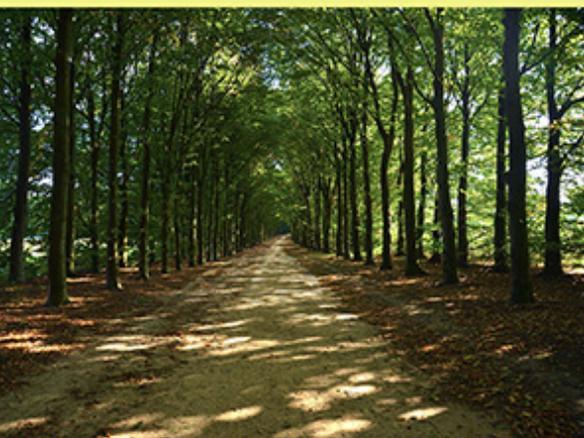


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

GENETIC REDUX

Kathryn Sparrow

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

GENETIC REDUX

By Kathryn Sparrow

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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GENETIC REDUX

By Kathryn Sparrow

Photo Description

A silver elfin face with intense, red, catlike eyes stares into the camera. Ridges line his forehead and nose. His long hair resembles silver chains and has glowing red beads at the tips. The points of his ears jut out. On his chin is an abstract design of concentric circles and lines that appears to be etched into his skin.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

When the Taeorns attacked everything in our world was forever changed! They destroyed the government without blinking an eye and almost immediately after that they crushed the building resistance and my elder brother along with it.

Since then what's left of our city's population has been disappearing, my cousin is certain that the Taeorns are responsible. He's sure they're planning the next phase of their invasion and he's spent weeks trying to gather together anyone else who's survived the attack so he can form another resistance.

As I stand here face to face with my own alien captor I'm sure his assumptions are correct, and yet as I stare into the beautifully intense eyes of the Taeorn before me I feel as if maybe everything isn't as it seems.

A noise to my right signals the arrival of another being possibly a member of my captor's team, instantly his eyes find mine and I'm shocked to see how similar in color they are to my own green-hazel mixture. I must have made some kind of sound because he began to make his way towards me and when he was closer I knew that what I was seeing was not an illusion.

I am unable to keep my thoughts to myself and the first thought I speak out loud is, "It's impossible! I saw you die!"

All the man said as he continued to stare at me was, "There's so much I need to tell you little brother."

Sincerely,

Gabrielle ~Bhlack Benehvolence~ Jones

Story Info

Genre: science fiction

Tags: abduction, endangered species, enemies to lovers, m-preg (implied), spacemen/aliens, interspecies

Content Warnings: secondary character death, non-consensual body modification

Word Count: 28,603

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GENETIC REDUX

By Kathryn Sparrow

Chapter 1

I was just trying to help. So why was life treating me like its whipping boy?

My name's Dominick Eldridge. I doubt this will ever be read by anyone on Earth, much less my family, but I needed to get this out of my head.

It all started when my brother Nate and my twin cousins, Brandon and Brooke, decided to spend Spring Break volunteering for Edu4All, a charity that builds schools in impoverished nations.

We each raised twenty-four hundred dollars to pay for our expenses and got on a plane bound for the island nation of Uhana in the Caribbean. My ex, Joe, thought I was nuts paying thousands to get put to work instead of heading with him to Orlando to party all night. I was glad I was done with him.

Riding into downtown Coreskport, the capital of Uhana, opened my eyes. There was a difference between knowing people lived in poverty, and seeing the cobbled together sheet metal and wood lean-tos these people called home. I ducked my head. What would the Uhanan people think of someone like me?

Seventy-four percent of the population of Uhana didn't have access to clean drinking water. Eighty-two percent didn't use electricity. I might as well have been from another planet. We didn't run out of hot water at home unless we ran the dishwasher, the washing machine, and both showers at the same time.

Building without the benefit of power tools exhausted me. I mixed concrete, hauled bricks, and helped dig a hole for the septic system.

On our fourth day in Uhana, I was pushing a wheelbarrow filled with concrete to the brick layers when the song playing on the site radio was interrupted.

"Breaking news. The island nation of Uhana has been officially declared under quarantine." The deep voice spoke in a matter-of-fact tone.

What in the actual fuck?

Nate stood up from the pit he was digging and leaned on his shovel, a serious expression on his face.

"No details have been released at this time, but the island has been declared unsafe to approach. A multinational fleet of ships has taken up position to blockade the island."

A shiver ran down my spine. Unsafe? This had to be some kind of hoax.

Several of the Uhanan workers had clustered together, speaking rapidly. Nate came up next to me, his hand on my back. Brooke stood with Brandon, to my left, biting the nail on her right index finger.

Brandon poked at his cell phone. “No service.”

I checked my phone. I couldn’t connect either.

“Contact has been lost with the Uhanan government and the US Embassy on the island. All US flights to Uhana have been canceled.”

“Oh, shit!” My voice sounded like a croak my mouth was so dry.

“If you’re just joining us...” Static. The radio lost signal. Jesse, an Uhanan worker, futzed with the dial. Everything seemed to be out. He was making his third pass through the stations when the long beep of an emergency broadcast sounded.

“People of Uhana.” The deep voice echoed, almost like two voices spoke, with a slight accent I couldn’t place. “We are the Taeorns. The United Nations of your planet has given us sovereignty over this island and those of you on it.”

The Taeorns? Who the fuck were the Taeorns? What the fuck did they mean “your planet”? Brooke gasped beside me as my heart raced.

Brandon laughed. “Chill out, Brooke. There’s no way this is real.”

“You will not be harmed. We are taking you back to Taeorn to aid in genetic reconstitution. Repeat, you will not be harmed.” The voice continued to reverberate.

The Shakespeare quote “The lady doth protest too much, methinks” raced through my mind. What the hell was genetic reconstitution? Whatever it was, it sounded painful.

“Please remain calm and representatives of the Taeorn Defense Guild will escort you to transport vehicles.” The beep sounded again and then static.

The tropical sun bathed me, forcing sweat to trickle down my back, but I shivered.

Brandon’s laugh jittered nervously. “Come on, guys. This has to be a prank.”

Nate shoved me forward. “I don’t know what this is, but it can’t be good.”

Brandon took in a deep breath, but followed Nate.

Out on the street, three strange people with silver skin, wearing long tunics belted at the waist, approached an armed police officer. Each one carried some kind of device that resembled a gun with a satellite dish on the end.

Silver freaking skin? Holy shit balls!

The policeman shouted, “Halt,” and drew his weapon. When they were about fifteen feet away he fired several shots, but he must have missed because they had no effect. Then a *pop* sounded from the closest Taeorn’s gun, followed by a flash of light, a humming sound, and the man disintegrated before our eyes. He was there and then... gone.

I screamed.

Nate grabbed my hand, and we ran. He led us back to our youth hostel just long enough to grab our gear. The entire time, he scanned the roads, looking for threats. Right now, I was really glad he had been in ROTC for almost four years.

Twice more, we saw policemen shot in the street. Nate’s face hardened, but I wanted to cringe.

We found shelter in an abandoned lean-to on the outskirts of town. Nate verified the area was secure before leaving to try to learn more about our situation. Brandon, Brooke, and I took turns standing watch while the others slept, or at least tried to sleep.

Aliens. There couldn’t really be aliens? Could there? They looked sort of Human. Any decent cosplayer could have put on silver makeup and crazy wigs that made their hair look like it was made of metal chains, but why would they?

Those weapons seemed like something out of a sci-fi movie. The way the alien shot it... so calm, like he had nothing to fear from the officer’s weapon. Shit. Could a Human really have done all that? Much less an army of Humans?

I rolled over on the ground. The ever-present sand abraded my skin.

I kept imagining Nate being captured by the Taeorns and tortured for information. The Taeorns finding us, their silver skin glowing in the moonlight as they took us to death camps.

Did they want us out of the way so they could colonize Uhana?

Nate returned at dawn, his morning stubble noticeable against the drawn lines of his face. “The government, such as it was... is gone.”

Uhana was not exactly the most democratic place on Earth. Most of its citizens couldn't read or write. Ballots were designed by the party in power. One name printed in big, bright letters, while the other showed in tiny print. I don't know why they bothered. It's not like the ballots were really counted.

"Gone?" Brandon asked, running his hands through his hair.

Nate crossed his arms over his chest. "Killed, shot while fleeing."

Killed. By a group of aliens. I was starting to believe, these... beings weren't Humans in costume. These aliens had destroyed an entire government. "What about the US Embassy? Can we get there?"

Nate shook his head. "It was neutralized as well."

"Damn it." The Uhanan government didn't exactly have an army. But the US embassy fell? A shiver passed through me. "Couldn't you have led with that?"

All the color blanched from Brooke's face. "Oh, shit."

Brooke never swore. A hysterical chuckle escaped me. Is this what it meant to be in shock? Some biomedical engineer I would be... if I lived that long. Shit. This wasn't supposed to happen. I was supposed to build a school and then go home to problem sets, papers, and tests, not to mention getting laid and working on my latest clay sculpture.

"Seriously?" He reached out and cuffed me on my temple.

I guess I deserved that. It knocked me out of my pity party anyway. My jaw clenched. "Cut that out, asshole."

"Then don't be a douche and pay attention. I found a group that has a small cache of weapons. I think they were drug dealers, but at this point, the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

I took a step back. My legs shook so hard, I was surprised they still held my weight. "Nate, you can't. You saw what their weapons can do. It didn't look like our guns did much. You might as well come at them with one of Brooke's knitting needles."

"Hey." Brooke frowned. "Watch it or I'll smack you."

Nate curled his hands into fists at his sides and held my gaze. "I have to do something. This is what I've been training for."

I might never see my parents again or our younger brother, Jonah. Anything could be happening in the outside world. “Don’t do this. Please. I can’t lose you, too.”

But my brother’s an action-oriented, take-charge kind of guy. I could see his resolve in the rigid lines of his body.

So my brother and his new *friends* watched the Taes. That’s what we called them. He kept me and my cousins as far away from the action as possible.

The Taes worked street by street, systematically rounding everyone up, and marching them into some kind of space shuttle. The pattern was surprisingly predictable. I guess the Taes didn’t fear defiance.

After a few nights of surveillance, the resistance set up an ambush. They hid in shadows and houses on the next street to be captured.

Nate had chosen a lean-to on one of the first streets that had been emptied and brought Brooke, Brandon, and I there to hide. “Stay here. It should be safe.”

I waited for him to leave and turned to my cousins. “I can’t let him go alone.”

Brooke gave me a grim nod as I slipped out.

I stayed about fifty feet behind Nate and followed him to the rendezvous point with the rest of the resistance. They spoke together, too quietly for me to hear, and then dispersed.

I stuck with Nate. My hands trembled as I walked behind him in the moonlight, a hint of salt ever present in the air from a breeze rolling in off the ocean.

My brother strolled along, casual and confident. I had been that awkward kid: smart, didn’t really fit in, had trouble making friends. Other boys wanted to toss a football, while I wanted to sculpt dragons. But no one ever hassled me on the playground, at least not more than once. Nate saw to that.

Sure he could be a domineering pain in the ass, but he always had my back.

When we arrived at the target street, Nate melted into a shadow in an alley. I positioned myself behind some trash cans across the street. The smell of rancid fruit filled the air, making me gag, but over time I shut it out, mostly.

Alone with my thoughts, I watched the sun rise. Why did Nate always have to be a hero? Why couldn’t I be more like him?

The shuttle lowered vertically from the sky, impressive as it set down with no sign of any air displacement or disturbance. It just floated to the road and stopped. I knew enough technology to be impressed and frightened. What chance did my brother have?

The vessel filled the entire street and stood taller than the buildings around it. It reminded me of a pontoon boat with an enclosed top. A large green circle with a pattern of wavy black lines inside it adorned the side.

When I craned my neck, I could get a reasonable view of Nate's hiding place past the edge of the shuttle.

I forgot to breathe as a large hatch opened almost in front of me and out marched a dozen Taes. This was the most I had seen at once. They reminded me of very tall elves, with skin like molten silver, but their metallic hairstyles varied. One had glowing beads in his hair and braids. Another had curls. A few had dreadlocks. They all wore long tunics with pointed shoulders and belts at the waist. An insignia adorned the front: A red diamond with black lines bisecting it.

As soon as the group of Taes cleared the ramp, my brother and his *friends* opened fire.

I don't know what I expected. Screaming? Return fire? Blood? Sweat rolled down my back and dotted my forehead. I struggled to control my panting breaths.

What color would their blood be? I tensed waiting for the splatter.

All but the last two Taes ignored their attackers completely. The last two unholstered their weird dish-weapons and aimed in the direction of the gunfire. Waiting for clean shots, I supposed.

The other Taes kept walking toward the nearest building like the gunfire held no threat.

At first, I wondered if my brother really was a horrible shot, in spite of all the training, because the Taes were unaffected. Then, I saw one bullet hit, dead-on. It slowed on impact and seemed to be absorbed into the Tae as if he had a force shield, or his body ate it, or something.

I prayed Nate would see this and give up, head back to our hiding place. What was the point in risking his life if the attempt had no hope of making a difference?

The Taes led people from the building in a neat line. The Taes were immune to bullets, but Humans weren't. How the hell were these people walking so calmly? A woman followed an elderly gentleman into the shuttle. Then a girl in her midtwenties followed with a little boy, perhaps four years old, clinging to her leg. His eyes were wide like the ends of binoculars.

I felt so helpless, just like back in second grade on the playground when Jimmy Buckworth pushed me off the swing. Only this time I doubted Nate could save the day.

One of the Taes stepped up to them and ripped him off her leg. The little guy screamed, "Mama!"

What the hell was the Tae going to do to that poor boy?

I heard a roar from across the street, and my heart sank through my feet into the ever-present sand. My brother broke cover, running at the Tae with the little boy. The sounds issuing from Nate's throat held primal notes, like an animal protecting its cub. He held a seriously badass weapon. I bet it was an automatic, but it was silent. I guessed the boy was too close to risk.

Nate almost got there too, before the *ping-pop* of one of the dish-weapons. The thump of a disk on his chest, a flash of light, and my brother was gone.

My brain flashed white, and I fell back on my butt. I wrapped my arms around my legs as shivers racked my body. No. Nate can't be gone. My parents, would they ever know? No. No.

I don't know how long I sat there, surrounded by filth and filled with grief, but a movement caught my eye. Two Taes were heading toward me.

Heart pounding, I scooted away. My tail bone throbbed. Nate was gone, but he wanted me to be safe. When I felt certain I was out of danger of being discovered, I stood and ran to find my cousins. How would we continue without Nate?

Chapter 2

I kept going for Nate. I wanted to give up, maybe even surrender and let the Taes take me, but then Nate's death would have been even more pointless.

Brandon, Brooke, and I moved from building to building, always choosing ones that had already been cleared by the Taes. Although calling them buildings was generous. They were more like three or four makeshift walls with some plywood or metal sheeting propped over the top. Anything of value had already been looted. Even though the Taes didn't show any sign of backtracking, we still moved every couple of nights to be safe. We scavenged for supplies but found little. At least we had my brother's filter so we could get clean water, but I could barely look at it. Nate prepared for everything. He was the one equipped to survive, not me.

My cousin Brandon decided to organize another resistance. Clearly, bullets weren't effective, so they were working on another plan. Something about posing like they were cooperating and then stealing the Taes' weapons. It sounded absurd to me, but Brandon had that look of desperation in his eyes brought on by too much stress and not enough food.

At night, I couldn't sleep. My mind jittered. I had lived in a world where information was instantly available. I wondered how many Uhanans had been taken. I'd seen some ignoring the situation and going about their daily lives, trying to survive like they always had. Others hid with us, helping Brandon prepare to fight.

Were my parents okay? I had no way to know what the rest of the world thought was happening or if the invasion was even confined to Uhana.

Brandon and his allies planned for days, choosing their target street carefully. Nate had been gone for three weeks when Brandon said he couldn't stand waiting any longer.

"Bran, don't... just don't." Brooke grabbed his arm.

I knew how she felt. I should have begged Nate. Instead, I lost him. "She's right. We need to stick together. Keep out of sight."

