



Loose Id

# VENOM'S BOND

NICA BERRY

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Nica Berry

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Published by  
Loose Id LLC  
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924  
Carson City NV 89701-1215  
[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

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ISBN 978-1-59632-521-0

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: C. B. Calsing  
Cover Artist: Croco Designs



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## Chapter One

Marquez was five days past his eighteenth birthday when the aging sickness came. He'd just stepped out of the shower when a dull pain began in his chest. He didn't think anything of it, since it had happened so many times before when he watched the other boys in the crèche. No reason to worry, not even when he felt his heart race and his entire body flush with heat. It happened every time one of the boys changed their clothes or took a shower next to him.

Another boy, naked and wet from the shower, walked past him just then. Marquez tracked him with his eyes, admiring the muscles toned from the daily workouts in the exercise room. The heat increased. Marquez shook his head, suddenly dizzy.

A few steps forward, and he had to brace himself against the steam-covered steel wall as the pain sharpened and drove straight into his belly. Marquez cried out and slid down against the slippery wall, hands wrapped around his stomach, legs kicking in futile effort to rid his body of the agony. Terror flowed through him. He'd seen the older boys collapse like this, shivering and sweating, whimpering in pain. The matrons tried to hide the sight from the younger boys, but they all knew anyway, and lived in a quiet, unspoken fear. When the older boys got sick, they never came back.

A vise of pain gripped him. His body jerked, wracked by seizures. Drool escaped from the corners of his mouth. His chest felt so crushed he couldn't speak, let alone cry out for help. He was dying. He was sure of it. It was his turn to disappear like all the older boys.

Ages or moments later, the doctors were there, catching his thrashing limbs and bundling him onto the lev and pushing it out beyond the walls of the crèche that encompassed the whole of his world.

Lights tracked overhead, flashing past as someone pushed the lev unit down one of the corridors on the *Trafalgar*. The coldness of the steel walls made Marquez shiver despite the heat that threatened to engulf his body. He was entirely naked under the sheet, but wanted to throw it off and absorb whatever cool air flitted by as the lev moved. He thrust the sheet aside time and time again, only to have it replaced, and to hear an angry, indistinguishable voice mutter in his ear. One more attempt, and the lev stopped so his arms could be bound to his sides. The heat rose again.

The overhead lights blurred, forming a continuous stream of light instead of panels. Sound distorted until Marquez was certain his mind was gone. Bitter, acidic flavors invaded his mouth. And the heat...the sheet sopped up his perspiration. He felt the damp spots emerge around his arms, his chest, his stomach, but they did nothing to help the heat. Instead, they made him itch, another torment.

A new kind of pain started, this time in the form of throbbing just below his waist. He could see the reason now, a mountain in the middle of a cotton plain. An agony he was desperate to relieve.

Drool leaked from the corner of his mouth and slid down in a maddening trickle on his cheek. He flung his head from side to side in an attempt to make it end, but the only thing that stopped was the lev while the women restrained his head.

"Do...all...this?" The doctors' voices flickered in and out, like radio traffic. "...normal. Fever...touch..."

Marquez screamed when something brushed his cheek. The sensation made his whole body tingle and worsened the ache just below his waist.

They took him into a steel room with another agonizingly bright light overhead. Air swirled around him as the women undid his straps and, lifting him from the lev, slid him onto the table. More restraints. One for each of his upper arms, wrists and ankles, one across his forehead, and another around his waist.

The voices buzzed again in his ear. "The I.V....here, quick...dammit, we're losing him!"

Marquez moaned as little bursts of fire pricked each of his arms. Plastic tubing ran into the air, like snakes he'd seen in one of the ship's vids. They were feeding him to the snakes.

The faces blurred. His heart pounded so hard it hurt, and he was so *hot*.

More snakes latched onto his arm. One drove into his belly. The women hovered around him, faceless, frightening ghouls, jabbing and stabbing at him. Marquez screamed and finally fell into the relief of blackness.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Marquez? Can you hear me?"

At last, something cool touched his skin. The gentle roughness of a cloth cleansing the sweat from his eyes. The sheet was gone, and now there was nothing between his skin and the cool air he craved.

The cloth moved downward, caressing the slope of his neck into the hollows around his collarbone. Don't stop, don't stop, he willed it. If he was dying, he wanted to die cool.

The cloth disappeared for a moment as the woman ran it under the sink to re-wet it. She held it over his chest and let the cold water drops pound into his skin. His arms were still bound, but when the cloth moved down to tickle his stomach, his hips rose to meet it. The sensation embarrassed him, and yet he craved more. *More*.

"It's a good sign," one of the women said.



Another woman snorted. “Don’t get excited. We’ve seen it happen before. They get aroused, but nothing comes out. Leave him alone for a while. We don’t want to overtax his system. He could still crash.”

Marquez opened swollen eyes to see blurry figures around him. Their voices no longer hurt his ears, but every brush of their skin against his was amplified to the point of pain. His body reacted in ways it hadn’t before. He felt hot inside and out, and there was an indescribable pressure below his waist. He glanced down to see himself naked, with tubes of all sorts sticking out of his arms, legs, chest, and even his stiffened cock. Bands wrapped around his wrists, upper arms, and ankles to keep him tied to the bed.

“Go back to sleep, Marquez.” The woman’s voice wasn’t sympathetic, but neither was it overly harsh, which was the manner of all the women he’d known. The matrons in the crèche had looked after all of the boys, but they remained aloof and detached, talking to their charges only enough to rebuke them for their behavior or to force them into the exercise room to keep them strong. Marquez supposed that the women didn’t want to get attached if the boys were going to get older and die anyway. Maybe that’s why the nurse standing above him was kinder. He was alive.

The sharp agony of a syringe blossomed in his arm. Sensation fled.

In the days following, they kept him in a stupor. Marquez was vaguely aware of his confinement to the bed, and the tubes sticking out of his arms and belly. Every time he saw them, the fear came back. What was going on? Why were they doing this to him? His questions came out half-formed and hardly understandable to his own ears.

“Don’t you worry,” a kind-looking woman told him. “This is all for your own good. You’re very ill, and all these are doing the work of feeding you and keeping you alive.”

He drifted, until one day he woke up with his head clear and his body empty of the tubes. Five women, all wearing white jumpsuits, surrounded his table. They wore gloves and masks.

"He's awake." He recognized this doctor from her visits to the crèche. Janet. She frightened him with her cold and distant manner. She palmed his face and pulled open his eyelids to look at his eyes. "Begin initial examination. Acknowledge all reactions."

Marquez was still naked, with his flaccid cock resting against his stomach. It embarrassed him to be so vulnerable amidst the women, and yet...it was exciting.

They didn't pay attention to his fears. Janet squirted her hands with a gel-like substance and rubbed them over his chest. She passed a handheld monitor over his chest and abdomen, and turned her head to watch a screen. Marquez looked at it, fascinated to see what his internal organs looked like. After putting the scanner down, she poked and prodded at his stomach, kneading the firm muscles there and pressing hard to detect anything unusual. She seemed pleased and gestured to another woman. "Alter the restraints."

The younger woman, who whispered her name in his ear, Emily, did as she was bid. She unbuckled the strap around one ankle and bent his knee upward and over to the side. She repeated the movement for the other ankle and then slid the lower half of the table inside itself so Marquez's bottom rested approachable and exposed.

Janet gelled her hands again and situated herself between his legs. She didn't look at him, but at his cock, which had started to swell and harden. She took the organ in her hands and examined it closely. Slowly, she stroked the shaft until it stood by itself, erect and hard. Marquez squirmed, confused by the heat and sensation and unable to free himself.

"Stop. Please."

The younger woman stepped back beside his shoulder and stroked his forehead. "Don't worry. It'll be over soon."

Janet's hand moved to cup his balls, manipulating each until she had Marquez nearly in tears. It wasn't pain, exactly, but he didn't like this. She wasn't gentle. Her hands felt like a vise, abrasive and squeezing.

He was about to protest when he felt Janet's hands again, somewhere where he was quite sure they should not be.

"No. Stop..." he said, but she either didn't hear him, or chose not to.

"Shh..." Emily said. "It's all right."

It wasn't. One finger had slid between his legs, into the hole that lay crudely exposed. It wiggled around, testing his soft, fleshy interior. It pushed to one side, and a second finger followed the first. It began to burn; the fingers slid in easily enough, because of the gel still on them, but as soon as the oil hit his virgin insides, the sensation was nearly unbearable. He writhed on the table, desperate to get her hand out. Janet placed her free hand on his stomach, just above his groin, to keep him still.

"Be still." Janet's voice was clipped, and the rest of her words came out as a lecture. "It hurts the more the patient moves around. I'm just checking to see if there are any growths or diseases; most men don't mind this part. In fact, they enjoy it." She looked unhappy that Marquez didn't seem to.

Marquez lay completely still, silently willing her to hurry up and be done, but her fingers lingered for far too long. He began to weep from the discomfort. Janet didn't notice, but Emily did. She cradled his face between her palms, wiping away the tears with her thumbs.

"Just relax. It's necessary," she said, awkwardly, as if she knew it ought to be said but didn't believe it.

Besides the pain, Janet's indelicate fingers were igniting something else, a sensation Marquez had yet to name. She touched a place inside him that made his groin flare with heat. His cock was hard and erect, something he'd been taught in the crèche never to cause lest he be punished for it. The sight of himself sticking up into the air like that was frightening; would Janet punish him for allowing himself to become so physically aroused?

Her internal explorations pressed harder against a certain spot and made his cock even stiffer and harder.

Marquez thought the feeling would drive him mad, until Janet's fingers finally exited his body and grabbed his cock, twisting round and round on the painful rigidity until he felt an explosion building inside. "Be ready," she warned one of her companions, who moved down between his legs, holding something in her hands. Marquez wondered what there was to be ready for, but Janet's hands were slick and twisting, alternately massaging his cock and balls, and leaving him no room to think of anything besides the physical.

It was too much. His head swam; the lights flashed before his eyes. His whole body convulsed. Emily's hand covered his mouth, stifling the scream he was desperate to sound.

The explosion came, starting inside and circling outwards in strengthening tides until he would have been thrashing on the table if it weren't for the restraints. As it was, he set his entire strength against them and felt the leather dig into his skin. He didn't care if he bled; anything to get his mind off the unbearable pulsing and throbbing, and from the gruesome wetness that his body had produced.

He thought he must be dying again, but it wasn't blood spewing forth. His heart still beat strongly, albeit fast, and he could still catch enough air to breathe. He spared a glance downward and wished he hadn't. The woman next to Janet wore a look of childish delight at seeing Marquez reduced to such a miserable state.

At length, the pulsations slowed and then stopped, and Marquez went lax against his bonds, too drained to move. His wrists and ankles throbbed from their chafing. He closed his eyes against Janet, against the disgusting thing that had happened.

"Open your eyes, Marquez." It was Emily, still near his head.

He cracked them, to see Janet holding a glass filled with sticky white goo. She rushed over to one of the instruments on the counter and set the jar underneath its lens. A blue light

emanated from it, turning the white substance purple. The other women watched her anxiously, waiting for some announcement.

“They’re alive and healthy.”

The women cheered. Emily stroked his hair and kissed him on the forehead. “You’re the first in eight years to be fertile, Marquez. Your essence will bring life to dozens on this ship. Because of you, we’ll be able to start a new colony within a year.”

Marquez meant to ask her what she was talking about, but she busied herself wiping his body clean with sponges and damp cloths. The women whispered with excitement. He was special, somehow. He just didn’t know *why*.

“Take him to the men’s compound, and have one of them look after him,” Janet ordered. They undid the restraints, and without the women’s support, Marquez wouldn’t have been able to get to his feet, let alone wrap himself in the silk robe and walk to yet another part of the ship he’d never seen before. Their touch bothered him. He wanted more than anything to be free of them, but their grips were firm, unyielding, and he had no choice but to let them direct him.

One of the women passed a key card over the sensor, and a door slid open to reveal a stark common room furnished with several chairs, couches, and vid screens. And men. Marquez had never seen a mature man before; in the crèche, all the boys left as soon as they grew old enough to fall ill, and never came back. There were a dozen or so men, all of whom went silent at the arrival of the women. When Marquez passed, he heard a few unintelligible whispers behind him. Only one man showed any sign of friendliness. One of the handsomer ones, his long black hair pulled back into a braid, gave him a kind smile, far more genuine and sincere than the women.

The women took him to a small cupboard of a room, furnished only with a mattress and linens. Marquez collapsed onto the bed and curled up, eager to have the women leave him alone. He was a man now, they told him, as if it should have some significance. They

were trying to make him feel important and special, for some reason. Maybe he could have felt that way, if there was some reasoning behind the treatment they had just given him, because then his pillow wouldn't have been soaked from tears.

## Chapter Two

Being abruptly removed from the crèche to be treated for an awful illness was bad enough, but being dumped into a compound with some twenty older strangers was worse. No one looked at Marquez. No one talked to him, even to direct him to the privy or the food slots. Miserable and scared, Marquez hugged the walls and corners and endeavored to stay out of the way, naïvely thinking to himself that if he were in charge, he wouldn't let this happen to the newlings.

The only one who paid him any attention at all was the handsome man he'd noticed when he'd arrived. As he eavesdropped on various conversations, he learned that the man's name was Diego. Diego was at least twenty years older than Marquez, and just beginning to lose the strength and vigor of his youth, along with, some thought, his mind. The unofficial leadership of the compound belonged to a younger man named Bran, tall and strapping with an unruly shock of brown hair. He prided himself on the body he kept fit in the exercise room. Marquez couldn't help but stare at the muscles he could see outlined through Bran's fitted shirt. Bran ignored Marquez. In Bran's eyes, Marquez was too skinny and too young, hardly the image of masculinity Bran was trying to keep alive in the compound. Diego, like Marquez, was an outcast, and the only person Marquez could turn to for a chance for comfort.

At first, Marquez agreed with the rest of the men when they spoke of Diego being mentally ill. When the other men were around, he'd do little else besides squat and rock back and forth on his heels while humming a nonsensical tune. Every once in a while, when the others were occupied, Marquez would see a brief smile and a clear, coherent gaze.

Marquez knew for sure Diego wasn't crazy when the women came. Marquez, like most of the other men, froze and watched the women with a panic-stricken gaze. As much as the men talked and bragged about their bodily prowess when they were alone, the actual sight of the women paralyzed them into immediate submission. All except Diego.

"Lydia, beautiful. So good to see you again." A broad grin covered Diego's face, and he held his hands wide to greet her. Flattery after flattery escaped his mouth, and Marquez watched in surprise as Lydia went from being cold and hard to sympathetic. They actually *joked* with one another, and they left the compound holding hands while the doctors had to forcibly restrain the other men to take them out.

When the men started trickling back a couple hours later, they all laughed and bragged about how well they'd done. Marquez watched them with a knowing eye; this was how they eased their tension and fears, by seeking camaraderie with each other, and by picking on the outcasts.

"Just wait, little Marquez," Bran told him. "You'll have fun when the women take you, and smother you with their sweet, soft bodies."

The men laughed, and Marquez blushed. The thought of the women touching him made him feel ill, but he couldn't say that here. The men all seemed to enjoy the women once they got there. What was wrong with him that he didn't?

"Don't forget their hands," another man called. "Their hands are everywhere, doing whatever it takes to make you come."

The jibes grew more and more disgusting. When Diego returned, he went immediately to his room. Marquez followed, grateful for any excuse to leave the crowd. He hovered in



Diego's doorway. The older man looked to already be asleep, his long braid undone and drifting across his shoulders. The sleeve of his robe had slipped down to reveal a long, white scar on his shoulder.

"Come in," Diego told him without opening his eyes. "Don't stand there. You'll attract the wrong kind of attention."

Marquez figured he'd already had enough of that for one night. He tiptoed inside and eased himself down in the space between the wall and the mattress. "How do you do it?"

One brown eye cracked open to look at him. "Practice. Will. But it comes with a price." He sighed and seemed to sink further down into the mattress. "If you stop fighting back with your body, your mind soon follows suit, no matter how much you try and convince yourself it's only a means or survival. It's wrong what they do. How they do it."

His eye slid shut, and he started to hum aimlessly. When he paused long enough for breath, Marquez blurted, "Teach me."

This time, both eyes opened, and Diego's expression turned to sadness. "When will it stop? This has to stop. Lying to survive, offering ourselves at the expense of our souls."

Marquez wondered if he might be senile after all. "Teach me not to fear them. Please."

"There is no life without fear. It's when you stop feeling that you should be the most afraid." He yawned and made a show of rolling over onto his side. "Come back tomorrow. We'll talk then."

So Marquez had to be content and wait.

\* \* \* \* \*

He almost thought Diego had forgotten. When Marquez crept back to the older man's room, Diego had taken his usual position of squatting, rocking and humming. The surroundings were surreal, with the lights barely bright enough to see anything and the entire compound silent. Everyone else was sleeping. Marquez almost wished he were too, but

loneliness and curiosity got the better of him. After a few minutes of watching Diego, Marquez began to feel uncomfortable, like a voyeur, and would have left, except for the older man's tiny hand signal. *Stay.*

Whatever aimless tune he'd been humming ended, and the brown eyes gazed at him with a frightening clarity. "Take off your clothes."

The order stunned Marquez, but he did as he was bid, easing off his shirt and pants and folding them neatly at his side. He shivered and wondered what he'd gotten himself into, naked and alone in a tiny room with a crazy old man...

Diego saw his fear and gave him a small smile. "I won't hurt you, but what happens here has to stay secret from the men as well as the women."

Marquez nodded, and huddled against the wall with his knees drawn up to his chest.

"Now," Diego said, and stood. All at once he affected the stiffness and poise of one of the women. "I'm the woman. You're the man. What will you say to me when it's your turn?"

Marquez could only stare and stammer. Even Diego's *voice* sounded like a woman's.

"Up, boy!" Diego grabbed his arm and yanked him to his feet. "It's time to go. What will you say?"

"I -- w-what do I call you?"

"Carmen. Brown eyes, gorgeous black hair, a body the other women envy, and hands the men would kill to feel on their skin." For emphasis, Diego/Carmen ran a hand through Marquez's hair, behind his neck, and down the front of his chest to tease one of his nipples.

"You're beautiful," Marquez said, and he meant it sincerely. He had no need to imagine "Carmen." All he needed to believe in was right in front of him. This, he realized, was why he felt nothing for the women. It was the men who excited him. He grasped one of Diego's hands in his own and kissed the back of it, an archaic gesture he'd seen in one of the vids they'd shown in the crèche.

“Such a sweet boy. And so eager. Will you promise to behave yourself? Or do I need to ensure --” Here, Diego reached behind Marquez’s neck and pinched him so it was painful. “-- our cooperation?”

“No need. I’d go anywhere, as long as it was with you.”

Diego smiled. When he spoke, it was as himself, not Carmen. “Good. You’ve got a glib tongue. That’s all for the best.”

Marquez felt the heat rush to his face and looked down. It wasn’t glib if he was telling the truth.

“Here. Pretend we’re in the exam room. Lie down, now.” Diego eased him down onto the bed and splayed his legs wide, just as the women had done. He untied the sash from his robe and used it to bind Marquez’s arms together at the wrist and raised them over his head to attach them to a metal loop midway up the wall the doctors used to restrain unruly men. Two more loops were at the far end, near his feet, but Diego didn’t have anything else to tie him with. Marquez shuddered when he thought about how someone could be tied and left while the women had their fun.

“Now, what will you say?” Diego asked. He knelt beside the bed and ran his fingers lightly against Marquez’s chest. The robe hung open to reveal Diego’s handsomely naked body. Marquez couldn’t help but stare. Diego followed his gaze and used a hand to cinch the robe closed. “Don’t look at that. I’m a woman, remember? I’m going to teach you how to please a woman.”

“But they don’t --” Marquez started, and was cut off when Diego’s lips covered his. A wandering tongue pried his teeth apart. He didn’t resist, though the sensation was odd.

“Yes, they do. They will do whatever it takes to collect your seed while pleasuring themselves. The more you help them, the less cruel they become.” Diego’s lips pressed against Marquez’s cheeks and left a wet trail down his neck and into the hollow of his shoulder. “Are you enjoying this?”

"Yessss."

"Then tell me so."

"I'm enjoying this. Sweet Carmen, your hands --" Marquez whimpered as Diego found a ticklish spot at his waist. He could feel his cock harden at the anticipation of what was to come. He closed his eyes, blissful as Marquez's kisses went lower and lower.

*Crack.*

"Ow!" Marquez snapped his eyes open. His cheek stung from Diego's slap. "What was that for?"

"Because I felt like it," Diego said in Carmen's voice. "Because you're tied down and helpless, and I can do anything I damn well please with you."

Was he still playing? Marquez had his doubts.

"How will you please them, Marquez? When you're in pain, how will you prove to them that you want this?" A few jerks sent Marquez's head from side to side.

"I don't. Let me go!" He bucked underneath Diego's body, but Diego was heavier, and didn't budge.

Diego clasped a palm across Marquez's mouth. "Hush. You asked for this. You wanted me to teach you. Learn to pretend, Marquez. When you're in pain, pretend, or let your mind drift away. It's the only way to survive here." He clenched Marquez's balls excruciatingly tight. Marquez couldn't scream; Diego's other hand made sure of that. All Marquez could do was wriggle in agony.

"Ride the pain," Diego said when Marquez's skin shone with sweat. "Focus only on it. You only have to live through the moment. Each beat of your heart is a success. Each throb means your body is still alive, and so are you. Breathe. Slow as you can. Focus on that. Focus on the softness of the bed, the heat of my body. There are good things around the pain, and you only have to survive from this moment to the next to keep enjoying them."

It took an eternity, but Marquez was finally able to get the barest understanding of what Diego meant. By then, the harsh grip on his balls had disappeared, and Diego was teasing him with a new sensation. Hand still across Marquez's lips, Diego had stretched himself so his warm mouth enveloped Marquez's engorged cock. The hand across his mouth soon caught whimpers instead of screams.

Long before Marquez was ready for him to finish, Diego reached between his mattress and pulled out a little bottle, one Marquez recognized as the gel the women used during their examinations. Diego liberally squirted some onto his hand and rubbed it between his own buttocks. A few moments later, Diego straddled the younger man, placing his rear end directly over Marquez's hardened cock. Marquez held his breath in disbelief, and braced himself as Diego sank down and took the entirety of Marquez's cock inside his body.

"I'm a woman, remember?" he said in Carmen's voice. "This is how they'll use you to please themselves." With the strength in his legs, Diego eased himself up and down, each movement pinching Marquez delightfully tight. The speed increased until the heat and pressure in Marquez's groin had built so high that he thought he'd burst. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

Marquez could only give him a vigorous nod and, now that Diego had removed his hand to brace himself, gasp for air as the tension and sensation increased. His heels dug into the sheets as his body grew desperate for a release he didn't know how to give.

All of a sudden, it loosed in a wet rush. Marquez bit off a cry as his body curled and throbbed from the inside out. Diego grunted, and then he, too, trembled, his head arched back in a wordless cry of ecstasy. Ejaculate rushed from his cock to spill across Marquez's chest. After several long moments, he eased himself off of Marquez and untied the young man's hands before sinking down beside him. He used the sash to wipe the stickiness from Marquez's chest, then fondled a lock of Marquez's hair. "Now what do you say?"

Still Carmen's voice. Marquez played along. "I love you."

Diego's face darkened, and his voice dropped to its natural range. "Don't say that. Not even in play."

"But --" Marquez could only stare and wonder what had made Diego so angry.

"Don't love anyone. Ever. It'll only bring you hurt. And trust no one. Not even me."

"But I do," Marquez said. "I *liked* this. Man or woman, I want to do this again with you. I want to touch you." He trailed his fingers along Diego's soft stomach and down to his cock and stroked it. "Let's do it again, and I'll be the woman this time." He pressed his crotch against Diego's for emphasis.

The motion earned him another slap. Diego's face was livid. "Get out of here. Now."

Marquez scuttled backwards and groped for his clothes. He yanked them on, not caring that his pants were backwards. What had gone wrong? Where did the play end and Diego's real feelings emerge? "You're the perfect woman," Marquez said in an attempt to calm him down.

Diego looked horrified. "Get out. *Out*. Forget this. Forget everything. Don't come back. I was wrong..." He curled into a fetal ball, and the sound of his humming followed Marquez all the way back to his room.

\* \* \* \* \*

The women came for Marquez the next day, and by the time they were done, he was so exhausted that all he could do was lie in his bed. He'd played along just as Diego had suggested. The brutality he'd experienced on his first meeting with them was lessened, but his efforts to please them took most of his mental and physical strength. He didn't have the time or energy to check on his friend, and after Diego's outburst, he wasn't sure he wanted to. Marquez still didn't understand what had happened between them. Sex, obviously, and *good* sex compared to what the women forced him to do. For a while Marquez had understood what it was like to be held and enjoyed and treated with kindness.

At night, he dreamed of Diego, not as the woman he'd pretended to be, but as the man he was, and they'd be somewhere safe, alone and away from the women who tormented them. The dreams made him feel hot and cold at the same time, and brought a burst of pleasure in his groin that left his legs sticky in the morning.

"What have you been doing?" Janet exclaimed upon finding his sheets and robe damp. "Damn you! You're such a vile, wasteful creature. Now we won't be able to get anything good out of you for days!"

She terrified him. Her black hair, pulled back into such a severe braid, only made her look more stark and angry. Marquez flushed as she told him to strip and handed him a damp cloth to clean himself with. He did, and rubbed the rag slowly around his spent cock, and let her watch. He massaged himself just enough to get an erection, but not enough to need a release. He hated this, the way he was forced to put himself on display and pretend to be happy about it. A shred of himself died then.

"Give me that!" She stepped forward and yanked the cloth out of his hand. "Men. Can't let them do anything. Hold still." He did, and any pleasurable feelings he might have had disappeared at Janet's rough treatment. He clenched his jaw to keep from crying out as she jerked and squeezed, or made the rag feel rough as sandpaper on his tender inner thighs.

