

**Adara  
☼ 'Hare**



*Budding  
Love*

## BUDDING LOVE

YOSHIDA Kazuo has less than a year of Intergalactic Trade School left before graduation, which is when his father expects him to take on a significantly bigger role in the family's off-world export business. In fact, the whole of Kazuo's life has been about his obligations to his father, never about what he wanted for himself. Anything alien absolutely fascinates Kazuo, but the majority of Kazuo's alien education has come strictly from his studies.

To help Kazuo gain more business experience and contacts, his father requires him to attend an industry gala held by one of the most well-known extraterrestrial importers on Earth, a Siryntalian known as Aethos. While Aethos is certainly a main attraction in attending the gala, Kazuo also remembers a past visit to the property's enormous extraterrestrial greenhouse—a visit he'd like to repeat, as long as he can avoid touching the plants this time around.

As far as decisions go, leaving the party to look at the exotic flora seems to be a fairly harmless one to Kazuo. But a walk through the greenhouse becomes a life-altering event when Kazuo comes across an alien plant with a mind of its own, and a desire for Kazuo. Now Kazuo has a life-or-death decision to make. The question is: does he have all of the facts he needs to make it?

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## BUDDING LOVE

By Adara O'Hare

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

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's Landscapes*.

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.

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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## Photo Description

An illustration in the style of Japanese manga artwork features a young Asian male, nude from the waist down, blushing in embarrassment as thick green plant tentacles hold him aloft, binding his arms behind his back and spreading his legs wide. A wide tentacle protruding from the center of a large pink blossom penetrates his anus. Three smaller yellow tendrils, also from the center of the flower, reach toward his erect cock.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I can't believe I let my cousin drag me to this party. He told me I was invited too, but that just can't be right. This is the event of the year. Only the most important, wealthy, influential people are invited to attend, and I'm just a geeky little nobody...*

*So you can imagine how surprised I was when our names were checked off the list and we were ushered inside. Wow. This kind of thing really isn't my style, but I have to admit that I'm impressed. But most of all, I'm intensely curious about our host. I've caught glimpses of him throughout the evening, mingling with all his well-to-do guests. But the chances of actually getting to meet him are pretty much nil. And now that I've seen him, that might not be such a bad thing. He's not what most people would call handsome, but there's something about him that's pushing all my buttons. If I tried to talk to him, I'd probably just end up stammering and stuttering, and making a complete fool of myself.*

*That's why, when my cousin made his move to join the crowd around our host, I decided to make my escape instead. Well, that and I was also bored to tears and intensely uncomfortable, standing around in my borrowed dress clothes, feeling like a complete outsider. So I decided to explore the grounds for a while, to kill the time.*

*HUGE mistake.*

*The big, beautiful greenhouse at the back of the property immediately caught my attention. The fact that it was locked? Pfft! No problem! I've got*

*skills... which I'm now regretting. Why, you ask? Because this is what my nose self has wandered into (see picture). Goddamned mutant alien plant, luring me in like a bee to honey with that enormous flower! This is not how I imagined my first time to be! How on earth am I going to get out of this? And did I just hear the sound of footsteps coming this way? I know I locked the door behind me, so who the hell is in here with me?*

*Someone who must have the key...*

*Oh... shit.*

*Please make his first time memorable and very pleasurable, dear author! Hot, erotic and very explicit is what I'm hoping for, with some strong, romantic overtones. (I don't want straight-up porn/erotica). And it would be great if the host was to join in at some point, so we have a sexy threesome going on! In the picture he's shocked, angry, and more than a little bit scared, but I'd like that to gradually change. But please do not include aphrodisiacs (from the plant or otherwise). I want him to enjoy what's happening without any mind-altering drug/chemical coercion.*

*I love kinky sex content (obviously!), so whatever you want to include, in terms of kink, is fine by me! Just keep in mind that this is his first time, so anything too extreme would be a bit off-putting and very unrealistic, like massive penetration. But some sounding with the plant's tendrils would be very hot!*

*I imagine this to be a futuristic setting, with a greenhouse full of strange, alien vegetation. The MC in the pic is Human, but maybe the host could be an alien species? (I do love interspecies pairings). But if you'd like to go with something different, that's fine!*

*And please give this a HEA ending, or at least a strong HFN with the distinct impression that these two (or three? Haha!) are well on their way to having a romantic relationship.*

*Sincerely,*

*C.M.*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** science fiction

**Tags:** aliens, shifters (non-wolf-cat), interspecies, virgin sex, tentacle sex, ménage, m-preg, sounding, bonded mates, betrayal, HFN

**Content Warnings:** possible rape trigger (an alien does not understand it does not have the consent of its mate. It stops when commanded before anything more than non-consensual fondling occurs), dubious consent

**Word Count:** 26,152



*Acknowledgements*

I have to give a gigantic thank you to Lor Rose, who kicked my ass in beta and told me to make this story better, and by doing so, almost completely changed the story I ended up telling. There is more to the story than what is here, and yes, I'll get around to telling the rest of it, someday.

Thank you also to C.M. Roberts for the amazing prompt that inspired the whole story, and to my other betas, Vicktor and Nox. And finally, thank you to all of the Goodreads M/MR moderators and volunteers who make this event what it is. I couldn't have done this without all of you.

# **BUDDING LOVE**

**By Adara O'Hare**

## Chapter 1

*Earth Year: 2307 A.D.*

*Standard Galactic Cycle: SGC 8961*

“Tell me why I’m attending this gala again?” I asked miserably, looking at my watch for the third time in as many minutes.

“To appease your father by making industry contacts so you can effectively take over the family export business from him once you graduate from university next year,” my cousin replied, no trace of remorse in his voice.

I sighed once more, staring into my wineglass. I opened the cufflink of my right sleeve and rubbed roughly at the mark on the inside of my wrist, trying to keep it from noticeably bothering me. The fabric rubbing against it had been driving me nuts all night and I needed it to stop; I wore long sleeves as little as possible to keep anything from rubbing against that sensitive skin.

I put on the suit and tie tonight out of an overdeveloped sense of duty, true to my Japanese heritage of self-sacrifice: Never mind my own dreams and goals because they don’t match my father’s needs for the family business. I had always been fascinated by the mysteries of the extraterrestrial, but I never had any time to devote to studying planets, cultures, or creatures. Intergalactic Trade School took up all of my time.

My cousin said, “At least try.” He wandered to the other side of the room to stand with the group surrounding our host for the evening, Aethos.

Aethos belonged to one of the more humanoid races known as Siryntalians. He stood out from the group of Earthlings surrounding him because of his pale golden skin that had a strange shine to it, his diamond-faceted orange eyes, and his naturally indigo-colored hair, a color which Earthlings had only ever been able to get out of a bottle of dye. Aethos certainly wasn’t the only extraterrestrial in the room, but he was definitely the most striking, and he knew it. He oozed charm, but also a touch of excitement and mystery. Anything alien held mystery, but Aethos was well-known on Earth for being aloof.

I found Aethos attractive, even if he was extraterrestrial, or maybe because he was extraterrestrial. I’d let him have my virginity in a heartbeat if I thought he wanted it—I was sure we could find some way to work around the acidic

quality of his species' skin—but he hadn't even noticed me sitting awkwardly at this table all night long. Why would he? Earth's elite investors and tradesmen surrounded him, hoping to gain his ear for even a few minutes, hoping he would share his intergalactic influence. I was only a university student; I had nothing to offer him.

Okay, that wasn't entirely true. I had the knowledge of my father's business and his export contacts—the same knowledge my cousin was probably offering to Aethos at that very moment.

Why was I here?

My cousin laughed over a glass of champagne, though Aethos was as aloof as always. The news media dogged him quite often for being so stone-faced all the time. I had always wondered if perhaps his species didn't smile as opposed to assuming he hadn't found anything pleasant enough to warrant a smile.

Finally, too ashamed of my pathetic inability to meet my social obligations, much less my family's expectations, I gave myself a derisive snort, pushed the wineglass aside, and left the residence to take in the grounds of Aethos's estate. At least that would give me some pleasure.

I had been to visit Aethos's estate once before in my life, roughly nine years ago. Right after the greenhouse had opened, my school's entire elementary sixth-year grade-level had taken a field trip to see Earth's largest private extraterrestrial greenhouse and botanical gardens. I remembered being fascinated with all of the alien plant life because it seemed so much more fantastical than our own. I liked imagining the places the plants came from and what it would be like to go there.

I rubbed at the mark on my wrist again, remembering when I received it during that field trip. I had been looking around at all of the plants and hadn't noticed a small green vine reaching out for me. A small orifice had nipped at the skin on the inside of my wrist, leaving the red, lamprey-like circular bite I still bore. At the time, I had been scared about toxins in my blood; the greenhouse had warnings all over it about not touching the plants because they could be deadly. I had freaked out and run to my sensei, who in turn had gone to Aethos. Aethos had assured me I was safe from that particular plant, and that was the last we spoke of it because another emergency had required his attention—a fast purple vine had touched one of my classmates, causing her to asphyxiate.

The only change I ever noticed after the mark appeared was to the sensitivity of the skin there. After the onset of puberty, even the slightest wind

blowing across the mark would cause full-body shudders and would stiffen my dick more than was publicly appropriate. I had taken a lot of ribbing in the locker room during gym classes the following year as I learned how to control my body. Eventually I figured out I had to rub the mark more roughly—not fast or painfully, but more pressure than gentle brushing—to keep the sensations from causing an inappropriate hard-on. And bonus, when I rubbed the marked skin myself, I learned to use it to trigger my own inner calm and focus.

I rubbed at my wrist without conscious thought anymore. Even now, walking outside in the cool night air, I rubbed the mark with my thumb to keep the wind away from it. I supposed holding hands might one day become an issue, but I didn't have anything to worry about for the time being. Holding hands required someone to hold in the first place.

I wandered slowly toward a blue-green glow behind a hill on the opposite side of the main residence. As Earth's number one off-world importer, Aethos afforded a massive estate. I read somewhere his estate contained a forested mountain and a small lake in addition to the main residence, botanical gardens, and greenhouse. I hoped the light might be the greenhouse. The late hour meant it should be blessedly empty.

As I passed an entryway, a couple of his guards watched my progress but thankfully didn't detain me or herd me back inside like I had expected them to. I found that rather odd. Did Aethos always allow people to wander around the grounds freely when they visited his estate? Was the freedom only for tonight? I shrugged my shoulders. Either way, it worked to my advantage tonight.

It took me fifteen minutes to walk the distance and climb the hill. As I topped the hill overlooking the greenhouse from above, I drew in a breath. The vastness of the reinforced glass building built behind the hill stunned me to a standstill. It was even more enormous than I remembered it being; the size easily topped that of the residence itself, already one of the most notable homes in Japan. The greenhouse was wide and flat, and at least two to three stories tall, though only one floor existed. Seeing it from this distance really drove home the fact some of the plants were gigantic and needed that much space. It shined wonderfully colorful at night, a gorgeous menagerie of alien plant life.

I didn't see any guards around the outside—or any security cameras, not that I expected to see those—which seemed even odder. Then again, the whole building was Aethos's private collection, and he rarely allowed visitors on his estate, so maybe they weren't necessary. Besides, what idiot was likely to leave the expensive gala Aethos had thrown to walk all the way to his greenhouse?

Other than this idiot, of course.

I snorted softly in amusement, smiled to myself, and walked the rest of the way to the building.

When I tested the door panel, it slid aside with ease, not making a sound. Stepping inside, I slid the panel shut and looked around the small glass foyer. A small cabinet sat in the corner, and atop it, I recognized a small black infobox. The blinking green light indicated data to download. As I neared, my watch beeped at me; its display showed a push request to download the greenhouse digital catalog to my personal storage. Assuming the catalog contained data on the species of flora, I decided not to download it. I only wanted to peek at them, not write a dissertation.

I opened the cabinet to find first aid supplies and lots of vials of liquid. On the wall, a giant biohazard sign written in several languages, including Earthling, warned visitors, *“Do not touch or taste the plants. Do not let them touch or taste you. Be wary of strange smells as some of these plants produce aphrodisiacs, noxious fumes, and toxins which can cause hallucinations, paralysis, and/or death. Read all warnings before entering a section. For your safety, do not visit any section alone.”*

I remembered these warnings from my previous visit. I didn't remember the “taste” warnings being there nine years ago, but otherwise they seemed unchanged. Duly noted, I blatantly ignored the last one and slid open one of the three available sectional doors to enter the greenhouse proper. I gazed in silent wonder at the garden of exotic plants and genuinely smiled. I had no idea what any of them were or where they were from, and I didn't see any tags. Had there been labels in the past? Maybe a private collector didn't need to mark his own stuff? I didn't mind anyway. I liked using my imagination to make up my own stories for the plants.

They were all so incredibly beautiful. This plant was tiny as a dewdrop and iridescent, sparkling like a multi-colored jewel; I had trouble focusing my eyes on it for very long. Another one was spiky as an ancient cactus but actually soft like Prairie Smoke. Another was a fascinating shade of burnt orange with neon green speckles and bright blue veins curled into three colossal towers, capped with a mottled brown and yellow bell blossom that appeared ready to fall over and swallow me whole. In the rafters, multiple brightly-colored vines tangled with each other through metal filigree and clung to wooden crosshatch trellises. Baskets and planters hung from the ceiling. The room smelled of dirt with a sweet undertone of fragrant blossoms.

I drifted carefully between the rows of tables and shelving, gaping in awe while being vigilant not to touch any plants or let them touch me. I was uncertain which ones were poisonous or venomous to me and didn't want to end up some alien flora's next source of sustenance. The thought made me shudder in revulsion.

Maybe roaming a building full of potentially lethal plants by myself wasn't my best idea, but I enjoyed the quiet infinitely more than the crowded ballroom of strangers. After all, wallflowers could enjoy the greenhouse too, right?

I chortled at my own bad joke, the sound loud in the quiet. It echoed slightly off the walls and high ceiling. Following my laugh, plants quivered all around me, the room's acoustics amplifying their rustling to sound similar to maracas. The unnaturally amplified noise unnerved me more than I cared to admit, so I decided it was time to check out a different section of the building.

I skimmed the environmental warnings for the next sector. The plants there thrived in carbon dioxide-based environments; non-carbon dioxide-breathing species should wear an appropriate mask before entering the section.