Brandon wrapped his arms around her. I remembered playing spies with them in the woods behind their home, sneaking through the forest, catching the evil Nightmare league, laughing at our victories.

Tears streamed down Brandon's face. "I have to do this. It'll work. I'll keep my head down, look like I'll go quietly."

She ducked her head into his shoulder. "You're going to get killed."

He rubbed circles on her back. "I'll get one of their weapons and turn it on them. We've seen what those things can do."

I went up beside them and wrapped them both in my arms, my eyes moist.

"We know what their weapons do to us." Brooke stepped back. Her eyes glittered like diamonds. "They probably have defenses. Stay with me and Dom. When the Taes think they've got everyone, I bet they'll leave and we'll escape, get home."

Brandon's eyes squeezed shut as he drew his hand across his face, removing the tears and smearing dirt. "Even if that's true and they leave, what about all of the Uhanans? How can we return to our families knowing we just let this happen?" His jaw set into hard lines as his chin rose, but his eyes... his eyes wouldn't meet mine or even focus much.

Brooke sobbed and I almost joined her. I hadn't cried since my brother died. Numb I guess. I sniffed in a tear and wrapped my arms around Brooke. I could see where he was coming from. I wasn't sure if I admired him for trying an almost hopeless plan, but I couldn't think of a better one, and I'd tried. Some engineering mind I had.

I should have gone with him, but I couldn't watch another person I cared about die.

He slipped out of our current hiding place, going to meet up with the others.

Since nothing would happen until morning, Brooke and I tried to sleep. We clung to each other. My stomach made its emptiness known by yowling like a cat wanting attention at two a.m. When I drifted into unconsciousness, the scene of my brother's death played in an infinite loop in my head.

Sometimes, I saw Brandon's face instead.

Nate spoke to me in the dreams. "Why did you let me die?"

I studied his strong face, his jawline covered with light stubble. Green-hazel eyes just like mine and army-short brown hair.

"I couldn't stop you." It sounded like a whine. Even to my ears.

His face hardened and his eyebrows drew down into a vee. "You could have defended me," he shouted. "Drawn their fire."

Some part of me knew this wasn't Nate. He wasn't like this. Maybe he should have been. Maybe then I would have manned up before it was too late. Instead of saying that, more whining came out of my mouth. "Then we'd both be dead."

"So?" He smirked, an honest to God, villainous smirk. "Is this really living?" His face elongated, like it was being sculpted, his eyes turned blood red, and his skin turned silver. His hair grew in long silver strands. A Tae stood before me, his voice a combination of a growl and some kind of weird electronic special effects. "You're going to starve to death soon."

My heart thumped faster than it had any right to. Sweat ran down my back like a tropical rainstorm, but I looked that Tae right in the eye. "Maybe. But at least I have a chance."

"A chance for what?" Nate was back in front of me, his face haggard. "To go home and tell Mom and Dad you let me die?" He turned from me and walked away, calling over his shoulder, "You're a coward. Clear and simple."

I woke up screaming. Brooke clamped her hand over my mouth. The nightmare left me shaking and my throat dry. Nate was right. I was a coward. But Nate never said that. I did.

Brooke whispered, "Shhh. We don't want to attract attention."

I sat up and grabbed a rag, wiping the sweat from my shoulders and neck. Shit, it hurt. The rag had sand in it like everything else on this island, and it rasped across my damp skin.

The makeshift door to the hovel we hid in burst aside and a Taeorn stepped in. I had a moment to think, *oh, shit*, before I felt a disk thump against my chest. Light flashed and then everything went dark.

Chapter 3

Where the hell was I?

I woke in a shadowy room that was empty of light except for a blue-white glow that emanated from beneath the bed where I was sprawled. The ceiling sat a confining two feet above my head, smooth like ice after the Zamboni had passed by. But the room wasn't cold.

Surprisingly, it wasn't hot either. The last thing I remembered was being on Uhana, the sun beating down, and sand in places I would rather not have thought about. But the blanket that covered me was soft, and I didn't feel the telltale prickles beneath me.

I sank now. Wait. What? The bed I was on lowered. A mild buzz filled the room as the glow in the space increased. I saw that the walls were silver. Like the skin of the enemy, the Taeorns.

The Taeorns...

Hiding with my cousin Brooke. The Taeorns storming the room. A projectile impacting my chest.

Holy fuck!

I thought I died, but I didn't feel dead. If this was the afterlife, then where were the angels, hot guys, and all the clay I could sculpt?

The bed stopped lowering about two feet from the ground, the ceiling now eight feet above me. I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the bed. The room had no doors, no windows. It must have been a cell.

A flash of light and a hum were all the warning I got before I was face-to-face with one of them, a Taeorn in the flesh. The air around me chilled and I started to shake.

This Tae was a girl if the hourglass shape of her body meant the same thing as it did for Humans. Her silver skin shone and her purple eyes glowed like amethysts lit from within. Her hair fell in tight silver spirals like corkscrews.

Her arm was extended pointing at me. A device like thick brass knuckles was clenched in her fist.

I wrapped my arms around myself, rubbing my hands up and down, trying to get warm and failing.

“Stand up. Hands on your head.” The alto tones spoke with an accent, just like the voice on the radio, and still a mystery.

I thought about fighting, but I’d seen what their weapons could do, hadn’t I? Or not. I was still alive. I needed more information so I complied to buy time to study her.

A second flash and hum and another Taeorn arrived. He stepped in front of the girl. I inhaled quickly as my heartbeat sprinted at the sight of his perfectly symmetrical elfin face, broad shoulders, and muscular arms. His red eyes glowed with an inner fire. I felt the urge to reach out and touch the ridges on his forehead. Would they be soft or rough? I scanned down and saw some kind of circular pattern on his chin. I couldn’t take my eyes off it. With the exception of some cross lines, it was like the orbital paths of planets in a solar system.

I swallowed hard. This wasn’t some meat-market club. This man was an alien that had abducted me.

He raised his hand and placed something cool and metallic on each of my temples and then gestured in the air. A projection appeared like a screen on a computer, but with nothing tangible to define it. It hung floating at about head height. The symbols, if that’s even what they were, made no sense to me. He tapped at the symbols and the disks on my temples began to heat. I took a step back, fearing the heat would burn, but the girl waved the brass-knuckle thing again.

“Don’t move,” she ordered.

My heart sped faster than a supercomputer, but I froze in place. What else could I do?

The male Taeorn studied the information on the air-screen and his brow furrowed. He spoke to the female, in their lyrical language. Her widened eyes and slack jaw said shock to me. Or did it? How could I possibly know alien body language? Maybe that was Taeorn for arousal and they were about to get it on right in front of me. Or hunger. Were we food to them? Shit... not good.

They discussed for a few more moments as he tapped at the glyphs in the air. She turned away from him and said something. A voice came through in response that sounded oddly familiar in tone. Why would a Taeorn voice sound familiar to me? I had never really heard one speak.

Another flash and hum sounded to my right and another Taeorn appeared. This one’s eyes were a green-hazel mixture. I gasped.

He walked over to me. As he got closer other details came into focus, the structure of his chin, the distinctive shape of his nose, just like my father's and my grandmother's and mine. This must have been an illusion. How could it have been anything else? Then I noticed his hair. A mixture of brown locks, the same shade as mine, with silver strands. His ears were less pointed than the other Taes.

The room seemed to sway. I moved my hand to my head to try and steady myself. "It's impossible! I saw you die!"

The too-familiar man's eyes twitched and he rubbed a hand across them. "There's so much I need to tell you, little brother."

I only had one older brother, and three weeks ago I watched him die. Then again, I thought I died. But it wasn't true for either of us. "Nate?"

He smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "That's right. It's me. In the flesh. So to speak." He gestured to himself, and I drank in the man wearing a Taeorn tunic with an orange star.

But was this man really my brother? His body had been modified in some way. Was the change only on the surface, or did it go deeper and affect his mind?

I touched his arm. "What have they done to you?"

"I'm a hybrid now, a Taeling they call us." He covered my hand with his. "It's okay."

His hand felt warm on my arm, not cold like I would have expected from silver skin. I jerked out of his reach. Although I craved this reassurance that he lived, I had trouble believing my brother really would have accepted all that had been done to him. "What? How can any of this be okay?"

"Relax. I'll fill you in." He took a breath. "When I went with the rebels, I saw a member of the Taeorn Defense Guild separating a child from his mother. I assumed the worst." Nate's hand passed over his face as he spoke. I half expected the silver to smear, like it was makeup, but it remained part of his skin. His voice came out much more quietly than before. "So I attacked."

The Nate I knew would never regret helping a child. Had they brainwashed him? The back of my neck spasmed and my head throbbed. "I saw. They shot you and you... disintegrated."

"Not exactly. The disks they shot me with allowed their transportation technology to lock onto me and... well... beam me up."

Did he really just say that? “Like Star Trek?”

Nate glanced over at the pretty male and the female Taeorn, but their expressions remained neutral. “Kinda.”

Were these two Taeorns forcing Nate to help them? They stood and watched us. I locked my gaze on the alluring male. In fact, it was hard to keep my eyes off him. Was he doing something to me? Oh my God, he was doing something to me. He had to be because arousal ran down my spine and stiffened my prick. “But what do they want from us?” I cringed. I sounded like I was about to lose it.

Nate shook his head and spoke very slowly, kind of like I was nuts. “Dom, I’ll explain everything. Just relax.”

Relaxing was not going to happen. My breath shot out, faster and faster. My brother was an alien. He was alive, but they did something to him. But he was alive. But I was a prisoner, and they were doing things to me. But. But! The room wavered, or was that me? I put my hand to my head, again.

“Dom. Dom! Breathe. It’s going to be all right. I can explain.” He turned to the male alien. “Can we get him a glass of water?”

The man spoke in the Taeorn language and tapped a symbol in the air. The bed-platform thing I had been on morphed and turned into a table with four chairs. Some glasses and plates appeared with an aromatic stew like mixture, sliced fruit, and a pitcher of clear liquid.

“Sit. Your vitals show your blood sugar is low.” He spoke in English. His voice rolled over me like a caress. “This food will nourish you while Nathaniel explains.”

Nate sat, content with taking the Taeorn at face value. The Taes each took a chair as well. They all turned to face me as I hesitated.

A sweet aroma with savory undertones like pineapple fried rice from my favorite Thai restaurant flowed through my senses. Those last days on Uhana, food had been scarce.

However, this felt like a cautionary tale: Don’t eat the food or you’re stuck forever. Maybe this is how they changed my brother.

Nate shrugged and served himself some of the orange and purple fruitlike stuff that seemed loaded with juice. Then he put some on the plate before the

empty chair. He was serving me, so like Nate, always a caregiver to his family, only fierce against outsiders.

Then he served the female. Why?

“This is Gyelle.” Nate’s face softened as he said her name.

“It’s a privilege to meet you. I have heard so much about you, Dominick.”

Nate talked about me? To her? Her voice wasn’t harsh like before. It was sweet with that very slight accent I couldn’t quite place, like French, but not.

Nate’s eyes roamed over her with some emotion. If I didn’t know better I would say affection or... something more.

Sweat dotted my skin, and my legs barely supported my weight. “O-kay...”

“Don’t be rude, Dom.” That sounded like my bossy older brother.

I held onto the back of the chair. “I don’t know what to say. What is proper etiquette when being introduced to one’s captor?”

“Dom...” His eyes pleaded with me.

Images of blanket forts on my bunk bed, arguing over who got the last doughnut, and jumping waves at the beach on Long Island Sound washed over me. Everything in life taught me that my older brother was someone I could count on. This person in front of me appeared different, but the inflections of his voice and his mannerisms, spoke to more than my mind. They hit me deep in the gut.

“I know this all seems really bad, but just give them, give me, a chance to explain,” Nate said in a tone that was as close to begging as I had ever heard.

“Okay.” I didn’t feel okay. But I had to play the game, just in case my brother really was in front of me. I sat in the chair and tasted the fruit Nate had served me, sweetness like a cross between a mango and a pineapple. “It’s um... nice to meet you, Gyelle.”

Once food hit my mouth, I couldn’t stop. I sipped from the glass. Nate had poured me some cool, clean water. I finished the fruit and found Nate had filled my plate with some kind of grain dish and a piece of flat bread. The others were using it to scoop the savory grains and veggies into their mouths. I wondered if it had meat in it.

Nate let out a slow breath. “Better. This is Ceyar.”

I turned to the male, Ceyar. He stuck his hand out and I shook it dutifully, at first, but a jolt of desire soared up my arm from his touch. What the hell? Was this some power the Taeorns possessed? But then Ceyar pulled his hand away and stared at it as if it bit him.

I wiped my hand on my... that's when I noticed I was wearing a tunic. Just like the others. Mine had an orange star like my brother's. Gyelle had a red diamond with black lines bisecting it like those we had seen on Uhana. Ceyar's had a green circle with three gold bars running from his bottom right to top left, piercing a black circle centered in the green one. Did this mean something or was it just the latest Taeorn fashion?

The soft fabric soothed my hand, although my heart continued to race. A squiggly line crossed the sky screen. Ceyar pressed a button on a device at his belt and the screen disappeared. "My apologies. I didn't mean to keep monitoring your vitals."

He reached over and gently peeled the two disks away from my head like an adhesive bandage. His touch was so soft, it made goose bumps raise on the back of my neck.

"Earth sold us out," Nate said in a harsh tone as his eyes narrowed.

"What?" My head whipped over to face Nate.

"Earth sold us out. The Taeorns needed our help. Being a law-abiding people, they approached the governments of Earth. You can imagine what that was like." He rolled his eyes and sighed. "The Middle East is a mess. The EU nations are in economic crisis. And don't get me started on North Korea."

That was Nate, ever the International Relations major.

"Our governments can't agree with each other, much less with an alien species. Squabbles led to posturing and escalating demands." He sighed. "The Taeorns didn't want much."

What the fuck? Didn't want much? Hello, prisoner here. "Just people." The first real meal I had in weeks sat heavy in my stomach.

He sighed again, and shook his head. "Yes, they need people. But they didn't want to take them. They wanted to explain their need and ask for volunteers. That's all."

"Then they failed." I was not a volunteer.

“The negotiations dragged on and on... for years. Each nation trying to cut the best deal, preferably at the expense of the others. The Taeorns were willing to give a lot, but they drew the line at weapons. Giving more weapons to our world seemed likely to result in one of those postapocalyptic stories you love to read. They weren’t here to destroy the world. All life is precious to them. You have no idea.”

“So explain it to me.” I sounded hostile because that’s how I felt.

“I’m trying.” His hand flew into the air.

Ceyar’s voice caressed my ears, like a musical instrument. “We were running out of time. We couldn’t wait any longer. So we changed our Soul.”

What did that mean? How could they change a person’s soul? “You haven’t said what you needed us for.”

Nate took a deep breath and let it out slowly, like when we were kids and I broke his skateboard. It saved me from getting pummeled that day. “They need Humans in order to procreate.”

Chapter 4

Did they raise the temperature in the room? Because my cheeks burned. I struggled to breathe. “Procreate? Like have babies?”

Nate’s lip turned up in a half smile. The kind that meant he was about to be a totally annoying wiseass. “Nothing gets by you, little brother.”

I flipped him the bird, but my mind was spinning. What the hell?

Ceyar’s melody sang through me. “Our race is dying. Fewer and fewer children are born each generation. Our bodies can no longer carry children to term. We’ve been trying to find a cure for centuries with no success.” His shoulders drooped. “Our biochemistry is toxic to our unborn children.”

“That makes no sense. How can a mother be toxic to her own offspring?” After I said it, a memory stirred. Something about Rh negative blood, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“The science is complex.”

I wasn’t insulted. Okay, maybe I was, a little. I’d been good at science. But perhaps I deserved that answer. “So, where do Humans come in?” The biomedical engineering wannabe in me woke up. I had another year before I declared my major, but I had chosen to go to Boston University because of the biomed program. The ability to build replacement limbs that worked appealed to the scientist and sculptor in me.

