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ROMANNCING
his
HEART

RED PLANET FATED MATES

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RED PLANET FATED MATES BOOK THREE

MIRANDA MARTIN

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JEAN

**B* ANG* *CRACK* *WHIR*

Shit.

“Move!” I yell at the poor sap in front of me.

He doesn't listen fast enough, so I push him to one side as I barrel down the hall. A tendril of smoke trails out of one of the vents.

Damn it. I thought it would last.

“Hey!” the guy yells at my retreating back, pulling himself off the wall I pushed him into.

I don't have time for his protest. If I don't shut the machine down now, we are beyond screwed.

And that's all on me. Great.

Just because I was a fan of *Star Trek* vids from Earth, doesn't mean I really want to be Scotty. Gordy, sure, he was cool, but Scotty was the one always operating under ridiculous pressure and circumstances that no one should be able to handle. Yet, he did. And that's why I don't want to be him. If I'm him, then it's on me to figure this out and I don't have a clue.

I turn the corner to the engineering room, skidding as I do, the rubber soles of my shoes squeaking loudly. Head down, arms pumping, it's a full on bullrush down the final few meters.

And I don't see the poor soul mopping the floor until it's too late. My foot hits the wet surface and I'm sliding.

“Woah!”

“Wha—”

crash

We go down in a tangle of limbs and body parts, twisting together like some kind of kamikaze version of twister. As I try to get back to my feet so does he, and it becomes a comedy of errors. Slapstick comedy that I do not have time for.

“Stop!” I yell. “Lie still. I’ll move.” He does as I command, and I manage to get my legs free then jump to my feet. “Jiminy Christmas.”

“Hey, you ran *me* over,” he complains.

I take a quick second to look at the guy lying on the floor. He’s wet, disheveled, and red in the face as he pushes himself into a sitting position.

“Sorry,” I say, scanning and finding his name tag, “John. This is bad. I have to run.”

“Fine,” he says, motioning me away. He mutters something as he climbs to his feet. All I catch is “You guys... putting... us down... screw you.”

I want to stop and handle what he says. I don’t like being lumped in with ‘you guys’, whatever that really means, but right now the only thing standing between death and every survivor of the crash is me. I truly don’t have time to dig into his complaints.

But I do feel bad.

“Sorry, look me up later,” I yell, running into the engineering room.

The monitor on the wall is flashing yellow, then red, and the alarm blares even louder in here.

“What do we know?”

“Main motor,” Emil answers.

“Shut it down,” I order.

“If we do—”

“Shut. It. Down,” I cut him off before he can continue his pointless protest.

He does as I said, bending over the keyboard. He types furiously, keys clacking loudly. I hold my breath, watching the monitor. The alarm stops and silence falls heavily across the room.

Emil straightens, looks at me, then shakes his head. “We are screwed.”

“You think?” I sigh and run my hands through my hair. I close my eyes and mentally work through the problem. “We’ve got what, ten minutes?”

“Twelve, maybe fifteen,” Emil answers.

“Okay, that’s how long we have to come up with a solution,” I say. “Ideas?”

“New motor,” he quips.

“Right, now something real?” I ask, fixing him with a harsh glare. “Seriously, we don’t have time for the snark.”

“We’ve told them for months that this was—”

I make a slashing gesture with my hand and shake my head. “Now is not the time.”

He shuts up and shakes his head. I pace the floor and go behind my work desk. I run my fingers over the neatly organized wall of parts. Each one labeled and color coded. It’s soothing. The order of it calms my nerves and frees my thoughts.

“We’ll have to get in there,” I say.

“It’s going to be the rotor,” he says.

“The left one,” I agree.

“Yeah.”

Think Jean. Think. How do I fix this?

“Okay,” I say, and Emil looks at me hopefully. I pace the room four times, picturing it all the way through. “That rotor, it’s an EP-24, right?”

“I think so,” Emil says. “That or a 26.”

“It has to be a twenty-four.”

“Why?”

“Because if it is, I have an idea, if not...” I don’t bother finishing because I hate being negative. Better to keep the focus on the positive.

“What’s your idea?”

Neither of us bothers to look, but I know he hears it as well as I do. Footsteps are coming. Loud and fast.

“Take the rotor out of refrigerator number four, replace the one in the motor.”

“It won’t be the same, that’s a smaller model,” Emil says.

“Yes, but it will work, I can make it work,” I say.

“It won’t last.”

“No, it won’t. It’s a fix. Short-term, yes, but a fix.”

“And what about the long—”

“What is happening!” Julia shouts, bursting into the room.

Captain Nyanna is on her flank and so is Shana the Supply Chief. Great, a Captain, a Councilwoman, and the Supply Chief. One would be enough of an issue, all three means they were in a meeting together already.

“Generator’s offline,” I say with a smile.

“For how long?” Nyanna asks.

I look at Emil who shrugs unhelpfully. Thanks Emil.

“Four hours, give or take,” I say.

“And that will fix it?” Nyanna asks.

“Is it as bad as what we talked about before?” Julia asks.

“What did you talk about before?” Nyanna snaps.

I close my eyes willing her not to say it, but my powers of mental persuasion suck.

“Forty-two years,” Julia says.

“What!” Nyanna and Shana manage to synchronize their exclamations and hit a note that I’m pretty certain would shatter glass if there was any in the room.

“Not that bad. Yet,” I say.

“What is your plan?” Nyanna asks, taking charge.

She’s a good leader. Solid head on her shoulders with a unique ability to regain her composure fast.

“I’m going to take fridge number four offline, scavenge a part or two, and then get the generator running,” I say.

“You’re taking my fridge?” Shana asks.

“I could not fix the generator,” I offer with a shrug.

“How much of a fix is that?” Nyanna asks, cutting to the chase of the matter.

“Six...” Emil is shaking his head in my peripheral, so I adjust my estimate. “Four months.”

“Then?” Nyanna asks.

“Then the ship becomes a convection oven, and we all die,” Julia offers helpfully.

“Oh,” Shana says. “Crap.”

“How do we avoid that eventuality?” Nyanna asks.

“I’ve got one idea,” I say. “The only viable one.”

“And that is?” Nyanna asks.

“I need to find another part of the ship, scavenge it for parts, then fix the generator permanently,” I say.

“We don’t know where any other parts of the ship landed. Or if they did. They may have all burnt up on entry,” Nyanna says.

“Odds are in our favor,” Emil says.

“How do you figure?” Shana asks.

“Because this section survived and look at the way it broke apart,” Emil says. “Structurally, I’m betting the ship was designed to tear into pieces. It makes sense because the idea was that when we arrived at our destination planet, the ship would be scavenged in sections to help build the new settlement.”

I look at Emil giving him a big smile. It’s smart and I hadn’t thought of it. That’s why I keep him around. He’s a brilliant engineer.

“Is he right?” Nyanna asks me.

“Hey, I’m the lead, but he’s every bit as capable as me,” I say. “I hadn’t thought it through, but it makes sense.”

Nyanna nods and looks at Julia. “Council Woman?” she asks.

“I don’t see that we have a choice,” Julia says. “The only other backup plan is the one offered by the Zmaj Angota.”

“And we don’t know how viable that idea is either,” Nyanna says.

“Do both,” I offer, having no clue what the other plan is, but it’s always good to have a backup. I prefer redundancies whenever possible.

“She’s not wrong,” Shana says. “Backups are great.”

“And if one doesn’t work, maybe the other will,” Nyanna says. “Good. I like it. Let’s make it so. Who do we send after more parts?”

“It has to be me or Emil.”

“I’d rather not,” Emil says. “Sorry. I have a thyroid problem and don’t handle heat well. I would go but I’m more likely to be a liability.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “He can’t stand the heat. He shuts down when it gets too much. I have to be the one because no one else knows what I need.”

“Do we know if any of the Zmaj can take her?” Nyanna asks.

“I have an idea,” Julia says. “Let me talk to Pryshka.”

“All right, we have a plan, but until then, what do we do about the generator?” Nyanna asks.

“Emil and I will get it running, but...”

“But?” Nyanna asks.

I look at Emil. We’ve worked together for so long now that we don’t need words. We’ve both already been thinking about it. He nods and I take the lead in answering.

“We need to stop running the generator at night.”

“It’s still too hot,” Shana says. “We’re going to roast.”

“It won’t be nice,” I agree, “but it’s better than the alternative.”

“We shut it down for five hours. At twenty-three hundred until oh-four hundred,” Emil says.

“Those hours buy us days, even weeks of life for the generator,” I say, finishing the thought.

“Make it so,” Nyanna says. “Julia, talk to your man. Find us someone good. Shana, how’s the taming going on riding those beasts?”

“Sure,” she says, shrugging. “It mostly works.”

“Mostly?” Nyanna says.

“I mean, we have a couple that the Zmaj have broken enough to work, but I wouldn’t turn my back on them.”

Great. This is going to be a good time.

“Fix the generator and be ready to go,” Nyanna says. “I don’t know how long we have, so all our lives are going to be depending on you.”

“Cool, no pressure then,” I say with a smile.

Nyanna walks over and grasps my shoulder with her own smile. “Right. You got this, no big deal. Just you be you, okay?”

“Thanks Captain,” I say, forcing myself to laugh.

Laughter is always best. Better to laugh than to cry, my mom would always say. Let’s put that to the test.

CEKPET

“*B*rother, you need to cheer up. Look! The warm sands stretch as far as the eye can see, the suns are high in the sky, and it is a beautiful shade of red,” Komik says.

“Humph,” I grunt, shaking my head.

“Ah Cek, you are the consummate curmudgeon.”

“You talk too much.”

“And you always say that,” he responds. “Come, I will race you back to the ship.”

“Not fit for a home.”

“We could build a new compound,” Komik says. “A worthy project. I think Lisa would like that. She is not a fan of living in the wreckage of her former life.”

“Huh.”

“About that race...”

He grins widely. The blade of his lochaber, strapped to his back, glints sharply. I look back over my shoulder at the rolling dunes of sand. Running is stupid. Increases the odds of attracting a zemlja, which he seems to have forgotten. Too long in the jungle. I remember very well living on the sands.

“No,” I say.

“Come on Cek, don’t be a spoilsport.”

I frown and shake my head as I adjust the straps on my shoulders. The dead bivo is digging into the sand as I drag it,

but there is no easier way to get it back to the ship for butchering.

“Strap on too,” I say.

“Bah, fine.”

He pulls leather straps out of his pack and attaches them to the bivo, then together we resume hauling it home. This will stock the cold machines for at least a month. It is a large alpha that we brought down. And the rest of the beast will provide supplies for clothing and other needs. A good hunt.

“You need a mate,” Komik says as we both lean forward to pull.

“I am fine.”

“I am fine.” He mocks my deeper voice and tone. “I am Cekpet, I need no one.”

“I did not say that.”

“And that is exactly my point, you do not have to say it, we all know it.”

“You know nothing, Komik.”

“Do I not?” he laughs. “I know that I am heading into the arms of the most beautiful female that the universe has ever produced. I know a sense of joy and happiness that I am pretty sure would crack your face because you would be smiling too much.”

“Bah.”

“Bah!” He mocks me again. “That is your answer? Bah? Seriously? You know I am right. You need a female. A mate who ignites your heart and makes your dragon sing. Someone that can get you out of this funk you have been in.”

“What I need,” I say softly, “is to make sure these humans are safe. This solution is not a long-term answer. And you know, as well as I do, that the Eye is not going to forget what we did. He will come after us.”

“Bah, the Eye,” Komik says. “We beat him once. We will do it again if he wants to get uppity.”

“We did not beat him,” I say darkly, remembering those times. “At best it was a stalemate, and we took an opportunity. Those who remain with him, they are loyal. And if what Angota says is true...”

“It cannot be,” Komik says.

“Humph,” I say, not wanting to continue the argument.

It is pointless. He is caught up in the joy of having found his mate and I am, in my heart, happy for him. He is a fool, but that does nothing to lessen my joy for him. I would also love to find my one true mate but I do not have time right now. There are too many threats to the survival of this group and too many of my brothers are not taking these threats seriously.

“One more dune,” Komik says.

“Suns are setting.”

“I love the sound of the ocean,” he says. “You smell that? The salt in the air? It is refreshing.”

I glare at him and do not bother to respond. I do not want to tell him how his joy that he cannot help but express in response to every statement is annoying. There is no point for one reason. The other reason is that it would do no good.

We fight our way to the top of the dune. The sands are loose and sliding, making every step forward only a half step so that the journey up takes twice as long as it should. At the top of the dune though we can see the humans’ wrecked ship.

It lies on the sand like a dark scar on the world. Like the finger of some giant, celestial creature, broken off and thrown to the sand as an afterthought. Electric lights twinkle in the dusk, illuminating the shapes moving around outside.

The humans are not made for Tajss. Their bodies are maladjusted and weak to the heat. They waste so much water it is ridiculous. They cool by shedding water. What a ridiculous concept. They have to limit their time outside to no more than a wingspan or less, or risk having what one of them called a ‘heat stroke’.

They have a handful of specially made suits that let them stay outside longer, but they reserve those for the direst of situations because, apparently, they have a limited lifespan.