At the end, she grabbed his cock in her bare hand. "Remember, Marquez," she said, "you belong to the women. If I had my way, you'd all be drugged so that your minds would be gone, and we wouldn't have to deal with nonsense like this. The others seem to think it would be cruel, and for some reason, enjoy the scant entertainments you provide while you're still sane. This --" she said with a squeeze that made him wince, "-- is mine. *You* are mine."

"Of course, dear Janet," he made himself say, and felt another little part of himself die. "I'm yours to use as you'd like."

She uttered a low, animalistic growl. Marquez wasn't sure whether it was from frustration, anger, or suppressed need. Whatever it was, he never found out, because she let him go and stalked out. Marquez found a fresh shirt and pair of pants and went to look for Diego, suddenly desperate to talk to anyone who might understand what it felt like to feel cold and sick inside.

The silence should have warned him. Diego's body was stiff, leaning awkwardly against the wall at the head of his bed. His robe was open, baring his chest and flaccid cock. The sash from his robe was cinched around his neck and tied to the metal ring. The weight of his body must have been enough for him strangle himself.

Marquez's cry of despair got the attention of Bran and the others. They crowded around the doorway and mocked Diego's last act. Tears in his eyes, Marquez crept forward to untie his friend. Diego's lips were parted and blue, his eyes open and rolled back in his head. Marquez couldn't help but slap the stiffening body. "Why? Why do we have to live when you don't?"

"What happened?" The women burst in, Janet at the forefront, wanting explanations.

"He killed himself. He's dead, because he didn't want to --"

"Didn't want to what, Marquez?" came Janet's steel-cold voice.

A cold, sick feeling washed over Marquez. Too late. His fear had made him say too much. When the women realized they weren't going to get him to speak again, they grabbed him by the arms and hauled him out of the compound and down the hallway to one of the exam rooms. They strapped him down and turned one of his arms up so they could inject an I.V. needle into his vein. Within moments, the drug had taken effect. Marquez felt light, almost floating despite the restraints. His awareness of the cold, metal table faded, and he was only aware of sound, question after question being asked, and his own voice answering without him meaning it to. Everything Diego told him, everything they'd done together came out.



“You *do* like women, don’t you Marquez?”

The question, the first he was clearly aware of in a long time, made his belly clench with fear. No. Yes. No...he remembered Diego’s touch, the weight of his body, the feel of his cock.

He wasn’t sure where he found the ability to lie, but he did. “Only the women, Janet. Only you. He forced me...” And with that, another little piece of him died. Whatever he liked wasn’t possible. Being himself wasn’t possible. He didn’t belong to himself, not his body, and now, not his mind. At least Diego was dead, and they couldn’t hurt him anymore.

Finally, the women let him go and deposited him back in his room. After that, whatever emotions Marquez had were buried far below the edifice he used to please the women. The scared young man was gone, replaced by an easy-going man who had learned how to spare his mind by not caring about what the women did to his body. It took him a long time to realize that he had become the thing Diego had most feared: a creature without feelings, or fear, until he repeated Diego’s mistakes with a newling of his own.

## Chapter Three

Five years since the last newling, and nearly fifteen since Marquez's own initiation, it looked like this new one would live.

Marquez gazed at the ruddy, sweat-dampened face. The boy was luckier than he knew. Despite the advances in technology in the last few years, half the boys still died from the aging sickness before they became men.

It had taken Marquez years to wile enough information out of the women for this whole situation to make sense, but now, he had the gist of it. Genetics. All of it bad genetics resulting from when the Earth's atmosphere had gone bad nearly three hundred years ago, and their ancestors suffered in the new, poisonous air. The women had made it through, unscathed except for a few easily-cured cancers, but the drugs for the men caused a side-effect, a mutation. Maturity came later, after eighteen, and with a terrible price: a deadly fever that unleashed itself and attacked a man from the inside out. Few lived, and fewer of those were fertile enough to sire children. In desperation, the women and surviving men had built the seed ships in the hopes of finding a new, untainted planet and a chance at breeding in an environment free of the toxins which caused the mutation.

Hence the compound and the thirty-three fertile men that called it home. Over three thousand women lived on the ship. There were about fifty other men in a different part of the ship, but they were the unfertile ones and parceled out to pleasure the women. Marquez didn't envy that lot at all, though his own situation was little better.

Janet was the worst of the women, the cruelest, in Marquez's mind. She hardly seemed female. She'd gotten even more bitter after a brief absence three years ago, from which she returned thinner, her face more drawn. There were rumors in the compound that she'd lost her own sexual organs to a terrible disease. Another rumor said she had them cut out on purpose so she wouldn't be swayed by her body's wishes while she worked with the men. Whatever had happened, she was now a cold-hearted bitch, braid streaked with gray and the lines across her once-smooth face making her even more frightening to look at. Even her own women disliked her. They would gossip freely about each other, but when Janet came up, they hushed, as if afraid the woman were eavesdropping and might come inside to punish them.

Marquez paused in the newling's doorway and spent a moment admiring him. The sight of a new face, especially a young one, was a welcome sight. The other men jostled behind him for a good look, but Marquez's strong arm across the newling's doorway kept them from bothering him.

He didn't appear well. The majority of the men woke with a sated, though dazed look on their face, minds and bodies alive with the wondrous sensations that the women had engendered. Not this kid. The newling's eyes were closed, but his breathing was fitful, and his muscles too tense for him to be asleep. Marquez wondered if he'd slept at all. He'd watched the women bring the kid in, and seen the blank, disoriented look on the newling's face as the women carried him to his new room. The other men were insatiably curious, but Marquez, as the eldest and unofficial leader in the ward, kept them away, waiting to see if the kid would emerge from his room by himself.

When the newling ignored the first chime that signaled breakfast, and the second, Marquez went in after him. "Time to get up, whatever your name is. If you don't, you can be sure the doctors will be in, and you don't want that. Trust me."

The kid opened his eyes at that. There was a faint recognition, the memory of seeing Marquez the night before. The newling's eyes didn't stay long on Marquez's face; they wandered down to where Marquez's uniform shirt hung open in a low V, exposing a fair amount of his smooth, muscled chest.

It was sweet, really, how when the kid sat up, his skin flushed as soon as he realized he was naked beneath his blanket. He pulled his knees up to his chest, trying to hide his other reaction.

Marquez ignored the erection, considering it a leftover from the night before. "That's more like it." He smiled, which made the kid blush again. "My name is Marquez." He reached for the folded clothes. "I remember my first day here. I could barely move from being ill." Part of it, he knew now, was withdrawal from the drugs the boys were given in the crèche. The rest was from the lingering effects of the aging sickness.

"I don't feel good." He raised his arms and allowed Marquez to pull the shirt over his head and tugged it down. "I'm not sick. The doctors, they --" he stopped, confused. "I was sick. Wasn't I sick? I had a fever. I was hot all over. Then they put tubes in me, and after that..." His voice died, and he trembled a little. It wasn't because of the withdrawal, or the drugs he'd been given to keep him alive while ill.

Shit. The first fertile man in five years, and the women had already frightened him enough that he was going to be nearly useless, unless they changed their tactics or Marquez could help him learn how to cope. He'd buried his own feelings about this place long ago, after he'd realized it was the only way to survive and stay sane. It was all a game here, and if the boy couldn't learn to play...

“It’s all right. No one enjoys their first experience with manhood,” Marquez lied. He hadn’t, but he’d known plenty of men who had. The kid looked lost, dazed. “What’s your name?”

It took him a long time to answer. “Jared.”

Marquez had been right; Jared had certainly *not* enjoyed his initiation. “Well, Jared, welcome to the adult compound.” Jared clutched at the blanket when Marquez tried to pull it down, but Marquez kept his gaze on Jared’s face when he helped the kid with the pants. That finished, he tugged a lock of brown hair behind Jared’s ear and cupped his chin with one hand, admiring the elongated face and delicate features. “You poor thing. You have so much to learn. Such as...” His eyes flicked downward, and Jared blushed fiercely again, “...how not to let that happen unless you’re around the women. Though I do admit, I’m flattered by your reaction.”

Jared tilted his head, trying to press it into Marquez’s hand, wanting to keep the warmth and softness of it there as long as he could. Marquez’s smile faded, and he withdrew his hand, slowly. This kid was going to be trouble. “Come on. I’ll introduce you to the rest of the men and show you where everything is.”

Jared could barely stand, his legs were so shaky, but Marquez steadied him with an arm and escorted the kid out into a clean but sparse gathering room. Cushions and chairs littered the ground, adding little color to the metallic surroundings. One wall hosted a vidscreen. Jared watched it for a moment, shocked to see naked male and female bodies interacting with each other. “Is that really what --”

Marquez jabbed him in the side. The kid shut up, and turned his eyes away from the screen and toward the other inhabitants of the compound. Some two dozen men watched them, all dressed in the same unflattering blue uniform. Of them all, Marquez remained the eldest at forty-three years old, rising to his status as unofficial leader after his predecessors had either become sterile or taken their lives.

The men all stared at the kid, who did his best to hide behind Marquez. He obviously didn't like the attention, another bad sign.

Marquez introduced the men, twice, but gave up when he saw that Jared seemed to have no comprehension.

"Better watch him, Marquez," Fernand said, eyeing the way Jared clung to his escort. "You don't want *them* thinking the wrong thing about their neophyte."

Jared tugged on Marquez's sleeve. "What's he mean? What's a neophyte?"

"Hush," Marquez said to him, and to Fernand, "He's new. He's scared. That's all. He'll relax after a few days."

"Uh huh," Fernand said. He stood and walked nearer the pair. Fernand, unlike Marquez, used his physical presence to intimidate. "What did you think of your first night with the women, newling? What did you think when they strapped you down and rubbed your cock until you couldn't help but give them what they wanted? Better get used to it. They'll do it again, and they'll worry if you don't enjoy it."

"Fernand --" Marquez warned, but too late. Jared stiffened and took a step back, making it apparent that Fernand's words had hit their mark.

Fernand rolled his eyes and scoffed. "Better not get too attached to this one, Marquez. He won't survive long. He's not like us. At least," he amended, "not like *most* of us." His eyes flicked deliberately toward Marquez.

"What's he mean?" Jared asked, confused.

Marquez wrapped his arm around his shoulder. "It's nothing. We all get tired of being here day after day. It wears away at us. Some more than others."

"You're a fool, Marquez. Just wait, and --"

At the sound of the door whooshing open, the men froze.

Marquez snatched his arms away. Jared paled and looked suddenly sick when he saw the women. Not good.

Marquez deftly stepped in front of the young man to hide Jared's reaction from the visitors. "Lydia," Marquez greeted one of the women warmly. "Always a pleasure. And Janet. Beautiful as always."

All around the room, the men preened, puffing out their chests and sitting up straighter while the women gazed around the room to decide who would be chosen that day.

*Not the boy, Marquz prayed. Not yet.*

But it wasn't Jared they were after. Not today. They didn't even look at him. "Fernand," Janet called. Fernand smiled and tossed his head so his long brown hair slid behind his shoulders.

"Morgan," Lydia said, and a skinny, awkward man answered and followed her out.

Marquez turned to his charge to find Jared shivering uncontrollably. The rest of the men were staring. A few had snide, knowing looks on their faces.

"Jared." Marquez's voice held a tone of caution. "Jared. Come on. We'll get you some food. You'll feel better."

"She didn't look at me," Jared babbled. "She just walked by like I wasn't there. I'm not important, right? She won't come back for me. She doesn't care about me, doesn't want me --"

Marquez clamped a hand over Jared's mouth. "Hush." His voice was fierce. "That's enough. They don't come for us every day. Every four days, maybe. They will come for you. That's what they do. That's why they keep us here."

"But why?" Jared's voice was plaintive, childish.

Marquez glanced around at the two dozen other men, all of them trying to look as if they weren't eavesdropping. "Not here. Not now. I promise I'll explain this to you later. Now, I want you to do something for me. I want you to eat so you regain your strength. Will you do that for me?"

"I don't want them to come back --"

"They won't come today, or tomorrow. I know it's hard, but put them out of your mind, for now."

Jared opened his mouth to say something else, but Marquez's stern glare kept him silent. Jared gave him a dull nod instead.

Behind them, one of the other men muttered, "If I didn't know better, I'd think he didn't *like* the women."

"He'll have it rough, then," another answered.

Marquez pretended not to hear. He prayed that Jared would have sense enough to do the same.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the evenings, most of the men would gather and exchange erotic fantasies about this doctor or that, and brag about how much seed they had provided that day. They would compare breast size or skin color or any number of physical features. Marquez didn't participate in the tale-telling, having no interest in the women or their attributes. Jared looked sick to hear the men talk, and tried to stay out of earshot of most of the banter. He would have hidden in his room all the time if Marquez hadn't warned him about being too antisocial, that the doctors would begin to think him mentally ill if he refused to come out of his room. Reluctantly, Jared followed his advice, but stayed to himself in the corners of the common room.

Marquez stayed by himself too, watching and listening as the men talked in an effort to stave off the madness that could come from the unnatural way they were treated. From observation, all of them seemed to have adjusted. They could watch the videos without flinching, and often made remarks on technique or whether one of the doctors had done *that* to him, or vice versa. But the bravado hid an underlying, unspeakable fear. It still made Marquez sick to watch them all go off without fighting and just let the women take them



away. They had no hope that there was any world other than this one, no other life than the one they endured.

Jared had only been in the compound for three days and was already terrified of the next time the women would come for him. He skulked in the corners and did his best to disappear behind a piece of furniture every time the women entered.

Marquez could understand. His memories of the crèche were vague. He couldn't remember how many other boys had been there, nor how many matrons had watched over them, but he *could* remember that no one had touched them more than necessary. Certainly no one had strapped them down and caused those *feelings* to happen for the sole purpose of determining whether or not he was fertile.

He didn't want to see the boy go mad. There had to be a way to ease his transition. His silhouette blocked the light, and Jared looked up. "Mind if I join you?" Marquez asked.

Jared shrugged, and Marquez slid down the wall until he sat beside the younger man. Marquez still wasn't entirely sure why he continued to take pity on Jared. The other men teased and criticized him enough for it. Whenever he was near Jared, the young man seemed even more uneasy, though Marquez hadn't missed the subtle physical signs that Jared displayed in his presence. Marquez felt much the same; being near Jared elicited feelings he'd long thought dead, the flush and heat that the other men had after they visited the women or when they watched a particularly orgiastic scene on the vidscreen. He wanted to sidle up to Jared, to feel the boy's bare skin against his, and to run his fingers through Jared's thick, black hair and let it tickle his skin as he bent over for a kiss.

But that was dangerous. As sexually excited as the women liked to make them, sex with another man was inherently taboo. The women saw it as a fault, and the punishment following such a discovery was swift and brutal as they'd attempt to rid the man of any such desires: they feared it would pass to the offspring the women were trying so desperately to breed.

"You're not the only one, you know," Marquez said, just loud enough for Jared to hear over the feral sounds emanating from the vidscreen.

From the look on his face, Jared didn't know what he meant. "Not the only what?"

"Not the only one who feels something when he's not around the women."

Jared looked at the floor and pulled his knees up against his chest to hide the growing bulge in his pants.

"You're a sweet young thing. No wonder the women were so eager to have you. Just think of all the beautiful babies you'll father." He let an edge of cynicism creep into his voice.

"All the what?" Jared looked startled, as if he had no idea what Marquez was talking about.

Marquez swore. "You don't have any idea, do you? I'm sorry. I've forgotten how ignorant and drugged they keep you in the crèche, and it's been years since we got any new ones in here. Of course they wouldn't tell you. They'd want to make you believe that you're in there for some treatment or another, or simply for your pleasure. They don't tell you the truth. They don't want you to know that the only reason we're here, and watched over so closely, is because so few males make it to maturity, and most of those are sterile. Some pollutant in the atmosphere on our planet poisoned most of the inhabitants. The lucky few, like us, have been raised and kept in a controlled environment, in the hopes that we will produce viable offspring."

Jared still didn't understand.

He spoke slowly. "The women need our essence, our seed, to become pregnant and to have children. That's why they go to such elaborate means to collect it from us, and why we undergo so many 'tests' to make sure we're still healthy, and not defective. There are over three thousand women on this ship, did you know that? All of them hoping that one day they'll be implanted with our seed and given a child. If they're lucky, it will turn out to be a

fertile male, and those women will be left to start a new colony, away from the planet that poisoned us.”

Jared gaped at him, unable to hide the shock he felt. Marquez knew the matrons in the crèche had never told him anything like that. They were on a ship, that seemed obvious enough, but the why had never occurred. And no one ever wondered why there were only boys and matrons in the crèche. No girls their own age. They never saw any women other than the matrons, never left the crèche to see what existed beyond the walls. They’d never cared enough to find out, either.

“They never told us,” he said.

“Of course not. They kept you drugged to the teeth to keep you dull and calm and healthy until you turned eighteen and the aging sickness hit. You were alive, but not aware.”

“Is this all there is for us? The women get to leave, you said, to go down to a planet. What about us?”

Marquez shook his head. “We’re prisoners, of a sort, treated as little more than animals because we’re needed to breed. This is only the first shipment of women. After we drop them off, we’ll be heading home to collect more.”

Jared put his head between his knees, suddenly dizzy at the horror of it all.

“There’s more,” Marquez said. Jared might as well know everything now. “It would be an easy thing for us to induce our essence ourselves, alone, but the women are starved for companionship from the opposite sex. That’s why they have all the elaborate rituals and exams. Until the atmosphere was poisoned, the balance between men and women was about half and half. Now, there is about one man for every three hundred women, which has thrown off the balance. It’s the way of nature for males and females to be attracted to each other, though there can be exceptions.” Marquez looked at Jared meaningfully. “And when the women are able to get something they have been long denied, sometimes they can be cruel or overzealous.”

He looked up. One of the doctors had come in. She gazed around the room until her eyes lit on Jared. She smiled, one terrifying in its sincerity.

"Come along now, Jared," she said. "The doctors are waiting for you."

Jared sat still, too terrified to move. It was too soon. Marquez had told him every four days. It had only been three.

"Aww, Charlotte, I was hoping you were coming to get me," Marquez said. The hatred in his voice had gone, replaced with something he knew to be as utterly fake as the doctor's smile. She didn't seem to notice, though, too entranced by his equally false flattery.

She bent to give him a kiss on the lips, which he appeared to eagerly return. "You've already been twice this week. The doctors have been busy, rearranging the estimates to include our newling here, but maybe I could get you in to see them. For now, they just want to make sure our newest resident --" This with a direct gaze at Jared. "-- is adjusting the way he needs to."

Marquez rubbed her leg, sliding one hand under her skirt up to her crotch. "He's doing well. I've been looking after him, showing him around, making introductions and all that."

"I'm sure you have," she said, still smiling, and moved out of his reach. "Come on now, Jared. They're waiting for you." When the boy didn't move, her voice grew harsh. "Jared. Now."

Marquez pinched him on his rear, startling him back into movement. Jared stifled a yelp, and followed Charlotte out, even more terrified now that he knew the truth of what they were doing. He glanced back at Marquez, who tried not to let his worry show.

## Chapter Four

Jared's sobs echoed through the metallic hallways. Marquez raced over to his room and knelt beside the unhappy young man. "Don't cry. They'll hear you. Be quiet, now!"

"Marquez," Jared said between sobs. He threw his arms around Marquez's neck when the older man sat on the edge of the bed. Marquez returned the embrace, his arms firm around Jared's ribs. Inwardly, Marquez trembled. He'd longed for this, the feel of Jared's slight, young body against his. Hair scented with the floral oils the women insisted on for their own enjoyment tickled Marquez's nose. He slowly rocked with Jared clasped in his arms, savoring the heat and softness.

They stayed that way until Jared's tears had stopped. Marquez slid his hands down the small of Jared's back until his fingers went beneath the waistband of his pants. Jared stiffened, and guilt shot through Marquez. He was breaking the one rule: never become intimate with another man, but Jared needed comfort. He couldn't help remembering Diego and their nighttime trysts. Marquez hadn't been so different from Jared, then, young and afraid, desperately lonely. Jared needed him. Just this once.

"Don't worry," he said in a husky voice. "The nurses just finished their rounds. They won't be back for a while. They won't know."

Both of his hands traveled downward to cup Jared's buttocks. Jared tensed, half-prepared for pain after what the women had done, but Marquez's hands were gentle and smooth.

"It's all right," he said in Jared's ear. "I want to show you what touch can be like. Not the evil thing they turn it into for the sake of creating progeny. I want to give you something pleasant to think of when you have to be with them."

Jared let him take charge, apparently too nervous and excited to do anything else. When Marquez unbuttoned his pants and slid them off, Jared went limp and his breathing quickened.

"It's all right," Marquez said again, and kissed the face that held a mixture of wonderment and fear. Damn the women for doing this to him, for being so cruel and uncaring. He worked at Jared's shirt, lifting the bottom up inch by inch to expose flawless brown skin glistening with perspiration. Arms raised, Jared let him pull off the shirt and sat, naked and expectant.

Marquez stood and removed his own pants, and there, in the dim light, Jared's eyes fixated on his cock, just beginning to swell and stiffen with excitement. Most likely, Jared had never seen another grown man naked, and found himself too mesmerized by the sight to turn away. "Don't be afraid," Marquez whispered. "And make no noise, whatever you feel. We're both taking a risk, but it's worth it. You'll see."

Jared nodded. Marquez again sat beside him and eased the younger man down onto his back. Despite the warning, Jared exuded little whimpers when Marquez bent over and enveloped his sweet cock with his mouth. Jared's eyes rolled back in his head and his body jerked. Marquez continued to lick, rolling and flexing his tongue around the hardened shaft until he had to pin Jared down at his waist to keep him from bucking too hard.

Jared grabbed Marquez's hair, his fingers stiffening around it as another electric shock raced through his body. He spasmed and jerked. Marquez stopped, just before Jared came.

Jared's cock, released from the warm and wet cocoon of Marquez's mouth, trembled in the chill air. Like a cat, Jared surged toward Marquez and pressed him backwards onto the mattress, eager to return the favor, desperate to see what he tasted like. He was hesitant and shy at first as he licked, tickling Marquez's leathery sacs with his tongue. A rush of heat sped through Marquez's body and his erection became even firmer and harder. Ignoring his own order, he emitted a low, animalistic growl, and his head thrashed back in pleasure.

And then Jared took him. Marquez was long enough that he couldn't fit the entire shaft in his mouth, even though he tried to the point of gagging to do so. Jared attempted to emulate what he'd felt with his tongue, rolling and unrolling it along the length of skin inside his mouth.

Below him, Marquez shuddered, and grabbed the sides of Jared's face and drew himself out. Jared struggled, already longing for the taste of him, but Marquez held him firm and twisted around to kiss him. Jared's open mouth met his, and his tongue was everywhere, searching and licking until the taste of his skin was gone.

Marquez grasped Jared's shoulders and turned him so he could lie prostrate along the length of the bed. Jared stiffened and bit off a cry. "Don't," he said, unable to keep the fear from his voice.

Marquez placed a finger over his lips. Of course Jared would be frightened; this was what the women did to subdue them during their sessions, by arranging them lengthwise and pinning them down to the table. "Shh," Marquez said, "it's all right. I won't hurt you." Hands around Jared's waist, he got the young man to lift his buttocks into the air. He ran his hands across Jared's skin, willing the young man's tension to drain away. "Just relax. I'm going to touch you, but there's no reason to be afraid. No reason at all. This will feel good, I promise." He spread Jared's knees, not far enough to hurt, but enough to give him comfortable access to both Jared's eager cock and the entrance between his buttocks. With one hand, Marquez reached through the widened legs to stroke the warm cock and the balls

beneath. With the other, he clenched each buttock while his tongue searched around the tight and unwilling hole.

Jared whimpered, and buried his face in the pillow to muffle his sounds. Marquez pressed his tongue inside, wetting him, preparing him. Jared shuddered beneath him as Marquez reached under his mattress for the bottle of gel he'd managed to steal from the women. The gel cooled his fingers, but Jared's body warmed them as one finger followed the tongue. Two. Both of them searching, probing the slick and soft warmth they found inside. They entered him again and again, Marquez liberally using the gel. Jared struggled, but Marquez held him fast. His own cock throbbed, desperate for release.

And then the fingers were out, Marquez pressed his cock up against Jared's exposed rear end. "Relax," he said again. "Just relax. I won't hurt you." Jared took a deep breath and let it out. Marquez gently pressed forward, feeling Jared yield to him, and reveling in the sensation of the younger man's body tight around his. When he'd sheathed himself to the hilt, Jared's hands tore at the sheets. He stopped breathing, not from pain, even though Marquez was sure he'd caused some, but from the shock and pleasure of having something injected so deeply.

Marquez resisted pulling out long enough to look down at Jared's surprised face to see if he was all right. Jared gave him the slightest of nods, and Marquez began to slide himself in and out, slowly at first, but then driving faster when his body cried out for release.

Jared reached up to fondle his own erection, and he was gone. Marquez could feel spasms wracking Jared's body, each one greater than the one before it. Climax hit Marquez at the same time. His back arched and his eyes rolled far enough back in his head that he was blind to everything around him. He came inside Jared's slick warmth, not caring that he was wasting precious seed or what the women would do if they found out.

When at last the spasms stopped, the sight of red brought Marquez back to the harsh reality. "Shit. You're bleeding. Why didn't you tell me it hurt?"



Jared couldn't answer. All he could do was lay there, evidently too spent to move, with a confused look on his face.

"They'll know, they'll know," Marquez kept repeating, like a mantra. He bent down between Jared's legs again and licked, mouth filling with a sticky, coppery taste. This time Jared could feel the sting, and he winced.

"There," Marquez said at last. "I think the bleeding has stopped, and we're lucky it didn't get on the sheets. Take it easy for the next day or so. If the matrons see blood, they'll wonder where it came from, and figure out it had to have happened in between visits."