Ceyar’s ruby-red eyes shined. “About a century ago, we discovered that we are genetically compatible with Humans. We just needed to make a few minor alterations to a Human’s biochemistry. These alterations made Human-Taeorn offspring viable. The modified Humans were able to carry the children to term and those children were able to carry children. In this way, some of our genetics would live on. We would continue.”

Possibilities played through my mind like a movie on fast-forward. Modified Humans could carry Taeorn babies. “So the Human carrying the child would be the other genetic parent?”

His face split in a large grin and his ruby eyes sparkled like they were lit from within. “Yes. A modified Human could be a surrogate for a pure Taeorn baby, but that doesn’t correct the flaw in the child’s biochemistry. By combining our DNA with yours the next generation can sustain itself.”

A Human-Taeorn child. The concept was mind blowing. What else had Taeorn medicine learned? Could they cure Human diseases? But then another implication hit me and my chest tightened. “How did you discover this?”

Ceyar froze for a moment, his eyes locked on mine. Had I asked a question that was off-limits? His skin darkened like silver tarnishing. His smile fled, replaced by a frown, and my breath caught in my throat. Had I caused this beautiful being to wither?

Ceyar glanced at my brother. “We recruited Humans and members of one thousand seven hundred thirty-one other species as well, but only Humans had compatible DNA. The Human-Taeorn hybrids that have been born have thrived and gone on to have more children.”

Recruited. Like I had *volunteered*. People had been taken.

Ceyar shifted in his chair. He spoke faster now. “We couldn’t wait any longer. Your people wanted technology they could not be trusted with. Your planet is so young in its development.”

I leaned back in my seat and crossed my arms over my chest. “So our governments wanted something in return for saving your freakin’ species, and instead you just gave them the finger?”

Okay, maybe gave them the finger was a little too colloquial for Ceyar because he bit his lip, and his eyes seemed to lose focus for a moment. And dammit, wasn’t that adorable?

“We gave the governments of your world an ultimatum. Give us access to Humans so we could plead our case or we would take whomever we chose.” Ceyar ducked his head, his cheeks coloring again like tarnished silver.

I glared at my brother. “How does aliens making threats mean the government sold us out, Nate?”

He held up his hand in the universal wait-for-it gesture, palm out. “The US government and the UN made a counteroffer. The Taeorns could have the people of Uhana if they left everyone else alone.”

“So why didn’t the Uhanans get asked to volunteer?” I leaned forward in my seat. “Or is this where that happens?”

Nate glanced at Gyelle. “No, they lost that luxury. They needed everyone on Uhana.”

I ducked my head. A hope had been born with the explanation and it just keeled over, coughing out its last breath. “How could the US do that? Uhana is a sovereign nation. That can’t be legal much less ethical.”

“It’s not.” Nate sighed. “But Uhana can’t defend itself. Between the corrupt government and the poverty, they were a drain on other nations. They were seen as a burden and expendable. Kill two birds with one stone.” Nate smacked the table with his palm.

For a moment, I saw the Nate I knew, the one who wanted to save everyone.

“So they’re taking all of the people on Uhana and what? Changing them against their will? Making them have children?” I was hoping it was at least through artificial insemination. Otherwise rape would be added to the list. “Why not just take the women?” Okay, I didn’t mean to sound like a bastard. I was being practical. I’m an engineer. You can’t use a hammer when you need a wrench.

Nate picked up a bite of fruit. His hand shook as he placed it in his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. “Part of the modification is that the men will be able to carry children as well.”

“What?” Male pregnancy? He had to be joking. He was going to carry a baby and so was I? Holy freakin’ hell!

Ceyar took over the explanation. “Over the centuries, we developed an artificial womb. We never were able to make it completely independent of a living host, but the gender of the host does not matter.”

My heartbeat sped. “So you’re forcing everyone, even me, to carry a child?” I cringed at the return of my squeaky voice.

Ceyar’s head dropped for a second and then his glowing red eyes met mine. “Yes.”

I imagined being pregnant and my breath quickened into wheezing pants. “It’s slavery.” *I can’t have a baby!*

Ceyar studied his hands. Nate glanced skyward.

Gyelle’s strident tone cut through me. “No. It’s not.”

These... these... bastards, fuckheads, asswipes... I couldn’t think of a strong enough word. Did they hear themselves? “So, I can leave?”

Gyelle glared at me. “No.”

Nate's eyes softened. He spoke in his best quiet, calm voice. "Dom, be reasonable. They need us to survive."

I wasn't buying any of it. "Are you insane? You were like Superman, all interested in truth, justice, and the American way. After three measly weeks as a prisoner, you cave completely? What the fuck have they done to you?"

"I was upset at first." He focused on me, his face pled with me to agree. "But I've seen the evidence. Reviewed recordings of the negotiations. The US betrayed the Uhanans and us along with them because we happened to be there."

I stood and paced back and forth in the small room. "So it would've been okay if it was just the Uhanans? Or are you saying you would've volunteered?"

His mouth tightened into a thin line. "I don't know if I would have volunteered. But when I came here, I got to know them." Nate gestured to Ceyar and Gyelle. "Especially her."

My gaze shot to Gyelle and back to Nate. He took her hand and things became clear.

"I... I care about her. She's... she's the one. I love her." The expression on his face... his eyes all soft, worshipping, as he gazed at her. I'd never seen him look at anyone like that.

It was almost enough to soften me, but then it crept me out. Nate and romance did not mix. Nate and scary guns? Sure. But giving up everything, agreeing to this madness, for a girl? It sounded so out of character for him. I was the one looking for true love. "What have they done to you? Have they brainwashed you? A few simple modifications? You're not the brother I knew, and I'll never agree to this."

If eyes could shoot missiles, Gyelle would have obliterated me. "You don't have a choice. You will be changed. You are scheduled to go in the tanks in two weeks. You will carry a child."

My mouth dropped open as my stomach sank. My fate had been signed, sealed, and delivered.

"Calm down. He's just had several huge shocks. Give him time." Ceyar placed a hand on Gyelle's shoulder.

I was tempted to spit, but that was a bit too gross for me. "I don't need time. You suck, all of you."

Nate raced over to me and tried to draw me into a hug. “Little brother, it’s going to be okay. Really.”

I pushed him away. “You may force me to do this, but it will never be my choice.” Nate looked like I’d kicked a puppy, or maybe burned the American flag.

Ceyar stood and gestured to Nate and Gyelle. “We’ll take our leave. Eat. Your body needs the nutrition.” He tapped the device on his belt, and the three of them disappeared with a flash and a hum.

I put my head in my hands. My brother... what the hell? And it was going to happen to me. I would be changed and impregnated. Impregnated? I couldn’t have a baby. I was a freshman in college. This is not what was supposed to happen.

I thought about lying down, but the bed was gone. There was just this table full of food, and I was hungry. I shoved some of the fruit into my mouth, trying not to enjoy its subtle sweet flavor. Maybe sleep wasn’t such a good idea. It would only lead to nightmares. Although maybe that would be better than the nightmare my life had become.

As I ate, one of those screen-in-the-air things manifested, floating in my line of sight, and played videos.

A soothing, melodic, male voice spoke, like a narrator from one of those documentaries about dinosaurs. “When you arrive on Taeorn, you will each be assigned a home structure. One building per individual.”

Buildings shimmered into view, reminiscent of the World Financial Tower in Shanghai. Each of us would get one? They had built a million of these things? Perhaps they had once had inhabitants, but as their population shrank, homes became available. I shuddered, imagining my hometown of Trumbull, Connecticut, empty of all people. That only represented around thirty-five thousand residents. Uhana had around a million citizens. That was more than the city of Boston, where I went to school. Boston, devoid of Human life, classrooms at Boston University abandoned, the T stopped, and Faneuil Hall deserted—my mind numbed at the idea.

“Each of these buildings is a single family home with approximately five thousand square feet of living space. The units are self-cleaning. They have been built around quads of open space approximately four acres along each edge. These open spaces are communal recreation areas.”

My family had a quarter acre of land. Having four full acres to roam over sounded heavenly.

The video switched to open land, with tidy circular rows of plants around a central structure. Every color of the rainbow had been represented in the garden, including blue leaves, green fruit, and orange flowers. The structure had a green circle with the black outline of some kind of leaf painted on its side.

“Food is plentiful. Our system of governance ensures that everyone’s basic needs are met.”

What must this look like to the Uhanans? That had to be enticing. The only time in my life I had ever experienced deprivation had been on Uhana. I was not eager to relive that again.

A Taeorn wearing a green circle with three gold bars just like Ceyar’s tapped at an air-screen. Although his features were similar to Ceyar’s, there was something missing, the cut of his jaw, or the shape of his torso. Another Taeorn female wearing a yellow pentagon sat with silver disks on her temples.

“Advanced medical treatments will be made freely available. Taeorn doctors have cures for most Human ailments, including diabetes, all forms of cancer, and multiple sclerosis. A Taeling, whether born Human and converted or born of a Taeling and a Taeorn parent, has a projected life span of three hundred Earth years.”

A shiver ran down my spine as I remembered Ceyar placing those warm disks on me. If I chose to be truthful, the shiver wasn’t from the disks, but from Ceyar’s gentle touch.

A busy street flashed onto the screen, filled with people walking to various destinations. It could have been any US city if the people weren’t silver and the structures had been a bit straighter. Instead, the architecture included gentle twists and swirls.

“We will provide any education needed to allow you to pursue a fulfilling life path on Taeorn. You will be able to join any of the five guilds that your abilities qualify you for. You will be offered full participation and membership in our society.”

Yeah, right. And monkeys might fly out of my butt. Although, since I was to carry a child, maybe that wasn’t the best analogy. Still, I doubted we would ever be more than second-class citizens at best.

Footage played of the President of the United States talking with the Taeorns in the Oval Office. The man prevaricated and delayed. Then he made the offer of Uhana, saying, “No one will miss them.”

Seeing the president just dismiss a group of less fortunate people infuriated me. I knew it happened. The US imported goods from other countries all the time where people worked in substandard conditions for small wages just to keep the prices low for Americans. That didn’t make it right.

However, Hollywood could easily fake all this footage, and we were technologically inferior to the Taeorns.

“Stop! Just stop the propaganda!” To my surprise the screen disappeared, *poof*. I’d never heard of brainwashing where the subject had that kind of control.

I glanced around me. My prison really was bare, just the table and chairs, no other furniture, the walls a uniform silver. Only gravity determined which were walls and which one was the ceiling. I could pace around the table in an area two feet wide. “Make the bed appear.”

The dirty dishes and leftover food poofed out of existence. I hoped I’d be able to get more. The table folded in on itself and the bed reappeared. I couldn’t believe it. I had some control over the room. Awesome. I wondered how far it went.

“Send me back to Earth.”

“Unable to complete request. Earth is out of range.” I couldn’t tell the gender of the voice, but it had the same accent as Ceyar and Gyelle.

That sounded bad. Was it just the technology I had access to was out of range? Or were we moving away from Earth?

“Are we moving away from Earth?”

“Affirmative.”

My heart sped. I had suspected I was on a ship, but hadn’t quite imagined we had left Earth’s orbit. Humans had never left the comforts of our home, not really. No one could come for me. Earth didn’t have the technology. “Where are we going?”

“Taeorn.”

Duh. I should have guessed that. “Estimated time of arrival?”

“Four standard Earth weeks.”

Well, okay then. I was on a space ship, headed for an alien planet, and stuck in a little room with no windows. Holy shit!

I paced around the room, feeling restless, my mind full of questions. They planned to change me, impregnate me, but was that safe? Would I survive childbirth? How many children were they going to force me to have? My breathing increased, faster and faster. Air. I couldn't get enough air.

I needed a distraction, but what? I had no books to read, and I had turned off the crazy screen. I could turn it back on, but I really didn't want to. My fingers twitched. I wished I had something I could sculpt.

“Play some music.”

“Specify style.”

I wondered why the computer spoke English. The Taeorns must have studied us. I wondered how thorough they had been. “Earth music. Katy Perry.”

The opening beats of “Roar” filled the air. The familiar tune soothed me. Over the course of the song, my breathing slowed. I needed a cool head to figure out what to do. What I could do.

I lay on the bed and tried to lose myself in the music. I wondered if they had a library of books too.

A chime sounded. “Visitor requesting entrance.”

“Who?”

“Ceyar, Nurture Guild, Medical Subguild.”

I guessed this was the equivalent of knocking. I thought about refusing just to see if it would work, but something in me wanted to see Ceyar again. I was curious. That must have been it.

“Allow him to enter.”

The flash and hum preceded Ceyar appearing in the room. These aliens sure liked their transporter technology.

His silver elfin face and metallic chain hair threaded with red glowing beads should have been off-putting, but the strong lines of his cheeks, and his tight waist, drew my attention. “Hello.” He fidgeted with something in his silver hands.

“Why are you here?” I know. Rude. Sue me. I wasn’t fond of slavery.

He swallowed once and nodded. “I brought you this.” He held out a small metal cylinder.

“What is it?” I resisted the urge to grab it. The engineer in me wanted to examine it, but who knew what it would do? Well, Ceyar did. I waited to hear what he said.

“It’s a learning module. Specifically to learn the dominant Taeorn language.”

I wondered if it was like an online course. “Is it some kind of DVD?”

His tilted his head. His eyes dulled and then brightened. “No, it’s not a video. It’s a direct knowledge implanter.”

“What?”

“You attach these two circles to your temples and plug them in to the module. It takes a couple hours. It’s how I learned your language. Most people do it while they sleep since the process tends to tie up brain cycles and make them a bit clumsy. When it’s done, your brain contains the knowledge in the module in a form you can access.”

Cool. And scary. I didn’t know what would be implanted in me. Maybe this was how they brainwashed my brother.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “What if I refuse?”

“Refuse? Why would you?” His nose squinched up, making his nose ridges ripple. He looked like he was about to sneeze.

A tingling ran up my arms and I felt an urge to smooth my hand over his face. Dammit, I had to stop thinking about him this way. He was my captor. “You’ve clearly done something to my brother. Maybe this is it.”

“I can assure you, I have done nothing to your brother. Nor have my people. At least nothing untoward. Gyelle may have done something with him, but I suspect he was a willing participant.” The left side of his mouth turned up.

Was this asshole smirking? “Not using it.”

“That’s fine. We aren’t forcing you to do anything but the minimum necessary to ensure our survival. I’ll leave it here if you change your mind. Just note, you can only use one module in a twenty-four-hour period. We have a few weeks before we arrive at Taeorn. Things will get busy for you once we get to the planet. You should use this time wisely.”

So no orders, but the hard sell. Interesting. I wasn't in the market.

"I'm sorry this is uncomfortable for you. It wasn't our wish, but we have no more choices." His body was relaxed with his hands open.

How much could I trust his body language? If he had been Human, I would have thought him sincere.

"Whatever." I turned away. It was hard to meet his eyes. They just sparkled with an inner fire.

Ceyar turned slightly away from me. "Transport me out."

And he was gone with a flash and a hum, but he left the module on the bed. Fuck! Now Katy Perry's "E.T." was playing, and damn if that didn't make me wish Ceyar would return.

Chapter 5

My chest puffed out with pride when I made food appear. No, it really wasn't hard. The whole system worked on voice command, and a two-year-old could operate it, but hey, I was a prisoner on an alien spacecraft. I had to take my props where I could get them.

I did try to leave the room.

"Computer, transport me to the..." Where would I go? "Bridge." All ships had a bridge, right?

"Transportation functionality restricted to authorized personnel."

"Am I authorized to transport anywhere?"

"Transportation functionality is unavailable to Dominick Eldridge."

"Does Nathaniel Eldridge have access to transportation functionality?"

"Nathaniel Eldridge has level three access."

So, buy in to their plan and you got privileges. Not surprising. My heart rate threatened to speed again so I lay down and tried to breathe slowly. I needed to keep my head.

I ate. I slept. I stared at the language module. It would be helpful to understand their language, but if I plugged into that module and allowed it access to my cerebral cortex, God only knew what it would do. It could take over control of my mind, force me to agree to cooperate. They might even use me to brainwash others, like my cousins, Brooke and Brandon. I bet Nate was talking to them, but having two of us would strengthen their case.