I watch the shadowy shapes moving around. Many of them are building the wall that they think will keep them safe. It will not, not against the things that matter, but it makes them feel safer and it keeps them busy. Idle hands worry, as Rakstan would say.

“Ready?” Komik asks.

“Epis.”

“Huh?”

“The humans. They need epis,” I say.

Komik looks at them working and rubs his jaw thoughtfully. While he thinks this over the lights flicker, then turn off. That is strange.

“Yes,” he says. “It would aid them a lot. But you know it has side effects.”

“And?”

“And nothing. Just saying.”

I nod then shrug. I lean into the straps and resume pulling, assuming he will get the message that it is time to get home. He does, though he talks the entire way. The suns are down by the time we pull up to the break in the wall.

Several humans come and help pull the bivo over to where they do the butchering. I would stay and help, but this is again work they can do whereas hunting is not. Best to let them do what they can. Both so that they are not idle and so that they feel they are contributing to their own survival.

I slip out of the straps and reclaim them for my pack before following Komik to the ship. The door slides open with a swish and we walk through. The lights are on again, which is good. The inside of this ship would be like a tomb if it was not for their electric lighting system.

“Kom!” Lisa runs up as soon as we enter the first room.

She had to have been waiting for him and shows her affection in an open display. Wrapping her arms around his neck as he lifts her off her feet and spins her around. I have to jump back to avoid being struck by his tail. I growl deeply. He breaks the kiss, looks over his shoulder and laughs.

“Sorry,” he says. “You know.”

I shake my head and growl again, then head to the dining area. I am hungry and ready for a night’s rest. I am sure that Komik will not be sleeping for some time but that is his business. If I had a mate who lit my soul I would not either, but I do not nor do I have time for it. Those of us who are not mated are still focused on the bigger picture. I cannot allow myself such luxuries.

I fill a plate and take a seat. The meat smells delicious. The steam rising from it wafts into my nostrils and my stomach growls. I lift the first bite to my mouth, but before I can eat, someone sits across from me. I look up and growl, but Pryshka is unperturbed.

“Cek,” he says, nodding his head in respect. “Eat. Please.”

I nod and thrust the fork into my mouth. The succulent meat is moist and well-seasoned. An explosion of flavor. I grumble with pleasure and shovel another forkful in, focusing on my food. Pryshka has not stopped watching me with his curious, amber eyes.

It is clear that he wants something more than my company and that he is only being kind enough to let me get the edge off my hunger first. Probably because he knows me well enough to know that I am never very amenable to anything when I am hungry.

“What?” I ask around my full mouth.

“Nothing, yet,” he says. “Finish your food.”

I drop the fork, place both hands beside my plate and lean a little forward. I growl. “What?”

Pryshka looks down at my plate and then up. He is gauging if I have eaten enough, and I know it. I have spent my entire day listening to Komik, who may be my friend, but he is also

annoyingly talkative. What I want right now is food, sleep, and quiet.

“There is a mission,” he says.

“No,” I say, picking my fork back up and jabbing it into another slice of succulent meat.

“You have not heard what it is!”

“You are right. No.”

“Look, Cek,” he says.

I chew my meat and watch him, waiting. He stops talking and now he is waiting too. We stare at one another, but I know he will break. If I wait long enough, he will talk. He proves me right soon enough.

“It is important. And there are not a lot of males I would trust with this.”

“Why?”

He looks around to see if anyone is eavesdropping and then, apparently satisfied, leans in closer. “The power of the human ship is about to fail.”

“And? What do I know of human engineering?”

“You are one of the best builders I have ever known.”

“Flattery,” I grunt, shoving more meat into my mouth.

“Truth and you know it.”

I swallow the meat and look at the last slice on my plate. I could eat another plateful, but we have been keeping stricter rationing of portions with so many mouths to feed. Still, no one would question me for filling my plate again. I did, after all, bring home the alpha bivo.

“And?” I push the piece of meat around my plate, letting it soak up the juice of its already eaten brethren.

“They have very few cycles left,” he says softly. “If it fails and we have no other solution, they will all die.”

I stop pushing the meat and look up at him. “You are sure?”

He nods.

I frown deeper and then look around the room. Dozens of humans move and sit around. They are eating, talking, laughing, and living their lives. They are, all of them, our responsibility. They accepted us and helped with the human mates we brought with us. They are good people, overall.

I look back to Pryshka.

“Good man,” he says, knowing my answer. “You leave in the morning.”

JEAN

I pull on the sleeve of the suit in a vain attempt to get the shoulder seam to sit in the right place. These suits are designed for a taller person than me, which makes the seam annoyingly ride up and causes the fabric to bunch at the neckline.

“Stop,” Nyanna says.

“It’s uncomfortable,” I complain.

“You won’t last outside without it and this is the closest one we have to your size.”

“You look great,” Shana says.

“The universe smiles on you and keeps you safe in peace,” Desiree says smiling.

I smile at the Minister too. She’s a good woman. I’m glad she’s here. Her words are generic, sure, but they still calm the fluttering in my stomach.

“Okay, you ready for this?” Nyanna asks.

“Yup,” I say. “It’s going to be great. Which one of the Zmaj is taking me?”

“His name is Cekpet,” Nyanna says.

“Does he speak common?”

“Not much,” Shana says. “How’s your Zmaj language coming?”

“Hmm,” I say. “I mean, I’m not fluent, but passable I guess.”

“Make the best of it. This will give you plenty of time to practice,” Desiree says. “Remember the soft consonants drag.”

I nod understanding and look at everyone assembled.

“And the other team?” I ask.

“They’ll be leaving tonight,” Nyanna says. “Thank you, Jean. You’re really stepping up here.”

“Not a problem,” I say, even though I’m honestly scared out of my mind. Maybe that’s why I agreed to do this. We all know this planet is full of dangers. It’s a harsh environment and everything feeds on everything else. I’m not sure where humans sit on the predatory food chain, but I am positive it’s not the top. “Tell Emil to not forget the shutdowns. And if he gets in trouble—”

“He knows what to do,” Nyanna says, placing a reassuring hand on my arm. “You have trained him well.”

“Yeah,” I say, shaking my head. I’m stalling and we both know it. Time to face up and do this. “Okay, where is my guide?”

“Outside waiting,” Desiree says.

The group follows me into the airlock where we wait for it to cycle then we emerge outside. The heat isn’t nearly as bad in the suit, though I am aware of it. It’s also early, so it’s not as bad as it will get. The primary sun is barely over the horizon and hasn’t been joined by its mate yet.

I look around and then see the hulking, shadowy figure of the Zmaj waiting next to two of the air-quoted tamed beasts we’re going to ride. Those beasts are the main reason I’m nervous. The Zmaj captured the monsters and said they were safe to ride. I’m not so sure about that.

Cekpet, my Zmaj guide, stands between two of them holding the reins. My skin itches and it feels like something is crawling through my brain as I look and contemplate riding one of these monsters.

The creatures are really big, the only thing that puts them into scale is the size of the Zmaj standing between them. They

have four legs with wide webbed feet. Their back has a series of mounds and spikes protruding from them. A saddle has been fastened between two of the mounds. The reins wrap around their mouths forcing them to keep them shut, which is probably for the best because I know from awful experience that those mouths are full of razor-sharp teeth. The one on the left snorts, shakes its head violently, and paws at the ground. The Zmaj jerks on the leather reins in his hand and the creature drops its head calming down.

“Are we sure about this?” I ask, my voice trembling.

“It’s the best, fastest way to travel,” Nyanna assures me. “And the Zmaj have been using them, they assure me they have it under control.”

“I’m not worried if he has it under control,” I say. “I’m worried about if *I* can keep it under control.”

“You got this,” Nyanna says cheerfully. Which has to be easy for her, she’s not supposed to ride the thing.

“Right,” I say.

The group comes to a stop in front of the Zmaj and I look at him, fully, for the first time and my heart skips a beat. He has a strong, square jaw and high cheekbones. The smattering of scales on his face glint in the setting suns. His eyebrows are dark and thick, almost bushy, and they outline his rich, warm, brown eyes perfectly.

He has a highbrow that leads up to a curly mess of unruly hair that doesn’t quite reach his shoulders, but it does cover his ears. His horns spiral out of the curls, curving back along the line of his skull. And his lips. They are full, plush even, and they smack softly as they part to reveal his sharp canines. He frowns, bows his head and grunts.

“Hi,” I say, raising a hand and then dropping it to my side because I don’t know if Zmaj wave or not.

He stares for way too long. The moment stretches and I don’t know if he didn’t understand me, can’t speak, or if he’s looking right into my soul and judging me. I shift my weight

from one foot to the other waiting for him to respond. After I don't know how long he shifts his gaze to Nyanna.

"This the one?" he asks in broken Common.

"This is Jean," Nyanna says. "She is an engineer and knows what we need to fix the ship. You take good care of her, please."

He grunts then turns and does something with the saddle of the creature on the left. This close to the thing, guster, they call them guster, I'm even more nervous than I was. I'm supposed to ride this thing but it's as tall as I am. The saddle has stirrups, but even those hang at a height I'll be hard pressed to put a foot into.

The Zmaj keeps the reins in one hand as he kneels and works. The stirrup lowers some then he looks over his shoulder and his gaze move up and down me. I'm embarrassed by how my skin flushes as he looks, and I can't help but wonder if he likes what he sees. He's a really good-looking guy. Gruff, quiet, and a bit on the dark side which tugs at my heart. I bet he's been hurt before.

He does some more work on the saddle and the stirrup lowers a little more and then he rises and nods his head towards me. I shake my head not understanding and he grunts, then motions with his hand for me to approach. Swallowing hard I walk forward. My neck muscles tighten so hard I don't know if I can turn my head and there is an itching sensation between my shoulder blades as I move between the two monsters.

Their mouths are bound. They can't eat me. They can't eat me. They can't. He'll protect me.

I think. I hope. He places a hand on the flank of the beast and pushes until it turns partially away. The stirrup is swinging in front of me. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, then reach as high as I can and grab the horn of the saddle, then place my foot in the stirrup.

I push myself up and off the ground then instinctively I try swing my other leg over. I make it partway then I hit one of

the spikes that protrude from the thing. The creature snorts and bounces away and I'm thrown backwards.

Falling I yelp and flail my arms trying to grab onto something to keep from hitting my head. The sky spins above then suddenly my fall stops with a start. The Zmaj has me in his arm, his brown eyes boring into mine, his brow is furrowed, and I can't tell if it's concern or anger on his face. I do know my heart is racing and I'm ready to throw in the towel on riding this thing.

"Sorry," I mutter. "I don't think I can do this."

The Zmaj grunts, a deep rumbling sound, then he lifts. As I slide along his arm he hooks under my shoulder and one-handed lifts me up into the air then places me onto the saddle. I grab the horn and make the mistake of looking down. It's a really long way down and my stomach flips.

"Oh," I gulp, trying to keep myself from being sick.

I squeeze my eyes tight and wait for my belly to settle. Working blind, I kick my legs around until I find the stirrups and get my feet into them.

"Good?" a deep voice asks.

Realizing it was the Zmaj who spoke, I snap my eyes open. He has one hand on my thigh and is staring. I'm acutely aware of his large hand resting on my thigh. His hand is so big it takes up half my thigh. And it's cool, not warm, but my skin is on fire. I look down at his hand and dirty thoughts dance through my mind.

"Uh, yeah," I say, stumbling over the words.

He offers me the reins with his other hand. Nervous as I have ever been in my life, I take them. He stays at my side, waiting. The beast seems to sense the change in control because it raises up and dances to one side. Before it can do much the Zmaj grabs its halter and hisses in its ear. He murmurs something that I can't catch and my mount settles.

"Good?" he asks again, but now he has moved away, holding the halter and watching my face.

“Yeah,” I say and nod to reinforce it.

He grunts then lets go of the halter. He waits, watching. I wrap the reins around one hand and pull them up tighter. That’s what I was told to do, apparently it shows I’m in control. Don’t give the beast its head, let it know I’m the boss.

The boss, right. I’m not a light snack, I’m the boss.

Cekpet watches longer still then at last he goes to his own mount and gets onto it so effortlessly that I feel like the rank amateur I am. He looks at me with a questioning look I don’t necessarily understand but I nod. He grunts and taps his heels into the sides of his mount.

The guster he’s on lurches forward and then is walking with an easy, rolling gait. I look at my fellow humans and they all give me a thumbs up and nod enthusiastically. I mimic what I saw Cekpet do, smacking my heels into the side of the creature.

It lurches ahead so fast that I’m thrown forward then back. I right myself and loosen the reins just enough that it speeds up and falls into line behind Cekpet.

For better or worse, I’m off. I’m pushed side-to-side as the creature walks. I look back over my shoulder and watch the wreckage of the ship, my home, disappear. We crest a dune, and the ship disappears from sight. I look ahead, ignoring the weight of my mission. It’s an adventure and I’m going to make the best of it.

JEAN

The guster travels over the sand with ease. I wish I could say the same for me. My thighs have been chafed raw and my back feels like it's been wrenched into every configuration but right. I've got sore muscles I didn't know existed.