"I don't care." Jared turned his face toward Marquez. "You were right. I wasn't afraid, I --" He blushed. "How can it be so awful when *they* do it, but not with you?" His eyes shone, and his body trembled with emotion.

"Because I care about you. They don't." Marquez stood and put on his pants before helping Jared into his. He was careful to keep even those movements was gentle and sensuous. He gave Jared one last kiss on the lips, lingering, twirling his tongue inside his mouth as if relishing something sweet.

"Will you be all right now?" he asked, and Jared nodded. "Will you promise not to cry after they take you next time?"

The boy looked away. Despite the beautiful thing they'd had together, Jared was still terrified of the women.

Marquez saw the fear in Jared's eyes, and cursed inwardly. "You'll learn. You have to. If you don't, they'll do worse things to you. I've seen men come back, wasted shells of what they had been. They were dead inside, their bodies only kept alive for the women." He kissed his forehead and said, "I don't want that to happen to you. Will you at least promise me you'll try? That you'll think of me whenever the women take you?"

Jared gave him another nod. Marquez smiled, mollified. "I have to go. It's almost time for the matrons. I'll come back when I can, if it's safe. Sleep well, newling."

He left, and for the rest of the night he could still taste Jared.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marquez should have known better. The women came for him the next day. He lay face up on the steel table, arms and legs spread wide and restrained. His body still felt warm from the stimulation Janet had given him to induce his donation. This time, the smell of antiseptics made him feel ill.

"What's the matter, Marquez?" Janet asked. She loomed over him. "You're not as lively as you usually are. Are you ill?"

It didn't matter what he said. If he said no, she'd examine him anyway in the belief that he lied. If he said yes -- he shuddered at the depths she would go to find out the reason.

She watched him, face pinched, black hair pulled back into a severe braid. "What have you been up to, Marquez?" She pointed at the container holding the minute amount of sperm he'd been able to produce. "You're below the quota, and it took ten minutes longer than usual for your donation. That hasn't happened before."

"Stress?" he offered.

He yelped as she grabbed his cock and pinched it with her nails. "You haven't been a bad boy, have you? Because you know what happens to the ones who lie to me and who do things they shouldn't." Her nails dug into the tenderest parts of his flesh. "I think you're lying to me, Marquez. You were thinking of someone else today, weren't you? Who is it?"

"Only you, my darling Janet." He tried to sound sweet and sincere. It didn't work. "Let me up. I'll show you how much I've missed you."

She didn't fall for that, either. She bent over him, nails raking his neck and sending an unwanted shudder of excitement through his body. "I'm warning you, Marquez. Keep your hands to yourself, or we'll have to put you and your friend, whoever he is, in isolation for a while."

Marquez wasn't worried for himself. He could handle a few days alone in the cell they used to punish unruly men. Jared, though, was far too fragile to be left by himself for so long.

Janet unbuckled the restraints and tossed his robe at him. "Get out of here, and behave yourself. You're one of my best donors. Keep it that way."

For a long time after she left, he couldn't move, and just laid there on the table until two more women hauled him to his feet and thrust his arms into the sleeves of the robe. They led him back to his room. As soon as he entered the compound, the men hushed, and all eyes were on him, although Marquez was sure they were forming bets on what he had or hadn't done during his absence. They knew better than to speak while the women were around, but no doubt there would be much discussion as soon as they left.

Fernand, dark-skinned and dark-eyed, purposely caught Marquez's gaze and flicked his eyes toward Jared, who huddled in a corner and pretended not to see anything. A tiny smile turned Fernand's lips upward. Dread curled in Marquez's stomach and stayed there the rest of the day.

## Chapter Five

Later that night, Marquez felt his pallet shift and a warm, bare body sidle up next to his. He didn't open his eyes, recognizing the awkward, nervous touch. Jared kissed him, lightly pecking along his cheeks and lips while sliding one leg over Marquez's waist.

"Jared. We shouldn't do this. Fernand --"

"Bully Fernand." The young man tucked his hands underneath Marquez's shirt. Their coolness made Marquez shiver. He opened his eyes, torn with wanting Jared and knowing how dangerous this visit was.

Jared saw his expression, and carefully drew open the silk robe. "Just hold me for a while. Give me something good to remember, and I won't cry anymore, I promise." But even as he said it, Marquez watched tears well in his eyes. He wiped at them with the heel of his hand. "Damn. Damn! It's my fault I'm such a weakling."

With effort, Marquez clasped the back of Jared's neck and pulled him down so the boy's head rested on his chest. "Listen to me. It's not your fault. I've been around long enough to know better. You're a newling, fresh from the crèche with no idea of how things work around here."

Jared swiveled and kissed Marquez on the lips hard enough to steal his breath away. "I want this." His hips ground against Marquez's. "I don't -- I don't feel like this with the women. It isn't the same."

"I know it's not."

"Say you love me." The command was sudden, impetuous, and dangerous. Jared wrapped his hand around his partner's cock and rubbed.

"Jared, I --"

"Say it."

Jared's blue eyes gazed down at Marquez, no longer young and innocent. Marquez watched him, horrified. This new Jared was his fault. Confident, and uncaring of what the doctors would do if they were ever found out.

"Jared," he said at last, but the words caught in his throat. He palmed Jared's face. The boy was half his age, and he'd already become hard. This was what happened to the unlucky ones. Something inside them died as soon as the women got hold of them.

He looked Marquez straight in the eye. "You liked it too, didn't you? You prefer men, like me."

"Yes," Marquez said, and closed his eyes in defeat. What was so captivating about this young man that he'd become so careless? He'd gone for years without any major punishments, and had attracted no undue attention from the women until now. But now Jared was here, young and handsome and frightened, and Marquez just knew he was the one to help Jared survive. He had to survive. Marquez desperately needed a reason to continue his own existence in the men's ward. This was the only life he would ever know, and if there was the least chance of adding some happiness to it, he'd take it.

Jared must have seen the adoring look in his eyes, because he carefully lifted himself up on his arms and leaned over to kiss Marquez full on the lips. Marquez's heart pounded, and

his brain kept screaming at him that they would be punished for this, but that would only happen if they were caught, and Marquez didn't intend to get caught.

This was worth it. Jared's lithe body hovered over his. Their mutual exploration of each other's mouth continued, until Jared moved to suck lightly at Marquez's cheeks and neck and shoulders. He stopped when he reached one of the burn blisters. "My fault," he said again, and would have backed away if Marquez hadn't caught him by the neck again.

"It's all right. We can't let them win, can we? We both hate them, and do this in defiance of what they do to us." He meant to give Jared courage, but deep down, Marquez felt a new fear. This was selfish, coaxing the boy to do as he wished. How wonderful to finally touch someone who cared about more than hurting and humiliating him.

Yet, Jared wanted this too. He eased one leg over Marquez so they were crotch-to-crotch and continued to work his way down Marquez's smooth chest. He lingered at the nipples, made all the more sensitive after their recent treatment. After a few moments, Jared shucked off his own robe to reveal smooth, bare body. Marquez could only look, blissfully happy. He reached up to tease Jared's nipples, pinching and twisting until Jared groaned and grabbed Marquez around the wrists to force his arms up over his head. Jared leaned forward and wrapped his legs around Marquez's. Slowly, he ground his pelvis until Marquez was breathing hard in anticipation. Need built up in his groin until his cock was hot and hard and each throb seemed timed with one of Jared's external thrusts.

Marquez jerked in a spasm far more pleasurable than the ones he'd endured earlier that day. Jared slid himself downward, using his body to splay Marquez's legs. He found the soft spot between them and rubbed, hard and fast while Marquez arched his back, hardly able to stay still.

"I want to feel you. Please," Marquez gasped. He could feel the tension build. Out came the hidden bottle of gel. Jared squirted some onto his fingers. They pressed delicately against the narrow entrance, stroking it until he dared to slide one finger inside. A second finger followed, and they wiggled around.

“Easy,” Marquez told him. “Gently.” The fingers slowed, searching until they pressed against the one spot that broke Marquez’s conviction to wait. Heat and pleasure exploded inside him. The only sensation he could focus on was Jared’s fingers, wriggling and pressing. There was only light and heat and the pleasurable agony of his body.

When the sensations eased, Jared crawled on top of him, eyes closed and body twitching in his own private pleasure. Marquez tangled his hands in the boy’s hair, wishing in vain that their lives could have been different, and that they could live without fear of the women.

Lost in the joy of each other, neither of them saw Fernand’s black eyes glittering in the doorway.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marquez went to Jared a few more times, when he dared to defy the nurse’s patrols. Their activity was rarely as frantic as it had been the first couple of nights, and more often than not Marquez was content to lay spooned behind Jared, aching cock resting inside him as deep as it would go.

Marquez used these rare, quiet times to tell Jared more ways to survive in the compound. Marquez was the oldest of the men, and therefore given a slightly greater amount of leeway than the rest because he was cooperative whenever the doctors sent for him. “It also doesn’t hurt to make sure the women get some pleasure as well, if you’re able.”

His words seemed to fall on deaf ears. Jared didn’t seem to have the capacity to think outside the moment. For him there was Marquez, and only Marquez. The women were a distant dream until they came for him. “How many other men have you done this with?”

“One or two. Not as many as you’d think. Most of the men get along with each other fine, but the women have trained them well. They refuse to touch each other or to become aroused by anyone except the women.” He nibbled on the lobe of Jared’s ear. “But you have to remember to always stay on the good side of the women. Whatever you do, don’t offend

them, and pretend to enjoy it. What they do is horrible enough, but it's nothing compared to what they'll do with someone uncooperative."

His stories made Jared nervous, but Marquez still had the feeling that none of his warnings sank in far enough. Jared wouldn't understand how important it was to keep the women happy. And even if he did, Marquez wondered if Jared would have done anything differently.

\* \* \* \* \*

Five days later, Jared put up a fight when the women tried to take him away. Marquez situated himself a fair distance from the younger man's doorway, but near enough to see and hear what was going on. Jared shrieked and ripped at the sheets as they tried to pull him away, but there was nothing he could do to defend himself against five determined women. "I don't want to go!"

A red-haired doctor frowned. "Now, Jared, there's no need for this. Come along quietly, and we'll forget your little outburst."

Jared, terrified, didn't believe her. The doctors never forgot. He knew that as well as Marquez.

One of the women gagged him by wrapping a bandage around his face and mouth. He could barely breathe between the gauze and the tears that ran down his face. They dragged him out of his room and across the floor towards the exam rooms, right through the common room where a dozen men, including Marquez, lounged and watched the vid screens. Marquez averted his eyes, and prayed that Jared would have the sense not to look at him.

Hours later, they deposited Jared back in his room, limp, shaken, and bleeding. Janet, smug from the punishment she'd just inflicted, paused long enough to speak to Marquez. "You'd better train your little newling right, Marquez. I won't put up with any more outbursts like that."



The women left. A thin feeling of relief crossed over Marquez as he realized Janet had all but given him permission to be alone with Jared. He hurried to the boy's room, and let out a cry of dismay at what he saw. Jared lay limp and vacant-eyed and shivering. His wrists and ankles bled freely where he had struggled against the restraints.

Marquez swept gentle hands across Jared's face and body, prodding to see where he hurt. "What did they do to you?" Marquez whispered, angry. "They don't understand that we have minds of our own, that keeping the young ones naïve is a mistake. They don't prepare us for this; they just spring it on us and expect us to be entirely cooperative with their great regeneration plan and adore them for giving us the means and the opportunity to help."

He crawled in bed behind Jared and pinned the boy's body to him. Jared was still too cold and numb to react.

"They don't understand that if they were the least bit gentle with the new ones, they wouldn't be so frightened." He raised himself up enough that he could lean over and kiss Jared's cheeks to clean the tears away. "How can I help you, Jared? I've told you how to please them and put up with them. What else is there?"

His voice was high and trembled with terror. "Don't make me go back. Hide me."

"I can't. There's no help for it." They'd driven the boy to madness, and he'd hardly been in the compound for two months. "Look, Jared, you were a sweet thing when you were new and naïve. You still are, but you have to come to terms with our life here. I can't protect you all the time. You've heard the men snickering, and besides that, if the women ever found out what we do together..." He trailed off to let the threat sink in.

Jared's shoulders heaved as a new collection of sobs wracked his body. "I can't deal with it. I can't endure it. I'll find a way to kill myself. There must be a way, somehow."

Fear crawled into Marquez's stomach and stayed. The matrons were exceedingly careful to keep any sharp or breakable objects out of the compound. No rope or string of any kind. No drugs, no foods with choking hazards, and no containers for water big enough to

drown in. Their environment was infuriatingly clean and sterile, and yet Marquez knew that the determined always found a way. Diego had. Marquez couldn't bear to let it happen again, not to someone he loved so much.

Marquez was silent, pondering the outburst, when Jared suggested something else that chilled him.

"You could kill me. You're strong enough to strangle me --"

"You're sick." His voice was filled with disgust. "You're desperate. So what? Do you have any idea what the death of any one of us would do? They've got all their formulas and genetics mathematically precise and mapped out. Besides that, they..." He trailed off as soon as he realized Jared didn't care. "I wouldn't hurt you, anyway, because I'm entirely too selfish. You're the only thing keeping me sane here, the only one of these unfortunate souls I would dare call a friend. And I -- I love you, Jared. I don't like to see you upset."

Love. He didn't know if the word meant anything to Jared, or if he realized how dangerous that admission would be. No one truly loved another in this place, not when life and happiness could be stolen away so easily. The men batted the word around in the common room, usually in reference to a particular doctor. But at Jared's age, he was too young and inexperienced to be able to identify any emotions besides fear and anger. Marquez's rare appearances helped to alleviate those emotions, but once those were gone, he felt flat and numb.

Marquez used the back of his hand to stroke Jared's cheek. "There's one more way I know of, another sort of survival tactic. It's like meditation, or self-hypnosis. Let your mind drift away from your body. It works, sometimes, and you can forget everything that happened."

"Yes. That's what I want." He wrapped one leg around Marquez's, to pull him close and feel the muscles of his body. "Help me learn how to forget."

Marquez felt a grave sort of pity. "Do you want to forget...everything?"

Jared knew what he intimated, and arched his head upwards so their lips touched. He tried to part Marquez's lips with his tongue, but Marquez resisted, wanting his answer. "Not everything. Not you."

"Then listen and I will teach you what I know." He rolled onto his side, and at Jared's protest said, "You have to learn to do this when I'm not next to you. Now, close your eyes, and pay attention to your breathing. Slowly, now. Count to ten as you breathe in."

He kept his voice low, hypnotic. As Jared listened to his instructions, Marquez saw him drift, not into sleeplessness, but...elsewhere.

"Jared!" The name was accompanied by a slap on his cheek. "Jared. Come back." Marquez was suddenly worried. Jared had drifted away far too easily. "You did good. Better than good, for your first time. We need a trigger to bring you back. Something only you and I know. A word, or a sound, something the women would never think of."

"Taboo," he suggested.

Marquez pursed his lips, then gave a slow nod. "Fine. Now, no more talk of death. I have to go. The matrons will come by soon. Promise me you'll cooperate, and you'll get these thoughts of suicide out of your head."

Marquez stared at him until he promised, and even then, Marquez knew the boy's heart wasn't in it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marquez's last hope of making life in the compound easier for Jared rested with Emily, the one doctor for whom he felt something less than hatred. The rest had all been twisted by their duty to control and subvert the men by any means possible. Emily, thankfully, was kinder and more lenient with him than the others. The restraints weren't used; instead, she let Marquez sit on the edge of the table with his legs apart. She stood between them, hands ungloved but coated with gel. They grasped his cock, and began the usual process of rubbing and stroking to induce his donation.

He kept his own hands away from himself. That was one of the rules. He didn't mind, because there were other things he could do. His lessons with Diego had given him enough courage to experiment with the women in the hopes of manipulating them enough to get what he needed from them. Most of the doctors were cold, their own need hidden beneath the guise of overseeing medical treatments, but Emily, out of all of them, had kept the softer side she'd shown the day Marquez had met her. He intended to use it to his advantage.

Not that he found the women attractive, or even desirable, but being forward with them made his treatments more bearable. His hands slipped underneath her shirt to grasp her unbound breasts. His thumbs rubbed around her nipples, tracing them until they grew erect.

Her eyes briefly met his. They shouldn't be doing this. She knew, but she was a woman, and human. Stress took its toll on her as well as the men.

"It doesn't have to be like this," Marquez told her. He scrunched up her shirt and pushed it up to expose her breasts. Her hands lost their easy rhythm. He found the soft spot between her breasts and kissed her there, kissing and sucking all the way down her stomach. Her breathing increased, and he left his mouth there, tickling the divot in her belly with his tongue. "We'd cooperate, if you'd only ask."

"The rules," she said.

"Break them," Marquez said. He placed a hand on her trembling stomach and slipped a thumb inside her waistband. "Let me show you how willing we can be if you give us a chance."

Fear glinted in her eyes. "No. I can't."

"Do." He stood, slowly, so as not to frighten her further. Her hands froze, still locked around his erection, but his kept moving, kneading her breasts while his mouth sought hers. Gently, he nudged her into turning around until her back was toward the table. She hardly

noticed, too caught up in the forbidden. He tugged at her pants and underwear, guiding them over her rounded hips and buttocks until they pooled on the floor.

She gasped when he slipped a hand between her legs and tickled her there. "Marquez," she said, half in protest, half in desire. Her wetness aroused him even as it disgusted him. Two of his fingers slid along her soft, intimate flesh. "Don't."

One finger slipped inside and stroked her there. She let go of his cock and braced herself against him. With his intimate hold, he eased her backwards until she sat on the edge of the table, exposed like he'd been only a few minutes before.

"Stop. Please. We're not allowed." She squirmed and tried to maneuver away from him. "If Janet finds out, I'll be punished. We're not supposed to touch you except when you're restrained."

"I'll stop if you do something for me." He added another finger, stroking her soft interior. Her mouth worked as if she were trying to speak and couldn't. "Look after Jared. Please. He's so terrified." He traced a line down her belly with his tongue.

She relaxed a little when he crooked his fingers to rub against her sensitive spot. His thumb tickled her on the outside. After a moment, she was able to speak. "He's not mine to watch. He's Janet's. She always gets the new ones."

"She'll kill him," he said, surprised at his own conviction. He stilled his fingers.

"She might," Emily agreed. Her face was flushed, her skin sheened with perspiration.

"Watch out for him. Please. He's fragile."

Her look told him he'd just said too much. "You care for him. Oh, god, Marquez, if Janet finds out --"

He put a finger perpendicular to her lips. "She won't. I promise." He flicked his other fingers inside her, causing her to gasp with pleasure. "Help me. Please."

"Marquez, I -- Oh!" He'd withdrawn his fingers and replaced them with his cock. Dangerous, he knew. He still hadn't made his donation, and if they left with nothing, there would be too many questions asked. "Don't. Oh, god, don't!"

She tried to push him away, but he wouldn't let her. The women ruled by fear, not strength, which was why the men were always restrained. He thrust, feeling a faint readiness for climax, but he had time. "Help him, or we'll leave here with nothing."

"Janet will kill us. The men aren't the only ones punished."

He grasped her head and pulled it toward him, close enough to whisper in her ear. "Help him. Nothing she does to me matters anymore, but there's no reason to punish Jared." His cock was hard, stiff, aching with a need for release. Not yet, he prayed. Not yet.

"All right," she said, breathing hard. Her own climax wasn't far away. "All right. I'll speak to her."

"Thank you." Marquez barely had enough time to pull out of her and fumble for the donation cup before he released his seed. When he looked back at Emily, she'd lain on the table, legs bent at the knee, hands covering her face.

"Finish it, damn you. It's the least you could do."

He felt sorry for her, then. Just like him, she wanted to be loved, and to be out of the hell they lived in.

He couldn't bring himself to use his mouth, so he kept to his fingers, using her own fluids to stimulate her inside and out. It didn't take long before she came, and he felt her body clasp his fingers in fleshy embraces. Her mouth opened, but she made no vocalization.

When the contractions stopped, he let her go. She dressed in silence, and motioned to him to do the same. He pulled on the pale green pants and shirt without looking at her.

"Here," she said, and slipped a bottle of gel into his pocket. After a moment's hesitation, she kissed him lightly on the lips. They walked down the hall back to the compound, not looking at each other, not speaking. As soon as he could, he went to the showers and stayed

there until Fernand pounded on the door and yelled something about dinner. Even then, Marquez stayed in the hot water, feeling as though he were covered with filth. He'd fucked a woman, on purpose. For Jared's sake, he told himself over and over. For Jared.

So why did it feel as though another part of himself had died? He slammed a fist against the tiled wall. Being helpless against the women was one thing, but offering himself freely... no wonder Diego had gone mad.

A mixture of hope and fear churned in his stomach for days after his visit with Emily, but it turned out his worry and his attempt were for nothing. He never saw her again. The next time a doctor came for him, it was Janet, and she was merciless.

\* \* \* \* \*

Muffled sounds coming from the next room woke Marquez from a deep sleep. He lay for a while, listening.

"Marquez?" Jared's voice, through the wall. Marquez almost answered, until he heard the rustling of bodies and sheets. Someone else was in there with Jared.

A quiet groan, and the wet smacks of someone kissing -- or licking. More thrashing.

"So this was what Marquez was hiding from the rest of us. Very nice, newling. Must be pleasing to the women as well. Oh, wait. You don't like them very much, do you?"

Marquez knew that mocking voice. "Fernand," he said, heart thudding in his chest. He had a sick feeling about just what Fernand was doing in Jared's room.

He laughed. "You should thank me, newling. This is a lot kinder than the women can be. Consider this practice. Consider this --" There was a significant pause after which more wriggling ensued. "-- a lesson in how they'll expect you to feel whenever they touch you."

The wet smacks continued, and Jared's voice grew fainter, as if his words were stifled by a pillow as well as the wall.

"You are next to worthless. Is this why Marquez has been visiting you? Because you can't keep it up long enough to pleasure the women?"

Marquez eased out of bed and walked as quietly as he could to Jared's doorway. The only light came from the strips along the floor, but it was enough for Marquez to make out two bodies. The larger of the two was Fernand, who sat naked on the bed, straddling Jared. Jared's shirt was pulled up over his face, and he struggled to breathe. Fernand tugged the shirt down, at last, and Marquez could see the silhouette of Jared's face, shiny with perspiration. Jared opened his mouth to gasp for breath. A mistake. In moments Fernand had straddled his face and thrust his steel-hard cock into Jared's mouth. Marquez gripped the doorway hard enough for his fingers to go numb. He couldn't tell if Jared wanted this, and didn't know what to do. Interfering with the willful Fernand would only get him more punishment from the women, as Fernand wouldn't hesitate to make up a story to prove himself innocent.

Fernand's knees kept Jared's arms pinned down, and his hands...Fernand gripped the boy's head and lifted it, maneuvering it forward and back so he could get a better angle at which to thrust in his cock. Jared's eyes rolled back in his head as he went limp and let Fernand do what he would.

Marquez stayed frozen, horrified as Fernand lodged himself in the back of Jared's throat, thrusting again and again. Bile rose from Marquez's stomach and into his throat. The room flickered.

Just before Marquez was sure Jared would lose consciousness, Fernand stopped, and slithered back down to hunker in between Jared's legs. He spread them apart until Jared was completely stretched and vulnerable. The chill air caused goose pimples to rise on Jared's exposed flesh. He clutched at the blankets, breathing hard as if to prepare himself for the inevitable invasion.



He couldn't. With a cry, Fernand thrust himself inside Jared to the hilt. The boy's mouth opened wide, in fear or pain or--ecstasy? He let out a muffled groan, still the extent of his vocal reactions after the nights spent with Marquez.

Jared looked like he... *enjoyed* it.

Fernand began to move, in, out, in out, a steady rhythm that grew faster and faster until Marquez thought Jared's hole would catch fire from the friction. Fernand lifted his waist to make it easier. Jared's head lolled back and forth. His hands loosened, and his body went slack.

Marquez couldn't stand to watch any longer. His shadow fell across the pair as he entered the room. His voice was cold and deadly. "Get off him."

Fernand slowed his movement and looked up at him, lazily. "You're awfully possessive, aren't you? Just because you're the oldest doesn't mean you make the rules around here."

He crouched between Jared's legs, his cock still hard, and vanished inside. Jared didn't look to be in pain, but he looked uncomfortable at the way Marquez watched him, as if he knew Marquez felt betrayed.

"Get *off*," Marquez growled, and rushed at Fernand, knocking him backwards onto the floor and pulling him out of Jared, leaving a trail of sticky wetness. Jared lay still, too spent to move.

"Bastard," Fernand said. Marquez had his shoulders pinned to the ground. "I know how you comfort him at night, after the matrons make their rounds. You think I wouldn't be able to tell? It isn't just the women that have been making him so pliable --"

"That's enough!" The room echoed with the *crack* of Marquez's hand against Fernand's cheek.

Fernand brought one hand up to touch his stinging skin. "You'll pay for this. I'll tell the women --"

"Who already know," Marquez said calmly.

"I'll tell them that you screw with their latest acquisition, and that he enjoys it. I'll tell them how he cries every night, and can't sleep unless Marquez is there to tuck him in, with a little goodnight kiss between his legs --"

Marquez cut him off, expertly manipulating Fernand's still-exposed cock so he was caught in a limbo between agony and pleasure. "Leave the young one alone. You've had your fun. Don't cross me. I know ways to make you sterile, and then the women will ship you off into the depths of the ship where they will ride you day after day, woman after woman, until you'll long for your drugged-out days in the crèche."

Fernand's mouth pinched into a straight line. "I've had enough of your threats. You're all talk and no action."

Marquez squeezed, and Fernand writhed on the floor. "Don't press me, Fernand."

