



FOUND  
BY THE  
BARBARIAN

PRIMAL MOON BARBARIANS BOOK ONE

IONA STROM

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**FOUND BY THE BARBARIAN**

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**PRIMAL MOON BARBARIANS BOOK 1**

# IONA STROM



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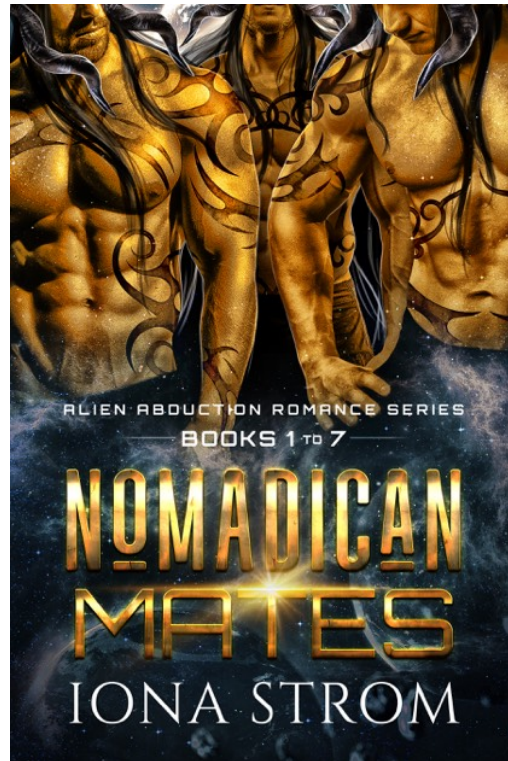
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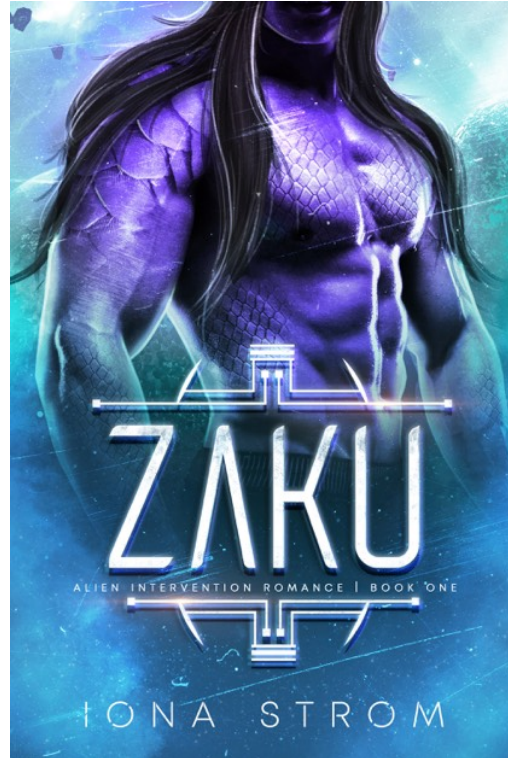
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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

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**I escaped one prison only to find myself in another. Except this time, my jailer is an irresistible brute.**

My owner has grown tired of me. After months of living inside a filthy cage like a pet hamster, I'm returned to where the nightmare of my abduction began—the wall on a planet called Tirus— to be auctioned off like a piece of meat.

Instead of being visual entertainment, I'm sold to a disgusting alien who makes no pretenses about his lecherous intentions toward me and the four other human women he's strung together on a chain.

In a turn of events, we escape and steal a ship. Our luck runs out and we crash land on an emerald moon serving as a remote prison. When I'm found by one of the inmates, not all is as it seems. Beneath the lush, tropical beauty of the moon, something much more sinister awaits.

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# CHAPTER ONE

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## Stacy

MY OWNER KEEPS a firm grip on my leash and chats with a troll-like creature I've had the misfortune of seeing before. I don't strain my brain trying to understand the strange language they speak to one another. I'm too tired for that. Both mentally and physically exhausted. Even after all the time I've spent around my owner, I've never been able to pick up on the mumbo-jumbo he utters.

The beat of their conversation is fast and clipped to the tune of a negotiation. Judging by the red planet we just landed on, which I, unfortunately, recognize, my owner is trying to get the best price for me.

He yanks on my leash as he speaks, "Nuff, nuff, nuff." Giving his bulbous head a shake. The nod and shake for yes and no seem to be universal among all aliens.

"Yuk le mi noff," the troll returns with a tilt of his head. His creepy rounded eyes look me over before he sneers at me in disgust.

"You're not exactly super-model material yourself, you overgrown leprechaun-looking freak," I snarl back.

The collar around my neck jerks my head down after a hard yanking of the leash attached to it. That's my owner's way of telling me to shut the fuck up, but the wrenching of my head just pisses me off. Anger fires a shot of adrenaline through my weakened body. My skin flushes hot with the need to act on my rage.

If my hands weren't bound behind my back, I would reach up and yank the end of my tether out of my owner's stumpy little hand and make a run for it. Instead, I take a step back, stiffen my neck, and pull. My feeble attempt at rebellion goes unnoticed. My body has grown so thin and frail from lack of food and water, my tug is no more effective than a beetle would be on a string.

The clipped exchange continues, and I'm powerless to do anything but watch as my fate is determined by others. I've become nothing more than a spectator in my own life ever since a duo of gray aliens with tiny shark eyes snatched me from my bed, tossed me in a cage with electrified bars, and flew me here, to this alien meat market, to be sold like cattle.

The highest bidder then had been the alien version of a Weeble Wobble. Short and round, my owner ambled around on four legs. The two in front, he used like arms. Not much more than a stinky purplish-gray glob of goo with appendages, he's still many heads taller than the troll he's arguing price over, even as vertically challenged as he is.

I'd been terrified of him at first, but as time went on and all he'd done was admire me inside my cage with his eight bulbous eyes, my captivity had been a relief of sorts. My only saving grace was that I had been bought as a pet and not as a sex toy. That reprieve had come at a price, and I had paid with my flesh melting off my bones. Slowly wasting away from starvation in a dirty cage with no hope of escape, I had been reduced to nothing more than a bag of bones.

"Negoota!" my owner declares with a conclusive nod, and just like that, I belong to another.

My leash is passed to the troll, who wraps the length of ratty leather in a meaty, avocado-green fist. A second troll saunters over and passes a sack of the white chips used as alien currency. It was what my owner purchased me with the last time I was on this shitty planet.

As I'm led away by the troll pulling my leash, I look back at my previous owner, who hasn't given me a second glance. He's too busy fingering the contents of the sack and hefting

the weight of his payment in the palm of his nubby hand. Now I know what a dog feels like when dumped off at the animal shelter. No longer wanted. Discarded like trash.

The sting of rejection I feel is ludicrous. I should be happy to finally be free of my cage. To no longer see my surroundings through a row of thin bars. Maybe I'll even get fed. Or maybe I'm in for something much worse.

I know what's coming next. I dig in my heels as I'm led through the dingy hut and out into the heat of the open-aired market where my fate will be determined.

My futile resistance only drains my already flagging energy reserves, and I stumble along behind the troll. My thin legs wobble and the cloak of fear that settles around my skeletal shoulders is too heavy. I fall to my knees. My knobby bones land with a jarring crunch on packed red dirt. The troll stops and spits a nasty curse in my face.

"Fuck you, too, yard gnome!" It feels good to strike back, even if it's only with words.

The troll motions for two larger creatures that stand guard. Greener and fatter, the duo are more like orcs than trolls, with tusks that jut out from a protruding, oversized bottom lip. The orcs jog over on stumpy legs, each carrying a pole-like weapon with a glowing blue tip that I would love to get my hands on.

They flank me and heft me up by my armpits with claw-tipped hands and drag me the remainder of the way to the wall. Once there, my bound hands are cut free, only to be yanked around, manacled in front, and hoisted over my head. The manacle is then attached to a short length of chain embedded in a grimy, whitewashed stone wall.

The wall on Tirius runs the length of the open-aired market. My place is at the farthest end and away from the spacecraft parking lot where we landed. My owner had paraded me passed the alien kiosks lined up on the opposite side by my leash. I thought he was here to shop, and he had chosen to take me with him like he used to do when I had first been bought.



As soon as we entered the troll huts, my heart dropped to my feet. The quailing feeling of déjà-vu slapped me across the face. I knew my time with the Weeble Wobble had come to an end.

I peer down the length of the wall at the many other girls sharing this horrific and humiliating experience with me. All girls, but not all humans.

My heart bleeds pity for the other girls, as most turn away from the bustling crowd to try and hide their nakedness. I was like that once, but my modesty evaporated long ago with the passage of time. Being kept naked in a cage like a pet hamster for months on end will do that to a girl.

Besides, there's not much of me left to look at. Starvation and malnutrition have taken their toll. The meat on my bones wasted away long ago. I'm a skeleton wearing a cloak of filth with a mat of dirty hair plastered to my scalp.

At first, my owner was enthralled with me, feeding me, caring for me, and providing more than the minimum to keep me alive. Like any new toy though, I lost my luster, and he grew bored, forgot about me, and moved on to something else more amusing. Recently, things had gotten so bad, he rarely even bothered to empty the bucket I used as a toilet.

I glance across the red dirt footpath that divides the market. Rows of huts sit side by side, each with a booth set up in front where an array of extraterrestrial merchants sell their wares to the milling crowd. It would be interesting shopping here, to see what a universe worth of aliens have brought to an outer space flea market if I weren't part of the merchandise.

I watch the troll I was sold to totter away on stubby legs and climb a dais placed in the center of the wall. His actions gain the attention of many who crowd around and wait for the auction to begin.

Now that I'm still, the ground burns the soles of my feet as if I were standing on a hot sidewalk. I shift my feet around on the red-packed dirt while my gaze roams over the many horrible alien creatures gathering around.

Above me is a cloudless, purple sky with a relentless blood-orange sun that beats down on my frail form. There's no reprieve from the heat, and it's hotter than Satan's buttocks.

Strung up like a goose in a meat market, all there is for me to do is focus on breathing the heavy air of this world and sweat. My gag reflex struggles through every inhale. This place stinks of unwashed bodies, lust, and fear. And some other acrid funk I can't put a name to.

I involuntarily tremble as my gaze skitters over the crowd. The icy hand of fear strangles me because I know one of these creatures will own me by the end of the auction. Under the hungry stares of so many weird eyes, I long to return to the familiarity of my dirty cage. But my previous owner never looked back at me and has already set his sights on a blue female with long orange hair who's been shackled on the opposite end of the wall.

The troll running this shitshow makes an announcement and more bizarre creatures crowd around. My head grows light with the rapid speed of my heartbeat. Hungry eyes fix on me. Some lick their lips in anticipation of snacking on my emaciated body or doing the unthinkable. Either way, by the gleam I see in many eyes, I'm destined for defilement.

The crowd goes wild as the bartering begins. I briefly close my eyes and shudder after witnessing an insect man running long, whiplike antennae over the body of the red-skinned female he just won at auction.

I cringe away from the sight of the sticky thread he shoots out of his abdomen to spin a web around her body. She doesn't accept her fate willingly, but in the end, her fight was for naught as she's thrown over an exoskeletal shoulder and hauled away.

That poor alien girl got bought by the worst of the bunch. Most of the aliens look relatively humanoid, walking upright on two legs. Some have horns, others have tails, but most have two eyes with similar features to humans, and they're all eager to buy the flesh the trolls are peddling.

At the demand of the troll, two of the orc creatures lift and carry the dais to the next girl to be auctioned. The crowd follows, crushing around the troll, and clamoring for the bidding to begin for the next female.

It's the blue girl with orange hair. My owner throws out the first bid. I can't watch, even knowing she is in for a far better fate than the red girl being carried to a parking area full of spacecraft.

What will become of me?

Nearby movement draws my full attention. A muscular male pushes his way through the crowd. His deep-set eyes lock onto me, intense and never wavering. A head taller than the rest, he comes to stand before me, chewing on the roasted leg of an unfortunate animal. As hungry as I am, the cloven hoof still attached to the leg triggers my stomach to clench with disgust.

I've never seen anything like this beast. Leathery skin covers a muscular frame, but he doesn't possess the physique of a bodybuilder. His muscles hang off him in melted slabs, and his coloring is all wrong. A sickly, jaundiced yellow that doesn't stop at his thick, pitted skin but extends to the white of his eyes and the slimy coating on his teeth.

The jaundiced male rakes hungry eyes over my emaciated body—and not in the way of a starving male. When he reaches between his thighs and squeezes the heavy bulge tenting his crudely sewn leather pants, I am certain what he's after.

I'm suddenly acutely aware of how very naked I am. Bile rises in my throat as my former owner wins the blue girl and the dais is moved and set up next to me. As much as I hated being locked in a cage, I'd rather be a hamster than a sex toy.

“You don't want me,” I say to the jaundiced male, and hate how feeble my voice sounds. “I'm nothing but skin and bones.”

The jaundiced male never even blinks, just tears a strip of roasted flesh off his animal leg with rows of serrated teeth, methodically chewing as his eyes touch me from head to toe and back again. A viscous string of drool drips from the corner

of his mouth to splash at his feet. Just as soon as the troll starts the bidding for me, the meal is forgotten and drops to the ground.

“Ust ta gruel!” the troll announces and sweeps his stubby arm toward me. “Ju tae le elle!”

Whatever the troll said makes the crowd go wild, and the bartering commences. I keep one eye on the jaundiced male and the other on the aliens shouting out their bids.

When the frenzy slows, the jaundiced male shouts out in a deep grumble, “Mi tris le donet,” and lifts a hefty sack in the palm of his hand high enough for the troll to see. “Fre oth treses hoomuhs.” He points down the length of the wall where other females are chained.

That shut up the crowd down to only a few whispers. The troll looks in the direction of the other male’s claw-tipped pointer finger. Something is going down, and I’m clueless as to what it is. All I can think about is the bulge pushing at the crude leather of the jaundiced male’s pants and how much I want no part of what he’s packing.

I hold my breath while my stomach twists into knots, silently chanting for the jaundiced male to be outbid. Not him. Please, not him.

“Ni trel!” The troll slams down a meaty fist, and my fate is sealed.

I’m grabbed by the two orcs. One claps a thick metal collar attached to a length of chain around my throat, while the other detaches the manacles from the wall and frees my hands.

We follow in the wake of the jaundiced male and the troll, the soles of my bare feet scuffing across the hot ground as I dig in my heels in a lame attempt to fight back. I stumble along until my feet are no longer under me and the orc is forced to drag me.

“Please, no.” I’m not one to beg, but my circumstances are dire. I pull and claw at the collar circling my throat. “Don’t give me to this freak.”

I know I'll die in the hands of this monster. Even after all that's happened to me, I'm not ready to throw in the towel. This can't be my end.

The jaundiced male stops and so do we. I scramble my feet beneath me and stand on wobbly legs. My knobby knees protest the weight of my upper body, but despite my weakened state, I'm bracing myself for a serious fight rather than submit.

A female's shriek sets my teeth on edge. I bob and weave my gaze through the crush of bodies to see we've stopped where the next human girl is tethered to the wall. She's being treated to a similar thick metal collar before her manacles are removed and she's marched over to be clipped to the same length of chain as me.

She takes one horrified gander at me and lets loose another hair-raising scream.

"I know I must look as bad as I smell, but you don't have to scream in my face," I snarl at her. "Like it or not, we're in this together."

Her dark eyes go wide as she listens to my words. She's young and pretty, with dark, curly, shoulder-length hair that looks recently washed. Like me, she's naked. Unlike me, she's clean. Her deeply bronzed skin glows with health and vitality over her curvy figure.

"I'm Darcy," she offers with an apologetic twist of her full lips.

"Stacy." I haven't spoken my name aloud in so long, it sounds foreign to me.

"What happened to you?" I bristle over Darcy's shocked scrutiny as she looks me over with pity-filled eyes.

"Plenty," I pin her with a hard stare, "but nothing like what's about to happen to us."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I'm not given a chance to answer as one of the two orcs yanks the chain we're attached to, and we're forced to follow. We stop at a third human girl who's shaking like a leaf. Her wide

terrified eyes dart around, trying to take in her new waking nightmare.

As soon as her wrists are unclipped from the wall, she covers her small breasts and crosses her legs to hide her exposed sex. Frightened eyes peer through a curtain of her chin-length, blonde hair. The second orc drags her over on legs too scared to move, and she's attached to the chain behind Darcy.

"You okay?" Darcy asks her.

Shell-shocked, she doesn't answer. Only pants, her lungs gasping to drag in the weighty air. At her feet, a steady stream of urine pools. My heart sinks knowing she won't last long.

"Poor thing," Darcy mutters.

"Poor us," I add as we're hauled forward again, down the wall lined with females from all over the Universe.

Our final stop is the last two humans. The girls are leaned in as close together as their tethers will allow. The one with vibrant, purple hair doesn't look as afraid as her redheaded friend.

"Fass mich nicht an!" the purple-haired girl shouts in what I suspect is German, fighting the orc the entire time she's collared and attached to the end of our shared chain.

The redhead, who is still tethered to the wall, cries out, "Leave her the fuck alone!"

The redhead is next to be moved. Just like her German friend with purple hair, she goes batshit wild. I silently cheer her on as she fights the orc-like a feral cat.

Once all five of our collars are attached to the chain, the jaundiced male exchanges the sack of currency for the key to our collars and the lead to our chain. The troll looks elated to accept the sack, never giving us a second glance as he opens the top and peers inside with an excited squeak.

My eyes follow the key to my freedom as it's clipped to the jaundiced male's belt. He licks his thin lips with a forked tongue before giving us his back and yanking us along behind him. I stumble and trip over my sore feet but manage to keep my legs under me.

I chance a glance back at the four girls strung together behind me. Three are keeping their chins up, marching along, and looking around at their surroundings as if trying to figure a way out of this. The blonde hangs her head and shuffles along, covering her nakedness the best she can.

I've never wanted to hug someone so badly in my life. Her shy vulnerability unleashes my protective instincts, causing them to roar to life, and bringing with them a surge of adrenaline that won't be denied.

"I'm gonna figure a way out of this," I whisper to the blonde.

Many eyes shift to me when the jaundiced male stops to attach our chain to a lock on a metal post using the same key that works on our collars. He re clips the key to his belt and walks the line of us, looking each of us over from head to toe.

His thin lips curl up into a skeevy snarl. He cups his bulge, which seems to have grown larger, in a vulgar gesture. I hear gagging coming from one girl while another whimpers in fear.

Starting with me, he gives us all a cursory once over that's not very flattering. I'm relieved he doesn't seem to find me all that appealing, but I'm horrified at what he will do to the other girls.

Darcy shivers when dirty claws scrape down her cheek to lift her chin. She recoils but is snatched back with a bruising grip on her jaw. The male turns her face this way and that as if admiring his prize.

"Ne tu glut," he growls and moves on to the next girl in line.

It's the blonde with the bowed head. She trembles and sobs when he lifts a lock of her pale hair and leans in for a sniff.

My body shakes with rage as I narrow my eyes on him. I will not stand by and let this happen. I refuse to become part of a harem to some freakshow, piss-yellow alien.

He leaves the blonde for the German girl. I cringe when he fondles her breasts but applaud her resolve when she slaps his hand away. Anger ghosts across his hard features before they brighten with humor.

“Ne lik thu fuut.” He wags a scolding finger at her. For once, I’m thankful for the lack of translation. My gut tells me it was something dirty.

He moves on to the last girl in line, but the German girl is relentless in denying him what he wants and pushes the redhead behind her.

“Zurück aus,” she screams.

The jaundiced male bears serrated yellow teeth and leans down to plant his face in front of hers. “Nit loc ne fook.” He shoves his large hand between her legs and grabs her from clit to crack in a claiming grip. “Mi loc ne fook!”

My skin shrinks to my bones. Shit just got real!

The jaundiced male pulls away and takes a step back, looking pleased with himself as the German girl’s bottom lip begins to tremble. Respect blooms within me as she straightens her spine and blinks back tears, refusing to let them fall.

“Blin nu fal louk,” the jaundiced male announces and gestures toward the line of merchant booths.

This is our chance!

I touch Darcy’s arm. “He’s going shopping,” I whisper to her. “We need that key.”

She gives me a nervous look then turns her head and shouts, “Hey, asshole! Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

The jaundiced male turns with a curious scowl and saunters over.

“Ru bi taug knoo?” His questioning tone borders on anger.

He steps into Darcy’s personal space and snags her roughly around the waist. She plants her palms on his bare chest and starts to push back then glances at me. She gives me the slightest of nods.

“You forgot to say goodbye.” Darcy bravely circles shaky arms around the male’s neck in an enticing way.

I swear I see his bulge pulsing against the leather of his pants. He owns us, and as far as I know, there’s no rule against public



sexual displays. If he chose to bend one or all of us over in this market, no one would come to our rescue.

The male unfurls the length of his forked tongue and slurps up the side of Darcy's throat.

"This had better be worth it," she says to me through gritted teeth.

Maybe this isn't the best plan, but we need a distraction. I just pray he doesn't take it to the next level. I can't imagine any of us surviving sex with what is growing longer down the length of his thick thigh.

"Leave her alone, you sick fuck!" yells the German girl in heavily accented English.

His eyes snap to her. That's my cue to grab the key. I reach over and grasp the clip attached to the key and slip it free of his belt just before he storms over to chastise the German girl. She quickly bows her purple head in submission and that's all it takes to defuse our owner's temper.

"Betf kek tri muure," he growls at us, then licks his lips and looks pointedly at Darcy. "Blesh ne fook."

"I'll kill myself before I'll willingly let you between my legs." Darcy's harsh words are spoken so sweetly, the jaundiced freak is fooled.

With a grinning grunt, he turns and saunters away.

"Please tell me you got that key." Darcy's head whips around to me.