The double suns are high overhead and starting to drop but we haven't stopped since starting early this morning. I pick up my canteen and take a small sip then place some electrolyte pills under my tongue. I've got to strictly ration myself. I don't know how long it will be, if ever, that we'll find more water. We're heading away from the ocean, deeper into the continent and there may not be any water at all.

Cekpet stays just ahead, keeping me on the left flank of his ride. He looks at me often, but never speaks. I keep trying to strike up a conversation but all I've managed to get out of him so far is a series of grunts and one groan. I still haven't figured out the groan.

"Do you have a specific destination in mind?" I ask.

It's a repeat question, but he never has answered, and I really would like to know. Are we randomly wandering? What is he using as landmarks? As far as I can see there is nothing to guide by except the suns. I guess you could navigate by them if you know where you're going at least. Other than that, all I see is kilometers of empty rolling sand dunes and that only when we're at the crest of a big one.

"Harumph," he says, not looking towards me.

“Oh, I see,” I say. “Gee, Jean, I’m so glad you asked. Let me explain to you how I am navigating. I do have an idea of where we need to go, you see. I’m using the suns to keep us on track. We’re heading, what, oh yes, west. And we’re going to keep going west until...”

I trail off, hoping he might fill in the blank. Even though I wait, he only shrugs and shakes his head.

“Well until we see the next landmark, of course. I know you probably don’t understand all this, but this is my home planet and I know it very well. All part of being a native, you know? By the way, how are you doing? I want to tell you what a pleasure it is that you joined me on this adventure. I thought I was going to have to do it all alone and well that would be a bummer wouldn’t it?”

“Har,” he barks, and I stop to stare.

“Was that... a laugh?” I ask. “Did you laugh at me? Am I amusing you?”

He looks over his shoulder. His brown eyes stare while his lips purse and his brow pulls down. The corners of his mouth quirk, ever so slightly, up into an almost smile. It’s like the precursor of, or a shadow of a smile.

“Oh, I amuse you? Good. That’s my purpose, you know? To amuse you. Glad I can be of service. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

The ghost smile fades, and his lips turn into a frown as he shakes his head. No, he’s not shaking his head, he’s looking around and fast. Cold ice balls in my guts. I draw a breath to say something else, but he shifts his gaze to me and places a finger over his lips.

I’m not stupid and I know how dangerous it is out here, so I follow the silent order and shut my mouth. He pulls back on his reins and the guster he’s riding doesn’t stop, but shakes and leans into the reins, pushing ahead, and fighting his control. He growls and jerks the reins back harder.

My own guster seems to pick up on its partner’s struggle because it suddenly leaps forward. The reins slide through my

hand so fast that they tear at my exposed skin. I tighten my grip and pull back, but the thing has its head and takes off.

I bounce up and down and side-to-side at the same time by some breaking of the laws of physics. My guts are jumping as the thing builds to a full-on run. The wind shears past my face, picking up grainy bits of sand that attack my open mouth, nose, and eyes.

I can't even scream because opening my mouth will only allow the sand in. I fight with the reins, trying to regain control but even as I pull back with all my strength the guster doesn't seem to care. I hear it huff and it shakes its head, jerking back all the slack I'd managed to take out of the reins.

It jumps to the right, and I'm thrown left. One of the spikes behind me pokes into my arm piercing the flesh. And that is, apparently, the worst thing that could happen. I'm not bleeding a lot, but I am bleeding and the scent of it drives the guster into a frenzy.

It stops the forward run, opting now to buck. I fly up from the saddle, my feet in the stirrups the only thing holding me onto it, but then I slam back into the seat. I bite my tongue and my mouth fills with coppery blood.

The world blurs as the thing jumps, spins, reverses mid-spin, and then leaps the other way. It is thrashing its head from one side to the other trying to break free of the restraint keeping its mouth closed and to eat me at the same time.

I knew this was a bad idea.

Up. Down. Spin.

I do the only two things I can. I wrap both of my hands in the reins, and I scream for help.

CEKPET

I hold my finger to my lips, a sign to the human female to be quiet. I heard something, but I'm not sure what. The guster that I am riding lifts its head and sniffs the air. I spin my head around trying to find the source. Something is close.

“Ahhh!!!!”

The female screams as her guster bucks and runs.

The creature twists and turns, trying to get her off its back while simultaneously attempting to break free of the contraption holding its mouth closed. My own beast rears onto its rear legs huffing.

I slap the side of the guster and tighten the reins, forcing it to drop down. It jumps and turns, trying to break my hold but I squeeze my legs harder and slap it again. The female yells again. Her voice is distant. I get my own guster under control then force it to turn until I spot her.

She is cresting the next dune and dropping behind it already. She is still on the beast, though it is tossing her around wildly. I don't know how she has managed to stay on this long, but that is good.

I kick my guster into motion. It starts slow and I kick it again and again until it speeds up to a full gallop. We bound across the sand trying to catch the other. The suns are low. We should be stopping to make camp before the sismis take flight, but

something enticed the guster, ignited their desire to hunt. I wish I knew what it was, but right now I must save the female.

I lean forward, putting my head next to the guster's to lessen the wind resistance. It helps a bit. The sand slides as it bounds up the dune, slowing us down, but when we crest the hill, I see her.

"Hold on!" I yell.

I hope I got the words right. The human language is very complex, and I am far from fluent in it. I used it because I am not sure of her fluency in Zmaj. She screams something, but if there are words in the sound I do not understand.

I kick the guster hard and it leaps from the top of the dune. We sail through the air, closing the distance between us and her beast. Her beast is slower because it keeps stopping to try and throw her off. As bad as that is, it is also my best hope of catching her.

We land with jarring force that makes my teeth click together. My tail slaps the ass of the guster, and it tries to roar, but its mouth is bound too tightly so only a muffled sound emerges. It rears up but I lean down and pull tight, and it drops back down.

It resumes running after the other guster, closing the distance. The female is thrown from one side to the other mercilessly. She is stronger than I would have thought to have hung on this long. It is admirable.

As her guster stops to jump and spin I close with it. I climb up and stand on the back of my guster, holding the reins in one hand. I try to time this exactly. My guster leaps forward and I jump, using the upwards momentum to catch the wind.

Snapping my wings open I glide up in an arc then at the apex I lean forward, partially close my wings, and rocket towards her. I slam into the head of her guster, barely missing some of its protective spikes.

The force of impact temporarily stuns the beast as it staggers back. I grab the halter around its head and jerk its head back towards me. It growls and tries to bite but is too tightly bound.

My own guster runs past, testing its own freedom. If I lose it, we will be down to half supplies and only one ride. I curse, not having time for this.

The female is dazed. She is slumped over but is breathing and shaking her head. Good, she is alive, that is all I can expect for the moment. Her guster tries to break my hold. Anger surges and with it comes the rage of the bijass.

I grab both sides of the gusters head and roar while staring into its eyes. My dragon fills my head and heart and the guster recognizes the alpha predator in me. It cowers, dropping onto its front knees and quavering. I slap its face and it whimpers.

Satisfied the female is safe I turn and run after my own guster. It didn't go far. My roar was enough to make it also stop and drop. I grab a hold of its reins and lead it back to her.

She is sitting upright, both hands gripping the reins of her beast tight as she pulls it back. She looks at me shaking. Her face is pale and the moisture they call tears drips from her eyes. She shakes her head.

"Sorry," she says.

"Humph," I say, shaking my head.

She shivers as I move to the side of the guster. I grab her by her arms, lift and free her from its back.

"You are okay?"

She nods and lets out a shaky breath. Her warmth soaks into my hands and for a moment I lose myself in her beautiful eyes. I pull myself out of the mesmerizing state, forcing myself to focus. This is not the time.

"Good," I growl.

I dig into the packs and find the stake. I drive it into the ground and tie up the guster. Then I pull out the protective shelter that I brought and set to work setting it up. The female watches, silent. My dragon rumbles with feelings and interest.

She is beautiful and handled herself well. She would be a good mate, but right now I do not have time for such. Now is a time

for survival, not mating. I push down the dragon and continue my work.

JEAN

*M*y legs are still quivering, and my breathing is ragged as I pace a circle. Cekpet is all business, but damn, give me a second. I shake my hands and kick the sand.

I'm okay. He saved me.

I stop myself pacing and slowly turn back to Cekpet. He is pulling items out of the packs and tossing aside some stuff trying to find what he wants. The disorder makes me twitch. I grit my teeth, clench my fists, and breathe.

“Do you need help?” I ask.

He grunts. Grunts. What does that even mean? He tosses something over his shoulder, and I have to step aside to avoid being struck by it. He grabs several items and rises. He paces past me and lays out a long cloth then puts together some stick things.

I can't stand it. I go to the mess he's made and gather up all the scattered items. He works behind me building a tent and I work to organize the mess he's made. By the time I get the last items neatly packed away again and turn back he has the tent built and is staring at me.

“Hi,” I say, raising my hand then dropping it when he doesn't do the same. I look at the pack I just finished organizing and then back up to him. “It was a mess. I fixed it.”

“Thank you,” he says.

His voice is one of those deep bass tones that rumbles deep in my belly. It's late into the dusk and shadows dance between us. Those shadows accent the lines of every ab muscle on his stomach. His wings are dark shapes behind him. He steps to one side, and I do not miss the way his muscles ripple. He makes a motion towards the tent with one hand and nods.

"For me?" I ask smiling.

He frowns and tilts his head.

"Do you wish?" he asks.

"I mean, yeah, I'd rather not sleep outside, you know?"

He grunts then takes another step to the side. I feel like I missed something here, but what? I frown, trying to figure it out. He looks past me, avoiding eye contact. Butterflies dance in my stomach as I stare at the tent. It's not a very big tent, especially considering his size. We're going to be right on top of each other. Not that I'm against that. It's been a really long time since I shared a sleeping space with a man and never, in all my life, have I been with a man like him.

He's gruff but I like that. He's also sexy as hell. I bet he'd be a lot of fun in bed. I could see myself at least having a roll with him. Except, from what I understand, the Zmaj don't do one-night stands. Ever. They're a one and done species, apparently.

Would that be so bad? No, no it wouldn't.

"Sleep well," he says, striding past me.

"What, wait, what?"

He is kneeling next to the pack and rifling through the contents that I just organized. It makes my OCD twitch, but fine. I can fix it. Why does he insist on doing that? He stops his rifling and looks up, locking his brown eyes on mine for the first time since this awkwardness started. Now there is a fire burning in them.

"You wish to sleep alone," he says. "I will stand watch."

"No, wait, no," I say, shaking my head. He doesn't respond, watching and waiting. "Okay, wait, backup." He rises and takes two steps backwards. "No, not you. I mean, hold on."

“You are a very confusing female,” he says and ends the statement with a growl.

“It’s not my fault,” I say because now I am flustered. This is spinning fast, and I truly have lost control. He stands there waiting, and I can feel his impatience. “Look, first off, thank you.”

“For what?” he asks, tilting his head to one side.

“For wha—” I sputter, “for saving me, of course. I was... you saved me.”

He nods. “You did very well.”

“I was going to die!”

“No, you were very brave.”

“I didn’t feel brave,” I say.

“May I approach?”

“Yes, why would you think you can’t?”

“You said to back up.”

“No, I didn’t mean...” I trail off. Is he really taking what I say that literally? Or is my command of his language that bad? Maybe both? “I didn’t mean that physically. I meant the conversation.”

“Hmm,” he says in a half-grunt, half-musing tone.

He walks closer, stopping an arm’s length away, but I am acutely aware of his presence inside my personal bubble. It’s not his size, or not only his size, but there is also something about his presence that is commanding. Demanding even. And the smell of him. There is an intoxicating scent about him that fills my head with thoughts of rubbing myself all over those hard, overdeveloped muscles.

And his eyes. They burn with warmth and depth that I don’t think I noticed before. Those eyes bore into mine, not blinking, not looking away. I swallow, hard, at the same time I inhale deeply savoring the exotic smells that he brings.

“Your body is delicate, small,” he says softly. “You stood no chance of controlling the guster with force. If you had been thrown free, it would have been the worst possible outcome. The only thing you could do was to bravely hold on and keep yourself on until I could get there. You did this. Admirably.”

“Uhm, thank you,” I whisper because my mouth and throat are as dry as the sand surrounding us, and I couldn’t get my voice to be any louder if I tried.

“You are welcome, but it is simple facts,” he says.

We stare at each other longer. Neither of us speaks, and then I realize that’s the most words he’s said since the moment we met. And all of them were a compliment that I did the right thing, not that I consciously thought any of that. I was reacting and trying not to die, but still it was the right thing. Apparently.

I clear my throat, forcing moisture back into my mouth. “About the tent.”

He doesn’t answer with words, but he does raise an eyebrow and cock his head. I motion towards it feeling incredibly awkward. I’ve never been a forward girl who starts the action, I’ve always let the guy take the lead. I don’t know what I’m doing. At all.

“There’s plenty of room for both of us,” I say. “You, uhm, you need sleep too. Don’t you?”

He looks over at the tent then back to me.

“You are certain?”

“Uhm, yeah, I am. I mean, I think I am. You do need sleep, right?” He grunts which I take for a yes. “Okay, good. Yeah. I mean, do we need to keep a watch or something? Is that a thing?”