"All right. All right, I won't. I swear. But you try my patience, sometimes, keeping such a soft young thing all to yourself..." Fernand let out a gasp when Marquez let go. Summoning the little dignity he had left, Fernand dressed and left without saying anything to Jared.

Marquez stood, silent and brooding. Once again, Jared looked at him, confused. "What's wrong? Why did you do that?"

"What's wrong?" Marquez resisted the urge to grab Jared's shoulders and shake him senseless. "What's *wrong*?" He had to pause and take a few deep breaths. Shouting at the boy wouldn't help. "I sleep with you because I care for you, and am sure the pleasure is mutual. Fernand..." He said the name with venom. "His encounters with the women have made him bitter, and warped his judgment. He uses you to sate himself, to vent his rage against someone who is helpless."

"But he said --"

"You naïve little fool!" He curled up at Marquez's accusation. "Haven't you listened to anything I've told you? I've been trying to give you the means to protect yourself. Don't

listen to him. Don't listen to anyone who plies you with sweet words just to use your body." He thought briefly, guiltily, that he'd done the same thing, but Jared didn't connect. Marquez wondered if he'd ever been this naïve when he was just out of the crèche. He didn't think the boy was stupid, but none of them came into the men's compound knowing hardly anything. Why educate the boys when over three-quarters of them would die when they came of age? The little Marquez knew came from experience, or from rumors passed through the compound, and those hardly contributed to a full education.

Marquez sat on the side of the bed and stroked the silky brown hair covering Jared's head. "It's all right. I don't mean to be angry with you. I just don't want to see you hurt."

"I'm not hurt. I liked it. But not as much as I do with you." Jared shifted position so his head rested on Marquez's thigh. "I went away, like you taught me to when Fernand was here. I don't ever want to go away when you're here. I don't want to forget."

Marquez continued stroking his hair, oddly touched by Jared's admission.

## Chapter Six

Over the next few days, Marquez could only watch as Fernand kept casting seductive glances in Jared's direction, or trying to whisper in his ear. Marquez knew Jared ignored Fernand as well as he could, and did his best to avoid him, but Fernand was always there, at the food station, lurking in the bathroom, or creeping outside his room at night, waiting to see how long Jared would be alone. Jared made it clear that he didn't want Fernand's company, which rankled and made Fernand more determined.

Jared came to see Marquez less and less, though Marquez always tried to be present when Fernand got too close. The other men had begun to ignore Jared completely, but Fernand... Marquez was so intent on watching Fernand's interactions with Jared that he ignored anything involving himself.

It was a doctor who found them when Fernand ventured into Marquez's room while he was asleep. He jerked awake to see Fernand parading Jared in front of him, bound, gagged, naked and bewildered. Quiet, docile Morgan followed, and before Marquez could react, Morgan grabbed his arms, pulled them painfully behind his back, and sat on him so he couldn't move. Morgan shoved his face into the pillow to dampen his screams, but made sure that Marquez was able to watch Fernand and Jared.

Fernand urged Jared prostrate onto the chill metal floor and dropped behind him. He drew open his robe, so Marquez could see his sizable cock, hard and erect. Without bothering to moisten his cock in any way, spread Jared's buttocks apart and shoved himself deep inside. Jared jerked, and his eyes glistened with tears of pain. Marquez didn't have enough air to scream. The cotton fabric of the pillow clung to his nose and mouth so he could barely breathe.

"Where's your great protector now?" His harsh movements jerked Jared back and forth, and Jared writhed and scrabbled to get away. Fernand wouldn't let him. He kept a vise-like grip around Jared's waist. Every thrust had to hurt worse than the one before, until at length the movement grow easier; not from ejaculate, but from blood. Jared's blood. The younger man went limp, though not unconscious. Marquez prayed that he'd been able to send his mind elsewhere so he wasn't here with these monsters.

Marquez couldn't move. If he tried, Morgan pulled his arms so rigid that any extra movement would break them, or pull a shoulder out of its socket. Marquez was so exhausted and oxygen-deprived that, when Fernand finally pulled out of Jared, Marquez didn't have the strength to protest Morgan's rolling him onto his back and raking fingernails along his cock.

Fernand's hovered over him, a look of satiation on his face. "I'm disappointed, Marquez. I don't know what you see in him, since he didn't last very long. He's young, I suppose, but you're not." His feral smile made Marquez tremble. "I haven't had enough fun yet tonight. Have you, Morgan?"

The other man grinned and shook his head. Morgan never said much. He didn't need to, when his actions spoke for him. He was small, but heavy and strong.

Together, Fernand and Morgan got Marquez on his knees and forced his head back into the pillow. Morgan straddled him again, this time with his legs under Marquez's arms and around Marquez's head. Morgan's arms wrapped around Marquez's waist. Again, Marquez couldn't move or even protest as Morgan grabbed his dangling cock and squeezed. Pain shot

through Marquez's body, made worse when Fernand spread him apart and shoved his still-hard cock inside.

Dimly, through the agony, Marquez could hear them laugh. His body shook with fatigue and fear, and the lack of good oxygen made him sleepy and disoriented. Morgan's rough hands stroked and squeezed his cock until, even though he was repulsed, his cock was as hard as Fernand's. The *slap-slap* of Fernand's skin against his grew faster and faster until Fernand's nails raked against Marquez's waist. He left himself buried inside and shuddered as he climaxed. A moment later, Morgan's hands had done their work, and Marquez's body bucked in involuntary muscle contractions.

They let him collapse, then. Fernand pulled out, cock shining with a mixture of fluids that made Marquez want to vomit. Morgan changed positions with Fernand and sat behind Marquez, his cock erect and waiting for its own turn.

"What do you think of yourself now, Marquez?" Fernand jerked his head toward Jared, who lay still and uncomprehending against the wall. "No man here should keep secrets from each other, nor a prize like that. It makes everyone jealous."

Marquez grunted as Morgan entered him. Less violent than Fernand, but still painful. The pain gave Marquez buffer enough to let his mind drift.

Fernand's voice grew dimmer. "What do you think the women will do to you now? You're an aberration. Both of you. They'll take you away, and then I'll be the eldest, with all the privileges."

Marquez wasn't listening. He focused on *elsewhere*, on the peace that he only felt with Jared, soft and safe, in his arms.

"Marquez?" Fernand's angry voice rose when his slaps failed to elicit a response. "Marquez! Dammit, Morgan, move. Let me have him again. I'll teach him to fade away while I'm talking to him!"

Whatever else they did to him, Marquez was only half-aware, lost somewhere between dream and reality. Pain was gone, or only a dim, forgettable throb.

And then, pain and reality came crashing back when suddenly the lights in the room flicked on, blinding after the dim night light. Fernand's heavy body was dragged off of him, and there were hands, female hands, probing between his legs, inspecting the damage.

"He *likes* it," Fernand protested. "He begged me to come to him, and told me how much he loved touching men, and how horrible it is when the doctors come to take him away. I'm not the only one he's seduced. There are others..." The rest of what Fernand said was lost as a pair of women dragged Fernand away.

When Marquez's eyes adjusted to the light, he could make out the features of the two women nearest him: Janet, his nemesis, and her helper, Lydia. They held him down with much the same strength and determination as his attackers had.

He screamed when Janet's gloved fingers thrust inside him, making his raw insides burn and bleed anew. She explored his abused hole, every movement sending lancing streaks of pain throughout his body. When at last they withdrew, Janet's fingers sparkled with blood.

"He's damaged," Janet told her colleague. "Fernand ripped him inside. We'll have to put him in isolation until he heals. The newling's not much better off."

Jared. "What did they do to him? Is he all right?" Marquez craned his head around to see, but Jared's body was hidden behind two more white-coated women whose words were quiet and indistinct.

The expression on Janet's face was not at all sympathetic. Neither was her voice. "I warned you, Marquez. It's a shame it had to come to this, but you brought it on yourself." Someone brought in a lev, and four pairs of hands lifted Marquez onto it with little regard to his injuries. "You and the newling will have to be separated from the rest for a while."

His lower jaw trembled. The lev moved out of the room and down the hall. Janet walked beside it, wanting answers.

"I didn't start this," Marquez told her. "Fernand did. He's the one who came to my room and went after Jared."

"You say you're the leader," Janet said, "but if you were, this wouldn't have happened. I was counting on you to provide a good example for the rest of the men. This wasn't what I had in mind." She curled her lower lip under to chew with her teeth. "I'm afraid you've ruined the newling. We're going to have to teach him to appreciate women again."

In panic, he tried to roll off the lev, but the lev paused long enough for the women to attach the restraints.

"No," Marquez said. "I told you. Fernand was lying. He likes women. He does!"

"But not as much as he likes you. He'll learn, Marquez. We have our ways."

*"No!"* Marquez struggled against the restraints. There had to be a way out of this. It wasn't fair. He'd only been trying to help Jared. Fernand had been the cause of all this, Fernand and his jealousy.

"Calm down." Janet was annoyed now. The matron produced a syringe, and Janet jabbed it into Marquez's arm before he could protest further. After a few moments, his limbs went numb. He couldn't move. He couldn't feel anything.

He couldn't fight back when they shifted him from the lev and onto one of the dreaded steel exam tables. They spread his legs apart and buckled them down. His arms, as usual, went above his head, so his entire body lay vulnerable and exposed.

Janet's aides worked in silence while she supervised. They scoured his body for wounds and internal injuries without regard to his own wishes. He was nothing more than meat, valuable only because of what his body could produce. They didn't need his mind for that. When he whimpered at the pain, Janet gagged him and watched dispassionately as tears leaked from his eyes.



“You did this to yourself, Marquez,” Janet told him again, “but we can help you recover. You and Jared both.”

Marquez closed his eyes and desperately willed himself away from the room, the women, and the tortures they would no doubt inflict in the course of “curing” him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The isolation chamber was a mind-numbing white room made of seamless plastic walls. The women meant it to be humiliating, and it was. They strapped him down to a table and left him there. Nutrient drips fed and numbed his body, catheters drained it, all a tidy process that meant the women had no need to look in on him at all.

He *could* escape, and he did, losing himself in his memories of Jared, the feel of their bodies locked together, the rare moments of freedom without worrying about the women.

By the time the women came to let him out, they didn’t care about his mind, or even notice it was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once he was back in the men’s compound, no one spoke to Marquez or deigned to acknowledge his existence. Fernand’s voice rang the loudest. Now that Marquez had been justly punished, Fernand was the leader. He’d escaped his own severe punishment on the grounds that he confessed everything to the women, and that they’d taken his actions as a form of masculine rage against another man rather than because of an attraction to men.

Marquez still lacked the strength to care for himself, so the women fed him with the nutrient drip and kept his hands tied to the metal ring above his bed so he couldn’t pull it out. They didn’t talk to him, not even when they came to fetch him for his donations. As long as his body reacted the way they wanted it to, they didn’t care. They restrained him at night to prevent him from wandering.

And then one day between feedings, Marquez heard the sounds of a lev floating in and a body being dropped next door. As soon as it left, Marquez dragged himself out of his room to look. Jared.

Marquez crawled inside and cradled Jared's head in his lap. The boy was weak, emaciated from being half-starved and fed on nutrient drips. His arms were red and blotched from all of the needles. The slightest touch aroused him. The women had done their work too well; a touch, *any* touch, and Jared's body would react.

"I didn't mean for this to happen," Marquez said. Jared's eyes were dull. His body's responses were entirely automatic. His mind was gone, and Marquez wasn't cruel enough to use the code word to bring it back. "We'll get out of here. I'll find a way."

His opportunity arrived by chance. Janet herself came late at night, to check on him or gloat, he didn't know. She undid one of the restraints around his wrist to adjust it. Feigning a restless sleep, Marquez swung his free hand so it rested on his other arm, right where they'd injected the nutrient drip. The needle wiggled under his skin.

He yanked it out, prayed for luck, and jammed it into Janet's chest between her ribs. Straight into her heart.

She only had time for a look of vague surprise before she keeled over and died. Marquez undid the restraints around his other wrist and ankles, and then pulled the keycard from around Janet's neck. With that, he had access to nearly everywhere on the ship, including the escape pods. He knew where they were and how to use them from the infrequent drills the women insisted on in case of a ship wide emergency.

He went next door, worried that his lack of strength would be a hindrance. It didn't matter as much as he'd thought. Jared was light, hardly more than bones and skin. His body shivered and a tent formed in his pants, but Marquez couldn't worry about that now. With Jared in his arms, he walked as quietly as he could through the compound and used the card to open the door.

It was a painstaking and terrifying journey as he made his way through the corridors. His heart thudded in his chest and beads of cold sweat broke out on his neck and back. Every corner he turned, he expected to run into a woman or three, but there was no one.

Until he'd gotten near the escape pods, he hadn't seen anyone, assuming that these corridors weren't frequented outside of maintenance visits. The female voice shouting from behind startled him, and made him run faster.

"Stop!"

A klaxon sounded, and flashing red and white lights blinked in the corridor and made the place look even more surreal. Marquez didn't dare turn, not now that he had his objective in sight. The whole hallway was lined with doors that led to the pods. He ran to the closest one and swiped Janet's key. The door opened to reveal a claustrophobic interior barely big enough for two to sit, one in front of the other.

Footsteps echoed against the metal flooring as the women approached. Marquez shoved Jared inside, into the forward seat. One of the women shot. Marquez reached down and pulled out the tranquilizer dart just as his body began to crumple. With his last strength, he grabbed the seats and dragged himself inside, just managing to palm the door shut before he collapsed onto the seat inside.

The women pounded at the outer door of the pod, but the series of beeps meant that the launch sequence had already begun. They couldn't stop it. With a lurch, the pod jettisoned.

Inside, the beeping continued. The air shafts hissed as they flooded the tiny chamber with gas. He and Jared fell asleep, lulled by the chemical meant to keep their bodies in stasis until he reached their new home, wherever it was the pod would take them.

## Chapter Seven

Marquez didn't wake until after the pod landed on the planet's surface, and the hatch sprang open to reveal something he'd never seen or felt before: sunlight. He'd never learned to read, since the women never thought it something the men needed to know, so the letters and numbers scrolling across the screen meant nothing to him. They might have said where they'd landed. Not that it mattered. He and Jared were trapped here now, away from the women, but in an environment neither of them knew how to deal with. They had both been born and raised in space aboard the *Trafalgar* and had expected to die there.

And now...Marquez shielded his eyes with his hand while he scanned the area around them. Brown, scraggly plants jutted out from red dirt and rocks. The tall shapes in the distance might have been trees. The sky overhead was blue, a deep, solid color that Marquez had never seen before. Even the air felt alien; instead of the recycled air of the ship, this felt clean and hot enough to sting his nose.

Now what? Where would they go? They couldn't stay by the pod. He was sure the women would have ways of tracking it, and he didn't want to be found anywhere near it. Ahead of him, the land was entirely flat. To his left rested the thin figures that he assumed were trees. Off to the right, the ground rose to peaks against the skyline. Mountains? Or

hills? He had no idea how far away they might be. He'd never had to judge a distance longer than the end of a hallway.

Jared huddled against him, still unconscious. Marquez eased himself out of the pod and marveled at the hot, soft dirt under his feet. Sweat trickled down his back, tickling his skin. Another new sensation. After the temperature-controlled rooms on the *Trafalgar*, the heat was oppressive and uncomfortable.

"Jared?" Marquez knew it was useless to ask, but he asked anyway. The young man's eyes were open, but his mind was gone, possibly forever after the women had tortured him. The pod had been programmed to keep them both sedated until it landed on a habitable planet. He wasn't sure if the planet would have other, intelligent life on it. He could hope, but there was every possibility that he and Jared would die here. The emergency pack in the pod came with several essentials; a few hypodermics filled with painkillers, a handful of bandages, a thermos of water and some hard, dried rations in packages. All of it was well and good, but Marquez couldn't read the directions on most of the supplies. They needed some sort of shelter from the blazing sun, but if there was anything in the pod that might help, Marquez didn't know what it was.

Even though they now risked death in the wilderness, it was better than there. Better than being used by the women as if they were nothing but stud animals kept for their pleasure.

Despite the heat, Jared's face felt cold and clammy underneath Marquez's hand. Jared wore only a pair of synthetic-fiber pants. Around his jutting ribs, the marks from the women were still obvious, though they'd paled to scars during their journey. Needle marks, cuts, and other small wounds marked the skin Marquez knew intimately. He wondered how long they'd been in the pod. His hair was longer than it had been, but there was no other indication of how much time had passed.

The young man was light as Marquez eased him out of the pod. His only sound was a whimper. He didn't like being touched, even by his erstwhile lover. Arousal no longer held any pleasure for him.

"Damn them," Marquez muttered. He dug through the supplies, trying to figure out what he could take. Water and food. The medical supplies. The rest... He didn't know what to do with the rest. They needed to find some sort of shelter.

He gathered up the supplies he could and thrust them into a knapsack that seemed to be provided for that purpose. He slung the strap over his shoulder, and carefully gathered Jared into his arms and looked around once more to decide on a direction. The trees, then. They seemed closer than the mountains.

The motion soon lulled Jared into a fitful sleep. His skin, far paler than Marquez's, soon turned red from the sunlight. The sun could burn, Marquez remembered from one of the vids he'd seen. It wasn't far before he grew dizzy and tired from carrying his burden. Soft dirt changed to rocks which cut into his feet, and he left a trail of blood behind. He struggled onward, because they had no choice. Walk, or die.

Marquez's arms ached from carrying Jared, and transferring the limp body to his back did little to help. Every step sent arcs of pain through his feet and legs. He paused long enough to rest and to use a sharp rock to slice his pants into strips to wrap around his feet. It helped for a while, but the synthetic fiber wasn't made to last in such a harsh environment. Too soon after he'd started walking, his makeshift socks were torn to shreds.

"We're not going to die. Not here, like this. Not after we've been through so much." His mouth was dry and cottony. The water was gone far faster than he wanted it to. Half for him, half for Jared. He made for the trees and the shadows beneath them in the hopes that they'd provide some protection from the hellish sunlight.

They seemed impossibly far away. He stumbled and fell forward. The rocks sliced into his palms and chest as Jared's weight pressed him downward. He couldn't think coherently anymore. Heat waves rose from the rocks

Marquez must have passed out, because when he woke, they weren't alone. A rough black snout nuzzled his face, and he let out a yelp and flung his body over Jared's for protection. The thing backed away, equally startled. Marquez froze when he realized the creature was fully as large as he was. A lizard, he realized. He'd seen them on one of the vids, only none of them had been anywhere nearly this large.

The lizard's immense size did nothing to hinder an inherent, snake-like grace. In spite of Marquez's terror, he was fascinated by it, the way its long, sensuous body moved and made its scales, a green so dark to be almost black, reflect in the sunlight. The jaws were massive, fully large enough to crack his skull open as if it were a raw egg. Its eyes, the color of burnt amber, watched him with something akin to intelligence.

Marquez watched it back. This wasn't possible. Lizards didn't think, even lizards the size of humans. And...his breath caught in his throat when it moved and lifted itself upright onto its hind legs and used its tail for balance. Lizards didn't wear ragged-looking loincloths around their waists as if they were humans with something at their waist to protect.

<Safe.>

He gave the lizard a blank stare. Maybe he was dying already, or hallucinating from the heat. He could've sworn that the lizard was trying to *think* something at him.

<Calm. Safe.>

It wasn't so much words as feelings. The lizard didn't want him to be afraid. He supposed that was a good thing, because he didn't have the strength to run anymore, and his feet were so torn up from running that the thought of putting them to the ground again made him dizzy with pain. All he could do was lay there in the dirt, helpless as the unconscious Jared, and try not to pay much attention to how much of that dirt had worked

itself into his open wounds. But fatigue didn't do anything to make the fear go away. What man wouldn't be terrified at having a giant, thought-sending lizard stick its snout in his face?

The lizard dropped to all fours again and nosed Jared's sun-reddened face. The forked tongue darted out to taste Jared's skin. Slitted amber eyes met Marquez's. *<Concern,>* the lizard sent.

Marquez's voice was hoarse, and he felt his lips split as he spoke. "Get away from me. Leave us alone."

*<Calm,>* it sent again just before he fainted.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next thing Marquez knew, he was rocking gently in a hanging bed of some sort. His body still hurt. Another lizard, equally graceful and with brighter green scales, dabbed at his wounds with a cloth dipped in an ointment that smelled worse than the sterile rooms back on the ship. Next to him, in another hammock, Jared lay so quiet and still that Marquez wondered if he were still alive.

"Jared?" Marquez tried to sit up, but the swaying hammock made him feel ill. A clawed hand firmly pressed at his shoulder. The lizard's tongue flicked out, scenting the air, scenting *him...*

It all came crashing back. The pod landing, Jared's limp body, the endless trek across red dirt and rocks. The giant lizard sniffing at him, and *thinking* things at him --

"Get away from me!" Marquez swung at the green lizard, who took a few steps back, until Marquez was clear to tip himself out of the hammock. The ground came up hard, and his vision went white in a haze of pain. When it cleared, he was in the dirt again, his feet sending agonizing rivulets of pain up his legs and straight into his head. Greenie came forward again, but Marquez braced his hands in the dirt and slid his legs forward, repeating the motion until he came to the edge of the dwelling. He didn't care how much he hurt or how much this lizard wanted to help. Jared might be dead, and the lizards might just be



keeping them here for some cruel reason. All he cared about was finding a way of getting himself and Jared away from him and out of this --

-- village? That hardly seemed the right word to describe what he saw. It wasn't much more than a compound, a large circular building, open in the center, built of mud with a thatched roof and divided up into smaller living spaces. A few dozen lizards, in colors that ranged from black to green to dull reds, occupied the space, some of them doing craftwork or weaponswork, or the younger ones roughhousing or chasing after a ball that was made of a smooth, brown substance he didn't recognize.

Greenie touched his shoulder with a clawed hand. That single touch sent a shudder through Marquez. The women had always begun that way, with a light touch that grew rougher and rougher until they forced his body to give them what they wanted. Unwilling, he curled up to protect himself. He should be stronger than this. Jared needed him, but the lizards were bringing back too many memories and emotions he'd thought long buried.

After a while, another clawed hand gently rested on his shoulder. The lizard must have sensed his tension, because it sent a thought at him. *<Calm. Safe.>*

Marquez opened his eyes to see the first lizard, the olive-colored one, gazing at him with something near concern. Now that Marquez had a closer look, he was fascinated by the lizard. On the ship, he'd never seen an animal of any kind, except on the rare video. To see one, for real...he was gorgeous. Sleek and dark, with sinuous movements that Marquez found both attractive and repellent. Without intending it, Marquez felt a quickening within his groin. Not now, he willed his body. Not now...and not with an animal.

The whole compound had gone silent. All of the lizards, even the little ones, had stopped their activities and were looking directly at him and his olive-scaled friend, who'd come to crouch at his side.

"Don't touch me," Marquez told him, though he doubted the lizard could understand him. Could regular lizards even hear anything? He didn't know. He talked again, anyway. "What are you going to do with us?"

Olive extended a hand too near Marquez's face, and Marquez slapped it away. Immediately he curled up as tightly as he could, with his head tucked between his elbows, a position he hadn't taken since he was young and new to the men's compound. They'd punished him for this. He'd gotten punished for much more trivial things, like for being less than eager when the women came for him, until he'd learned how to deal with them.

*Come on now*, they'd say, and grab at him when he was still limp from cold and fear. *Time for your service for the continuation of our kind*. And if he'd tried to pull away, they'd force him down on the table and strap his arms there so he couldn't move while they loomed over him...

And if he was this bad off, he wondered about Jared. He peeked out between his arms, fearful of what he couldn't see. Olive had backed away, and was busy exchanging glances with Greenie. Marquez guessed he must've been some trouble to them both, but he didn't care. He'd escaped from *Trafalgar* at risk of his life, and he wasn't about to concede to anything he didn't like, even if they were trying to help him. No one would touch him again without permission. He didn't care if he developed a raging fever and ulcers on his skin the size of dinner plates. *That* kind of pain was bearable.

Greenie dropped to all fours and walked away, his bony hips wriggling back and forth. Marquez felt mildly more comfortable with only Olive nearby. He must have managed to convey his terror enough, because the lizard didn't try to get any nearer. But then he was left with the difficulty of what he should do; he couldn't lie on the dirt forever, and he didn't have the strength to get up.

He kept his eyes resolutely toward the dirt, purposefully gazing at nothing, until two more pairs of feet came into view; the first, a bright red, scaly pair that obviously belonged to yet another lizard, and the other were...human. Female.

Marquez felt near to vomiting. They'd found him. The lizards were a trap. They only kept him until the women tracked him down to take him away again --

Her voice was quiet and gentle, far different from the ones he'd been used to. "You're from one of the plague ships, aren't you? No wonder you're terrified."

Plague ships? What the hell was she talking about? Marquez dared to look up at her. Reddish hair and pale, freckled skin. None of the women on his ship had been that light-skinned. Maybe there was still hope, even though she was probably from a ship of her own, or had contacts with those who would want him and Jared regardless of their preferences.

She knelt in the dirt just in front of him so he didn't have a choice but to look at her. She *seemed* to get along with the lizards all right; the big red one behind her had his tail wrapped around her waist. She wasn't afraid, like Marquez was. She wasn't wearing much, either, just a loincloth of her own and a leather strip around her chest as much to protect her breasts as to keep them from flopping around when she moved.

He didn't know what to say to the woman. He didn't move. All his memories came flooding back, all the old habits of submission to women. He couldn't help it. The instinct was too strong, after all he'd endured. Maybe if he allowed her to take what she wanted, she'd leave him alone.

He rolled on his back and grimaced as dirt once again worked itself into his wounds. He lay there, utterly exposed, and prepared to let his mind drift away when she touched him. It was the only way to survive, to let his mind go somewhere else while his body did whatever it needed to.

"Marquez?" Her voice came from a distance. The sound of his name surprised him. How did she know? Something covered him, soft. A blanket. "Marquez, it's not like that here. *I'm* not like that. You're safe here. That's what Gharial has been trying to tell you. Can you hear him?"

