say.

His body glows, letting me know how bad he wants me to have it.
"Tell me."

I lift from his lap, feeling the sting dissipate. Seductively moving my body toward the windows, I lower to the floor.

"Mm," he purrs. "Keep showing me."

I face the window, nose just barely touching the glass edge. Tempting him, I drop my arms behind my back. I spread my cheeks apart to show him both of my holes.

"I want you to fuck my ass," I say.

I can feel my face turn bright red, but I own my shame.

After a get-together with the other moms led to some hardcore wine drinking and fantasy spilling, a few of the women admitted they had always wanted to try it. I stayed silent, but my endorphins went berserk.

I haven't been able to get the thought out of my mind. Now that it's out in the open, I'm ready for it to become a reality.

His thumb teases my lips, spreading up toward my clit, which he uses to soften me. However, there's not one inch of me that's relaxed.

A car honks at another outside. A few birds scatter, loudly from our pecan tree in the front yard. Oh, God. This fantasy has been stewing for some time, but I'm not sure if I can get through with it.

I'm on all fours.

He holds the back of my back down, sliding my wetness across my tight hole above. I hold my breath as his thumb presses firmly.

“Fuck,” I grunt. “It hurts.”

“Shh,” he whispers. “There, there.”

I try to relax my body and sit, but his hands control me. He subdues and forces me back onto my kneecaps.

“I don’t think I can do it,” I whisper.

His smirk is devilish and improper. “That’s what you said when we first met.”

Turin kneels behind me, kissing the outer bits of flesh, while moving closer to my pussy.

His hunger is loud. With each kiss and taste, he makes a strong noise of satisfaction. I look back, and he’s pumping his cock as he dives into my lips.

He eats me from behind. He devours me like a starved animal.

Like a magnet, he draws his tongue to my clit. Pressing lightly against my pelvis with his hand, he exposes my tiny bead of pleasure. He taps lightly before swirling and sucking to my delight.

I’m not like the other women. I’m not some housewife who lives in a fantasy realm. I’m a woman who has lived and experienced the best and worst this life has to offer.

I can do this. I can take him.

A tickle rushes through my core. I close my legs, but he just forces them back open, consuming all I offer.

Turning my head, I watch as he sucks my pussy, relentless and stern. I reach back and push his face into me, feeling the pressure inside me rises.

My legs tremble.

My body turns hot.

I wag my head forward and let out an uncontrollable, shrill moan. “Yes,” I scream, patting the ground. “Make me come. Come on, just

like that.”

He digs, and he searches for the one source, the one thing that can cure my needs. As he slides in two more fingers, he finds it.

No pleasure. No pain. There is just... come.

I explode. No, I shatter into a thousand pieces, erupting over the freshly vacuumed carpets.

My come drips down my thighs as my body tremors. Rich, vibratory waves run through me, electrifying my nerves.

I close my eyes and feel him mount my hips. I should be worried, but I’m too excited to think.

He spits.

He rubs.

He teases me open with his index finger.

And then I feel his crown hit my hole. It’s thicker and much harder than his finger.

I breathe out through my nose as he forces forward.

He’s gentle, yet firm, always whispering in my ear to tell me that it will be okay. That, he’s here for me.

Once I accept it, he opens me. I fall forward, but he’s there to catch and bring me back in.

Every inch is tight, but once he’s deep enough inside, a feeling of deep pleasure washes over me.

He owns me.

I’m coming.

He grabs my hips and rocks back. “Filthy, naughty cunt,” he coos against my ear.

I’m fucking coming...

Grabbing a fist full of my hair, he pulls and eases himself deeper. "How are you so good at everything?" he asks.

"I've been taught by the best," I moan.

He bucks and eases away.

Trembling, I drive my hips back, hungering for more. "Come inside me," I say. "I want to feel you shoot it in my ass."

The words are so wrong. So dirty they belong in one of those ancient pornography "tapes." Yet, as I rub my pussy and tell him to fuck my asshole deeper, it's never felt so right.

He pulls my ponytail harder. "Beg for my seed," he growls.

"Give me your hot seed."

"More," he commands.

"Fill me to the fucking brim," I cry out.

He leans forward, fucking me like his life depends on it. "Tell me what you want from me," he whispers.

"I want another baby with you!"

Okay. Those were not the words I expected to say. Some might think I'm too old enough to have another child, but those people don't know the power of alien sperm.

If he wants it enough, he'll put a baby inside me.

Driving his body around mine, he pulls out and fucks my pussy. Measured, he moans, "I'm going to blow my fucking load."

Uh-oh...

"Give it to me," I cry. "Please. I'll do anything for it."

Why am I saying this? Is it because, deep down, I want to relive it all again?

I feel his cock expand. His crown swells and bobs against my spot.

My hands press against the window. He's never fucked me this good.

Bent over me, working my pussy like a master, he lets out a relieved roar. "I'm... I'm..."

He stutters and lurches around me, cupping my breasts and fucking me deeper.

"I'm coming," he breathes. "Fucking coming all over you."

He sprays my pussy good. Deep inside, I feel the warmth fill and surround my walls. Pump after solid pump, his thick seed coats me.

I arch my head to kiss him, and he reacts to me like candy.

I can't control him. He thrusts one more time, giving me every drop.

I lower to the ground, kneecaps red from the wet carpet beneath me. I curl against his chest and catch my breath.

"That was incredible," I moan.

He stares into my eyes. "Dax is gone for two weeks, and I'm hungry for more."

This is my family now. Dax, Turin, and Naomi. We once traversed the cosmos in search of a better future. Well, we found that.

Every once in a while, Hugh and Roy call. We don't say too much, but I always hang up feeling renewed.

With no one knowing, we changed the course of the world. Maybe we couldn't stop Earth Federation's expansion. But we could start a family that believed in the good of humanity, a family that believed in change and growth.

Considering what we went through to get to that stage, that's pretty unbelievable.

Turin's arms coil around my breasts from behind. "I was wrong," he says.

“Hm? About what?” I ask.

He tongues my neck, tenderly. “Humans are wonderful creatures.”

I place my hand on his cheek and stare into his dark eyes. We’ve been through a lot, but life is a road of self-continuing discovery. It has taken him a long time to admit this.

I ease back into him, feeling his warmth wash over me.

Humans don’t thrive on pain. Nor do they prosper by the hands of malevolence or any kind of evil.

Humans thrive on choice. The decision to do good and exercise compassion. The choice to accept that the world loves you back, even when it beats you down.

I believed in a better world, and I got it.

I believed in love.

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Penelope Woods writes dark sci-fi, horror, and uniquely gothic romance and reverse harem novels. She grew up in a family that loved the experience of going to Blockbuster together. As a young girl, she relished in “B” sci-fi horror films and fell into a world of dark fantasy. When she learned about smut, it was like a light bulb clicked on in her head. She started writing in 2016 and has never looked back.

Oh, yes:

She may or may not have a bionic eye. But that’s a whole other conversation!



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