He doesn’t answer with anything more than a grunt. He motions towards the tent, and I take the hint, walking over to it. I slip through the opening slit and inside there are two sets of blankets laid out. One is thicker than the other, several blankets piled one on top of the other and two pillows.

He slips in behind me and his body brushes against mine. My backside burns like fire and my mind is immediately filled with dirty thoughts. And because that makes me feel awkward, I involuntarily jump a step forward to break that contact. Contact that I want, but I can't appear to want it can I?

"Yours," he grunts pointing at the one with the pillows.

"Are you hungry?" I ask.

He doesn't answer but he steps back outside the tent, and I hear him rummaging in the packs. I suppress a groan. I know he's making a mess of all my organizing, and it makes my brain twitch. A moment later he comes back in, and he holds out his hands.

He's holding an open leather package with pieces of smoked meat in it. I pick a piece up and pop it in my mouth and only then does he pick one to eat himself. I move further in and sit on my bedroll while chewing the meat. The smoky flavor makes my mouth water, but the meat is a bit tough and takes a bit to chew. As I swallow it, he holds out a canteen which I gratefully accept.

We eat in easy silence. The meat makes me feel invigorated and alive in a strange way. Almost as if I am hyperalert, all my nerve endings tingle. A shiver races down my spine and out along my limbs. I'm smiling and can't stop.

"Wow, that is really, really good."

"Epis," he says.

"Huh?"

He stops chewing and gives me a quizzical look.

"Epis. In the meat."

"What is epis?"

He shakes his head and shrugs. "Lifeblood of Tajss. A plant. It infuses the meat. Small doses. Good for you."

"Oh," I say. "Nice."

He grunts and damn it all if that grunt isn't sexy. I want to make him grunt for an entirely different reason.

He wraps up the remnants of the meal in the leather pack then checks the cap on the canteen before carefully storing the leftovers. Once he's done all that he lies down on his pallet with his back to me.

I lie down too and stare at his back. His wings are thinner than I thought. I can see tiny veins running through them in the dim illumination from the moonlight. His tail twitches but his breathing is steady and even.

I'd thought he might be more, I don't know, ravishing. A guy, a girl, alone in the big empty desert. No one to hear or bother. I'm willing. But he's... snoring.

Great. So much for my first night alone with the sexy hunk. Maybe tomorrow will be a better day. Sighing heavily, I roll over and try to find sleep myself.

JEAN

I'm immediately awake from a deep, but unrestful sleep. The vestiges of a very dirty, very erotic dream fade as I sit up and realize I'm alone. The tent is not only empty, but the blankets that Cekpet slept on are gone too.

It's still dark outside the tent. How early did he get up? Did he sleep at all?

I rub my face, clean the sleep from my eyes, then crawl out from under the blankets. Through the crack in the tent door, I see a small fire burning. The shadow of what can only be a Zmaj moves across the tent wall, which calms the unsettling fear that something is wrong. Except that he is up so early. Did he not want to be near me? Are these feelings I'm experiencing wrong? Maybe I'm projecting.

I pull my fingers through my hair, working out the sleep tangles, and then set about folding my own blankets. Once I have them neatly stacked, I pick them up and emerge from the tent. The fire is crackling, and the scent of sizzling meat fills my nose making my stomach grumble. Cekpet is crouched at the far side of the fire with a skillet in his hand. He makes a thrusting motion that tosses the sizzling meats inside the pan.

"Good morning," I say.

He looks up for only an instant and grunts before returning his attention to the pan. Okay then. Talking is definitely not his thing. I walk past him to the packs and open the one my sleep stuff goes in. Inside the pack is total disarray that makes my brain itch. I tell myself to ignore it. I try.

Nope, can't do it. I set my blankets down and set about removing all the stored items. I sort them into piles by function and need. Once that's done and the pack is empty I put them back in, now in proper, fully organized order.

About halfway through the project, I feel Cekpet's eyes on me. I look over my shoulder and meet his stare with my own glare.

"What?" I challenge. He shakes his head. "You know, I organize this stuff for a reason. I would appreciate it if you would respect that. The idea is to make it much easier to find what we need, when we need it. It's a simple concept."

"Yes," he says, turning back to his skillet.

I stare at him with my mouth agape. Yes? What does that even mean? I snap my mouth shut, debating whether or not to pursue this unhandled subject. I finish the packing while I continue to turn the problem over and over in my head. The longer I stew on it, the more annoyed I become. I tie the pack close and rise to my feet. I move around so that I'm in front of him.

Squaring my shoulders, I make the decision to confront him. It's disrespectful and I do not have to put up with that. I have done nothing to him to deserve to be treated like this.

"Cekpet, I do not think this is fair," I say. He pulls the pan from the fire and looks up. "The packing. The way you are treating me. It is not my fault that the... thing... got away. I thought we'd covered that but if that is your problem, well then, I did my best."

"I said so," he says, arching an eyebrow and looking completely confused.

"Yes, you did," I agree. "But the packs. And getting up early. Do you just not like me? What is happening here? Why are you acting like this?"

He tilts his head to one side as he continues to stare. His mouth is turned down into a frown and he shakes his head. He opens his mouth as if he's about to say something then in a change of mind he snaps his mouth shut. He shakes his head instead.

“What?” I ask, my voice trembles because I’m feeling desperate. “Say it, please.”

He drops his gaze to the skillet and stares at it instead of me. Slowly he rises to his feet, which means he’s towering over me, and then he offers the skillet. Several pieces of meat sizzle there and the wonderful scent of the flavored meat fills my nose which turns my stomach into a betrayer because it grumbles loudly.

“Eat,” he says, speaking softly. I raise my eyes, turning my gaze into a full-on glare, from the meat to him. He meets my glare with a softness that I don’t expect. “Please.”

And just like that I cannot hold onto the anger. How do you glare at someone who has puppy dog eyes meeting your sternness? I can’t manage it. I don’t know anyone who could.

“Fine,” I say.

I gingerly grab a piece of the meat and then toss it back and forth between my hands while it cools enough to hold. Once it does, I take a bite.

“Oh, wow,” I exclaim. I can’t keep myself from it. The flavor is an explosion in my mouth igniting every taste receptor and making my stomach grumble louder as it demands more. My brain feels like it comes alive, every nerve ending sparking with life. “This is....” I say between chews. “Incredible.”

“Like?” he asks.

“Like?” I ask, staring at him as I finish chewing the first bite and swallow. “I like organization. I like a pretty sunrise. This... this is.... I don’t have words. Like is not enough.”

He smiles and nods. “Good.” He motions the pan towards me again. “More?”

“Yes, please and thank you,” I say, taking a second piece.

He nods with an air of self-satisfaction then takes the last two pieces of meat for himself. He doesn’t bother waiting for them to cool and I’m not sure if he even chews them. They both disappear into his mouth and are gone as fast as that. He kicks

sand over the fire then kneels and grabs a handful of sand. He scours the pan while I watch, paying no attention to me at all.

He finishes cleaning the pan then goes over to the pack and opens it. Once he's done that he stops, staring at the organized items. He frowns deeply then shakes his head. He looks at me with a questioning gaze.

“Where?”

So, he did listen. He's not a jerk. Or not a total jerk. I walk over with a wide smile and show him the spot I left for the pan. He places it in with a level of care that belies his size and what I thought his intent was. He seals the pack and places it onto the guster. A moment later he grabs the second pack and fastens it.

I finish my food and sip a little water to wash it all down. By the time I'm done he's pulled the stake that bound the guster and is looking at me. He doesn't have to say anything, I know what he wants. I walk over to my mount and wait. He steps in behind me and places his hands on my waist.

And he stands there. Hands on my waist. His breath is warm on my neck. He inhales deeply and still we stand this close, touching. My heart is racing. Any second now he's going to kiss my neck. Please, please kiss my neck. I want you to. I will him to.

He grunts and his hands tighten on my waist then he lifts me onto my mount. He keeps one hand on my waist, waiting until I have my feet in the stirrup and the reins firmly in my hand before he moves away. Slowly. He moves away slowly. *Reluctantly? Maybe.*

He moves to his own mount and climbs on. He makes a tsk sound and slaps his feet against its sides. The beast lurches into motion and I fall in behind him, staring at his back and wondering what in the hell I'm doing.

JEAN

“*T*he sunrise is really pretty,” I say.

We’ve stopped at the top of one of the multitudes of rolling sand dunes. This one is a little taller than the others, giving a broader view. The primary sun has just crested the horizon. It’s a red gas giant and casts its light over the sands. Instead of shades of purple like the vids from Earth always showed this is more yellows and oranges. Still, it’s gorgeous. It hits the sands which break the light and cause a myriad of rainbows and dancing shadows.

“Hmmp,” Cekpet grunts.

I’ve gotten used to him not talking much. It’s still annoying, but I suppose you can get used to anything if you give it long enough. He’s not a conversationalist but I’ve got lots to say so I’m happy to carry both sides of it.

“Gee, it sure is Jean. Wow, look at the way the rainbows push back against the lingering dark. Gee, Cek, I see what you mean. Wow.”

I glance at him hoping to get some kind of reaction. I think I see the corners of his lips quiver. I will break him, sooner or later. I’ll wear him down and he’ll either hate me or love me. No one feels in between about me, and I like it that way. Better to have things be clear cut.

“There,” he says, startling me out of my thoughts and observation of the natural beauty.

He's pointing off into the distance, so I follow the direction he's indicating. I don't see anything, so I shield my eyes, but still all I see is rolling dunes of sand with the same striations of red and white that I've been looking at the entire time.

"I don't see it," I say. "But I trust you. You've gotten us this far."

"Hmm," he says, or grunts, or makes a sound like it.

He tsks and kicks his mount, pushing it back into motion. I do the same but now I try to stay by his side. I'm bored staring at his back all this time. We've been going for hours. Hours of trying to keep my mind off how raw and sore my thighs are or how much my back is killing me because every time this beast sways left, I'm going right and vice versa. I cannot get the hang of rolling with it. Logically I know that's what you're supposed to do, but logic and reality are not the same.

"Think we'll get to it before lunch?" I ask. He shrugs. "Not sure, huh? Yeah, makes sense. It's got to be hard to gauge distance when it all looks the same. I mean what do you go by? That sand dune is a fingers width shorter than the one before it, so I know we made progress?"

He snorts. Yes! I did it!

"You! You laughed!"

His face is stoic and serious as usual. He refuses to turn and even look in my direction, which only further affirms that I did make him laugh.

"See, I knew you had a sense of humor in there. I only had to find it. I'm an engineer, by the way, I guess you probably knew that. It's what I do, but it's also how I think. Everything in life, you see, is a problem. If you break down all the possible solutions, then you can refine them until you find the best one.

It's a logic game. Like you. You don't laugh. You don't talk, well much anyway. I know, I know, you're thinking Jean, I talk all the time. I go hmm, harumph, and growl, but that's not talking my friend. You may think you're talking a lot but you're not. You are communicating though. So that made the

problem I had to solve. How do I get you to break out of your patterns.”

I’m rolling along lost in my thoughts as I explain my logic to him when I suddenly realize he’s no longer beside me. I pull back on the reins looking around in bewilderment.

“Huh? Where... what?”

He stopped his mount and is a good ten meters behind me. He’s staring directly at me with his arms crossed before him and a deep frown on his face.

“I talk,” he says.

I’m stunned. I don’t know what to say. I can’t think of a single thing. He spoke. Directly in response to something I said. I didn’t just break through, I broke him. I move my mouth, intending to say something but no words come out because I’ve got nothing.

“Uh-huh,” I say, covering my own lack of a coherent thought. He continues to sit, waiting for me to say something obviously. I shake my head to clear the confusion then nod. “I see that you do. But you haven’t been on this whole trip. Why?”

“You talked enough for both of us,” he says, motioning with his hand.

He kicks his mount into motion, and it plods its way forward.

“I don’t talk that much,” I protest, but he shuts me up with a single look. “Okay, well I do, but only because, you know, it felt like I needed to hold up both ends of this conversation.”

“Okay,” he says.

“Okay? That’s it? Seriously?”

We’re next to each other and I kick my guster into motion to keep up with him. He shrugs.

“This is your thought. I respect it.”

“You respect? Huh?”

He turns his head and stares at me for a long time or what feels like a long time. I'm not able to read his face to get a handle on what he's thinking or means.

"Jean. You are you. Yes?"

"Sure, but—" he holds up his hand and I cut myself off.

"I respect you."

"And that's why you haven't talked?"

"No."

"Then why?"

I feel his hesitation. I'm hitting too close to something. Something he doesn't want to say. He grunts and we ride in silence but I'm not going to let this go. It feels important. I don't know why but I know my heart is beating faster and fresh sweat is beading on my feverish skin. This is something real. Something deep.

The beasts keep up their rolling gait and ground passes as the suns rise. I don't take my eyes off him. Waiting and he knows I'm waiting. I'm going to try his game. Silence until it invites conversation.

The second sun crests the horizon. The temperature rises and I'm still waiting. My skin is itching all over. It's driving me nuts. Like bees buzzing inside my skull. Talk damn it! Talk! And still, he does not. Finally, I do break.

"I asked why!" I shout.