"Hear him?" Gharial. So that was Olive's name. He wondered how the hell she knew his.

"Maybe you can't," she said. "It comes easier to some, and there's always the bond, if you're willing, but we wouldn't ask that of you until you're well enough to bear it. Now get up; there's no need to grovel in the dirt. Gharial and Anole won't hurt you. I swear it."

She inched nearer, and he began to shiver. "No one touches me. I don't care."

"Marquez," she began, but the red lizard put a hand on her shoulder. She looked up to meet his eyes before she returned her gaze to me. "I told Krait how frightened you were. He wants Anole to drug you, to sleep, so he can look after you."

"No. No drugs." He rolled back onto his side with his knees pulled up to his chest, grateful for the blanket.

"I know you're afraid. We all do. But Anole is a healer, of sorts, and Gharial is his apprentice. At least let them carry you back --"

"No." His voice broke, and he started to weep. The woman looked up at Krait, her face stricken. "What about Jared? What are you going to do to us?"

"We won't do anything you don't want us to. As for Jared --" She glanced again at Krait. "His mind is gone. It will take some doing to retrieve it, if we can do it at all. He's near death, but I think you know this."

Something inside Marquez's chest cracked. All for nothing. Jared would die, and he would live alone, surrounded by lizards who could read his mind... He tried to find that place he'd known so well aboard the ship, that hidden place in his mind where he could hide away and nothing could hurt him. Except that wouldn't help Jared. Marquez had to stay here and fight and get Jared to safety, where they could be alone, and no one would touch them again.

"There's no need to hide from us. You're safe here."

She didn't understand. Since landing here, he'd been almost at the breaking point. If he let it out -- all his anger and fear and rage and incomprehension of his life on the ship -- he didn't know what would happen. He'd go mad. He'd seen it enough in the older men, all of whom had been quietly collected and taken away. He didn't know what happened to them after that.

"Don't bottle it up, Marquez. Let it come."

No, no, no! He closed his eyes and curled up as tightly as he could, focusing on the pain in his body and doing everything he could to push his fear away. It was almost as if he was still on the *Trafalgar*, the sight and smell of it was so real. The scent of blood and sex and cold metal, Jared's pliant body in his arms, the women, surrounding him and pinning him down while they jabbed needle after needle into his arm.

"Marquez." Her voice held a sort of pity. Without warning, she reached out to touch his face, palm flat against his cheek. He screamed again, and then he was lost, back to the *Trafalgar* and the horrors within the compound.

## Chapter Eight

When Marquez woke again, it was night, and he was back in the hammock. He didn't hurt so badly anymore, and someone had wrapped a leafy poultice around each of his feet, but hunger clawed at his belly. He'd been on the nutrient drips on the *Trafalgar* so long that he barely recognized the sensation.

Gharial was beside him, one arm behind his head for support while the other held a bowl of some sort of broth to Marquez's lips. It smelled wonderful, natural and earthy after his time in the sterile confines of the ship. But while he had every intention of swallowing, his body betrayed him. He'd been given the nutrient drips for too long. His body didn't recognize the broth as food, and he choked and spat most of it back out at his host.

Gharial wasn't offended. At least, he didn't appear to be. He held the bowl up and, slower this time, let a bit of it trickle into Marquez's mouth.

Still no good. Marquez's body revolted, and flecks of broth dripped from Gharial's muzzle.

"I'm sorry," Marquez told him, choking now as his throat tightened with tears. "I want to eat. I'm hungry, but I can't."

The lizard held the bowl up one last time, still determined, but Marquez turned his head away from it. Gharial let him rest, and disappeared for a short while. He returned after Marquez's tears had stopped, and gently pried apart his lips and put something under his tongue. Sweet and hard. He mimed that Marquez shouldn't chew it, so he didn't. He just let the cloying sweetness melt and mix with his saliva. After a while he began to suck on it, and his mouth remembered what it was like to do such things.

When it was gone, Marquez opened his mouth and waggled his tongue to show Gharial. In response, the lizard resumed his earlier position, and let some of the cooling broth trickle into his mouth. Marquez swallowed this time, and was ecstatic. His stomach rumbled, crying for more, but Gharial kept the drip to a maddeningly slow and necessary pace.

Long before Marquez was sated, Gharial set the bowl down and let him rest again. Marquez had the faint sense that he approved, and was happy with his patient's progress. Marquez was getting used to him, as long as he didn't touch him any more than was absolutely necessary. He almost *liked* the lizard. Gharial was fascinating to watch. He had a human intelligence, yet he was alien in his movements and reactions. And kind; Marquez found himself relaxing enough to almost trust the lizard.

"How's Jared?" He could barely make out the other hammock in the dimness. "I want to see him." He struggled, hands going through the netting of the hammock before he managed to steady himself and sit up to see better. He almost had one leg out before Gharial caught his ankle and tucked it back inside.

<Stay.> The firm thought, coupled with the lizard's flicking tongue and sharp claws discouraged Marquez from any further attempts. He did seem to sense Marquez's distress, and, once he was sure his patient would stay put, walked the short distance to the hammock on his hind legs. Marquez couldn't make out what he did, but Gharial soon waddled back. The thought he sent Marquez wasn't positive.

Marquez reached up to wipe away the sudden wetness on his cheek. "Don't let him die. Whatever you do, don't let him die."

<Calm,> Gharial sent, and curled on the ground beneath Marquez's hammock.

Sleep didn't come easily, especially on that first night. He was all the more terrified because he couldn't see what made the multitude of noises. There was a slow, raspy shuffling that might or might not have been lizards walking back and forth. Loud, chirping sounds, irritatingly repetitive, or low buzzes that seemed to come near and then disappear. He was sure Gharial meant his presence to be reassuring, but Marquez kept thinking of the lizard's pointed teeth and wandering tongue.

He could barely stand to shut his eyes; to him, every sound in the night meant a matron looking for a troublemaker, or one of the doctors coming to fetch Marquez or some other unfortunate man for yet another experiment. Every movement of the air was like a touch of their hands. So it was little wonder that he screamed when he saw a six-legged, metallic-looking creature crawling up his chest. He couldn't stand the feeling; it made his whole body itch with half-remembered pain.

Gharial was there, as soon as Marquez made the noise. A long, sticky tongue shot out, and the thing was gone. His body was his own again.

<Calm,> he sent. <Safe.> Those were the only emotions he could get across, but Marquez believed him.

"Stay for a while. Please. I can't -- I'm not used to this." He gestured with his arm, meant to encompass the world beyond the wood and thatch dwelling.

Gharial seemed to understand. He sat upright beside Marquez for a long time, perhaps wondering if his pet human would go to sleep. Marquez couldn't, not after a fright like that. There were too many sounds behind which might lurk something of malicious intent. Gharial offered drugs, but Marquez refused. He wanted to be in control. He couldn't bear to let himself go to anyone or anything, no matter how kindly meant. He still couldn't believe



the lizards would keep him here out of kindness. The woman seemed well-treated and unafraid, but he wasn't a woman.

Exhaustion at last overcame his terror, but his sleep remained uneasy and full of nightmares.

\* \* \* \* \*

It soon became clear that Marquez had to rely on Gharial for nearly everything. He couldn't walk yet; even if his feet were healed, the lack of nutrient drip had sapped his strength completely. And if he couldn't walk, he couldn't go to the latrine pits the lizards dug to see to their private needs. Shamefully, and because he had no choice, he soiled the loincloths that Gharial wrapped around him. The lizard seemed to take it as a matter of course, and made no fuss as he removed the old one and set about cleaning him.

The last Gharial did with great care. Marquez was already afraid of being touched; being touched *there*, no matter how gently and unobtrusively, always triggered his body's physical response, and his mind immediately went elsewhere until Gharial was finished and his rebellious body was under control again. The entire experience was humiliating to go through at least once and usually twice a day. Gharial said nothing, thought nothing at him. Marquez could only assume that he thought humans were disgusting in their ways, but there was no help for it.

From his hammock, he could see the green lizard, Anole, do the same thing for Jared. The lizard moved with such a delicacy that Jared hardly reacted to his inevitable touch. Anole hardly left the boy's side, which only made Marquez worry more. If he were getting better, he wouldn't need such constant attention. He was too far away to touch, but Marquez talked to him, long, one-sided conversations about how wonderful it was to be off the ship and breathing fresh air, and how lucky they were to have found the lizards. Jared never answered or gave any other indication that he heard.

The woman didn't come near him again. He decided she knew the response her presence triggered, and respected him enough to keep her distance until he was at least somewhat recovered. He had a thousand questions to ask her. How had she adapted to life here? The women on *Trafalgar* would have found it a backwards, hostile place, much as Marquez did. All he'd known in his life was captivity, plush though it had been at times. To be able to walk around and to breathe unrecycled air -- the feeling was heady and terrifying. There were no walls here, no protection from the sun's heat and damage, nor from the insects that continued to plague him when he sweated. Food didn't come prepared on a tray. He watched lizards bringing in meat or piles of leafy green things, and it seemed as if they were always cutting or peeling or grinding something for food.

Jared soon had another attendant for the times when Anole was needed elsewhere, a thin, juvenile-looking blue-black lizard that snapped at the buzzing insects and kept Jared's skin cool with damp cloths. Anole continued to dose Jared with a number of concoctions, with the younger lizard patiently holding the boy's head up and waiting for the liquid to dribble between his parted lips.

Still, Jared didn't wake. His only noticeable reaction was an added tenseness whenever one of the lizards touched him. Even the gentlest caress made him shiver and become aroused. He grew thinner, and Marquez grew more despondent. There was no doubt that the lizards meant anything but kindness, and it was clear that they were doing everything they could. It frustrated Marquez that all he could do was lie here and watch as his friend and lover died.

And then finally -- finally! -- Gharial had gotten enough of his shame and embarrassment and helped him up out of the hammock and toward one of the latrine pits. Marquez had to lean on him every step of the way because he limped on his still-healing feet, but this he was willing to do so for the sake of relieving himself without Gharial needing to clean up afterwards.

As they made their way back to his hammock, they met the woman and her lizard escort, Krait. Marquez took his first good look at the red-scaled lizard; he wore a loincloth, like Gharial and the rest, but he also wore a necklace of sharp and deadly-looking teeth. Marquez hadn't seen any of the lizards wearing jewelry. Was he the leader, then? He might have asked her, but he stumbled. He didn't even know her name.

"Krait watches over his people," the woman said, "and my name is Eilis."

"Stop it," Marquez said. She gave him a confused look. "Stop reading my mind. I can't stand it."

She looked immediately contrite. "I'm sorry. I've gotten so used to it, I'd forgotten you can't."

Marquez stood there, mute and bewildered. He'd never heard a woman apologize for anything. Never. And, though he tried as hard as he could, he couldn't prevent his body's automatic response upon seeing her. His loincloth developed a distinct bulge. He crouched down on the ground, his knees upward, feigning a sudden weakness in a belated attempt to hide it.

"Marquez," Eilis began, and unhooked her arm from Krait's. She knelt in front of him in an attempt to get him to look at her.

"How did you get here, anyway?" he asked, desperate to change the subject.

"I escaped. Like you. Only it was far easier for one of three thousand women to escape, rather than one man out of thirty. I wanted to be something other than a brood mare; I wanted a life beyond the one they'd planned out for me. They had no right to do what they did. To either of us. I fear they'll come back for you."

"No, they won't. We're defective," he said it with a rueful half-smile.

She glanced down at what he was trying to hide and raised an eyebrow.

"He's -- we're -- we were lovers." Back on the ship, he would have been beaten for admitting that. *Had* been beaten, he thought, as he remembered the last few days on the ship.

She wasn't surprised. Instead, she nodded slowly, and looked at Gharial for a long moment before returning her gaze to me. "It's all right, Marquez. Things like that don't matter here. We won't beat you. We can help you, if you'll let us. It must be hard, to live in fear all the time as you do."

Eilis meant to be sympathetic, but her voice began to sound like *them*, honeyed words making promises, trying to convince him that they were right and he was wrong. He turned his head away from her, no longer willing to listen.

"I'm not like them. I swear it." Her voice was adamant, but he still couldn't make himself believe her.

When he wouldn't look at her, she silently rose, and she and Krait continued on their way. He wouldn't stand again until he felt himself relax and he was sure the telltale bulge under his loincloth had disappeared. Gharial waited patiently until he was ready, and they walked back to his hammock. He felt even weaker than before.

## Chapter Nine

The other lizards in the village somehow seemed to know not to come near Marquez. He'd sit outside in the sun, back leaning up against one of the rough wooden posts, and watch them all in an attempt to make sense of the world in which he found himself.

It wasn't just the lizards to which he had to grow accustomed. It was the world itself. He'd never seen green, growing things, or bugs, or even a patch of blue sky. Even the air felt and tasted strange. And while he was learning to enjoy these things, not to be afraid of them, he started to curse the life he'd led and the women who had forced him into it.

Gharial found him weeping, one day, one of the many times he just crumpled to the ground in grief and horror. Gharial pulled Marquez to him, aware that the human now found his touch comforting as long as he didn't go too far, and wrapped his tail around Marquez's legs.

"Is that what you're supposed to do with a child?" Marquez asked. He'd figured out that Gharial could hear him, and the openings on either side of his head were his ears. "They're playing with the little lizards. Feeding them, holding them, and they're not frightened. They look like they're having fun."

It had never been like that in the crèche. The boys had always implicitly known that the matrons were there to perform only the most basic of duties. Whatever friendship and support they created had to come from each other, and even then it was tentative and restricted, diluted by the drugs the women gave them to keep them docile. The boys always knew they'd disappear when they got older. No one wanted to make friends only to lose them later.

The lizards had no such restrictions. The youngest lizards played with each other, with the adults occasionally thrusting their muzzles in when the play got too rough. Marquez wondered what it would have been like to grow up like that, among other little ones and adults who actually *cared* and who wouldn't disappear.

There was Gharial, of course. He *seemed* to care, but Marquez couldn't bring himself to accept it. He would leave, or leave Marquez, when he was well enough to tend to his own needs. And he was a lizard, not remotely human. Marquez figured he was probably ugly to the lizard, thin, black-haired, all soft flesh rather than smooth scales.

Gharial didn't let Marquez go, though. The lizard must have been able to sense his pain. Marquez thought hard back to his days in the crèche, but couldn't ever remember wanting to do anything active. Their days consisted of little more than eating, sleeping, and watching the vids the matrons thought appropriate.

The little lizards had brought out one of the balls, and batted it around with their noses and tails as they ran around on all fours. One of them, a pretty one with bluish-green scales, was a little too eager and smacked the ball hard enough that it flew over the heads of his companions and bounced over to rest near Marquez.

All the young ones paused and turned their heads toward him and Gharial. The lizard let go and gave Marquez a shove forward, toward the ball. He glanced back at Gharial, nervous, but the lizard made a gesture with his head that Marquez took to mean he should get the ball back to the little ones.

He picked it up, and twirled it around, feeling the smooth surface. One of the little lizards, a reddish one, gave an impatient snort. Obviously he was delaying their game. He threw it back, with the ball listing awkwardly to the side. There was a brief scuffle and a cloud of dust, and for a few wild moments the little lizards were all over each other, fighting for possession of the ball.

And then, absurdly, the ball once again appeared at Marquez's feet. The blue-green lizard stared at him, tail flicking in impatience.

So did Gharial. He didn't have any facial expressions that Marquez could interpret, but he had the feeling he was as impatient as the young ones for the return of the ball. Marquez picked it up, and this time, before he had a chance to throw it, Gharial was behind him, nudging him toward the cluster of little lizards. They surrounded the human, a few rising up awkwardly on their hind legs, using their tails for balance. Marquez dropped the ball.

Once again there was a scuffle, and once again the ball landed near his feet. This time, he kicked it. The little ones were delighted and went speeding after it, surprisingly fast despite their ungainly appearance. After watching a little more, Marquez began to get the idea that there were two teams of lizards, and the point of the game was to keep the ball away from the other team as long as possible. He must have been recruited to the blue-green lizard's team, because that little one kept passing the ball to him and he back to the little lizard just before the reddish lizard and his friends stole it away.

Marquez glanced back at Gharial, but he was basking in the sun, his eyes half-closed, his body long and lean and gorgeous. A shudder of desire raced through Marquez. Eilis was perfectly happy with Krait, and he obviously cared for her. Gharial continued to watch over Marquez and guide him even though Marquez was well enough to care for himself. Could it be that Gharial, like Krait, actually wanted --

The thought was cut off when the ball again landed at Marquez's feet. With a smile, he lifted the ball over his head and tossed it back into the fray.

\* \* \* \* \*

During the day, it was easy for Marquez to remember that he no longer had to fear the women, but at night, his nightmares got worse. It was a loss of emotional control that scared him. The more he realized how badly he and Jared had been treated, and what kind of life they could and should have led, the more his anger leaked out in his dreams. Additional memories flooded his mind as he remembered more and more of what the women had done, restrained him, jabbed him with needles, smothered him with their bodies --

He woke at the sound of a scream. From the rawness of his throat, and Gharial's hasty appearance, it must have been his.

His body was slick with sweat, his mouth sour from fear. The one thought in his head was that he had to get away, to run or to let himself drift. He clutched the edge of the hammock, stiff and anxious, ready to leap out and run at the first hint of danger.

<Calm.>

The mind-touch was easy to recognize, but he still didn't dare to believe it. If he were still having these nightmares, he wasn't safe. He couldn't calm down. They'd be back to find him despite his bravado with Eilis. They would come and take him away, and he would be helpless again.

Gharial usually didn't touch him, but this time he did, using the back of his clawed hand to rub smooth circles on Marquez's back. He'd seen the other lizards do this with the little ones, to calm them down to sleep. The gesture was having the same effect on Marquez. The pounding in his chest slowed, and the usual after-nightmare fear dissipated.

He lay there for a while, not moving, not thinking, just focusing on Gharial's soothing touch. His tension slowly eased, but it wasn't enough. He was still in danger. He still had nightmares that made him cry out in his sleep and left him wet and shivering. He didn't dare to close his eyes again.



The hammock moved, and he felt the extra weight of someone else slipping inside. Gharial. He tensed again, but the lizard did nothing more than turn so they lay back to back with no sign of intimacy. The heat of his body was comforting, the slight roughness of the scales on his back different enough from the women's touch that Marquez could relax, and he drifted off to sleep. It might have been the emanations from the lizard's mind, or Marquez's own desires, but he dreamed of Jared, of seeing him warm and healthy.

In the dream, he was comfortable, lying on his belly upon a soft mattress. Blankets pooled around him. Air tickled his bare skin. Slowly, he became aware of the weight and heat of someone straddling him.

Jared. He knew the touch immediately. The younger man massaged his shoulders and upper back with firm, sure hands. "Relax," he told Marquez.

Marquez kept trying to twist around to look at him, but Jared kept maneuvering Marquez's head back down. He laughed. "Relax. I'm here."

"You're all right," Marquez said.

"I'm all right. And I'm here for you."

"Let me see you." This time, Jared let him turn over but kept Marquez between his legs. A moment later, Jared's lips were against Marquez's. Marquez groped at him, desperate to touch his skin, eager to hold Jared's naked body against his.

Tongue met tongue, and they played with each other. Jared tasted of sweetness. Marquez ran his fingers through Jared's silky brown hair, determined to keep him close. Jared scooted forward so their cocks touched. Marquez shivered and jerked his hips upward toward Jared's. The younger man's body ground against his, cock to cock.

Jared reached down to fondle Marquez, sliding fingers from tip to base with a touch far more sure and expert than he should have had. Too lost in the moment, Marquez didn't care. He loved Jared, needed him, wanted to be inside him.

He couldn't wait any longer. He grabbed Jared and swung him around to push him face down amidst the blankets. The younger man didn't protest; rather, he seemed eager, knowing what Marquez was about to do to him. Marquez's flailing hands found a bottle of gel. He liberally coated his hands. With his knees, he splayed Jared's legs enough to expose the area between his buttocks. Marquez squeezed each of them, lovingly, before moving inward to explore Jared's interior. One finger went in, two. His heart pounded as he coated Jared's most private place with the gel. In and out, in and out. Beneath him, Jared gasped in pleasure.

Penetration came easily this time, and it was as if Jared's body had been hungry and waiting for Marquez's cock. He slid in, swallowed by the warm, comfortable tightness. He shuddered at the sensation, reveling at the sheer beauty of being able to make love to a man without fear or consequence. "I love you," Marquez said.

Jared didn't answer. Marquez let it go. This was love, it had to be, one body meeting another without pain. It hadn't been like this with the women, who'd only used the men's bodies to further their own purpose.

He went slowly, savoring the feeling of being inside Jared. Reaching beneath Jared's belly, he wrapped a firm hand around Jared's cock. Squeeze and stroke, squeeze and stroke. Jared's body undulated against his, and for a long time, there was only the wet slap of skin and a few quiet moans as Marquez pumped himself in and out.

A few moments longer, and Jared stiffened against him. A cry of pleasure echoed in Marquez's ear when Jared came. Ejaculate coated Marquez's hand, a sort of victory. It was Jared's. And his. Not the women's. Free to be spent wherever they liked.

Marquez gasped at his own release, and then collapsed on top of Jared. They lay together for a while, spooned, sated, but not for long. Even though Jared was here with him, Marquez felt desperate, as if Jared would be torn from him too soon.

Jared must have sensed his anxiety. He rolled over to stroke Marquez's face and kissed him. "Let me, now," Jared said. "You've given me so much."

He urged Marquez to lay flat on his back with knees raised. Marquez closed his eyes, focusing on the sensation, on Jared's touch, willing the time to last as long as possible. Gel came from somewhere. Coolness spread along Marquez's cock and between his buttocks. One finger slipped inside, two, liberally coating his insides with the ointment. He sighed in contentment, then moaned as Jared's wandering fingers hit that spot of pleasure. "You've learned," Marquez told him. His flaccid cock roused from the internal stimulation.

"I had a good teacher."

Marquez had the fleeting thought that it couldn't have been him. Marquez hadn't known about that, or that, or --

"Damn," Marquez said. Jared's mouth had enveloped his cock while his fingers explored. The thumb from his partially-inserted hand massaged the smooth stretch of skin between his legs and then pressed against the fleshy sacs. Jared's tongue worked wonders, tickling the length of his shaft. Any exhaustion Marquez's body had felt was long gone, and his cock was already stiff and erect, eager for more.

"Here," Jared said. He lifted one of Marquez's legs, and then the other, over his shoulders, and eased himself forward so his own erection pressed between Marquez's buttocks. He jerked forward without warning, but his entrance was smooth. Marquez clawed the sheets as heat and tension gripped his lower body.

They came together, this time, both of them arching their bodies backward and uttering groans of pleasure. The little ejaculate Marquez had left dribbled down his cock and onto his belly. Jared smiled, lowered Marquez's legs, and leaned forward to lick it up as if it were a treat.

"There," he said when he was done. "It's finished. Good-bye, Marquez." He gave Marquez a faint, sad smile. "Thank you for everything."

Horrified, Marquez grabbed at him, only to meet air. Jared wasn't solid anymore. "Don't leave," Marquez said. Jared didn't answer. His image faded. "Don't leave!"

His own cry gave him a jolt. Marquez opened his eyes to see Gharial's, eerie and iridescent in the dark. Gharial's hand still stroked his back. "Jared," Marquez said, suddenly anxious.

He was there, a few steps away, lying limp in the hammock. A shaft of moonlight revealed Anole's curved back as he rested on the far side. Unlike Gharial, he looked to be asleep.

"It wasn't real," Marquez said in disappointment. "He's still hurt. Don't let him die. Please, don't let him die. I need him."

Gharial nuzzled him, exuding sympathy. "I need him," Marquez said again. Gharial continued to rub his back for comfort, and the next time Marquez fell asleep, he didn't dream.

## Chapter Ten

Eilis took to taking Marquez for long walks, both to help him get his strength back and to explain everything in this new world. It also helped keep his mind off Jared, who still wasn't getting any better. Marquez liked the walks; every step brought him something new, and it felt so good to be out with the sun touching his skin. He felt peaceful, despite the fact that if he were left alone, he'd have no idea how to survive on this world.

The colors stunned Marquez the most. It was like he'd been blind while aboard the dim, monochrome *Trafalgar*. Coming here, the sky was a deep, radiant blue, the ground a wash of red dirt and rocks, golden scrub and grasses, flowers that bloomed from green stalks with orange, violet, and blue blooms. Insects, too, were myriad hues, with shiny carapaces changing color in the light.

He had the feeling he annoyed Eilis, because he'd stop every so often to bend over and pick something up. A sparkling rock. A curiously shaped leaf. A handful of soft dirt, so he could feel it run through his fingers. He started collecting bits and pieces of his favorite things in the hopes that he could show them to Jared.

"You're even worse off than I was," Eilis said bluntly. She'd taken him past the pond, and they walked along the river that fed it. "At least we had access to information regarding

planets and what we might find on them. But you --" She shook her head as Marquez picked his way delicately amidst the green plants on the ground.

"They showed us very little. Our videos were mostly of men being obedient to women. I only learned the reason for our treatment through gossip, and a few favors I did for the women. They kept us so ignorant. I can't even read." His hands clenched into fists. "I hate not knowing what everything is. Dirt. Sun. Rocks. Lizards. These are all new things to me. What is this?" He bent down to touch the plants under his feet.

"Truly? I don't know its real name. The lizards call it a water-plant, because it can absorb water through its leaves and hold it there to use during a drought."

"Drought?"

"A time when rain does not fall and water is scarce." She sighed. "Really, this would be easier if you would only --"

"Only what?" His interest piqued. He'd be willing to do anything to make his transition easier.

She shook her head, and took a few hasty steps forward. "Forget it. Look at this." She knelt and fingered a bright orange blossom.

"Pretty," Marquez said, and wondered what she'd been about to say. "You talk to the lizards, don't you?"

"Yes." Her voice was short, abrupt.