Would it be like in *Supernatural*, where some part of me knew the rest of me was being forced to comply? I would experience everything screaming inside? Was that what was happening to Nate right now? Or maybe he was blissfully unaware of what had been forced upon him because Nate would never agree to all of this, especially not leaving our family back on Earth.

I needed to keep my mind free and study the enemy and look for weaknesses. So far, I had found none. I really sucked at this. If I didn't shape up, would I ever see my parents again?

My eyes stung from that thought. I wasn't going to cry. No sir. Not me. That wetness on my cheek was from dust in my eye, not from thinking about

never seeing my little brother, Jonah, again or never getting to graduate college or never seeing Mom and Dad. Nope.

A chime sounded. The computer spoke in that gender-neutral, even tone. “Visitor requesting entrance.”

“Who?” But I knew who.

“Ceyar, Nurture Guild, Medical Subguild.”

What did he want now? Another module? I didn’t think two weeks had passed, more like a day, so it couldn’t be my turn in the tanks, whatever that meant.

This time when Ceyar appeared, he carried a large square thing wrapped in plastic. “May I bring up a table?”

I was curious. “Sure.”

“*Kenec For’t-ah.*”

The bed folded up and the table and chairs returned. Ceyar placed the object on the table and unwrapped a gray block of material.

It couldn’t be.

I could feel my eyes trying to escape their sockets as adrenaline coursed through me. “Clay?”

He sat across from the lump. “Yes. Nathaniel said you sculpted this to make art.”

The clay drew me. I sat in front of it. My fingers itched to touch. “You brought it from Earth?”

“Not from Earth. We synthesized the exact chemical compound.” His tone was matter-of-fact, but his eyes sparkled. “It is identical to the substance you work with.”

Clay. Here in the midst of this madness. Was it a bribe? “Why did you bring me this?”

A slight frown marred his face. “I thought you would enjoy it. Perhaps you can show me how to work with it?” And the sparkle was back. My heartbeat increased. That sparkle was deadly.

He wanted me to show him how to use clay. He lived in a world where knowledge of an entire language could be downloaded directly into his brain. “Why? Don’t you have some learning module for this?”

“I’m an artist, too. Some things are more about the experience than the knowledge. Besides, I feel restless when I go too long without creating, and thought you might feel the same.”

That hit me, right in the gut. I ran a finger along the side of the block. My nerve endings fired, bringing me back to when I was a child. My first grade teacher noticed I had sculpted two cats battling with swords out of play dough. She brought the art teacher in to inspect the detail. After that, I was supplied with clay.

I glanced at Ceyar, his eyes following my finger. “You do art? What kind?”

“I sculpt with solid light.”

Childhood forgotten, I was on an alien spacecraft. “Solid light?”

“Yes, it’s a technology we developed about three thousand years ago.” If I didn’t know better, I would say he shrugged, possibly even looked mildly embarrassed. His cheeks flushed with that burnished color. “We make light solid. Here, these beads are solid light.”

I examined the red beads hanging from the ends of his chainlike hair. They glowed, catching the ruby glints in his eyes. I assumed they were some kind of bulb, although I wasn’t sure what powered them.

“Please, may I watch you?” He stood up straight with his hands clasped together in front of him, so polite, so serious, his lips slightly parted.

“Okay.” I’d never had an audience like this before, but found the idea enticing. “Cup of water.” The computer—or whatever it was—supplied the cup. I wondered how it knew when it was being addressed, but I hadn’t seen it misinterpret a command yet.

I took some of the clay in my hand and started working it. The cool feel on my fingers soothed me. Back and forth I massaged it, my palms taking on a color not dissimilar to Ceyar’s skin, although not as shiny. It warmed and softened. I lost myself in the familiar sensations and just worked with the clay.

I glanced up. Ceyar’s eyes were trained on the shifting material. Almost with a will of their own, my hands pushed and pulled it. Forming and shaping it into the being I saw in front of me—the strong line of his cheek bones, the eyes at a slant, his full lips. I finally had an excuse to study his face carefully. My eyes followed the scalelike ridges on his forehead and nose to the etched patterns on his chin.

He embodied all that was alien, peculiar and yet... There was something about him that spoke more to our similarities than our differences.

“Can you show me some of your art?” I didn’t know where the question came from, but if I was honest with myself I knew what I was really asking as I shaped the clay. I wanted to know more about the enigma in front of me. This man who had been raised on another planet and was forcing me to leave everything I knew and loved, except he brought me clay.

He nodded his head once, a smile played across his lips. “*Tif’na-fay Dno.*”

A three-dimensional projection of a sculpture of some sort of animal, but made with spirals of light, danced on the table. Greens and browns coiled together, forming the body and head. The green continued into two horns. The whole creature reminded me of a gazelle, although the light emphasized its otherworldliness. This wasn’t a gazelle. If anything, it was the goddess of gazellekind.

“This was made approximately four hundred Earth years ago by the artist Toefin, Philosophy Guild, Logic Subguild.”

I was disappointed. I wanted to see Ceyar’s art, not his people’s.

“May I try your clay?” He raised his hand toward the chunk I hadn’t used. His fingers twitched. I could imagine the desire.

I nodded.

He tore off a piece with strong fingers.

“It’s colder than I expected.” As he worked it in his hands, gray dulled his silvery skin.

I smiled. “Yes, you need to warm it up before you work with it.”

We sat together in a companionable silence, massaging and forming the clay. I continued to sculpt the framework of his face, shaping the dark grooves of his eyes. I wondered if they could make glaze for when this was finished. Could they create a red to match his sanguine irises?

I looked up and saw the beginning of what his agile fingers had shaped. The outline was crude, but it was unmistakable: a baby. My breath hitched as I watched him continue to shape its small head, his fingers so gentle, loving.

His eyes stayed trained on the work in front of him. “I won’t ever have one of these without a Human to help me. Almost none of us will.” His voice dropped in pitch and his hands shook.

Was this the return of the brainwashing? It didn't feel that way. His entire focus was fixed on the small likeness in his hand.

My forehead pinched and my stomach twisted. "I'm sorry. But that doesn't mean you can just take what you want."

"This is more than what I want. It's what we need. If you and the other Humans were allowed to refuse us, it would be the end of our race. A million years of art and music, scientific discovery and engineering innovation all ending with only our artifacts to remember us by. No one alive to tell our stories."

I felt sucker punched to the gut. The pain came out of nowhere. A million years? The emergence of man was a blip on their radar. Humans mourned the loss of every species that went extinct on Earth. How was this different?

But dammit, why did it have to happen like this? Tearing people from Earth to fulfill needs those same people didn't share? Isn't that what happened to the Native Americans? They were forced to live on reservations because the Europeans wanted their land.

Why was my need for self-determination not important here? Heat raced across my skin.

I was quickly associating his eyes as the windows on his soul. They were hard now—sharp, like diamond, only red. Rubies?

"Your people have clearly done some amazing things. But you have no right to force this on us, to violate our bodies. This is... this is more invasive than... than rape!" My hands had clenched, marring the smooth surface of my sculpture of Ceyar's cheek with a deep gash.

Ceyar's eyes narrowed and fixed on the gouge. "If you refuse us, it amounts to you committing the final genocide of our species."

I shot up and banged my fists on the table. "You did not... You're saying I have to bend over and take it, or it's like I pushed you in the gas chamber?" I spluttered. "That's sick. You're sick. All of you. Get out!"

"Fine." His head lowered as his lips pressed into a tight line. "*T'laick-na bedic.*"

A flash, hum, and Ceyar was gone.

Panting, my eyes were drawn to the small sculpture on the table of a baby. The ends didn't justify the means. Right? Even if the end was simple survival.

Chapter 6

How do you count days without sunlight? I went by waking and sleeping. Several days passed and no one came to see me. Not Nate. Not Ceyar. Although I couldn't blame them. I had already sent them away.

I ate. I did jumping jacks, push-ups, and other exercise. Nate would have been so proud and didn't that make my heart pang.

It's a good thing clean tunics were provided when I asked the computer. The room even turned into a shower with water coming at several different angles in an exhilarating cascade.

I sculpted or at least I tried. I couldn't look at the likeness of Ceyar, the gash an angry scar across his cheek. He wanted to save his race, but at the expense of my future.

I found myself drawn to the baby he made. I added more clay to increase its size.

I never really thought about having children. Being gay meant I would have to go through extra effort to be a father. I knew I might choose it someday, if I found the right partner, but not now. I was only eighteen years old. I had so much living to do. And, when you live on a planet where there are seven billion people, many of whom go to bed hungry or in fear of war or abuse, your contribution to the gene pool doesn't seem important.

I couldn't forget the expression on Ceyar's face, the naked longing for a child. This was a gift only a Human could grant. The equation changed when I met Ceyar, a living being with needs of his own, versus considering the needs of a species.

I leaped to the sculpture of his face, smoothing the cheek, repairing the damage I had done.

I thought of the women who acted as surrogates and then gave up the baby. They did this so gay men could be genetic fathers of the children they raised. Was what they were asking me to do so different?

But it was. *Consent* was the difference. I hadn't chosen this. I was being forced. I wondered how they would do it. I assumed it would be through in vitro fertilization. Impregnating me in a natural way seemed impossible

because I was a guy, but who knew what medical technology the Taeorns had developed? That made me shudder. I was firmly, completely against rape.

But then an image popped into my mind. Ceyar and me. Naked. His cut pectorals exposed for my view. Would they have ridges like his forehead?

My cock stood at attention and some part of me moaned, “Oh yeah.” I was attracted to this beautiful man who just wanted to have a baby.

Suddenly, I needed to talk to him. That made no sense, but I did. “Can I contact Ceyar? I want to talk to him.”

An air-screen appeared with Ceyar’s face. His voice surrounded me in a melodic cocoon. “Are you all right, Dominick? How can I assist you?”

His face was like a balm to me. “I’m... I’m fine.” But it wasn’t enough. “Could you come here? I want to talk.”

“Of course. *T’laick-na Dominick-ic.*”

His face disappeared from the screen, and then the flash, hum, and he transported to stand before me.

My breath caught. I wondered how it would feel to run my fingers through his hair. Like metal chains or soft? I shook my head in an attempt to focus.

I paced in front of him, flailing my arms. “This situation is impossible.”

Ceyar watched me, a placid look on his face. “You did make that clear,” he said.

I couldn’t read him. If he were Human, I would have thought he was hurt. Why? “I get that you want your people to survive. Carry on the line and all that. But why do you personally want a baby?”

Where had that come from? However, nothing was more important to me than his answer.

He took a step back, inhaled, and let out a slow breath. “I grew up in a world with few children and many adults. Only about one in one hundred of my parent’s generation successfully carried even one child to term. Siblings were unheard of. Children were... are precious. Every adult I met wanted to be a surrogate parent to me. They wanted their chance to be part of the next generation, not just genetically, but through their words, their actions.”

A hundred adults for every child. So different than the overcrowded classrooms back home. Twenty-five or more kids got one adult during the day.

After school I went to a program run by an adult, but most of the people in charge were in high school. It was fun hanging with them. It made me feel like a big kid. But they were still young.

I saw my parents at night. But there was homework, and my brothers wanted attention too. Soon it was bed, wake up, repeat.

Ceyar's chin lifted and he straightened to his full height, just a few inches taller than me. "The future is going to be different. Everyone who wants to be a parent among my people will be. Many will be alone. What you call a single parent. I've come to accept that now. We are doing what we must, but we must also minimize the impact on you, all of you. So I will get to have a profound effect on one small life, and I will get to love that life, nurture it, teach it in a way no one living on my world has. It is an opportunity to do something that will have a huge impact on just one person. The responsibility is terrifying, but the reward... immeasurable."

Something opened up inside of me, making me almost giddy. A dream that I had squelched since I realized I was gay. I could have a child, one that had been made by me. Even more intimately than the usual father on Earth since the life would grow inside me. There would still be a girl to provide the genetic material, but it wouldn't be about sex.

"What if the Human doesn't want to let you do it alone? What if they want to be in the child's life?"

"Their contribution, whatever they want it to be, will be more than welcome. When this all started, I had this fantasy that those Taelings who were not already married... that I would find someone special."

He wanted to find love among us? What would it be like to embrace all of this? To find a match among the Taeorns? For it to be Ceyar? But he needed a female. The thought of Ceyar with some unknown Taeling female did not sit well with me. In fact, it made me want to growl at her and... and... kick her. Or something. "How will they choose this girl for you?" My voice didn't sound hostile. Did it?

Ceyar's eyebrows rose, sending his brow ridges into a pattern. "A girl? Why do you assume I would have a child with a girl?"

Um... Duh? I thought Ceyar was some kind of medical doctor. "Because you're a guy. That's how it works."

Ceyar ducked his head. I'm sure it was to hide him laughing at me. "We surpassed that hurdle long ago. We just need two parents to give genetic material, and one parent or surrogate, regardless of gender, that is able to carry the child to term."

The implications of that hit me. Every gay man or woman on Earth would want this technology, the ability to have a child with their chosen partner. I bet some of those religious types would have had something nasty to say about losing the heterosexual monopoly on breeding. "So a child could have two fathers?"

"Of course." Ceyar's eyes held mine with their crimson twinkle.

My heart thumped loudly. "And this partner you were looking for. Wouldn't you prefer a girl?"

He stepped closer to me. "Most of my people are..." His eyes bored into me, like they could see my soul. My heart thumped as he continued, "I believe the term on your world is 'pansexual.'"

Pansexual? "What does that mean?"

"We don't look for a partner based on gender, but on that connection one feels with the right partner."

He was so close to me now. His breath caressed my face. I reached up and touched his cheek. It was so smooth, like a fine marble statue, but radiating gentle warmth. I leaned in slowly and joined our mouths.

At first, he stilled. Had I misread the situation? But then his arms came around me and pulled me in close. He tasted like nothing I ever imagined. Sweet, like the fruit I ate with him when I first came here, but more. Like a really good curry, mixed with pineapple, sweet and spicy and delicious.

I wrapped my arms around his lower back and pulled him close to me as I began to devour his lips. When his tongue slipped into my mouth, zings of need zipped through me, activating me like an electromagnet, pulling me closer to him.

Damn my brain. I wondered if he was just kissing me because he wanted a baby, another tactic to convince me to cooperate. Cooperate. I was never asked if I wanted to be here. Was this Stockholm syndrome? I had started to care for my captor.

I pulled my arms between us and pushed him away. My breath came in heavy pants, and my dick was like a steel spike under my tunic.

His mouth was slick with our joint saliva, and his breathing was rapid. I wanted to lunge at him and lose myself in that kiss.

“Why did you stop?” he asked breathlessly.

Why did I stop? My brain spun so fast I was sure it would explode. I wanted him, but I didn’t trust him. “Why are you here?”

He shook his head back and forth, and his expressive eyes glimmered. “You asked me to come.”

“So you would go to any of us? Just for a chance that one of us would give you the baby you want?” That was an ugly question. Was that really what this was? I was jealous. No. Yes. Maybe...

He took my hand in his. “No.”

“No?” My heart skipped a beat and sped along at warp speed. “What do you mean no?”

“Do you think I brought you clay to convince you to give me a child?” He gestured with his other hand to the table. “I don’t have to convince you. I will have a baby. If needed, someone will be assigned to me.” He stepped close enough that I could feel the warmth radiating from his body.

Should I kiss him again? I wanted to more than anything, but I had to know one thing. “Then why did you bring me clay?”

Ceyar took my other hand as well and pulled them both to his lips, pressing a kiss on each. “When I met your brother and got to know him, he talked about you, your art, your desire to help others, your love of science. You sounded like the kind of person I wanted to be. When I met you, I felt something stir. You attracted me. When I realized you were *also* Nathaniel’s brother, I wanted to call a philosopher and ask, ‘Was this fate?’ I brought you clay to see if the connection I felt that day was a fluke. Or if it was something more.”

I knew what he meant. I felt it too. This... need to be near him. How? Why? But it was there and I knew I needed to see where it led. “Why do I feel this way? I should despise you. You have taken away my choices.”

“I would never willingly take all your choices. We did take one choice. Perhaps your largest choice. For that I am sorry, but for the rest, the fact that this brought you here, to me... I am not sorry for that.” His hands quivered in mine. “Please, Dominick.”