"Yes."

"Are you going to tell me?"

His frown deepens as he purses his lips and his brow furrows. His wings rustle and even his tail stiffens. I don't know what any of that means though. I haven't been around the Zmaj long enough to be able to read their body language like they're humans.

"It is..." he trails off. The tension in his shoulder is clear and his tail is twitching. Is he nervous? Is that what all that means?

"Uncomfortable."

“Oh,” I say. “Uhm, I’m sorry? How do I help?”

He glances in my direction then jerks his head back to eyes forward. I do not miss that his grip on the reins tightens. His knuckles are paler he’s gripping so tight.

“Focus on the mission,” he says.

“But... we are,” I say. “We’re heading to the wreck, right? You’ve got that part under control and what else are we going to do while we’re traveling? We can talk, right?”

He grunts, shakes his head, and then slaps the sides of his mount, speeding it up. Puffs of sand explode with each pounding of the creatures wide-webbed feet.

Great. You pushed him too far.

I kick my guster into gear and try to catch up.

JEAN

*M*y stomach is twisting itself into knots, unknitting only so it can twist itself into a new configuration. The suns are almost directly overhead now and I'm sweating even through my environment suit. Not as bad as I would be without it, but nothing completely protects my human build from this heat.

It's been hours since our 'conversation' and he hasn't spoken since. In his defense, I haven't either. I have replayed the entire conversation over in my head at least a hundred times. Probably more. I don't see how I could have done anything different, and I still don't understand him.

I try turning it into a mechanical problem. Mechanical things make sense. They do exactly what you tell them to do and if they aren't then there is a logical reason for it. All you have to do is figure out what is off then blam-o, fixed.

Unfortunately, he's not a machine. It helps, some, but it's not a total solution. What I have figured out is he's obviously focused on the mission. He said as much. Okay, but to the exclusion of anything and everything else? That doesn't make sense.

I've been around the Zmaj enough now to know that the others are more than capable of focusing on more than one thing at a time. They are intelligent, every bit as intelligent as a human. More than some humans if I'm being blunt. So that doesn't make sense. Unless... maybe he's not so bright? A learning disability maybe? Do Zmaj have learning disabilities?

We have systems to detect and adjust the education of any human child to fit their learning style. No, scratch that. We *had* systems for that. None of those systems survived the crash. No, that's not right either. None of those systems were in our section of the shipwreck. They could be out there somewhere, spread across the planet.

I've done the math already. The ship was big enough that if it broke into the component parts, like Emil hypothesizes it did, they could be spread over about two-thirds of this planet's surface. Simply because they would have broken into different angles, hit the atmosphere at different times, with different trajectories and therefore would land all over the place. The odds are in favor of other large portions of the ship having survived reentry.

Which means there could be more survivors. Somewhere. Out there. Like the Jungle People, as we've taken to calling them. Except they were only one pod's worth, not an entire piece of the ship like we came down in. Those of us unlucky or perhaps lucky enough to not make it to our assigned pods.

All of which brings me back to him. He keeps his head on a swivel but never quite turns it far enough that he has to look directly at me. Which is awkward for him and for me both. And to be honest, it hurts my feelings.

I like him. He's taciturn, gruff, and kind of grumpy but that has always been my 'type'. I like the gruff ones. The ones who look like grumps most often have the softest of hearts if you pierce their protective shell. In my experience they've been hurt and really need someone to listen and help them heal. How can I not be a sucker for that?

And he's good looking. Alien, sure, but it's not like I'm breaking new ground there. All ten of the women from the jungle are mated with one of the Zmaj. And there's the baby.

The baby. I'm every bit as enamored with that little one as pretty much every other woman survivor is. The little bugger is as cute as anything I've ever seen. Precocious and loves all the attention she's been getting.

Incredible, a perfect combination of human and Zmaj traits. And healthy. She's already taking her first steps, a fact that was broadly celebrated by everyone on the ship. Captain Nyanna even had an announcement made about it. I engineered some childproofing for Riley and Angota's room to make sure that Nadiya couldn't get into too much trouble if she wandered out of sight for a moment or two.

I always wanted kids. Someday, I used to think. Before all this. Now, crashing, surviving, and being here on this planet where every single day is a fight to stay alive, it feels somehow more important. Like if I don't have a kid soon I might not ever. Tomorrow is not guaranteed by any means, and I want to make a difference. I want to create a future.

The first thing we had to come to terms with, after the crash, was that this is our home. Some folks thought we'd be rescued. I knew better and made that point clear to the Council when it first formed. Rescue isn't going to happen. The generation ship was lost, meaning there was also no way for us to continue on to our original destination. No, Tajss was our home, for better or worse and the faster we accepted that the better.

I didn't mind. Still don't. Yeah, it's rough here. It's a challenge, but what engineer isn't up for a challenge? Gordy embraced every challenge and came out on top every time. I know it was a vid and all scripted, I'm not an idiot, but it is still a great role model. And it's an engineer's approach. No problem cannot be overcome if you gather enough data and put your mind to it.

A vague empty ache in my guts is all this comes down to. A sense of something missing and I've lived with this long enough to know what it is. A baby. I want a baby. I want a young mind to help shape, influence, and to raise with a life partner at my side.

And I thought, though I'm not sure why, that Cekpet might be the one to join me on that journey. Maybe I was wrong. It could be. I've been wrong before; I mean I am human. We make mistakes. Life is messy.

“Woah,” Cekpet says, pulling back on his reins.

I do the same and manage to come to a stop only a meter ahead of him. Go me. He twists in his saddle and opens the pack behind him. Throwing the lid open he stares at the contents for a long, long time. I watch, wondering what he is doing, but not having the guts to interrupt whatever it is. I messed up our last conversation so badly now I feel gun shy.

He frowns and I see his eyes going over all the contents. Does he not see what he wants? I organized the pack very carefully. I assume he’s looking for the food packs. I know right where they are, but I hesitate.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath then lets it out slowly. When he opens his eyes, he immediately grabs a food pack and turns back around. He unties it and opens it then holds it towards me, offering the first meat.

I smile, take two pieces, and bite off one piece. He doesn’t meet my eyes, though he is watching. He takes back the package, pulls two pieces of meat out for himself, and closes the pack. He tosses both pieces into his mouth then twists back around. I chew and watch as he carefully places the pack back exactly what I had it. He rests his hand on the contents for a long moment, then closes the pack and ties it off.

I finish chewing the bite I had taken and swallow. He is chewing his own meat, staring straight ahead in an almost pointed fashion. Pointed in that he’s not looking at me. My heart is beating faster because the glimmer of an idea is forming, but I don’t know yet. It could be...

“How much further you think?” I ask.

He looks up at the sky then back down.

“Half-day,” he says. I nod, taking another bite and silently chewing. “Keep riding.”

He kicks his guster into motion and I do the same. We ride in silence but now I think I understand. And understanding brings a plan.

JEAN

He likes me. That has to be it. He likes me.

Okay, if that's true, which I feel certain it is, then how do I get him to admit it? I turn the problem over and over. As I do I watch him in my peripheral. He rides tall, with his shoulder square and his wings partially open. His focus is always shifting as he watches all around us for any potential threat.

The suns are dropping to the horizon, and I know, according to his estimate, we'll soon arrive at the wreckage of the ship. That will be my next chance to get him to open up. I don't know how I'll do it, but there must be a way. Because I think, I hope, he has the same interest I do.

Interest. Right. I want to know him better. Beyond physical attraction, which is all well and fine, but I'd like to know the man himself. Or the alien male himself. Whatever. Details.

The dune we're climbing is steeper than most and the sand slides even under the webbed feet of our mounts. He kicks his and I do the same forcing it to move faster to outrun the slippage. As I do my guster bursts into a gallop. Fear booms through my thoughts as adrenaline pumps at the memory of my recent runaway ride. I do not want a repeat of that experience.

The guster bounds up the dune, passing Cekpet and his mount, but I have the presence of mind to tighten the reins the moment we reach the top. The guster tosses its head, pulling

hard against me, but I throw my weight back as I pull and use it to fight the guster. It snorts loudly then gives up its testing.

My heart is in my throat, hammering, but I'm in control and safe. Cekpet bounds up and pulls to a stop next to me. He's staring at the guster then at me. It looks, I think, like an appraising gaze. He gives a rare smile and nods.

"Well done," he says, his voice all gravelly and sexy.

"Thanks," I say.

Only now do I look ahead. All my attention had been on controlling the guster before it broke free. When I do look, I see the remnants of the ship. It's a much smaller section than the one we've all called home. I also see the scattered remains that dot the sand between us and the wreckage.

My stomach drops and I can't keep back the tears. It's probably stupid but seeing it is like opening a wound that I didn't know was still there. All the memories of immediately after our own crash. The wreckage. The bodies. All those we lost and the days we spent digging graves. Then all those we lost in that first month as we came to terms with our new home.

"You are, okay?" Cekpet asks.

"Yeah," I say, choking on the word. I wipe the tears on my sleeve, shake my head, and take a steadying breath. "Yeah. I'll be fine. Sorry."

He doesn't say anything but makes a low growling sound and shakes his head. I look over but he's not looking at me. He's studying the path ahead, looking at all the bodies and wreckage. His wings rustle and his tail twitches.

"No dishonor," he says.

"I don't, uhm, I don't understand."

He leans forward, resting on the pommel of his saddle, then turns his head to look at me. He frowns again and shrugs.

"War," he says, waving his hand towards the carnage. "No dishonor in being sad."

“Have you ever been to war?” I ask.

Something dark and terrible passes over his face. It’s mostly in his eyes. Like a weight slamming onto his shoulders and a sadness fills his normally warm eyes. He nods sharply and grunts.

“The mission,” he says and kicks his guster into motion.

What have you seen Cekpet? What makes you so sad?

I’m more intrigued than ever. I must get to know this man. I want to fix him. And now I know I’m in trouble for sure.

‘You don’t want a man you have to fix honey. It never works out. Look at your father.’

And there is the voice of my mother. I remember her telling me that when I was only eight years old. My dad had broken one of the cardinal rules of life on the ship. He left. You don’t do that. All the screening and the special rituals couples had to go through before getting approval for marriage was supposed to make sure that didn’t happen. It still did happen, but not often. I was one of the lucky ones, I guess.

Dad left and didn’t look back. Not once. Which never bothered me but now I have to wonder, was my mom right? Or not. My dad wasn’t just broken, he was an asshole. He didn’t want to be a father and I was the biggest reason he gave for leaving. If you don’t want kids, why get married?

Besides I don’t think Cekpet needs fixed. I like what I see. He seems to be mission focused, determined, strong, and capable. He’s also sexy, which is nice. And he’s been nothing but kind in his interactions with me, even if he is grumpy about it all. Maybe he’s not grumpy but preoccupied. Could be. Could be.

I follow him letting my thoughts drift. I keep my eyes on him though because I don’t want to look at the remains. They’re all over the place. People who didn’t make it. I see them, in my peripheral, but that keeps them from being *too* real. They’re part of the scenery, not real people with lives that were lost. I’m not in the headspace to deal with that again.

Cekpet is not an asshole. There is no evidence that indicates he is. Point in his favor. And besides, my mom didn’t know

everything. I love her, don't get me wrong, but that doesn't mean she was all-knowing or had all the answers. She'd say as much herself. She was a woman doing her best to raise a daughter on her own. A smart, precocious child whose IQ tested way higher than hers, which couldn't be easy to live with.

It did get me into the engineering program though. Which is where I wanted to be. I have always loved figuring out what makes things work. Once you know that then you can set about making them work better. And that is what holds my attention about Cekpet.

What makes him work? What is it that holds him back? How do I fix that because I have this sense that if he lets go, it will be amazing.

JEAN

The shadow cast by the shipwreck stretches across the desert and is cooling as we pass into it. The second sun is below the horizon and the primary is dropping quickly. It will be full dark before long, but it's still stifling hot. There isn't even a breeze right now, which is unusual. There's almost always at least a bit of wind blowing.

Cekpet dismounts and I wait for him to get the stake set before I do the same. Once he's driven it into the ground and tied his own mount, I hand him the reins to mine and dismount too. The ship remnant hit at an angle driving the forepart deep into the ground. The rest is set at an almost forty-five-degree angle to the ground.

"Well, this is it," I say.

I have no idea if we'll find what we need inside or not. I've never seen the ship from outside prior to the crash so it's not like I can look at this part and say, oh yeah, this is some specific section. We're going to have to explore inside.

Cekpet doesn't respond. When I look over, he's moved past the guster and is staring out at the horizon. His tail is rising until it's straight up and curling over his head. His wings are partially open too. Everything about him screams he's worried. But about what?

I walk over and stand next to him, staring in the same direction he is. I don't know what he's looking at, but I do see that it looks like there are clouds forming on the horizon. That would be something new. Is it going to rain? We've been here

months, and it hasn't rained once. Rain would be nice. Cooling. Does it rain in deserts?

Cekpet grunts, shakes his head, then looks down at me. There is a deep frown on his face making it clear that he is definitely worried. He looks from me to the horizon and back again.

