



Where Willows Won't Grow

Lia Black

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Undercover agent Alex Kley is a long way from home. Six months of investigation have brought him to Willow House, a high class brothel on Omanai Station, as beautiful on the outside as it is corrupt on the inside. Sold into sexual slavery to infiltrate an illegal prostitution ring, Alex must find the evidence he needs to bring down the leader of a powerful criminal cartel—a man who may not even be human.

Illythe, the manager of Willow House, is a long way from freedom. The jet-skinned beauty with the face of an angel walks the halls of Willow House with serenity and authority, but underneath his cold and beautiful facade, Illythe is as much a slave as any of the young men working in the brothel.

In an undercover operation, falling in love is the worst thing an agent can do, but Illythe is a mystery that Alex can't resist.

It doesn't take long for Alex to realize that Illythe is not in his role by choice. Yet Illythe holds the information Alex needs. The more Alex learns, the clearer it becomes, that when the cartel falls, Illythe will be buried in the rubble.

In the end, Alex must make a choice: save Illythe and forfeit the mission, or leave him behind in a place where willows won't grow.

Important Note to Readers: This work of fiction is for adults only. Please see content warnings in "story info" front matter before download.

This story was written as part of the M/M Romance Group's 2014 "Love's Landscapes" event.

Where Willows Won't Grow Details

Date : Published July 12th 2014 by M/M Romance Group/ Vinedark (first published July 9th 2014)

ISBN :

Author : Lia Black

Format : Kindle Edition 157 pages

Genre : Romance, M M Romance, Science Fiction, Erotica, Bdsm

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From Reader Review Where Willows Won't Grow for online ebook

Sofia says

A dark, painful story about a man cut adrift, living a nightmare, totally forgotten because there is no one to remember him

And

Another man also cut adrift, alone, no real ties but not forgotten, so with him comes hope, connection and love.

Black got the tormented mix of feelings Illythe had for Scion down pat. That mix of hate, anger, love, need, despair, loneliness. All those basic human emotions concentrated on that one 'person' because all there is, is that one person, because that person made that so.

Somewhere along I lost my initial connection with Alex but the connection with Illythe remained, it grew stronger and stronger as I continued to read and this became his story and I liked that, that we had this build up, just as Illythe built up the strength in himself.

Compliments to Giulio for his prompt and to Ms Black to taking that prompt and give us this.

~ Lei ~ Reading Is An Adventure ~ says

★★★★? *A Love's Landscape Story from the GR M/M Romance Group*

Dark story of undercover Federation officer Alex trying to break up a prostitution ring and finding almost more than he can chew off. Horrifying at times but ultimately a beautiful love story.

Jaye McKenna says

This story is a like one of those rich, sinful desserts... dark, delicious, and I couldn't stop reading it. Not for the faint of heart, this one, but it pushed all my twisted little buttons just right!

Emma Sea says

Gosh, what a great response to the prompt. Ambitious in scale, with characters that stick in the mind. The writing is evocative: I spent part of the story with gritted teeth, peeking from behind my fingers. Great descriptions of Scion; I can totally see the bastard.

Giulio says

Oh my god; this story is awesome. Dark, twisted, pervy and at the same time deeply emotional and romantic. The sci-fi setting was perfectly crafted and the epilogue highly satisfying.

My favorite part: the auction. So scary and arousing!

My favorite quote:

What a fucked up time to realize a new kink

Almost every imaginable kink was contemplated, even a few I didn't know existed. I don't know if the Author read my mind or has somehow gained free access to my browser history but she really fulfilled many of my darkest fantasies. Even tentacle sex!!

A huge thanks to Lia for creating this wonderful free work of art out of my prompt and to all the volunteers who made the Love Landscape's event happen.

(view spoiler)

Alona says

I will start with what I loved in the book.

The times when Illythe and Alex showed their emotions toward one another. it was sweet, beautiful and heart warming.

I loved the end (thank god my husband is a dentist ;))

The writing was nice and the author's imagination was great, but that is also where I had a bit of a problem. Now, I am not a "serious" ci fi reader, but I read some that I really liked, but they where also somewhat "tame" on the alien side of the story.