I studied his face, once so alien but becoming more important to me than my own. His blood-red eyes seemed sinister in the faces of other members of his race. But here, today, they were not threatening at all. They were beautiful and precious. Can something good come of something evil?

Two sharp rings sounded, and then a voice, “*Na’at’ton, nick-falthin.*”

Ceyar stepped back, on alert. “I have to go. There is a medical emergency.”

“Go.”

With a flash and hum he was gone. I wanted to be glad that I had time to think. But the room seemed so empty.

Chapter 7

Thinking, it turned out, sucked. No really, my mind just spun like a teacup ride at a carnival. Once, Nate and I rode one of those and he kept twisting the wheel faster and faster. It felt like our cup careened out of control, while the ride itself twirled us around. Maybe I had too much cotton candy before that because I vomited halfway through the ride. I didn't even manage to get any on Nate.

So thinking... yeah. I was torn because Ceyar meant something to me.

I tried to sculpt with the clay *he* brought me. I ended up pounding an unused piece against the table.

I felt so alone, but did I have to be? "Can I talk to my brother?"

Another air-screen and then Nate appeared, the curve of his nose and hazel-green eyes so familiar in the midst of a sea of silver skin and ridges on his brow. "Dom."

"Nate. Will they let you come here? I want to talk."

"I'm on my way."

The screen disappeared, followed by a flash, hum, and there he was, my brother. We played basketball on the driveway. He was taller and more athletic, but somehow he made the game fun.

I caught him making out in his room with Angela Dosenberg. He was so mad I walked in on them. I called him an idiot for not locking the door.

When I came out to him, my heart had raced with fear. Would he strike me? He was such a guy's guy, but he did nothing. He just said he wasn't surprised and that it didn't matter. He even offered to fix me up with his friend Joel. Gross. Joel was so not my type.

Here Nate stood and there were things I needed to know. I asked, "What happened when they took you?"

He frowned, blinking rapidly. "What do you mean?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "You were fighting them, and then three weeks later, you're in love with one of them?" My voice sounded hard to my ears.

He sagged, and then took a deep breath and straightened to his full height, three inches taller than me. “When I woke up, I was in a tank of this green goo, an oxygen mask strapped to my face. One of them, probably Ceyar, saw I was awake and did something.”

I stayed silent and waited for him to continue.

“The next thing I remember, I woke up in a room like this. Changed. My body barely recognizable to me. At least on the outside. I was so angry. Beyond angry. They had *mutilated* me.”

I could imagine his anger, but now he seemed calm.

“Ceyar and Hophane came. You haven’t met him yet. He’s another member of the Defense Guild. They explained the situation to me. At first, I couldn’t accept it.”

He sort of grinned at me, pointing back and forth between us. Yes, we were cut from similar cloth.

“I saw the videos. The one of the President saying no one would miss us floored me. The US had an embassy on Uhana. He knew Americans would be taken. He just didn’t care. Bastard. It made me realize, we are all just people. Trying to survive. The Taeorns aren’t any different.”

Trying to survive, like one of those postapocalyptic stories I loved to read: *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins or Pam Goodwin’s *Trilogy of Eve*.

“I talked to Ceyar and Hophane and many others. They introduced me to Gyelle. She looked ethereal and... you’ll see. Some of our senses are different after the change.”

I wanted to know what that meant and started to ask, but he kept talking.

“They’ve told me they all know that something has to be done or their race is doomed. However, they are of mixed mind whether they are doing it the right way. The debate raged all the way to the governing council.”

I found that strangely comforting. The idea of an entire race marching in lock step brought up too many images of the Nazi German army. Debate is healthy.

“Gyelle. She’s like me. A protector type. You know, they don’t have an army in the sense that we do. It’s the Defense Guild. They haven’t attacked another species or each other in thousands of years. They have been peaceful since before Christ. Before the pyramids.”

I went to London my senior year of high school. Walking those streets, knowing the sights I saw had been there for hundreds of years longer than anything in the US humbled me, but that was nothing, a blip in time compared to the Taeorn's history. Didn't preserving that mean something? Or must all things end?

"No Humans have been killed, just captured. Life is too precious to them and we're their only hope."

Would I have volunteered if they had asked? In some ways this was an amazing opportunity. Like winning the lottery and ending hunger on Earth and creating flawless bionic limbs all at once. But, I had a few more things to check.

"Was it the education modules?" I held up the cylinder Ceyar had left for me. "Did this change your mind?"

Nate shook his head, his long brown locks mixing with the silver strands. "No. At least, as best I can tell. I remember worrying about that. But after the first, I still felt the same anger. It was talking with the others, meeting Gyelle, that really changed my mind."

He was persuading me. Okay, Ceyar had done most of the work, but Nate was taking me the rest of the way. I grasped onto my last great fear. "But what about Mom and Dad and Jonah? Are we ever going to see them again?"

"No. It's part of the treaty the Taeorns signed. We can't go back. When I found out, I wrote our family a letter. I can't send it, but I had to write it. Mom and Dad did so much for us, for me. Made me who I am today. Remember when they took us as a family to work on that Habitat for Humanity house?"

I nodded. Of course, I remembered. One of the kids who was moving into that house was my age. His family had lived in a homeless shelter for a while. I had felt so proud that I was helping him.

We were always doing stuff like that. When I was in first grade, my school did Jump Rope for Heart. My mom took me to work with her so I could ask her coworkers to sponsor me. I raised the most money in my school that year.

"I may not like how this happened, but I have an opportunity to save a race, or at least be part of that. I think Mom and Dad would approve. They'll have Jonah, and he'll help them to get through this. I pray for them sometimes, that they can move beyond losing us and have fulfilling lives. I hope they can be proud of what I do here, even if they don't know."

Tears streamed down his face and mine.

I threw my arms around him. “At least, we have each other.”

“I was hoping that was true.” He clung to me. “You were so mad.”

“I know. I needed time. I still feel so confused.”

He pulled back a little to study my face. “Confused? Talk to me.”

“It’s Ceyar.” I ducked my head.

Nate shifted his weight. A shit-eating grin split his face. “Dude, he’s totally into you.”

“Me? Are you sure?” I freaking bounced. “He doesn’t just want anyone who can give him a child?”

“No. Ceyar’s head of the line to get whoever he wants. He’s high up in the Medical Subguild of the Nurture Guild. That makes him important. But he keeps asking about you. How to get to know you. I see you’ve been using the clay.” He glanced over at the bust I had sculpted of Ceyar and practically smirked.

The strong lines of Ceyar’s cheekbones and the ridges across his brow had taken shape under my hands. “It saved my sanity.”

He walked over and inspected it more closely. A little thrill ran through me. Nate wasn’t usually interested in my art. He was always more interested in football or basketball or whatever, as long as it made him sweat. “That’s an impressive likeness of him.”

“Thanks.” It got hot in here. Right? Because I certainly wasn’t blushing. “I seem to be fixated on the subject.”

“Give yourself time. I know you. You need to think things through. Not like me, Mister Leap-Before-I-Look. I fell head over heels for Gyelle. Take the time you need to see if Ceyar is for you. He’s not going anywhere.”

“Thanks.”

I had my brother. That was something, right? Would I be able to grieve the loss of my parents and Jonah and move on in a new life? Maybe with the help of someone special.

Chapter 8

For a week and a half we traveled closer to Taeorn. I saw Nate and Brooke. She had found knitting needles and this crazy purple yarn. In between absorbing modules about Taeorn history and law, she absorbed information about Taeorn fashion and worked on a sweater she designed with raised triangles.

I got to speak to Brandon, although he was on another ship. He had already been changed and seemed to be doing well, if a bit lonely. I guessed he hadn't fallen for any of the Taeorn like Nate and I had.

When I slept, I learned. I started with the basics, the Taeorn language.

The first time Ceyar spoke Taeorn to me it made perfect sense, but I felt odd for a moment—like when you say the same word over and over again until it sounds like nonsense—and then I realized what was happening.

I took stock of myself. I still felt like me. Nothing had changed inside, at least as far as I could tell. I just knew a new language. It's was actually kind of neat.

After that I couldn't get enough. I absorbed math, chemistry, physics, and other basics. It was like I was living my college curriculum, one night at a time. I did miss hanging with friends, but instead I got something better.

When he wasn't on duty, I spent time with Ceyar. He taught me how to get as much clay as I could ever want, and we sculpted. I got inspired to make some crazy things: a model of a complex molecule for the substance the Taeorn used as fuel, and a mostly scale model of the Taeorn solar system. I think it was my mind processing all the new data it absorbed.

I continued to work on the bust of Ceyar, adding each detail with tender precision.

The best part? We kissed, again and again and again. I'm not sure what held us back from getting naked, but I sensed that Ceyar was waiting for something. When I asked, he would just give me this knowing smile and say, "Soon."

A chime woke me as the bed platform lowered. I blinked my eyes, rubbing stinging wetness from them. Why was I being awakened? That hadn't happened since I was taken by the Taeorn, and I really liked being able to sleep in.

An air-screen manifested in front of me, and Ceyar's face came into view. A thrill of pleasure passed through me.

His face looked serious, but softened as his eyes roamed over me. "Good morning, Dominick. It's time for you to be converted."

Converted.

I would be changed from fully Human to a Taeling. A shiver passed through me. Caring for Ceyar was one thing, but to help him, I needed to take this step. Would I be myself at the other end? I tried to picture silver on my face, similar to Nate's, but my face was softer. Would my hair be long instead of the neat trim I had now? I hadn't seen any short-haired Taeorns.

"May we enter your chambers?" Ceyar asked.

I briefly considered saying no, just to see what would happen, but the hopeful look on Ceyar's face stopped me. I stood and stretched. Then I realized he had said "we." I wondered who he was bringing. "Enter."

Flash, hum, and Gyelle stood in front of me, one of the brass knuckle weapon things pointed at my abdomen. Without thinking I raised my hands in the air. Why was she pointing a weapon at me?

"Prepare for transport," Gyelle barked.

What? Did she expect me to resist?

Flash, hum. I blinked, swaying a bit. I must have been transported with her. I put my hand to my head, trying to steady myself.

The room I now occupied had fifty large tanks arrayed in rows of ten. They reminded me of the brewing tanks at John Harvard's, except they were transparent. A green liquid filled them. Most of the tanks had a person submerged, wearing an oxygen mask. Several still had Human skin tones with just a tint of silver starting to show. Others were almost completely silver, their ears starting to change shape and strands of metallic hair grown partway down their faces. Each wore simple undergarments.

Ceyar stood in front of me with Gyelle between us. Part of me wanted to go to him, but I held back. Why had he sent Gyelle?

She motioned with the gun toward the tank. She opened her mouth, but Ceyar interrupted her.

"Gyelle. I don't think this is necessary. Dominick will cooperate. I told you this." He walked around her and placed a hand on my raised arm and pushed it to my side. The warmth from his hand soothed me.

“This is standard procedure, Ceyar.” I could just imagine her stomping like a young child. Or maybe that was my nerves talking. Her lips pinched together, forming a dark line.

I sighed and let the melodic Taeorn language flow out of me. “Just tell me what you want me to do.”

Ceyar patted my back. “Please remove your tunic. You can keep the undergarment on.”

A tremor of fear passed through me. This was it. No turning back. How many Humans fought at this stage? I trained my eyes on Ceyar.

He nodded at me, and his eyes sparkled.

I really did care about him, and this was the way to help him. I unbuckled the belt and then slid the tunic over my head.

“Thank you, Dominick.” Ceyar gave Gyelle a look that was halfway between a glare and na-na-na-na-na. “Please stand on the platform next to tank seventeen.”

I went to the platform, my legs trembling. “I’m afraid.”

He turned from the air-screen he had been manipulating. His eyes softened. “You will be asleep through the process.”

My breathing sped. “But will I still be me when it’s done?”

His face softened. “I’m not a philosopher, but they have pondered this question. The evidence is that who you are does not change.”

I could see it in his eyes. He really believed that. Or not. Honestly, when was I going to learn that just because his expressions looked Human didn’t mean anything? He was an alien, raised on an alien world. He talked about philosophers like he had heard one speak on the subject. He probably had.

The platform started to rise. I swallowed hard—my last minutes as a Human being. Ceyar stood on another platform next to mine, also rising.

My platform swung over the top of the tank. Ceyar pulled an oxygen mask down from the ceiling and placed it over my nose and mouth. He tightened it. The edges of the mask adhered to my skin, presumably forming an airtight seal. At least, I hoped so.

He placed two silver disks on my forehead and a band around my arm that connected to a tube. My arm itched for a moment as the band settled in.

“This is like an IV.” The harsh sound as he switched to English to say IV jarred me. “It will nourish your body while you are in the tank.” He placed another band on my other arm. “Together, these will also read your vital signs so that we can make sure all is well during the change.”

He held up a module. “This contains the next five days’ worth of knowledge toward the field you described, biomedical engineering.” Harsh English again. “We do not have a field that is exactly equivalent, but this module will teach you more about engineering, physiology, and medicine. It is programmed to feed you the requisite amount of knowledge each day. When you emerge in five days, you will have more knowledge in addition to your new body.”

My heart raced. I nodded to Ceyar. All of this was happening, whether I chose it or not. I could only hope that in the end, maybe things would be what they seemed.

The platform lowered slowly.

Ceyar watched me. He rubbed the back of his neck, and his ears twitched.

My feet itched once they touched the cool, green gelatinous material in the tank. As I was lowered, the itching progressed up my skin, higher and higher.

A loud dinging sound echoed through the air. Two other Taeorns in the room ran to one of the other tanks. I turned to investigate, but moving was so hard. A man in another tank was thrashing about. I should have been concerned, but tiredness stole over me. Drugs. The sleeping medication.

I blinked my eyes a few times and then... *nothing*.

Chapter 9

Cold. So cold. A shiver ran over my skin. Then warm air soothed it deliciously. A towel, also warm, smoothed over me. I opened my eyes. I lay on a bed in a room that was probably mine, and Ceyar was there, wiping green goo off me, his hands trembling. He smiled.

A scent hit me, like nothing I'd ever imagined: cinnamon, nutmeg, and frosting. It flowed into my nostrils. I couldn't help but inhale deeper. I wanted more of that smell.

Ceyar ducked his head. "Sorry."

"For what?" My voice croaked. My eyes had that droopy feel after waking from a deep sleep. I guessed five days in a tank could do that to you.

His face turned that tarnished silver color that I suddenly knew was the equivalent of a Human's embarrassed blush. "The smell. I have trouble controlling my scent glands around you. You have an excuse. I don't."

"I don't understand."

The tarnished color spread down his neck. "Taeorn physiology. Think about scent glands."

And like a memory, the information was there. Taeorns and Taelings had a stronger sense of smell than Humans, and scent glands along their wrists, neck, and beside their genitals. Although the Taeorn language is spoken, communication is enhanced based on the scent being emitted. Scents for normal emotions such as anger, fear, happiness, pleasure, and arousal were secreted involuntarily. Defensive scents, similar to skunks, could be shot out if needed although only once or twice before a period of regeneration was required.

Which scent was coming from Ceyar? What did I smell like to him? Arousal. Clearly. Because with his hand gently smoothing the towel over my skin, need traveled through my veins. Need for him.

I reached up and put my hand—my very silver hand—on his cheek and slid it around his head, pulling him in close to me. Our lips slotted together and the sensations that rippled from that simple touch were like aftershocks from an earthquake, sending desire skittering along my skin.

He climbed up next to me on the bed. Silver always looked cold to me, but his body was warm, hot, smoking hot as he pressed into me.

A moan escaped my lips as I tangled my hands into his chain braids. They were softer and more pliable than I had imagined.

For a moment, I wondered if any of this would feel the way I expected to him. Did sex work the same among his people? And the memory was there from the module I had consumed. I reached my thumb up and stroked where his eyebrows would be, across the ridges on his forehead, each indentation rough against my skin.

His eyes fell closed and a sound like a purr rumbled through his chest, and the scent from him intensified, drawing me in.

I moved my nose into his neck, just inhaling. My nipples hardened and my prick filled. The spicy scent enveloped me. Like walking into a candy store, waves of rich goodness poured over me.