"I got it."

The metal key bites into the palm of my hand. I hold onto it as if my life depends on it, which it does. I wait until the jaundiced male melts into the crowd milling through the market before I go to work unlocking Darcy's collar.

I hand her the key and she returns the favor before turning to the trembling blonde. The German girl is next to take the key and releases her redheaded friend, who does the same for her.

“Now what?” The German girl turns to me once we are all free.

“See that V-shaped ship with the silver hull parked just there?” I point at my former owner’s craft. “We’re going to steal it and get the hell out of here.”

“You can fly that thing?” Darcy eyes me skeptically.

I nod and hope I seem convincing. “It belongs to my previous owner. I’ve watched him fly it every time we’ve traveled. We can’t sit here chatting. It’s now or never.”

“I’m not so sure,” the redhead says, looking over at the craft.

“Listen,” I plea, knowing this is our only chance. “I can’t guarantee anything, but I do know that if we leave here with that monster, we will all die.”

“I’m game,” Darcy says with no hesitation. “I’m as good as fucked after what I just pulled.”

With a round of mumbles, an uncertain agreement floats through our group. Even the blonde is eyeing the craft with a hopeful expression. She notices me watching her and gives me a tiny nod.

“Stay close and follow me.”

.....  
**CHAPTER TWO**  
.....

## Draxyn

“DON’T BE STUPID, TRU!” I yell at the male. His collar is beeping out a steady warning to the same tune as mine. “Get inside your pod before it’s too late.”

Truyn shook his head, bare feet steadfastly planted on the cool stone floor. His chest is bare and he wears only loose-fitting pants as most of us do on this tropical moon. His golden eyes are downcast but resolute, his shoulders are slumped; the confinement has defeated him. It is getting to all of us; this invisible tether restricts our movements.

I begin to back down the hall of Annex 2 toward my pod and away from the central common area where the two Annexes connect. Decapitation by exploding collar is not on my agenda today.

Truyn has been on edge for cycles, tired of living within the limits of confinement long overdue for an ending. I knew he was growing more despondent as time passed but I never saw this coming.

“Tru!” Rooke bellows. The unscrupulous marauder burst through the door from the outside, waving a triot wrench at the male. No doubt, he was making repairs to the broken emergency shuttle left behind by the guards. “Get your tail in your pod. Now!”

“Why is he free of his shackle while I am not?” Truyn points at Rooke but shouts at me. “Rooke committed murder, yet he is free to roam as he pleases.”

“It was self-defense, and the collars are malfunctioning, fool.” Rooke shifts one foot back, bends his knees slightly, and settles on the balls of his feet as if preparing to pounce. “When the guards return, they will fix the problem.”

“No one is coming back for us!” Truyn seethes, ignoring Rooke and talking to me. “It’s been twenty rotations. I was only to serve five, yet here I am, stuck on this moon and still bound by restrictions while that marauding shite has roamed free for more than half that time.”

“Nothing is ever fair, Tru.” I keep up a steady backward pace, judging the distance between me and the safety of my pod as the beeping of my collar increases. “Your time will come, the same as mine. You just have to be patient.”

“I have been patient long enough, Drax!” he yells back, with a hopelessness that tears at my soul. “I can’t take it anymore.”

“Tru, please go to your pod!” I’ve never been outside my pod this close to the end of the cycle. Never wanting to test the mechanism of death around my throat. My heart pounds, keeping time with the rapid beeping of my collar. “Buzz me on the comm and we’ll talk.”

“Not this time, Drax.”

This isn’t the first time I’ve talked the male down, but it is the first time Truyn has stood solid with an unwavering conviction. I know this time, I am going to lose him. His bright golden gaze holds a hopelessness that has never been there before.

“Rooke?” I look to the only male who can help.

“Go!” Rooke points in the direction of my pod and yells at me. “I’ll do what I can. No need for both of you idiots to die.”

I want to stay and make sure Truyn makes it safely inside, but I have to think of myself. With an anguished groan, I turn and run just as Rooke barrels down on Truyn. Time is running out! The act of turning my back on Truyn burns bitter in my heart, but if I don’t get inside soon, I will share in his fate.

With my tail held high, my legs pump out the distance between me and the archway to my pod. I just hope Truyn will

come to his senses in time.

I sprint past the few remaining males of Annex 2 already inside their pods waiting for lockdown. Their privacy doors remain open to Truyn's drama in the common area, while their collars blink the steady green of safety and mine flashes an angry red. It's a countdown to my demise if I can't get my tail past my individual checkpoint embedded in my pod's arched doorway.

"Hurry up, Drax. Or you're as fucked as Tru," Bruke yells, as I bolt past him where he stands idly inside the pod closest to mine.

I don't slow to comment but reach down deep and pick up speed. The beeps at my throat now pulse so close to one another, they have become nearly a constant tone. I know for a fact that once the persistently blinking red light turns solid, it is the point of no return.

The second I'm within range of my pod, I yell out, using voice recognition to unlock the privacy door. I hear the snap of the lock disengaging echoing off the corridor walls.

I turn and take three lunging steps, drop to the floor, and slide the remainder of the way inside, kicking open the privacy door in the process. The instant click of my collar changing from an angry red to a flashing green is an immediate relief.

I don't pause to relish in my salvation but push off the floor and race to the back wall and the row of computer monitors I have lined up along the length of a table. I place my hand over the scanner that grants me access. Once my home screen illuminates, I touch the icon for the camera I installed inside the common area and pan around, finding it empty. Rooke's triot wrench lays discarded on the stone floor among the jumble of tables and chairs.

"I tackled his stupid ass inside," Rooke's irritated voice booms through Truyn's comm and into mine.

I slump on the stool in front of my monitors in relief. "Tha—"

Rooke's harsh curse cuts me off. "Get back here, you stupid suicidal fuck!"

In the next heartbeat, my collar stops blinking a steady green and turns a solid blue, the same hue as the detention lights embedded in every corner of my pod and outlining the door's archway.

The luminetric barrier engages, becoming a solid sheet of light blocking the doorway and trapping me inside. The compound is officially in lockdown until the start of a new cycle.

"Coruthian cunts!" Rooke hisses.

I turn my camera around until I can see the mouth of the corridor leading to Annex 1, and wish I hadn't. Truyn must have dove through the archway of his pod just as the luminetric barrier engaged. His severed torso lays in a pool of blood on the threshold of his pod. Not a second passes and his collar turns a solid red.

His head explodes in a shower of gore that I shut my eyes against, but it's too late. The imprint of horror is a sunspot behind my eyelids. A moment caught in time that will forever be burned inside my brain.

"Sorry, Drax," Rooke mournfully whispers. "I thought he was going to stay put."

My hand trembles as I reach for the comm. "You tried," was all I got out before a wave of nausea gut punched me.

I sprint for my cleanroom, barely making it in time to empty the contents of my stomach into the evacuator. I stumble backward as if every ounce of energy inside me has been sucked out with Truyn's demise.

I collapse onto the floor with an arm thrown across my face. I welcome the chill of the cold stone beneath me. It penetrates my flesh and bones, adding to the somberness that seeps into my soul.

Sprawled on the floor of my cleanroom, I have no interest in moving, but the root of my tail has grown numb. I flick the tip, sending sparks of needled pain shooting up the length. Listlessly, I roll to my belly and push myself up, sitting back on my knees. My abused tail comes alive with sharp prickles as it refills with blood.

The scene of Truyn's last moments won't leave me alone. Every time I blink, I'm haunted by the gruesome image of his severed torso sticking out one side of the luminetric barrier, then his head evaporating into a spray of a million tiny pieces. I'd only ever seen the aftermath of one male, Mrux, who had met the same fate. Never have I witnessed a head actually exploding.

Mrux hadn't been suicidal but had met his end as a result of tampering with the collar and losing. None had tried it since Mrux meddled with his. A self-proclaimed technological guru, he had surmised that if the collar was blue, he could trick the locking mechanism into disengaging and falling away.

It hadn't worked, and Mrux's theory had been a disgusting mess to clean up. I never thought we would get the spray of brain matter cleaned out of all the nooks and crannies of his pod. The sultry heat of the moon's climate only enhanced the stench of death, so scrubbing every inch of surface area wasn't optional.

I swallowed through the bile tickling my throat in hot licks. My head swam with the knowledge that the one male on the whole of Zune whose presence I could tolerate for any length of time is now gone.

Truyn had been convicted of arson, which had led to the involuntary death of a Ziarian who had been trapped inside the structure Truyn torched, and that's why he had been assigned to Annex 1.

Murderers were all housed in Annex 1, while lesser offenders like me were housed in Annex 2.

I rub the knot of grief settling behind my sternum. As bad as I feel, Rooke has it worse. With the luminetric barrier firmly in place until the start of the next cycle, he is trapped inside Truyn's pod with half a corpse. As if I'd conjured the male with my thoughts, his gravelly voice broadcasts through my comm.

"I'm going to lose my fucking mind in here, Drax." Rooke doesn't sound like himself; his usual cockiness dampened by a



sickly tone. “I need something to occupy my time, so I don’t focus on the carnage.”

I drag myself off the floor and shuffle my way over to the stool I’d quickly unassed to go empty my guts. I roll it back over to the table where my computers and monitors are lined up in a neat row and take a seat.

“What would that be?” Elbows planted on the table, I drop my head in my hands.

“I don’t know,” Rooke groans. I could picture the male tugging at his red-streaked mane in aggravation. “Hook me up with some schematics on that escape pod since I’m trapped in here and can’t work on it or the damn shuttle.”

“You won’t be able to access Truyn’s computer without his palm print,” I somberly point out.

“I’ve got my tablet in my back pocket.”

“That escape pod you found belongs to the Thrushians,” I state dryly. “They aren’t known to publicize their technology.”

“That’s why I need you to break into their mainframe and find the schematics.”

I wasn’t of a mind to help the marauder.

“Come on, Drax. You’re the only male I know who can hack their security.” Rooke blew out an exhausted breath. “Listen,” he says and pauses as if he is struggling to find the words. “I’m sorry, Drax. I know he was your friend. Once I wrestled him into his pod, I made the mistake of thinking he would stay put. The last thing I expected was for him to lunge out the archway.” Rooke blew out an anguished sigh. “Once the barrier engaged, there was nothing I could do.”

In all the cycles I’d spent around the marauder, I never knew him to sound so genuine. Trust was hard-earned among the prisoners on Zune.

Honestly, why would anyone believe the word of criminals? I sure as fuck didn’t. The only male on this moon who had earned my trust, now lay headless and in two pieces.

Yet, I can't ignore the risk Rooke had taken when he'd forced Truyn inside his pod. He could have been killed from the blast had Truyn's collar exploded while he had a hold on him.

"Thanks, Rooke." Despite the genuine apology, I would never trust him, but I did owe him my gratitude for at least trying to save Truyn. Even if he was unsuccessful. "I'll see what I can do about getting you those schematics."

"I appreciate it, Drax."

I could imagine Rooke pacing inside Truyn's pod, wanting to get back to work examining the escape pod he'd found in the forest. So far, Rooke claimed the thing had proven useless except for the long-range lifeform scanner he'd been able to remove. He said he had found no compatible components to replace the damaged ones on the emergency shuttle left by the guards, and the only reason I believed him was that he was still on Zune.

I know beyond the shadow of a doubt, once the damaged shuttle is repaired, Rooke won't hesitate to leave all of us behind. Including his righthand male, Slye. It is universal knowledge that there is no honor among space pirates.

I lift the lifeform scanner from where I'd left it on my table and turn it over in my hands. Still, it is hard to believe Rooke trusts me with it. Then again, he is computer illiterate, and if he wants the thing merged with the compound's network, I am the only male on Zune capable of doing it.

Despite all Rooke's poking around the inner workings of the escape pod, all he'd figured out so far was it had been ejected from a luxury star cruiser owned by the Thrushians.

It was pure happenstance that Rooke had been hunting close by when it had entered our atmosphere and fallen from the sky. He said he'd scented two passengers who had evacuated and taken off into the forest before he had gotten there.

From what information could be gathered from the escape pod's life support system recordings, the two occupants had both been of unknown species. All we had known then was one was male and the other female.

It had taken many hours of research and cross-referencing their vitals with all known species in the universal network before I concluded that the male was Valosian and the female a human. Both species were considered primitive, infants in comparison to lifeforms on other worlds, and completely incompetent when it came to space travel.

The human world called Earth was even under Universeal Rule. Guarded by Yulineon patrols to safeguard their infant galaxy from more advanced species wanting to take advantage. Despite the Yulineon presence and the laws written to protect the infant galaxy, a nasty species called Gretolics had found ways to sneak past the patrollers and steal human females to sell at the flesh markets like on Tirius.

So, what were two unlikely species doing inside a Thrushian escape pod? My only guess was they had been bought at the flesh market on Tirius and had escaped their abductors.

No matter the reason, uninvited visitors on Zune weren't a good thing. Not when all of us wore confinement collars set on a strict timer and set to explode if we weren't inside our assigned pods at the end of each cycle.

Well, all of us except for Rooke and a cold-blooded killer with a green-streaked mane named Mordox.

Mordox is the main reason Rooke wants the lifeform scanner integrated into the compound's network, so it can be accessed from any terminal inside or outside the prison.

Bruke swore he had spotted the deadly male lurking along the cliffs where the moon had broken into two halves following a massive tectonic plate shift hundreds of years ago. It had split the Zune River in half, creating an impressive waterfall that spilled over the cliffs and formed a massive lake below.

Mordox is not a male to turn your back on. A lifer, he had earned that sentence for his horrific crimes. A convicted mass murderer, it was rumored he killed indiscriminately. Males, females, young. He didn't care, as long as he was shedding Ziarian blood. The male is an unpredictable brute.

What is baffling is, the cycle after the guard's sudden departure, Mordox's collar had blinked yellow and fallen off along with twelve other lifers. They hadn't hesitated to take off into the thick forest. I, for one, was glad to see them go.

The lifeform scanner had come in handy, finding an adult male Ziarian, who we assumed was Mordox, exactly where Bruke had sighted him. Out of all the lifers who had fled, only Mordox and one other male had been located. What had happened to the other eleven? I could only imagine they met their demise at Mordox's skilled hands.

Only the odd thing was, the other male's vitals had read something strange. I was no medic, but the energy signature of the other male was off the charts. Maybe it was a glitch with the scanner. I don't know. All I know for certain is I don't want to run into either one of them.

We'd also been able to pin down our two uninvited visitors. The couple had hunkered down inside a cave on the far side of the lake. We had kept an eye on their location during their brief stay. They appeared to be hiding out, so we had left them alone.

Then a shuttle had landed. In true marauder fashion, Rooke had taken off after it, in hopes of stealing it from its owner. I recall the argument between Bruke and Slye. Slye had stood up for Rooke, claiming he would never leave him behind while Bruke squabbled that Rooke thought only of himself and would leave us *all* behind if given the chance.

I silently had sided with Bruke. I knew it in my bones, if Rooke ever managed to repair the emergency shuttle, he wouldn't hesitate to leave Zune and all of us behind.

Lucky for Slye, Rooke had returned empty handed, and our uninvited visitors were gone. I knew the only reason Rooke hadn't left the prison compound in favor of freedom inside the forest wasn't that he didn't want to leave Slye, but because he feared Mordox, and the safest place was inside the compound.

I activate the lifeform scanner, fiddle with the parameters, and watch the colored dots representing the various species native to Zune move around the landscape with choking envy.

Twenty rotations have passed since I was loaded aboard a detention vessel along with fifty other felons and flown to this newly constructed, remote prison on Ziarian's moon, Zune. It wasn't unusual for my species to use inmates as laborers, so we thought nothing of it. We were to work off our time mining a rare ore called, xedon recently found here.

Upon our arrival, we had been split into five groups of ten, with Annex 1 and 2 kept separated.

Group one was assigned to work in the mine first. None of the ten had returned. The guards claimed there had been an accident in one of the shafts and all had been killed. Group two was next to go on the following cycle. Supposedly, the same happened to them. Again, there were no survivors.

Many cycles passed and the remaining three groups were never tasked with going to the mine. We were told the shafts were being reinforced by workers flown in from Ziaria.

After a time of doing nothing but existing, one cycle after lockdown, we had all left our pods when the luminetric barriers had disengaged to find the guards gone. By the looks of the shambolic storage room and guard barracks, they had left in a hurry. All that had remained was an emergency shuttle which had been stripped of its main engine starter and thruster.

Truyn had been right all along. Something had happened and we had been left behind. Abandoned on Zune with no way home. *"No one is coming back for us!"* Truyn's words echo inside my skull.

I understood his anger. It made no sense why some of the inmates with greater charges had been released first. I also understood his anxiety over an uncertain future.

Would I ever be free of my collar?

I wasn't to the point of offing myself, but twenty rotations was an overly long sentence that did not fit my crime. My collar should have turned yellow and fallen away eighteen rotations ago.

I grind my teeth thinking of Rooke and Mordox, free to roam anywhere they please.

Network hacking and assault didn't compare to what Rooke had done. Piracy, hijacking spacecraft, and stealing cargo, is a class 2 felony. He was also found guilty of murder, claiming self-defense. No one believes that shite, not even Slye who shares in his commander's crimes.

Don't even get me started on Mordox. Of all the lifers, he was the worst of the bunch to have occupied Annex 1. He'd killed hundreds. A stone-cold killer. And he was on the loose.

"Have you hacked in yet?" Rooke's voice startles me back to the present.

"Not yet." I touch the monitor where I've hidden the file for the construction of the escape pod, but I have no intention of ever sharing it with him. "I'll keep trying."

"Not as accomplished as they claim, huh?"

My ego easily takes the jab. I had already found a back door into the Thrushian's space fleet designs, but I'm not about to tell him that. As long as the emergency shuttle remains on Zune, the rest of us have a chance of getting off this primal rock.

To pacify the marauder, I share a standard layout of the pleasure cruiser from where the escape pod had jettisoned. It is nothing more than a layout of the enormous spaceship only the wealthiest of the most perverted space travelers can afford.

"Check your account," I buzz Rooke. "I just dropped some info about the pleasure cruiser in your que."

"Excellent." I hear Rooke clap and then rub his hands together.

That should buy me some time. It will take Rooke a while to finish examining the layout to figure out there is nothing there of real use.

I kill the comm, needing some personal space, spin around on my stool, and stroll over to my makeshift privacy door which is little more than a rectangular metal sheet hinged down one side. I added a cypher lock to close things up during the cycle hours when our collars allow us to freely roam.

I don't want anyone inside my pod, fucking around with my shit. As an introverted male who prefers his privacy, I had to fight with fists and horns for the few luxury items left behind by the guards, like my chiller and cooker, and I don't want them pilfered by any of those fucks.

With my hand on the privacy door, I pause in closing it to stare at the wavy distortion of the luminetric barrier. Undulating in rippling waves of a glowing blue, it moves like raindrops hitting the surface of water. The effect is mesmerizing. I reach out to glide my claws down the solid sheet with a hard gulp and try not to imagine how something so beautiful can be so deadly.

Emotionally spent by the time I lock up, my feet drag across the room to my cot. Exhausted, I plop down on the thin mattress and stretch out tired limbs. My horns even droop with fatigue, lying lax on my pillow. Bone weary, sleep still evades me.

My cot creaks with every turn and roll as I shift into a comfortable position. As sleep begins to weave its magic around my troubled mind, I relax and welcome the temporary escape from my shitty reality.

I decide to dream of Ziaria, my home world. Of my bungalow overlooking the rocky shores of the Groush Sea. Isolation had been easy to find there. Not many saw the beauty in the rugged terrain, which meant only a few had chosen to settle there.

Given my hot temper, I was doing the public a service by hiding myself away. Solitude had been my drug of choice. My seaside home was void of triggers that could set off the ever-present rage boiling just beneath the thin veil of my stoicism. The scents and sounds of the sea's purple waters were a balm to soothe my ravaged soul.

I drift off, imagining myself throwing open full-length windows and breathing in the salty air. I conjure memories of crashing waves against the rocking shore, lulling myself into tranquility.

The shrill squawk of my alarm propels me off the cot and to my computer monitors. I tap the icon for my outdoor camera.

The device is my eyes to the outside world while I'm trapped indoors. I had set the motion alert low enough so the camera wouldn't alarm every time one of Zune's many creatures twitched. It would only detect significant movement.

I rub the haze of sleep from my eyes, not believing the vessel it's tracking. My technology was crudely repurposed, and all salvaged from what had been left behind in the guards' haste to leave. But the vessel crossing into our atmosphere is definitely there and much larger than the escape pod. Had Truyn been wrong, and on the heels of his death had the guards returned?

As the vessel continues its descent, flames lick at the hull. It's coming in too fast and heading on a crash course for the top of the cliffs overlooking the valley where the prison compound is situated.

Because of the massive tectonic plate shift, the landing on Zune is tricky. The electromagnetic energy coming from Zune is unpredictable, flaring, and receding without notice. Once it grabs a hold of a vessel, there is no breaking free of its magnetic pull. The only safe way to land on Zune is with shielding to stave off the magnetic drag.

I watch as the craft narrowly misses the cliff's edge as if the pilot is fighting the controls. The nose raises at the last second, leveling off the craft before it cuts a path through the thick canopy, upsetting a nest of flintlocks before I lose sight of it in the lush forest.

Tendrils of smoke curl up and dissolve into the pale-green sky from the point of impact. I zoom in on that area and note the craft came down just beyond the widest part of the river that turns into the majestic waterfall.

I've climbed the sheer cliff to the top of the falls a few times before. It was a long trek and required pre-planning to safely travel there and back before lockdown. After many rotations of the same view, I was as antsy as Truyn for something new and had made the climb.