A movement in the corner of my eye snagged my attention. A dark purple vine quickly slithered its way toward me along one of the rafters overhead. Remembering the girl who had asphyxiated after a purple vine had touched her, suddenly the fact the next room contained primarily carbon dioxide didn't seem to matter to me as much as it should. At least there might be another oxygen-based environment on the other side of that section. I would surely die if that purple vine touched me with no one else around to provide aid.

Decision made, I took the deepest breath my lungs could hold, opened the door, and ran through it, slamming it shut behind me. Only after the purple vine smacked into the glass door did I notice the oxygen masks on the wall of the room I had just evacuated. I smacked my forehead against the glass in frustration.

I wasn't certain if even my ancestors could keep me from dying out of sheer stupidity tonight.

Thinking this section couldn't be *that* big and I could make it, I ran down the aisles quickly but carefully, not examining the dazzling plants I had never seen before and which deserved more of my attention. I had to find an exit and trust I could breathe the air there. Or at least find an oxygen mask. I kept following the tables and shelves along the aisle nearest to the wall, hoping to stumble across an exit. Why couldn't I find an emergency exit when I actually needed one?

As I ran, spots slowly began to swim before my eyes. I tried to blink them away, but they wouldn't clear. The blackness crept into the edges of my vision. Becoming dizzy as I used up the air I had taken in, I missed a step and stumbled, knocking into the table at my side and getting dangerously close to one of the plants. I think it was an unusual shade of violet-blue.

My head began to throb.

I truly started to believe I wouldn't make it out of the greenhouse alive. The more quickly I moved, the more oxygen I used. I could feel my heart in my throat beating rapidly from adrenaline-fueled fear.

I finally realized how stupid I had been to come to this place, and to run in here instead of taking my chances with the purple vine and going back out the way I had come. I had put myself in a catch twenty-two I might not make it out of. I needed to slow down to keep from touching the potentially hazardous plants, but I had to keep moving quickly if I wanted to find an exit before I passed out. I wanted to cry, but I held back the tears because my vision was already so blurry I could barely see in front of me.

I swayed dizzily and leaned against a table. I swallowed the air in my mouth to keep from opening it and sucking in even more carbon dioxide. My body wanted me to inhale deeply, but I knew I couldn't. Fear tried to paralyze me, but the encroaching darkness drove me faster, stupidly stumbling forward with my hand on the table railing beside me, hoping I didn't touch any of the plants.

The headlines tomorrow would read

**Yoshida Exports Heir Dead At 20 From A Fatal Case Of Idiocy.**

I didn't want to die.

My hand felt a corner on the railing, and I turned toward it. I reached in front of me and felt the smallest glimmer of hope as my hand touched the latch of a door. Maybe I could get it open.

I needed it to open.

At that point, I didn't care if it was a broom closet so long as I could breathe the air inside. Unable to read the posted warnings anyway, I fumbled at the latch with clumsy fingers.

It didn't open.

I could only see a faint glow in front of me. I could hardly think because my head hurt so much I wanted to cry.



No, I wanted to *breathe*.

Desperation drove me to keep trying. I sank to my knees with my left shoulder to the door and braced my right foot against the frame, pushing with my leg and pulling back on the latch with whatever strength I had left. The panel gave way suddenly, and I fell backward with it, hitting my head against the other side of the doorframe. More pain blossomed in my skull, and I gasped in surprise. My lungs heaved in the surrounding carbon dioxide.

I leaned sideways into the room, falling over and landing in a heap on the other side.

\*\*\*\*

A herd of wild boars stampeding over my head could not have hurt more than the migraine I suffered through as I woke. I curled into the fetal position and cried in sheer misery, wracking sobs which made the throbbing in my skull ache even worse, but I couldn't stop my body from trying to draw in more air. I wanted to die, my head hurt so much.

I didn't know, and couldn't bring myself to care yet, how long I had been unconscious. I cracked open one eye and then wished I hadn't as more agony lanced through my optic nerve straight into my brain. Without thinking, I groaned aloud, having forgotten what the sound might trigger around me. Enormous relief slowly replaced the receding pain as I took in more oxygen. I took a chance and tried to open my eyes again. This time the glowing lights were tolerable. It took a few moments for my eyes to focus on the room, sideways as it was.

I was on the floor, facing the door. Somehow it had slid shut. That had probably saved my life, or at least prevented further brain damage. (I had to face the fact that I must have already been brain damaged to have ever thought to try what I had just done.) Were the doors automatic? They might have been, for all I knew.

I closed my eyes and let the pounding of my heart subside. I had made it. Mentally, tomorrow's headlines changed to read

**Yoshida Exports Heir Learns Valuable Scientific Lesson in  
Alien Greenhouse: Earthlings Breathe Oxygen.**

I laughed—an unusually high-pitched bark that sounded somewhat hysterical to me—which turned into a coughing fit that made my head throb some more. I groaned again.

Unexpectedly, I felt something—maybe a hand?—slide up and down my back. It soothed me and helped to calm my racing heart. It felt nice, but... I hadn't thought anyone else was here. Maybe Aethos *did* have security cameras in this place after all.

I slowly rolled over onto my back, keeping my eyes closed for a bit longer as my mind came back online. The stroking touch moved to my sides and chest, continuing to... pet me. I couldn't find other words for how it felt. The touch started to unnerve me; the placement felt too familiar, but something else was off as well.

Something encircled my right wrist, maybe taking my pulse? That made sense to me. Whoever it was rubbed against the mark there tentatively. The touch was too gentle, and I shivered involuntarily with the sensation. Typical for me, the tingle shot straight to my dick, which began to rise. The only thing lacking to top off my embarrassment this evening was a stiff dick, but I was too exhausted to fight my reaction like usual.

"Don't," I slurred, still somewhat groggy from the killer migraine. I couldn't quite find the words I really needed to express my unease or apologize for the inappropriate reaction. I did try to pull my arm away from the light caresses rousing my cock over my mental objections, but my rescuer was stronger than I was and continued to hold my forearm in place while caressing the mark softly. My cock throbbed. I moaned and opened my eyes to look at him or her, but I didn't see anyone hovering over me as I expected to.

A sudden tantalizing pressure rubbed against my cock like a snake slithering alongside it, muscles undulating as it moved.

I squealed and startled bolt upright, eyes open wide and unblinking. The bright room swam dizzily in and out of focus. I tried to pull my right hand up to my eyes to combat the vertigo, but whoever had my wrist wouldn't let go, so I had to use my left hand instead. Everything spun around me for several long moments while someone continued to grope my happy-to-oblige dick. I was simultaneously excited by the stimulation (and by the idea someone wanted to touch *me*) and aghast that someone would fondle me without permission.

The room slowly righted itself. I looked around for someone—anyone—but the room was empty except for me and a gigantic plant with a singularly humongous white saucer blossom, big enough to eat me. The outer edges of the petals were rose pink.

Mouth agape in bewilderment, I looked down at my forearm and stared obliviously at a thick green vine wrapped around my wrist. The end of it brushed back and forth across my mark in a gentle but constant stroke which matched the throbbing in my dick. I blinked rapidly in confusion before looking down at my crotch, where another vine proceeded to open my pants. A third rubbed alongside the visible ridge of my erection, like a snake, as it worked its way beneath my shirt and up my chest.

Then my brain finally kicked in, and I screamed.

I flailed, arms and legs moving all at once. Or rather, I attempted to flail, but a dozen other tentacle-like vines shot out from the root of the plant to wrap around my arms, legs, ankles, and torso, hindering my movements. Fueled by adrenaline once again, I attempted to thrash even more, throwing my weight to the side to try to free myself from the plant's grip.

In response, it held me aloft in midair.

I shrieked again, higher this time.

And again.

I couldn't bring myself to stop screeching. My throat burned as I went hoarse. I couldn't move. I was certain I would have emptied my whole bladder on myself if my dick hadn't still been so hard. It should have been well on its way to deflating, but the damned vine kept touching my wrist, like it knew exactly what that touch did to me.

Another vine wrapped itself around my throat. As it tightened, I stopped wailing and stilled. I couldn't look down now, couldn't see what the plant intended to do to me. I felt rather than saw it coil around my cock.

Anticipation knotted around the sour fear already churning in my gut. I wanted to throw up, but I wasn't certain I could move enough for the bile to clear my mouth. I choked back the nausea, tears streaming down my face. I closed my eyes as I waited for the plant to continue...

“Sssilannahsh shorzihsssh!”

The hissed alien command reverberated through the room. The vines released me instantly, and I crashed unexpectedly to the floor, twisting my ankle as I landed on the dirt.

I sat, stunned, until the pain finally registered, lancing up my leg and pounding through my ankle.

“Swell,” I muttered to myself.

And yeah, it probably would swell.

And with that stupid internal joke, I started laughing hysterically. Leave it to me to crack stupid jokes when a plant had nearly... I hadn't even noticed the room was covered with dirt until a moment ago. How could I have missed that? Just because a plant had tried to...

The room spun around, and then... nothing.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 2

When I woke on my back, something was touching my ankle. I jerked away hard from the touch, intending to get as far away from the plant as possible, and ended up nearly rolling off a daybed before I caught myself. My ankle throbbed dully with the movement, and I remembered I had landed on it wrong when I had fallen to the ground.

“You should keep your ankle elevated, Kazuo.”

I looked around, surprised to find myself in a lounge—not in the greenhouse—which explained why I was on a daybed, but not how. Daylight filtered through the window. How long had I been out?

I exhaled in relief, only now realizing how much I had tensed to begin with. My shoulders ached with the strain of holding me over the edge of the daybed. I rolled my head from side to side to loosen the muscles and pushed myself up some.

Orange eyes peered down at me from the end of the daybed. Aethos had been examining my ankle. He was in different clothing from his gala attire, and he wore thin, semi-transparent gloves of some sort. I placed my ankle back on a small stack of pillows where it could remain elevated. Aethos picked up a small jar of some transparent goo and slathered a glop of it carefully around my ankle. I felt coolness settle into my skin and the throbbing eased a bit, so I settled back onto the cushions. Aethos removed the gloves and set them aside.

“I am no doctor, but I believe it is only sprained. It did not swell very much. Your ankle should heal completely in a couple of weeks, provided you are not too aggressive in your activities.”

I had heard news feeds of Aethos speaking in his Sirynthalian-accented Earthling. I knew beings of his species accentuated and drew out any “s”- or “th”-like sounds when they spoke Earthling, and I had generally understood him in those news feeds, but hearing him speak to me directly, I had some difficulty understanding him. He didn’t lisp so much as hiss, slurring words and sounds together, making them tricky to distinguish from one another.

“I can call a doctor if you would like another opinion,” he added.

I bent my ankle ever-so-gently to test how bad it was. It throbbed a bit, but I found the faint pounding bearable. I thought I could manage to stay off of it for a few days.

“Thank you, Aethos-sama, but it doesn't hurt too badly. I will manage.”

“Very well, Kazuo.”

I grimaced at hearing my given name said so casually, without any title. In business circles, failing to use appropriate titles was a huge slight when speaking with others. The lack of title indicated either a lack of acknowledgment or agreement with one's rank, or a level of familiarity between the speaker and the subject which Aethos and I did not share. Either possibility made me uncomfortable.

“Forgive me, Kazuo. I meant no disrespect. My world does not use family names or titles. In my home, I speak as I would on Sirynthe. If it is not too difficult for you, please allow me this indulgence. And you may do the same.”

I started to object but then cut myself off. This was his home, and I was an unexpected—likely unwanted—guest. I had no real reason to object other than my own discomfort, and I found asking him to accommodate me in his own home out-of-line on my part. Knowing his reasons, I could overcome my discomfort. “Of course, Aethos-sa—Aethos.”

The name felt foreign and improper, too intimate for such a casual acquaintance, but Aethos smiled at me—he really could smile—apparently pleased with my effort. Seeing him smile was worth enduring any discomfort of impropriety, maybe even the whole of my misadventure in his greenhouse. He was even more striking when he smiled.

“Thank you for obliging me, Kazuo.”

“I—Do you remember me?”

“You remember, do you not? It is difficult to forget the day I had to shut down public access to my greenhouse. The parents of the young lady sued, of course, and I still pay for her treatments to this day. She was quite unfortunate to have tangled with the Ynthazniard Snarlwrot and to have had such a violent reaction to it. I was, however, very much distressed to not spend more time with you discussing your own altercation, but such could not be helped. Her need was greater than your own at the time.”

I hadn't heard anything about my classmate in years. In the last update I had heard, eight years ago, she was still in the hospital. Her parents had moved her to an extraterrestrial treatment facility on another continent, and her friends stopped receiving updates after that.

“I never had the chance to apologize to you all those years ago for touching your plant. I didn't mean to.” I hadn't even been turned toward it at the time.

"I am aware, Kazuo, but there is no call for apology. I watched the security feed many times. The plant... it chose you, not the other way around. I did not see you doing anything you should not have."

"Thank you for understanding, nonetheless," I replied. Aethos came around the end of the daybed and sat on a small ottoman next to it. "If you don't mind, what time is it?" I asked.

"Late morning. Not quite eleven."

I startled at the late hour and struggled to sit up.

"I'm late for work. My father will—"

"Your father has been notified you sprained your ankle and will be my guest for a few days while you recover. He apologized profusely for the inconvenience of your stay and thanked me for my hospitality while making sure I knew he was fully at my disposal should I require anything to assist you. He was the epitome of politeness."

"I'm sure he was," I said bitterly. "I have no doubt he assumes I will use my time here to convince you of the great benefit a partnership with his company will produce, and I will return home with, at the very least, a gentlemen's agreement. He doesn't actually care about me, only his company."

My assessment of my father might have been harsh, but time and again he had proven to me the company would always come first with him, and I was a distant fifth or sixth on his list. Like the time he missed my judo championship bout to meet with Aethos to discuss trade agreements. Or the time he had promised to take me on vacation, just the two of us, but canceled to fly overseas to meet with a visiting dignitary of a new species. I had no doubt if I returned empty-handed after my extended stay, he would look at me as an even bigger failure than if I had gone to work today with nothing more than a few choice stories from last night.

"You do not believe his words?"

"Did he ask how I sprained my ankle?"

"No."

"Then I stand by my statement."

"If he desires an agreement, should you be telling me such things about your company president?"

"Of course not," I responded candidly. "But I'm not here now as a sneaky excuse to talk business, and I would rather you understand that about me than assume I trespassed last night to garner an invitation to stay longer."