His hands traveled down my back and into my underclothes. He reached and gripped my ass and pulled our groins together. His hardness pressed against mine, and the need to thrust overcame me. We rutted together for endless moments before I knew I wanted more, to feel his skin against mine.

“Clothes. In the way.”

“Yes.” His breath came in heavy pants as he pulled away and threw his tunic off his body and removed his underclothes. His body stunned me with its muscled, hairless chest. No treasure trail led down, but the prize was still there—a large, rigid dick stood at attention, a dribble of precum at the slit. I would have called it circumcised, but the knowledge that Taeorns didn’t have a foreskin bubbled forward.

I hooked my fingers in my underclothes, removing them.

Seeing my cock and balls, silver and now hairless, silenced me for a moment as I stared down.

Ceyar placed a hand on my cheek and pulled my eyes to him. “I’m sorry.”

“What?” Did he not want to have sex with me?

His hand swept up and down my body. “I did this.”

“Oh.” I should have been more worried about all this, but at that moment, my prick had other plans.

“I can’t regret it though.” His gaze held me. “You were already stunning before, and now, we are also compatible.”

My breathing quickened. *Compatible*. Did that mean... “Will I get pregnant today?”

“No. We haven’t added the womb. The pregnancy will be medically accomplished. Only Taeling women can get pregnant from this. We haven’t changed your fundamental nature.”

I drew comfort from that simple statement. I was still me. The memory stirred, bringing with it the knowledge that they could have done that—changed me into a woman. Many on my planet would have loved this opportunity. A Taeorn sex change was complete and indistinguishable from being born in that gender. But that wasn’t what I wanted or needed. I was happy with who I was, I had just been... what? I didn’t have a word for it. I wasn’t enhanced. That would imply the Taeorns perceived themselves as superior, and they weren’t, but the changes weren’t just cosmetic either. Ceyar had said it best: compatible. I was now genetically compatible with them. But I was still me somehow.

Ceyar’s thumb, stroking my nose and forehead ridges, brought me back to the moment. The sensation of the light scrape of his fingers might as well have been a hand on my cock. “Ohhh.”

I kissed him again, deeper, more intensely. My body filled with need. I kissed down his chest and nuzzled at the burnished silver nipple I found. His skin was smooth, silky, and warm. I continued kissing down until I reached his silver shaft.

The scent between his legs gripped me, like I fell into a swimming pool that was protected by pleasure not chlorine. I needed to taste him. I licked the drop of precum from his slit, flavored like saltwater taffy, but smooth not sticky.

When I engulfed him, his head flew back, and his hands came to my head, smoothing down the hair. I took my time learning his hot spots. He didn’t appear to be sensitive in the spot under the crown. I wondered if that had changed for me, something new to explore later. When I swirled my tongue around the tip, his mouth drew into an almost pained line as a muffled grunt expelled from him.

I pumped my head, drawing him closer and closer. His cock, smooth and hot in my mouth, fit perfectly on my tongue. I pumped and bobbed. I reached up and cupped his balls, tickling.

A strangled sound escaped his lips, and he shot his essence, like whipped cream and nutmeg, deluging my taste buds.

“Dominick, come here.” Ceyar beckoned me to him as his head fell back, his eyes closed. “That... I’ve never... Wonderful.”

I smiled. I’d had a few boyfriends before, so I knew I had some skills. It was nice they seemed to translate so well.

He joined his lips to mine and kissed me deeply, his hand drifting down to grab my ass and nestle me against him. My throbbing member pressed into his thigh, and my hips thrust involuntarily. I needed friction.

He pulled back and started smoothing his thumb over the ridges on my forehead, back and forth, rhythmically stroking. Sensation hummed along my nerves, sending need pulsing through my cock. Back and forth, back and forth. Who would have imagined an erogenous zone on the forehead? But it wasn’t the skin smoothing, it was the way each ridge seemed to catch and snap back into place that was having that effect. Then he strummed my ass in the same way. I guess I had ridges there too.

My hips moved faster now against him as a fingernail ran along each individual crinkle on my butt. Twang, twang, twang.

I devoured his lips, thrusting, twanging, until I couldn’t hold it any longer and satisfaction shot out of me, painting his skin.

I panted, struggling to catch my breath. “That was intense.”

His smile was soft, sweet. “I hope it brought you pleasure.”

“Oh, yeah.” I curled into his side, marveling that we came from different worlds, but in this moment, I felt like I was where I belonged.

I ran my thumb over the ridges in his chin. I didn’t remember seeing other Taeorns with such markings. “What are these?”

He smoothed his hand through my hair. “They’re decorative. Like when your people get tattoos.”

I pulled myself up on my elbow. “Did it hurt when you got them?”

He blinked. “A little.”

I’d never gotten a tattoo. Pain didn’t do it for me. “Is it just a design, or does it mean something?”

“It represents life and how it may start from very different places, but things happen to connect us. Intersecting lines of destiny that bring us together. I got it right after the council chose this course with Earth. I didn’t like what we were

doing, but I knew we had no other choice. I promised myself to embrace the opportunity, and I'm glad I did, because from the moment I met you, I've felt drawn to you in a way I've never felt with anyone before."

I didn't like the way it happened either, but I couldn't regret where it led.

An air-screen appeared. "Ship-wide assembly in fifteen minutes. All nonessential personnel and passengers, please report to your designated screening room."

Ceyar showed me how to get to my designated screening room. I didn't want to leave him, but he said my brother would be there and that he would see me soon.

Ceyar had a sink appear and we cleaned up quickly. I donned a tunic with a plain orange star. The orange was much more muted than I remembered. I glanced around the room—colors in general weren't as bright as I recalled. Ceyar's deep-red eyes were more maroon. The green circle on his tunic more pine than grass.

A memory surfaced comparing the ocular system between Humans and Taeorns. Fall in New England would never look the same. Not that I would be there to see it, but it still saddened me a little.

"Do the symbols on our clothes mean anything?"

Ceyar straightened his belt. "They indicate what guild you are part of. The orange star indicates you have yet to join a guild."

"Do I have to join a guild?" This was my new life. I needed to understand what was expected of me.

"Yes, it is part of becoming an adult in our society." He took my hand, his thumb stroked my palm. "You will learn about all of the guilds. I can bring you the learning module for your next sleep. Then you get to choose how you want to live your life according to your abilities."

"Abilities?" What abilities could I possibly have that would be useful on an alien planet? "What do you mean?"

He smiled softly at me. "Some guilds have an admissions process. You must have the right abilities to do what the guild requires. Consider this in terms of left brain versus right brain. A naturally cerebral individual would be less inclined toward a more physically oriented guild like Defense."

“What if I’m not qualified for anything?” Were there any engineering problems left to solve that I could actually help with? Did they have a sculpture guild?

He smoothed back my hair and kissed me lightly. “You will find your place. You are intelligent and interested in invention and discovery. I’m sure either of those subguilds will be happy to have you.”

“Subguilds?”

“I will bring you the module and answer all your questions later, but we must go.” He leaned in and kissed me once more. “I will see you after the assembly.”

I issued the commands needed and was whisked out of my room and into a large auditorium that easily seated a thousand people. In front was a large stage area. The room was about halfway full, with people arriving steadily. I was impressed that the computer could have people appear in random places without colliding with anyone moving about.

The majority of the people I saw were Taelings, like me, with that peculiar mixture of Human and Taeorn hair and blue, green, or brown eyes. Interspersed among them were a few pure Humans. The room was filled with the hum from a hundred small conversations. The scents of pepper, roses, mint, dark coffee, and too many others to name swirled around me.

I spotted my brother standing with my cousin Brooke. I threw my arms around her.

“What?” She pulled back a little and studied me. “Is that you, Dom?”

“Yes. I guess you’re next.”

“Uh huh. I’m scheduled to go into the tanks later today. I was scared at first, but now, I’m excited. Have you absorbed any modules on their system of government and law? It’s fascinating.” She bounced on her toes.

I hugged her again. “No, I didn’t get to that module yet.”

Her entire body thrummed with enthusiasm. “I’ve always wanted to be a lawyer. But these guys take it to a whole new level.”

A voice projected into the room in English. “Ladies and Gentlemen, please be seated. The presentation is about to begin.”

I sat between Nate and Brooke, a few rows from the front. The stage lights came up and five figures appeared, like a light turning on, seated in a semicircle facing us. Their bodies were slightly translucent.

Someone cleared their throat behind me.

The Taeorn in the middle of the semicircle spoke, “Greetings, people of Earth. My name is Fillag, Philosophy Guild, Religion Destinism Subguild.” Fillag wore a sort of business suit with a muted pattern on the fabric. On his rounded lapel was a large pin shaped like a pentagon. Its background was yellow and it had a brown strip that was wider in the front than the back. It reminded me of a path or road. But it was his appearance that was striking. His green eyes and strands of red hair intermixed with silver announced him to be a Taeling.

“I am the Soul of the Taeorn ruling council.”

This Taeling sat on the ruling council. If I could read anything from the fact that he was doing the introductions and that he named himself the Soul, he might be the most powerful person on Taeorn, and he was partly Human. Holy shit! Could he have been born on Earth and converted like me?

A light murmur flowed through the room, but when Fillag put up his hand, the room silenced.

“To my right...” He gestured. “Is Paaliv, Nurture Guild, Food Production Subguild.” Paaliv was dressed in a similar outfit to Fillag’s but with more greens. She wore a circle-shaped brooch filled with green, like Ceyar’s, but instead of the pattern that filled it, there was a black outline of a leaf, the same as the one on the building on the farm that had been part of the propaganda videos.

I tried to imagine something called the Nurture Guild on Earth in our government and just couldn’t. Our government was more about keeping people from harming each other than actively helping them.

“Next to Paaliv is Kinwe, History Guild. He is the Keeper of Continuity for the council.” Another similar outfit but his pin was a blue square.

Historians on my planet tended to be tucked away in universities. People always said we should learn from history. Having a historian on the ruling council took that idea up a notch.

All these introductions made me wish I had learned more about Taeorn society and government to give this some context. A laptop, or even pen and paper, for note taking would have helped as well.

“To my left is DaeCora, Legal Guild, Adjudication Subguild.” Her brooch was a purple triangle with an outline showing the palm of an open hand.

This at least made sense to me. A ruling council would need people skilled in law.

Brooke squeezed my hand.

“And last but not least, HiVane, Defense Guild, Order Subguild.” His pin was a red diamond with a single line going from left to right.

His pin I knew. On Uhana, I saw that symbol often enough and had come to dread it. My time on the ship had softened my view.

“Collectively, we are responsible for the decision to bring you here. This was not an easy choice. My colleagues and I in the Philosophy Guild debated the ethical imperative of species survival versus the loss of free will. In the end, a vote had to be taken for which course of action to pursue. As the leader of the victors, I became the new Soul of the council.”

Back home, the idea of majoring in philosophy was a joke. Unless you got a PhD and a position as a tenured professor, your destiny seemed to be working at a bank, or as a manager in retail. In other words, positions that didn't use what you studied. Here the concept of considering ethical questions seemed to be taken much more seriously. I found the idea that they had at least considered my right to free will comforting.

Toward the back of the auditorium, a baby started giving a babbling speech of its own. Followed by some loud shushing.

“DaeCora will now outline our plan for you.”

The woman to Fillag's left stood and took a few steps toward the audience. “The survival of our species, in some form, was of paramount importance and ultimately guided our decision.”

When I was first taken, I would have scoffed at this comment. My view of right and wrong had no room for shades of gray, but I saw both sides now.

“To this end we have brought you here.”

Still, my chest tightened at this comment. They didn't bring us, like you bring a friend to a party. They forced us to come.

“Our best medical minds have determined that each of you, once modified into Taelings will be able to bear a child. We have tested this and are pleased that we have several third-generation Taelings as part of our society, including this council's Soul.”

Three generations ago, Humans were stolen from Earth. Was that hundreds of years ago? Were those disappearances the beginning of the alien abduction stories? Those Humans were preindustrial. What must their transition into Taeorn society have been like?

“This hybrid subspecies is completely viable.”

I guess I was glad they proved it worked before they dragged us from our homes.

“We require each of you to bear one child for a Taeorn. We are in the process of collecting one million Humans—the entire population present on the island Uhana. In exchange for facilitating this collection, we have promised your governments that there will be no contact with Earth except through official channels. They do not wish to reveal the existence of life on other planets at this time.”

A couple gasps sounded behind me, but I had figured all this out.

Why? Why was secrecy the most important thing to the governments of Earth? It made no sense to me.

“It saddens us that this is the best deal we could arrive at with the peoples of Earth.”

Imagine what Earth could have gotten: Cures for so many diseases, transportation technology, faster-than-light travel. This decision reminded me of a million decisions I had read about. Choosing to spend only a million dollars to start a project instead of two million dollars to finish it, even though that meant it would cost ten million to complete later. Our politicians sucked at taking the long view. Everything was about short term gains to keep them in office.

“Those of you who are past child bearing age are excused. You have been brought in an attempt to keep family groups together.”

I would have thought that was kind, except it didn't include me. My family was split.

“Those that are below the age of eighteen will be allowed to wait until your eighteenth birthday.”

Well thank God for that. Children being forced to bear children would have been even more disgusting.

“Those of you in committed, mated relationships will act as surrogates for selected Taeorns. Whether you are part of the lives of the children you bear will be negotiated on an individual basis. After you have met your obligation, you are free to continue your relationship and encouraged to have more children together.”

They didn't expect couples to break up.

“Finally, those of you that are unmated will have a choice. You will be allowed a year to meet unmated Taeorns. If fate allows, you may choose a mate and have your child with them. After a year, if you do not choose a Taeorn mate, you will act as a surrogate for a selected Taeorn and have the opportunity to choose whether you are part of the child's life.”

Ceyar. I wanted Ceyar. I think he wanted me too.

Another murmur passed through the crowd.

DaeCora nodded once and sat down.

Fillag took over the narration. “I hope many of you who are unmated will find mates among us. My grandfather found the experience rewarding.”

DaeCora said Fillag was a third generation Taeling. Did Fillag have siblings? I wished I could meet his grandfather and hear about his experiences.

Paaliv addressed us. “You will each be provided with a house that is yours to live in if you so desire. Or do with as you please. Each of you will be offered a place in our society as befits your abilities and interests. Leaders from all five guilds and the leaders of their subguilds stand ready to help you with the process of finding your way to productive, happy lives. All of our education is open to you.”

It sounded positive enough, productive, happy lives, but it was hard to keep my mind from spinning the words and finding negatives. What if someone wasn't productive? Communism sounded good on the surface, from each according to their ability, to each according to their need, but Human nature had a way of throwing a wrench in the works.

A huge grin split Kinwe's face as he started to speak. “You will be arriving on Taeorn in a little over one Earth week. Housing assignments and other logistical information are being sent to the accounts we have created for you on the planetwide net. We look forward to meeting you and helping you adjust to your new home. We're excited to teach you what we know, but we're also

excited to learn from you. Every unique being brings new thoughts and ideas. It's this diversity that makes true progress possible.”

They said Kinwe was a historian. That fit my mental picture. When he spoke of learning from us, he exuded an infectious enthusiasm. I wondered if I would get to meet him.

I had already started learning from the Taeorn. I probably *knew* more about engineering than a dozen PhDs back home. I was only just beginning to access this information and the possibilities truly did seem endless.

The five council members stood, placed their closed fists against their chests, and bowed, eyes closed. Then, like the image on a TV screen being turned off, they disappeared.

Brooke turned to me, her eyes sparkling. “I know I shouldn't be, but the truth is, I'm really excited.”

Chapter 10

After the presentation, Ceyar transported in to meet us. He embraced me as soon as he saw me and our lips met.

“Get a room!” Nate called out over the milling crowd noise, but he was smiling and the scent of fresh cut grass rolled off of him.

“Damn that’s hot,” Brooke commented. “You’ve been busy, Dom.”

I wondered what I looked like at this moment. My cheeks didn’t feel hot or cold just different, prickly, but I bet they were that tarnished silver color I’d seen on Ceyar.