The view from the top was breathtaking. For as far as the eye could see, there was lush, untamed foliage chock full of



wildlife. The only dismal stain on the pristine landscape of the valley was the prison compound. A circular, gray stone structure with two wings jutting from the center.

Unlike Ziaria, Zune was untouched by our rapidly increasing population, but none were allowed to settle here after the moon had split in two. Our government had deemed it too dangerous, not knowing if or when another tectonic plate shift would happen.

Always light on one side and dark on the other, the magnetic anomaly has fixed the moon to the planet's geomagnetic field. It no longer orbits but remains in the same position.

In my haste, I fumble with the lifeform scanner as I attach it to my computer. I zero in on the crash site, checking the readings twice.

“What the fuck?” I mumble and replay the footage of the craft when the camera first picks it up. “That’s not possible.”

Upon closer inspection, I see that it’s a Starskip class, short-range vessel. How have five human females found their way on board, much less flying it? What in the universe is happening out there that five humans have managed to fly to Zune in a Starskip?

Humans are an infant species who have barely scratched the surface of space travel. They are little more than the treetop-lunging plurshy who scratch their asses and pick their noses.

How are humans flying vessels around the galaxy?

Thankfully, I am the only one with monitoring equipment, and with Rooke in lockdown, I know he didn’t see the crash. If the craft has managed to land without too much damage, Rooke could salvage the starter and thruster needed to fix the emergency shuttle. Then it’s farewell to all of us poor, collared ingrates.

I use the charts to map a course for the crash site. It’s far away. Once there, I would only have a few minutes to scavenge what I can before reaching the point of no return. I’ll have to watch my time.

In all the times I've climbed the cliffs, I never crossed the river. The strong current and rapids will be challenging. I'll have to find a narrow place to cross. With no time to spare, I'll have to move fast and make sure I'm not followed. That's where the lifeform scanner will come in handy.

I finger the collar around my neck with clenched teeth. One close call was enough, but I know in my bones, if Rooke gets there first, he and the emergency shuttle are as good as gone.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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## Stacy

“FIND SEATS AND BELT YOURSELVES IN,” I order the girls as I assume the commander’s chair my former owner once occupied. I work the controls for take-off the way I’ve seen him do several times before.

I will my hands not to shake as I engage the buckle on my seat, hurry through the engine start-up procedures, and try like hell not to make a mistake. We can’t afford a mistake. Our absence will be noticed, and I don’t want to be fumble-fucking around trying to get us off the ground when that jaundiced alien freak realizes we’re no longer tethered to the post where he left us.

We lift off in a bumpy ascent. Instead of the smooth launch I had hoped for, it’s more like a rollercoaster ride of ups and downs before I get the hang of the two steering sticks. The Weeble Wobble made it look so easy.

The girls seated beside and behind me all stifle screams and suck back panicked breaths as I figure out the steering.

“Sorrysorrysorry.” I suck in a few harsh breaths of my own. “IgotitIgotitIgotit.”

Once we are outside Tirus’s atmosphere and the blazing-red surface is far below, I level us off. But I don’t relax, knowing we aren’t out of the woods yet. Enormous ships loom large where they have made berth. Too large to land on the planet’s surface, they are still manned by aliens, the likes of which I want nothing to do with. I pray we go unnoticed as I try to fly straight and not draw attention.

“We just need to make it through here,” I say more as a pep talk to myself than to the others. “Once we’re far enough away from the ships, we can take a breath.”

“You’re doing great,” says the redhead who’s seated at the console to my right.

“So far, so good,” I reply, with as steady a voice as I can muster. No need to add panic to the stress.

Once we have flown far enough away from the docked ships, I reach across the console to engage the map I’ve seen my former owner use. The ship lists hard to one side. Soft curses and gasps sound out around me. One girl whimpers and I don’t need to look behind me to know it’s the terrified blonde.

“Sorry,” I say loud enough for all to hear. “My bad.”

“Can I help?” the redhead asks.

“Sure.” I glance at her then swing my eyes back front. “Um... so tap the green square. The one that’s lit up. It’ll bring up a map of the nearby planets.”

“Wow!” She taps the green button and recoils away with wide eyes as the three-dimensional map projects up from the console. “So, all these planets are around us?”

“Yes, but they’re farther away than what they appear on the map,” I say.

“I’m Tasha, by the way,” the redhead introduces herself.

“Stacy.” Having no reason to say it since my abduction all those months ago, it’s like the name of a stranger. But the more I say it, the more human I begin to feel. I was a nameless hamster in a cage. Nothing more, nothing less. These women are the first humans I’ve seen since being snatched from Earth.

Tasha leans forward in her seat and looks around me at Darcy. The girls introduce themselves while I fly.

“Thanks for getting us out of there, Stacy.” Tasha’s smile is laced with sympathy. I can feel her curiosity about me the same as if she’s voiced a question.

“Don’t thank me yet. You can thank me when I find us a safe planet to land on.”

“We can’t go home?” Darcy asks from my left. “Why can’t we just go back to Earth?”

“Because I don’t know where Earth is,” I reply honestly.

“Can we not use the map to find it?” Tasha asks, looking at all the planets scattered across the large, glowing map.

“The map only shows the galaxy we are currently in. We may not even be in the Milky Way,” I tell her. “All I know about the map is the planets ringed in blue are the only ones my owner ever landed on. He avoided the ones in red. I’m not entirely sure why.”

“The one we just left is red.” Tasha points to the planet we’re speeding away from.

“The color red is used as a warning,” Darcy says.

“Yeah, but that’s on Earth,” Tasha counters. “I don’t think it applies out here.”

“Or maybe it does,” I interject. “That planet is definitely a place we want to avoid.”

“Agreed. Then let’s aim for one of the blue-ringed planets far, far away from that red one,” Tasha says, gently moving the map around with her fingertip.

“Tirius,” I supply with a tight smile. “At least I think that’s what it’s called. I heard my owner say that word several times before we landed.”

Now that we’ve leveled off and entered the vacuum of space, the flying is smooth. It’s as if we are simply floating and not hauling ass at a high rate of speed. No matter how effortless the traveling feels, the front windshield tells a different story, because far-away planets are zipping past at an alarming rate.

“Is it safe to move about the cabin, Captain?” Darcy asks. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’d love to find something to wear.”

“Samesies,” Tasha says, still searching for the perfect planet. “If we chance to meet some hot alien guys, I don’t want to give the wrong impression by being naked.”

“Hot alien guys?” Darcy raises an incredulous eyebrow at Tasha but aims her question at me. “Is she serious right now? After the meat market, we just busted out of?”

“I’m just trying to stay optimistic,” Tasha says. “The Universe can’t be all bad. Can it, Stacy?”

I open my mouth while I search for an answer. “I don’t really know,” I finally say. “I’ve only ever traveled to a few planets, but that was when I was first sold on Tiriis. I was mostly kept in a cage on my owner’s planet.”

“How long have you been out here?” I jump when Darcy lightly touches my arm.

“What year is it?” I ask, unsure if I want to know. Darcy’s answer is not what I expect. “I’ve lost two years of my life.” My lips tremble and I blink hard against the sudden press of tears threatening to blur my vision.

“It’s okay. You’re okay now. You’re free,” Darcy reassures me in a soft caring voice. “And you saved all of us in the process.”

“You’re our hero, Stacy.” Tasha stops playing with the map and turns toward me in her seat.

Clicks from the metal seat buckles sound out all around me, and suddenly I’m surrounded by naked girls showering me with words of gratitude. I was never the hero type back on Earth, and after my abduction, I just had myself to look after. All the attention is making me nervous.

As the girls crowd around, they crouch on both sides of my seat, careful not to block my view of the space I’m navigating. Even the sobbing blonde is there, patting my arm with a trembling hand.

“Thanks, ladies.” A burst of emotion washes over me, and I try to hold it together. I’d checked out of reality a long time ago, suppressing my feelings in favor of survival mode. “I’ve never been good at driving and crying so, enough with all that. So, I’m Stacy, for the girls I haven’t officially met yet.”

“I’m Romy,” says the German girl with the vibrant purple head of hair.

“Zoe,” came out from a meek voice I knew was the terrified little blonde.

“Nice to meet you all,” I try for a cheery tone.

“We want to help,” Darcy quickly volunteers. “Tell us what you need us to do, Captain Stacy.”

I chuckle at that. “I’m not your captain, but Tasha said she wanted something to wear.”

“Yes.” Romy briskly rubs her arms. “Clothes, please, but that’s more helping ourselves than helping you.”

“All right.” I think for a minute. “I need Tasha to find us a planet.”

“I’m on it.” Tasha resumes her seat and slowly moves the map around. “Looking for a planet ringed in blue, far away from Tirius.”

“We need to explore the ship and collect all the food and water we can find,” I decide. “Tasha is right, we need to find something to wear, but not in case we run into any ‘hot alien guys’, for when we run into aliens period. She’s right in that we don’t want to give the wrong impression.”

“You said *when* and not *if*,” Romy points out in her heavily accented English. “You’re sure we’ll meet up with extraterrestrials?”

“You saw the species represented on Tirius.” I won’t sugarcoat the truth. These girls need to know what we’re facing. “I’ve seen more than that traveling with my owner. *Former* owner,” I correct myself.

“Then let’s get to searching.” Romy claps her hands together. “Anything we need to know about this ship before we get started, Captain?”

“Just Stacy will do.” I shake my head and smirk. “And yes. There are no doorknobs. The doors open with body heat, so place your palm over the circular emblem with the weird swirly mark in the center.”



“What’s the swirly mark mean?” Zoe’s timid voice comes from somewhere over my right shoulder.

“Open, I guess.” I shrug. “I was never able to learn any alien languages or writing. It just sounds and looks like a bunch of mumbo-jumbo to me.”

“We have our assigned tasks, so let’s get to it.” Romy takes the lead and motions for Darcy and Zoe to follow her. I hear the door at the back of the cockpit open with a swoosh.

Tasha stays glued to my right, searching the map. “What about this one?” she asks and points to a large, orange planet many solar systems away from Tirius. “It’s ringed in blue.”

“Tap it and zoom in.”

She taps it with the tip of her finger, then spreads her thumb and forefinger wide to increase the size of the planet. “What does all the strange writing at the bottom mean?”

“I can only guess it’s information about the planet.” I glance over. “Sorry, I have no idea.”

“That’s okay. We’ll figure it out together.” Tasha pats my skeletal arm. “I think you’re right. It looks like a list of details. Wish we knew how to translate it. I’ll bet it tells everything about the people that live there and oxygen readings and other stuff like that.” Tasha snorts, “Listen to me sounding all scientific and shit.”

“You’re doing a great job,” I praise her.

“So are you,” Tasha returns the compliment.

“Thanks.”

“You know, yesterday, when I was in line at Starbucks impatiently waiting for my venti latte, I never would have dreamed that I’d be waking up naked and helping to navigate a spaceship.”

“That’s not something that happens every day.” My mouth waters at her mention of Starbucks, and I envy her recent memories of life on Earth.

“The naked navigator,” she giggles.

We share a laugh. Such a normal thing of everyday life that's taken for granted. And something I don't recall when I'd done last.

"The orange planet looks really far away though," I say, stealing quick glances at the map. I envy my former owner his eight eyes. I'll bet he had no trouble eyeballing everything all at once. "I do know this thing runs on some kind of fuel." I take one hand off the steering just long enough to point to the lit gauge that I know shows fuel levels. "We've got a mostly full tank. I hope it's enough to get us there."

"I'll look for a plan B that's closer, in case we don't have enough fuel to get us to the orange planet," Tasha says, expanding the map of planets. "I'd love to get as far away from that Tirius place as possible, but not at the risk of not making it somewhere at all."

"I agree."

Tasha uses our flight path aiming for the orange planet and searches for closer worlds ringed in blue. "What about this one?" She points to a rainbow globe. "Looks like Rainbow Bright's home world."

My gaunt face stretches into an unfamiliar smile. "Rainbow Bright will be our plan B."

"Aye, aye, Captain Naked," Tasha jokes. "Figures Rainbow Bright is an alien. I always knew there was something weird about that doll."

I burst out laughing as Romy and the two other girls join us wearing toga-style garments. "I'm glad to see the two of you in good spirits. We found something else to keep those smiles on your faces."

In my periphery, I see Darcy do a little spin and pose. "They aren't designer, but they'll do."

"Looks better than Chanel to me." Tasha beams and curls her fingers at Zoe. "Gimme."

Zoe walks over and hands her what looks like a dingy white sheet. It's neatly folded into a perfect square, so I know it's clean. I also know it to be packaging for fresh meat. My

former owner used them to wrap his grocery purchases when he visited various markets on different worlds. The packaging is unused, so I don't spoil the excitement and keep that little tidbit to myself.

Tasha immediately stands and wraps the coarse cloth around herself and over one shoulder in a Greek-style dress.

"You look lovely," Darcy says from behind me, and I hear the flapping of material. "I'm copying you. I like the one-shoulder drape better than my boob tube."

"Go right ahead. I'm happy to be your muse." Tasha takes her seat and coyly peers over her shoulder at Darcy. "Think of me as a fashion icon."

"I definitely will," Darcy replies with laughter in her voice. "I can't wait to see your spring collection."

"Thank you, *daawling*," Tasha drawls and flips her red hair off one shoulder. "I plan to modernize on the classics with a bit of whimsy."

"I wish I could be as calm as all of you." Zoe's timid words turn all eyes her way.

"Sorry." Darcy moves to drape a comforting arm around her shoulders. "I guess we shouldn't seem so flippant about what's happened to all of us. I, for one, am riding on a wave of adrenaline."

"Me too," Tasha easily admits. "I'd shit my pants if I was wearing any."

"I keep waiting to wake up and all this be a really weird, vivid dream," Romy adds.

"Don't apologize," Zoe snuffles. "I'm glad to be among so many strong women."

"You're stronger than you give yourself credit for," I utter.

"I don't think so." Zoe wraps her arms around her small frame. "Thanks for the vote of confidence though."

"Look at what you've been through and survived," I argue back. "What all of us have survived."

“That’s right,” Romy chimes in. “We’ve got this. Thanks to our fearless leader, we’ve escaped the meat market, and we’re on our way to someplace safe.”

I hope Romy’s right as the other girls join in, surrounding Zoe with encouraging words and comforting hugs. It’s like we’ve become a sisterhood in the short time we’ve known each other, and Zoe’s our little sister that needs protecting. She appears to be the youngest, and she’s the smallest. Petite in stature with a delicacy about her that brings out my protective side.

Zoe ducks her head and wipes a few stray tears off her cheeks with the back of her hand, then moves away from everyone and to the back of the ship. I figure she’s returning to her seat until she eases up beside me carrying a folded sheet. “Can I drape one on you?” Zoe shyly asks me.

“Sure, thanks.” I sit forward, careful to keep the steering steady.

Zoe gently drops the sheet down my back, then reaches under my arms to wrap the coarse material around the tops of my barely-there boobs and tucks, in the end, to keep it in place. Before I’d lost all the meat on my bones, I’d had a decent rack. Now I was sporting two pancakes on a ribcage. At least I’d lost that pesky belly fat no diet could ever melt away.

Her simple act of kindness assaults my senses and I fight back the hot press of tears. I can’t remember the last time anyone treated me like a human being. “Thanks, Zoe.”

“You’re welcome, Captain Stacy.”

It seems my nickname has stuck, even though I don’t want it to. I should correct her, but the quivering of my chin won’t allow it. I know if I open my mouth, I’ll burst into tears. Since these ladies are all looking up to me as their leader, I don’t want to disappoint them by appearing weak. Especially to Zoe, who needs a big sister right now, and crying like a little bitch over a kind gesture will do exactly that. I have to be strong for both me and them.

“Where we headed?” Romy sits in the seat that Darcy once occupied to my left, and I’m grateful for the turn in the

conversation.

“We’re going to try for the orange planet Tasha found,” I say. “That’s our plan A, but, if it looks like we won’t have enough fuel to travel the distance, she’s picked one closer.”

“Our plan B looks like a psychedelic, rainbow beachball.” Tasha points out plans A and B planets on the map. “We’re hoping to reach the orange planet though because it’s farther away from Tiriis.”

“Yes. Fingers crossed for the orange one.” Darcy leans in for a closer look at the 3-D map. “This thing is really cool. Can I touch it?”

“Sure,” Tasha says. “It works just like any touchscreen.”

The girls *ooh* and *ahh* over the alien tech then begin to chat about what they found on their search of the ship.

“Maybe Captain Stacy knows what all this stuff is.” Zoe drags a bulging bag over close to my chair and pulls out a silver pouch. “It’s squishy like a Capri Sun. Is it something to drink?”

“I never drank from those, but my former owner did.” I glance at the large pouch she holds up for me to see. “I’m not sure what’s in there.”

“What about these canisters?” Zoe holds up a metal tube-shaped bottle with a pop-off lid.

“Water,” I say.

“And this?” Zoe holds up round, green produce.

One look and the inside of my mouth sprays with saliva. “Edible.” I swallow hard remembering the sweet taste of the alien fruit.

“You should eat this one.” Zoe offers me the fruit.

“I need both hands on the sticks to fly straight,” I say, with a wistful glance at the green orb she holds out to me.

“If it wouldn’t be too weird, I can hold it while you bite into it,” Zoe offers, knowing how hungry I must be.

I simply nod and devour the fruit to the core as she carefully holds it up to my mouth while I take big bites. It tastes like an overly ripe pear, grainy and juicy, with a hint of tartness like a Granny Smith apple. I thank her even though the food hits my empty stomach like a stone and just sits there.

“You want another?” Zoe asks sweetly.

“No. I’m good.” I try not to grimace at the knot my stomach is trying to remember how to digest.

“Here.” Zoe pops the lip off a canister of water and holds it to my lips. “Take a few sips.”

I do. The water is cool and soothes my parched throat. Zoe passes around the canister to the girls, everyone taking a turn to drink.

Zoe digs through one bag and then another, holding up object after object that I try to identify. Most go in the edible or useful pile, while the other mystery items go into another bag to try and figure out later.

“I wonder what the orange planet will be like?” Darcy muses.

“Maybe there will be people who can fly us back to Earth,” Tasha says.

“I hope so,” Romy adds. “Maybe this nightmare will be over soon, and we can get back to our lives.”

My mind drifts back to the life I barely recall. After all this time and all I’ve been through, how can I go back and pick up where I left off? It feels impossible. I don’t even know who I am anymore.

“What language was that you spoke earlier?” I ask Romy, loving the conversation going on around me. It’s so nice to hear words I can understand and chat with other humans after all this time of being alone.

“German,” Romy says. “Ich komme aus Berlin. I teach English to third graders at Heinrich-Zille-Grundschule.”

“You were in Germany when you were abducted?” Darcy asks her.

“Yes. What about you, Darcy?” Romy lifts her chin. “Where were you taken from?”

“Sacramento, California,” Darcy says. “I’m finishing—or was finishing— my last year of college in business administration. Were you and Tasha already friends before the abduction?”

“No. We met in a cage on Tirius,” Tasha answers with a wry twist of her rosy lips. “I was taken from Mesa, Arizona. I work as a florist in my family’s flower shop. What about you, Zoe?”

“Gresham, Oregon.” She lifts her hand in a little wave. “I just graduated high school and was planning a trip to Europe with friends before starting college.”

All eyes shift to me. I could feel their curious stares like soft touches on my dirty skin. “Well,” I clear my throat. “Two years ago, I was stolen out of my bed in Macon, Georgia. I’d gone back home during summer break to visit my mom. I was studying interior design at the Art Institute in Atlanta.”

“Does anyone remember their abduction?” Darcy gulps. “What took us or how we got to the red planet?”

“Two gray aliens snatched me from my bed.” The haunting memory comes rushing back.

“With beady, black, lifeless eyes set too close together,” Darcy finishes describing the scene playing out inside my head.

“I remember being in a cage with lit bars in a room filled with other girls,” Romy adds. “I was really groggy, so I shut my eyes, thinking I was having a nightmare until I woke up with Tasha in a cage on Tirius.”

“Yeah, good times,” Tasha deadpans.

“I don’t remember any of it,” Zoe quietly says. “Just being strung up by my arms on the red planet and all the scary monsters leering at me.”

The room goes silent. I imagine we’re all reliving our own individual nightmares. Lost in our own heads, the rainbow planet grows larger as we reach the halfway point to the orange planet. I glance down at the fuel gauge and grin. It’s good news.

“We still have over half our fuel remaining,” I announce. “We can make it to the orange planet.”

Cheers fill the room only to be cut off by a sudden jolt of the ship. We hit another bump in the road, except there’s no road. The controls I’ve held tightly to through the entire flight, are steering out of my control. I fight to keep the ship aimed toward the orange planet and away from the rainbow world that feels determined to drag us down.

“Did we hit turbulence?” Tasha asks.

“Is that even possible in outer space?” Darcy says. “There’s no air in space.”

“I don’t know what’s happening,” I admit, as I continue to battle the two steering sticks.

“Look at that small moon!” Romy points to the emerald sphere growing closer.

The ship has a mind of its own. At first, I thought it was the planet that had a hold of us, but I realize it was the moon that was dragging us toward it. If we were on an episode of *Star Trek*, I would swear a tractor beam had latched on and was reeling us in.

The ship takes another hard jolt, only this one sets off a shrill alarm. “Buckle up, ladies,” I holler over the blaring alert that’s sounding off in time with a bright, flashing yellow light.

I can barely steer the closer we get to the emerald moon. The ship starts to shake so violently that I bounce in my seat, grateful for the seatbelt, and hope the other girls are buckled in.

I squeeze the steering and fight against the tugging force. It’s no use, the moon is filling up the windshield and our ship is on a collision course.

“Shit! Shit!” I curse. No matter how hard I fight with the steering, the ship is being pulled toward the moon—and the surface is coming up fast. It’s like gravity has reached out a greedy hand and won’t let go. “Hang on, girls, we’re going down!”