I mean, I need the characters in my books to be somewhat attractive, especially when they're having sex. NO, they do not need to be stunningly gorgeous at all, but while reading the story I kept seeing this images in my mind:

other issues that I had with the book was that it wasn't really dark, it had so much potential to be full of heartbreakingly dark moments that will make the reader feel for the MC's, but to me, it was a miss.

For example, there was NO training at all! so except for it to be a bit unlogical to send kidnapped whores, to highly important clients, without training them and "breaking" them first, it was also a shame that the reader missed the potential in it to deliver angsty moments.

There were other things that did not come to a complete fulfillment, like Alex mission, or Mel, one of the side characters, that was acting fishy, and raised Alex's suspicion, but nothing came out of it.

so, for me, if it was a bit more dark, with more about the MC's connection and despair, and had a notch less "unattractive creatures", it could have been a lot more.

Well done Giulio, for a great prompt!

Elizabetta says

Enter with caution, this has a badass bad guy to end all bad guys. He almost steals the show.

The Scion is a tentacled monster who owns a brothel for aliens. And human rentboys are at a premium with his customers. The beautiful alien, Illythe, runs the brothel for the Scion but is also his personal pet slave. This takes a darker turn in that Illythe has been a slave since he was a child. While there is only off-page reference to the child abuse, there is certainly on-page sexual abuse/torture for the adult Illythe. Not for the squeamish, it can get pretty gory and explicit—the Scion is in his element as a soulless tormentor and abuser.

Alex, an under cover cop, infiltrates the brothel—he is hand-selected by Illythe as the newest human sex slave, fresh off the auction block. He and Illythe get a thang goin' on and the romance is pretty sweet. Alex's job is to uncover the mysterious death of a colleague in the brothel and to break up the sex trafficking. His growing feelings for Illythe certainly complicate things.

I really like the sense of despair we get from Illythe. He is kept as a precious pet at the whims of his evil owner and has accepted this fate. Almost. This is an ambitious effort—some great world building, good grizzly tentacle wielding, and the prompt is nicely met. Really enjoyed this one.

For this and other great reviews, author interviews, and general fabulousness, visit **Love Bytes**:

Vivian says

Alien sex auction and placement. Now, that's just the opening.

This is a darker one, folks. There is malevolence and torture, but like a snowdrop pushing through in Spring, there is also hope. Tenuous at times, but there. The impersonal, voyeuristic, objectified beginning gives way quickly to something deeper with a lot more emotion and sinister. Nice intrigue, backstabbing, and political shifting.

SheReadsALot says

BR with Adam - tent virgin no longer!

(Once you see it, you can't *unsee* it.)

I appreciated that boot in the butt to read this story because I kept meaning to read Lia Black. Her stories always caught my eye, her story tags always got me excited: non-con, dub-con, interspecies sex, dark stuff, etc = fun times to me.

WHY THE HELL DID I WAIT SO LONG?! <~~~I have a feeling this will be my recurring theme for the year 2015.

And this was free? ARE YOU KIDDING ME? I'd have paid for this.

Alex is an undercover law enforcement type in this sci-fi prostitution ring, human trafficking novella. His morals are questionable at best, so he seemed perfect for the job. He's chosen by the obsidian skinned, silver eyed alien prostitute/ brothel owner, Illythe, for the exclusive and highly dangerous, Willow House. Illythe has been broken down so many times in his life, he seems to have no hope. But he's drawn to the human, Alex. Alex reciprocates those feels. And while there's non-con tentacle sex (this is the first time I've read deadly tentacles), political intrigue and a little suspense.

Alex and Illythe's emotion & lust filled tug of war? That's the magic of this story. All while having to servicing others, they form a bond.

This is **4.5 stars** because the world building, the different aliens, the sexual tension, the detail given to the growing relationship between the MC's and Illythe.

Oh man Illythe. Damn. I think he was spot the fuck on. The warring sides of him that made for one damaged soul but he has redemption. He was flawed and just awesome. That last scene and his internal dialogue? **PERFECTION!** The abused can't jump right into warrior without still having a thread of being a victim in them. And Illythe was broken and deconstructed from a young age, he wouldn't know anything else but his pain. His characterization...was just...excellent. Enjoyed the hell out of the ending. I liked the storytelling overall.

But.