"What is it?" I ask. Goosepimples racing down my arms and the hair on the back of my neck is standing on end. He looks back to the horizon and shakes his head ending that with a grunt. "Come on, what? You're scaring me."

He looks behind us at the ship.

"We need to shelter," he says, striding towards the ship.

"Shelter? Why? Is that a storm? Why is that bad?"

He doesn't answer me, which isn't surprising. He moves faster and easier across the loose sand than I can. Which is totally not fair. He's three, maybe four times my size and he walks across the sand like it's a solid floor. He uses his wings and tail to great effect, unlike me. Every step I take I sink to at least my ankles and sometimes up to almost my knee.

He presses his hands to the side of the ship and moves quickly along its length. I struggle to catch up to him, but he stays a few meters ahead because of my difficulty moving. I hear him grumbling as he searches for an opening. Or I assume that's what he's looking for.

I can't keep up with him, but I can study the ship. I know what an airlock looks like and that will be our best hope for getting inside. I work my way back until I have a good view of the length of the wreckage. The dusk makes it harder to see details, forcing me to squint and try to decipher what I see.

It's at least three hundred meters of ship chunk that I can see above the portion that's buried. We came up on the high end which is around ten or fifteen meters off the ground. Cekpet is about a third of the way to the buried tip, feeling for a door or something.

I run my eyes down the length of it. There are burn marks on the hull. We were definitely attacked, but I already knew that. I never saw the creatures that boarded us, but other survivors

did and have described them. They sound horrifying and I'm thankful I've never seen one in person.

When I look close to the section that is buried something catches my eye. The metal there looks torn, it could be an opening.

"There!" I shout and point to what I spotted.

Cekpet looks back and then follows my gesticulating arm and finger. He nods and moves quickly in that direction while I fight my way there through the sand.

It's not a big opening. As I get closer, I can see that the metal is folded out. Something exploded from inside and came out. There must have been fighting or something on the other side of the hull. Something caused an explosion that threw something else through the thick hull.

Cekpet is studying the hole. He grabs one of the bent pieces of metal and pulls. It doesn't move, at first, but then he makes this loud, grumbling noise that grows louder and louder. As it increases in volume and pitch his muscles bunch and bulge. The sound booms into a roar and the sound of tearing metal accents it.

I watch in awe. This is the most impressive display of strength I have ever seen. It was quite literally incredible. The hull of the ship is thick, half a meter thick, and he just bent it like it was wet paper.

The wind suddenly picks up and a blast of sand is driven hard into my face. It hits my eyes, and I can't see. I open my mouth to say something and regret it as my mouth fills with sand too. I shield my face with an arm, squinting to try and see what is happening. The guster make a low, mewling sound that I've never heard from them before. A moment more and then I hear Cekpet roar and more metal bends to his will.

"What is happening?" I ask as the wind continues to rise.

The wind is picking up sand and blasting us. The wind, filled with sand, becomes a scouring force. It feels like I'm using high grit sandpaper to exfoliate. It hurts, not bad, yet, but it

doesn't take much in the way of imagination to realize this is only the beginning.

"Sandstorm," Cekpet must yell to be heard as the wind speeds up even more.

The wind has become a roaring sound. I shield my eyes to look. What I thought was a cloud isn't, or at least it's not a nice, fluffy rain cloud. It's a rolling wall of sand coming at us with frightening speed.

The guster buck and strain to break free of their tie as they make a mewling, frightened sound. Cekpet tears at the ship, widening the tear. I don't think we have long, if we're exposed when that storm hits, we're going to be shredded. Literally.

"This is bad," I shout.

"Inside," Cekpet yells, grabbing my shoulder he lifts me off my feet and shoves me into the opening he made.

I tumble through the opening and land inside all akilter on the wall of a hall. I untangle myself and get to my feet. Cekpet hasn't come inside and it's getting really dark. The opening allows in the only light, so I rush to it.

Outside Cekpet is fighting his way through the gusting winds to the guster. He grabs the reins and jerks them free. The guster both buck as they fight his control. Their eyes are wide and they're still making that fearful sound.

Cekpet is lifted off his feet and slams down. His wings are being forced open by the wind. He roars and turns back towards the ship. The storm is coming faster, and this is still only the forefront of it.

"Hurry!" I yell.

I know it's not helping but I have to say or do something. Terror is causing cold chills to race down my limbs and leaving me shaking. There is nothing I can do to help. He is bent in half against the wind. Every step he takes is a testament to his incredible strength and yet it seems he's barely making it. As if he is moving in slow motion.

The guster are barely following him. Every step or two they rear up and try to break free of his grip. They know what's happening at least on some kind of instinctual, reactive level and they want to run away. But that won't do them or us any good. The journey here wasn't bad with them, but if we have to return without them, hauling whatever parts we find, it will be a much different story. Not to mention that all our supplies are currently strapped to their backs.

The wind whistles past the opening so loud it's a constant whine in my ears. Sand is piling up in front of the opening and almost as much is making its way into the wreckage of the ship. Cekpet is almost here. The opening he made might be big enough for the guster to fit through. It's going to be tight.

"Step back," he yells as he hands me the reins to the beasts.

I wrap the leather around both hands and step out of the way. He undoes the pack on one of them, grabs it and throws it through the opening. I push it to one side with my foot. He undoes the other pack, and it follows suit.

He looks in at me then the wind gusts. He slams to one side, right into one of the gusters. One of the protective spikes on the monster pierces him. I can't tell where he is hurt. I scream, desperation and fear overwhelming all good sense.

Even over the roaring wind I hear him grunt then he screams as he pulls himself off the spike. He turns and I see blood pouring down his arm and chest. He wraps the reins around his arm and climbs through the opening.

"Move," he barks.

I drop my own hold on the reins and move out of his way. He pulls the gusters inside. They fight him, pulling and jerking around, and it takes some time, but he gets them inside and once they are out of the wind they both settle down. It's as if they know they are safe or at least safer than they were.

"You're hurt," I say, coming closer.

He holds up one hand and stops me in my tracks.

"Not yet," he says.

His injured arm hangs loose at his side and his blood is dripping onto the floor, but he is looking up and down the hall. He spies a rail a little way down the hall and walks over to it. He pulls and tugs on it, testing its resilience, then when he is satisfied it's solid, he ties the guster to it. He stumbles as he walks back past me to the packs.

"Let me help," I say.

"Not yet," he barks, and I stop. Stupid, but tears well in my eyes.

I'm trying to help, damn it.

He kneels next to the pack and digs into it. He tosses aside things until he finds a torch which he pulls out. He holds it in front of his face and then he belches, loudly. When he does a ball of flame explodes out of his freaking mouth and ignites the torch.

"What?" I exclaim.

I had no idea they could do that. These Zmaj guys are even more dragon like than I would have ever thought. Their physiology is fascinating.

The torch pushes back the shadows. Sand is piling up inside the opening and the wind continues to build. It's so loud now that I hear the sand pelting the wall of the ship. Cekpet looks over his shoulder and motions with his head.

"Come," he says.

I glance at the mess he's made of the pack, again. It makes me twitch but now is not the time to give in to my own OCD tendencies. I nod and follow him into the dark.

JEAN

The long hall opens into a courtyard. The ship was big enough that no one person ever saw all of it and I am not familiar with this area. Or maybe I am, and it just looks completely different in the dark with only a single torch. I can only see a few feet in any direction, but I can tell this is a big open area.

Cekpet leads us around. I'm not sure what he's looking for but right now I'm glad to be out of that storm. The whipping wind causes weird moans and whistles. I keep jumping in surprise when they come unexpectedly.

We poke around until I finally figure out this must have been a park. Every level of the ship had a park. An open area with lots of trees, paths, benches, and usually some toys for kids to play on. It created the illusion we weren't stuck in a tin can, even though essentially, we were. It also helped to clean the air and take pressure off the life support systems. The parks were an essential part of life, plus a nice place to go and take a walk. The lights, if they were working, would simulate sunlight and provide a good source of Vitamin D for those of us who were never supposed to see a sun in our lifetimes, much less two of them.

I figured it out when we come across the first copse of trees. They've fallen over, their roots sticking out and casting even more weird shadows. Cekpet thrusts the torch around trying to understand what he is seeing.

"It's a tree," I say. "Do you have trees on Tajss?"

He looks over and grunts. That's when I remember he came from another continent that they call the jungle so of course he knows what a tree is. God I'm an idiot. I smile and give him a sheepish shrug.

"Sorry, I know you do," I say. "This was a park. What is it you're looking for, maybe I can help?"

He walks away from the downed trees and the torch flickers as he waves it around. The pelting sound of the wind is louder than ever. The storm must really be hitting now. I hope everyone back at home is safe. They should be if they all got inside. They have to be but what about the other team that was going to look for another place to live? Did they find shelter?

Something clatters to our left. Cekpet and I jump at the same time. Well, I jump in fear, and he does this hop, jump, drop into a defensive crouch. One hand has the torch held forward and his other hand is on the haft of the weapon he wears on his back.

I hold my breath, not wanting to miss the next sound. The clattering, scrabbling sound comes again. It sounds like claws on metal. My blood turns cold, and I step closer to Cekpet. The sound is running around us.

Cekpet turns in a circle, keeping his arm with the torch fully extended as he stares into the gloom. Nothing happens. He finishes turning a circle then it comes again and it's behind us. He whirls around, the weapon coming free and whistling as it slices the air.

Something growls and for once it's not Cekpet. I can't hold my breath any longer. I'm panting. Sweat is pouring out of all my pores and my stomach is a tight ball of fear. Cekpet turns in a slow circle.

Suddenly he leaps. He drops the torch as he does, both hands going to his weapon. He moves so fast it startles me. I don't know what I should do but I act on instinct. I drop to my knees, grab the torch and hold it out trying to see what is happening.

Something dark moves in a flash. I can't see Cekpet or what it is that I just saw moving. I wave the torch around trying to get the flickering flames to illuminate whatever is attempting to eat me but to no avail.

I want to scream, but I choke that down. That is the last thing I should do because I don't want to attract attention. I should probably put the torch down and hide, but some primal part of my brain refuses that idea.

Animals fear fire, right? Fire is the only protection I have and putting it down or out seems like a terrible idea. Except it's also the thing that is clearly marking where I am for anything that does have hopes of making me its dinner.

The shadows dance and then there is the clattering sound again. I spin towards it in time to see another, large blur in the darkness. Cekpet roars. I recognize the sound of his voice and then I see his shadowy form gliding through the air.

The flames of my torch glint off the razor-sharp steel of this weapon and I see it swinging. There is a thunk then a high-pitched yowl. It's so loud I drop the torch and cover my ears. Another thunk and the sound stops. Tentatively I thrust the torch in the direction of the sound and rise to my feet.

Cekpet emerges from the shadows and looks me up and down. His chest is heaving and there is more blood splattered over his chest as well as the wound still dripping from his arm. He stares in silence but there is a weight to his gaze. An appraisal.

The tension between us is palpable. He grumbles, a deep rumbling sound, as his eyes drift down my body and then back up to my eyes.

Then, in a blur, he grabs me by my waist, lifts me with his good arm and his lips are on mine.

JEAN

Our kiss is desperate, needy, and insistent. His hands are all over me as I wrap my arms around his neck and give myself over. It's electric. My heart races and electric sensations race over my body.

He groans into my mouth and that pushes me over the edge. There is no logic or thinking. It's lust and desire. His tongue penetrates my mouth like invaders storming a castle. I taste him and I want more.

When at last he breaks the kiss, our foreheads are pressed together. I feel the spirals of the base of his horns pressing against my skull and it's as exotic and erotic as him. We're both panting, breathless. I run my hands softly down his neck, over his shoulders, then I touch the wet and come back to my senses.

"You're hurt," I gasp. "Let me help."

He grunts but sets me back onto my feet. I pick up the dropped torch and move it closer so I can see how bad it is. There's a hole right through his bicep. The blood has clotted some, but it's still dripping.

"Oh shit," I say. "You need stitches." I look around to orient myself. "I packed a med-kit in the packs. We have to go back and get them."

He looks from the hole in his arm to me then back at the hole and grumbles.

"It's not an option," I say. "That needs fixed."

“Fine,” he says, holding out his undamaged arm to take the torch. I give it to him then let him lead us back to the packs. As we reenter the hall the sounds of the storm are louder than ever. It sounds like there’s thunder too, which must look wild in a sandstorm.

The sound of the guster growling is the next thing I hear that tells me we’re close. That and the whistling of the wind coming through the tear in the hull. We arrive at the packs and I put back together the one that he tossed around.

“We talked about this, remember? I organize this so I can find things easily,” I say as I repack. “You need something it’d be a lot easier if you’d just ask.”

He grunts but if that is in agreement or not who knows. I find the med-kit and stand up holding it high.

“Got it!” I say.

He moves past me towards the guster. The wind is roaring so loud it’s hard to hear anything else. The hall by the opening in the hull is full of sand. A full-on mound of it piling up against the wall and spilling further down the hall.

The guster are on the far side of it and still tied up. As I move closer, I can see that they’re still skittish but not freaking out like they were when the storm was rolling in and we were outside. Cekpet climbs over the sand goes to them. He pets and soothes them and I’m not sure because of the wind, but I think he’s singing to them.