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## CHAPTER FOUR

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## Stacy

SOMETHING WARM LANDS on my arm and I come awake with a hard jerk. There's nothing on my body that doesn't hurt. Not even my eyeballs that I'm reluctant to open. There's a pounding inside my skull where my head hangs forward.

I don't recall the moment of impact. All I remember seeing was a wide river cutting through hundreds of densely packed trees and thinking about how Earthlike the topography looked.

Something warm slowly drips down my cheek. It tickles and I want to brush it away, but my hand is too heavy to lift.

I pry open an eye to see the thing touching my forearm is a hand. Following the arm up, I find it belongs to Tasha. She's slumped to the side and still strapped in her seat. I worry about the other girls.

My mouth is dry as I try to speak to Tasha. The noise I make is only a sticky movement as my dry lips soundlessly form her name.

Darkness creeps in around the edges of my vision and I fight to remain conscious.

These girls have declared me their captain. I'm responsible for them and need to know if they're all okay. But the harder I try to remain alert, the harder darkness grips me until my surroundings flicker away to black.



MY BODY FEELS as though it floats along with the whispers weaving around me. Something hard touches my back. I turn my face into the sweep of a concerned touch.

“She’s bleeding pretty bad.” I recognize Tasha’s voice.

“Head wounds always do. It’s not as bad as it looks,” Romy says. “Stacy. Can you hear me?” The concerned touch returns, and the whispers increase and register as words as if the volume had been turned up on a radio.

“Yes,” I move my lips and speak through what feels like a mouthful of cotton and blink open heavy eyes.

“She’s coming around,” Darcy says enthusiastically.

I wince when a cloth is applied to a sore spot on my temple.

“Sorry, it’s only a small cut, but I need to stop the bleeding,” Romy apologizes in her accented English.

“It’s a good thing Romy took a first aid class, or we’d all be clueless.” Tasha gently cups the back of my head and presses a canister to my parched lips. “Here. Drink some water.”

The cool liquid feels like heaven filling my mouth. I could easily gulp down the entire contents, but I know the onboard supply is limited and there are five of us. I raise a hand to nudge the canister away.

“You hardly drank anything,” Tasha gently scolds.

“No, I’m good.” I attempt to sit up and several hands come to my aid. “Is everyone okay?”

“Yeah, we’re all fine. Just a little shaken up.” Darcy pats a trembling Zoe’s arm. “You sustained the worst of the injuries.”

“We landed on that emerald moon.” Romy hikes a thumb toward the cracked windshield.

“It was more like a crash than a landing, but we made it. Thanks to you,” Tasha adds.

My head swims as I sit on the floor surrounded by my girls. I reach up to probe the knot throbbing on my forehead.

“The ship is in bad shape. The console broke free from the floor,” Romy says. “We had to pry part of the steering off you to get you out of the seat.”

It takes me a second to orient myself. I look around at the damage for the first time. Romy’s right. The ship is a wreck but it’s upright and resting on a slight angle. By some miracle, the ship landed almost level with the nose up.

The windshield is cracked and wrapped around the base of a huge tree. It appears we hit the ground and slid until the tree halted our progress.

The command console lays on its side from where it was bolted to the floor. Most of the tiny lights on the once sleek console no longer illuminate. I’m no mechanic, but the ship no longer looks worthy of flight.

Warning lights bathe the interior in a bright yellow, pulsing with the beat of my aching head. I shield my sensitive eyes against the assault. “I need to turn off those flashers.” I push to my feet.

My shoulder screams with my movements and I wince, holding my arm close to my body. The sharp pain lancing through my limb clears away what’s left of my brain fog.

“I’ll help you.” Romy wraps a supportive arm around my waist, and together we navigate the slanted floor to the damaged console. I cradle my arm against my body to keep from jarring my shoulder, squat down, and randomly tap lit buttons until the warning lights cease their relentless flashing.

I briefly shut my eyes and breathe through a mixture of relief and nausea. “That’s better.”

“You look a bit pale, Captain Stacy.” Romy leads me to the command seat that’s sitting a little crooked. “Come take a seat.”

“We need to make a plan.” I start to think of our options. “From what I can see out the busted windshield, we’re in a dense forest. We’ll have to ration the supplies you all found until we can find food and water sources on this moon.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Tasha gives me a lopsided salute. I guess humor is her way of dealing with stressful situations.

“We need to make a sling for your arm.” Zoe nicks the hem of her makeshift dress with her teeth and tears a swath off the bottom.

“You all can stop with the captain bit.” I suck in a harsh breath when Zoe drapes the swath around my neck and across my body to tie the ends together at my shoulder. As the initial pain subsides, it’s a relief to have my arm bound so my shoulder is kept stationary without me having to hold it in place. “Thanks, Zoe.”

“You’re welcome,” grins the doe-eyed blonde. “If it’s all the same to you, it’s comforting to call you captain since you’re the veteran abductee. Feels like we have a leader.”

How can I argue with her when she’s looking at me as if I’m her hero, even though I don’t feel like much of one since I did crash the ship?

“Okay,” I reluctantly concede. “Let’s see what supplies we have that survived the crash.”

I start to rise but a gentle hand keeps me in place. “Nope. Not you. On top of your injuries, you’re malnourished. Save your strength.” Romy nudges a canister of water into my hand. “Sit. Drink. Rest.”

“Bossy,” I smirk.

“That’s what my students say.” Romy mimics the wry twist of my lips.

I ease back into the seat, feeling guilty that I’m sitting on my ass doing nothing while Darcy and Zoe move off to the back of the ship to collect the scattered contents that spilled out of the bags from their initial search.

The door separating the cockpit from the back of the ship sits cockeyed in the jamb. We have to go through there to exit the ship. I hope it isn’t permanently stuck.

Romy and Tasha stay up front, examining the cracked windshield and sorting through the mess of wires and tubes

now littering the floor. It's like the ship barfed up its guts on impact, the sleek panels covering the walls now dented or missing.

The cockpit is small, so it isn't long before everyone is finished and piling up the food and drinks they gathered earlier from the back of the ship. I note we only have enough food and water canisters for a few days.

"Someone check the door and see if it's permanently stuck." I point to the cockeyed door.

"I'm on it." Tasha goes to the door and gives it a shove. It only moves a fraction of an inch. "It's jammed in there pretty good, but I moved it a little. I'm gonna need some more muscle."

I sat there like a useless lump while all four girls gripped the edge of the door and forced the panel into its pocket.

Darcy brushes off her hands. "Girl power."

"Abso-freaking-lutely." Romy high-fives Darcy. "What next, Captain Stacy?"

"If that's all the food and water from the back of the ship, we're going to have to go outside and find more." I point to the pile the girls made on the floor near my seat. Fear dampens the mood, but it can't be helped. "Even if we ration to the bare minimum, that won't last the five of us for very long."

"As scary a thought as it is to venture out into the unknown," Darcy reasons, "we can't stay in here forever. Eventually, we have to go outside."

"What if the air isn't breathable?" Zoe quietly asks.

"The windshield's sporting a good-sized crack." Tasha picks her way through the debris littered floor and I notice her slight limp. She puts her hand in front of the cracked windshield. "Feel the air current? That warm breeze is coming from outside."

Romy joins her, leans forward, and pulls in a lungful of air. "It smells really fresh, like when you go hiking in the mountains. I don't feel lightheaded or anything."

“I don’t either.” Tasha leans into the windshield for another breath. “Smells like air. Feels like air in my lungs. Unlike that thick air on Tirus, this is easy to breathe, like what we’re used to.”

“All right. No one goes out alone,” I decide. “We take turns and go out in pairs to search for anything edible and drinkable.”

“Agreed,” Romy says. “I’ll volunteer to go out first.”

“Me too.” I get to my feet.

“No.” Darcy rushes over to me with a supportive hand at my back. “You’re hurt.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s my fault we crashed here,” I argue. “I should be going out alone since I’ve already put all of you in danger with my shitty flying.”

“The moon’s gravity pulled us in,” Darcy argues back. “You didn’t know that was going to happen.”

“Besides, we’d all be horribly violated and as good as dead if we’d stayed with that jaundiced freak.” Tasha shudders.

“After I blatantly flirted with him, I would have been first.” Darcy’s deep complexion pales.

“Thank you for that.” I bob my head at Darcy. “If it wasn’t for your convincing flirtation, he wouldn’t have been distracted enough for me to grab the key.”

“Yeah, thanks Darcy,” Zoe says. “I was as good as useless. I was so scared.”

Romy and Tasha chime in on the heels of Zoe’s thanks but Darcy waves away their praise as if her bravery was no big deal.

“No worries.” Darcy takes the appreciations by humbly ducking her head. “Glad I could help.”

“Me and Romy will be the first pair to go out.” I head toward the back of the cockpit in the wake of many disputes, and through the door, that’s been forced open.

“No, you don’t, Captain.” Tasha’s limp grows more pronounced as if she has been hiding her injury. “I’ve already volunteered to join Romy on the first search.”

“You’re injured.” I stop and point to her leg. “How far are you going to get with that limp? My legs work just fine.”

“I just banged my knee up a little,” Tasha disputes. “It’s nothing.”

“Your shoulder is jacked up, and let’s not forget about that bump on your head,” Darcy sides with Tasha.

“It stopped bleeding right away and it doesn’t even hurt anymore.” I shrug it off, feeling the weight of responsibility. “As your captain, I insist on making sure the moon is safe to explore. I don’t want anything else happening to you all on my watch.”

“Stubborn.” Romy’s lips twitch into a grin.

“Bossy and stubborn together,” I tell her. “We’ll make a good team.”

“I don’t like that you’re going out with that bad shoulder, but I get the feeling we’re wasting time arguing with you.” Romy loosely crosses her arms and sticks out a hip. “You’ve made up your mind and that’s that.”

“You already know me so well.”

“You ladies aren’t going out barefooted.” Zoe points to our toes peeking out from under our makeshift toga dresses. “We need to fashion some footwear, even if it’s just cloth. You need to protect the soles of your feet from that alien forest.”

“A weapon or two wouldn’t hurt either,” Tasha adds. “I’ll start looking for something to take with you.”

All the girls go in different directions, some searching for something we can use as weapons, while others look for something hard and flat we can use as shoe soles.

“The best I could find for shoes is padding from a torn seat cushion and fabric strips to hold it in place,” Zoe announces and holds up her find.



She motions for me and Romy to join her where she sits on the floor. As Zoe starts to pad and wrap Romy's feet, Tasha and Darcy return from the back of the ship.

"We found these," Tasha wags a piece of pipe at us. "They're lightweight, but I think if you swung them hard enough, they could do some damage."

Darcy hands the section of pipe she carries to Romy and Tasha gives me hers.

"Where did you find these?" I ask, the metal tube recognizable.

"In a room in the very back where a bunch of mechanical looking stuff is," Tasha says.

"Sounds like the engine room or whatever it's called," I guess.

I had watched my former owner place the white chips he used as currency at the markets, inside the chamber of what looked like a giant sparkplug. The thing was vertical and attached to a network of piping. A piece of which I was now holding like a baseball bat.

Shoed and armed, Romy and I are as ready as we are ever going to be.

"Ready, partner?" I ask Romy, then look at the many apprehensive faces with my palm poised over the scanner to release the hatch.

"Let's do this." Romy shoulders her pipe, testing and readjusting her grip with twists of her hands.

"Wait," Tasha says and hands us each a drawstring bag containing a water canister. "Water and collection bags for all the yummy food you're going to find."

I appreciate her optimism as the scanner reads the heat of my palm and the hatch clunks open. Fragrant, breezy, tropical air hits my face in a rush. I blink back the sudden flood of tears that blurs my vision. I've been a captive for so long, locked in a dirty cage inside a stinking hovel where my former owner kept me like a pet.

The air is fresh, with a faint hint of decay from the leaves and dead branches littering the forest floor. This moon is the closest place to Earth I've been to in two years.

"Shall we?" Romy's voice jerks me from my nostalgia.

I step out onto a littered forest floor and turn my face up to a pale green sky with puffy blue clouds. A sky I can only see now because we plowed a huge hole through the thick canopy. The profuse vegetation is mostly jeweled blues and greens, with colorful flowers dotting the ground.

Most of the trees are like what I remember on Earth, only enormous. The trunks are as wide as three city buses set side by side. Others have huge tropical leaves like you would find in a jungle, umbrellaing off thick stalks.

I look around at where we crashed. We mowed down a row of trees, flattening an area to make a crude landing strip.

"The air is amazingly fresh." I hear Romy drag in a deep breath and exhale slowly. "Fresher than anything on Earth."

"I don't remember the last breath I took of Earth's air," I mumble.

"I can't imagine what you've been through." Romy touches my shoulder with a sad expression.

"I plan to keep it that way. None of you will ever experience life in a cage," I vow, but my attention wanders to a familiar sound. "Do you hear that?"

Romy goes still, then tilts her head in the direction of the distant sound. "Is that rushing water?"

"That's what it sounds like to me too."

"Let's go check it out." Romy steps in front of me to lead the way.

I start to follow but pause to look back at the girls huddled together in the open hatch. "Close and lock the hatch. Don't let anyone in except us."

Zoe gives me a thumbs up. Darcy and Tasha nod and close themselves in. I don't follow Romy until the hatch is firmly

back in place and I hear the lock engage.

“It’s really pretty here.” Romy looks around as we carefully navigate the thick underbrush. “Wherever here is.”

“Stay sharp,” I say. “Looks can be deceiving.”

“So much for trying to stay quiet,” Romy huffs, our cautious movements crunching with every step. “Every living thing on this moon can hear us moving around.”

“Remind me to thank Zoe again for the footwear.” There’s so much dried debris littering the ground, I can’t imagine how much the sticks and leaves would hurt against the soles of my feet without the padding and cover.

We’ve only gone a few steps when Romy pauses and looks back toward our crash site. “I can barely see the ship through the overgrowth. If we aren’t careful, we’re going to get lost in here.”

I follow her gaze. She’s right. After only a few feet, the vegetation is a natural camouflage, choking in around us. The forest is so heavy with foliage, it’s hard to see more than a few feet in any direction. “Got any breadcrumbs, Gretel?”

“I’m fresh out,” Romy grins at me. “But maybe we can find a substitute.”

“What about that orange stuff?” I spot splashes of bright orange growing at the base of several impossibly tall trees.

“Be careful,” Romy says, as I carefully pick my way over to the closest clump of orange and kneel.

I lay my pipe and collection bag on the ground to run my fingertips across the spongy surface. “It feels like moss.”

“Maybe we can break it into tiny pieces and leave a trail to follow back.” Romy isn’t looking at me but all around with her pipe up and at the ready.

“I think that’s a great idea.” I pluck the clump of orange moss from where it loosely grows on the exposed tree roots and stuff it inside my sling. It’s fluffy and a little dry against my fingertips. It holds its shape, and I can tell it’ll be easy to pinch pieces off to scatter on the ground.

I shoulder my collection bag like a backpack and tuck my pipe under my good arm, going to other trees to collect more moss clumps, then rejoin Romy where she watches my back.

We move with caution and keep our eyes open. I sprinkle bits of the bright orange moss as we pick our way through the overgrowth. Along the way, we pause to inspect and collect the strange fruits we find growing on some of the bushes and trees. I'm pleased our collection bags are starting to bulge but worry what we are collecting might be inedible or even toxic. We have no way of knowing what's okay to eat until we try it.

The forest seems to be chock full of life. Unseen creatures rustle around beneath the heavy vegetation as we follow the sounds of what I hope is a river or stream. Little flying insects chirp loudly while forest creatures call to one another.

We both suck back a surprised gasp when Romy moves aside a low-hanging tree branch and disturbs a flock of yellow and purple birds the size of parrots. In a beautiful spectacle, they spread colorful wings and take flight, disappearing above the lush canopy.

"Maybe this place isn't so bad after all," I murmur, and pinch off some moss to drop on the ground.

We continue another couple hundred feet, then pause to look back in the direction of the crash. The moss trail is working. I can clearly see the bright chunks of moss until the trail disappears into the lush foliage. I know if we look to the ground, the moss will lead us back to the ship.

This jungle-forest is daunting, to say the least. We haven't walked that far and already I feel lost. I peer all around us and it's as if we've been swallowed up by the vegetation. Where we've pushed our way through, the foliage has already resealed itself.

"I think we're on the right path," Romy says, looking around. "The water sounds are getting louder. I remember seeing a huge river when we were crashing."

"I saw it too."

We keep traveling in the direction of the rushing water. Out of the corner of my eye, something flies through the twist of branches and lands with a thump overhead. Alarmed, we both come to an abrupt halt and squat, keeping close to the ground.

“Was der fick!” Romy hisses in German.

I don't know any German, but I imagine it's a curse. Afraid to make noise, I stay quiet and peer up into the tangle of trees until I spy a tiny, furry face. I touch Romy's arm and point. She follows the direction of my finger and another flying creature lands next to the first.

“They look like a cross between a monkey and a squirrel,” I say. “They're sort of cute.”

“Remember what you said earlier,” Romy reminds me. “Looks can be deceiving. They're probably dangerous as hell.”

“Maybe. Or, maybe they're more scared of us than we are of them.”

“I seriously doubt that.” Romy slowly stands. “Let's keep moving—”

The monkey-squirrels let loose a screech that jangles my nerves. We both freeze and watch as they leap, spreading their long limbs, extending a webbing, and glide through the air to land on one branch and then another until we lose sight of them.

“Wonder what got them spooked?” I ask.

The vibration of the ground is slight enough to be imagined. Then it grows stronger, followed by a distant thunder that isn't coming from the sky. Whatever is headed our way is coming in fast.

Romy and I share an anxious look before we decide to turn back and make a run for the ship. We don't make it but a few steps before a herd of large deer-like animals with Micky Mouse ears and green coats burst through the trees.

Twice the size of deer, they thunder down on us, forcing us to move in the opposite direction of the ship. There are so many of them, the herd seems endless.

“Shit! Shit!” Romy yelps in a panic as I follow close on her heels. “Run, Stacy!”

We zigzag between the enormous tree trunks to avoid their trampling hooves and pointy horns. The forest is so thick, it’s hard to go fast without smacking into shrubs and undergrowth. The green deer stay right on our tails no matter which direction we take, seeming to follow us.

I glance back to see how close the green deer are only to turn back and lose sight of Romy. She must have veered off. The foliage is so heavy, I don’t see her anywhere.

“Romy!” I yell out for her.

“This way!” she hollers back.

I run toward her voice, but bushes and low-hanging branches slow my progress. I’m losing ground and the green deer still follow me. Fear of being trampled to death or impaled on one of those horns forces me to pick up speed.

“Romy! I can’t see you.” Panic claws at my throat. My breaths are hot as they rasp out on uneven huffs. Her answer back sounds so far away.

“Fuck!” I keep running while blinking back tears of terror that blur my vision.

I’ve lost my pipe somewhere along the way. I swat at the foliage that smacks my face and body with my good arm as I run. I feel like I’ve been running forever, my emaciated thighs burn with my efforts. Just when I think the chase will never end, the green deer suddenly cut left and the stampede heads in the other direction.

My legs slow and I huff out relieved but exhausted breaths. “Thank fuck—”

Through all the chaos, I hadn’t noticed the roar of rushing water had increased until I turn to find myself on the bank of the river, which explains the green deer’s sudden change in direction. The river is extremely wide and rages with foamy rapids.

My head swims with fatigue. My sprint through the forest zapped what little energy I had left.

As impressive as the river is, what's hanging low and heavy in the sky is even more breathtaking. I tilt my head back in disbelief, unable to comprehend how close the rainbow planet is to the ground. It's like any second now, it's going to fall out of the sky and crush me. I reach out a hand wondering if it's possible to trail my fingers through the colorful swirling clouds.

My foot slips on a rock at the river's edge as I take a step. A strangled scream rips up my throat as I lose my footing. My good arm pinwheels through the air, fighting for balance. But it's no use, I'm falling.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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## Draxyn

I GLANCE up at the sky to check my heading without slowing my pace. Under the dense canopy, it's easy to get turned around. The sun is directly overhead, and I make sure to keep the planet, Ziaria on my right.

I look down at the lifeform scanner I've clipped to my belt. I programmed out all other lifeforms except for Ziarians and humans so they are easily spotted at a glance. It shows two of the five humans on the move toward the river. The other three remain with the ship.

There's a group of Ziarians inside the compound, Rooke and the other inmates, but the blips that I'm concerned with the most remain where I last saw them, far away from the crashed ship. Mordox and a second lifer are moving around on the second level above the valley but are far away from the crash site. They are never together. I imagine whoever the second lifer is, does his best to stay out of Mordox's way.

Rooke's blip hasn't moved from his place on the landing pad. He's been busy with the emergency craft and the shuttle ever since lockdown ended. He wasted no time getting away from Truyn's body as soon as he could, but so had I.

I should be helping with Truyn's body removal and cleanup, but I bolted out of my pod as soon as the luminetric barrier dropped. In the wake of the gathering inmates' sneers and curses, I ran through the common area's door and out into the valley with the excuse that I couldn't handle looking at my friend's corpse.

Even though that was true, as his only friend here, I should be the one to see he has a proper burial, but if I didn't get to the ship before Rooke discovered it, the rest of the living were going to be fucked.

I'm moving at a fast clip and have almost reached the rock wall. I'm making good time, but I can't slow down. I must hurry so I have plenty of time to search the ship and get back before the cycle ends or those unfortunate fools burying Truyn will have another dead body on their hands.

I adjust the shoulder straps of the empty pack riding my back. With claws out, I break through the tree line. A few more lunging steps and I leap into the air, catching the wall in a shower of dirt and debris. My claws dig in and I easily scale the rockface with my hands and feet. My tail whips in the air, gaining me momentum as I climb.