There were a few minor niggles:

- Alex - I think he was just fleshed out enough (could've been more - I wouldn't have minded) however, the undercover plot kinda fell by the wayside towards the end. (view spoiler)
- Mel - Alex was nervous around him. There seemed to be something off and then, poof! He's written off. Alex thought there was something off and I'm expecting some big 'aha moment' and nothing.
- The 'I Love You' - I'm iffy on them saying it so soon.

And this one is probably a me thing. I won't factor it into my rating but I couldn't help picturing the Scion like this:

And while I did think of him as the big baddie that he is...it kinda turned into a weird Davy Jones tentrappe thing in my head.

Story was dope. I really liked the style, there was an ease to the tone. Totally reading more Lia Black in the future.

My thanks to the author and the team behind this story! This prompt was one of my favorites, totally wasn't disappointed.

Kim Alan says

Content Warnings: graphic violence, rape, dubious consent, references to child sexual abuse, character death (secondary), extreme taboo: gruesome alien sex, sounding, sadism

Holy Hell. This was so far beyond my comfort zone... and I couldn't have stopped reading if I'd wanted to. The writing is so compelling (and evil and sadistic and horrifying) that despite my discomfort I was in a constant state of NEEDING to know what happened next. The bad guy is by far the baddest, most twisted bad guy I've ever read, mostly because of his psychological and physiological hold on Illythe. This is not at all an 'implied' hold. It's explained (from Illythe's POV, which for some reason I hadn't expected) in graphic detail how it came to be and how it continues to be ... and it ain't pretty.

The characters - whether human or alien - are believable and easily imagined. In an odd (yet probably brilliant) choice by the author, the two humans in place with Alex are extremely unlikeable, even given their backgrounds. I appreciated how they garnered very little sympathy from Alex, because it was far easier to buy than some altruistic hero mentality that somehow managed to survive in that environment. Because by this point, Alex, too, has become a product of his ... life. His capacity for empathy had already been drained almost dry before he even arrived at this place, only to be tested here at every turn. In fact, in addition to the literal, physical challenges Alex endures, he has these frequent, uncomfortable moments of facing the deterioration of his own morality ... Like in his apathy towards his fellow 'companions', or the unexpected excitement and arousal he feels at moments that should have warranted fear and disgust.

But under it all is the love story of Alex and Illythe, which quickly becomes the driving force behind their every action, and thankfully for my poor psyche, makes it all worth while in the end.

Take the content warnings seriously! This is a dark and difficult read. (I'm pretty sure I've developed a chronic, clenching twitch in my ass.) But if you're a fan of dark, twisted, non-con, dub-con, freaky aliens, gut-wrenching violence and wicked (not in a good way) tentacle sex ... this is the book for you.

Lori says

This story contains many things I would not consider reading normally, in fact I wasn't going to, I had no plans to read it at all. Then I saw all the great reviews for it and decided to give it a go. I'm so glad I did.

A great story, well written and thoroughly enjoyable, despite the hard and horrible themes involved. Thank you Lia Black.

Optimist ?King's Wench? & MANTIES Champion says

Now, *That's* how you write dub-con!

3 Things:

1. Kinky wrestling.
2. Sounding.
3. Pierced peen.

Alex has been working undercover to discover who's been abducting male prostitutes and wends up on the auction block himself where he's crudely inspected by a three fingered alien and mortified to discovered he's got a touch of the exhibitionist in him. He's chosen and has to go through the initiation process. Alex, the stuttering Mel and the giant Bryant (*Hey, that rhymes!*) and some other human captives must battle to determine who's worthy of Willow House. **WOOT!!! K-O-M-B-A-T-W-R-E-S-T-L-I-N-G!**

What? You're not convinced by kinky kombat wrestling? They're oiled up and **shi-nyyyyy**.

eyebrow waggle

You know you want to.

Alex is drawn to Illythe, his three fingered inspector, when he first sets eyes upon him after he calls an end to the bout between himself and Bryant. Thereafter he calls him his "angel", but they're forbidden. Illythe belongs to the Scion, who's Alex's target. The Scion is a Gengian which is the most feared species in the known universe. He also sounds disgusting and vile. Poor Illythe. He's owned Illythe for the past three decades and subjected him to all sorts of unimaginable humiliations and torture.