I shield my face by pulling my shirt up from inside the suit and hooking it over my nose then shield my eyes with my hands and peek outside. At first, I can’t see anything. There’s motion but my brain can’t process what it is I’m looking at. Then it clicks.

The sand is blasting across the opening so intensely it’s like a moving wall of sand. Then the lightning strikes something and illuminates the entire wall of roaring sand. It’s beautiful and deadly. If we were out inside of that I’d be shredded, even my bones would be picked clean. Cekpet, with his scales, stands a

better chance of survival than I do, but I don't know if even he could survive it.

"Come," he says, suddenly at my side.

He pulls me away from the opening and leads the way back to the park we were in before. He hooks one of the packs with his good arm and carries it along with us. I keep the med-kit in my hands and think about the kiss.

It's a better thing to focus on than my other options. The deadly sandstorm, the thing that was in the dark trying to kill us, and a dozen other items I could worry about. No, the kiss is a much better thing to focus on. The kiss is nice. Nice, the kiss was amazing. My lips tingle at the memory.

And I want more.

"There should be a shop or a stall if we stay closer to the wall," I say as the hall ends and we're back in the open.

He grunts and leads the way to the left. The parks were usually lined with shops and little outlets. Some learning places, entertainment stores, and lots of places to eat. There was never a shortage of food on the ship.

The first one we come across looks like it was an ice cream shop. The gate is pulled down, but Cekpet looks at it for a moment, bends down, grabs the handle, and then jerks it up hard. The lock wasn't made to withstand much force because crime on the ship was nonexistent, so it snaps easily. The gate rattles loudly as he lifts it up.

We walk inside and he pulls it down behind us as a precaution against anything else that might have turned the wreckage into a lair. There are eight tables with four chairs each. These chairs aren't well designed for a Zmaj with their wings and tails. I place my hand on his arm that is controlling the torch, and he lets me take it.

I search until I find a bench set against the wall. I go over and grab it, pulling it away from the wall. I motion for him to take a seat and he does. I open the med-kit and look through the supplies. I pick up a bottle of disinfectant, open the cap and

sniff it. The strong odors of alcohol and hydrogen peroxide fill my nose.

“This will probably hurt,” I warn him.

He nods so I pour the solution onto his wound. He grunts and makes a jerking motion, but nothing else. I repeat the process on both sides of his arm since the spike pierced clear through. I reseal that bottle and pick up the next one which is a liquid antibiotic. I apply that and he doesn't react at all.

I move the torch in and inspect the wound. It's fairly clean. I'm surprised it went through his scales but the edges of flesh are splayed around it so I think I can sew him up. I thread a needle then look into his eyes.

A fire burns in his eyes. A fire of passion and suppressed desire. I purse my lips and try to quell the butterflies dancing in my stomach.

“This... will hurt,” I say. He nods. I lean in and kiss him. He hooks his good arm behind my head and tries to keep the kiss going but I pull away. “Let's do this first. You're still bleeding.”

He grunts but I have made up my mind to get this work done. “Can you hold the torch so I can have the light?”

He does as I ask, and I pick my spot. I press the needle to his flesh, bite my lip, look at him, then steeling my nerves I push it through. He doesn't even grunt. He watches with great interest as I pull the thread through then push it into his flesh again. Having broken the barrier of starting I work quickly and in short order have this side of the hole in his arm all sealed.

“Now for the other side,” I say.

He turns on the bench so he's straddling it, giving me easier access to the backside of his arm. I don't want to drag this out so I sew that side up as fast as I can. I inspect my work when I finish and decide to dub it not bad for an amateur medic slash seamstress. I take out some gauze and wrap the wound up to keep it clean then tie that off.

“Okay, you're all fixed up,” I say.

He looks down at the bandage then back to me.

“Thank you,” he says.

And his eyes don't leave mine. Neither of us move. My breath catches in my chest and I'm acutely aware of my own heartbeat. This is a moment. A crossroads of decisions. For both of us.

“I...” I trail off because I don't know what I was going to say.

I like you? You're sexy? Hey, wanna fuck? None of those seem appropriate, but the ghost of his lips on mine, the sensation of his hands running over my body. I want that. No. I need that. I need him close. We almost died, more than once, and right now I need this. This affirmation of life. Of having survived. A lot.

He raises his hand, moving slowly. He reaches forward until he touches my face. He trails his finger along my cheek and down to my chin. His eyes bore into mine then he drops his hand to his lap.

“You are...very beautiful.”

“Thank you,” I say, and my skin is red hot as a flush burst across my entire body at once.

I can't keep meeting his eyes. They're too intense. They're saying too much without him having to say a word. I fight down an urge to squirm or run away.

Feeling awkward and oddly tentative I reach my own hand out. I don't really have a plan but my fingers land on his left horn of all places. I trace the spiraling lines down to his forehead. I brush an unruly curl to the side, out of his eyes.

His lips part and he exhales. His breath is warm and sweet. I want to inhale his air and all of him.

“Are you...okay?”

He grunts and I trail my fingers across his face, down his neck. He leans forward. Into me. I continue trailing my fingers. He's cool to the touch. Cooler than the room even. His eyes drift close, he leans his head back.

On his neck I feel his pulse thundering. Making his jugular jump with excitement. I step closer. My breasts brush his chest and even through my clothes and the protective suit that momentary contact is electric.

I lean in, moving my mouth beside him. I inhale deeply, the musky scent of him fueling passions fire. I lick his earlobe then gently bite it. He groans and his hips thrust towards me.

“I want you,” I whisper.

And just like that, he loses control. He growls, deep, rumbling in my chest as he explodes off the bench, grabbing me and lifting me into his arms.

JEAN

*J*slam against the wall and his weight holds me there. My breath is forced out and into his mouth. He takes it in, never taking his lips off mine.

Our hands are all over one another as we kiss with the fuel of long held passion. I wrap my legs around his waist. I squeeze them, rubbing my pussy against his erection. I groan loudly, breaking the kiss so I can inhale.

He doesn't stop kissing, moving down my neck. A shiver races down my spine as the sensations become overwhelming.

A spring coils low in my belly, growing tighter by the moment. I twist my hands in his hair while throwing my own head back to give him better access. He nibbles at my skin as I grind on his cock.

He moves his hands under my arms and lifts. He pins me to the wall and buries his face between my breasts. The suit is in the way. I reach behind and undo the fastener, letting it loose. I wiggle, working it off my shoulders. He pulls back long enough to let it drop before resuming his assault of desire.

He buries his face back into my breasts. Then, surprising me, he bites the button of my blouse and jerks back, snapping it off.

“Oh!” I cry out, but he's not stopping, instead he growls and bites off the next button too.

I care for all of a split-second then that moment is over because I want him on my flesh. I don't only want him, I need

him.

His tail is under my legs, helping to support me, and then he pulls me off the wall, spinning around. His mouth is on mine as he walks. How he knows where we're going, I have no idea. I don't care.

Our tongues wrestle, our lips move together, we're joining. He lowers himself to his knees then gently lies me onto the floor. He rises, grabbing my suit, and in a single fluid motion he pulls it off, tossing it aside.

His eyes glint in the light of the all but forgotten torch. The reflection of the fire in them mimics the raging desire. He grumbles, a low growl, and licks his lips as his eyes rove across my body. I have never, in all my life, felt sexier or more desired.

He touches my arms, leans in close, then he whispers into my ear.

“You want? You are sure?”

I gasp in surprise. Even this far along he stops to make sure of what I want. My heart hammers harder and faster and a lump forms in my throat. I bite my lip and nod. He studies my face, waiting, wanting to make sure.

I can't speak because my throat has clenched tight, so I do the next best thing. I grab his horns and pull him close then kiss him. I force my tongue into his mouth and with my left hand I trail down his neck and over his muscular shoulders.

He understands this is my acceptance and takes over again. He kisses me with an intensity that is unbelievable. While he does, he holds himself off me and his hands work at my clothes. It's fumbly and messy and everything love making should be. Real love making is never pretty, or exact, but it's true.

Soon enough I am naked, and he of course only has on his pants and while I really want to see his cock, see if all the rumors I've heard are true, he doesn't undress yet. No, he kisses his way down my neck and over my breasts. My stomach trembles as he kisses across it, slowly. Deliberately.

His hands are on my thighs, massaging. He nibbles and kisses his way lower. Oral sex makes me nervous. Always has. And nervousness makes me tense, but he takes his time. He doesn't go right for my pussy either. He kisses over to the side and down my hip.

He works his way down my right thigh, Kissing, nibbling, all the way down to my knee then slowly back up. I can't help myself getting the same flutters as he gets close again and I think this will be it. Will it be okay? Do I taste okay? Will he like it?

But he doesn't go in. Not yet. He works down my other leg while massaging the right with his free hand. Down to the knee and back up. This time he kisses across my pelvis but doesn't part my legs.

Back to the right, massaging my left, then up and this time he comes a little closer. His hot breath feels really good on my wet pussy, but that's all he does, passing over to the left again.

He repeats this over and over until when he comes up towards my pussy I am in a state of complete relaxation. Then he pushes my legs apart and I let him, willingly. I'm ready. I want this. No, I need this, that coiling spring feels like it's about to explode.

He kisses down my mound and then takes his hand and parts my lips. He breathes onto my inner folds and I shiver with pleasure. His tongue teases and he sets to work. I have never, ever, experienced such pleasure.

He works my folds with his tongue while pushing a finger deep inside. The combination with all the build-up is amazing. I'm about to come and it seems like he's barely started. I cry out as it comes closer and closer. I grab his horns and buck against his face as my body gives itself over to the pleasure.

When at last it passes, my back is arched and I'm holding his horns in a death grip. Instantly I feel bad.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I say, letting go as I drop back onto the floor.

He looks up from between my legs with a deep frown.

"Sorry?" he asks. "Bad?"

“No, god no, I mean, I didn’t, did I hurt you?”

He smiles and that’s it. My heart explodes and fireworks go off in my brain. His smile is beatific. Sometime in the future I’ll look back and I know, even right now, that this is the moment. The moment I fell in love with him.

It’s not only interest and it’s not lust. I love this grumbly, grumpy Zmaj warrior.

“I love you,” I shout.

My cheeks burn hot. I didn’t mean to shout it. I didn’t mean to say it at all, but I couldn’t contain it. It feels like a volcano is exploding inside the center of my being and the burning sensation is overflowing me.

“Treasure,” he says in that deep grumbling voice that vibrates in my brain.

“Come here and fuck me lover,” I say. “I want to make you come.”

He smiles and doesn’t take time to ask more questions.

JEAN

Lying on his chest I listen to his heart beating. No, hearts. I hadn't thought about it, but I did hear they have two hearts as well as two cocks, which secondary member he used to astounding effect. I can see how being with a Zmaj will spoil a girl.

I'm pleasantly sore and more than satisfied. And tired. I try to suppress a yawn but it's too hard. I throw my leg over his and scoot in closer. He's cooler than the room which is a really nice cool down after the vigorous sex.

"You are happy?" he asks, while idly playing with my hair.

"Yes," I murmur. Sleep is creeping in, but I am happy. Really happy. For the first time in... a really long time. "Very."

"Good," he says.

I love the rumble of his voice. It's deep and resonating. He doesn't talk a lot, but that's okay, when he does it means something. But not talking a lot leads me to a question.

"Cek?"

"Yes?"

"Why now? I thought... you said the mission... and..." I trail off, unsure how to put a thought this big into words.

"You are my treasure," he says, and maybe for him that answers the question, but it doesn't for me. I rise up onto one arm and rest my head in my hand.

"I don't understand," I say. "Can you explain? Please?"

His eyes glint while he stares at me. His lips turn down into a frown, but he nods slowly.

“Now?”

“Please?”

He shifts and pushes himself into a sitting position, so I do the same. He grabs the blanket he'd gotten for us earlier and wraps it around my shoulders, tucking it tight.

“Warm enough?”

“Yes,” I smile and shake my head.

That certainty that he is the one grows every time he does these little things. It's not the grand gestures, those are appreciated sure, but it's the details. The making sure I'm warm first and foremost. That I eat first and am well fed. All the little things he does that add up to... he's fucking wonderful.

“Good.” He says but doesn't continue talking. He pulls one leg up and hooks his hands around his knee, sitting there perfectly comfortable naked. I mean, I think any guy who looked as good as he does would be totally happy sitting around naked.

“You were saying?”

He grunts and shakes his head.

“I am worried,” he says.

“About what?”

“Many things,” he says. “Caring for you humans. The ship you call home is not nice. It is falling apart. It is not a solution for the long term.”

“Yeah, that's part of this mission.”

“Yes,” he says.

Then he remains frustratingly silent. I want to open my mouth and push him, but I sense that if I wait he will tell me in his own time and in his own way.

My patience is rewarded.

“Also, the Order,” he finally adds.

“The people you all ran away from?”

“Yes,” he nods. “The Eye, you would call him the Leader, I feel certain he has not forgotten us.”

“You think they will come after you?”

“I think they cannot have us out here like this. We should have killed him.”

He says that casually and that causes a cold chill to run down my spine. This is life on Tajss. It’s always life or death and very rarely is there any kind of gradient scale between them. Almost always it’s black and white.