"I see. Very well, Kazuo, we will discuss a subject of a different nature, if you are agreeable. It will eventually lead into your evening escapade, and the one past, which we did not have a chance to discuss years ago."

I cringed as though Aethos had scolded me for a nine-year-old transgression, but he had said I hadn't done anything wrong back then. Perhaps it was residual guilt on my part.

"Certainly, Aethos-s—" I stopped abruptly before the title slipped out and smiled a bit sheepishly at him. I needed a while to get used to that idea.

"Did you know that when I sent the invitation to your company for my dinner party last night, it was addressed specifically to you?" he asked.

I knitted my eyebrows together. That was certainly *not* how the invitation to the gala had been presented to me by my father. My father had brought my cousin and me into his office to discuss the impact of attending the gala and the networking opportunities it would present the company. He had presented the invitation to my cousin and said I should go along also to make contacts. He had made it sound like he was bestowing on me a huge honor by allowing me to attend the gala as my first industry networking experience. I should have known better. I filed it away as another example of how his company was always more important than I.

Plus, I didn't follow how the question was supposed to lead us into discussing what happened last night.

"I did not," I finally replied.

"Your father also contacted me directly to request I... *reconsider* my choice of representative for his company. When I refused, he asked if he might send along a second associate. As you are well aware, I agreed."

By his emphasis on "reconsider," I assumed Aethos meant my father tried to convince him I was not suitable to represent the company and my cousin would be a better selection. But why had Aethos specifically requested me in the first place?

"Why me?"

"Because many years ago, one of my plants tasted you, and it is time we met again. I have kept an eye on you."



“Why?” I didn't like the sound of that. If the plant was as safe as he had told me, why did he need to meet with me again? Had he been hiding something about the plant all these years? All kinds of horrific possibilities began to spin through my head: disfiguration, dismemberment, death... “Has something changed? Was it a slow-acting poison that only kills after ten years? Am I going to—?”

“Calm yourself, Kazuo. There is nothing wrong with you as a result of either encounter. As I told you then, the plant is not venomous. It can choose to produce poisonous sap if it wants, but you did not ingest anything, so you have nothing to fear, then or now. I will get to my reasons soon.” Before I could respond, he asked me another question. “Were you aware I had never before held one of those parties on my estate until last night?”

The abrupt switch left me off-balance. Where were these questions headed?

However, for the question about the location of the parties, that answer I knew. My father had spoken to my cousin and me at great length about how rare an opportunity it would be to be inside Aethos's home. All the more reason, in his mind, for me not to attend, I supposed.

“My father did make me aware of that detail,” I responded.

“Excellent. Given the lack of access the public has had to my home, do you believe I would allow anyone to wander the grounds unescorted?”

“Um...” I had wandered the grounds unescorted. Was it a trick question? Should I answer based on my experience or based on his leading phrasing? “No?”

“Very good. Finally, given the hefty expense of electricity for such a building, do you think I typically leave the lights on in the greenhouse at night?”

I groaned out the “no” as I finally started to piece together the picture painted.

“Then why, Kazuo, do you think you managed to get into trouble in my greenhouse last night?”

“I... I...” Why would he allow me to do those things, unless... “You wanted me to,” I accused.

“I anticipated your desire to visit the greenhouse again, yes. And I suspected you would be too proper to wander away if you believed my attention focused

on you, so I held the party here to appear otherwise occupied. The other events were... less fortunate, shall we say?"

"'Less fortunate'?" His lack of acknowledgement for the part he played in my near-death experience outraged me. Sure, I had made some stupid decisions, but he went through an enormous amount of effort to get me back into his deathtrap of a greenhouse. How did he know me so well he understood I wouldn't have left the party if I thought I would be missed? And, if he hadn't left the lights on, I probably wouldn't have ventured up that hill searching for the source, expecting to find the greenhouse. "That's all you have to say? You... you stalked me so you could what? Understand how best to lead me back to the greenhouse? And then one of your plants tried to—to rape me, Aethos!"

"Rape from your perspective, perhaps. While your lack of consent was quite apparent to you, it was not so to the plant. It is intelligent and understands Earthling speech, but it did not have experience with Earthling screams. Thus, it was unaware that your screaming constituted a lack of consent. From its perspective, it was finally about to mate with the one it had chosen years ago and had waited—"

"IT'S THE SAME PLANT?" I sat up and screeched the question at Aethos at the top of my lungs.

"—patiently to meet again. Had you clearly said 'stop touching me' or 'let me go' or given some other understandable directive, instead of slurring one so vague, the plant probably would have complied." More to himself, he added, "That is difficult to determine when they are in heat, though. They are a bit less inclined to acquiesce to requests the further they are into their mating cycles."

I laid back down on the daybed and stared up at the ceiling, unable to look at Aethos. The haze I saw in that moment had nothing to do with a lack of oxygen. My whole body shook with seething rage.

He had allowed the whole scenario to happen instead of treating me like any other guest. He had encouraged me to seek out the greenhouse alone by leaving the lights on and telling his guards to leave me alone. That he could sit there and calmly debate whether or not rape was actually rape if one party didn't know it was raping the other party stunned me to silence. I could not find adequate words to argue with him, so instead, I ground my teeth together and clenched my hands into fists, my nails digging small, crescent-shaped marks into my palms.

But the more silence that passed—the more I processed his comments—the more I began to rationalize them: Maybe where Aethos came from, a being's ignorance meant all should be forgiven, regardless of the slight to the other party? I had no concept of a societal structure where ignorance could excuse even the most heinous of crimes against another, but that didn't mean one didn't exist somewhere. Was that what I was dealing with? If one didn't know something was wrong to begin with, how would one know to avoid it? Or even what to look for, like screaming? Was that even the question at hand?

Why did I suddenly feel like I was in the wrong when my body—my psyche—had been violated? Feeling how I felt was *not* wrong.

It was too early in the day for such a philosophical crisis. I wanted to roll over, put my back to Aethos—figuratively and literally—and ignore the whole episode. And as soon as my ankle was tolerable, I wanted to go home to my normal, pathetic life. I did not want to think about the plausible innocence of a guilty alien plant which might not have meant to violate me as it had.

“Why do I care about the plant's perspective?” I finally asked calmly after my internal struggles abated.

“So you can make an informed decision,” Aethos replied.

“On?”

“Whether or not to mate with the plant.”

I lay there, utterly speechless, mouth agape like a fish out of water. I could no longer fathom how Aethos's mind operated, because whenever he spoke, his words never went in a direction I could anticipate. I could not comprehend how he believed even the tiniest possibility existed that I might “mate” with a plant. Of all the hundreds of sexy intergalactic alien fantasies I had daydreamed, in not a single one did the possibility of “mate with a plant” *ever* cross my mind.

I sighed as my headache returned; keeping up with Aethos mentally exhausted me. I closed my eyes and rubbed my temple with my fingers, trying to get the pounding behind my eyes to release me. Instead of attempting to follow his logic, I asked him to tell me directly.

“Why would I ever consider the idea of mating with a plant, Aethos?”

“It will die if you do not.”

“Excuse me?” I didn't believe my ears. He did not say—

“The plant will die, within a couple of days most likely, if you do not allow it to mate with you. When it tasted you nine years ago, it bonded to you,

regardless of whether or not you bonded with it. The plant has finally reached its first mating cycle. If it does not mate during its cycle with its bonded, it will die.”

“So it should mate with someone else!”

“It will not accept anyone but you, much to my frustration.” His voice warbled more than normal. Was that anger? I didn't have enough experience with him to know his tones of voice or his moods or how they manifested. “It chose you, Kazuo. Now you must choose, and soon.”

“I can't 'mate' with a plant, Aethos. I can't. It's—it's—it's *a plant*.”

“On other worlds, the line between flora and fauna is not as distinct as it is on Earth. On Earth, a plant cannot taste as an animal, nor can it mate with an animal. This plant can and does, and it does so much more than that. It is a very rare and highly guarded prize to be selected by one, more so even than any Earthling can comprehend, because your world is so new to the Intergalactic Assembly of Worlds. It gave *you* the choice, Kazuo, and it will never choose another. Not only this once, but for the rest of its life—or yours—either you will mate with the plant during its mating cycles, and it will live, or you will refuse, and it will die waiting for you. Consider carefully, because you will live with the consequences of your decision for the rest of your life.”

As Aethos stood up and crossed the room to a dresser, the ramifications of Aethos's words punched me in the gut. I would be responsible for this creature's life or death. I didn't want to mate with it—because *eww! A plant!*—but I didn't want it to *die* either. Why did I have to be responsible for its life or death? I didn't want this decision. Why couldn't it have picked Aethos instead of me?

Aethos opened the top drawer of the dresser and removed an infobox from inside. He fiddled with something and then brought the box over to me. My watch beeped with a push request for “security recording.”

“I think you will find this security recording from last night... enlightening.”

I accepted the request and downloaded it to my personal storage for review. Aethos then crossed the room and placed the box back in its drawer. He walked to the door and slid it open, but he turned toward me before he exited.

“For the record, Kazuo, I did not save your life last night. It did. Consider that in your decision as well. If you decide to help it live, I will tell you more about it and what to expect.”

A door sliding shut had never sounded more like the hum of a prison cell in my life.

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In the next few hours, I watched the whole twenty-minute security recording over and over. Each time I saw something new, but every time, I saw the same thing...

The plant had saved my life. Consciously. Not a fluke.

The greenhouse recording started from inside the plant's room a few seconds before I banged into the glass door panel from the outside.

The plant calmly stretched across its room, vines resting everywhere across the floor, walls, and ceiling. The recording clearly showed me stumbling outside of the room through its glass walls. When I thumped into the door, the vines recoiled from the disturbance and wiggled. The whole plant quivered from petals to leaves. I dragged my hand across the door latch. The recording clearly showed the latch to the room locked from the inside.

The first time I had watched the recording, I had needed to bite down on the rolling nausea that swelled in the pit of my stomach after I first noticed the locked mechanism. The plant controlled visitors to its room.

I pulled on the latch to no avail and sank to my knees outside the glass door. My chest lifted as though I breathed heavily, but my lips remained firmly clamped. The vines crept back to the door, resting on the glass again as I turned sideways, braced my foot against the doorframe, and pulled the latch toward myself. The muscles of my neck pulled taut. I squeezed my eyes shut, my face a grimace with the strain of desperation.

One of the vines flicked up the release, unlocking the door. The panel slid open quickly under my exertions, and I fell backward into the other side of the doorframe, smacking the back of my head and landing on my ass. My mouth and eyes opened in surprise, but my chest continued to heave.

As I relived the events displayed, I breathed heavily in sympathy to the memory. I still vividly recalled the inability to inhale air. I rubbed the heel of my hand across my sternum to relieve the phantom pains there.

I leaned sideways into the open doorway and used my arms to pull my body partially inside before my arms collapsed beneath me. When I didn't move any further, the vines wrapped around my arms and legs and rolled my body the rest of the way into the room. They then pushed the door closed. As a loud rushing sound filled the confined space for around fifteen seconds, a vine flicked the lock and started to pull away from the door, but then it... hovered, paused. Then it flicked the release again, unlocking the room.

The only way my mind wanted to interpret the scene was to believe the plant had made a decision, thought about it, and reconsidered. But plants didn't have conscious thought, so my interpretation of events didn't make any sense to me. It wasn't possible. My interpretation had to be wrong.

For the next several minutes on the recording, the vines brushed over my body, everywhere. I trembled again in phantom memory of those vines caressing me as I watched them tousle my hair and wrap around my limbs, snaking around and under my clothing. Watching the recording objectively, I didn't understand why the plant inspected me. What purpose did it serve? Was it assessing my vital signs? Learning what I looked like? Tasting me again?

The thought of being tasted again renewed my tremors.

As I began to stir and cry, the vines withdrew to a safe distance. I curled into a ball and convulsed bodily. I groaned. The vines crept nearer to me slowly. I laughed and coughed. A vine stroked along my spine. As I rolled onto my back, the vines moved to massage my sides and chest.

I shivered in real time as I watched. If I closed my eyes, I could still feel their caress—petting. I had thought someone was petting me at the time. The recording seemed to confirm that assessment.

A vine wrapped around my right wrist and touched the mark there. Not only did I shiver bodily at the touch, but the plant did as well. All of its vines trembled slightly as my erection took shape within my dress pants. I said "don't" as the plant held my arm when I tried to pull it away. I moaned softly, the sound vaguely erotic. The vines reached over and one pressed along the ridge of my cock. I squealed and sat up dazedly. A few heartbeats later, I screamed. The vines nearby wound around

my limbs and chest, and I struggled. The plant lifted me from the ground, the thick tentacle around my torso bearing most of my weight. I shrieked some more until a vine wrapped around my throat and then I fell silent.

Aethos finally burst into the room and shouted... something. The plant let go of me abruptly, and I fell. My ankle turned awkwardly beneath me. I sat silently for a moment until I muttered something and a crazed look entered my eyes. I shrieked in incomprehensible laughter.

I looked like a lunatic who had snapped.

I swayed and crumpled into a heap. Aethos spoke more to the plant in a strange hissing language I didn't understand. The blossom tipped over and twisted away from the camera. The vines withdrew and coiled beneath the leaves at the root of the plant.

By the dipping of the blossom, it looked like it had been chastised, but how could a plant understand such an emotion? Surely that was me placing Earthling emotion where nonesuch existed. I also wondered if it was only my imagination or if the petals of the blossom looked slightly darker—pink—than they had at the beginning of the feed.

Aethos had one of his guards place an oxygen mask on me. Another checked my pulse—using my left wrist at Aethos's instruction—and picked me up in an over-the-shoulder carry. Oxygen masks all in place, they exited the room with me, Aethos closing the panel behind everyone. The loud rushing noise returned, and the plant uncoiled a vine and stretched to the door, locking it. The blossom tipped toward the ground, looking like the weight was too much for it to hold upright any longer.

The recording blinked off again.

Aethos... He knew enough about me to know to order the guard to use my left wrist. From that alone, I believed he really had been keeping tabs on me for all those years. There was no telling what else he already knew about me. Any trust I had left in him before seeing the recording had been obliterated as I watched it.

But the plant... Aethos's words had made me susceptible to seeing what he wanted me to see. I personified its actions, whether I should have or not. I noticed little things and made them mean something: The full plant-body shudder when it felt the mark at my wrist indicated acknowledgment it had found the one it sought. When it wrapped around me as I screamed, the tip of each vine continued to stroke me, as someone holding your hand might do with their thumb. The blossom dipping at the end felt like sadness, like it had been defeated and its prize—mate, according to Aethos—had been taken from it, and watching the scene thinking that way made me sad for it too. Even knowing its prize was me.