I reach the top of the cliffs, but don't stop to celebrate my record climb. I head straight for the tree line to check the lifeform scanner. I need to make sure I haven't been followed before I go any farther.

Rooke's blip and the other inmates remain where they were at my last check. The two lifers remain in the same location as do the three females inside the ship. But the two females traveling through the forest have split up. One moves quickly toward the river while the other has veered off and is heading deeper into the forest.

I stay in the thick of the forest and run towards the river. The heavy foliage will keep me mostly hidden, but there's no real hope of completely hiding my movements. The vibrant yellow streaking through my black mane clashes brightly with my surroundings the way it was meant to do.

My brilliant colors are there to warn off predators on my world, but I'm no longer on Ziaria. I'm on Zune, the moon that orbits my world, and it is a far different environment here than where I was born.

Once I cross the river, I'll have to avoid the humans. That shouldn't be too hard. They are a primitive species and will mistake me for just another forest creature.

I see the river up ahead. I shift my direction to run parallel to the raging waters until I find a narrower place to cross. The current is strong, and if I lose my footing on the slippery rocks, I risk getting swept over the falls.

Over the rush of the Zune River, I hear the thunder of alope hooves. A skittish beast, they stampede over the slightest thing. I glance over to see a herd break through the trees lining the riverbank as I run. The ones in the lead cut a hard left, slipping on the smooth river rocks on the shore.

Their dark green pelts blend with the foliage around them, making them difficult creatures to hunt, but that's when they are moving slowly in the density of the forest. Their frantic movements always give their location away. All a hunter must do is stay hidden and wait them out. Something will eventually spook them, then the chase is on.

If I wasn't on a mission, I would chase one of the males down for the third meal of the cycle. But hunting alopes isn't what I came all this way for.

A flutter of white catches my eye. I trip over my own feet as I spot the alien female standing dangerously close to the shore. I crash to the ground in a clumsy display, sliding to a halt on the side of my face. I spit the dirt from my mouth and stay perfectly still in a crouch.

The human didn't notice me. She's looking up at Ziaria with an unhinged jaw. I don't need to look at the lifeform scanner to know that she's one of the humans. She looks as feral as the images I found on the universal network.

I tilt my face up into the breeze and catch her sweet scent tinged with illness and shouldn't care that she is malnourished and filthy. Humans are a stupid species, polluting their own world like unruly young. I should leave her and be glad she is one of five I won't have to deal with once I reach the crash site.

She is my first look at a live human. Why do I find this waif so captivating? It's been a long time since I last laid eyes on a female, but that can't be it. This one is barely more than skin and bones. Not curvy to my liking, yet there is something so

guileless about her that flutters my scales with an instinct to protect.

I should not be having this reaction for this skeletal alien female.

I flick my tail, trying to shake off the tingling at the base of my spine. She is not mine to mark, yet my horns uncurl and straighten. The deadly tips point toward the back of my head, readying me to deliver the sacred Ziarian kiss between her skeletal thighs. My cock thickens at the mere thought.

I lift my nose again to the sultry breeze and drag in another full breath. Her scent is exotic. My lip curls up in approval. So sweet, but oh so alien.

I still can't fathom how a people so primitive flew a Starskip. They hadn't come here from Earth, that is for certain. That class of ship is for short-range travel only. No way could it have made it all the light years between Earth and Zune without having to make several stops for maintenance and recharging the transputer converter.

A weird sensation washes over me as I watch the female reach up a hand to my home world as if she longs to touch the colorful clouds swirling around it. I've done that very thing more times than I care to remember. A longing to return home, Ziaria remains so close, yet so far away. Warmth settles in the region of my heart and the gland at the base of my spine tingles anew, my cock hardening in its desire to mark her as mine.

Were these human females trying to land on Ziaria when they crashed?

It would have done them no good. My people would not have welcomed them there. They would have been viewed as pests and immediately exterminated. The thought of her demise is reminiscent of what I felt for Truyn before he took his own life.

Sympathy.

"It took being arrested and imprisoned on Zune to learn I had a heart," I snort.

Enthralled with Ziaria, she takes a step and loses her footing. I watch in horror as her feet fly out from under her. Her back hits the foamy rapids before her head smacks the flat of a rock. Then she's lost in the rushing current.

I stand and run to the riverbank, not caring if I'm seen. I search the churning river for a glimpse of her. Nothing. The current has swallowed her whole—

A flash of white, then her dirty brown mane bobs in the water before the current sucks her back under. Without a second thought, I turn and run the riverbank, scanning the raging current until I catch another glimpse.

I jump in after her, but the rapids are too strong here and threaten to drag me under. My arms pump through the water as I fight my way across the rapids while being driven downstream. I tilt my head back to keep my chin above the surge and search the water for her.

When I next spot her, she's face down, her fragile body a victim of the tide. I must get to her before she reaches the cliffs. She won't survive the falls on her own.

I reach down deep for the power I need to beat the river. As strong as I am, nature is kicking my ass, but I can be just as relentless. As soon as the female is within reach, I lunge for her.

My fingers graze her strange skin before I grab her thin arm and clutch her to me. With her back to my front, I wrap my body around hers, keeping our heads above water, and protect her from the brutal current the best I can. We're at the mercy of the rapids, tossed and flung about as we're rushed toward the falls.

I flatten the natural armor of my scales down tight and turn my body into the boulders jutting up from the riverbed, taking the brunt of the impacts. As frail as the female feels in my arms, she won't live through the battery.

The drop over the falls and into the lake below is far. I know I will survive, but she is too delicate for such trauma. I must get us free of the water before we reach the cliffs.

Broken tree limbs and fallen logs litter the river's edge. Keeping my arms tightly around the female, I whip my tail out to snag something, *anything* to slow our progress downstream. The sound of the falls is deafening, the churning waters an ear-splitting roar, as the ledge is fast to approach.

My tail slaps and curls around the debris littering the shoreline but everything I grab pulls away in the soft mud. The falls are upon us, and the water is relentless. I tuck my tail around us both and keep both arms tight around the female as gravity dumps us over the massive waterfall.

We fall forever, my scaled back leading the way, and I pray we miss the rocks below. Air leaves my lungs in a painful rush when my back hits the lake with a mighty slap. Once we float clear of the waterfall and out into the smooth waters of the lake, I place my hand over the female's nose.

She breathes.

The relief I feel is profound. Something to ponder later. For now, I use my legs to kick and one arm to swim us to the riverbank. The water is shallow enough here, I stand and walk us the rest of the way out and take a quick look around to see if our trip down the falls was witnessed. The female hangs limp and lifeless in my arms. I swallow hard, afraid for her well-being.

I don't take my eyes off the landscape until I know for certain we aren't being watched. I pull hard at the air, sifting through the scents of the forests. When I only scent the indigenous wildlife, I run with her in my arms and take cover just inside the tree line.

After gently laying her on the ground, I take another quick look around. She remains unconscious so I lean down and place my ear close to her face to double check her shallow breaths brushing my cheek. I find her heart higher up in her chest than mine, and it beats slow and steady under my palm.

She had fallen backward in the water, swept off her feet by the rushing current. My fear is realized on the tips of my fingers when I pull them away from where I touch the back of her head.

She's bleeding.

Her blood is red and not blue like mine. I'm not a medic and have only rudimentary skills when it comes to treating wounds. Plus, she's an alien! What if I do her more harm than good?

I ignore the fact that she's completely naked now, her white garment lost in the current, and focus on searching her body for injuries. She doesn't so much as twitch when I check her limbs for broken bones.

My heart weighs heavy over the condition of her body. The female is so gaunt, teetering on the edge of starvation. She lacks musculature where there should be muscle.

The healing cuff I have back in my pod is calibrated for Ziarian physiology. It might not work to heal her, but it's the only chance she's got, yet I can't take her to the compound.

Can I?

If someone sees me carry her inside, I don't know what those males will do. They might kill her on sight. If Rooke sees her, he will know there is another craft somewhere in the forest.

I growl as indecision plays havoc with logic. Saving a human was not on my agenda when I set out for the crash site. I should be scavenging what I can from the wreckage, not formulating a plan to sneak a dying human inside the prison compound. But leaving her to die is not an option.

When had I grown a conscience?

"Fuck!"

My pack still hangs from my shoulders, plastered to my back in a soaked sheet. I reach for the lifeform scanner at my belt to find it missing, along with my only hunting knife. I curse my stupidity. I'd jumped in the river without thinking and now all are lost.

Now I can't scan for any lifers or Rooke. I'll have to rely on scent alone to make sure we aren't followed back to the compound.

I peel the sodden straps off my shoulders and spread the pack out on the ground. The human is so small, I can hide her inside and carry her on my back.

As carefully as I can, I lift her from the ground and cradle her in my arms. She shivers and I worry about how she can be cold in the sultry heat. I place her in the center of the pack and lift the edges around her curled form.

She weighs nothing as I shoulder the two straps and easily stand with her on my back. I take off running back inside the cloak of the forest while putting my sensitive olfactory cavity to work. I scent nothing but the native creatures.

I don't stop until I get as close to the compound's door as I dare. There's only one way in and one way out, and this is it. I hunker down and wait. There are still several hours until the end of the cycle, so the other prisoners will be milling about. Yet, I see no one.

Where is everybody?

Usually, the yard is full during this time of the cycle. Most are returning from hunting and gathering food for the last meal before lockdown. Strange there is no movement.

If I had the lifeform scanner, I would know for sure. I curse my impulsiveness. I should have left the scanner on the shore before diving in after the human. I should have left her to drown. There is no reason why I should feel obligated to help her. None whatsoever.

The tiny human softly moans from inside the pack, and my fucking heart skips a beat. My cock jerks in response. Vexed, I slap my tail on the ground to chase away the tingles at the base of my spine.

I lift my nose to the air, finding it rich with Ziarians. I also catch the hint of death. Truyn's demise will linger for a few cycles before it is fully gone. My guess is the majority of prisoners are here. By the direction of their scents, they are on the opposite side of the compound from where I wait, burying Truyn's body.



I want to make a run for the door, but I can't. If I take her inside, the others will scent her presence.

Why hadn't I thought of this before now? But I know why.

My single-minded determination to save her got in the way of logic. Now, here I hide in the forest, just a few feet from my pod and the healing cuff she needs to survive. I growl low in my throat, thinking of a way I can keep her scent masked from the others until the luminetric barrier does it for me.

The motors on the automatic ventilation shutters!

Those burn out all the time. No one would suspect anything if I were to sabotage one or two. The stench of burnt wires will throw off everyone's olfactory cavities and will linger for cycles. I can keep the human in my pod while she heals, and none will be the wiser.

I race across the yard, stopping at the first vent I come to. It's nothing for me to extend a claw and pry off the cap protecting the wiring. I pull two wires from the motor and touch them together, creating a shower of sparks. I return the wires and close the cap. Easiest thing I've done all cycle.

The stink of burnt wires is an instantaneous assault on my senses. I try not to breathe too deeply and run alongside the curving exterior wall of the central common area until I reach the door. Inside, I skid to a halt, coming face-to-face with a seething Rooke.

"Nice of you to leave the rest of us to clean up after *your* friend," Rooke grouses. "The least you could have done is helped carry his body out, maybe even helped dig the hole."

"Smells like another ventilation shutter has shorted out," I divert.

"I can't smell anything over Truyn's blood," Rooke shouts. Then, "Fuck me running! Can anything else possibly go wrong this cycle?"

On the heels of Rooke's rhetorical question, I slide the pack off my shoulders and swing it around to my front before taking off down the corridor of Annex 2.

“I’ll take a look at it in a minute,” I toss back over my shoulder.

“What do you got in the pack, Drax?” Rooke yells after me.

“Just provisions for lockdown.” I pick up speed and shout out to initialize the voice recognition on my lock, clicking open the privacy door to my pod. Before I make it inside my pod and shut the door, I hear Rooke’s knowing remark.

“Provisions, my tail! What are you hiding, techie?”

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## CHAPTER SIX

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## Stacy

I FLOAT awake as if emerging from a deep sleep. I don't remember the last time I slept this well. I turn my face on the pillow beneath my head and snuggle my cheek into its softness. A spicy bouquet fills my nose. It's an unfamiliar yet comforting scent. Very masculine, like a fine cologne. I drag more of it into my lungs and exhale with a slow, appreciative sigh.

I blink open heavy eyes to the view of a male's face, one with turquoise skin and a bright yellow gaze. Sculpted lips pull up at the corners into a friendly grin as he looks at me expectantly. His features are rugged like they've been chiseled from granite. He's not human, but he's classically handsome, and I find myself smiling back.

His grin widens to display a set of monstrous canines and the spell is broken. My face drops into an alarmed frown, but I'm momentarily frozen in place as I take in a pair of immense horns that sprout from his temples and follow the curvature of his head in a gentle twist that ends in sharp points.

Growing from his scalp is a wealth of long, gleaming black hair with bright yellow streaks. It's tousled around his shoulders with a few hanks falling in his face. I'm a little jealous of the glossy sheen and absurdly wonder what hair care products he uses to get that kind of shine.

On closer inspection, the skin covering his face isn't skin at all. It's more like scales tightly woven in a fine, geometric pattern. As my eyes travel down his neck, over an intricately

carved necklace with a tiny blue light, and onto his massive chest, the pattern becomes more pronounced.

Across the breadth of his shoulders is a spiky armor. The plate-like scales are a deeper shade of turquoise, changing to a royal blue towards his back, and are slightly raised from the heavy layering.

He's crouched at the side of my bed. He looks tense and poised to pounce. A claw-tipped hand gingerly lands on the edge of the mattress and I shrink away. A large strap around my forearm holds me in place. Panic grips me when I realize I'm his captive.

Had I only dreamt the other girls and the escape from Tiriis? I search my brain, trying to recall how I'd gotten here. I remember being chased by green deer and losing Romy in the forest. Then I'd found the source of the crashing water sounds.

I need to get back to the ship and the girls. I need to make sure Romy made it back to the ship and she's not lost somewhere in an alien forest.

"Female no fear Drax," he says in stilted English.

My eyes widen in shock to hear familiar words coming from an alien's mouth. "How do you know English?"

"Drax English little." He holds up his hand with his thumb and forefinger held close together.

My surprise quickly turns to anger. How many humans has he known before me?

"With freedom comes trust, and I don't trust you." I wiggle my trapped arm to make my point.

"Agree." He nods and slaps his chest but inches closer until he's practically on top of me. "Drax trust no one."

I press my body into the mattress to distance myself from the heat radiating off his naked torso. He's huge and built like a linebacker. The predatory gaze burning into my soul as he prowls over me makes me nervous.

His muscled chest is completely exposed, and from what I can see, those armored scales on his shoulders flow down the

backs of his arms. I can only imagine what his back looks like.

I'm thankful for the leather pants he wears. I'm barely holding it together as it is. I don't think I could handle a completely naked blue alien.

Something sweeps across the floor, and I swallow a scream mistaking it for a snake. The tip end of it has a fur tuft the same color as his hair. Of course, he would have a tail. He has horns and fangs and claws. Why not a tail too?

"No." I push against one rock-solid pectoral. My breath comes out in stuttered pants. "Ple... please, don't hurt me." I hate that I feel so helpless. You would think after being kept in a hamster cage for months on end, I would be used to the feeling of being trapped, but this guy is making me edgy, and his intentions are unknown.

"No hurt." He dips his head to my throat and sniffs. "Heal only."

His hot breath bathes the delicate skin on my throat and all I can think about are those enormous canines he's sporting. If he takes a bite out of me, he'll rip open my jugular and I'll bleed out. I try to wriggle away, struggling with the strap on my arm that is holding me good and tight.

I grab hold of one of his thick, black horns and give it a good yank. As soon as he pulls away with a surprised glare, I use my head as a weapon and slam my forehead into his with a resounding crack. Dizziness dims my vision. I feel like I just headbutted a bowling ball. I fall back on the mattress with stars dancing around my vision. Lots of stars.

And him?

He appears unaffected but moves a safer distance away to look at me as if I've lost my damn mind. And maybe I have because his bright yellow eyes have narrowed to angry slits as he gingerly rubs the horn I just yanked. The armored scales of his shoulders raise as if his hackles are up. That horn of his I pulled has curled up tighter to the side of his head.

Horns are not supposed to move, but his do.

I've seen a lot of weird aliens during my time off Earth, but this guy is definitely the most interesting. I don't want to be fascinated with him. I want to be free.

"Bad female." He wags a finger at me, then rattles off something in a strange language that sounds very much like a complaint. "Bushk lut towr ruft."

I pull and struggle against the wide strap that's holding my forearm to a board covered in tiny lights that are attached to the bed. I claw at the seam that runs across the top of the cuff. I can't get it to open. It feels as if the more I struggle, the tighter it holds me, and now it's making a soft buzzing noise.

"You haven't met my bad side yet," I seethe. "Try to bite me again and I'll rip that horn right off your damn head."

He studies me with renewed interest. Aside from the unnatural yellow, his irises are larger than a human's and seem to glow from within. There's a curious glint there that worries me. The last thing I expect is the deep chuckle that rumbles from his parted lips. His amusement rubs me the wrong way. There's nothing funny about waking up tied to an alien's bed.

"I'm glad you find me so amusing." I glare at him.

My anger delights him, and his fanged smile widens. If he wasn't sizing me up like a predator, I would find him attractive, which is completely crazy. I must have scrambled my brains when I headbutted him.

"How would you like it if someone was keeping you as a prisoner?" I bark.

He cocks his head at me, confused.

"Captive," I say. "I don't like being in prison."

"Prison." He nods, picking up on the single word, and raises his hands from where he's perched on a stool and gestures around the room. "Drax prison."

My mouth falls open at the revelation. I've survived one cage only to be tossed into another, only this time, I have a roommate.

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## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

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## Draxyn

THE TINY FEMALE shouldn't be alive. My goal was not to rescue a human but to salvage what I could from her crashed vessel. Here I sit, like a damn fool, smitten with a lesser species. I keep telling myself that she's just a human, yet I've watched over her healing body for two cycles.

Rooke is on to me. He doesn't know what I smuggled back from the forest, but he knows I'm hiding something. More like *someone*. The marauder hasn't let up, banging on my privacy door as soon as the luminetric barrier drops.

I give him the same excuse. That I'm unwell and need to rest. He doesn't believe my lie and returns at the top of every cycle, yelling at me to get my tail out of my pod. And every cycle, I manage to avoid him, sneaking out to short one of the ventilation shutters and grabbing food and water from the supply room.

Now that my human is awake, I find myself even more captivated. Her emaciated body has plumped. Her withered curves were now full and lush. But it's her unexpected fierceness that ignites my blood, triggering my instinct to mark her as mine. The tingling at the base of my spine hasn't let up since the first time I breathed in her alluring scent. Nor has my cock completely softened, hanging half-hard along my thigh.

"Bad female," I say in her language before switching to Ziarian. "Was that really necessary?" I know she can't understand me, but I feel the need to voice a complaint. I smooth my hand over the shell of my traumatized horn,

rubbing away the sparking stings until it uncurls back into its normal position.

My human is quick to talk back in her foreign tongue. It can't be anything nice judging by her scathing tone.

"I was only checking your scent to see if you're fully healed," I reply in Ziarian. "Don't you know how sensitive a male's horns are when we've found our fated mate?"

I must learn more of her words if we are to communicate properly, but I've wasted enough time waiting for her fragile body to heal. I could have simply left her here and made the journey to her ship without her. Better yet, I should have let the river wash her away.

But biology wouldn't allow me to leave her to die, an inner scream that says she's mine. For the first time in my life, I allowed my body to rule my head. Now here I am, inside my pod, watching over a human. I could have made the journey to her ship and back two times over.

I trade a hard stare with the female, reminding myself that I don't like company. For some reason I cannot fathom, I haven't minded the little human's invasion of my privacy. I haven't even minded sleeping on the floor in exchange for her comfort. The overwhelming urge to care for her has been both strange and gratifying.

Something about her appeals to me. I can't imagine what that is. She has no scales, and with no natural armor, she is a frail being and would be easy to kill. No horns. No claws. Her teeth are blunt and small. There's no light of vitality shining from her pale green eyes. Her coloring is a weird pink, and her mane is the same brown as a river rock. And even more freaky, she has no tail.

How can she maintain her balance without one? Then I remind myself that she can't because she did, after all, fall into the river.

Instead of feeling repulsed by her alien features, I'm drawn to her. The aggressive need to protect her is something only mated males feel for their chosen females. But that only

happens with Ziarian females, so why do I feel this with her? My body reacts in a way it shouldn't for this feeble human.

She's a complication I do not need!

Moreover, I feel irritated by her actions. After everything she survived, the head wound, the river rapids, the waterfall, the malnourishment, and now she's gone and reinjured herself. An angry red mark mars her forehead where she impacted the boney skull plate where my horns are attached.

Despite her soft, fragile body, she shows fierceness and has a temper to match my own. Her courage is admirable. If I woke to a stranger from another world, my first instinct would be to lash out as well. This small female is a fighter, the same as me.

I've watched her slumber for two cycles but seeing her animated, I can't help but grin at her ferocity. I was wrong to assume because of her unarmored flesh that she would be meek and submissive. Still, it's troubling that she would reinjure herself knowing she could not possibly defeat me.

Her first instinct was to fight, but how could she know that I would never harm a female? She's not my kind, so why should I care what happens to her?

The most masculine part of me roars to life. Her fury only fuels a long-dormant fire deep in my bones. I had yet to find a compatible mate on Ziaria before I was convicted and shipped off to Zune. To find my match in this tiny human female is truly unexpected. And most inconvenient.