“Oh,” I say. “What do you think he will do?”

“I do not know,” he says. “But I am concerned. We need to be prepared to defend.”

“And the ship is not very defensible,” I say.

“No,” he agrees.

“Do the other Zmaj feel the same?” I ask.

“Not all,” he says. “Not most.”

“Could you be...” I trail off debating a way to say this nicely and failing. “Could you be wrong?”

“Of course,” he says, “but it is better to be prepared and wrong, then caught unprepared.”

I can’t argue with his logic on that, so I don’t bother trying.

“But why did this keep you from saying something, to me?”

He grunts, shakes his head, then sighs.

“Honesty?”

“Please.”

“I was afraid of the distraction,” he says.

That hurts more than it probably should, and it must show on my face. He leans closer and tucks his hand under my chin, lifting my head back up.

“Not you,” he says. “Me. I feared... if I let myself feel this,” he pats his hearts, “that I would not be focused on preparing.”

“And now?”

“Now I know better,” he says. “I will be more prepared. I will allow nothing to happen to you. You are my treasure. My everything.”

The emotions that surge through me at his words are too much for my body to contain. It’s stupid and maybe too girly but I can’t help it. Tears stream down my face and I cup his face in my hands.

“You,” I say, choking on the tears. “Are my everything too.”

He smiles and we kiss. This isn’t the first kiss of rising passion; this is a kiss of pure love. Pure affection. It is, in some ways, an even more fantastic kiss than our first one. Which I never would have thought possible.

“Sleep, my love,” he says. “The storm will pass tomorrow, and we must return.”

I nod and we settle into the blanket together.

CEKPET

I watch her chest rise and fall in a steady rhythm. Her eyes dart behind her closed lids and I wonder what it is she dreams of. My hearts thump loudly in my own ears.

This might have been a mistake, but how was I to continue to resist? My dragon rumbles deep in my core. It knows, no, I know. She is my one. Now that we have joined, I feel complete, but that does nothing to ease my concern.

I know the Order will come for us. How can the Eye let anything else happen? And the resources of the Order are many. Leaving behind all that I knew, all that I had given my life to, finding out that it was all a lie.

That isn't true, though. The Order was not a lie, the Eye was. He twisted our grand purpose. Turned our worthy goals towards evil. The Order was meant to preserve Tajss. To shepherd the planet through these dark times and be a beacon of light and hope for the future. A future where the Zmaj were free.

I remember what life was like before the Devastation. The society that was nothing more than a golden veneer over a rotten core. No matter how it was supposed to look, I saw the truth then. Our planet, our progenitor, being raped for her resources until the delicate ecosystem was collapsing under the weight of the abuse.

I joined the Order to stop the decline. The Eye, the first Eye I knew, was insightful and had true visions. He predicted the fall

and the Devastation. And when it came, we were prepared. I have not given up on that sacred duty, it has only changed.

The humans are part of the plan. This must be true because otherwise how can she feel so right in my arms. I was dedicated to saving them and the planet before, but now... now my reasons are more than ever.

Jean stirs. Her eyes flutter and she yawns, then her beautiful, perfect eyes open, shining and bright. She looks up and her smile makes my hearts beat faster.

“Good morning,” she murmurs, stretching.

“My treasure,” I whisper because there is a lump in my throat that keeps me from speaking louder. She shifts and moves to a sitting position. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes,” she says.

I slip out from the blanket and go to the packs.

“I like this view,” she says mirthfully as I dig through the pack.

I glance over my shoulder and swing my tail which makes her laugh. Her laugh is like the first rays of the sun. A moment of golden joy that makes the weight of my concerns feel lighter. The blanket drapes over one shoulder, dropping and leaving her left breast exposed. The rosy nub of her nipple is erect, and my primary cock stiffens at the sight.

The human females’ breasts being exposed, which I’d heard from the other males but had never seen, is exotic. Zmaj females’ breasts were only exposed to feed children, never for pleasure. And I know that hers brings her great pleasure when I tease it with my tongue. Thinking of it makes my mouth water but now is not the time. This is the distraction I cannot let myself give into.

I force myself to return my attention to the pack and to get food out for her. It is not easy, but it is, in its own way, satisfying. I am tending to her needs and wants. And that feels right. Comfortable.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“I am,” I say.

“Cek, what’s on your mind?”

I cannot hide the truth from her. She is too smart, too insightful. I feel my shoulders slump as the weight returns and I sigh. I take a few pieces of smoked meat out and then close the package and carefully replace it in the pack exactly as she had it.

“It is nothing,” I say, turning and walking back to her.

I do not miss that her eyes are on my cock, which has softened and swings between my legs. It begins to stiffen again as I retake my place at her side and offer the food.

“No, don’t do that.”

“Do?”

“That. You are worried. If we’re going to do this, I want to be on the inside.”

“Inside?” I ask, genuinely confused.

“Yes, inside. I want to share your burden. You do not hide them from me. No secrets, not between us. If you can’t agree to that, then this, us, isn’t going to work.”

I think over her words, both to give them due consideration and because she alternates some of her own language into the speech. Words that I am not sure I fully understand. I play it over until I am certain I grasp her meaning. She chews on her meat, waiting with patience.

“I understand,” I say at last.

“Good, now share.”

I grunt, thinking of what to say. I do not know what she knows about the Order or what we were. Or how we got here. We do not have time for a long story. The sandstorm is subsiding and soon we will be able to travel back, once we find the part she needs.

“I worry about the former group,” I say.

“You think they’ll come after us? The Order, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and yes,” I say.

She nods, thinking to herself. I appreciate this. She doesn't speak willy nilly, she considers and chooses her words wisely.

“Okay,” she says. “We'll need to prepare.”

“Yes,” I agree.

We eat in a comfortable silence with no need to fill it. She is warm like my own personal sun. Her body heat but also her presence. She burns bright in her soul, and I am happy to bask in the glow of her.

“Okay,” she says, standing up and rummaging around for her discarded clothes. She pulls on her pants then holds her shirt up. “That one is,” she gives me a pointed look and I cannot stop my smile, “going to need some repairs.”

She goes to the pack and pulls out another blouse that she puts on. Once we are dressed, I light the torch.

“Will the part be here?”

“I believe so,” she says. “We need to get deeper in. I assume you can climb? The angle will be pretty steep.”

“We will manage,” I say.

“Good. We need to get back before they burn up. Then we have to talk to the Council about preparing for your coming war.”

“It may not be war,” I say.

“Let's hope not, but better to be prepared than not, right?”

I grunt my agreement and she smiles brightly. She truly is my greatest treasure.

JEAN

“Just a little further,” I say. Cekpet adjusts his hand, moving it over my ass which is more than a little distracting if I’m honest. Settling into a different hold he then pushes me up and I bump my head. “Ouch.”

“Are you okay?” he asks, dropping me back down.

“No, it’s fine, fine,” I say, rubbing my head. “I wasn’t careful, should have dodged. Put me back up but slower please.”

He does as I ask, pushing me up into the ceiling slowly. Damn he is strong. I’m not a huge girl, but no matter. He’s holding me up one-handed like I weigh no more than a couple of pounds. No big deal, let me just hold you up here dear. Dust gets into my nose, and I blow air to get it away, but still end up sneezing anyway.

“There, found it,” I say. “Can you hand me that wrench?”

“Wrench?” he asks.

“The metal thing in the left pouch down there.”

“One moment,” he says.

He dips down, meaning I dip too, and then he hands up the wrench. It takes more than a minute, but I do manage to disconnect the parts I need from the motor.

“Got it,” I say.

He lowers me down but doesn’t set me on the angled floor. We stacked a bunch of crates which he is standing on because the floor is angled at fifty degrees or so.

“That is not a big part,” he observes.

“No, but it’s important.”

“It will fix your home ship?”

“I hope so,” I say.

“You do not know?”

I stare at the part I’ve scavenged. It’s not designed for a big generator like I’m going to put it into. I got it from a backup generator that was only for this series of shops so it’s a smaller capacity by design.

“Not for sure, no, but it will buy us time.”

“Time,” he grumbles. “Okay.”

“It’s all that there is in this section.”

“Well enough, you are ready?”

“Yeah,” I say.

He pulls me close to his chest, grins, then leaps off the crates. His wings snap open, and we glide down to what was the wall but is now the floor.

“Woah!” I exclaim as my stomach stays back up where we were. “What about the tools?”

He sits me down and nods then leaps up. He lands lightly and picks up the pack of tools before coming back down.

“The storm is done,” he says. “We should go.”

“Lead the way... my love,” I say trying that out for size.

He stops, turns to look directly at me, and a slow smile spreads over his face.

“Yessss,” he hisses. “Treasure.”

I can’t keep a smile off my face even if I wanted to, which I don’t. Hand in hand we walk through the ship. There are more things we could scavenge, and I take note of them as we move. What I don’t see are any survivors or signs of them. There are scratches, burn marks from fired lasers, and other signs of battle, but no bodies. That seems strange.

Outside there were a lot, but why did they all run outside? I can only assume the power wasn't working in this section. Unfortunately for those who crashed here there isn't a main generator, or if there is we haven't found it.

He leads us back to the opening we came through without incident. When we walk down the hall sand grows deeper and deeper until it comes up to my knees. The sandstorm really did a number. I hope the guster are okay.

We have to climb a full-on dune of sand to reach the opening which is half-buried. On the far side of it the guster are there. The moment they see us they fight at their restraints, glaring in our direction with accusing cold lizard eyes.

While Cekpet goes over to calm and retrieve them I take the chance to look outside. The suns are rising but the world looks completely different from when we entered. The dunes are completely changed and all the bodies that I had avoided looking at before are buried and gone.

I hope he knows the way home because any identifying landmarks I spotted are gone. I climb through the hole to make room for Cekpet and the mounts. Outside the ship is half buried in sand too. When Cekpet gets to the hole it is no longer big enough for him to lead the guster through.

He grunts and the two of us set to work using our hands and finally pieces of metal that he breaks off from the ship to dig. It takes half a day to get enough sand moved so that the guster can emerge from the ship.

At last, we are mounted and Cekpet is leading us home. The horizon is so far away it looks like a hazy forever. I'm getting better at rolling with the gait of the guster but it's still chafing my thighs. I let my thoughts wander as we travel home.

"Hey, Cek?"

"Yes, my treasure?"

"Do you guys have..." I trail off searching for the right word. He waits patiently. It's one of the things I find so incredibly attractive about him. Even if he appears grumpy, he's patient. "A binding commitment?"

He frowns thinking about what I said before he answers.

“Do you mean the Water Ceremony?”

“I don’t know, what is that?”

“An ancient tradition,” he says. “It is for couples. They profess their love and connection in front of friends and family.”

“Yes!” I say excitedly. “That sounds perfect.”

“Then yes, we do. Do humans have such a ritual?”

“Yes, we call it a wedding.”

He sounds the word out and it takes him a few times to get it right.

“You wish a *wedding*?” he asks.

“It would be nice,” I say.

“Is the female mate of Rhuklyv not a... what is the word....”

“A Minister?”

“Yes, a leader of rituals.”

“She is, but that would be a human tradition. What does yours consist of?”

“It is very sacred; I would do this with you.”

I blush, which may be the only appropriate response to that.

“Who does it?”

He frowns and shakes his head.

“In ancient times it was a Commander or City Leader. Someone of great stature among the Zmaj.”

“But what about now?”

“Now...” he trails off staring off to the horizon. I wait, letting him think. “The Eye would have been the one to lead it. But that cannot happen. Perhaps we could ask your Desiree to do the human ceremony. Then, someday, perhaps we will have a Zmaj worthy of leading a Water Ceremony too.”

“I like that,” I say.

“Then I will make it so, my treasure.”

We continue traveling home. I know this is only the beginning of our journey together but someday it will be a story we tell our children. And our grandchildren. I smile thinking about our future.

“Cekpet?”

“Yes, my treasure?”

“I love you.”

“I love you. You are the missing half of my soul. In you, I am complete.”

“You say the most romantic things,” I laugh.

He smiles and holds out his hand. We ride hand in hand, bringing home at least one temporary salvation. But more than that, we are bringing home a love that will, no matter what, overcome all the adventures that fate will throw our way. Of that, I am certain.

THE END

If you missed it, start at the beginning with [Dragon’s Baby](#). ([Red Planet Dragons of Tajss Book 1](#)).

If you want to know more about how the survivors arrived on Tajss read the prequel [Red Planet Dragons of Tajss](#) ([Red Planet Jungle](#)).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Miranda Martin writes fantasy and scifi romance featuring heroes with out-of-this-world anatomy that readers call ‘larger than life’ and smart heroines destined to save the world. As a little girl, she would sneak off with her nose in a book, dreaming of magical realms. Today she brings those fantasies to life and adores every fan who chooses to live in them for a while.

Though born and raised in southern Virginia, Miranda Martin is a veteran who’s traveled to places like Korea, Hawaii, and good ‘ole Texas. She’s since settled in Kansas, the heart of America, with her husband and daughters, a cat, and wishes for a pet dragon or unicorn. When she’s not writing, you can still find her tucked away somewhere with a warm blanket and her nose in a book.

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