After I had watched the recording through a few times, I paused it on the scene prior to my screams, as the plant tentatively reached for my rising erection. If I ignored the fact it had been a plant, ignored the fear and uncertainty I had felt during that moment when I didn't understand why someone was touching me so intimately, and focused on how the touch felt... If I thought about a *person* desiring to touch me that way, and me also desiring that touch, I could remember my body's reaction and being so incredibly turned on.

I lay back on the daybed and closed my eyes.

*He held my wrist down with one hand, rubbing his thumb gently over the mark there, driving my body wild with need. My cock sought friction. At first, he denied me. He ran his other hand beneath my suit jacket, over my shirt and across my pec, and then fumbled with the buttons to open my shirt. As he revealed my nipples, they pebbled beneath his touch. If only he would lick them. Or kiss me. Or nuzzle me behind the ear.*

*He popped the button on my dress pants with more ease and drew down my zipper, deliberately brushing against the length of my filling cock. I lifted my hips to feel him press down and rub back and forth. I moaned and opened my eyes to look into his.*

*Instead of his face, a gigantic pink blossom loomed over me, yellow pistils wiggling like mandibles only inches from me. I squealed and backed away, up against the wall. The scene zoomed out, the plant now far, far away from me across the room.*



*Time sped up unnaturally. The petals wilted, losing their pink color as they faded to brown. The blossom slumped to the side onto the ground and flattened. Deep wrinkles formed as the petals dried out and fell off. I watched in horror as the vines struggled to move. They reached toward me. The tips of the vines desiccated—gnarled—slowly back to the roots. The leaves turned brown and fell away. The stem tried to lift up the center one last time as it shriveled. It leaned toward me, nearly dead...*

I awoke with a distressed yell, my body covered in sweat and my clothes and hair sticking to me. My heart thumped wildly and felt stuck in the middle of my throat. I couldn't swallow the lump lodged there.

I had my answer for Aethos.

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### Chapter 3

"I can't let it die."

Aethos had barely entered the room to check on me before I sat up and blurted out my answer. He directed the electronic cart carrying my dinner over to me. My stomach rumbled in agreement with that plan. I hadn't eaten anything since the gala the night before.

"I anticipated as much," he replied. I frowned at him.

"But I don't think I can bring myself to... you know," I finished, flustered. I felt the heat of embarrassment rising in my cheeks.

"If it makes you feel any better, you likely will not have to do much. The Amorphophallus will take control and see that what needs to happen happens."

"Is that what it's called?"

"The name of its species. I have not named the plant. When I speak to it, I refer to it as 'you.'"

"So it really does understand you? What do you say to it?"

"Most often, I speak of you, because that is what it wants to know about. This is why I have kept an eye on you all of these years."

Great, so not only did Aethos know way more about me than most beings, but the plant already knew a lot more about me than I knew about it.

"What...? How...? Oh, for goodness... Aethos! I don't even know how to start asking questions about this!" I crossed my arms over my chest and pouted.

"You do understand the process of mating?" He huffed a couple of quick hisses of air, making a sound similar to water sizzling on a rock. I was fairly certain he was laughing at me, the bastard.

"Yes!" I would die of mortification if Aethos started a discussion on the basics of sex with me. I wasn't completely clueless. I had experimented on myself with more than my hand. Besides, he wasn't even an Earthling!

"Then I shall explain how it will be different, to begin with. And you shall eat your dinner and listen."

Eat dinner while an alien I had been infatuated with for several years—who turned out to be a creepy stalker—spoke candidly to me about my soon-to-be

sex life with a plant. My hunger won out over my dread and embarrassment. I would figure out how to keep the food down.

I nodded to him to continue and picked up my utensils.

“When an Amorphophallus mates, it needs genetic material—in this case, your semen—to complete the mating process and pollinate. Causing you to ejaculate and collecting your semen will be its primary goals.”

Okay, so somehow it was going to jack me off. That didn't sound too bad.

“However, your natural semen is not compatible with its pollination process, so first it will need to modify your semen. It does this by inserting a small, biodegradable pit into your sperm sac via a very thin yellow filament.”

I choked on a chunk of meat and started hacking and thumping my chest with my fist to get it to dislodge. I grabbed the glass of water and took a big swallow to soothe my abused throat. Aethos continued as if nothing was wrong.

“Once it has inserted the pit, the stigma will envelop your penis and cause your ejaculation. It will look like a small mouth on the end of the thickest tentacle. It was the stigma which tasted you all those years ago.”

So, if it involved the “mouth,” did that mean it was going to give me a blow job instead of a hand job? Er, vine job?

The queasy feeling returned. I stopped eating and thinking and closed my eyes until the queasiness passed. Aethos kept going.

“Once it has collected your modified genetic material, pollination should occur, and it will survive until its next mating cycle. The mating can end at that point,” Aethos finished.

“You mean it doesn't expect me to reciprocate?” I joked, trying to lighten the serious tone. Aethos apparently didn't get it. He was strangely quiet for a few heartbeats before he answered.

“I believe it will... eventually enjoy reciprocation on your part, but for this first mating, no. Reciprocation would prove difficult.”

I wished I could read his facial cues better, because I didn't know whether the face Aethos made now was more Earthling or Siryntalian. His eyes angled and squinted in a way not normal for him. If it was Earthling, I would say he looked mischievous, like he was hiding something—at my expense.

“But I don't think I can let a plant do those things to me.”

“So, stop thinking of it as a plant, Kazuo. Think of it and talk to it as though it is a person. In fact, you should begin thinking of it with Earthling gender pronouns. He is intelligent enough to understand you. Tell him about you, like you would with anyone you want to get to know you and what you like.”

Aethos made the statement off-handedly, as though thinking of the plant as not a plant would be such an easy thing to accomplish. Though, thinking on it, wasn't that what I had done in the dream? Before it had turned into a nightmare, anyway. Maybe I could close my eyes and imagine.

“But the sex...”

“Tell him what you like, or even better, show him what you like. If you like your ass played with—” Aethos looked me directly in the eye, and I flushed pink. No point in denying it; he probably knew from stalking me. *Creepy*. “—then tell him. Allow him to experience you pleasing yourself, and then allow him to touch you and learn.”

Nope, that wouldn't be embarrassing at all, particularly knowing that Aethos would record the whole thing.

“You'll turn off the recording?”

“Of course.”

I wished I could pinpoint how I knew he was lying to me. I couldn't prove it definitively, but I had absolutely no doubt that he would have never agreed to turn off the security feeds, no matter how intimate the moment. His answer showed me his lying face looked exactly like his normal face. I supposed knowing that was better than not knowing that. It meant I would never be able to trust a thing he said to me. But he did seem to want the plant—him—to live, so maybe Aethos would be truthful about it—him.

Sure, easy, switch to a gendered pronoun and suddenly no more problems exist. I closed my eyes for a moment to focus.

I wondered what he would do with a recording of me and his plant having sex. Aethos seemed to already know what I liked to do to myself in (what I had thought was) private. Maybe he wanted to keep it to watch? Maybe he wanted to show it to others? Would he try to use it for blackmail? He didn't seem like the type, but I didn't know much about him outside of his typical business dealings.

Did I have a choice in the matter? Should I use Aethos's need for me to do this as leverage to make sure he didn't record us? I didn't think I could hold up

to my end of that ultimatum, though, if he called me on it. I couldn't bring myself to hold someone else's life hostage, so I would have to deal with the consequences. I frowned in unease.

"In the recording," I asked, "it looked like the petals were pinker at the end than they were at the beginning. Was I seeing things, or did that happen?"

"You have a good eye. Indeed, he was more pink by the end of your encounter. I suspect that being near his aroused mate sped up the chemical reactions of his mating cycle, increasing his heat. The farther into heat he is, the more pink will show, and the less rational he will become."

"What exactly does that mean?"

"I am given to understand that to the *Amorphophallus*, being 'in heat' is quite literal. The chemical which causes the pink also causes a burning sensation inside his tissues. The more the chemical builds up, the worse the burn feels to him, the more pink he becomes, and the fewer faculties he has to remember things such as gentility with his mate. The chemical will build up to toxic levels, which will eventually kill him if he does not mate and achieve pollination. The pollination cycle apparently releases a different chemical which will dissipate the other."

"But even though he's burning up on the inside, he won't choose another, even simply for relief?"

"Even if he wanted to, which he does not, assuming he is anything like the rest of his species, it would do him no good to mate with another. When he tasted you as a seedling—apologies, as a youngster—he bonded chemically to you. The chemical heat he suffers is genetically coded to you, hence why only pollination by you will dissipate it."

In other words, there would be no getting out of this: sex with... him, or his death. I sighed heavily.

"How do you know how any of this feels to him? You said he has a mouth. Does he actually speak?" If so, not speaking to me while trying to mate with me was fairly rude, in heat or not.

"No, he does not speak at present. Though, I expect he will learn from you." Aethos's eyes took on that odd squinty aspect I saw before, and he seemed to emphasize the words "from you" with a harder edge than necessary. Was he upset with me for something other than trespassing in his greenhouse? "With me, he wiggles vines in certain ways to communicate simple answers. The rest

of my knowledge of Amorphophallus biology comes from my twin brother, who is mated to one."

"Oh." I hadn't known Aethos had a twin brother. I wondered briefly if my father knew. Maybe the emotion I had registered earlier from Aethos was jealousy. He wanted what his brother had, but the plant—he—chose me over him? That made sense.

The plant needed a name. A name would help me to personify it—him.

"You said you hadn't given him a name? May I?" I asked.

"It is your right to do so, as his mate," Aethos replied. I definitely thought I heard bitterness, or maybe even resentment, in his tone that time. Damn his accent for making it harder to pinpoint his emotions.

"If I go see him, will he try to mate with me as soon as I enter the room?" That would ruin the whole illusion I wanted to create to be able to go through with this ordeal.

"Possibly, but probably not, not after the way things ended last night. During the session, however, yes, it is likely to happen. It will be difficult for him to stay away from you, and he will not want to let you go again without mating. Knowing what he is going through, can you blame him?"

I felt guilty about not being more comfortable with the whole situation, but in fairness to myself, switching mentally from looking for a male humanoid to take my virginity, to preparing for a plant to do so was a huge paradigm shift, and not the sort of thing that typically happened overnight. Just because I didn't have longer than a day, maybe two, to get used to the idea didn't mean I would suddenly welcome it. The plant—he—wasn't the only one going through a major change.

*Sakura-chan.*

I wanted to name him Sakura-chan. It was a feminine name, but it fit so well, I suddenly couldn't think of him as anything other than Sakura-chan. Sakura blossoms ranged anywhere from mostly white to deep pink.

"Does it need to be tonight, Aethos?"

"The longer you wait, the more difficult it will be for him to heed your wishes. If you seek my personal opinion, I believe you should choose tonight. I believe it will be easier on both of you. Tonight, you might have some time to talk to him first, to become accustomed to his touch before the process begins. If you wait, he may not be strong enough to give you such an option."

Still queasy, I couldn't bring myself to eat anything further, so I pushed the cart aside. Aethos escorted it to the door and set it out in the hallway before coming back to sit on the ottoman next to me.

“What about my ankle?”

“We will wrap it in a stabilizer, but you must ask him to be careful with it. In all probability, he will be mindful of your ankle tonight.”

Either I chose some discomfort in my ankle and my sensibilities tonight, or I chose much worse unpleasantness tomorrow if Sakura-chan couldn't hold himself back for my sake. Not much of a choice. I scrubbed a hand over my face and ran it through my hair. I wasn't ready for this—I wasn't sure I would ever be ready for this—but I agreed with Aethos on the timing, assuming he had told me the truth about the mating heat's effect on Sakura-chan.

Naming Sakura-chan really did make it easier for me to think of him as humanoid.

“Will you watch the security feed live?” I was already certain he would, whether I wanted him to or not.

“Yes. It will be best for your safety, Kazuo. While I do not expect him to harm you intentionally, I do not want any more unintentional developments to occur.”

I mentally heard his sentence end with “like the one from nine years ago.”

“I agree. If I call for you, will you come?” I asked him.

“Of course, Kazuo. What would you have me do?”

I hesitated in answering. “Hold me. Maybe run your hands over my body.” I blushed. “Maybe... kiss me?”

I couldn't look at him, so I looked down. I felt heat radiating from my face as if I had been out in the sun too long.

“Kiss you? Logistically, that would be difficult, Kazuo, and probably painful given the typical Earthling reaction to my skin. But why would you need me to kiss you?”

“I... I want to be kissed, to feel... like it's a special moment between us—me and him—and not just a requirement. And I... you're attractive, and I have wanted...”

I couldn't finish the sentence, because I couldn't bring myself to say the words, to describe the fantasies I had had about Aethos when I was an

adolescent. I'm not sure I could have felt a lit match next to my face at that moment. But I did feel the burning imprint of his fingers on my jaw as he forced me to look in his eyes. When he let go of me, I rubbed a hand over my chin where his fingers had been, trying to smooth away the burn of his touch, but I didn't look away.

"You have wanted...?" he repeated, leaning toward me, crowding me against the back of the daybed with one hand on the cushion between my right arm and my hip. He couldn't lean any further forward without climbing onto the daybed with me. His gaze and posture were exceptionally predatory, so why did my dick choose that moment to stir?

"I... um... I..." I swallowed, finally whispering, "Don't make me say it, Aethos."

"Did you wish to mate with me, Kazuo?"

"I..." Even knowing what I knew now of his stalking habits, the thought still appealed to me at a purely visceral level. "Mate?" I squeaked. "I'm supposed to mate with him, though."

"If you ask me to come into the room with the two of you, may I join in to climax, or am I just a body for you to use?" Aethos clarified.

This conversation wasn't happening. I was still dreaming and this was another of my wet dreams. I shifted against the back of the daybed as my interested dick slowly filled.

"I—what about what he wants?"

"They are very possessive and protective of their mates, particularly while mating. He may not want to let me in the room with you. You may have to persuade him to allow me in at all. What do *you* want, though?"

He wasn't quite close enough to my face for me to feel his breath as he spoke, but I still shivered. I didn't mind the idea of Aethos climaxing with us. I found it incredibly provocative and sexy.