"No bite," I try to explain with my limited vocabulary. I lick the tip of one fang, imagining the nibbling I will do once she allows me to spread her creamy thighs and gift her with my most sacred kiss. My horns uncurl and straighten, the points moving to the back of my head in preparation. "Help only."

"Help, huh?" Her gaze lands on my mouth and she gives an indignant snort. "Then why are you eyeing me like a Thanksgiving Day turkey?"

I tilt my head, searching my limited knowledge of her language for her meaning.

“Never mind.” She wriggles her arm in the medical cuff and continues her incoherent jabbering, “Take this off me. Do you understand? Set me free.”

She props herself up on one elbow and the top of the blanket I covered her with slips to reveal the swell of her breasts. I’m only male, so naturally, I stare at her lush curves. Her frame has filled out nicely with the aid of the medical cuff nourishing her emaciated body.

I’d dried her off and cleaned her up the best I could when I’d first brought her here. She was more bones than flesh and didn’t hold the same appeal as she does now. I’d also been focused on saving her life and not on mating her. Now that she is awake, the niggling of my initial attraction has erupted.

When my eyes flicker back to hers, my ardor is dampened by the fear I see reflected there and my protective instincts rush to the forefront.

With her forearm lashed to the bedframe by the medical cuff, she doesn’t seem to know that it’s only to heal her and not to keep her tied down.

She flops back on the cot and gathers the blanket under her chin, then struggles to sit up. I instinctively move to assist her, but she flinches away. I back up slowly and resume my seat on my stool while she wriggles into a seated position.

“Hurt.” I touch my forehead and point to hers.

“Yes, my head hurts,” she juts her chin up in defiance and jabbers. I catch one or two words, but the others are lost in translation. “It’s all your fault. Had you not tried to bite me, I wouldn’t have had to go all WWE on your ass.”

I scratch my head, growing irritated by the language barrier. “Drax no.” I shrug and shake my head.

“Dracks. You keep saying that. Is that your name?”

I pat my chest and nod when it sounds like she’s trying to say my name. “Draxyn.”

“Drack-in?”

“Drr-acks-yeen.” I grin at her botched attempt. “Drax only. You?”

She hesitates before saying, “Stacy.”

“Sht-ayy-she.” I roll her name around on my tongue.

“Close. Stay-ceee,” she repeats.

“St-a-ceee.” Pride wells within me when she nods her approval.

Why I am so captivated by her is a biological mystery. She is nothing like a Ziarian female, with her pale, soft body. Maybe it is her vulnerability that tripped my body into thinking she is my mate. Or maybe, I’ve been stuck on Zune too long without female companionship.

“All right, Drax only.” Stacy wriggles and strains her arm against the medical cuff. “How about turning me loose?”

“Stop struggling or you will break it,” I fuss at her in Ziarian, but she keeps fighting and the sophisticated device starts to whine from her abuse. Alarmed she will break it, I lean forward and point at the cuff hoping she will understand. “Heal Stacy.”

Her bravado slips and she shrinks away. It wounds me that she would think I would hurt her. “Drax no hurt Stacy. Save water.”

“From that huge river with the white-water rapids?” Her gaze drifts to a spot over my shoulder and she babbles in her strange tongue. “I remember slipping on a rock, but nothing else after that. I fell in and you saved me?”

“Head rock.” I pick up on some of her words and smack the back of my head to demonstrate. “Drax water.” I churn my arms through the air as if I’m swimming. “Drax Stacy waterfall.” I hug myself and dive my hand through the air.

Stacy’s pale eyes widen. “We went over the waterfall?” She mimics my diving hand gesture. “Are you serious? That’s a long drop! How could we have survived that? Drax save Stacy?”

Only understanding a few of her words, I sit up straighter and jut my chin out at her. “Drax save Stacy.”

“How?” She shrugs with a shake of her head.

“Drax strong.”

Her eyes skim my shoulders and arms. “Yes. I can see that.”

I lift one arm and flex to demonstrate. “Drax strong.”

“Yes, and not the least bit modest about it.” Her pretty pink lips quirk upwards at the corners. I want to know what she’s saying, but even more, I want to kiss her. I want to know the taste of this tiny human female. “Now that we’ve officially met. How about taking this off me?” She insistently wriggles her arm in the medical cuff.

“Head heal.” I point to the bright red mark on her forehead and then to the medical cuff.

Stacy studies the cuff with its blinking lights and soft whirring. “This restraint can heal me?” She wriggles her arm.

“No Stacy.” I shake my head trying to deter her from putting undue stress on the cuff. “Head heal.”

“I feel fine,” she says brightly and pries at the cuff. “All healed up, so you can take this off me now.”

She is a terrible patient. Even worse than me. She will injure herself or damage the medical cuff if she continues to struggle with it. Neither is acceptable. I don’t like seeing Stacy hurt but she wears one of only two operational cuffs we have left.

I stand and start toward her. She startles and tries to scoot away. Her arm tugs hard at the cuff. A warning beep sounds out, startling us both.

“No Stacy.” I submissively show her my palms. “Drax help only. No hurt Stacy.”

“Okayokayokay,” Stacy pants. I watch her throat work through a hard swallow. “Okay, Drax. Okay. Move slower because you’re freaking me out,” she incoherently jabbars.

I pause and she eyes me warily, so I ease closer as if moving on a skittish animal caught in a trap. “Drax help only,” I

reassure her as I move with caution.

“Okay. Drax help,” Stacy nods, using my limited vocabulary, and scoots back as far as the cuff will allow. As I come closer, she peers up at me with terrified eyes and prattles on. “Those are some scary horns you got there, big blue. You’re taller than I originally thought too. Really freaking tall. And huge.”

I simply nod to give the appearance of agreement. I have so much more English left to learn. Her human language isn’t an easy one to grasp, with so many words that sound the same but hold different meanings depending on the context in which they are used.

I feel fortunate to have chosen the one she spoke. According to the universal network, English was the most widely used language on her planet, so I’d gone with that one.

I keep one palm held aloft while tapping in the code on the locking mechanism with the tip of one claw. The medical cuff powers down before falling open.

Stacy wastes no time scrambling off the cot, knocking the pillow to the floor, and crossing the room. My heart sinks that her terror is caused by me, but I am not the alien here!

With her back pressed against the wall, she cradles her arm that was inside the medical cuff close to her body. I’ve never cared if I was feared by males or females before but knowing Stacy is afraid of me, wounds me deeply.

I will have to learn more of her language and prove my worthiness as her protector.

I keep my movements slow in retreat until the backs of my legs touch the stool and I ease down onto the seat. Once I’m settled, only then does Stacy dare take her eyes off me to inspect her arm for damage.

“Trust,” I say softly. “Stacy trust Drax.”

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## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

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## Stacy

“AFTER WHAT I’VE been through, trust is an issue for me. You said it yourself, big blue.” My eyes flip back to meet his bright yellow, luminous ones. “Trust no one.”

“Drax agree.” The enormous male pats his chest and ducks his head, giving me a soft-eyed expression. “Stacy trust Drax.” He keeps his voice low and easy.

“We’ll see,” I say with a stern bob of my chin. “You’ll have to earn my trust.”

Drax slowly nods as if he understands.

I give the small room a quick look around, but my eyes flick back to Drax often. It’s rectangular with every corner trimmed out in blue tube lights. The walls and ceiling are a dingy white and the floor a dull gray.

Behind where Drax is seated on a stool, is a table that takes up the back wall, perpendicular to the bed. A neat row of monitors is lined up across the table. The screens are black and lifeless.

Over to the side of the table on the floor, is a neatly made pallet. My gaze shifts to the bed where I slept, then to Drax, and again to the pallet. Has he been sleeping on the floor while I’ve been using his bed?

Across the room from the bed is a row of cabinets like you’d see in a kitchen, with counter space that’s stacked with metal boxes of various sizes, and a large wooden trunk scooted off to the side. There’s also a doorframe, hinting at an en suite bathroom.

It's set up more like a studio apartment than any prison cell I've ever seen.

The wall I keep my back against has the door, where I cautiously sidestep over to. Its arching top is lined with more blue tube lights like the room trim. The lights disappear behind an ill-fitting, metal sheet that acts as a door, covering the majority of the opening. The metal sheet is hinged down one side with a keypad lock attached to the other. A crudely made handle is attached above the lock.

I jiggle the handle, but it doesn't budge.

Drax said this was his prison, but if we're inside a cell, then why is the lock on the inside?

He watches me like a predator would its prey. He remains as still as a statue as if he doesn't want to scare me away. But where would I run? The retrofitted door is locked, although there is another room attached to this one. I'm super curious as to what I'll find inside. Is it an en suite situation or an exit?

I wrap the blanket tighter around myself, blushing over the fact that I can feel how completely naked I am underneath. And going by Drax's heated looks, he was the one that got me that way.

I narrow my eyes on him and keep them glued to his hulking frame perched on the stool as I inch closer to the attached room. Besides his glowing eyes tracking me, his tail is the only thing on him that moves. Gracefully swishing back and forth, like a predator patiently waiting for the perfect time to pounce. It makes me anxious.

Once I reach the room, I take a quick peek inside. There's a large upright cylinder in one corner, a circular basin, and a knee-high podium with a hole in the center.

"Is that a bathroom?" I turn to him and hike back my thumb.

His brow scrunches and he tilts his head in a way that should not be endearing. There's something so appealing about his appearance, beyond the claws and fangs and armored scales. An undefined charm that piques my interest way more than it should.

Despite his strange appearance, he hasn't given me any reason to be afraid of him. He could have killed me already or raped me ten times over, but he hasn't. That arm restraint hadn't been to keep me tied to his bed but had been healing me.

Why shouldn't I trust him? He hasn't tried to hurt me, only help me. I try to relax a little.

Now that I'm relatively sure he isn't going to pounce on me at any moment, I notice how I'm no longer skin draped over bones. My shoulder and head injuries from the crash, which were so painful, no longer hurt. And gone is the fatigue that dogged me from malnourishment.

I feel stronger. More like myself. A sliver of panic turns my blood to ice. The girls!

"Drax. How long have I been here?" I ask, horrified over how much time might have passed while I lay unconscious.

"Show Stacy?" Drax looks at me questioningly and points to the attached room I asked about.

"Drax." I hold up a hand to get his attention off the room. "How many days has it been since you saved me from the river?"

Drax shakes his head with a perplexed expression.

Damn, this language barrier is frustrating. I think for a second then try again, "Drax save Stacy water."

He juts out his chin and sits up proudly. "Drax save Stacy."

I lift my shoulders. "How long ago? Time?" I touch my wrist like an idiot as if Drax would know what a wristwatch is. His bright yellow gaze remains vacant of understanding. I move back to the locked door and touch the lock, then yank at the immovable handle. "Out. Stacy out."

"Drax no," he says and touches the elaborately designed collar around his neck then points back to the door. "No quatis letktu aums mihl shoul simoone."

I ponder his gestures and study the collar I thought to be ornamental only. There's a tiny blue light embedded in the intricate scrollwork of the collar that matches the tube lights

lining the room and along the arch of the doorframe that's covered down the sides by the retrofitted door with the lock.

I run my fingers over the hinges fastened on the inside. Besides the lock, it makes no sense if we are inside a prison why it appears the occupant of the cell installed a door to lock himself in.

What the fuck kind of prison is this?

I yelp when Drax is suddenly at my back. The heat radiating from his powerful body is intense. He stands seven feet, dwarfing me, yet despite his size, he moved so quietly and fast, I didn't even hear him coming.

My mouth goes dry. He could easily overpower me with one hand tied behind his back. Why did that make my belly flutter? I should be afraid, not turned on.

Now that my initial shock over seeing him for the first time is dissolving, I find him attractive. Handsome even, with a square-cut jaw and strong masculine features. He's still very much alien and even a little monstrous with fangs and horns, but when he hesitantly smiles at me and displays a dimple on one cheek, he exudes a certain endearing charm.

Drax is dangerous in more ways than one. Now that he's all up in my personal space and I'm no longer bound to his bed, my body heats up in a way that has nothing to do with fear.

That dark, spicy scent on the pillow I had found so deliciously enticing, belongs to him. His scent swirls around me now, weaving its way into my nose and robbing my brain of reasonable thoughts.

I feel my pussy dampen and bloom. Squeezing my thighs together under my blanket wrap, I school my expression to not give my erotic thoughts away. But Drax leans in and sniffs, releasing a low growl that drives a bolt of desire through me which I'm ill-prepared for.

The intensity of my reaction has me taking a step back and I regain some of my senses now that his spicy scent isn't overpowering my higher reasoning.

"Stacy out," I repeat my earlier request.

Drax seems to shake himself, his tail twitching hard, and the layered scales on his shoulders ruffle before settling down.

“No Drax,” he says touching the collar and then sweeping his hand in an arc to indicate the matching blue lights around the room and the arched doorway. “Only trika murr. *Bing*,” he sounds out then mimes punching the keypad and walking out.

Glad for the distraction, I look at his collar and back at the lights edging the top of the arched frame covered by the retrofitted door. “But you can unlock this door. Can’t you?” I touch the lock and then look back at him. “So, open it. Show Stacy.”

“Hurf lud nequa trika murr.” Drax touches the collar again and shakes his head.

“You can open the door,” I insist and tap the lock. “Show Stacy.”

Drax releases a harsh breath before throwing up his hands in resignation. “Vit lut yin.” He narrows eyes on me then places a finger across his lips and makes a *shh*ing sound.

He wants me to stay quiet. Why? Am I not supposed to be in here? What happens if I scream? Will guards come running? Then what?

In my experience as an abductee, it never bodes well to make a scene. Better to keep your head down and your mouth shut.

I’m inside a cell with a prisoner that has barricaded his door but can’t leave because he has some sort of collar that will most likely sound an alarm. He somehow found me outside and brought me back here, so he’s obviously allowed outside.

He saved me from drowning and nursed me back to health. Now he’s protecting me from something else. “No one else knows I’m here. Do they, Drax? You snuck me in. Didn’t you?”

I place my finger across my lips and nod my head. It’s in my best interest to keep my cakehole shut. Drax hasn’t hurt me. If we are truly inside a prison, there may be other aliens here that would.

Drax punches in a code with the tip of one claw and the lock audibly clicks. The handle turns with the touch of his hand. The door swings open to reveal the sides of the arched doorframe lined with blue tube lights. What should be passable is blocked by a wavy distortion of blue light that I can't see through. It might as well be another closed door.

I worry about what lies beyond the undulating solid blue light. Are there more aliens like him locked inside prison cells, or are there a variety of aliens like what I've seen on Tirius?

I look up at Drax and point to the undulating blockage. He runs a claw tipped finger across the light that is somehow a solid barricade. He touches his collar, then again, points to the blue sheet of light.

I'll have to be patient and wait for this inevitable *bing* he described. Maybe then he'll sneak me back outside and let me go. Then I can find my way back to the ship and check on the girls. For now, all I can do is wait and worry about their safety.

Drax closes the metal sheet door and engages the lock. One shiny eyebrow lifts. "Drax show Stacy."

"You did." I nod. "Drax showed Stacy. Thank you."

I doubt he comprehended all of what I just said, but his full lips curl up at the corners as if he's pleased with himself. "Drax show Stacy?" he says in a questioning tone and indicates the attached room I had asked about earlier.

I nod and follow him. I wait outside the room while he goes inside. I was right. It is a bathroom.

Drax demonstrates how the basin works. He lifts a handle and a fine spray, more like mist, rushes out. He puts his hands under the mist and rubs them together before they are hit by a gust of air. "Brusk te wash," he explains in a garbled mix of his language and mine.

"No soap or towel required, huh?" I mutter when he shows me his clean hands.

Next, he opens the cylindrical pod in the corner, steps in, and closes himself inside. When he reopens it, he points at a

handle stuck to the wall and mimes taking a shower. “Mishk te wash.”

He exits the pod and points to the podium with the hole. His blush speaks volumes and I nod my understanding. Gotta be the toilet.

Drax points to me and then to the bathroom. “Stacy wash?” He raises glossy black eyebrows in question.

My pulse picks up speed at the thought of getting clean. I barely remember the last shower I had before I was snatched from Earth. I’ve worn a layer of filth for so long, I can hardly relate to cleanliness.

The river did a lot to wash away my funk, but to truly wash my skin and hair is a luxury I never thought to take pleasure in again. As enticing of an idea as it is, I worry about the lack of a door. Can I trust Drax not to perv on me while I borrow his bathroom?

“Stacy?” Drax tilts his head at me in his too charming way.

“There’s no door,” I say tugging the blanket tighter around me. “I’m not into public displays even if I was stuck naked inside a cage for months.”

My body language speaks for itself and Drax nods. “Drax no,” he says and taps the corner of one eye then points to where the row of monitors is lined up across the table. “Drax ruxin leu.”

I take that to mean he’s going to be busy with something else while I shower. I’m not wholly convinced but remind myself again that he hasn’t hurt me or forced himself on me. And he’s even given up his bed, sleeping on the floor like a true gentleman. Even with our limited communication, he’s done nothing to make me think he is any less than honorable. And actions speak louder than words.

I’m cleaner than I have been in a long time because of my trip down the river, but I’d still like to give my skin and hair a good scrubbing.

“Okay,” I decide. “Stacy wash.”

Drax's broad smile is positively breathtaking. Even with the fangs, he rocks me on my heels. I don't want to be attracted to him. I really don't. But that dimple in his cheek is slaying me. My insides turn all giddy, and I suddenly have a case of nerves.

*Jesus, Stacy, I silently chastise myself. Stop crushing on the big blue alien.*

"Biosh," Drax holds up a finger as if to say I'm to wait here.

He leaves me at the doorway and starts riffling through the large trunk pushed up against the wall. He lifts out a square of folded material and returns to me with another panty-melting grin.

I take what he offers, tuck the blanket around myself tighter so it doesn't fall to the floor, and shake out the material. The fabric is fine and soft as silk between my fingers. Even better than that, it's clean. Once it unfolds, I find it to be a giant square. I can totally fold and tuck to fashion a garment out of this.

"Thank you, Drax." I peek up at him with moist eyes. I can't help how grateful I feel right now.

Things could have been a lot worse had we not escaped the jaundiced alien who bought us on Tirus. A wave of guilt washes over me again. The girls are out there on this alien moon, inside a crashed spaceship, and I'm supposed to be their leader. What about Romy? Did she even make it back?

"Breat lu califru, Stacy." His smile is sympathetic as he brushes a gentle hand down my cheek. It's as if he knows what's going on inside my head and is telling me everything is going to be okay.

And damn me, I lean into his compassionate touch. I shouldn't encourage him, but it's so nice to have someone look after me for a change. To feel safe and protected after so long of being alone and afraid.

Zoe's softly spoken words float back to haunt me. *"If it's all the same to you, it's comforting to call you captain since you're the veteran abductee. Feels like we have a leader."*



The girls named me their captain, and here I am, making nice with a big blue alien.

I inhale deeply and swallow the guilt of what I can't change. I'm stuck in here until Drax says it's okay to leave. Until then, there's nothing I can do except wash my nasty ass and think about what I'm going to do once Drax sets me free.

Once that happens, I have a ton of unknowns to face. The first is, I have no idea where I am to our crashed ship. So much for following back the trail of bright orange breadcrumbs. The only thing I know for certain is we went over the waterfall, so climbing is in my future.

I watch as Drax leaves me to wash and takes a seat on his stool in front of his bank of monitors. He touches the center monitor, and it comes to life, silhouetting him in soft illumination.

He taps out something on the table. When I look at his fingers, there's a hologram of a keyboard projecting from the monitor. Lines of text appear across the sleek black screen and Drax pauses his typing, probably to read the rows of paragraphs formatted like a newspaper article.

With his back to me, I get a good look at the layers of triangular shaped scales covering his shoulders and running the length of his spine before disappearing into the crudely made waistband of his loose-fitting pants. Equipped with natural armor, claws, horns, and a set of Dracula-worthy fangs, Drax is the ultimate protector or the ultimate predator.

Emotions well within me. I shouldn't allow myself to trust him. He's a stranger. Even if he did save my life, I don't know anything about him. Like what he did to get locked up. But none of that seems to matter whenever I lock eyes with his bright yellow gaze.

His tail waves lazily behind him. An involuntary action accompanying his distraction with the text, as he uses a claw-tipped forefinger to scroll up as he reads. A feeling of normalcy slides over me. Drax reading on his computer and me about to take a shower.

But nothing about this is normal. I douse the warm feelings flooding my heart and peer around the four corners of the room—the *prison cell!* I remind myself. Outlined in blue tube lights, it's a neon reminder of where I'm at. This may not be a small cage with bars, but it's a prison cell all the same. And not even *my* cell. I escaped one cage already, and I don't plan on getting comfortable in this one.

With that firmly in mind, I leave Drax to his reading and step fully inside the bathroom. I hate there is no door. Even though I know he's already seen me naked, I still ache for privacy.

The upright cylinder that is the shower Drax demonstrated is standing open and waiting for me. I start to loosen the blanket secured around the tops of my boobs and pause. I peek around the doorframe. Drax is exactly where I left him, except now, he's leaning into the monitor as if whatever he's reading just got very interesting.

Convinced he won't be spying on me, I move toward the shower and quickly drop the blanket. The heavy material pools around my feet and I get my first look at my rejuvenated body.

My boobs have returned, a full B-cup like they were pre-abduction. Hips are a tad smaller, which I'm not complaining about, and I'm minus the pesky belly fat I could never diet my way out of. I run my hand over my flat stomach, happy with my new figure.

My legs can no longer be mistaken for toothpicks but are back to their shapely selves. I look over one shoulder to find my ass has returned. Not as full as it was, but an ass all the same.

*How long have I been out?* Days, weeks, months? The question burns to be answered. Without knowing the proper words, there's no way I can convey my question to Drax.