"Can I learn?"

"No."

He stepped back, stunned at her bluntness. "I'm too stupid."

"Marquez, wait. It's not that."

"Then what? It's not my fault I don't know anything." He turned and blundered off into denser vegetation. "It's because I'm a man, isn't it? We don't deserve to learn anything because most of us die anyway."

A hand grabbed at him, but he flicked it away. No one touched him without permission, especially a woman. "Leave me alone."

"Marquez, *stop!*"

The urgency in her voice made him freeze. He found himself looking down at a patch of spotted, pointed leaves.

"Please back up. Touch those, and they'll make you itch for a week. They don't bother the lizards, but I had to find out the hard way."

Gingerly, he stepped back, but he didn't turn around to look at her. His face burned with shame.

"It's not because you're a man. You're not stupid, Marquez. It's not your fault you never got to learn anything. I don't mind teaching you."

"But you won't teach me more about the lizards."

"I can't. Not because I don't think you can, but --" She made a little noise of frustration. "-- everything comes in its time. You're not ready for it."

"What does it take?" He couldn't keep the annoyance out of his voice.

"Trust."

He snorted. "I trust you. I'm out here alone with you, aren't I?"

"That's not what I mean. Not entirely." She stepped forward toward some waist-high plants and bent down to pull them up from the roots. "Here. Help me pick a few of these. Good for making baskets."

He did as she asked, still fuming at her treatment. She piled his basket full of the leaves, then picked an armful for herself.

She had to be wrong about him. He trusted her. Didn't he? And Gharial. The lizard had been gentle with him, and hadn't done anything to him that wasn't necessary to help him get well again.

He had a nagging feeling that, at least in part, she was right. Kind as she and Krait and Gharial were, he still expected them to turn on him, and that, he supposed, was no basis for trust at all.

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Marquez went to sit by Jared one afternoon. The younger man's blue-black attendant hovered nearby, though not so close that Marquez felt intruded upon. He longed to touch Jared, and hold him, but even the lightest caress caused him pain. Jared couldn't bear to be touched by anyone. So Marquez had to make do with talking, and hoping Jared might hear him.

"It's everything we hoped it would be once we got away from the women. The lizards don't care who we love. It's scary, too. I mean, there are insects that make all kinds of noises and will land on you at any time, and plants that you can't touch because they'll hurt your skin, and even staying out in the sun too long hurts.

"And the lizards, of course. I was afraid of them at first, but now I enjoy being around them. When you get better I'll teach you how to play their ball game. The little lizards have two teams, and..." He kept rambling, telling Jared about the details of the game, down to which lizards fought over the ball the most, and which were the most skilled at scoring points.

"Wait until you meet Gharial. All of the lizards are neat to watch, but there's something about him that's different. Maybe it's his color. Most of the lizards are brighter. He's strong and sleek and kind, and helped me get better, just like I know Anole and his friend are helping you."

He yelped when a cold, rough snout jabbed at his back. Turning, he caught a flicker of amusement from Gharial. At once, Marquez felt embarrassed. How long had the lizard been there, listening?



He smelled the reason for Gharial's visit before he saw it. Food. The lizard produced a clay bowl filled with strips of cooked meat, cooked vegetables, and short, white grains soaked until they became soft. He had Eilis to thank for some of the food preparation; the lizards had learned a while ago that their pet humans were repelled by the thought of uncooked meat.

The bowl to his lips, Marquez used his fingers to scoop the contents into his mouth. The lizards didn't bother with eating utensils, and neither did Eilis. She claimed it was just as easy to use her fingers. Marquez was just happy he could eat at all, and it tasted wonderful. He'd never realized how bland the food on the *Trafalgar* had been until he had the chance to taste something fresh.

Gharial watched him eat, head cocked to one side.

Marquez used his head to indicate Jared. "He'll get better, won't he? I need him. I don't want to be here without him." He couldn't suppress a shudder. He still had nightmares until Gharial came to soothe him, which was nearly every night. The lizards would never understand what he'd been through on the ship, and Eilis -- she was a woman, and had the opposite perspective. He enjoyed her company, but it wasn't the same. He wanted Jared, and to be able to hold him, and talk to him.

The lizard glanced up at the still hammock. His lack of response was the same every time Marquez asked him. No change.

Anole shuffled in, and glared at the two of them. Hastily, Marquez got to his feet and went back toward his own hammock with Gharial at his heels. It was time for Jared's own dinner, and Anole didn't like anyone but his assistant nearby.

From a safe distance, Marquez watched as the green lizard went about changing Jared's loincloth and cleaning him up. This time, Jared's physical reactions were weak, as if his body lacked the strength to respond. Neither did he do anything when Anole held a bowl of broth

to his lips and let the liquid trickle inside. Jared couldn't even swallow; Anole had to gently rub Jared's throat with the knuckle of his finger to stimulate the reflex.

Marquez could only watch, stunned and depressed. Gharial thrust his head underneath Marquez's arm, and Marquez hugged him around the neck, tightly, to absorb whatever support the lizard could give him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"He's worried about you."

Marquez was helping Eilis to weave reed baskets, her idea of giving him something useful and not strenuous to do. He wasn't nearly so deft as she was, but she said it came with practice. The lizards loved the baskets, since Eilis had various designs that they could carry in their hands or on their backs, and their thick fingers and sharp claws made working with the delicate grasses nearly impossible.

Marquez focused on the over, under, over, under pattern of threading the reed around the framework, but she wouldn't let him avoid the statement. "Dammit, Marquez, he and every other lizard can sense what you're going through. He wants to help, he *can* help, but you're pushing him away."

"Because there's no reason any of them should take an interest in me. I'm fine. I'm up and walking around. I'm healed. He doesn't need to watch every step I take." He swore as he realized he'd broken the pattern, and started to unweave the reed back to the flaw. "I don't know why these lizards care about us, anyway. We're pathetic weaklings, good for nothing except breeding more pathetic weaklings."

Eilis didn't reply. Marquez dared a glance at her face to see it taut and tight-lipped. "You've been here for a while now. All of us care about you, and none of us, especially me, see you as a pathetic weakling. Other men, and women, would have died from exposure, or just from giving up. Some would have left the wounded behind to save themselves."

They worked a while longer in silence until Eilis asked, "What are you going to do when he dies?"

He felt sick. "He's not going to die. Once I get him to realize he's safe, that I'm here for him, he'll be fine."

"There's nothing you can do for him. Anole is doing everything he knows how, and it's not working. What will you do when he dies?"

He didn't have an answer, because in his mind, Jared's death had never been an option. They were supposed to get out of the ship, and live together without fear.

Eilis caught the thought. "Are you going to give up, then? No Jared, no nothing? You've been spending most of your time with him. We admire you for your dedication, but you need to think of yourself, too. You're alive, and you're free. You have friends here." Her basket was tightly woven, rounded, finished. She clenched it hard enough that her knuckles were as white as bone. "I pity you, Marquez. Despise me for it, if you like, because your body and mind have been broken, and so has your spirit. You can't trust anyone, and there is no love without trust, no acceptance, no happiness. You're as good as dead now, anyway."

She rose and walked back toward the compound, taking her basket with her. Not long ago, her words would have hurt him badly enough that he would have retreated to his hammock and watched as his tears dropped to the floor.

Now, there was only a hollow, dead feeling. His hands were numb as he worked a new reed into the basket. It went crooked. He didn't care. If Jared died, nothing else mattered.

## Chapter Eleven

Eilis came to see him one afternoon when Anole was hovering over Jared's nearby hammock. Krait followed her, and Marquez sensed that something was going to happen to Jared, for better or worse. Gharial, too, was at his side, and seemed more withdrawn than usual.

"Are you Jared's guardian?" Eilis asked.

Marquez looked at her blankly, not understanding.

"Do you speak for him?"

Marquez shook his head. "No. He should speak for himself. That's why we ran from the ship. I just wanted to give him a chance."

She nodded, and looked unhappy. Behind her, Krait stood solid and unreadable.

"What are you going to do to him?" He looked from one lizard to another, hoping for an explanation. None of them, including Eilis looked at him. Instead, they watched each other. "Stop talking without me! What are you going to do?"

Gharial nuzzled his shoulder, but Marquez shoved him away. "It's bad, isn't it? Whatever you're going to do. Tell me, already! I'm his lover. I deserve to know."

“Calm down, Marquez,” Eilis said. “You aren’t helping. Krait and Anole have a proposition. They may have a way to reach Jared, but there are still details to be worked out. They will speak to you further when the time comes. Will you be content with that?”

“Anything, as long as it helps him.” He grasped Eilis’ hands in his, startled at the exuberance of his own reaction. “I want him back, no matter what it takes.” This was the first hope he’d had in over a month. Jared had leveled out, not getting worse, but not getting better. If they’d finally thought of something that might help...

His eagerness left him with a surplus of energy. He couldn’t wander around the dwelling all day, waiting to see what Krait and Anole came up with, so he went outside for some sun. To his delight, the little lizards engaged him in another bout of ball. He was getting the hang of it now, and learning how to manipulate the ball with his feet while he ran to keep it away from the other team. Gharial, ever watchful, monitored the activity from nearby. Marquez felt pleased to have him there so he could show the lizard just how well he was getting around. A moment later, guilt made him keep his eyes averted from the lizard. It should have been Jared out here, enjoying this with him.

After a while, he had to stop. The little lizards had far more endurance than he did, so he compromised by fetching their ball whenever it went awry. After one particularly hard kick, it went past Gharial and toward Marquez’s hammock. Gharial lurched to his feet just as Marquez reached him.

“What’s the matter? Are you going to play to?” He went to one side, but Gharial blocked him. He tried the other direction, but Gharial stopped him there, too. Now Marquez was getting annoyed, and a couple of the young lizards huffed, impatient at his slowness in fetching the ball. Marquez crossed his arms and met Gharial’s eyes. “All right. Have it your way. Get it yourself, then.”

The lizard seemed satisfied at that, but the moment he turned his head Marquez dashed ahead to grab the ball, which had stopped just at the edge of the dwelling. He grabbed it and was going to go back to the little lizards, when he noticed more visitors than usual inside.

Krait's unmistakable red hide squatted next to Anole's. A limp form rested against Krait's chest. Jared. Marquez watched in horrified fascination as one clawed hand wrapped around Jared's wrist and brought the paper-thin flesh to his snout. He bit

A chill rushed through Marquez. "What are you doing?" The ball dropped from nerveless hands and rolled behind him. He took a step forward, and another, until a pair of strong, scaly arms encircled his waist. "Let me go!" His voice rose high, panicky. "They're going to kill him. Let me go, let me go!"

He flailed and kicked at Gharial, but the lizard refused to let go. He tried to drag Marquez backwards, but Marquez grabbed onto one of the roof supports for the dwelling so he couldn't be moved.

Eilis rushed over and clapped a hand against his mouth. "Hush! You're only making it worse. Leave them alone. They'll take care of him."

Furious, Marquez shook his head. Over her shoulder, Jared lay, limp as ever in Krait's arms, a new expression of pain on his face. As he watched, Anole drifted over on all fours next to Krait. The green lizard stripped the loincloth from around Jared's waist and then from around his own. The lizards had no external genitalia; instead, they had a sort of pouch at the base of their tails. Marquez watched, half-sick and half-aroused, as Anole's genitals emerged, shiny and red and thick.

The lizard had not one phallus, but two, and he clearly meant to use them on Jared.

Marquez would have shrieked if it weren't for Eilis's hand. He wriggled and struggled while Gharial gently pulled him backwards, trying to make him loosen his grip. With her free hand, Eilis pried at his fingers. "You have to trust us, Marquez. If there were any other option, they would have done so."

<Calm,> Gharial sent, although the emotion was overlaid with concern. Not for Jared, but for him.

Eilis's voice was calm, but did nothing to allay Marquez's horror. "This is the way the bonding is done," She didn't look at him, but concentrated on his fingers, and let go of his mouth. "We're not the first humans the lizards have bonded with. There were more, years ago, other refugees. The method was figured out by accident, but once they found out it worked, they did it for everyone."

"But -- they're *hurting* him!"

"Poison hurts," Eilis agreed.

"Poison? You *poisoned* him?" In his shock, he'd let go of the pole, and in one swift motion, Gharial was on his hind legs with the front ones still clasped around Marquez's struggling body and heading toward the far side of the compound. Beyond that lay the pond where the lizards drew fresh water and did their wash. Gharial took him there and deposited him on the large, flat piece of sandstone beside the pond.

<*Calm. Safe,*> the lizard thought at him. He reached toward Marquez's shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" Marquez scrabbled to the edge of the rock, just out of Gharial's reach. "You lying bastards. You said you wouldn't hurt us, but you poisoned him, and now you're going to --" He shook badly enough that he couldn't say anything more.

Gharial backed up and went to all fours, a submissive stance. Marquez found his voice again. "Filthy, lying, awful creatures. I wish we'd never found you. I wish we'd died out there in the sun as free men, and not as one of your toys." He spit. The froth landed on Gharial's snout, but the lizard did nothing to wipe it away.

<*Hurt,*> the lizard sent.

"Damn right I'm hurt. You lied to me. So did Eilis. Leading me to believe that you were helping, when all that you want it to use me like the women did." He choked and trembled. "I don't ever want to see you again. Not you, and not anybody. I'd rather die." He curled up on the rock with his back toward Gharial. "I'd rather die."

He felt the lizard's sending of hurt and disappointment as Gharial padded away. Gritting his teeth, he willed himself to bury his own raw emotions. He didn't need the lizard anyway. He didn't need any of them. Once Jared got better, they'd leave, and find a way to live on their own.

He had the sense that Gharial stood watch behind him, waiting patiently until Marquez calmed down. It took until the sun went down and the night bugs began to nip at his skin when he went back to the compound and his hammock. Gharial followed behind, silent and dark as a shadow. Marquez ignored him.

Anole, the green lizard, dozed on the ground beneath Jared's hammock. The young man was so still that he appeared to be dead, but a closer look showed the light rise and fall of his chest. Still alive. Marquez felt dizzy with relief. He dared to take his hand and press the clammy fingers to his lips. "I'm sorry I let them hurt you. As soon as you're well, we'll go away where no one will hurt us again. It'll just be you and me, and we'll be free."

His voice choked with emotion. Jared didn't give any sign that he'd heard.

"Come back to me. I need you." He set the hand, attached to a purpled, swollen arm, back at Jared's side. He glanced down, and saw Anole's eyes, open and glistening, unreadable.

\* \* \* \* \*

It took Marquez five days to find Eilis again. She must have been avoiding him, something that couldn't have been too difficult if she could always sense when he was coming. This was one of the rare afternoons when he'd managed to ditch his caretaker. Gharial had been following him ever since the afternoon Jared had been assaulted. Marquez had the sense that the lizard was trying to apologize, but Marquez ignored him as much as possible. Today, Gharial had finally gone off on some errand and left Marquez to himself.

He cornered Eilis at the river, where she was using a soapy plant to scrub at the stains in her clothing. "You can borrow the soaproot, but I'm not doing your laundry for you," she said.



"I wasn't going to. I mean, I didn't bring..." He spread his arms in a helpless gesture.

She didn't look up from her scrubbing. "What do you want, Marquez?"

He was struck by the venom in her voice. "I want to ask you something." He waited, and continued when there was no response. "Tell me the truth. Tell me what this bond is between you and the lizards."

"Don't ask me. You won't like the answer."

"Please." He crouched down so they were at eye level. "I want to know. Whatever you did for -- for Jared, it seems to be working. He's not dead yet."

"Krait told me to apologize to you. You weren't meant to see that. They thought you'd be distracted long enough, but Jared's case is...complicated." She hauled out one of her makeshift brassieres and hung it over a low, horizontal tree branch. Back at the river's edge, she reached behind her back and untied the strings that secured her current brassiere. Marquez supposed it was a sign of his progress that she bared herself before him, and he didn't grow hard. The doctors would have been disappointed. But whatever ailed him had killed any stirring of lust, no matter how ingrained. The sight of Eilis' bare breasts, glaringly white against her tanned skin, meant nothing to him.

His resolve was further tested when she finished scrubbing that accessory, hung it next to the other, and calmly stepped out of the wrap at her waist. Again, he felt no reaction. His cock hung limply inside his loincloth.

"I'm ready," he said when she'd bent over the water again. Her breasts jiggled as she scoured the leather wrap. "Look." Not to be outdone, he undid his loincloth, dropped it to the ground, and stood naked before her. "See? Nothing's happening. I'm better. I can think for myself now."

She rinsed off the last of the soaproot and stood, holding the garment at the perfect angle to provide a bit of modesty. She didn't look at his limp manhood. Instead, her eyes met his, and he couldn't look anywhere else.

"Marquez." Her voice was quiet, gentler. A few steps brought her near enough that they could touch. Only the wet leather garment dangled in the way, and he found the heady scent of it rather unappealing.

"Tell me how it works. I'm ready to listen."

"No you're not."

He started to feel something. Anger. Except for killing Janet, he'd never fought back against a woman, no matter what they did to him, but in that moment he could have hurt her.

She sensed it. Her eyes widened, just enough so he could see her fear. "Hurt me, then, for not giving you what you want. That's what we both learned, isn't it? Pain is a way to gain information, and to own people." The wrap went flying through the air, landing with a wet *thwack* against a boulder. The water trickled down the stone like blood.

Her skin, warmed by the sun, radiated heat. She stood as close as possible without touching, waiting, testing him to see if he would react.

"Tell me how it works," he repeated.

"You have to let them kill you."

It was only because she said it so matter-of-factly, so sincerely, that Marquez could believe her incredulous statement.

"Their bite is poisonous. Even a small nick could kill either of us in a matter of hours. But their blood is their defense, and their antivenin. That's why, when they roughhouse and one of them nips another, no one dies. They're immune to their own poison."

He was so busy listening to her that he barely realized she'd grasped his wrist and was slowly lifting his forearm.

"One little bite --" She mimed it, pressing her teeth against his wrist. "-- and you start to die." Marquez shivered and tried to pull away, but she wouldn't let go.

“Okay. I get it. They bite me, they let me die so I get some sort of enlightenment, and then I drink their blood so I don’t really die.” He was desperately hoping that the rest of what he thought would happen between Anole and Jared didn’t.

Eilis dropped his arm. “It’s not that easy.”

He took a few steps back, unnerved at the feral edge to her voice.

She followed, keeping pace with every move he made until his back was pressed up against the rough bark of a tree, and the sharp scent of sap assailed his nose. “It’s only the male lizards that take part in this ritual, because only the male lizards can provide the essence needed to implant the seed so the telepathy will occur. The younger lizards aren’t telepathic. It comes with maturity. The males gain it by heritage; the females by mating.”

Horror crept along his spine as her meaning slowly sank in.

“You asked for the truth. This is it. You realized it the other day, but refused to accept it. The male essence must be absorbed into the body. Swallowing doesn’t work; the stomach has too much acid and destroys it. The most effective way is intercourse for both males and females.”

“No.” He felt ill. How could the lizards condone something tantamount to rape? His mind had already been devastated by others using his body. It didn’t seem possible that anything good could come of a pact such as this, no matter how calm and happy Eilis seemed. Surely it was only another way for the lizards to torture him after all, to play at healing him just so they could destroy him again.

“If it makes you feel better, we never do this involuntarily. Jared was an exception. That’s why Anole mated with him himself. He’s got the strongest, steadiest mind, and if anyone had a hope of reaching Jared, it would be Anole. But forced bondings usually don’t work. There has to be a sort of love and trust for them to be the most effective.”

Eilis had him trapped, pinned against the tree, too stunned to think about pushing her away. Right now, he couldn’t bear the thought of touching someone voluntarily.

She gave him a cruel half-smile. "I said you wouldn't like the answer. You aren't ready, Marquez. You won't be. And soon, you will grow unhappy, always being on the edge, feeling a longing you can never satisfy. You can bury your emotions, but they will not go away. You're still captive to your past. We can do no more for you, unless you find it within yourself to trust Gharial, and take the bonding." She walked over to her drying clothes and gathered them into her arms. She turned, and this time her gaze was angry. "You're hurting him by denying him. You can't sense it, but the rest of us can."

Gharial. She had to be talking about Gharial. Marquez felt ill again. "I don't know why he's hurt. He can't love me. I'm nothing but a failure. He must think I'm ugly --"

Her glare made him stop. "Did you ever ask him what he thought? Did you ever pay the least amount of attention to him? He's done nothing but be kind to you. So has everyone else."

"But I can't." Gharial was kind, as she'd said. As the days went by, Marquez could even see a certain sinuousness and grace of form that was attractive, nearly enough to make him want to run his hands along Gharial's sides and back, around the curve of his haunches and underneath the rim of the loincloth to see what lay beneath. But such actions didn't happen in a void; if what Eilis said was true, Gharial would want to touch him back, and even...he shuddered as a memory from the ship washed over him. Fernand, pinning him down, sliding his hated body in and out --

"Marquez." Her voice was sharp, but not from anger. It was enough to bring him back to the dust under his feet and the cattails around the tiny pond. "It won't be like that. Whatever the lizards do, it's out of love, not hate. Trust us. Trust him."

"I'll ask Jared that as soon as he's able to talk. What's it like to fuck a lizard?"

Her jaw clenched, and she shook her head in disgust. She walked away, back toward the village. Marquez sank down to the ground, unsure of what to do next.

## Chapter Twelve

Jared never woke up. He died in the night.

There wasn't any warning, only a little choking sound, and that was it. He stopped breathing. Marquez had opened his mouth to call for Anole, but the lizard was already there, pressing down on Jared's chest in an attempt to force his lungs to breath. It didn't work.

Marquez tumbled out of his hammock and over to Jared's side, where he could only watch, helpless. "Do something. Please!" Tears fell onto Jared's still face. Marquez clasped the boy's cold cheeks and kissed him. "Don't go, Jared. Not after what we went through. Don't let them win." Another kiss, one he was dimly aware that Jared would never feel. "Don't leave me alone here."

The body went slack, the eyes, wide and glassy. Marquez howled in anguish. Someone -- Gharial, had to be Gharial -- touched him and tried to ease him away. Marquez fought. This couldn't be happening. They were supposed to escape together and be able to live and love without fear of punishment.

Gharial sent a thread of emotion. *<Grief.>*

Marquez jerked out of the lizard's grasp and watched him, disbelieving. How could these creatures mourn for someone that wasn't even of their species? How dare they? Jared was his lover, the young man he was supposed to protect, and failed.

The cold, rough snout found its way underneath his arm. Marquez shoved it away. The escape had been for nothing. Jared still died, and now Marquez was alone without any of his own kind. There was Eilis, but she was a woman. It wasn't the same.

He stumbled out of the hut on shaky legs and out of the compound, wandering blindly until he was too tired to go any further. He collapsed in the dirt and rocks, uncaring about his surroundings. He brought to mind the ideas of the meditations he'd taught Jared, the means of escape from a painful reality. He focused on his breathing and let his mind drift to a place where there was no love and no loss, no emotion at all. His one reason for living had been taken away, and now it didn't matter if Marquez even existed. No one to touch. No one to love. Never again.

A short distance away, Gharial laid down and watched over him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Get up." A spray of dirt landed in Marquez's face. Sputtering, he sat up and wiped the grit from his eyes.

Eilis glared down at him, with Krait behind her and looking suitably amused. Despite his efforts, Marquez's body reacted to her presence, or rather, her domination. His mind knew he didn't want her, and yet he grew hard, just as the women had trained him to do. He looked away, ashamed. Why couldn't she just leave him alone? Now he'd ache for the rest of the day unless he could find somewhere private to pleasure himself.

"I'm not leaving you alone because you've been doing nothing but lying in the dirt for the past two days. Gharial didn't spend all that time healing you just to let you pine away after some skinny boy you thought you loved."

He glared at her. "How dare you? You don't know anything --"

"The lizards and I know more than you think." She jerked her head to the side, where Gharial stood on all fours and looked rather defeated. "You had sex with him. You admired his handsome body, but in the situation you were both in, it's understandable that you used each other as a means of escape."

"He loved me --"

"Anole bonded with him. He knew Jared's mind, and knew that Jared died because he wanted to, because he was weak. You weren't enough to keep him here. None of us were. For you, he was someone to protect and teach, more like a child than a man. Lovers should be equals." She glanced down at the erection he was trying to hide. "Stop hiding that, and stop being embarrassed. I value you as a friend, Marquez, as someone with a shared background. Nothing more. I would find...sex with you as repulsive as you would find it with me."

Marquez couldn't help but feel relieved. "But Krait; do you...is he your --"

"The answer is yes," she said when Marquez stumbled over the words he was too embarrassed to ask outright. "Krait is my lover. He's gentle, and he loves me, and I love him back."

He shuddered as he remembered the sight of Anole's organs, shiny and thick and erect. Thinking of Krait making love to Eilis...it was more than he cared to comprehend. "I couldn't do that." He fumbled for an excuse, anything to get Eilis' mind off the idea of pairing him with Gharial. "Besides, it's too soon. I miss Jared. It wouldn't be right to just forget about him."

"You don't have to forget about him. Just don't dwell on him at the expense of your own needs." She glanced down at his erection.

He shook his head and tried to ignore the ache in his groin. She didn't understand. Jared deserved something more than being buried and forgotten. The revelation that he hadn't been enough to keep Jared alive had cut Marquez deeply, especially when he also

knew that his companionship couldn't prevent Diego from committing suicide. How could he do that to anyone else, especially Gharial?

"It's not just about him, is it?" Eilis' voice held an edge of impatience. "You loved him. That's fine. We know his death was sudden and hard for you, but something is holding you back from becoming close to anyone else. What are you really afraid of with Gharial?"

Ashamed, he didn't look at her when he answered. One of his worries was causing the death of another of his lovers, but he told her another. "Gharial is male. What about...what do the lizards think --" He stumbled, as old fears resurrected themselves. Eilis waited for him to continue. "Gharial's male. So am I. The women didn't like such pairings. That's why they --" He broke off again.