"I—you can climax, as long as you don't interfere?"

"Very well, Kazuo. If you request, I will assist but not interfere. Until you ask for me, I will remain in the foyer of the greenhouse."

Aethos leaned back, and I exhaled and relaxed into the back of the daybed, releasing the tension in my shoulders which had been holding me away from him. I wanted to adjust my dick inside my pants, but I didn't want to call attention to my arousal either.



"If he might not want to let you into the room, why did he unlock the room last night after he locked it?"

"He knew I would be there soon. No one but I had ever been in his room before you stumbled upon it. He knew I would be... concerned." Aethos replied.

"Oh." Concerned for which of us? "Anything else I should know?"

"I believe you know enough to survive."

Subterfuge. The more I saw the squinty look, the more my brain translated it to "subterfuge." Every time I wanted to begin to believe in Aethos, to trust him, he did something to invalidate that feeling. The phrase "enough to survive" made me feel as though there was a lot he wasn't telling me that I needed to know. I felt like he was playing a game with me, and I didn't know any of the rules.

"That's reassuring," I responded, my tone laced heavily with sarcasm. I assumed Aethos had had enough dealings with Earthlings to understand it when used on him, or he wasn't much of an interstellar businessman.

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Aethos and I waited outside the door to Sakura's room. Instead of the mostly white blossom I had seen last night, the petals were a faint but solid pink and the edges of the petals, particularly toward the center of the blossom, had darkened to fuchsia. It was a stunningly beautiful plant. I recalled Aethos's explanation of the pink coloration and winced in sympathy. Poor Sakura must be blazing with heat, as pink as he was. Waiting would not be easy for him.

I shivered, slightly chilled by the night temperature. Knowing I would soon need to be naked, I hadn't worn anything but my pants and the black stabilizer fabric which encased my right leg from toe to mid-thigh. I also had on an oxygen mask, primarily out of necessity, but also so I could pay attention and learn the route instead of running blindly.

Not that I could have run on a sprained ankle. Aethos had given me a float-board to move around on more easily. I sat and kept my bad ankle propped on it, and I pushed with the other leg to move myself around.

Aethos was about to knock on the door when I stopped him.

"Does he always keep it locked?" I asked. The mask muffled my words, but Aethos nodded.

“Usually, except when I approach, yes,” he replied. Aethos had mentioned on the way in he could breathe in multiple environments, including helium, oxygen, carbon dioxide, and nitrous oxide, so he didn't need a mask. The environmental sections of the greenhouse made more sense knowing that Aethos could wander through all of them without environment-related repercussions.

“Did he know it was me when he unlocked it last night? Or was he only saving my life? Or—”

“I do not know, Kazuo. You will have to ask him that yourself one day, assuming he learns speech.”

I frowned at Aethos and nodded. “I'm as ready as I'm going to be.”

Aethos knocked and waited. A vine beside the door flicked open the locking mechanism and pushed the panel aside. I took a deep, steadying breath and crossed into the room. Aethos closed the door behind me. I heard it slide into place and then the frame hissed as it sealed around the door. The loud rushing sound I had heard on the security feed occurred again as oxygen pumped in to stabilize the air. The sound subsided. I took off the mask and took a tentative breath. When I didn't choke, I sighed in relief and turned the mask off.

Multiple vines started to surround me, reminding me I had something I needed to say.

“Wait. Please. I know that won't be easy for you—Aethos explained some of what you're going through, and I understand you're in pain—but I have some things I need to say, and I need you to listen and understand. After that, we'll see what happens.”

One vine tapped against my forearm, the signal for “yes” according to Aethos. Two vines meant “no.” Three meant “I don't know,” and four meant “I don't understand.”

I turned off the float-board, and it settled slowly to the ground. I moved my butt off of the side of the board so only my stabilized ankle still rested on it.

“I need to talk for a while first. I... I'm not comfortable with the idea of mating with you yet. I know you've been thinking about this—about me—for years, but I only found out a few hours ago, and I haven't had time to adjust to this yet. I don't want you to die, and I want to help you live, or I wouldn't be here, but the idea of somehow mating with a plant is so foreign that—that I can't, yet.”

The leaves of the plant shook, and the blossom slumped downward some. It reminded me of a child pouting, so that's how I chose to interpret the movement. I smiled at the thought because it amused me. Then I remembered I would be mating with that "child" and I stopped that train of thought, but not soon enough.

*Eww.* Not the way to become okay with the situation.

"Aethos suggested I stop thinking of you as a plant and treat you as a person I want to get to know. So I'm going to try that. I'm going to close my eyes and talk to you as if I'm talking to a new friend who interests me. And I want to call you Sakura-chan. Well, Sakura, anyway. The -chan ending is a title of endearment. Sakura is the name of the blossoms from one of the types of trees here on Earth. They're very beautiful, and they range from white to pink, so it fit. I hope that name is okay with you."

One vine tapped my forearm in a "yes." I smiled because he actually approved of the name I selected for him.

I continued speaking, keeping my eyes closed and reliving the memories of some old stories that I thought would help Sakura get to know who I was—things that Aethos wouldn't have been able to tell him about me. I told Sakura to be cautious with my ankle and that's why I had the float-board with me. I talked about the mark he had given me all those years ago, and I laughed at some of the problems it had caused me during school. I spoke about the times I had wished for someone to hold and who would've held me and cuddled me too. And then I spoke about some of my sexual experimentation, because it was an easy way to tell Sakura about some of the things I liked without stripping and demonstrating the sorts of things I had put in my ass.

I knew it would happen eventually. Somewhere around the sixth or seventh story, maybe an hour after I had entered the room—I hadn't been tracking the time—one of his vines touched the back of my right hand, similar to a caress, though not quite the same as a thumb felt. It started to wrap around my wrist.

"Please don't play with the mark yet, Sakura-chan. I'm not ready to be aroused that fast. Try something else first."

The vine left my wrist and came up to touch my cheek. Another brushed across the back of my neck and up into my hair. And though I wanted those touches to feel comforting, they were... off. They felt wrong. Vines didn't feel like hands.

Multiple vines wrapped around my upper body, slowly tightening into something like a hug. But in my head, his vines didn't feel enough like hands or arms, much less an actual body, and this time I didn't have the fuzziness or numbness of oxygen deprivation to trick my mind. The touches didn't feel humanoid enough. His vines around me felt like an approximation of a hug, but their writhing broke the mental illusion. And, there was no warm body in front of or behind me attached to those "arms" encircling me.

My chest constricted in a way that had nothing to do with the vines holding me. Holding me up? Holding me together? Maybe both. I opened my eyes. I thought maybe the pink petals had darkened a touch more since I had entered.

"Sakura, wait. I..." At the word "wait," the vines slackened and drooped to the floor. They didn't pull away from me, but they didn't hold me either. I could almost feel Sakura's despondence. Or maybe it was my own I felt. Tears pricked the corners of my eyes as I petted the vines lying across my lap sympathetically. I expected to feel some of the heat within Sakura, but the vines felt cool to my touch. I felt worse knowing that he endured such pain so I could become comfortable with our mating, and I still couldn't bring myself to do it. I felt like such a miserable failure to be unable to save him by myself, to handle the situation on my own, to have to ask for help. I took a deep breath.

"I need Aethos. I need help with this. Please, Sakura? Please let Aethos come in and help me get in the right frame of mind." Sakura tightened his vines around my torso again, and I desperately wanted a body to lean back against. "He promised he wouldn't interfere with us, and I really need this."

One of the vines reached up to stroke my cheek before moving to the door to hit the lock release. I hadn't even noticed it had been relocked until he did that.

I sighed, a mixture of relief and frustration filling my chest. I still didn't really trust Aethos. I still had the nagging suspicion he had hidden things from me—important details. But, I did trust his desire to help Sakura, and that had to be enough for me to rely on tonight.

"Thank you, honey." The endearment slipped out without even thinking about it. "Would you hug me until he gets here?"

The vines tightened slightly more around me. I lifted my forearms and crossed them over my chest, gently holding on to his vines as much as I could. I wanted to feel more than spaghetti noodles in my arms.

A knock on the door startled me. I looked up to see Aethos standing outside the door.

Naked. Aethos was *naked*.

My eyes went wide as saucers and my mouth went slack as I drew a surprised breath. He pointed at me and made a motion. I blinked, my mind completely blank of intelligent thoughts as I took in the sight of his body.

His naked body was quite different from mine. My eyes immediately locked on to the complete lack of genitalia between his legs. He had no slit, no protrusion, no nothing visible from the front but smooth skin between his legs. The next things I noticed were his thighs; they were massive. I don't think I could have encircled either of them with both of my hands. His inner thighs also bore a strange rippled ridge. I wondered how he walked without rubbing those together. The rest of his body was skinny, which I had already assumed from seeing him in clothing. He wasn't bony, but he did lack defined musculature on his torso. He was flat, and also completely hairless but for the indigo blue on top of his head. His body was extraordinarily shiny, like he'd rubbed oil all over himself, and his hair was strangely pressed flat to his head instead of being fluffy, like it normally was.

But none of that explained why Aethos was naked. We hadn't discussed clothing because I hadn't seen the need to. I had assumed he would wear his normal clothing, because how was he supposed to hold me if every touch burned my skin like acid?

It took a moment for my brain to register the motion he made as "close your mouth" and to remember the room outside contained a different gas. I shut my mouth, took a deep breath, and nodded to Aethos, who opened the door and stepped inside. The door sealed and the rush of air began. Aethos advanced until he stood over me, and I had to crane my neck to see him.

"You're naked," I stated after the rushing sound stopped.

"I anticipated your desire," he replied. I blushed, only mildly peeved at the assumption. I *had* told him I found him attractive earlier.

"But why are you naked? How are you supposed to hold me and not burn me?"

"Technically speaking, I am not. I have on a thin, transparent membrane bodysuit. Only my eyes and mouth will be uncovered. Such a garment aids coupling for species which cannot come into direct skin contact. I can mostly

feel through it, but your skin will not burn.” He began to pull on a pair of thin, soft-looking gloves. I recognized the fabric as crushed velvet. “Have you and...” He paused, searching for a word. “...you and Sakura, changed your minds?”

I stroked the vines wrapped around me.

“No.” Those vines contracted around me again, this time somewhat painfully. “Sakura-chan, please.”

Two vines loosened themselves from around me and reached up to tap Aethos on the forearm, Sakura’s signal for “no.”

“Then do not concern yourself with me. I will manage my pleasure separately from assisting in yours. I am here to help you mate with Sakura.” He stepped around and sat down behind me, one leg to either side of my body. His arms wrapped around my shoulders, above Sakura’s vines, and he spoke low in my left ear. “Is this what you needed, Kazuo?”

Heat passed through the membrane and into me. I leaned back into the solid body behind me, my head on his shoulder. It felt right, so much better than before. It was exactly what I needed.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Scoot up and back so you are sitting astride me instead of in front of me, Kazuo.”

I complied, straddling Aethos’s thighs, and he hissed. I wasn’t sure if that was good sign or a bad one. I turned my head into the crook of his neck.

“Aethos, are you okay?”

“I am fine. Are you comfortable, Kazuo?”

I was, mostly. The strange membrane he wore felt slippery, as if Aethos had coated himself in a lubricant.

“Yes. What do I—?”

“Sakura, undress him,” Aethos ordered. “And be careful with the ankle, please. Do not remove the stabilizer.”

The order from him sounded so natural, and yet I wasn’t sure why he should be the one directing my mating to Sakura. Then again, the only idea I had of what would happen to me was what Aethos had told me, so it didn’t make sense for me to direct. That left Sakura. I supposed if Sakura took issue with Aethos’s orders, he would let Aethos know somehow.

Sakura withdrew the vines around my midsection to comply. As before, I looked down to see small vines working open the panels of my pants. Once open, Aethos released his hold on me and slid his gloved hands down my sides, inside the fabric and beneath my buttocks. I recognized the softness of the crushed velvet—I had a jockstrap made of it that I wore when I needed to feel sexy—and I shivered in his hands. My cock certainly also recognized the sensation as Aethos lifted my body just enough for Sakura to slide the pants off my legs.

When Aethos lowered me gently onto his thighs, the slick membrane made me feel like I was going to slide off of him. I cursed my bad ankle for making me keep my right leg stretched out in front of me instead of being able to curl it underneath me so I could kneel properly, straddled across him as I was. However, it did feel strange to have a male body beneath me but not feel the evidence of his arousal, though his thighs were as solid as my erection had ever felt.

I inhaled sharply as a gloved hand wrapped itself around my balls, which hung low between his spread legs. Too many sensations spun in my brain as I tried to sort through them all. The fabric I knew, but someone else's hand massaging my sac was an entirely new experience—a touch I didn't control. What I wouldn't have given in that moment for my sac to be clean-shaven so I could feel that velvety softness directly on my skin.

The other glove slid around front, up my abdomen and chest, and stopped around my throat, pushing my head back against his shoulder. I reveled in the soft glide across my skin, but when that hand stopped on my throat, I relaxed completely into his arms and sighed happily. I felt freed. I needed to float away, to not think, and Aethos could give me that gift because I had given him control first.

“Nnngh.” I could only manage incoherent sounds. “Aah-aaaah.”

Vines wrapped firmly down both of my forearms, the tips ending at the wrist. Sakura brushed across his mark on me, and my already stiffened cock stood rigidly, the foreskin revealing the whole head. I moaned and shifted my legs wider, grinding down on Aethos's thighs and arching more off his chest. He hissed again and leaned back more, drawing me back with him. I didn't feel like I would slide off any longer.

“That is it. Give in to how we make you feel. Fly, Kazuo.”

I already found Aethos's accent quite alluring (if sometimes hard to understand) when he spoke naturally, but in the heat of my passion, I found hearing Aethos speak incredibly seductive.

"I wish you could kiss me right now, Aethos. I want my mouth and my ass both to be full."

He made an "unngh" sound that could have been either satisfaction or dismay; I couldn't tell. In the back of my mind, I vaguely hoped he didn't resent my request for help, but this worked for me in a way my imagination alone had not.

Sakura coiled a vine around my dick and thoughts fled as I attempted to hump that coil. It didn't feel like a hand, but through the haze of lust, it didn't matter at all. Aethos grunted and pulled away the tentacle wrapped around my shaft. I whimpered at him in frustration. In retaliation, he stroked my inner left thigh with his softly gloved fingers.