I study my forearm that was trapped inside the strap Drax said healed me. There are no marks on my arm. How the thing nourished my body without a puncture wound from an IV-type setup, I wasn't sure. It was baffling, to say the least.

I gulp, wondering what I will find if I make it back to the ship. Will the girls even still be there if I've been gone for a long

time? What if they decided to leave and take their chances in the forest?

I shake myself away from all the *what ifs*. I'll drive myself crazy worrying and wondering. After my shower, I will try to find out from Drax when we will be leaving. I can't stay cooped up in here not knowing about the girls.

I turn to the shower but am a bit apprehensive about stepping inside what reminds me of a vertical coffin. My desire to get clean wins out over my wariness. I take one last peek around the doorjamb to see that Drax is still seated on his stool and engrossed in the screen before him.

I shut down my fear and close myself inside the shower pod. I'm enclosed from head to toe. The entire inside is white and smooth walled, like being inside a capsule with a flat floor. It's somehow illuminated even though I don't see anything that resembles lighting.

On closer inspection, there are rows and rows of tiny holes covering the walls. That must be where the mist sprays out. I touch the handle Drax mimed turning on. It is a quarter turn to the right.

I yelp, not knowing what I expected to happen. I'd seen the mist he washed his hands in under the basin, but to be blasted from all angles is startling. I slam my eyes closed and hold my breath. The moist air swirling around me is warm and relaxing. Minus my initial shock, it's like being inside a giant facial steamer.

I held my breath until my lungs demand I breathe. When I do, the blowing mist doesn't burn or choke me. The air around me is humid but tolerable and tickles my nose.

Drax didn't say I couldn't open my eyes, so I do. It's foggy and weird. I look down my body but can't see my feet through the mist. I hold my hands close to my face to find beads of moisture coating my skin.

I touch my hair, finding it damp. There's no soap or washcloth, so I'm gonna have to assume the mist somehow magically cleans me.

I rub my arms and legs, then widen my stance to let the mist get at my girly bits. Then tunnel my fingers through my hair that's no longer a matted dirt patty stuck to my scalp. I finger comb the strands, wishing for some floral scented shampoo.

The mist suddenly shuts off on its own. I'm left to stand there dripping. I guess that's it. I'm done. I push at the door to let myself out, but it doesn't budge. I'm stuck inside this alien contraption.

“Shit!”

I ball up a fist and start to panic, ready to bang on the wall for Drax to come save me. Out of nowhere, a torrent of warm air tornados around me. Fist still raised high, the torrent subsides, and the door clicks open.

I stand there and blink a few times to get my bearings. The wetness on my skin is gone, blown away by the warm air blast. I hold out my arms and marvel at my freshly cleansed skin.

I touch my hair, bringing a handful over my shoulder. It's longer than I remember it being pre-abduction. My usual hairstyle worn just below my shoulders has grown to reach past my boobs. My brown locks are glossy and shiny as if I'd spent a fortune at the salon.

*So this is Drax's hair care secret*, I grin to myself.

Something meaty and delicious invades my senses and lures me out of the shower pod like a dangling carrot. My mouth waters and my stomach growls. I haven't felt hungry until now.

I snatch up the silky material Drax gave me and hastily cover my nakedness. I tiptoe to the doorframe and peek out to find Drax's stool vacant. His monitor still glows, the text on the screen left idle.

I find him standing at the row of cabinets. One of the metal boxes has a steamy pot set on top of it. Drax's arm is moving in a circular motion as if he's stirring something. A *whooshing* exhaust fan hums and pulls the steam up from the pot and through a mesh grate under the cabinet.

His back is to me, but he senses me and turns. He nods and points to the steaming pot then touches his mouth with the pads of his fingers.

Drax points to me. “Stacy food?”

“Yes.” I nod eagerly.

“Stacy eat.” Drax waves me over.

I start toward him then remember I need to fix my hastily donned garment. I gesture to the fabric hanging off my body and raise a finger before stepping back into the bathroom.

At first, I do a generic wrap around, but the fabric is slick and clingy, unlike the bulky blanket I left lying on the floor. It shows more of my figure and with no underwear, I feel too exposed.

On a whim, I tie two ends around my neck and straddle the entire piece, bringing the other half up my back to wrap around my waist. I’ve just made a halter-top romper, thank you very much. The baggy ass and the bulk bunched between my legs isn’t going to win me *Project Runway*, but I’m clothed and clean. Something I’ve wished for almost as much as the promise of a meal.

I follow the hearty aroma reminiscent of beef stew to where Drax is just setting a steaming bowl on the end of the table where his monitors are lined up. He sees me and gifts me with a fangy grin, looking me over from head to toe.

“Stacy food.”

I practically run to the bowl. I can’t remember the last time I’ve eaten freshly cooked meat and vegetables. It is a stew of some kind. Definitely not beef, but the meat is brown and cut into chunks. The broth all that deliciously scented food swims in is meaty and thick.

Drax hands me a spoon and pushes his stool over for me to sit. I don’t question, only sit and spoon up a healthy bite of stew and cram it in my mouth. A moan escapes me. The explosion of flavor is incredible. The meat is tender, and the vegetables are the tastiest things I’ve ever eaten.

Table manners go out the window. I'm too enthusiastic over my first real meal to care if I'm making a pig of myself. Too soon, my spoon is scraping the bottom of the bowl, but Drax is there, ready with a ladle and the pot to refill.

I absently notice him placing a cup of water at the side of my bowl while I devour my second helping. When Drax offers more, I hold up a hand to stop him. My stomach is bulging with the first meal I've eaten in ages. If I eat more, I fear I won't be able to keep it down.

The food doesn't sit heavy on my stomach like the piece of fruit had when Zoe held it for me to eat. It feels normal. Stuffed, but normal. Things are digesting the way they should.

I drink the cup of water and look up where Drax still stands at my elbow like a patient waiter at a fine restaurant. To my embarrassment, I realize he's been there the whole time. And he hasn't eaten yet.

"Drax eat?" I use his stilted English.

"Stacy eat," he says. "Drax eat."

The moment turns awkward now that food is no longer my focus. It occurs to me that even though he's being chivalrous by letting me eat first, he's a prisoner inside his cell. He has one stool, one spoon, and one bowl. The bed I've been sleeping on is a single, which is why he made a pallet on the floor.

"Jesus." I stand and offer Drax his stool back. "Sorry for taking over your place. The food was delicious and I'm sure you're hungry. Is there a sink where I can wash the spoon and bowl?"

Drax's brow pinches, perplexed. "Wash?"

"The dishes. So, you can eat." I lift the bowl with the spoon inside. "Wash?"

A tiny grin lifts one corner of his chiseled lips. He shakes his head and takes the bowl from me. "Drish lis prush." Drax sets the bowl on the table and refills it with stew. "Drax eat."

“I guess you’re not worried about human germs or anything, huh?”

Drax’s answer is the same mystified expression. This language barrier is a pain in the ass, and I need answers. I leave him to eat his meal in peace and busy myself with picking up the discarded blanket from the bathroom floor and folding it neatly, leaving it on the foot of the bed.

There isn’t much to do, so I wander around the small space, pausing to check out his kitchen. The cabinets are a lot like what you would find on Earth. I peek inside the top row, finding it filled with canisters like those on the ship containing water. There’re also some pouches, stuffed with what? I can only guess.

Down below the short stretch of countertop, I crack open a large metal cabinet finding the air inside cold. Stacked inside are transparent, square containers. Each is filled with what looks like the stew I just ate.

I look over my shoulder to see that Drax is still eating but has rolled over to the monitor, scrolling while he chews. Curious, I stand behind him and to one side. There are words on the screen in English.

I touch Drax’s shoulder to get his attention. His royal blue scales ripple beneath my palm and I forget all about the English words on the monitor. His scales aren’t hard shells, but smooth and supple like thick leather, and they’re warm beneath my fingertips.

I find myself petting him to watch his scales lift and flatten at my touch. Also, because I like touching him. Maybe I’m affection starved, or maybe because I find him attractive. His natural armor is not what I had expected. He’s strangely soft but rock-hard at the same time.

His horns get in on the action, straightening from where they were curled along the side of his head like a ram’s. I can’t resist the urge to touch him there. I brush my fingertips along the hard casing.

“Sorry for tugging your horn,” I say. “In my defense, you scared me.”

Drax leans into my touch. Encouraged, I carefully palm his horn and stroke it from root to tip. Both are completely straight now and reaching back past his heavy shoulders. Eyes closed, and head tilted into my touch, he makes a mewling sound as if he’s enjoying the feel of me touching him.

He opens his eyes and peers up at me. His pupils are completely blown, black with a thin yellow ring, and I wonder if I’ve just crossed some kind of line. Apparently, his horns are super sensitive to the touch. I get the ardent impression what I just did is related to sex for his kind.

He saved me, healed me, fed me, but I’m not ready for anything else. Am I? The way he’s looking up at me makes me feel like he could devour me in a single heated look.

I pull away my hand and take a tiny step back. Drax tracks my movements with a feral gaze. An erotic tension stretches out between us. I’m curious but afraid of where this could lead.

It feels taboo to ponder sex with Drax. He’s a huge alien male. By Earth standards, he would be considered a monster. Now that I’ve traveled to other worlds, my perspective is forever changed. Drax is handsome to me in a beastly way.

I imagine he’s big everywhere. My pussy clenches in needy response. I could use a little pleasure after what I’ve been through, and Drax looks more than ready to accommodate me. I have to admit, I’m super curious about the growing bulge in his loose, leather pants.

“Drax friend only,” I announce weakly. Am I trying to convince myself or him?

In response, Drax scoots himself closer on his stool over to me. The top of his head is almost level with mine. Even seated, he’s nearly as tall as me. Slowly and cautiously, he leans in to nuzzle the hollow of my throat.

“No bite.” I shiver.

“Drax no hurt Stacy.” His hot breath washes across my delicate skin. “Never hurt.”



Heat races through my limbs and nails me between my thighs. Despite my silent vow not to have sex with Drax, my pussy dampens and blooms with his cuddle.

My hands instinctively land on his shoulders. He brushes a kiss just below my ear then slowly pulls away. The horn massaging must mean more to him than I can guess.

I need a diversion before I cave to his touch. “Show Stacy words,” my voice breathy as I gesture to the monitor.

Drax looks back at the monitor. “Drax English.”

“Show Stacy,” I encourage the distraction.

“Drax rufit luteis dist,” Drax waves me over. “Show Stacy.”

I stand at his side. He points to a word that looks like gibberish to me, then touches the English word next to it. An electronic voice utters, “learn.”

“Luuuurn,” Drax repeats then touches the word on the monitor a second time. The electronic voice pronounces the English word and Drax tries again, “Leeern.”

“Better.” I place a hand on his shoulder. “It’s like the alien version of Rosetta Stone.”

I’m thrilled he’s learning more English, then we can communicate easier. Maybe I can get the answers I need about when we’ll be leaving and how far away we are from the crash site.

“Stacy.” Drax turns toward me and pats his thigh. “Stacy learn.”

“I seriously doubt I’ll ever be able to learn your language, big blue,” I say. “I barely made it through high school Spanish. After listening for two years to my former owner’s alien gibberish, I still don’t know anything more than I did before I was abducted.”

“Stacy learn,” Drax insists and pats his thigh again.

I concede with a longsuffering sigh. “Okay, fine. I’ll try, but I can’t promise how good a student I’ll be.”

Drax's arm comes around and his broad palm settles around my waist as I take a seat on his thigh. It's a chaste position where I sit, and he doesn't try to make a move on me except to nudge me into learning his language.

Drax prompts me with a little ticklish squeeze to my waist that makes me giggle. I try to repeat Drax's language after the electronic voice, but the guttural sounds are difficult, and I fail miserably. I give up and lean into the heat of Drax's warm body with a defeated sigh.

"Stacy blishe da Drax's neomba," Drax utters in a soothing tone and pulls me closer to his side. "Bi blishe veromi bi ne wilsh em yonik."

"Whatever you say, big blue," I reply with a yawn.

My belly is full and I'm clean for the first time in ages. I feel sheltered, protected in the cocoon of his chaste embrace. The sense of safety is a relaxant that I give myself over to.

While Drax keeps at his English lessons, I lean my head against his shoulder. I'll just shut my eyes for a little while. Enjoy this moment of bliss.

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**CHAPTER NINE**  
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## Draxyn

I'M reluctant to carry Stacy to the cot. She fell asleep a while ago, but I like the feel of her soft breaths brushing across my scales. Her fatigue is not a surprise. A healing sleep is normal after recovering from injuries such as hers. Yet, I'm beyond thrilled she trusts me enough with her safety to fall asleep in my arms.

The very second I scented her willing musk, I knew she was as good as mine. At first, I had my doubts that she felt the same urgency as I do to be mated, but the sweet fragrance of her arousal had chased away any lingering uncertainties.

She had seemed fascinated with touching me and even stroked my horn. Her fear of me is no longer an issue.

I knew she couldn't understand my words, but still, I voiced my intentions. *"Stacy will be Drax's mate. I will prove I am worthy of you."*

She had made an agreeable remark and snuggled closer before falling fast asleep on my lap.

I easily stand with her slight weight in my arms and carry her to the cot. I'm sorely tempted to curl up behind her, to savor the feel of her soft curves pressed against me. But I need to learn more of her language.

Now that she's healed enough to travel, I plan to leave at the top of the next cycle. Instead of joining her, I cover her with the blanket she folded and return to my computer.

I focus on learning the words I will need to convey my plan. She needs to know and understand my time issue and why we

must hurry before Rooke finds her ship.

I'm curious about the other four human females on the ship. Stacy has not mentioned them. They were alive at the time I climbed the cliffs. Their lifeform readings were all normal. Yet, the lifeform scanner showed Stacy had traveled away from the ship with one other before separating herself. That was when I had seen her on the riverbank. Are the other humans her enemies? Were they the ones who starved her?

Since she hasn't mentioned the other four, I'm led to believe my theory that she was trying to escape them. I need the words to make sure she understands I will not let them hurt her again, but it is imperative we strip her ship of useable parts before Rooke discovers it.

Time passes quickly as I focus on learning her English. Stacy stirs and I look around to find her waking. She rubs her face and looks at me with shy eyes.

"I fell asleep on you," she utters, and wish I was a faster learner so I would know all of what she says.

"Stacy eat," I say.

"Drax eat first this time," she replies.

I shake my head, understanding enough of her words to argue. "Stacy eat first."

I stand from my stool and go to the chiller. I hate that I don't have a huge variety of food for my Stacy. It would be nice to offer her my favorite first meal of tregarus bean cakes topped with frital curd. I haven't enjoyed that since I was chosen to come to Zune and work off my crimes in a xedon mine. One which I have never been to or seen.

My meager food selection will have to suffice for now. I took what I could get my hands on in storage. Mostly alope stew with root vegetables. A staple among the premade prison rations the guards left behind. There were hundreds of containers of the stuff, and I was glad to have gotten my hands on several crates, but my palate has grown tired of the same meal.

It was a treat to watch my Stacy enjoy what I found so bland. She had eaten two bowls of the stew. I was elated to have been the one to have nourished her body, especially since she was so emaciated when I found her.

My anger flares for whoever did that to her. Was it the other human females or someone else? Soon, I will know.

Still, I frown at the container of alope stew but grin when I find the last of my blusia tea shoved in the back of the upper cabinet. A blue flower that only grows in the marshy ground near the lake, its petals must be carefully picked and not bruised, or the plant won't dry properly. Then the petals are crushed before they can be steeped. A tedious process but worth the reward.

Stacy's slight footsteps pad up behind me as I set out the pot and ignite the cooker.

"Can I help?"

I peer down into her upturned face. "Stacy help," I nod.

For a male that prefers solitude, I can't recall ever feeling this replete with my own company. In the little time my Stacy has been with me, she has forever changed me. Strange how quickly one's attitude can transform in the presence of the right person.

She already explored my small galley, opening all the cabinets and investigating the contents inside the chiller. Now I show her how to open the square ration container of alope stew. She empties it into the pot as I instruct and insists on stirring the food as it heats.

I get busy steeping the tea. I'm curious to see if she likes it as much as I do. It's an odd feeling to care about another's tastes or preferences, and even more peculiar to care for someone besides myself.

I will need to find a safe time to hunt and search the forest for food. Moreover, I will need to find another hunting knife. The only one I had was lost in our trip over the falls. My mate deserves fresh meat, vegetables, and fruits.

It has been a while since I felt the desire to do such things. It was simply easier to eat the prison rations as I waited for my collar to set me free.

I'll have to keep my Stacy locked inside my pod and out of Rooke's reach. I don't know what the male would do if he discovered I had a female in here. How I will keep her scent hidden until the time my collar decides to fall off, I don't know. I can't continue to sabotage the ventilation shutters forever. I'll have to take it one cycle at a time and stay cautious.

"Stacy bluisa tea." I point to the steeping pot of dried tea leaves. "It is an acquired taste, but I think you will like it."

"Some kind of hot drink?" Stacy jabbars. "Hopefully coffee. I haven't had any in years."

I feel my brow furrow over her words. I still have so much left to learn. I fear by the time I know all her words, my brow will be forever pinched in a scowl. I simply nod and try not to look so vexed over our communication issues. I don't want her to fear me.

I had never thought much about finding a compatible female on Ziaria. If I had, as introverted as I am, I figured it would take a great deal of effort on my part to make a successful mating work. Perhaps that is why I had never looked very hard for female companionship. I didn't want to make the effort. It was easier to remain alone.

My body has decided for me, lust roaring through my veins and the base of my spine tingling with my need to mark her. But to have found a mate in another species with whom I can barely communicate yet feel utterly smitten is insane.

"The stew is boiling," Stacy rambles and points at the pot of bubbling stew.

I turn off the cooker and set out the bowl and spoon I washed earlier, then ladle in the stew. "Stacy eat."

"Drax eat," she insists.

I shake my head, knowing this is a fight she will not win. "I don't know how you came to be nearly starved to death, but I

vow as your mate, I will never put my needs above yours.” I motion for her to take my stool and have her meal first. “Stacy eat.”

I fold my arms across my chest, not in a menacing way, but in a resolute one. She may not understand my words, but she will my attitude. Never will my Stacy go hungry again.

“Stubborn bastard,” she utters words that sound like a curse, but I don’t care what she says as long as her needs are met.

While Stacy eats, I pour her a cup of the steeped bluisa tea. “Stacy drink.”

She sniffs at the cup. “Smells like blueberries.” Her first sip elicits a moan that ignites all sorts of erotic thoughts. “This is so good.”

I know Rooke will come knocking as he always does, and the time grows short until the top of the cycle.

“Drax make plan us,” I say taking a seat on the foot of the cot.

Stacy pauses with the spoon in the air. “You know more English words.”

“Little more.” I hold up my thumb and forefinger close together and point to my computer monitor. “Learn.”

“You’re amazing! I couldn’t even pronounce one of your words. I fall asleep and you learn mine,” she exclaims then proceeds to pepper me with questions. “When can I leave? How long have I been here? What kind of prison is this that lets inmates lock their doors from the inside? How long have you been here? Most importantly, and I’m afraid to ask, but what did you do to get locked up?”

My head starts to spin. I hold up a finger to stop her. Many of her words are gibberish and I can only translate so much. “Tell Stacy Drax plan,” I say slowly.

“Okay.” Stacy takes another sip of the tea before setting it aside. Her face is open and attentive as she faces me where I sit. “I’m listening. What’s Drax plan.”

“Stacy ship,” I begin. “Rooke steal.”



“Rooke?” Stacy shakes her head at me.

“Male like Drax.” I touch the yellow streaks in my mane.

“Rooke mane red. Thief. Drax, Stacy travel soon.”

“We’re traveling to my ship soon?”

“Travel soon,” I confirm.

“Rooke won’t get very far if he steals my ship,” Stacy explains something in her gibberish. “No fly. Crashed. Broken.”

I nod my understanding. “Rooke steal trisby and cultri busx.”

Stacy shakes her head. “I don’t know what that means.”

I rub my forehead, searching for the right words. “Part only Stacy ship.”

“Rooke needs parts off my ship?” Stacy asks, surprised.

“Why?”

“Rooke repair Rooke ship. Leave.” I motion between her and me. “Us stuck Zune.”

Stacy blinks at me as if she’s absorbing my words. “So, we have to travel to my ship before Rooke gets there?”

I think I understand what she means and nod. Once she finishes her meal, it is my turn to eat. Stacy relinquishes the stool to me, and I open the exterior camera and pull up the map of the moon while I eat.

“That’s here,” Stacy says, excitedly from over my shoulder.

“That’s outside on this forest moon.”

I look up at her from the monitor. “Zune.” I point to the image and stuff a spoonful of stew into my mouth.

“This moon is called Zune?”

I nod while I chew, then swallow. “Zune.” Then I zoom in on an area that’s been devastated. “Stacy, Zune.”

“Wait?” she says. “You saw us crash?”

“Stacy.” I point to the pale-green sky on the monitor and make a descending, whistling sound. “Stacy, Zune.”

“When?” She lifts her shoulders, but I don’t understand what it is she’s asking. “Stacy, Zune. When?”

Her questioning tone is perplexing. I can see the frustration play across her delicate features. So, I show her the path we will travel on the monitor in hopes of satisfying her questions I don’t understand.

“That’s a serious climb up,” Stacy remarks in her gibberish. “How many miles away are we from my ship?”

“Hurry. Return Drax prison.” I touch my collar. “Green flash us travel.” I nod and gesture to the lights lining my pod. “Red flash.” I shake my head, point to my collar, and use my hands to mimic the pulsing red of my inevitable demise if we run out of time. “*Baaboom.*” I fist my hands at my throat then make an outward gesture of explosion.

“Boom?” Stacy repeats with wide, terrified eyes. “Are you telling me that we only have so much time outside, and if you’re not back here before the timer goes off, that collar will explode?”