"The lizards bond for life. Most of those bonds are with the opposite sex, but a few are not. Gharial is one for whom females hold little interest. So are you, which is why I think he took to you so strongly. There's no shame in it. The women were wrong. Even with such a dire need to procreate, they had no right to tell us who we should love."

The vehemence in her voice scared Marquez until she calmed, and then she looked worn and tired. They weren't so different after all. "Tell me, sometime, what they did to you," he said.

"Bond with Gharial, and I won't have to." She kicked dirt at him again. "Now get up. It's time you contributed something to those that live here. And you'd better find a way to apologize to Gharial. He hasn't moved for the past two days because he was determined to keep watch over you. I've brought him food, but he wouldn't eat unless you did."

He looked over at the dark lizard, who still watched the both of them. Marquez liked him, even enjoyed his company, but the thought of letting Gharial poison him, and then couple with him --

Gharial caught the thought. He sent a wave of hurt in Marquez's direction. Before Marquez could apologize, Gharial had bounded away.



## Chapter Thirteen

They buried Jared in a grave outside of the compound, an area rife with flowers and other growing things. Marquez had half-expected Jared's body to just disappear. He had no idea what happened to the dead on the *Trafalgar*. The bodies just...vanished. Shot into space, possibly, or more likely burned. To his relief, several of the lizards had dug a deep grave in the soft earth, and lowered Jared's body into it. Then, with tails and hind legs, some of the lizards pushed the displaced earth back into the hole.

Marquez just watched, too stunned even to cry. He looked among the crowd for the lizards he recognized. Eilis and Krait stood nearby, but he couldn't see Gharial's handsome olive, or Anole's bright green. He hated himself for missing Gharial. The lizard shouldn't matter to him, but Gharial did.

"Anole is too ill to attend," Eilis told him. "Jared's passing was hard on him."

"Hard on *him*?" Marquez asked, and saw her flinch. "He was *my* lover. My friend. All Anole did was -- was fuck him."

As soon as he spoke, several scaly heads turned in his direction. Since the first day of his arrival, he'd never felt afraid in the presence of the other lizards, but now he realized just how predatory some of them could look.

"You don't know what you speak of." Eilis's voice held carefully contained fury. "Anole gave Jared part of himself to try to reach him. For *you*. Because *you* desired it, and because no living creature deserves to be treated the way Jared was." She crossed her arms, and Krait wrapped his tail around her waist for support. "You asked me before about the bond. I say again that you're not ready. You're nothing more than a selfish, cold-hearted *man*. I don't know what Gharial sees in you. I pity him, because he's fallen for such a weak and self-centered creature."

Her words pounded at him, jabbing like the women and their incessant needles. He stood there, shaking, unable to escape Eilis's onslaught of words.

"Anole's recovery will be slow. He lost part of himself, and he is one of the stronger-hearted lizards here. I'm not so strong. If Krait died, I'd follow him soon after. It's something you wouldn't understand. Caring so much for someone else that they're a part of you, and when they die, a part of you goes with it. The bond goes deeper than love. I know Krait, and everything about him. We have no secrets. He knows my fears, and I know his.

"I thought for a while there was a chance you could be one of us, to be part of the community and share our minds. Now I see that I was wrong." She leaned back against Krait, as if weakened by her tirade. Around her, the other lizards began to disperse. None of them looked at Marquez except Krait, and the red lizard's gaze was full of an intense dislike.

"I'm sorry," Marquez said, hardly loud enough to be heard. "I didn't mean -- I didn't know --"

Her face was still hard. "That's not an excuse. You *used* Jared, and you knew it. You didn't love him. I don't think you're capable of loving anyone at all."

"But -- Eilis!"

“Prove it, Marquez. We've all done our part in caring for you. It's time to show that you can do the same. I don't mean sex, if you don't want to, but some small sign that you care about someone other than yourself or your dead lover. If you can't...” Her eyes grew cold and hard. “If you can't, go and live by yourself outside the walls of the compound. You have no place here.” Krait wrapped an arm around her shoulder and led her away, leaving Marquez standing alone by the grave.

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He didn't see Gharial for several days, even in passing. The lizard never came back to his part of the compound and left Marquez to live there alone. Marquez couldn't blame him. Lizards lived in the sections on either side of him, but none gave him any attention. They left him to fumble on his own for food and to take care of himself. Even the little ones were gently shepherded away by their parents if he tried to get too close.

Marquez tried to console himself. If he'd survived for weeks in the isolation chamber, he could survive this. Here, he was free and could do what he liked. He could move, and enjoy the sun and dirt and stars. The difference was, aboard the *Trafalgar*, no one cared about him. It was far easier to endure being alone when the only interaction between people was a means of survival. Here, it hurt far more to know that once he'd had friends and companions, and now they shunned him because of a few ill-thought words.

More than that, he thought grimly as he tried for the third time to light a fire. Eilis had made it look so easy. The dried grasses he'd picked for tinder smoked sullenly for a few moments, but the smoke died a few moments later. He *was* selfish, but so had everyone else been on the *Trafalgar*. Even Jared, desperate to have a masculine touch to help him forget about the women.

And, sensitive as these lizards were, it probably hurt them to have him in their midst, thinking of nothing other than himself and his own wishes. He struck the flint again, and watched a tiny spark land on the tinder. The conversations he had with Eilis still unnerved

him. He couldn't trust anyone. *Trafalgar* had shown him the dangers of that. Exposing himself, showing his vulnerabilities...*that* was what he couldn't endure. How could he bond with anyone, knowing they'd see such horrible things as he'd endured? And if Jared's loss hurt this much, how could he even think about getting so close to someone that their loss would kill him?

The spark died. Marquez swore and struck the flint over and over. Not once had he wished to be back aboard the *Trafalgar*, but now he missed the convenience of having food prepared for him, and sharing it with someone else. His stomach growled, and his frustration rose. Another spark flew, and he bent low to blow gently, hoping this time it would light.

It did, finally. Marquez added larger and larger sticks until he had a flame strong enough to heat water. He poured a couple of handfuls of grain with equal parts water into the clay bowl and set it to boil.

The lizards hated him now. He could endure being alone. Once he learned enough to survive, he'd go away from the compound and find some place of his own, away from the lizards, and -- and do what? He'd never truly been alone. Even when he was in the isolation chamber, he'd known the women were just on the other side of the wall. There were always men in the adult compound.

The bitterness of his life here stung him. If he went out alone, he had no purpose. If Jared had been alive, Marquez would have looked after him, which would have been fulfilling enough. If he found a way to get the lizards to forgive him, if he managed to become close to Gharial, he'd have a purpose in the compound, too: helping to find food, weaving baskets and other necessities, playing with the little ones.

"Ow!" Marquez said, burning himself on the clay bowl as he yanked it out of the fire. The grains were done, fluffy and brown. Starving, he scarfed them down, not caring about manners since there was no one around to watch.

Gharial's image came unbidden into his mind, and with it an ache of longing. He missed the lizard and could almost imagine what it would be like to be able to tell Gharial all of the things that had happened on the *Trafalgar*, and have him understand, and maybe the nightmares would be gone forever.

Eilis was wrong. He *did* care about others besides himself. He cared about Gharial, and her, and Anole, and the little lizards who'd shown him how to play ball. He could show it, too, if only he weren't so afraid of what might happen once he got too close to his favorite lizard.

\* \* \* \* \*

Insomnia made him restless. Gharial hadn't come to the dwelling in several nights, and neither had Anole or his blue-black companion. Marquez had no idea where they slept. He only used his regular hammock because he didn't know where else to go. Now that Jared was dead and Gharial gone, he felt like an intruder.

The last few nights had been equally torturous, and he missed Gharial's comforting presence to chase away his nightmares. Without the lizard, the dreams made him thrash, and pumped his body with so much adrenaline that he couldn't sleep for hours at a time. Only at night did he feel free enough to wander the compound with out fear of retribution from the lizards. Most of them slept, and the few that didn't were too sluggish to care much about what he did.

He went to the edge of the compound and past it, heading towards Jared's grave. It gave him comfort to know that a part of Jared was still here. Whether they'd really loved each other or not, Jared was his last link to his previous life, which Marquez couldn't bring himself to let go of.

Crunching grass and leaves woke him sometime when the full moon was halfway across the sky. The bright light was enough for him to recognize the two shapes. The first was Krait, his red scales nearly black in the moonlight. The other was Eilis, her pale skin

almost silver. Krait held her, arms crossed over her chest. Her head lolled into the hollow of his shoulder, and he bent his head down to let her kiss him along the rough scales of his jaw.

Marquez's gut clenched. He shouldn't be watching it. It should have been...obscene was the first word that came into his head, but he felt immediately guilty. There wasn't anything wrong with what they were doing. Eilis wasn't afraid, Krait wasn't domineering or abusive. He treated her tenderly, all too aware of her soft, fragile skin.

Eilis turned her head toward Marquez's hiding place and smiled a wisp of a smile. They knew. They *knew* he was there, watching, and they didn't care.

Krait nuzzled her neck while one hand undid the binding across her breasts. The piece of leather fell to the ground. Her chest rose up to meet Krait's exploring hand. His long neck craned around hers, and his snout dropped down to nuzzle between her breasts. She kneaded his head, rubbing just behind his skull and just beneath his jaws. His thick tail thrashed from side to side, scattering leaves and flowers.

The clawed hands slid down her bare belly, ticklish, because she gasped and shivered. Her loin wrap soon joined the other garment on the ground and revealed a dark thatch of hair and soft, curving hips and thighs. She wriggled and bumped up against Krait when he tangled his fingers in the coarse hair and explored the moist area between her legs.

Marquez flinched at the thought of Krait's sharp claws touching her *there*, but they were bonded. The lizard would know in an instant if he were hurting her or not. After a few moments, Krait put his hands on her hips and turned her around, then dropped to all fours in front of her. He eased her legs apart with his snout and gently grabbed her fleshy, rounded buttocks. She grasped his head to keep her balance as his eager mouth and tongue crept upwards. Her head tilted back, and her mouth dropped open in ecstasy. In the still, quiet night, the sound of Krait's talented tongue carried straight to Marquez's ears.

Sickness roiled in his stomach. He didn't want to see this, didn't want to know that Krait would do this and Eilis would allow it to happen, but he couldn't tear his eyes from the

scene. The expression on Eilis' face was one he'd never seen on the women aboard the *Trafalgar*. She was enjoying herself, without pain, without humiliation. The subtle gasps and moans were from love, not lust.

She eased herself down in front of Krait, to eye level, and reached to undo the lizard's loincloth. He leaned back to lay on the ground, exposing his body to her. Her pale body merged with the lighter scales on his chest and abdomen, but Marquez could see her hand rubbing between his legs, at the base of his tail. Slowly, his two phalluses emerged, both stiff and thick and shining. Each jutted out at a slight angle from the lizard's body. Eilis angled her head toward the nearest one, and took the entirety of it into her mouth. Krait's chest rose and fell with hard breaths. His hind legs clawed at the earth.

Marquez sank to the ground, weak and dizzy from confusion. All the times he'd coupled with women, and men, it hadn't been like that. Krait and Eilis were equals. They loved each other. Marquez didn't need their ability to read minds to know it. Their passion and respect for each other was apparent in the way they moved, in the way their bodies met and separated, the way they could be still and look at each other without speaking. His own groin ached with need just from watching.

Krait twined his tail around her slender waist to support her as she straddled him. She reached down between her legs to ready herself, and slowly eased herself down over one of his erections. His snake-like head rose up to meet hers, and they kissed while she rocked her body up and down. One of her hands braced herself against his chest while the other reached down to Krait's second phallus and stroked it with far more gentleness than Marquez would have expected of a woman. The lizard shuddered beneath her. His head rolled back. She increased the speed of her rocking until Krait couldn't take it anymore. Without dislodging her, he managed to roll her onto her back. His clawed hands met hers and pressed them into the ground.

Krait used his tail to spread her legs wide and support one so she could twist her body to a better angle to accommodate him more comfortably. She gasped as Krait slid himself in

slowly, so as not to hurt her, and then eased himself in and out of her body, gaining speed. His grunts were low and urgent as their bodies slapped together. Her pale legs were a white stripe across Krait's dark back, her voice a fine accompaniment to his.

Marquez knew when they came. Their writhing bodies froze for just a moment before shudders overtook them both. Eilis's clear, human voice rang across the field, startling a pair of sleeping birds into a panicked flight. Krait gave a low, animalistic growl. Fluid leaked from the end of his unsheathed phallus. He clutched Eilis, both of them desperate to be as close as possible to one another as they climaxed.

Afterwards, Krait rolled to the side and pulled Eilis close to him. They lay spooned together, one of Krait's hands protectively covering a breast, his tail wrapped around her legs.

Marquez became aware of the ache between his own legs. He imagined Gharial's warm, scaly body next to his, the thick phalluses brushing against his, seeking an intimate entrance and finding their way inside...

No. Not Gharial. Jared. Surely it was Jared he imagined. The soft, lithe body in his arms, the naiveté, but, try as he might, thinking of being intimate with Jared left him hollow, while the mere thought of Gharial made his body burn with heat and need.

"I don't mean it," Marquez said to the grave. "I'll always love you, Jared. Only you."

Only when he spoke did he realize that he was lying. Jared couldn't hear him, and wouldn't care what happened to him. Jared was *dead*. Eilis' words kept playing in Marquez's mind. *What are you going to do when he dies? Give up? You have friends. We care about you.*

Marquez slid fingers beneath his loin wrap and toyed with the hardness inside. He wished Gharial were here, that it was the lizard's snout and tongue doing the work of his hand.



He shuddered. No, not the lizard. It wouldn't be fair. Gharial had to know that Marquez couldn't love him or anyone else again. Gharial wanted to bond, Eilis had made that clear, but Marquez couldn't bring himself to accept the idea of such a thing. To voluntarily commit suicide and let the lizard have its way with his body...impossible. He couldn't, no matter how much he loved Gharial. It wasn't fair to the lizard, either, to subject him to all the horrible things Marquez remembered.

But watching Eilis and Krait lay together in the field, he couldn't help the feelings of jealousy that bubbled up. He wanted *that*. The easiness they had with each other, the complete trust of mind and body.

He wanted it with Gharial. And he was terrified. Doing this alone, only thinking of the lizard was something with which he could deal. Actually enduring the lizard's touch, however tender he might be, was something Marquez didn't know if he could stomach. Beautiful as Eilis made it, as gentle as Krait was with her, Marquez couldn't imagine the same sort of love and intimacy for himself. He wasn't worthy of it.

He clamped his mouth shut when he came. His hand emerged, sticky and bitter-smelling. The tension in his body was gone, but that in his mind remained. He loved Gharial. If Eilis could survive Krait's attentions, surely Marquez could deal with Gharial, who was less bulky than his leader. Feeling resolute, he decided that no matter what, he would find a way to make their relationship work.

But first he had to find Gharial and apologize.

## Chapter Fourteen

It took two more days, but finally, Marquez found Gharial fishing in the river. Low brush and overhanging trees surrounded the water. Insects buzzed, but this time, Marquez knew enough not to be afraid of them. It smelled fresh and green there, the water clear and trickling.

Out in the middle, Gharial lay on a flat rock and gazed intently into the water. He was thin and sinuous, his long hind limbs curled at his sides in a crouch. Even his lengthy tail was still, curled in a half-circle.

Marquez paused, palm against a tree, hidden behind its dangling fronds. Gharial's green-black scales sparkled in the sunlight. Here, they looked metallic, sharp and deadly, like his claws.

Deadly, but beautiful. Marquez had the sudden urge to run his fingers over every inch of Gharial's scales, to count them, each one by one as he discovered just how similar and different their two bodies were. The image of Krait and Eilis twined together still haunted him and made his body grow hot with need.

Gharial raised his head and craned it around to look just where Marquez was hiding. He didn't send anything. Marquez was almost disappointed. The lizard held his gaze for a

moment more, then with a speed that astonished Marquez, he whipped his head around and thrust his front hand into the water, and when he lifted it out, a silver fish struggled in the air, impaled on his claws.

Marquez watched, fascinated as Gharial set the flopping fish on the rock and went after a second. Cold water lapped around his thighs and pebbles dug into his feet when he waded halfway toward the rock without realizing it. He wanted to see the fish up close, and alive.

The lizard watched him come, and even held out a hand when Marquez drew close enough to grab it. He scrambled up on the rock, shivering and cold from the water. The lizard's dark scales radiated heat since he'd been lying in the sun for so long. Marquez inched closer. Gharial held so still Marquez couldn't even tell if he was breathing. Yellow eyes with vertical slit pupils watched him and waited.

"I -- I came to find you." Nervous, Marquez lowered his eyes and glanced at the fish, now dead. "These are neat. Fish. I've never seen one before." With a pair of fingers, he stroked the side of the nearest fish. Warm and slimy. He picked it up and marveled at each body part in turn. The thin, bony fins, the round, lidless eyes, and the U-shaped mouth that opened when he inserted a fingernail and pulled it down. And scales, of course. He did his best to quell the quickening in his groin as he wondered what it would be like to examine Gharial so intimately. The sleek, black lizard was just beside him, waiting, but Marquez couldn't bring himself to touch him. One exploration would bring another, and another, and Marquez couldn't bear to think about how far it would go. Eilis wanted them to bond, said Gharial cared for him, but was it enough? Would it be worth the pain and fear?

Gharial jerked his head toward the water, indicating Marquez should look. He did, and there he saw the little darts of silver flitting around the rock. Few looked longer than his fingers, but there were one or two nearly the size of the ones Gharial had caught. Deftly, Gharial thrust his hand in again and caught one of the large fish.

Not to be outdone, Marquez went after the other and missed. The fish scattered, and he had to wait a while for any of them to return. Even a little fish would be good for his first catch. Marquez tried again, and the fish flitted away. Not even close.

At his side, the lizard was making quiet grunting noises, which perplexed Marquez until he realized what the noises meant.

"You're laughing at me!"

Gharial didn't have the facial muscles to express his mirth, but there was a certain sparkle in his eyes. Half enraged and half amused, Marquez shoved him on the snout. Gharial continued to laugh, and used his head to butt Marquez square in the chest.

Caught off-balance, Marquez tumbled backwards over the edge of the rock. Cold water flowed over his face. Panicking, he opened his mouth to breathe and got nothing but water. He flailed with his arms and legs, but he couldn't tell which way was up or down. His hands and knees scraped against sharp rocks and something slick and slimy that only scared him further. Who knew what lived in the river? The lizards weren't the only creatures on the planet. There were surely other, deadlier creatures that lived in the hiding places where he couldn't see, determined to catch the unwary and eat them.

All these awful thoughts flitted through his mind as Marquez fought to find the surface. He finally found it and broke through, gasping and thrashing, fighting for his life the way he had the day he'd collapsed in the crèche. Something rough and thick caught him around the waist. Frantic, Marquez used all of his strength to push it away, but it wouldn't let go. He flashed back to that awful day, when he was hot and wet and sick and there had been tubes everywhere in his body. He wouldn't let that happen again. Not ever.

*<Calm!>*

The sudden sensation in his head was loud enough to stun him for a moment. Gharial bodily lifted him from the water and draped him across the rough granite rock. Marquez coughed and spluttered, choking as he hacked out the water he'd swallowed. He shivered

intensely despite the warmth from the sun overhead. Gharial stretched out his long body beside Marquez, who was surprised to feel its heat. Forgetting his fear of the lizard's touch, he turned to face Gharial and pressed himself as tightly as possible against the smooth scales. He needed the touch and comfort he'd missed when he was frightened and sick and treated like a lab experiment until the women were sure he'd survive.

"Hold me," Marquez begged him. Gingerly, Gharial curved an arm around Marquez's back and curled his claws inward. Marquez lay there, letting the damp, musky scent of the lizard calm him and remind him that the *Trafalgar* was far, far away. Too far to take him back.

Eventually, Marquez relaxed enough to enjoy the feeling of the lizard next to him. Gharial basked in the sun, head angled toward Marquez, and watched as Marquez explored his body, the raw strength of his arms, and the control he had over his prehensile tail.

Obligingly, Gharial rolled onto his back, but still kept his head cocked so he could see Marquez. The scales on his chest and belly were pale, almost white. In this position, his keel bone jutted forward to leave his stomach slack and flat. Marquez's fingers found his ribs, and paused where the great heart beat beneath them. Down to his belly and the softness of the organs protected by the scale plating.

And then the leather loincloth, which Marquez couldn't bear to touch. His shoulder suddenly itched, and he jerked his head around in time to see Gharial's tongue flit out again.

"You're teasing me!" He laughed and lay on his stomach so Gharial's head was next to his. The lizard was patient as Marquez inspected every bump and crevice of his skull, and opened his mouth wide to exhale a hot, stinking breath of air. Marquez ignored it and felt along Gharial's jaws and gaped at his teeth; two of them, his fangs, were easily as long and thick as Marquez's fingers. The rest, while smaller, were sharp enough that Marquez didn't dare to touch them. The purplish tongue rested inside his mouth, the tip of it wriggling.

Gently, Marquez pressed Gharial's jaws together and nuzzled the lizard's snout. "You're beautiful. And thank you for saving me. *After* you deliberately knocked me in."

The lizard's sending was faint, but Marquez thought it might have been amusement.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once Eilis saw the both of them return to the compound together, she recruited them to look for herbs and roots to satisfy the lizards' vegetarian side. The larger lizards were fully capable of bringing down several long-legged, hoofed animals with teeth and claws alone, but most of them ate more than meat, and, like the two humans, preferred a varied diet.

They'd squatted to dig up a few brown tubers that Eilis said reminded her of potatoes, when their conversation turned from food to something that made Marquez uneasy.

"You're blocking him," Eilis pointed out. "There's a part of your mind that you keep dark to everyone here. It's -- uncomfortable."

Marquez, who didn't quite understand what she meant, asked, "Don't you keep secrets here?"

"Of course we do. We honor each other's privacy. But you --" She sighed and shook her head. "It's something that eats at you and causes you pain. The lizards can sense it, and so can I, but you still don't trust any of us enough to help you stop the hurt."

"Maybe I don't want to share with anybody."

Gharial head-butted him. Marquez supposed it was the lizard's way of telling him not to be rude.

"Maybe you're afraid to," Eilis shot back. "What happened to you up there that you trust no one? I know the women would mock you, but didn't you have any friends at all among the men?"

Marquez went still. Something nagged at the back of his mind, something he hadn't thought of in a long, long time.

"There was someone, wasn't there? Other than Jared, I mean," Eilis said, more kindly. She dusted off a few of the potatoes and set them in her basket.

"No," Marquez said quickly. He picked up the basket and walked ahead. In his mind's eye, he caught the sight of thick brown arms, a musky, masculine scent, the sound of humming...

He found the vine-like plants that indicated more tubers underground. He used a sharp rock to dig and dig, putting all of his muscle into it as beads of sweat trickled down his bare neck and chest. He hadn't thought of Diego in years, and didn't want to remember him now.

Eilis settled beside him and dug more sedately. "Dammit, Marquez. Stop fighting it. Stop fighting *me*. You can't sense it, but Gharial worries about you. He and Krait talk a lot about what they should do."

"They don't have to do anything. I'm fine. I'm better. I'm alive, aren't I? I don't react to you anymore."

"You don't react to anything, except with anger, or by running," Eilis pointed out.

"That's not true. I --" Marquez paused in his digging, his arm paralyzed in the air. "What am I supposed to do? I'm not on the ship anymore. Jared's dead. I keep seeing *them* like they're still there. When I close my eyes at night, they're there, waiting to come and get me. I want to be with Gharial, but I..." He shook his head, embarrassed. The lizard was several feet behind them, but he perked up when he heard his name.

"Tell him," Eilis urged. "He should know this. Tell him whatever you can. He'll listen."

Marquez stayed quiet. He couldn't talk about it.

"They're far more sensitive creatures than you think. If you bonded with him, you wouldn't need words."

Marquez felt a chill, even out here in the hot sun. Gharial wandered over on all fours, his muscled body covered with dust and dirt.

"Who was your first lover, and what did he do to you?"

The sparkle of sunlight on the water reminded him of something else. Metal. Sharp, shiny tools as the women held them, and probed at his naked body...

Gharial nudged him, and Marquez found himself cold and shivering despite the heat of the lizard's body.

"I can't tell you. I can't. It was horrible. I just want to forget."

Gharial nudged him again. *<Safe.>*

He couldn't answer. Memories came tumbling back, flashing in front of his eyes as if they were actually happening again. His heart pounded. He opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out. Hands touched him, but it wasn't Eilis or Gharial. The women closed in on him, ready to stab and poke and smother...

\* \* \* \* \*

When he opened his eyes again, he was back in his hammock with Gharial curled around him. Eilis knelt nearby with Krait crouched at her side. All three stared at him, and Marquez wished he could promptly disappear. He cringed, and Gharial's arms tightened around him for support. "I suppose you're waiting for me to ask what happened."

Eilis didn't smile. Krait's tail flicked back and forth along the ground as she answered. "Your memories overtook you. Gharial had to carry you back." She wrapped an arm around the red lizard's neck for support. "We're in agreement, Marquez. This can't keep happening."

He felt cold, and was grateful for Gharial at his back. "You're right. It can't." He took a deep breath to prepare himself for his next words. "I'm sorry for the burden I'm causing all of you. I can't be easy to live with." He tilted his head backward so he could see Gharial's kind, yellow eyes. "I think -- I think I'm ready to tell you everything. I have to talk about it. If I don't, I think I'll go mad." Gharial's grip tightened protectively around him. "I trust you, more than I have anyone. Ever. Will you bond with me?"



When he looked back at Eilis, she was smiling her approval. A moment later, she said, “Krait wants to remind you how long it took you to get used to all of the new things on the planet, and how much they frightened you. What you have seen and endured is beyond their understanding, and what you’re feeling because of it frightens them, but they will learn, just as you did. There’s no need to feel guilt about what you went through.”