Ceyar turned to Brooke. “If you could come with me, it’s your turn in the tanks.”

Her eyes widened and her voice was a whisper. “Okay.”

Every so often I caught a flash, hum as people left the hall.

Nate put a hand on Brooke’s shoulder. “It’s a piece of cake. We’ll be here when you get out.”

Brooke hugged him. “I know, but it’s still... change.”

Ceyar waited, shifting from one foot to another. Just seeing him there made me happy... for me. Even for Brooke. I guess I officially drank the Kool-Aid.

“You’re just worried your new silver skin won’t match your wardrobe.” I loved teasing her about her incredible fashion sense. Truthfully, I was jealous. Something was defective with my gay gene because I had no idea how to dress well.

She let go of Nate and smacked me on the shoulder. “Yeah, that’s it. Mister Sensitive.”

“I aim to please.” I hugged her tight. “We’ll see you soon.”

Ceyar issued the commands and they transported away.

I turned to Nate. “What should we do today?”

“Gyelle will be off duty in about an hour. How about we go hang out in my quarters and she can meet up with us?”

Much of the auditorium had emptied. “Sounds perfect,” I said.

We went to Nate's room, ordered some food.

"Want to see something cool?" Nate asked.

"Sure." My mind whirled with possibilities. The Taeorn had so much amazing tech.

Nate looked up. "Show me this year's Super Bowl."

An air-screen manifested, showing a recording of the game.

I have to admit, that wasn't what I expected. The Super Bowl? We knew who won that already. However, that was Nate. "Can we watch any TV from Earth?"

"Yeah, as stuff airs there's a delay 'cause the signals have to travel to Taeorn, but they figured we would want to keep up with news and such from our home world."

Nate would be worried about news, current events, politics, and shit. I never paid much attention to that stuff. "Awesome. I can keep up with *Supernatural* and *The 100*."

"Really." Nate's mouth dropped open. "That's what you're excited about?"

"Dude, mock not the *Supernatural*, and you should totally watch *The 100*." I wondered what Ceyar would think of these shows. Did they have stories like these on his planet? I would have to introduce him to them.

After about an hour, Gyelle joined us. She and Nate kissed.

She gave me a light peck on the cheek before eating a quick meal while watching the game with Nate, explaining the rules.

"Do you have sports on Taeorn?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. I used to play a game called Cor'batchen. The object is to place a metallic rod in the opposing team's goal as many times as possible. Goals are set atop two opposing artificial climbing structures. You use your hands to steal the rod, but you cannot move with it in your hand. It has to be placed in pouches the players wear on their backs."

It was hard to picture so she showed us a holographic projection of a game. It was interesting to watch as they climbed and swung from place to place, moving the rod. Although it was completely different than any sport I had seen on Earth, it also wasn't—two teams trying to score by getting a thing into another thing. It was comforting somehow.

“Can you teach me to play?” Nate thrummed with excitement.

She stroked a finger along his cheek. “Of course, when we arrive on Taeorn and get you moved in.”

“Are you two going to live together?” I blurted out before thinking. I cringed. Had they even talked about it? “You don’t have to answer that.”

“It’s okay,” Gyelle responded. “We are. We have yet to decide whether Nathaniel will move in to my existing home or whether we will live in the place assigned to him.”

“Oh.” Before I could ask more, Ceyar called looking for me and joined us. As soon as he got there, I jumped up from where I was sitting and threw my arms around him. The scent of nutmeg surrounded me, not as sweet as when we were alone. My new medical knowledge told me that was because we weren’t in private and about to... you know... have sex.

“Your cousin is settled in the tank. She requested a module with the notes of the Keeper of Continuity for her learning. She is quite intense.”

Nate and I both smiled. She would take Taeorn by storm.

Although they were in different guilds, Ceyar and Gyelle had known each other for a long time. Kids were so rare that playdates were a special event and were much more formally arranged with crazy rotation schedules. Celebrations of birth and other milestones were sponsored by the government to ensure enough kids could be gathered together to have a fulfilling experience.

There were so many adults and so few children that kids were basically supervised 24-7 or the Taeorn equivalent.

Ceyar talked about learning to paint, etch, and finally sculpt. “When I showed interest in the arts, leading experts in each of these areas took time to mentor me.”

“Can I see your work?”

Tarnished silver clouded his cheeks.

I smiled at him and said in my best little kid voice, “Please?”

He took my hand, and we said good-bye to Nate and Gyelle. He spoke a few words, and we transported to another room.

“These are my quarters.”

Ceyar's room was about the same size as mine although it had a dresser and some decorative items organized around the space. In one corner, a large sheet covered something. Ceyar led me over and pulled the sheet off.

Nothing could have prepared me for the beauty of the object in front of me. It was a sculpture of a beach on Uhana, done all in light. The water, a rainbow of shades of aquamarine, glowed as the light moved, ebbing and flowing with white surf lapping the almost white sand. Each grain of sand was an individual speck of light that I could cascade through my fingers. A gleaming starfish lounged just inside the water, and palm trees with glittering trunks angled out over the surf, their fronds dangling.

The breathtaking beauty of the piece was only rivaled by my memories of similar beauty on Uhana. It was nice to be able to take time to admire it now, without fear like those days when we evaded capture.

Ceyar stood beside me, his tarnished silver cheeks and downcast eyes told me he was nervous to hear my opinion.

I wrapped my arms around him. "This is stunning. A beautiful likeness."

"Uhana was an inspirational place. You were lucky to live there." His arms encircled me.

"I didn't live there." I pulled away from him and turned back to the sculpture. I scooped up some glowing sand and let it fall through my silver fingers. "We were visiting. We were volunteers building a school to help the natives. I lived in the United States."

Ceyar came up next to me. "Nathanial never mentioned that. You brought learning to Uhana? That is laudable."

Now it was my turn to duck my head as my cheeks prickled. "It felt like the right thing to do."

"You'll get your wish. All the Uhanans will get access to learning with us."

"I know." I embraced him again. "I just... I just wish you had asked first. I'm sure some people would have said yes."

"Would you?" His eyes studied mine.

I desperately wanted to say yes, but I couldn't lie. "I... I want to say I would, but I don't know. I could never have predicted the way you make me feel."

His thumb strummed across the ridges on my forehead, making me tingle. “I had hoped we could ask, but I can’t regret what happened. Not if it brought us together.”

A feeling of intense love welled up inside of me, like nothing I had ever experienced before. I slammed our lips together. I needed to kiss him. Now. I needed to show him just how strongly I felt about him and the life we were starting to build together.

His arms came up around me, pulling me in closer as his tongue delved into my mouth, exploring.

I cupped the globes of his tight ass, pulling him in, our rigid lengths pressing together.

He pulled his lips away, tilting our foreheads together, sliding back and forth. The ridges pulled and twanged, sending sensations of desire skittering down my spine. My ass clenched. I needed him inside me.

Three sharp rings sounded. Ceyar jumped away from me as the transportation light took him.

Chapter 11

I stood in Ceyar's quarters alone, panting, my erection still at half-mast but wilting fast. Why did Ceyar just leave me? One minute we were kissing in front of his beautiful sculpture, the next he was transported away. Did we do something wrong? If we did, why was Ceyar taken and not me? It didn't make sense.

I wasn't sure what to do. Should I try to find Ceyar? The computer could locate him. Should I try to go back to my own quarters?

The sharp rings sounded like some kind of alarm or warning. Could something be wrong? Maybe a doctor was needed. That made sense.

"Where is Ceyar?"

"Ceyar, Nurture Guild, Medical Subguild, has been called to a medical emergency."

Knowing he was off being a doctor should have calmed me, but medical emergencies weren't good things. I decided to wait for him. "Can I have some clay?" Some appeared next to me on the dresser.

I brought it to the table and tried to lose myself in the artistic process, but I ended up smashing several failed attempts back to clay. My mind just kept spinning greater and greater scenarios of doom and despair. I wanted to call Ceyar, but I knew he shouldn't be interrupted.

A couple hours passed. I had a basic model sculpted of the same scene Ceyar had made. I wondered if Ceyar would teach me how to work with light. Although I thought my likeness showed a lot of skill, the clay seemed dull and flat compared to his moving colors.

The flash, hum announced Ceyar's arrival. His shoulders drooped and he wouldn't meet my eyes.

"Your cousin Brooke is dead."

"What?" Brooke couldn't be dead. I just saw her, so excited for the future.

"It happens sometimes. Her body couldn't handle the conversion process." His voice cracked as he spoke and his eyes glistened. "Her immune system interpreted her new cells as a virus and attacked."

“It happens sometimes? How much is sometimes?” My voice had that high-pitched crazy sound. I thought this whole threat of death thing was past. It was time for happily ever after, but not for Brooke.

Ceyar’s chin quivered and he wouldn’t meet my eyes. “About one in fifty can’t tolerate the process. We are still studying the issue.”

One in fifty. Two percent. They were converting one million people. That meant twenty thousand would die. Twenty thousand people were killed so the Taeorn species could live.

My stomach twisted. Some crazy part of me wanted to vomit, like that would fix something. “The issue? The issue? My cousin is dead. You killed her.” The man I had fallen for killed Brooke. How could I love him? “You should have waited until the process was safe.”

“We couldn’t. We did everything we could to ensure it was without actually trying it.”

The sad part was that I understood what he was saying. You could do all the trials in the world on animals and using computer simulations, but until something was tried on a large sample of Humans, there were too many variables. Even the Taeorns’ mighty tech couldn’t reduce the risk to zero.

But we weren’t talking about some abstract risk. We were talking about people like Brooke. My cousin would never knit me another sweater with pink-and-orange stripes, and she would never get to pursue her passion for the law.

Ceyar finally met my eyes and his looked... haunted. This was tearing him up. “We’ll learn from this group, we’ve only taken about fifty thousand in this first round. Hopefully we’ll be able to either upgrade the process, or predict who can’t tolerate it, before we return to Earth.”

A part of me wanted to comfort him, but the part that was going through those stages of grief was firmly stuck in anger. “So you just sacrifice twenty thousand people? You say you value life, but you mean Taeorn life. There are so many of us, we’re expendable.”

During my tirade, Ceyar wrapped his arms around himself. I could feel his misery in palpable waves, smell it rolling off him, like pepper and rancid meat. I wanted to go over and hold him, soothe him. But I couldn’t. I was too confused by everything that happened, and I needed time to think.

“Transport me to my quarters.”

I threw myself onto my bed and lay there. Brooke was dead and there was nothing I could do. I remembered playing spies with her and Brandon when we were six. We were trying to catch Cronos because Brandon was obsessed with Percy Jackson. In our game, Cronos was a pink pony, because Brooke loved My Little Pony and was always trying to find ways to incorporate the figures into our games.

Brandon would bring out a bunch of Marvel superheroes, and the battles would commence.

How could Ceyar be so casual about killing twenty thousand people? But that wasn't right. He didn't seem casual, just determined to save his race.

The costs piled higher and higher: Loss of choice for one million people. Loss of life for twenty thousand people. Loss of control over our bodies, being changed without consent and then forced to carry a child.

Was his race worth it? Was any race worth it? I tried to put myself in his mindset, and Brooke's face appeared before me. She was eighteen, giving a speech for Speech club. Talking about how we had to seize the future. Find the opportunities and move forward.

No more future for her.

Flash, hum, and Ceyar was before me. I turned away. I couldn't look at him. He couldn't even respect my wish for some time alone.

He mumbled a few words, and instead of lying on my bed, I was sprawled on the floor in the middle of a room filled with air-screens, like some kind of control room. I stood up.

"I know what we did was wrong, but I had no choice. I can't give you much, but at least I can give you this." He tapped at one of the screens. A ring sounded from a speaker, like a phone connecting.

"Hello?"

It was my mother. Holy shit!

"Dom, you have to answer your mother. Quickly, we don't have much time."

"Hello?"

My legs shook so I grabbed on to Ceyar for support. "Mom, it's me, Dom."

"Dom? How? You're dead. The plague on Uhana..."

“I’m not dead. I’m alive. I can’t tell you much. Nate and I, we’re safe, but we can’t come home.”

“I don’t understand.” Her voice quivered.

“I know. I don’t know how long I can talk. I love you so much. Please don’t tell anyone you heard from me.” My face was wet, but I managed to keep from sobbing. “Just hug Dad and Jonah extra tight and know that we’re okay.”

“No! You have to come home. Why can’t you come home? I don’t care what’s happened.” I knew that tone of voice. That was her get-here-this-instant voice. “Come home.”

Eighteen years under her roof had trained me to obey that voice. “It’s not up to me. I’m going to get to help people, create things, just like I wanted.”

The sound of her tears poured through the phone. “Son, please, find a way to come home.”

I knew she didn’t understand, couldn’t understand.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t do my chores better and didn’t tell you I loved you more. You are the best mom, and I will miss you so much.” I cried now, great heaving sobs. “Tell Dad I love him. Hug Jonah.”

“I will...”

The signal cut off. Flash, hum, and several Taeorns entered the room, red diamonds on their chests, brass knuckle weapons pointed at me and Ceyar. Then they disappeared and I was back in my room, alone.

Chapter 12

Nate transported into my room. “Ceyar is being held for treason.”

“What?” I shrieked. I wrapped my arms around myself to try to warm up, because suddenly I felt like I was outside in Boston in February... in my underwear.

I had spent the last several hours in an information blackout. The computer hadn’t accepted any commands to let me communicate with anyone.

What had happened to Ceyar? Had I said the right things to my mom? Brooke was still dead. My mind fractured into a million shards.

Nate settled on the bed next to me and patted my leg. His voice was gentle. “Communication with Earth is forbidden. They say he contacted Mom for you. Is she okay? What did she say?” Nate’s eyes spoke volumes about his need to know.

I wish he could have been there with me, able to talk to her one last time. “Yes. No. I don’t know. She misses us. I told her we were okay.”

He nodded his head slowly as his face twisted. “Okay.”

I knew that look, Mister Tough G.I. Joe was trying not to cry. I reached for him, grabbed his shoulder, and squeezed.

I wanted to comfort him, but I needed to get this out. “Brooke’s dead.”

“Gyelle told me and Brandon. I’ll miss Brooke.” Tears made Nate’s silver cheeks glisten.

“Me too.” I sniffled, my own face wet. “I blamed Ceyar. He called Mom for me as a way to say he was sorry. What are they going to do to him?”

He inhaled deeply and let it out slowly before meeting my eyes. “We’re not sure.”

“But you have a guess. Tell me.”

“Best case? He’ll be denied a Taeling to breed with. Worst case, life in prison.”

Ceyar in prison for the rest of his life for helping me? Either way, I would never have a child with him. They would make me go with another. “Is that my punishment? I have to have someone else’s child?”

“What? No. You aren’t being punished. You weren’t in control. Ceyar made it clear that he acted alone and just brought you.”

I must have been staring into space because Nate tapped my leg to get my attention. “Although you do still have to have a child.”

“No.” I shook my head faster than a needle on a sewing machine. This couldn’t be happening. After everything I had been through. “I want his child. I want him. I choose him to be my mate.” They couldn’t take the one good thing in this situation away from me.

“Do you love him?” Nate talking about feelings? Jesus.

“I...” Did I? It had only been a couple weeks. I had only met a couple Taeorns. Love at first sight doesn’t happen. Excuses. “I think I could. I do.”

“We need to go see the adjudicator.” He looked up. “Gyelle?”

Gyelle’s face appeared on the air-screen. I couldn’t read her very well, but her lavender eyes flickered dangerously. “Yes, Nathaniel?”

“Can you get us in to see the adjudicator for Ceyar’s case?”

A silent look passed between them.

“No and yes. The case will be heard by the ruling council, not just an adjudicator. They want to question Dominick.”

I froze. What would they ask me? Would I be able to help Ceyar?

The room we transported into was about the size of a twenty-person classroom at my college. Ceyar was seated in a chair to my left, and I wanted to run to him, but Nate’s hand on my shoulder held me back. I was glad they let Nate come with me as support. I was also assigned a counselor from the Legal Guild. I had spoken with her briefly on an air-screen. She said I would see her here.