"Ah ah ah, Sakura. Kazuo is a young man. If you play with his dick too soon, he is likely to climax before you are ready. Nibble his anus while you finish preparing him. Penetrate him, if you like," Aethos instructed.

I frowned slightly at Aethos's instructions and groaned to hide it. As much as I wanted those things to happen—I wiggled in anticipation, my cock bobbing with my movements—his orders felt like unnecessary interference. Was he actually helping us? I was beginning to think Aethos's control of the scene was more for his benefit than my own or Sakura's. I didn't think either of us needed to be commanded.

Or maybe Sakura liked to be commanded and I was in the middle of the two of them? That possibility made my heart clench and stomach tighten more than it should have, and I shoved the thought aside quickly. I didn't want to be reminded of their relationship in the middle of this moment.

I was a virgin in the sense of playing with others, but I had experimented with lots of toys in my ass before. However, the thickest of Sakura's tentacles was roughly four inches in diameter and a little larger than any dildo I had used on myself. On the end of it was the mouth-like orifice of his stigma. Sakura's stigma nipped and sucked gently at the skin between my cheeks. It rubbed gently against little hairs. It also felt like it slicked me up slowly with some sort of natural lubricant oozing from the tissue. I could feel the slickness on my ass against the cool air, and I was suddenly overcome by nerves. I shivered with the realization this was about to happen and I would no longer be a virgin.



Soon, the stigma began lapping at the tender skin of my sphincter, and I didn't know what to do with myself. No toy I had ever played with came close to the sensation currently crawling across my skin, making me moan loudly in enthusiasm. I closed my eyes and put my arms over my head to lock my hands behind Aethos's neck, trying not to claw through the membrane but needing something to hold on to as I soared on the sensation of being rimmed for the first time.

"Yes! Yes! Sweet, merciful Sakura, I want you inside me, please!" I begged. "Please, oh please, honey, I need you inside."

Aethos began to fondle my balls again. As Sakura pushed slowly inside my slickened ass, I almost missed a light touch to the tip of my cock. I would have ignored it to focus completely on the gentle movement in and out of my sphincter, but I felt an unnatural stretching sensation easing down my dick. I opened my eyes to see a thin yellow filament pushing its way inside the slit.

Aethos had warned me about this part, but I'd never put anything inside my dick before. Though the filament was the smallest I had seen from Sakura, I began to feel the pinch as it pushed farther in. I whimpered and shook my head side to side rapidly because I didn't want this, even though I knew it was necessary for Sakura. I tried to back away, but Aethos kept a tight grip on my balls; as I pushed backward, he held my balls in place, pulling the skin taut. The juxtaposition of the usual softness to the uncommon strain distracted me. I yelped and stopped trying to flee. After a moment, I became accustomed to the stretched feeling, though the pinch remained uncomfortable but bearable.

I made an unhappy face and wiggled in vexation. Aethos tightened the hand against my windpipe ever so slightly until I settled and whined in uneasiness.

"It may be easier if you do not watch, Kazuo."

But I couldn't force myself to look away, even as I whined uneasily. A very small lump worked its way through the inside of the yellow filament, similar to a snake which had swallowed a mouse whole. When it reached the tip of my cock and started inside, the pinching pressure increased to a burn.

At that same moment, Sakura discovered my prostate and nudged. The agony in my dick mixed with the ecstasy inside my ass, and I keened, unable to figure out which unescapable sensation to focus on during the most profoundly painful and pleasurable moment of my life.

The small lump reached the base of my cock and stopped. I tried to grab my dick to jack off to force it out, to alleviate the painful burning, but the vines still

wrapped around my forearms pulled my hands away. I groaned in frustration and arched up, putting pressure on my bad ankle and causing that new pain to mix with the other. I cried out in distress as I fell back against Aethos and clawed at his neck again.

Sakura continued thrusting in and out of my ass, teasing me by sucking on my prostate at the end of each thrust. Experiencing that skill alone was worth the pain; I endured the awful pinching and burning to feel Sakura massage my prostate with his stigma.

“Give—” Aethos panted heavily. “Give it a moment to dissolve and enter your testes, and the pain will fade, Kazuo. You are almost to the end.”

I didn't know whether I wanted this torture to end or continue. Everything swirled together confusingly in my head.

Sakura pulled out of my ass, and I missed the feeling of him within me immediately. I whined “no” and writhed on Aethos's lap, trying to get that feeling back.

Aethos spoke quietly in his native language. It sounded like it was more to himself than it was to me, and I found it so incredibly sexy that he was so far gone he couldn't remember to speak Earthling. His harsh breaths sounded loud in my ear. I really wanted that kiss, but not enough to tolerate a burning mouth to go with my burning cock.

Sakura wrapped strong vines around our upper thighs, lashing me tighter to Aethos, who groaned loudly in what sounded like a foreign curse. All at once, I felt several slight stings on the underside of my legs where they met my ass. Then Sakura's stigma began to suck my glans inside it, and the stings faded to the cool sensation smoothing over my heated flesh.

My body slicked with sweat, and I wondered if the strange heat suffusing my skin was similar to what afflicted Sakura. I was glad Sakura had lashed me together with Aethos so I didn't have to worry about sliding off of the membrane.

The stigma inched slowly down to the root of my cock, wiggling, massaging, sucking. I started chanting “ah ah ah ah ah ah” louder and louder, over and over. I was right on the edge of climax...

A piercing pain shot through my balls and radiated through every nerve in my body. I screamed as my sac pulsed unnaturally. I couldn't hear much of anything but the rush of blood in my ears, but I swore I heard Aethos say, “Sakura, don't.”

I hoped Aethos meant “don’t” as in “don’t pull away from Kazuo; the scream isn’t what you think it is.”

For the briefest instant, time stopped. I couldn’t tell pain from pleasure any longer. I teetered on the edge of orgasm as the unknown pain slicing through me balanced perfectly with the incredibly pleasurable suction surrounding my cock. And then time moved and the scales tipped as his stigma sucked the last of the pain away. I howled in unfathomable pleasure as I came hard. I shot fountains of cum into Sakura’s greedy mouth, more pulses of semen than I had ever shot before. They kept coming, and Sakura kept sucking until I groaned from sensitivity and tried to back away.

Pain spiked in my balls and thighs again, and I shouted and thrashed on top of Aethos, forgetting about my ankle until I thudded it on the dirt and more pain radiated up my leg than down it.

“Sakura, let me go. Ow, it hurts! Let me go, let me go!”

Sakura withdrew from my oversensitive dick and released the vines tethering me to Aethos. I used my good leg to scoot forward and slide across Aethos’s rigid thighs and onto the dirt next to his left, escaping the tiny, needle-like spines. Exhausted and sweaty, I lay there breathing deep and steady to slow my heartbeat. I reached for his gloved hand and twined his fingers with mine.

Aethos made a strange sort of choked noise. He, too, breathed heavily. He let go of my hand and sat up to remove his gloves and lift the membrane from his forehead, over his hair. It made a squelching sound as it peeled away from his skin. After our exertions, his hair was sweaty and matted, like mine, only with less dirt in it.

He rolled partially on top of me, thrusting his right leg between mine, trapping my leg between his. I swore I felt something stiff between his legs this time. Humming my right leg, he grasped my head in both his hands and thrust his tongue—his really long, thin tongue—into my mouth. I didn’t expect the kiss, so I squeaked in surprise before engaging him. Then I closed my eyes and kissed him back with everything I had wanted during sex. My tongue dueled with his, but he won; he controlled when he pulled back to breathe and when to dive in deep again. I brought my hands to his chest and ran them up to his neck and through his hair. Aethos softened the kisses down to nothing and pulled back enough to see my eyes as I looked up at him.

As much as I hated reality for intruding, my brain started asking questions I wanted to ignore for a while longer. What had happened before I came? When I

came? Wasn't it supposed to burn if Aethos touched me? I took a breath to ask the first question when Aethos put a finger to my lips.

“Not yet, Kazu. I will explain, but not yet. Let us go to the residence and clean up. Then I will tell you what happened.”

I furrowed my brows in concern, but I nodded my assent. “Kazu?” I asked, somewhat amused. No one had called me Kazu-chan in many years; I think not since my mother had passed on when I was eight.

“Yes. Kazu.”

Aethos spoke briefly with Sakura in his own language, petting one of the vines he had picked up. It was an intimate gesture that spoke volumes about their relationship that I hadn't realized. After a minute of discussion, he switched to Earthling.

“You already look better. I will check on you tomorrow morning, dear.” To me he said, “Shall we go clean up?”

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Aethos helped me float back to the main residence. Much to my gratitude, I did not spot a single guard the entire way back. Neither Aethos nor I had chosen to bother dressing for the return trip. On the way back, I had wavered on whether or not I should ask Aethos to stay with me when we returned, but ultimately the idea felt clingy and I thought I could use the time to think.

Instead of the room with the daybed I had woken in earlier, Aethos showed me to a more private suite where he had arranged for me to stay for the duration of my visit. Inside were eight large boxes and one smaller box stacked along the wall, addressed to me. Confused, I opened one of the large boxes to find more than two dozen of my business suit jackets, dress shirts, and pants neatly folded on top of several boxes of dress shoes. Apparently, my father had been good to his word and sent over my clothing, though it looked like he might have packed my entire wardrobe and then some. One of those large boxes would have been more than enough to contain what I should need for this visit. But eight?

The rest of the large boxes included more of my clothing, as well as electronics. I randomly pulled out short-sleeved shirts, sweaters, undershirts, swimwear, jockstraps, briefs, shorts, multiple types of socks, heavy wool coats, windbreakers, running shoes, hats—I never wore hats—and electronics for any purpose I could think of: communication, recording, security, entertainment, and of course, business.

The box that befuddled me the most was the one containing several years' supply of toiletries: toothpaste, deodorant, soap, tissues, painkillers, everything I could think of—including toilet paper. Why had my father packed toilet paper? Did he think Aethos would make me wipe my ass with my hand? It just didn't add up.

The smaller box I had saved for last. It contained my sex toy collection. I blushed and closed it quickly before anyone saw inside. Not that anyone was in the room with me, but if Aethos had security watching the greenhouse, he probably had it in the main residence as well.

I was mortified that anyone had seen my toys, much less packed them into a box and shipped them to me here. But the ultimate question was why? I didn't need all of this. I had a sprained ankle, not a broken back. This went far beyond being prepared for any occasion. It felt like my father thought I was moving in.

I shook my head and stopped trying to figure out the logic. At least I finally had something clean to wear.

Once I stopped thinking about the mystery of the clothing, my mind turned to other mysteries. It churned with reliving the evening and my unanswered questions and all the possibilities that weren't very likely but were all I could think of in my limited experience. Maybe Aethos could touch me because his body chemistry changed during sex? Maybe Sakura did something when he bound us together? Why did I keep feeling spiking pain during sex? Was that normal? Did I have to go through that every time I needed to mate with Sakura?

I cleaned up and dressed rapidly. About the time I had wondered whether I should go to look for him, Aethos knocked on the door to my suite. I hadn't even finished closing the door before I couldn't contain my curiosity any longer.

“What on Earth happened there at the end, Aethos?”

“I am sorry, Kazuo-san. I tried not to,” Aethos hedged. He turned and stood facing me but not looking at me.

I instantly noticed his use of a title. The only reason I could think of that he would use it now, after we had agreed not to, was because he felt shame for something. But I had asked him to help, and Sakura had agreed, so he had no need to feel shame for enjoying our time together to his own completion, if that was what had happened. It didn't make any sense to me, but things rarely had these last twenty-four hours.

"You tried not to what, exactly?" I asked as I sat down on the bed and propped up my ankle on a couple of pillows.

"I tried not to interfere in your mating with Sakura. I told Sakura I was too close, that I needed to back away from you. And that was when he bound us together, preventing me from escaping or holding back."

"I don't understand, Aethos. Holding back? What, your orgasm?"

"My mating spike."

"Your mating spike?" I remembered the spiking pain in my balls. "You mean a literal spike?" My voice rose at the end.

He nodded. "I could not hold back the spike, and when it protruded from my skin, it pierced through the membrane and one of your testes. I flooded you with my... semen is the simplest reference you have. I tried to warn Sakura not to drink, but he ignored me. And so you climaxed and released both of our fluids into Sakura."

Mind reeling from the potential implications of everything Aethos had said, I tried to pick the one important item to focus on.

"Did the mating with Sakura work? Is he safe?" Was I safe?

"It will affect him, but I am uncertain how. I seriously doubt such a triad mating has ever occurred before amongst his species. His color appeared to lighten some before we left, though, so I think maybe pollination was successful and he is on his way to recovery. I have the guards watching him around the clock tonight for anything unusual. If he starts to pinken again or if anything out of the ordinary occurs, the guards will fetch me without delay."

I nodded, grateful for the precautions Aethos had already taken.

"So, you accidentally mated with me? After you said you wouldn't interfere?" I hadn't agreed to have sex with Aethos, but I had given him permission to climax if I asked for him. After the unusual request I had made of him, I could understand an accident in the heat of the moment. That didn't mean I knew how to feel about it, though. Sex with him hadn't been anything like I had fantasized, that was for certain.

Aethos flushed orange. "I beg you a thousand pardons, Kazuo-san. It was most unintentional."

That explained his shame.

“So when you say ‘mated,’ do you mean we had sex, or do you mean you may fall over dead if we don’t have sex regularly?” I asked.

Aethos huffed short hisses of air, a laugh, based on my experience.

“We do not share any bond in the way Sakura bonded to you. It was only sex,” he replied.

His accent made it difficult for me to determine anything about his mood through his tone of voice. Hearing him say “it was only sex” hit me in the chest though. I had thought by the end that maybe we had shared more than the pleasure of sex. Neither calling me “Kazu” nor that kiss at the end had been necessary to the mating process with Sakura. It felt like there had been desire in that kiss on his part as well, not only mine.

“Am I going to suffer any side-effects of having had sex with you? Oh, and how was it we were able to touch and kiss without burning me?”

The orange flush deepened on his skin.

“I am not aware of any potential side-effects of Sirynthalian–Earthling mating, except for perhaps the pheromonal euphoria we inject during climax, but I am uncertain how that affects Earthlings. When a Sirynthalian approaches climax, one large spike appears between the legs, roughly below where your testes connect to your body. Once injected into our mate, the spike releases our genetic material to impregnate. You may have also noticed my thighs—”

“Your thighs are enormous!” I interrupted.