He nodded. Encouraging as they were, he still couldn’t help but be afraid. It wasn’t the poison. He’d been hurt often enough that he could deal with pain. It was the idea of Gharial -- of *anyone* -- using his body again.

<*Calm*,> Gharial sent.

“I’ll try,” Marquez said, not at all sure he’d be able to last the whole way through the ritual.

## Chapter Fifteen

After his request, he needed some time alone to prepare himself. He didn't go far. Just out to the flat rock in the middle of the river, the one he and Gharial had spent so much time on. Saying goodbye, he figured. The chill night air licked at his skin and made him shiver. His legs and feet were still cold from wading through the water, but this was the only place he knew he could be alone.

Or not. At the back of his mind, he felt the sense of someone familiar. Gharial. Marquez looked over his shoulder, back at the shore. He didn't believe he would be able to see the dark-scaled lizard in the shadows, and he didn't. Only the sparkle of moonlight in Gharial's eyes gave him away.

The lizard stepped into the water. Marquez watched him swim. He held his head up and curved his body from side to side, like a snake. The moonlight and water made his scales sparkle, and Marquez knew then that Gharial was what he wanted, and all that he'd ever want.

Gharial clambered up onto the rock. Marquez could only stare at the beautiful, water-flecked body glistening in the moonlight. "You're beautiful. I don't deserve you."

In answer, Gharial nosed the curve of Marquez's shoulder and pressed his warm head to Marquez's cheek. His sending came strongly, an emotion Marquez hadn't felt until now. Love.

Fighting back tears, Marquez grasped the great head so he could look Gharial in the eye. "How can you? I'm human. Nothing like your scaly friends. I'm not strong, like Eilis." He couldn't get a clear answer, only a muddled sending that included frustration. If they were bonded, he could understand what Gharial meant to say. Would it be worth it?

The lizard nudged him as if in response to his unasked question. Hesitantly, Marquez put his arms around Gharial's neck and breathed in the dark, musky scent. "I love you, too. More than you know. I don't want to hurt you." He couldn't help but think of Diego and Jared, both dead because of him. Gharial sent him a flash of annoyance, one that almost made Marquez laugh despite the seriousness of the situation. "All right. I give in. I'll do anything to keep you, even if it means..." He couldn't bring himself to say it, but he was sure the lizard understood. "Whatever it takes. I'm yours."

Gharial sent him a thought of reassurance, and another, stronger one of love. Marquez shook despite being wrapped in the warmth from the lizard's body. It was so hard to let go and trust him, terrifying to let himself become so vulnerable.

Gently, Gharial guided him back into the water. His body twined in long, sinuous strokes while Marquez walked awkwardly, slipping on the smooth stones beneath his feet. Once he was a few steps out of the water, Gharial was there on his hind legs, body close to Marquez to warm him again.

Somehow, he wasn't surprised to see Eilis and Krait already waiting for them. Krait's scales were dark, almost black in the moonlight, while Eilis' pale skin made her look ethereal and cold.

Marquez clung to his friend, determined, yet still afraid. Gharial bowed his head and used it to stroke the smooth slope between Marquez's neck and shoulder. Goose pimples

dotted Marquez's skin, even while heat flared in his groin. Gharial held him close, each arm curved around his back, the claws safely curled under.

Eilis moved to stand behind Gharial so Marquez could see her over the lizard's shoulder. "Are you ready, Marquez?"

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He felt the presence of another lizard behind him, sandwiching him in warmth. Krait. Marquez held his breath as the larger lizard grasped his wrist and maneuvered it away from the safety of Gharial's body. Marquez buried his head in Gharial's shoulder so he wouldn't have to see.

Pain, sudden and severe, ripped through Marquez's arm when Krait bit down on his wrist. His cry was stifled by Gharial's thick scales. The lizard held him tightly, protectively, as more of the poison seeped into his bloodstream. Every instinct called at him to pull away from the monster with teeth sunk into his arm, but Krait held him fast. Marquez couldn't so much as twitch his arm.

<*Calm*,> Gharial sent as a reassurance.

"I'm trying." His arm burned, and his mouth felt thick and swollen. He remembered Diego's lessons. Feel the pain, and then feel the pleasures around it. Gharial's protectiveness. The warmth of his body, the smoothness of his scales.

All of a sudden Krait released him. Marquez tucked his injured arm between his chest and Gharial's. He shivered as the poison continued to spread, a slow warmth that traveled to his chest.

"You have an hour. Two, at the most," Eilis said. "Be well, Marquez. May your journey be all that you need." She walked around to join Krait, and they disappeared into the darkness, leaving Marquez and Gharial alone.

<*Concern*,> Gharial sent.

"I'm all right. For now." His body shook, as much from adrenaline as from the effects of the poison. "Hold me. Don't let go."

The lizard eased him down into the green vegetation that covered the ground. Marquez didn't know the name of it, but it was soft, a welcome coolness to soothe his heated skin. Still holding Marquez against him, Gharial reached down with clawed fingers to undo the loincloth around Marquez's waist. It was nothing he hadn't seen before, but Marquez felt shamed and closed his eyes. Gharial was so sleek and beautiful, and he was nothing more than a weak and ugly human.

A sending of reassurance touched his mind. Gharial nosed him along his cheek and neck, the slight roughness of his scales arousing Marquez despite his fear. He clasped Gharial around the neck and hugged him tightly. The wound in his arm stung. Pressed this close, Marquez could feel the beat of Gharial's heart, slow and hard, one beat for Marquez's every two.

After he'd calmed, Marquez let go and allowed his hands to slide down Gharial's smooth chest and stomach until they reached the lizard's loincloth. Hands trembling, he fumbled at the knots. The traveling heat reached his groin, and he was suddenly excited to see what he might find. A distinct bulge -- no, *two* bulges, one arcing to the left and the other to the right -- grew under the loincloth as Marquez struggled to get it off. His own cock hardened in response.

At last, he got the knots undone and gasped when he saw *them* emerge from a sort of pouch at the base of Gharial's tail, shiny and thick and hard. Marquez backed away, shocked at the sight, but Gharial's long tail whipped around his back and prevented him from moving further.

<*Calm*,> Gharial sent. <*Safe*.>

He didn't feel safe, and yet Gharial's yellow eyes were so sincere that he couldn't help but trust him. Still, he couldn't help but ramble.

"I'm insane. You're a lizard. I'm not. This is crazy, the two of us, here, like this. I like you. Hell, I like you a *lot*, but I can't --"

Gharial silenced him by pressing his snout to Marquez's lips and kissing him. It was the only word Marquez had for the gentle explorations of the lizard's long, sticky tongue. Gharial licked his skin, around his neck and chin, the soft spots under his eyes, and finally, his lips and inside his mouth. At first, the strangeness unnerved him, but then it excited him. Gharial was a tease; he knew exactly how to touch him for the greatest pleasure. The benefits of being telepathic, Marquez supposed. But until they bonded, Marquez knew only the emotions Gharial chose to send him.

The poison spread further. Now Marquez's chest and stomach felt hot as the sand at midday. His groin ached, heavy with need. Gharial sensed it. He eased Marquez backward onto the ground and continued his lingual inspection. Every lick made Marquez's skin tingle. Eager, he reached for Gharial's head and stroked it while the lizard continued his downward descent. The sticky tongue ringed his nipples, tickled his belly button, and paused just before the organ Marquez most wanted him to touch.

"Do it. Please. I trust you."

Gharial did. It was like nothing he'd ever felt before. He dipped his head between Marquez's spread legs and, with long, slow strokes, brought his tongue up the smooth stretch of skin to encircle Marquez's painfully hard cock. Over and over, until Gharial had to use his weight to keep Marquez's legs from kicking. Just when he thought he couldn't stand it any longer, Gharial turned his attention to a different area. Before Marquez could react, the lengthy tongue licked between his buttocks, and plunged inside.

Long and sinuous, it was far more malleable and pleasurable than any human appendage. It flicked at that most pleasurable spot, the one the women used to torment him. Gharial treated him differently, as if he were something fragile and precious. Marquez clenched his teeth to keep himself from crying out. Old habit prevented it, though there was no one around to hear, or care.

The thing he'd feared the most was that his mind would drift away as it had so many times before with the women, and with Fernand, but Gharial's delicacy and sincerity

brought none of the pain and fear of his past. He was physically present with Gharial, and enjoying everything about it. He wept, something he hadn't done since his first night in the men's compound aboard the *Trafalgar*.

The lizard's head jerked up. <Concern. Hurt?>

"I'm not hurt," Marquez told him. "I'm not hurt. I'm fine. I --" He met Gharial's round, yellow eyes. "I love you."

A burst of joy flew from Gharial's mind. He nuzzled Marquez's neck, and Marquez wished desperately that he could know Gharial as well as the lizard seemed to know him. For all the times he'd explored Gharial's body, he still had no idea of how to please the lizard, since he didn't have the same erogenous zones as a human. Was he ticklish? Would it feel good to rub his snout, or his neck, or waist?

"How do I please you?" Marquez asked him. "Where does it feel the best to be touched?"

Gharial responded by thrusting his head this way and that under Marquez's scratching hands. He rolled on his side, and used his snout to guide Marquez. There, under his arms, were delicate patches of skin that had Gharial nearly purring in contentment. Slow circles on his belly made the lizard relax and go limp.

And then came the organs Marquez had feared the most, both of them slick and shiny with fluid after emerging from the pouch at the base of his tail. They weren't so very different from his own, nearly the same length, but thick and round with a grayish, wrinkled expanse of skin between them. Maybe it was the heat and dizziness affecting his judgment, but Marquez bent down and took one of Gharial's cocks into his mouth. The bitterness made him gag, but he kept at it, licking and sucking and using his lips to vary the pressure. Gharial deserved it after Marquez had denied him for so long. His hand massaged the soft, fleshy place between the cocks before wandering over to stroke the other. Gharial's breathing grew

tense and shallow, and Marquez knew he was doing everything right to please his friend. His tail thrashed in the dirt, and his powerful legs rent the earth.

Marquez couldn't go on as long as he wanted. The heat spread to the ends of his limbs and weakened them, and dizziness made it hard to focus on what he was doing. He collapsed onto Gharial's belly, angry at himself for his weakness. Only a little more, and he could have --

Gharial distracted him from his thoughts by easing Marquez onto his side and lying alongside him. One of his arms cushioned Marquez's head while his tail wrapped around Marquez's leg and lifted it so it rested across Gharial's back. The lizard moved his lower body closer until Marquez could feel one hot and damp hardness between his legs, and the other poking at his own hardened cock. Gharial adjusted his position so Marquez was as comfortable as possible -- and thrust.

The poison had spread far enough that Marquez no longer had control of his limbs. He lay helpless in Gharial's embrace as the lizard slid one of his organs in and out of Marquez's willing body. He wanted this, more than anything. Gharial pressed inside him, deep and hard. Marquez's eyes rolled back, and his shallow breaths became faster and faster. His heart beat so fast as to make him dizzy, but all he could focus on was the pleasure Gharial was giving him, the rising tension that would crest and break soon, soon, before Marquez went mad from his body's need. No longer was it the dirty, shameful thing the women had forced on him, but a glorious meeting of bodies and minds. Gharial's love.

Orgasm surged through him as the friction from Gharial's body, inside and out, caused a cresting wave of pleasure. Marquez would have screamed if he had the air. Instead, spasms shook his body as he thrashed on the ground like a dying fish, half-blind and helpless, but speared by a different kind of claw. His hands clenched and tore at the plants beneath him. He felt as though he'd be split in half, but he didn't care. Hot wetness sprang from his cock and dribbled down onto his stomach. He watched it and laughed. No more women to force it out of him.



A moment later, Gharial's body shuddered, and Marquez knew the lizard had reached the same point of ecstasy. Gharial's head reared back, his mouth open and panting as his ejaculate loosed itself inside Marquez. The rest joined Marquez's own sticky seed. They stayed like that for a long time, one of Gharial's cocks comfortably inside, the other pressed against Marquez's own throbbing cock.

At length, Gharial's organs withdrew and retracted to the pouch between his legs. Gharial returned his gaze to Marquez, and waited. His long body covered Marquez's, but he rested on his elbows so Marquez felt none of his weight. They stared at each other, and Marquez had the feeling that Gharial was trying to think something at him without being so overt.

Marquez strained to hear. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the lizard, trying to sense him without his vision interfering. Faintly, something tickled at the back of his mind.  
<Hear me. Hear me.>

"Gharial?" he said aloud. The repeated message grew louder, until, all of a sudden, it felt as though he lost his own body in the midst of sensing everything else. The plants had a presence. The trees, the wind, the chirping insects.

And Gharial, of course. The lizard's presence swarmed his senses.

<Sex/concern/want/hope/need.>

"I can hear you." Marquez opened his eyes and felt the burst of joy from the lizard. "I can hear you!" He didn't have to wait for Gharial to project at him. He just *knew*.

And then, "I can't...breathe."

Gharial was suddenly unreadable. He put an arm beneath Marquez's head and eased him up enough so that breathing was easier for a few moments.

"Now...what?" Marquez gasped. Dizziness stalked him, so that even with Gharial's arms around him, he felt as if he were bodiless and floating.

<GHARIAL!>

In a quick motion, Gharial used one of his sharp claws to re-open the wound on Marquez's arm. It hurt, but Marquez was too far gone to care. He barely understood what Gharial was doing. The lizard used his teeth to open a wound in his own wrist and laid it over Marquez's. Blood to blood.

<Stay,> came Gharial's voice, far clearer than it had been in the past.

<I don't want to. It hurt...>

<Stay,> the voice demanded. Marquez did his best to hold on, but his body was failing. Instead of the furious beating of only a few moments before, his heart slowed as it lost its fight to keep the poison away. Images flashed before his eyes. His life, every brutal piece of it. He lacked the voice to scream, so he did so in his mind. Gharial heard it, and he could sense the lizard's fear. For him.

<Safe. Stay!> the lizard sent desperately.

Marquez slipped away, unable to hold on to Gharial's presence, and plunged into the worst of his nightmares.

## Chapter Sixteen

Cold seeped through his skin and into his bones. He couldn't move. His arms and legs were pinned to a metal table. Tubes ran in and out of his skin, and another went straight down his throat. That's why he couldn't breathe. The machine did it for him.

A face loomed over him. Janet, black hair tied back, face pointed and grim. A waft of fruity lotion reached his nose.

"It's all right, Marquez. You've been sick. Having a lot of dreams. You told us about them, before we had to hook you up to the ventilator."

Tears leaked from his eyes, and he felt his heart break. Gharial wasn't real. It was all a dream.

Janet ignored his emotion and checked the machines and his restraints. Marquez's eyes flitted around the room. The same, familiar exam room he'd seen time and time again. The same tubes they'd put in him the first time they'd brought him here.

Only this time, a shadow lurked in the corner. If he looked out the side of his eyes, he could just see a large, lizard-shaped form.

"You're lucky, Marquez," Janet said. "You had a relapse. Almost died more than once. We saved you." She kissed him, cold and unfeeling, on the forehead.

She turned the lights down when she left. The shadow moved. In the dim light, Marquez felt it more than he saw it. Heat, and a dark, musky scent. It wasn't real. Couldn't be real.

*<I'm here.>*

His heart thudded in his chest, uncomfortably fast. This didn't make sense. It had to be the drugs making him dream about lizards.

*<Calm,>* came an urgent sending. *<Calm!>*

A sudden, fierce beeping echoed off of the metal walls as the machines that monitored his condition let off shrill alarms. Janet came running flanked by half a dozen women. She turned the lights up, and they surrounded him. In the midst of white and the sound of crushing voices, he thought he saw the lizard standing there, golden eyes filled with worry and compassion.

*<I'm here,>* it sent again.

And then everything faded.

The next time Marquez was aware, he wasn't any better off. He still couldn't breathe. He was prostrate, forearms pinned to the bed by bony knees, mouth wide and helpless, face shoved into a suffocating pillow. Rough, strong hands gripped his waist. Hard knees spread his legs apart, and a harder cock shoved itself inside to the hilt. Hoarse laughter reached his ears. Fernand.

His hands clenched with every brutal thrust. Marquez's body jerked until, at last, he was able to move his head just enough to breathe, and to look for Jared. But where he expected the limp, broken body to be was a sinuous black form instead.

The lizard raised his head and looked straight at him. *<Breathe,>* a familiar voice said in his head. *<Fight. This isn't real.>*

It felt real enough. Pain shot through his body as Fernand used all of his strength to hurt him. His hands were numb and painful from the circulation being cut off.

"You're not real," he said once he got his mouth free of the pillow.

"What did you say?" Fernand asked without stopping.

"He said we're not real." Morgan, the one pinning his arms down, laughed.

Marquez cried out when Fernand's fist landed on his lower back, just to the right. "This real enough for you?" The fists came again and again, hitting all the tenderest points on his back and legs. Morgan still held his arms, and Fernand his legs, so Marquez could do nothing to escape them.

After a long, long time they left. He lay there, spent and used. A lizard-shaped figure watched from the corner of the room. Marquez spoke to it out of swollen and bleeding lips. "Why can I see you?"

*<Because you're dreaming about your life on the ship. Come to me.>* The head lifted, and the tongue flicked out to scent the air.

Marquez closed his eyes and curled tighter. He'd finally gone mad, here on the *Trafalgar*. The women had won. "I can't. Don't you see? You're not real. This is real. You're a hallucination, something the women dreamed up to torture me. I never left the ship. I never met you." He drew in a long, harsh breath. "I've gone crazy."

*<I'm real.>*

Marquez flinched as he felt the scaled skin brush against his. The lizard lay down beside him and licked at the blood, each touch as tender as Fernand was cruel.

"I wish you were real. Everything we did..." He shuddered as the lizard's tongue rubbed against his cheek, remembering the dreams in which they had been close and happy. When he'd felt safe. "I'm dying now, aren't I? Fernand killed me. The women don't care anymore. They've given up."

*<I haven't.>* The lizard continued licking.

"Gharial?" Marquez opened his eyes and saw the lizard swing his head up to meet his gaze. "Hold me. Real or not, I want you to be. More than anything."

The lizard obeyed, gently lifting Marquez and letting him lean against the broad, scaly chest. The deep thud of Gharial's heart lulled him. He felt at peace. Safe. Even if the lizard wasn't real.

*<I am. They won't hurt you again. Believe in me.>*

The scales were smooth and hard under his fingers, Gharial's body strong and warm. "I believe in you. In us. You've seen the worst of me, and you're still here." He shivered, suddenly feeling cold and wet. Drowning. He was pulled down, down to where he couldn't breathe...

...but when he came back up, spluttering and gasping for air, it was Gharial holding him, Gharial's arms wrapped around him, and Gharial's burst of relief and love flowering inside his mind. He was alive. And this was real.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marquez could hardly keep his hands off his new lover. Every part of Gharial, from his ridged, bony head to his powerful hindquarters and clawed feet seemed new and unusual. Marquez felt like he spent hours just exploring, running his hands along Gharial's body, determined to touch each individual scale.

Gharial happily acquiesced, but laughed at him. This, Marquez could tell both because of the strange rumbling noises the lizard made and from the emotions Marquez could sense emanating from Gharial's mind. The telepathy was, by far, the strangest part of their new relationship, and the most intriguing.

*<I love you,>* Gharial sent him.

Finally being able to understand Gharial was the best part. So was finding out more about his lover. Gharial already knew Marquez's darkest secrets, thanks to the process of bonding, so Marquez was delighted when Gharial shared with him his own secrets, the loneliness as other lizards bonded and paired off, his passion for his work as a healer alongside Anole, the love he had for his people.

And, Marquez discovered, a delightfully prurient interest in humans.

Gharial liked to play by teasing Marquez with his tongue or knocking the human off his feet and pouncing. Always gentle; the telepathy told Gharial in an instant if anything he did hurt Marquez, and he adjusted accordingly. This afternoon was another such session; they'd wandered over to the river to be away from any eavesdropping minds and ears.

<*That tickles!*> Marquez protested when Gharial had him pinned facedown in the dirt and used his sticky tongue to tickle Marquez's feet. "Stop it! Stop it!" Marquez said aloud, but was rewarded only with the lizard's rumbling laughter.

<*I like it when my prey squirms.*>

"I'm not your prey!" Marquez grabbed a handful of dirt and twisted his arm around to throw it at Gharial. The lizard snorted, but didn't let up.

<*Aren't you?*> Gharial finally stopped torturing Marquez's feet and moved up to lick the back of Marquez's calves and thighs. Marquez still had his loincloth on, but, he suspected, it wouldn't last long. He could already feel himself harden as Gharial nuzzled him, and was relieved to know that this time it was from pure desire and not fear or coercion.

A brief tug, and the lizard's sharp claws made short work of the knots. Marquez relaxed in the soft dirt as Gharial turned his claws inward and used his knuckles to massage any remaining tension out of Marquez's body, up his legs to his buttocks, to the small of his back and between his shoulders. Gharial was a healer, in every sense of the word, and his interest in human bodies showed.

<*Roll over.*>

Marquez did. Gharial left his mind open, allowing Marquez to sense the lizard's happiness and pleasure as he worked the muscles in Marquez's chest, and, maddeningly, touched everything *except* his stiffened cock.

When Gharial wrapped his tongue around Marquez's erection, Marquez thought he would faint from the bliss of it all. His groin flushed with heat, and his heels raked the dirt. Gharial emanated satisfaction.

*<This is better. I can feel what you do. I know you're enjoying yourself.>*

*<You could say that,>* Marquez said. *<Oh -- do that again!>*

Gharial had whipped his tongue back, sending a jolt of pleasure through Marquez as the tongue rushed along his most sensitive skin. The lizard complied, doing it several more times but stopping just before Marquez came.

"Bastard," Marquez grumbled, then hissed as Gharial's tongue was back, tickling him at the base of his shaft, around his balls and down the smooth spot between his legs. The lizard's tail flicked from side to side, thumping the dirt and sending small clouds into the air as he grew more excited about what he was doing.

Marquez propped himself up on his elbows. Gharial was twisted so his hindquarters were lying on their side but his front was flat on the ground. Marquez saw why; the pouch between Gharial's legs split open to let the two fluid-covered cocks emerge.

He wanted them. And he wanted them *now*.

*<Patience,>* Gharial sent.

Marquez growled his frustration. He didn't have patience, not then, when Gharial continued to tease him and bring him just to the point of climax and then pull back. Over and over and over. Maybe this mind-reading thing was a detriment, after all, if the lizard used it to torture him like this. It still astounded him as to how a creature so large and deadly could be so gentle with him.

*<I love you,>* Gharial said, as if it were explanation enough. His golden eyes watched Marquez's ecstatic expression. *<I would never hurt you.>*

*<Then fuck me now before I explode.>*



The lizard laughed again, but complied. He turned Marquez on his side and maneuvered Marquez's upper leg to the left side of his waist. Gharial straddled Marquez's lower leg and crept forward so one slick phallus pressed against Marquez's own cock and the other between his buttocks.

<Yes. Do it now!> He'd been waiting for this, dreaming of it since they'd bonded. Gharial inside him, filling him, loving him.

The wetness coating the lizard's phallus made penetration doable, if not entirely comfortable. Inch by inch, Gharial levered himself inside, waiting patiently until Marquez's body adjusted to his size. Marquez shivered from eagerness as Gharial rubbed against that pleasure spot inside of him. He groaned.

They took it slower this time, bodies rocking back and forth as Gharial slid in and out, the passage becoming easier as his natural lubrication coated Marquez inside. Gharial's pointed, bony head bent down to nuzzle Marquez between his neck and shoulder, surprising the human with the heat emanating from his body. Marquez grasped his head and kissed it, needing something to do before he went mad from the friction down below.

Gharial upped his speed. Marquez twitched as Gharial's twin cocks stimulated him inside and out. The lizard jerked his head up, mouth lolling, panting from exertion. Hoarse cries escaped from Marquez's mouth. He was going to break -- Gharial was going to break him in half --

He came only a moment before Gharial, ejaculate rushing from his cock to soak the ground. His body convulsed, and he felt a rush of warmth as Gharial joined him in climax, fluid escaping from both phalluses. Gharial gripped him, tightly, as they both shuddered. It wasn't just the physical that made Marquez half-blind from pleasure, but the mental. The lizard's emotions rolled over him, cresting waves of pleasure that made Marquez weak with love for his companion.

<*I love you,*> Marquez sent when their bodies and minds had quieted. The lizard responded in kind.

Afterwards, they returned to the compound and swung together in Gharial's hammock, sated and content. Marquez felt lighter and freer than he ever had. The lizard's tail twined around his leg and his arm around his waist.

Eilis wandered in, wearing a sly and knowing smile. Marquez didn't have to open his eyes to know it was she, but he did anyway. <*Feeling better, I see.*>

<*Much,*> he agreed. He scratched Gharial in his favorite place, just under his jaw. The lizard's tail flicked to show his contentment.

<*I'm glad.*> She walked up to the hammock and gave Gharial a few scratches of her own.

<*Tell me how you came here.*>

She didn't lose her smile, but her eyes grew a little sad. <*That's a story for a later time. Not now, when you're happy. When you first know you belong with us.*>

To his surprise, she leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek. <*Welcome, Marquez. May you and Gharial have a bond as joyous as the one Krait and I share.*>

She sent her thoughts loudly enough for both of them to hear. Gharial hugged him tightly, and Marquez smiled. <*We will. I know it.*>

 THE END 

## **Nica Berry**

Nica Berry is a writer of queer science fiction, fantasy, and erotica. She's a graduate of the Clarion Writer's Workshop for Science Fiction and Fantasy, the Taos Toolbox workshop for SF/F novelists, and will graduate with an M.A. in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University in January. She lives in San Diego with her two cats, where she enjoys going to the zoo and taking pictures of the animals, especially lizards.

Check out Nica on the Web at [www.orossy.com/nicaberry](http://www.orossy.com/nicaberry).