A shimmering, nearly invisible curtain divided the room in two. We sat in chairs on one side of that barrier. After a few minutes, the council, my counselor, and a few Taeorns I didn’t recognize appeared on the other side. Appeared was the wrong word. They were translucent, meaning holograms.

The council was arranged in the same semicircle as at the presentation. I wondered if we appeared to them as holograms as well.

The Soul of the council, Fillag, cleared his throat. “The matter which brings us together saddens me greatly. Ceyar, Nurture Guild, Medical Subguild has broken our treaty with Earth. A treaty ratified by this council. He contacted a Human. We do not yet know the ramifications of this action. We are here, today, to decide his fate. As this is a legal hearing, DaeCora will take the lead.”

I didn’t know much about legal trials in general, much less on Taeorn. A pang ripped through me. Brooke would have been able to help.

DaeCora gestured to Ceyar to stand. There was no swearing in. Perhaps the idea of lying was not considered among Taeorns. “Why did you contact Earth?”

He glanced over at me and then focused on DaeCora and the council. “So that my chosen could say good-bye to his family. We’ve hurt him.” He glanced at me again. “I needed to do this for him.”

DaeCora tapped something in front of her that didn’t appear in the projection. “Did you know this was illegal?”

Ceyar lifted his chin. “I did.”

“Do you regret this action?”

I prayed. Please, say you regret it. Maybe they would have mercy.

“I do not.” Again he gazed at me as he spoke.

Have you ever felt utterly ripped in two? Just shredded to bits? I did. He said he didn’t regret his actions, but the tone, the scent of honey and cinnamon, his expression all told me that he meant it as a declaration of his feelings for me. Maybe even love. But, those words would also condemn him and any future we might have.

Before DaeCora could ask another question, I stood. “You can’t punish him.”

DaeCora tapped the thing in front of her again. Her voice firm, she said, “You do not have the floor. We will question you in due time.”

My counselor waved to me to sit, like I didn’t know that was what they wanted.

“No. I won’t be silent.” I felt like a small child arguing with my dad—all I needed was to stamp my foot to make the image complete. But this was probably the most important argument of my life and I had to see it through, and I had to win. “Your council kidnapped me, modified my body, and you are

going to force me to bear a child. The only choice you have given me is with whom. You said if I chose a mate among you, I could bear his child. Are you taking that choice away too?" My voice broke. "I'm trying very hard to care about the Taeorn people, but as far as I can tell, you're cold bastards. Why should I care if you survive?"

Okay, maybe that last bit was over the top, but I was desperate.

Kinwe, the Keeper of the Continuity for the council, spoke. "Your people hadn't even evolved to sentience when our history was already millennia old. We have helped worlds, fed the hungry, healed the sick, and brought great beauty into the universe. What have your people done? Killed each other in increasingly brutal ways and allowed many to starve. Your media is full of hate, and your planet is choking."

I sat there spluttering. He nailed it in one.

Fillag spoke. "Kinwe. Have you become a philosopher?"

Kinwe turned to Fillag. "No, I merely state facts as they exist."

"Another fact then: without their thriving vitality, we will all perish." A sad grin adorned his lips. "Still Dominick brings up an interesting point. Why should he care if our race survives? From a micro point of view, many would argue his point. His personal survival will always be more important to him. But there was something else he said." Fillag turned to me. "You accused us of taking away your choice of a mate. We have not and will not take your choice away. You have a year to meet Taeorns and choose a mate."

I took a quick breath and tried to speak calmly. "But I've already chosen. Ceyar is my chosen one. If you take him away, you take away my choice. He did what he did for me. I cannot allow him to be punished for that."

Ceyar's eyes sparkled, and he held his fist over his heart.

Fillag's eyes glittered as his forehead ridges crinkled. "That's very interesting. You would condemn our race but still feel this strongly about one of us?"

I took a moment to think and chose my words carefully. "There is a difference between individuals and society. Your society and you as the leaders of that society have made choices that go against one of my core beliefs: People have a right to free will. They choose the path their lives follow. You have taken that away to some extent, not Ceyar." I met Ceyar's eyes as I spoke. I

tried to put all my love for him on display. “He has bent over backwards to give me free will, to respect my needs and choices. Will you?”

The expression on Ceyar’s face almost slayed me with its tenderness. His mouth opened in a soft O. Would they really keep us apart?

DaeCora’s face hardened. “The law is clear.”

HiVane, the Defense Guild representative, barely let DaeCora finish before adding, “Order must be maintained.”

“There is no historical precedent for this particular situation.” Kinwe’s eyes were unfocused, like he was thinking hard. Two Taeorns standing behind him nodded in agreement.

Fillag stood. “As the Soul of the council, I am calling a recess. We have things to discuss. The moral questions this young man raises have far-reaching implications.”

The hologram disappeared.

I ran for Ceyar and clung to him. “I’m so sorry. You did this for me.”

He kissed me. “I’m not sorry. I love you. I gave you what you needed.”

Then the guards pulled us apart and whisked me back to my quarters.

Chapter 13

After the trial, I was confined to my room. Nate sat with me, and I pounded out my emotions in clay, often alternating between anxiety and frustration. Seven days had passed and still no word came from the council. We would arrive at Taeorn in two days.

Nate, Gyelle, and I held a funeral service for Brooke. Brandon attended by air-screen. We lit candles and remembered the good times with her. Gyelle provided us with TanForke, a drink that was distilled from a berry on Taeorn. TanForke was a traditional drink at Taeorn funerals. The first sip is always spit out into a cup to represent that the deceased would no longer be able to take that drink for herself. Nothing would bring Brooke back, but it helped.

During the wait, my housing assignment had been sent along with information from the Nurture Guild. Ceyar had set that in motion as well. Engineering fell under their aegis. I had a meeting scheduled with medical researchers when I reached Taeorn. They would take me on as an apprentice.

Nate would join the Defense Guild. His house was next to mine. Brandon's was across the quad. Nate and Gyelle were still deciding whether they would prefer to live in Nate's home, so he could stay close to family, or Gyelle's, which was on the other side of the continent. Although with Taeorn transport technology, we would see each other often no matter what he chose.

A gaping maw inside me ate at my joy. I would almost forget, start to relax, and then I would think of something I wanted to tell Ceyar. My center would tighten, and I would struggle to breathe. What if the council stuck with their laws?

The night before we arrived at Taeorn, I finished the bust of Ceyar. It was a perfect likeness. Down to every beloved ridge and marking on his face. Bar none, it was the best piece I had ever made.

Finally, the summons came, and we transported back to the same room where the trial had taken place.

I was surprised that only Ceyar, a guard, and myself were in the room, along with the hologram of Fillag and DaeCora. I tried to decide if this was a good sign as my heart beat like a snare drum.

When I saw Ceyar, I reached out to him, but the guard kept us apart. Ceyar's eyes were sunken. Had he slept? My hands clenched in fists. I hated seeing him like this.

Fillag spoke first. “We expedited this process as much as possible. We didn’t want Dominick’s first steps on Taeorn to be clouded with uncertainty. We have a deal to offer both of you.”

“I’m listening,” I held my breath.

DaeCora focused on something in front of her that was not projected in the hologram. “We cannot have zero consequences. Ceyar we are prepared to offer you five years’ probation. During this time you will be confined to Taeorn. You will lose your rank in the Medical Subguild and be removed from the Human to Taeling conversion project. You will no longer be able to research reducing the adverse effects the process has on some Humans. This is to limit your interaction with former Earthers, reducing the risk of a repeat offense.”

No prison, but what about us? Would we be allowed to mate? What about all the lives Ceyar could have saved if he stayed on the project?

“In exchange for this reduced sentence, Dominick, you will agree to mate with Ceyar and you will both give your word that you will never try to contact Earth again, under any circumstances.”

“But what about all of the Humans that are dying? How can you take Ceyar away from that research?”

DaeCora and Fillag glanced at each other.

“You don’t ask for much,” Fillag said.

I wanted to glare at Fillag, but swallowed it. “What you offer tempts me beyond words. As long as Ceyar wants me as his mate, I agree not to contact Earth. But twenty thousand Human lives are a lot of deaths to have on my conscience.”

“I do want you as my mate, Dominick. I will not contact Earth, but I must honor my chosen. There are many ways I could aid in the research without direct contact with Humans.”

DaeCora made a gesture in front of her. Although she and Fillag started talking, no sound came through. I guess they pressed mute. DaeCora gesticulated wildly while Fillag had this placid expression that reminded me of Yoda.

I inched closer to Ceyar and he turned to me.

“I did this for you. We Taeorns were—are wrong. I had to make amends.”

“I know. I don’t blame you. You’re a good man.”

The sound restarted. “Ceyar will be permitted to consult for the project performing data analysis and designing testing strategies. However, these strategies and data collection will be done by other medical personnel. You will choose a secondary field to pursue during periods of downtime.”

Ceyar smiled. “I would like to pursue pediatrics.”

Fillag turned his lip up in a half smile before schooling his expression. “That is acceptable and will soon be a high need.” Fillag placed his fist over his heart. “Since you have both agreed not to contact Earth and to take each other as mates, I declare this matter closed on my authority as the Soul of the council.”

DaeCora mimicked his gesture. “I witness this agreement.”

Relief swept through me. Ceyar would still work on the problem. With him involved I knew real effort would be made.

Fillag smiled. “Please stand next to each other and hold hands.”

Ceyar moved to my side and grabbed both of my hands in his. His eyes locked with mine and his mouth parted. I sensed something was about to happen as adrenaline rushed through me.

Over my shoulder I heard Fillag speak. “By my authority as Soul of the council, you are mates, joined to live this life together. Go forth, and may the Great Destiny grant you many children. Congratulations.”

Whiplash. Okay, that happened a little fast, but that was fine, because it happened. Ceyar cared for me, and he would not be punished for it. We would be together.

The council members disappeared and the guard left the room.

A tear rolled down Ceyar’s cheek.

I reached up and brushed it away. “I’m sorry this happened. What you did for me. You lost your position. Your research has been limited.”

He grinned, not a wry smile, a big, goofy, happy grin. “No. I gained everything. I have you by my side. I get to continue to work on the most important problem facing Human conversion, and I get to work with children.”

His happiness was infectious, or maybe that was my own simple joy.

We transported back to his quarters, and I realized for all intents and purposes this was our wedding night. Tomorrow we would arrive at Taeorn and

have to figure out our new lives together, but tonight, there was just one thing I wanted.

“On Earth, it’s customary to have sex after a mating ceremony. It’s called consummating the marriage.”

“I see. This is one custom we have in common.”

I giggled. Dammit, I was trying to be so solemn and serious and romantic, and I was giggling like a crazy person. All of the stress just flowed out of me.

Soon Ceyar joined me, his Taeornae twittery laugh enchanted me. The room filled with a scent like grape soda, so sweet and like bubbles tickling my nose. I bent over double and tears streaked down my face.

Ceyar placed a hand on my cheek, his face still split with a smile and led my lips to his. The hilarity fell away as the erotic sensations swirled through me. I reached up my thumb and stroked the ridges above his eyes.

A rumble flowed through him like a purr of appreciation. He reached around and grabbed my ass, pulling us closer together, but I didn’t want frottage tonight. I wanted him inside me.

I pushed lightly on his chest, and he stepped back, a frown marring his beauty until he saw me unbuckle my belt and pull the tunic over my head. He did the same and soon we were naked together.

I drank in the sight of his toned abs and hairless body. I ran my hands over his strong pectoral muscles and grazed his nipples with my thumbs.

He grabbed my hands and pulled me over to the bed. We lay on our sides facing each other and joined our lips again. His tongue licked into my mouth, exploring.

I reached between his legs, not breaking the kiss and stroked his rigid steel length, so warm and just the right weight in my hand. His hands ran down my back and twanged my butt ridges before dipping in to caress my hole.

The knowledge that lube would still be needed bubbled up to the surface of my mind. “Do you have lubricant and condoms?”

“Lubricant, yes. Condoms aren’t needed. As your doctor, I know you do not have any sexually transmitted diseases. I do not either. I would not have been allowed on this mission if I had any kind of contagious disease.”

“I trust you.” And it was true. Ceyar would never put me at risk.

“Lubricant.”

A blue-tinted bottle appeared on the side of the bed. Ceyar reached for it and poured some over his fingers.

The lube against my opening was slick as expected but something more. The moment he touched my skin with it, my need increased, making my hole flutter and open.

“The lubricant contains some pheromones that help relax the anal muscles for more pleasurable penetration.”

My eyes closed. Score another for Taeorn technology. “Oh, yes.”

His fingers disappeared inside of me, spreading the lube, preparing me in record time.

“Would you lie on your back? I want to see your eyes as I enter you, make love to you.”

“Yes.” I positioned myself under him and let my legs drop wide. He knelt between them and scooped my knees placing them on his shoulders.

He leaned in and kissed me, all lips and tongue and need. His erect cock nudged my entrance and then pushed forward, into me. He slid in with little resistance. That was some lube. When he brushed that spot inside of me, I howled. “Right there.”

“You like that?” He smiled and then twanged my head ridges while he thrust deep inside.

“Oh... Ung...”

Being there with him inside, things felt right, for perhaps, the first time in my life. I’d never felt this way about a sexual partner.

The scent of nutmeg and musk surrounded me, hyping me up even more. I reached up and pulled him back to me, as I rocked my hips to meet him halfway. I captured his mouth and ran my tongue across his forehead ridges and then down his neck.

His hips snapped faster, like a piston, and I loved every minute of it. I started to reach for my prick when he got a particularly awesome hit on my spot and my orgasm overwhelmed me, whiting out my vision.

He thrust a few more times, once, twice. “Dominick!” His warmth filled me.

He collapsed beside me, his head on my chest. I pulled him in tight.

If you asked me last March where I would be now, just two months later, I would have said studying for finals, my time on Uhana just a short memory and source of pride.

Instead, I was on an alien spacecraft, about to disembark on a new world, and begin a new life.

The way it all began sucked, and I would miss my parents, Jonah, and Brooke. But I found the person I had been looking for and didn't even know I needed. We would start the family I never dreamed I would have, and we had a lifetime of love to look forward to.

Together.

The End

Bonus Material

The Taeorn council has five members. One member is selected from each of the five guilds. Each guild chooses its own representative, using its own process.

The five guilds are Philosophy, Defense, Nurture, Legal, and History. The representative from the Philosophy Guild is called the Soul of the Council and presides over the Council. The representative from the History Guild is called the Keeper of the Continuity. This representative is always flanked by two other members of the History Guild. These two do not vote on the Council but are present to increase the accuracy of the historical record by keeping notes of the proceedings.

Each guild has a symbol that is used to mark items under the guild's purview and is worn by members during official proceedings. These symbols are:

Philosophy – Yellow Pentagon

Defense – Red Diamond

Nurture – Green Circle

Legal – Purple Triangle

History – Blue Square

If a person who has not yet joined a guild must attend an official proceeding, they wear an orange star.

All of the guilds except the History Guild are broken up into subguilds. These are specialized groups within the guild and have their own leadership that reports to the guilds' heads. The symbol for a subguild is rendered inside the main guild symbol.

The largest guild is the Nurture Guild. This guild includes many subguilds for production of various goods and food, medicine, innovation, and discovery.

Pronunciation Guide

Ceyar – Say • yar

Gyelle – Jee • yell

Taeorn – Tay • orn

Author Bio

Kathryn Sparrow has had stories spinning around in her head her whole life and finally decided it was time to write them down. After working twenty years in the Software Industry, she has left the engineering world to be a chauffeur mom (because she doesn't really get to stay at home.) She lives with her fantastic geek husband and her two adorable, sometimes infuriating daughters, who are too smart for their mommy's own good. If she had spare time, she would spend it knitting, crocheting, cross-stitching, and doing any other handicrafts that caught her fancy. Kathryn and her writing partner, Robert Cage, have just released their first novel, Submit for Redemption – Book 1: Submission, published by Storm Moon Press. This M/M BDSM Romance tells the story of Captain Everett Palmer and Colonel Phineas Bainbridge, the professional torturer who has been hired to break him. Kathryn also has her first solo book, Alpha Coder, a M/M Romance about werewolves working at a software company, coming soon from Loose Id.

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