“What you saw as an enlarged Earthling thigh is actually our genitalia, which remains below the skin. It thickens with blood as we become aroused and—”

“Wait... You’re telling me your cock is your... thigh?”

“For lack of a better way to describe it to you, yes,” Aethos responded. “When aroused, a small ridge emerges on our inner or upper thighs. We use those smaller points to inject the pheromone I mentioned. It prolongs our enjoyment of climax. The pheromone injection to your bloodstream allowed me to kiss you, as you said you wanted.”

I tried to wrap my head around all of that information. I had asked him to kiss me; that was true. I just hadn’t known what all it would involve.

“That’s a lot of spikes for it to be enjoyable.” I said it more to myself than to him. But some of the events started making more sense now, like the grunts when I moved on top of him, and when Sakura bound our thighs together.

“The smaller marks will be on the backs of your thighs and buttocks because you were on top of me. That ridge can move to the side of the thigh where we need it.”

I tried to wrap my mind around Siryntalian sexual pleasure involving the spiking pain I had felt, but I failed. “Do you enjoy the pain of the mating spike and the other ridge?”

“There is no pain for us when we inject our own kind.”

“No wonder,” I muttered.

I still felt shaky and uncertain about Aethos's accidental spiking. I had wanted him to join us—I had needed it, to be honest—but now Sakura might suffer from unknown complications, which was exactly what shouldn't have happened. I felt guilty because I had enjoyed Aethos being there with us. I could do without the pain radiating out from my balls, but I...

I had caused Aethos to orgasm unexpectedly, and that pride was a powerful emotion. I wanted to keep that moment.

I didn't want to hurt Sakura, but the problem was I didn't know what he expected of me now that the first mating was out of the way. Supposedly the plants were possessive about their mates. Did that mean I was never allowed to have sex with anyone else? Would sex with a plant be my only option for the rest of my life?

Maybe one day I would learn to enjoy the feel of vines instead of hands and arms and body, but right this second, I shuddered to think of a sex life without humanoid touch. I didn't think I could live without it. I felt trapped by my decision.

“So, what happens now?” I asked.

“We wait until morning to see how our unusual mating affected Sakura. Then I suspect you will have more questions.”

I nodded. It seemed around Aethos, I always had more questions than answers.

“Have I answered all of your questions, Kazuo-san?” Aethos asked quietly, using my title again.

A few hours ago, it had felt uncomfortable and unnatural to hear Aethos say my name without a title, and now I ached for him to stop using it again, because I knew it meant he felt something was wrong between us. I didn't want there to be. I wanted to be able to trust him.



“Call me Kazuo, Aethos, please.”

“If you find it acceptable for me to do so, Kazuo.”

“I do have another question. What does Sakura expect of me now that he and I have mated? Am I allowed to have sex without him, or am I his alone for the rest of my life? I don't know what's appropriate.”

“Before tonight, I would have said you would be his alone after the mating. But, tonight, Sakura surprised me. I honestly do not have an answer for you.”

I reached for Aethos's hand before I remembered it might hurt to touch him. When no burn came, I asked, “How long do we have before that pheromone injection wears off and touching your skin will hurt me again?”

Aethos looked down at me. “Maybe two hours. It depends on your body.”

“That's long enough,” I replied and pulled Aethos down into another kiss. I could feel the acid in my stomach already beginning to gnaw at my insides, but I selfishly wanted the contact tonight, and I hoped Sakura would be willing to forgive my insecurity.

Aethos held himself stiffly above me as the kiss began, but as it lingered, he relaxed his body and returned the kiss. He pushed me back on the bed, arms to either side of my body, pinning me beneath him.

“This time, though,” I added, “don't spike my balls.”

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## Chapter 4

I woke in the softness of comforters in my own room. Aethos had insisted on helping me change the sheets once we had finished having sex in my room. He thought the oils from his skin might end up burning me in the middle of the night, whereas I thought he was being overly cautious about indirect contact. As much as waking up in the morning curled around his naked body would have been nice, it wasn't practical for us, sadly. Cuddling and seeking morning sex were the only things that could have made waking up this morning even better.

A knock at my door caused me to sit up. Aethos entered, wearing a very elegant ensemble. He looked exceptionally overdressed for the morning after.

"Good morning, Kazuo. Please make yourself presentable. There is someone you need to meet waiting in the reception room."

"It's too early for a business meeting, Aethos." I moaned the complaint as I lay back down and covered my head with the comforter.

"I assure you, this is not business but pleasure. Come naked, if you like, but be downstairs in ten minutes or I shall bring him here, regardless of your state of undress or cleanliness."

I peeked out from the comforter at him, arching an eyebrow at the mild threat and the unusual suggestion of presenting myself naked. Who on Earth could I need to meet where being naked might possibly be acceptable? As far as I was concerned, the only two beings who should see me naked were Sakura and Aethos. I would much rather go check on Sakura first thing this morning than meet a stranger.

"Aethos, I want to check on Sakura first." I felt a twinge of guilt for not thinking of Sakura sooner.

"You know better than to keep our guest waiting, Kazuo-kun. It would be exceptionally rude."

I pouted and frowned at the chastisement and the use of a diminutive title. Then I noticed the squinty-eyed face again. Aethos had *very* squinty eyes this morning. I narrowed my eyes at him, but I did as he requested. After taking care of my typical morning functions, I dressed quickly in some casual wear my father had sent over.

Aethos led me on the float-board to the reception room where an unusually colorless, thin, and quite naked young man waited for us as he leaned back in a chair, legs spread. He looked to be around my age and mostly Earthling in body but not in appearance. Everything about him was white, from his hair to his toenails. He was hairless except for the fairly short hair on his head and his eyebrows. His skin had the same strange shine to it as Aethos's, and his eyes had the same diamond-like quality, only more so for their pure, sparkling clarity.

As I examined him, his dick began to plump between his legs. His thighs seemed to thicken as well. His face showed a strangely vacant expression, as if he was without any thoughts.

“Who...?”

I didn't want to believe what my eyes were trying to tell me, but this young man appeared to be a Sirythalian–Earthling hybrid, except for the unusual white coloration which wasn't native to either of our species. An Earthling might make an assumption he was albino, but even albinos had pink eyes because of the blood vessels within them.

“Kazuo, meet the birth-parent of your—our?—future fruit.”

“Sakura?” I asked incredulously. It wasn't possible. If it was Sakura, I expected some sort of reaction or recognition from him, but the young man continued to stare at me blankly, tapping a finger against the arm of the chair. The only reaction I saw from him was the continued swelling of his sizable dick and thighs. Maybe a hybrid could have two sets of genitalia? It was the only idea I could come up with to fit what I saw in front of me.

I looked to Aethos for an explanation.

“Did I forget to mention the Amorphophallus's ability to use the genetic material of its first mating not only for pollination but also to shapeshift into the species of its mating partner? Or, in this case, partners. He is still getting used to his new body,” Aethos answered. He looked and sounded not the least bit guilty, that I could tell.

I whipped around to look at him.

“You... you... unbelievable bastard!” I roared at him. “How could you not tell me that?”

I shook with anger. If the fire in my eyes didn't give it away, the fact I had cursed at him was evidence of my fury—I rarely cursed—but Aethos had gone

too far. He had been keeping details from me for years, and I was tired of it. If I had known sooner, I might have gotten used to the idea of mating with a plant, been able to think about and focus on who Sakura would become. I might have been able to mate without... *without his help*.

It could have changed everything that happened between us, the three of us.

Understanding dawned. His twin brother had an Amorphophallus mate, and Aethos wanted that for himself as well. He had thought Sakura would be his all those years ago, until Sakura chose me when he wasn't looking. And he still wanted Sakura, at whatever it cost to keep him.

"It was all on purpose, wasn't it? Everything after Sakura marked me, up to the point of not telling me about how you mate and then feeding part of yourself to him. You still want him for yourself, and you used me."

I spat the accusation at him with all the venom I had. I had been a pawn—a means to an end—and I felt the need to heave up my non-existent breakfast. I had wanted to trust Aethos, but every single moment had been a lie.

Aethos's skin tinted toward orange, his guilt showing on his body as I called him on his deceit.

"I..." he hesitated. "I did tell Sakura not to drink from you once I had..." He trailed off under my withering stare.

"Pang of conscience, Aethos? Or more likely you knew Sakura wouldn't stop at that point, no matter your warning. You wanted him for yourself, but that was out of the question, so you hid details from me so events might unfold as you wanted, regardless of what either Sakura or I might have wanted otherwise. We didn't need you, so you made us need you."

Aethos flushed bright orange, I suspected not only in guilt but outright shame. Sakura stared blankly as he looked back and forth between us. I didn't know whether he understood us or not; I thought he might not know how to interpret sound in this form, being so new to it. I really didn't know much about him or his biology, obviously. I rubbed the bridge of my nose in frustration. I didn't know whether to be angrier with Aethos's duplicity or more saddened by the loneliness that led him to do it.

And I had no idea where that left us after last night. His duplicity hurt in ways I hadn't expected. I had thought his spiking me was an accident. After having sex with him again last night, I wanted to believe him, to trust him. Apparently I had been wrong to believe sex meant something more to him. I

had been so naive. Now I wanted to slap him, to claw at his chest until he bled. I wanted to make him hurt the way I hurt, so the betrayal could eat him the way it was eating me. I wanted all the lies to stop.

“I’m tired of the half-truths and lies of omission, Aethos. What really happens now? Try telling me the whole truth for once. Does Sakura need you to continue mating with him too now that he’s had our genetic cocktail, or have you affected how he’ll look for the rest of his life and that’s all?”

“I—I honestly do not know, Yoshida-sama.” No longer using my given name and adding an elevated title was a clear and unmistakable sign of his shame. “What I told you about the uniqueness of the triad is true, to my knowledge. There is no way to know how the mixture of our fluids will affect him, because I do not believe such an event has occurred before in the history of the species. We need to go to his homeworld. There are people there, an entire council which regulates access to the species. They are the experts on Amorphophallus biology, mating, and reproduction. If anyone will have answers, they will, but I do not think they will have these answers.”

“So we go make sure Sakura’s healthy and nothing unexpected is going to happen to him, and then come home?”

Aethos shook his head. “Once they know about him, they will never allow him to leave his homeworld again. That was why I hid him in my greenhouse on this world the whole time. Earthlings know nothing of his kind, their history or their abilities. As a mate, you will be free to come and go, but because mating cycles can happen unexpectedly, mates typically never leave the planet again either. Others may visit, but the unmated may not stay.” He paused. “I—I do not know what that means for me, Yoshida-sama. Technically, I am unmated, but I may or may not be necessary to the survival of an Amorphophallus. We probably will not know the answer to that until his next mating cycle.”

“And you didn’t think perhaps I needed to know I would have to leave my home forever before I made my decision to mate with Sakura?”

“Would that knowledge have changed your decision to save his life?” Aethos asked.

I didn’t have to think about it to know the answer was no, I would not have changed my decision. I declined to answer the question, however. I suspected Aethos meant it to be rhetorical anyway.

“You could have told me, Aethos,” I whispered. “I would have understood. I had no pre-conceived notions of how this should have happened.” Everything caught up to me in a sudden rush of emotion. Angry tears welled up in the corners of my eyes. “You didn’t have to deceive me. Now, I... I—”

Sakura made a strange noise and we both turned to look at him. I had forgotten he was there. He looked at me and tried to use his throat again, but all that came out was an awkward hacking sound. He reached out for me, attempting to sit up in the chair. His erections had vanished during the conversation.

I floated over to the chair where Sakura sat and reached down for him. He lifted his arms up but didn’t grab a hold of me, so I pushed his arms closer to my neck and folded his hands around until he got the right idea and held on to my neck for support. Then I lifted his body and helped him move over to the sofa. After Sakura sat in the middle, I lowered the float-board and pushed myself up onto the sofa from the floor. I sat on Sakura’s right and turned to face him.

He was so very alien and so very beautiful. I reached up to touch his face, and then thought better of it and touched his shoulder first. Though Sakura’s skin shone like Aethos’s, my fingers didn’t burn as they held him. Satisfied my touch would not pain either of us, I brushed my hand up and down Sakura’s arm before lifting it to his cheek and drawing it back into his soft hair. I smiled at him, my eyes still a bit watery, and pulled him into a hug.

Sakura sat still in my arms for a few moments and then squirmed until I released him.

Sakura reached out for Aethos, who—guided by Sakura’s hand—sat down to his left side. Sakura looked Aethos in the eyes until Aethos started to shake silently. He appeared to be crying without either the sound or the tears. Aethos put his head on Sakura’s shoulder. Sakura slowly rubbed Aethos’s leg above the knee. I thought he wanted to comfort Aethos until I remembered that Aethos’s genitalia hid below the surface of his thighs. Aethos gasped and looked Sakura in the eyes again.

“Do you mean it, Sakura?”

Sakura tapped one finger against Aethos’s forearm. Yes.

I had no idea what had just happened.

“He forgave me,” Aethos said, as if I had asked the question aloud. His voice sounded rough, like he had been yelling at the top of his lungs, abusing his throat.

“How do you know that?” I asked him, skepticism evident in my voice.

“As far as we know, he has no need to mate with me outside of his mating cycle, and even that is questionable. He has no need to touch me to arouse if he no longer wants me around except out of necessity. He does not have to accept me in his life, but he wants me in it still.”

Aethos got all of that from Sakura looking at him and caressing his thigh? Their understanding of each other was obviously much deeper than I had even begun to imagine, and knowing that upset me. I felt like I had walked into the middle of someone else's relationship and become the third wheel, and I didn't understand where I stood with either of them. Was I the one in their way because Sakura made a mistake nine years ago?

I ran a hand down my face to try to hide the quiver of my lips, but the tears in my eyes gave me away.

Sakura turned back toward me, but Aethos said to him, “Let me.” To me, he said, “I forget sometimes you are as young as you are, Kazuo-san—”

“Stop using the fucking title!” I shrieked. “Stop hiding behind propriety and be honest with me!”

Sakura put a tentative hand on my shoulder, and it was like he sapped the anger from my body until all that was left of me was a quaking, teary mess wondering where I fit into this turmoil. Sakura used his other hand to wipe at a single tear rolling down my cheek.

“I betrayed your trust,” Aethos tried again. “I am well aware of that. When all of this began, I didn't think you were important. You were in the way of my happiness—my life with Sakura—and that was all I cared about. I brought you here for Sakura's sake, and for no other reason.”