Somehow Illythe has managed not to turn into a monster himself and finds himself feeling protective and possessive of Alex as well, mostly because he reminds him of his former, human lover, Neil, who also happened to be a Federation officer. This wrinkle niggles me still. I didn't care for Neil playing that large a role in their relationship. They even look alike. >__>

Regardless of their feels, the facades must be maintained or Illythe will suffer the wrath of Scion. Naturally, the entirety of Willow House is under constant surveillance forcing them to find stolen moments in corners. Alex also has to contend with his fellow abductees who aren't exactly trustworthy. Still, it's a great love story formed under inhospitable conditions.

The investigation doesn't seem well conceived, so if you're looking for CSI, look elsewhere. Where Willows Won't Grow focuses on the relationship development of Alex and Illythe with some decent world building and fantastic aliens.

I'll admit being skeptical of all the aliens/tentacleyness, but I'm happy to report I was wrong. Ms. Black did an excellent job both sticking to the prompt and letting her imagination soar. I'm landing somewhere in the **4.5 Star** range rounded up. Thanks to her and her team for this addition to the LL event.

Samantha says

So if you want a light, fluffy read about puppies and flowers... well, keep looking. In fact, you should go to like the other side of the globe from this book, because you won't find any puppies or flowers here (unless you count oddly adorable Admiral, 'cus yeah, he's kind of like a dopey puppy.)

Lia in these past two years has seemed to develop a way to take a prompt and just run with it. She did it last year, and she did it again this year. If I could just play in her dark imagination for a day, I'd probably have nightmares for the rest of my life, but also be gleeful for just the chance to see where this all comes from.

There's an edge of dark, but a certain bit of hope that just lurks at the edges and draws the reader forward.

With great attention to detail, Ms. Black builds a wonderfully terrifying world that left me wanting more... and more... and more.

In sum, I loved it.

Sunny says

Pleasure and pain, how the two mix. It's a theme in the story, but it also describes my experience reading it. It's beautifully written, but the darker parts were painful to read.

I think Lia must have a very dark imagination. This was not an easy read, but everything that happened fit the story. Nothing felt gratuitous or over the top. For me to tolerate torture in a story is kind of amazing. And then to read about the hate for a tormenter all mixed up with a messed up love for a protector and how that impacts someone...

shudders

The psychology of it was perfectly demonstrated in a stunning fashion.

(view spoiler)

Lia's talent for writing shows in the fantastic world building and compelling characters. It was all so well done. I was firmly stuck in the story and it didn't shake off easily.

I was impressed by the variety of aliens and I liked how the author painted such a clear picture of them. I did get freaked out by some of the alien sex, though. Freaked out by what happened, and by my reaction to it; it left me cringing and turned on at the same time. Later, though, I only cringed. Illythe touched my heart, and then put it through a shredder. His despair, desperation, cautious hope...it all just stomped all over my poor little heart.

Well done, Lia, well done.

Lilia Ford says

I'm a big Lia Black fan dating from last year's M/M event with her contribution, Worthy, and was thrilled to see another dark, sexy tale on offer this year.

This year's is quite dark indeed, so much that it managed to raise a genuine fear about what would happen to the characters. By far the most interesting aspect for me was Illythe's relationship with Scion. I have a fascination with Stockholm stories, and Where Willows Won't Grow was sharp and effective in its exploration of Illythe's conflicting feelings for the abusive enemy general who'd held him prisoner for so long. Black is not afraid to ascribe real feelings and even love to both despite their horrific history together, and in a way that felt neither exploitative nor manipulative of characters or reader. It's both a plus and a minus that Scion is so horrifying. That Illythe has such conflicted feelings for him is a sign of how ruthlessly he was broken and conditioned, and it makes the tenderness between them all the weirder. But unfortunately, it is impossible for the reader to feel anything but horror for an 8-foot creature who is described as a combination of an insect and a sea monster--and who is entirely evil. The erotic mind-fuckery that goes along with that scenario is mostly sacrificed in favor of focusing the reader's sympathies and attention on Illythe and Alex's growing feelings for each other.

The rest of the story was all good, with solid world-building, characterization and plotting, though I did find the brothel strangely underpopulated--that might have been due to the time pressures for completing the story for the event. And of course the sex was hot, hot, hot.

Altogether another great contribution to the Love's Landscapes event.