I stared at Aethos in mute horror, more tears now spilling down my cheeks as he confirmed the thought that he had used me as his only means to continue to be with Sakura. I wanted to back away from the two of them, but Sakura grabbed my hand and held onto me. I looked down at that connection and processed it as comfort, but not love. I choked back a sob.

“But I underestimated his intelligence, Kazu. All this time, I thought Sakura had chosen you for himself. And all this time, I have been wrong. I finally figured it out. He chose you for me as well.”

I almost stopped listening when Aethos said he had been wrong. It took me a moment to process what he had actually said. I couldn't hold back the next sob as I asked, "How could you know that?"

Aethos looked at Sakura and smiled at him before looking back and smiling at me. "Because I had no intention of wanting anyone other than Sakura, and he knew that. And then last night, you charmed me with your sweetness when you took my hand—not once, but twice—and I realized I want the both of you, Kazu. I want you now as much as Sakura did from the day he marked you."

Sakura looked like he was about to tap my forearm, but as he reached toward me, his finger elongated, thinning and curling and turning green. I stared in awe as the finger-turned-tendrill wrapped around my forearm. Suddenly, Sakura's other four fingers on that hand elongated as well, each wrapping around me somewhere. As quickly as his fingers had become vines, they shrank back into pale fingers. Sakura held his hand up and splayed the digits apart, examining them. Then he finally tapped a single finger on my forearm.

After that stunning display of non-Earthling ability, it took me a few heartbeats to remember what Aethos had just said, what Sakura was agreeing with.

Finally processing everything, I hugged Sakura tightly, relieved I wasn't the unwanted third wheel I had begun to believe I was. Aethos joined the hug from the other side of Sakura. I was never so glad for clothing as I was in that moment as he touched me, included me.

"I am sorry, Kazu. After last night, I did not wish to betray you further. But if I had told you last night about Sakura's shapeshifting, you would have been this upset with me last night, without the benefit of Sakura to confirm or deny details. These last revelations had to play out this morning, with Sakura present. I was uncertain you would still be willing to accept me once you knew the truth. But, I swear to you now: No more deception or half-truths. That is, if you can find a way to believe me now?"

I wanted to. I really wanted to. The moment he said it, I had wanted to believe him—I had felt such relief. But I didn't trust that emotion. I didn't trust him. Too many actions disproved his words: Leading me to the greenhouse, omitting information like the mark meant I had to mate with the plant and might eventually have to live off-world for the rest of my life, lying to me about not interfering in our mating when that was what he wanted more than anything. I couldn't bring myself to believe that his lies had come to an end.



But for Sakura's sake, I lied. I sat up, tried on a watery smile, and nodded mutely at Aethos. I didn't trust my voice not to betray me in that moment. I had not forgiven him, but I needed them to think I had.

"Thank you, Kazu. You have no idea how much your forgiveness truly means to me because you are the one to whom I have done the greatest wrong, and you are the one with the most reason to hate and distrust me. I am certain we will speak about this more at length. However, today we have much to do before we leave tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Does it have to be so soon?"

"Yes. The trip to the planet Aroid takes around three months, and I am uncertain how long Sakura's fruiting cycle will be. He might be ripe by or before the time we arrive," Aethos answered.

"Ripe? What do you mean?"

"Ready to give birth, Kazu. Only, with plants, they bear fruit."

"Sakura is... he's pregnant? With fruit?" I asked, feeling quite stupid.

"With your baby. Or perhaps our baby. That is still unknown," Aethos replied. "What exactly did you think 'pollination' meant all this time?"

I gaped at Aethos disbelievingly. "I don't know! But not that! I... Plants and Earthlings can't have babies together in my experience. I didn't even think about it. Why would I ever think that?"

"I introduced him to you as 'the birth-parent of our future fruit,' Kazu."

"I didn't know that meant he was already pregnant with a baby! You said 'fruit.' And he hadn't been humanoid before that."

Aethos rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger in a very Earthling gesture of frustration. He took a deep breath.

"I am sorry, Kazuo," he responded in a calmer tone. "I should have checked for your understanding sooner. Let me use more Earthling terminology: When in heat, Sakura must have sex with you until he becomes pregnant. The beginning of his pregnancy releases the hormones which relieve the mating heat. At the very least, Sakura was pregnant with your child before we left the greenhouse last night."

Sakura tapped one finger against my forearm. Yes.

If I hadn't already been sitting down, I would have fallen over. As it was, I suddenly felt exceptionally light-headed. I leaned my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes until the dizziness subsided.

I was about to be a father. At only twenty years old. What did I know about being a father? My own had practically ignored me for years.

Aethos continued talking as if he hadn't upended my world. Again.

"You need to pack and say goodbye to your family and friends. They will rarely be able to visit you due to the length and expense of the trip. Sakura will go with you to your room and continue to work on his movement and balance. I need to put my business affairs in order. I have an emergency board meeting tonight to hand over control of my company."

Aethos's issuance of orders on what I should do with my life grated on my nerves, but I tamped the feeling down for Sakura's sake.

"Why would you do that if you're not sure whether you'll be allowed to stay with us on his world?"

"Because this is what I have wanted for years. I would rather not have the business as a loose end which the council might use against me to ask me to leave. I can easily build another company. This opportunity comes along only once."

"Then who will take over Aethos Imports?"

"It will be merged into... Yoshida Exports."

"My father?" I couldn't even articulate the rest of my question.

"He understands my import business. All he needs are the contacts and help understanding the export regulations of other worlds. He is a very capable businessman, so I am certain the board will agree with my decision to merge our company with his."

I laughed ruefully. "So he gets something out of my being here after all."

"He loses far more than he gains, Kazu."

"What does my father lose?" I furrowed my eyebrows in bafflement. "You're about to give him everything he's wanted and worked for, for years."

"His son, Kazu. He loses you."

"My father hasn't cared about me in years," I scoffed.

Aethos tinged toward orange again. I was beginning to despise whenever his skin turned orange, because so far it had always meant he'd hidden something significant from me. I cringed as I braced myself for this new revelation.

"That may be my fault as well," Aethos said.

I found that hard to believe, but I waited for the rest.

"Your father has known your fate since the day after Sakura marked you. I spoke with him at length, explaining the events which would eventually unfold. Your father has known for nine years this day would come. And he knew you well enough then to know what choice you would make; he knew you would decide to save the plant, and your mate would ultimately take you away from here permanently. Why do you think he sent over so many clothes and other things for your recovery?"

I hadn't braced enough. In a matter of a few sentences, Aethos turned everything I thought I knew about my father upside-down. I couldn't even begin to think of a response to that. My whole life from eleven onward suddenly felt like a lie, like a shadow of what those years should have been, and that made me want to put my fist through the wall.

"Everything he has done since that day was to help prepare you for this time. He made sure you were exposed to several alien cultures, he sent you to Intergalactic Trade School, and he made sure you learned the Intergalactic Trade language. But, I think he also chose to cut out early on his personal ties with you, to make it easier for you to leave when the time came. And to make it easier for him, as well," Aethos finished.

I opened my mouth to deny the possibility. My father had neglected me time and again, and I had a dozen memories of disappointment I could bring to mind instantly. But of all those memories, I could not remember a single disappointment that had happened before I turned eleven—before I had been marked by Sakura.

My stomach dropped through the floor, and I started to breathe too rapidly. My head throbbed behind my eyes, and the world began to swirl in a kaleidoscope of color to rival Aethos's greenhouse.

Aethos had, in fact, single-handedly changed the course of my entire life, from his greenhouse and his alien plant on down to the majority of my relationship with my father. But my father's decision was not Aethos's fault.

For all the supposedly good things my father had done for me during those years, the selfish bastard had also cut off our relationship prematurely to save himself some pain when I would have to leave. I was furious he had left me flailing as a teenager when I most wanted and needed his approval, and I was profoundly confused as to whether or not he loved me now and had loved me all these years.

My chest constricted, and I put my head between my legs to try to force the nausea away. Sakura rubbed my back, and for a time I leaned into him and focused on that sensation instead of the implications of what Aethos had told me.

“You should go see him today, Kazuo. It may be your last opportunity.” I felt the sofa redistribute as Aethos stood. “If you would like breakfast, speak with the kitchen staff. If you need help getting Sakura to your room, you need only ask. If you...” He hesitated. “If you still need me, I will be in my office.”

He lingered in the room for a few moments. When I did not look at him or speak, Aethos exited quietly.

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Aethos mostly left me alone for the rest of the day, coming to check on us only once it was time for our evening meal. I had done as he suggested that morning and taken Sakura upstairs to practice standing while I packed. I should have used the opportunity to speak to Sakura, to tell him more about me, but I had been too self-absorbed in the things I planned to say to my father.

When I went to see him, my father had tried to brush me off at first. After I had furiously stormed past his secretary into his office, he had put down whatever he was working on and listened to me rail at him for all those years I had thought he didn't love me any longer. He had taken it stoically while I cried in front of him, but I saw the moisture in his eyes.

The bastard had loved me all that time. And that made it worse when I had to say goodbye. He had offered me his hand, and in spitefulness I had pulled him into a bruising hug and made him feel every stuttered breath as I said goodbye to him. He then patted one hand against my back, and I pulled away and called him a bastard to his face before I walked out.

Drained from my encounter with him, I hadn't even tried to say goodbye to anyone else. I hadn't had it in me to go through any of that a second time, much less more.

Aethos left us alone at bed time as well, for which I was supremely grateful. I wanted to spend some time with Sakura on our own. I happily curled around Sakura and cuddled with him. His body was cool, like his plant form had been, whereas my body could heat the bedding like a self-contained furnace. We balanced each other well in that respect. After a little while, I nibbled and sucked just below Sakura's ear until he rolled to face me.

Then I taught him how to kiss. Though I started slow, Sakura soon mashed our mouths together and explored me with his tongue. I had to teach him not to bite down too hard, too.

When our erections swelled and bumped, I rolled partially on top of him and pressed my body closer, teaching us both the pleasure of grinding together as we kissed languidly, building up the slow burn toward an inferno. When the kisses turned rough and the friction between our bodies threatened to undo us both, I covered his hand with my own and taught him to stroke us together to climax.

As I curled an arm over his chest to fall asleep, I realized the previous night with Aethos had been about physical connection; I had wanted it to be more than that, but it hadn't turned out that way. This night with Sakura had given me the emotional connection I sought. I needed.

Aethos found Sakura and me entwined like that in the morning when he woke us to get ready to leave. He had a look on his face I had never seen before, a dullness to his orange eyes that made my chest ache unexpectedly. His words to us to get dressed were unusually clipped.

Maybe he recognized I hadn't completely forgiven him. Perhaps he was sad he couldn't sleep with us because of the direct skin contact issue. Or maybe he felt left out because I was actually Sakura's mate, though I had the feeling the resolution to that situation had yet to play itself out.

Once we reached the Earthling spaceport, Sakura and I floated together, following Aethos through the crowd. My arm hugged Sakura's side as we passed through for the last time. Sakura still needed some help with his balance, but he had improved significantly in only a day. "A fast learner," Aethos had called him. (Given Sakura's performance in bed last night, I had to agree.) For today, the float-board was faster than walking.

Since my arms were full as we floated, Sakura was kind enough to rub the mark on my wrist firmly for me. And to mess with me every so often, he would brush it gently instead, and I would groan quietly into his ear, the evil tease.

I had thought my last moments on Earth might be bittersweet, but in truth, I was relieved to leave behind the expectations of my old life, and looking forward to something new, something extraordinary. Life with Sakura—and a baby! And maybe, just maybe, even Aethos (if he proved I could trust him)—would be an incredible new adventure... and a scary one. Maybe I would get bored at some point, but it was hard to imagine that ever happening.

On the way to our port, Aethos stopped for a moment to buy a news feed. When it came time for him to download it, he moved aside and looked at me.

“You should save a copy of the news from today, Kazuo-san.” I winced inwardly at the title, but we were out in public. “For the sake of nostalgia if nothing else. It is your homeworld. It is a part of you.” I started to object that I didn't want it, but Aethos insisted. “Please, Kazu,” he whispered.

I relented and moved closer until my watch beeped. I downloaded the feed without opening it.

“Would you mind reading me the business headlines, Kazuo-san?” Aethos asked.

If the complete lack of subtlety in the question hadn't given Aethos away, the squinty eyes would have. Apparently there was something I needed to see.

I selected the feed for the business section and opened my mouth to read as Aethos had requested, but no sound came out once I saw the main headline.

**AETHOS IMPORTS AND YOSHIDA EXPORTS TO  
MERGE IMMEDIATELY;**

**IMPORT TYCOON AND YOSHIDA EXPORTS HEIR  
UNITED IN NEW OFF-WORLD VENTURE**

Tokyo, Japan – In a completely unexpected move, Yoshida Exports and Aethos Imports announced the merger of their two companies under the new name Yoshida Import-Export. President and CEO of Yoshida Exports, Yoshida Ichiro, said in his company's press release that the suddenness of the merger was prompted by an unusual and immediate off-world opportunity which would require the attentions of both the Aethos Imports President and CEO, Aethos, and the expected Yoshida Exports heir, Yoshida's son, Yoshida Kazuo. When questioned, Yoshida would not elaborate further on the off-world opportunity involved.

“I will miss my son,” Yoshida said. “He has been groomed for an opportunity such as this, and I have no doubt he is the best person for the position. Though he will be off-world, likely for the rest of his life, he will have Aethos to guide him. I could not leave him in better hands.”

With the union of two of the biggest independent players in the Import/Export industry, competitors are struggling to determine what such a merger will mean to their bottom lines. Yoshida Import-Export now holds the largest market share in its industry on planet Earth.

I amended my earlier thoughts: Learning the truth about my father was truly bittersweet.

I sniffed and wiped the couple of tears from my cheeks before I looked up at Aethos. He and Sakura smiled at me.

I loved Sakura's smile, now that he actually had one. I smiled back at them.

“What does it say, Kazuo-san?” Aethos prompted.

Deadpan, I replied, “It says, ‘Import Tycoon And Yoshida Exports Heir Impregnate Alien Flower, Symbol Of Their Budding Love.’”

Aethos hissed a laugh.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Adara O'Hare is a geek in writer's clothing—a mild-mannered website designer by day, and a wife, mother, reader, and sometimes writer by night. Adara is an avid reader who writes on occasion, mostly for her own enjoyment.*

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