I nod, certain she understands my plight. “*Baaboom.* Big boom. Drax boom.”

“Jesus-fucking-Christ!”

I shake my head. “Drax no boom.”

“Agreed. That would definitely be a bad thing.”

“Drax Stacy return pod.” I turn on my stool and take her small hands in mine, so she will know how important this is to me. “Stacy Drax mate.”

Stacy stops breathing. Her eyes widen in shock.

“Um...” Stacy pats my hand where I hold hers. “Mate? That word can have different meanings. Are you talking about sex or a serious relationship?”

My eyes search her wary expression. She does not understand my desire to make her mine. I must think of how to explain so that she understands. I lift her by the waist and set her on my lap.

I touch a different monitor to activate it. The universal network is where I left it. I type in the Ziarian word for mate and search the network for the English translation.

I'm not surprised to see that the word has multiple meanings. Why do the Earthlings not simply say what they mean? Why all these same words with different meanings? How can they communicate properly this way?

I sort through the various meanings until I find a word that fits. Spouse. The databanks explain that a wife is the female counterpart of a mated pair, while husband refers to the male.

I turn her to face me. She returns my smile, and it makes me happy to see her face set in such a pleasant expression.

"Stacy Drax mate," I begin. "Wife. Stacy Drax mate."

"Oh, wow." Her open grin turns wooden, and I feel her body stiffen. "It was a little less daunting when I thought you were just talking about a romp between the sheets. I hadn't dreamed you were talking about something much more permanent."

My Stacy nervously rambles. I worry that she isn't of a like mind. I had scented her exotic perfume. Why does she look so fearful now?

"Humans mate?" I'm unsure how to ask my question. What if her mating practices differ from mine? It's a possibility that just occurred to me, and apparently, a little too late, judging by the distressed look on her pretty face.

Now it's her turn to search my face. I can see her mind working it over. "We just met, and I don't know if I'm ready for all that. I'm flattered though. But there's still so much we don't know about each other, like what you did to get locked up in here."

"Drax Stacy wife," I say cheerfully following her serious but incoherent monologue, then switch to Ziarian. "I will show you how good a hunter I am. Once my collar falls away, we can leave Zune and find a safe place to spend the remainder of our days. I would love to share my bungalow on the Groush Sea with you, but none on Ziaria would welcome you. Not to worry, there are many other worlds where we can safely live."

I know she can't understand my words, so I keep my tone upbeat and enthusiastic.

Her bright smile is darkening with confusion. "We should take it slow. Get to know each other first." She motions to my forgotten bowl of stew. "Drax eat before we leave for Stacy ship."

She's right. This is not the time for making forever plans. Once I learn more of her words, I can make her understand. For now, the goal is to get to her ship and take the usable parts before Rooke finds them.

I'm unsure what to do about the four human females. Maybe they will be easily scared away. Or maybe, since it has been a few cycles, they are no longer on the ship. Since I lost the lifeform scanner to the waterfall, I can't check to see if they are still there.

Stacy stands and retrieves the pot of stew, adding more to my bowl. "Thank you, my mate."

Stacy releases an impatient sigh. "Eat. We'll both need our strength to get to the ship. How soon until we travel Stacy ship?"

"New cycle." I point to the timekeeper on the monitor that's counting down. "Travel soon."

Stacy paces the pod while we wait for lockdown to be over. As the timekeeper nears the top of the cycle, Stacy and I gather what we need for our journey to her ship and back.

Stacy piles the dried ration pouches and water canisters I hand her, stuffing them into a small sack. Once it's full, I help her don it on her shoulders.

"Drax Stacy pack." I show Stacy the large pack I smuggled her in. "Stacy hide quiet. Drax carry Stacy."

"Got it," she nods. "Explains how you got me in here undetected."

"Rooke soon." I mime the male banging on the security door. "Drax hit. Drax run forest."

“So that’s the plan?” Stacy steps into the center of the pack I’ve laid out on the floor. “You’re gonna knock Rooke out and we’re gonna make a run for the forest?”

I nod, hoping she understands. I place a finger across my lips and make the *shh*ing sound.

She gives me a tight smile, adjusts the straps on the pack she carries with our travel rations to her front, and says in her garbled English, “Got it. Stacy *shhhh*.”

I lift the edges of the pack to cover my mate. She weighs more than she did when I first brought her here, but her weight is nothing as I shoulder the pack with her in it onto my back. I unlock the security door in anticipation of the luminetric barrier dropping.

My collar clicks from blue to a flashing green, and I whip open the door. Rooke is exactly where I knew he would be, his fist raised in preparation to pound on my door, but I’m faster and punch him in the center of his angry face before he can blink.

The male grabs his nose with a confused look before toppling backward. I don’t stick around to enjoy my handiwork, but sprint down the corridor of Annex 2, through the central common area, out the door, and disappear into the forest before anyone can stop me.

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# CHAPTER TEN

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## Stacy

I RIDE in the pack on Drax's back with my body in a fetal position. My side presses against his back. The scales on his shoulders ripple in warning before I feel his tremendous muscles bunch and flex as he whips open the door, hauling back an arm and swinging. I hear a resounding smack when he connects with something solid.

The pack that hides me is of a coarse weave, so I can see through the meshy fabric. But strapped to Drax's back, I only have a rearview and it's of his cell. The tube lights lining the room have changed from blue to a flashing green.

Male laughter echoes off solid walls, and a large body hits the ground with a solid *thud*. I assume the body belongs to Rooke since it was the plan to knock him out, but the male hooting with laughter is out of my view until Drax takes off at a dead run.

Drax leaps into the air, clearing the male crumpled on the ground. I note the fallen male has the same alien features as Drax. Horns, scales on his shoulders and back, and a tail, but his hair has bright red streaks instead of yellow like Drax's.

As Drax barrels down a stone walled corridor of the same dingy white as his prison walls, I catch glimpses of other arched doorways and males of the same species as Drax stepping out. Curious looks etch their faces as they turn to watch him run past. Thankfully, everyone gets out of his way, and none decide to follow.

All the males have black hair worn long and wild about their shoulders and back, but none have the same brightly colored streaks. Each head of hair is unique. I wonder about that.

A male with bright blue hair streaks wanders over to where Rooke lies sprawled on the floor. He nudges the male with his booted foot, before dropping to his haunches for a closer look. Drax reaches the end of the corridor and makes a sharp left turn and I lose sight of them. The sudden shift in direction swings me on his back. I play like cargo and keep as still as possible so as not to shift him off-balance.

We entered a large, circular room littered with tables and chairs like a common dining area. It reeks of a strong chemical smell. Maybe it's the alien version of Pine-Sol, I don't know, but it burns my sinus cavities. Then there's a burnt wire stench that Drax's cell hinted at. It wasn't as strong in there, but now that we're out here, it's enough to choke me.

I lift the neckline of my romper, covering my nose and mouth. My eyes burn and water from denying my lungs to cough. No one knows I'm here and I can't draw attention to myself when I'm so close to freedom.

The common area is beginning to fill up with other males filing out of a corridor opposite from where we just exited. Some yell out and gesture toward Drax, but none give chase.

They all wear collars. So, no guards? Maybe they don't need any because of the exploding collars. Until I can talk to Drax with more than a few words, I'll never know.

Just when my throat starts to spasm with the need to clear my airway, a rush of fresh, tropical air washes over me. I gulp back lungfuls of it. The temperature outside is sultry and humid and the sun that beats down on us makes the pack hot and sweaty, but I don't care. I'm finally free to find the girls!

I look down at the ground speeding past at a blinding rate. Drax wasn't kidding when he said we would have to hurry. He's literally high tailing it out of there with the base of his tail raised and rigid, the fuzzy tip flagging out behind him. He is in a race against time, something I will shamefully be exploiting.



I have a clear view of the compound now that Drax has put some distance between us and the prison. It's a huge, dismal structure made of gray concrete or stone. I'm not sure what building materials aliens use, but it looks like boring old concrete to me.

There's no mistaking it for what it is. A prison. Two large wings jut out from a central dome. Not a very large structure, but if I were to guess, I would say about forty or fifty inmates could be housed inside.

A spike of anxiety shoots down my spine. I shiver, worried that I might end up spending the rest of my life locked away inside that concrete hell if my plan fails.

My only crime? Being ripped from my world and sold against my will at an alien meat market.

"Forest first. Drax climb cliff," Drax tells me without so much as a hint of exhaustion. He isn't even breathing hard. "Stacy good?"

"Stacy good," I repeat his words even though I'm sweating profusely. No way am I voicing a complaint that could slow him down. We need to get as far away as possible from the other inmates. Now that everyone is free to roam, I don't imagine if I'm caught, I will have as much luck as I've had with the honorable Drax.

The guilt that settles in the pit of my stomach angers me. I should not feel bad about what I'm going to do once Drax scales the cliff and crosses the river.

I don't want to betray him. I really don't. He's proven to be trustworthy, so far. He's done nothing but take care of me. He wants me to be his wife, for God's sake. Once we reach the ship and he takes what he wants off it, he's expecting me to return with him to his prison.

I'm not cut out to be a prison wife. I already escaped one cage. I have no intention of living the rest of my life in Drax's. I've done nothing in my life to warrant the loss of my freedom.

I just can't resign myself to being caged even if I have developed some warm and fuzzies for him. The big blue alien

has grown on me. And what happens if one of the other inmates finds out I'm there? Drax can't fight them all.

My goal is to return to the girls, not become the wife of an alien prisoner. Drax is expecting me to return with him to his cell. The girls are counting on me to be their leader and so far, I've let them down.

I have no other choice but to betray Drax's trust. There's no way in hell I can climb the cliffs and cross the river to get back to the girls without his help. Even if I could do all that on my own, I wouldn't know in what direction to travel. I've already experienced how easy it is to get lost in the forest.

Even though Drax seems like a good guy, what if he isn't? Because of our communication barrier, I still don't know what he did to get tossed in prison. What if he's some kind of psycho mass murderer and he just hasn't shown his true colors yet? What if he snaps one day and rips me to shreds with his giant claws? Or tears my throat out with his great big lion teeth?

How well do I really know him? I don't know what he's capable of, so I can't lead him to the other girls. He saw the ship crash, but he's never mentioned any other humans, so I don't think he even knows they're here. I believe he found me by chance.

I also believe he really likes me and unfortunately, I'm going to have to exploit his tender feelings. Once he reaches a point in the forest close enough that I think I can find my way back to the ship, I'll find a reason for him to stop and let me out. Then I'll take off into the forest and hide.

I know he will search for me until his collar forces him back to the safety of his prison. Then I can find the girls and take them someplace far away from the prison, where no one can reach us, and return on the same day.

My heart sinks thinking about never seeing Drax again. Tears blur my vision and mix with my sweat. With an angry hand, I wipe them away. I didn't ask for this. I didn't ask for any of this. I have to do what is in—not only my best interest—but

the best interest of those girls who I talked into boarding an alien spacecraft. They trusted me and I will not let them down.

Drax runs for what feels like miles through the dense forest. I can no longer see the compound through the thick vegetation. The farther he runs, the closer the sound of rushing water and the closer we get to the waterfall.

The scent of fresh water tinges the air as the forest thins. A breeze picks up, giving me a temporary respite from the trapped heat inside the pack. Despite the cramped position and the sweat rolling down between my breasts, the view is amazing. I have all the time in the world to enjoy it now that I'm not running from a pack of green stampeding deer the size of cows.

My back is turned away from the planet I now know as Ziaria, but if I look up through the breaks in the canopy, the giant rainbow world looms so large and close in the sky that I catch the curving edge. Hanging opposite is an orange sun, shining brightly in the pale green sky.

A flock of colorful birds flies in formation across the cloudless sky before settling in the branches of a huge emerald-green tree. Even the bark is of the same jewel tone.

I lean my head back and take in the beauty of this alien moon while Drax does all the work, running at a speed I can't even comprehend.

"Water close," Drax says without slowing.

The mention of water makes me realize how thirsty I am. I'll bet Drax is too. I dig around in the small pack I'm curled around and pull out one of several water canisters. I pop the top and help myself to a few swallows of the cool water before tapping Drax on his scaled back.

"Drax drink some water," I say and push the water canister out of the pack and over his shoulder.

He reaches across and pulls the canister from my fingers. I feel more than see his head tilt back as he drinks.

I'm doing nothing but hanging out on Drax's back, but my body says it's time to eat. Traveling has always made me

hungry. My stomach churns in on itself, so I pick through the selection of dried foods Drax packed and settle on something that looks like beef jerky.

I offer the food to Drax first. “Drax eat?” It’s the least I can do, being a burden while he runs.

He takes what I tap on his shoulder. I figured he would stop to take a break, but he eats on the run. I find another ration pack of jerky and sniff at the stiff meat before taking a tentative nibble. It’s bland but edible in a meaty sort of way. Not spiced up like the jerky from home. I eat a few strips knowing I’ll need energy if I’m going to outrun this guy.

“Havis bry.” Drax swings the water canister and empty ration pack over his shoulder at me. I stow them back inside the small pack with the other provisions.

I’m guessing his guttural words mean thank you. “You’re welcome.”

I have to pee, but I’m gonna hold it. It’s too early to ask him to stop.

I spot the bank of a wide river’s edge before it expands into an enormous lake. I can barely see across to the other side. Up ahead, I hear the thunder and feel the misty spray from the waterfall I’d only seen from the sky as we were crashing.

My back and legs are cramping from being curled into a ball. It feels like a lot of time has passed but the sky is unchanging. If a cycle is like an Earth day, wouldn’t the sun and the planet change position in the sky as the moon revolves? It’s like we’re stuck inside a frame of time that never progresses.

The closer we get to the crashing falls, the rougher the lake water becomes, turning from placid rippling to churning waves.

“Drax climb,” was all the warning I got before Drax takes a lunging leap into the air and clings to the side of the sheer rock wall. Digging in his claws using both his hands and feet, he starts to climb at an inhuman rate.

The edge of the waterfall is so close, I could reach out and touch it. The water is flowing so fast, and the spray is so cool,

I can't help but be mesmerized by it. Even from inside the pack, I can feel the mist on my face and the spray on my arms, and it feels amazing.

Drax climbs ever higher. I chance a glance down and wish I hadn't. The rocks below are huge and jagged with the water pummeling them from above. The effect creates a thick foggy mist that becomes harder and harder to see through the higher Drax climbs.

It's a dangerously beautiful sight and a long freaking way down, but Drax is scaling it like a boss.

Once we reach the top of the cliff, Drax doesn't stop for even a breath but runs into the tree line of the forest. He keeps parallel to the river's bank, running a few feet away and keeping us mostly hidden in the thick of the foliage.

It's getting close to time for me to implement my plan. Drax needs to cross the river and I need to be on the lookout for any signs of where we crashed. I know the ship mowed down a path through the trees. I saw the decimated path when Romy and I looked back from where we'd traveled.

I keep my eyes locked on the canopy of trees across the river. I tense when Drax slows and then crouches in the underbrush. Small creatures scurry away unseen. I wait an eternity for something to happen next.

When all Drax does is keeps his nose to the air, I prompt, "Everything okay, Drax?"

"Drax wait. Look." Drax lifts his nose to the wind and inhales deeply. After a moment, he declares it safe. "Cross water here."

I gulp knowing my time to escape is coming. I have to pull this off and reunite with the girls. Drax will take me back with him to his cell if I don't get away now. My throat constricts thinking about being locked away again. Even with outside time, I can't stand the thought of being caged.

As Drax stands, he turns to the side and follows the tree line a little farther down, giving me my first look at the broken

canopy. My heart rate speeds up, knowing how close I am to the girls. The ship will be at the end of the broken trees.

Drax turns suddenly, and I throw out a hand, grasping the rough fabric covering me as I swing in the pack. He leaps and comes down with a hard splash. We're crossing the river. Drax's height keeps me above the waterline.

My breath catches in my throat as the water rages below me. There's no way I would have made it this far without him. I'm hit with a fresh wave of guilt, but I have no other choice.

Drax takes lunging steps through the swift current. Water laps at his knees. He trudges through, sometimes leaping from one rock to another until we're across.

He doesn't stop to look back at where we crossed, just keeps going like a machine. I can feel his drive and determination to reach the ship. I can't let that happen.

Once we're deep enough inside the forest, but not so deep that I can no longer tell in which direction I last saw the broken canopy, I give Drax's back a pat through the coarse fabric.

"Drax. I need you to stop so I can go pee."

Drax makes a grunting sound as if he doesn't understand.

"Drax stop." I pat his back again. "Stacy not good."

Drax comes to a screeching halt, sliding on his heels. He carefully unshoulders the pack and gently sets me down on the ground. The ground beneath my butt crunches from sticks and leaf debris and I remember I have no shoes. This is going to suck worse than I originally thought.

"Stacy hurt?" Drax uncovers me and helps me stand.

My legs unfold like an old lady's, my unused joints popping and cracking.

"Not hurt," I say feeling like a piece of shit as I prepare to lie. "I need to pee."

When he looks at me confounded, I hold myself and cross my legs. Drax grins a little and I know this will be the last time I see the boyish dimple on his cheek.

I step away into the trees and he starts to follow. “Drax stay.” I put a hand to stop him. “I can do this on my own.”

Drax stops and tilts his head at me. I’m tempted to tell him goodbye in English because I know he won’t understand all the words, but I don’t. I’m afraid of the tears pressing behind my eyes. If I open my mouth, I’ll give myself away.

I take a final, lingering look at the big blue alien who saved my life and step into the thick foliage. Once I’m hidden in the vegetation, I step as fast and lightly as I can. I’m not as quiet as Drax, every footstep breaking a twig or rustling some leaves.

I do have to pee, so I step behind the trunk of a large tree and do my business. I stay and listen for Drax to follow, but I’m met with only the sounds of the forest. I look back toward the river. I can just make out the bank when I crouch on the ground. I spot an extra-large rock in the center of the rapids. That will be my landmark.

I know if I start from here, all I’ll need to do is go left and then keep straight; that should run me right into the ship. I hope. I shove aside my doubts and sneak off farther into the forest. I’ll hide until Drax gives up and is forced to return to his cell. Then I’ll follow the sound of the river and return to the bank.

Once I see my landmark sticking up from the rapids, I’ll go back into the forest, cut left, and head straight for the end of the damaged canopy. Drax will be back safe in his cell, and I’ll be free and reunited with the girls.

I pick up speed once I think I’ve put enough distance between me and where I left Drax. My heart aches as I run. I swipe away tears as I zigzag my way through the trees and shrubs. It feels so wrong to betray him, but he’s left me no other choice.

I hunker down behind a huge tree trunk, listening intently as I slap a palm over my mouth to keep from sobbing aloud. Drax hasn’t yelled my name and I hear nothing other than the distant river and the usual creatures rustling about under the leaf littered forest floor.

I chance a peek around my tree and glimpse a flash of yellow. The same bright yellow streaking Drax's hair. I suck back a gasp and flatten myself against the trunk.

That can't be possible. How in the hell could he have followed me, and I not hear him? I know the guy is light on his feet, but to not have heard anything, not even a twig break, that's not possible. Is it?

Maybe I'm being overly paranoid and imagined it. I summon the courage for another look. My breath comes out in short pants as I slowly turn around. My palms press against the rough bark as I ease around the trunk of the tree.

He's there!

Standing between a shrub with giant spiky leaves and a tree with rounded palm leaves. His head is tilted back, his nose in the air. I've seen him do this many times during our journey. Like he's scenting the air.

His head slowly drops, and he levels a searing gaze on my hiding spot. His yellow eyes glow with fury. He's on to me.

Indecision peppers my skin. In a split second, I'm bombarded with uncertainty and doubt. It isn't too late to pretend something scared me and I ran off. I could act happy he found me but then I would be giving up my freedom to return with him back to a cell that wasn't mine.

Or I could take off running like my ass was on fire and try and get far enough away so he won't have a choice but to turn back before time runs out for his safe return. Drax wants me to be his mate, but he won't sacrifice his life to find me.

In the next heartbeat, my decision is made.

I push off the tree and focus all my energy into my arms and legs, running as fast as I can go. Drax is on my heels, no longer hiding his movements, but crashing through the forest like a wrecking ball.

I keep to the densest parts of the forest, using my petite stature as an advantage over his giant blue body. I easily duck low branches and leap over small bushes while he must squeeze



through or take time to clear a path by breaking away the foliage.

I chance a glance back to see that I'm actually gaining some ground. I half laugh, half sob knowing I'm running away from the blue alien who nursed me back to health and has only shown me kindness.

I can't be what he wants. I can't live in his prison cell. I can't be trapped—

My feet suddenly lose ground. My arms and legs flail, searching for purchase in the air as gravity kicks in and drags me down and into the unknown.

A body collides with mine. Arms wrap around me, and I don't need to see his face to know who has curled his body around mine, cocooning me in his strength. We fall forever, Drax pivoting us in the air, so his back is leading the way down. Even after I betrayed him, he insists on protecting me.

My heart aches over my deception, and I couldn't feel worse as he takes the brunt of the impact when we finally hit bottom. The air is momentarily knocked from my lungs.

"Stacy leave Drax." He pins me with a wounded stare that pierces my heart. "Stacy run."

I had been prepared for his anger, but his suffering expression cuts me to the bone.

"I'm sorry, Drax," I say in a small voice. "I spent two years of my life in a cage. I can't be in another one. Not with you. Not with anyone."

Drax rubs at his chest sure as if I planted a dagger through his heart. "Stacy hurt Drax."

"I know and I'm so sorry." I stand on shaky legs. "But I won't be forced to live in a cage ever again."

Drax curls his lip at me in disgust, and I hate how bad it makes me feel knowing he's mad at me. He turns his searing gaze up to where we've fallen. We're deep in a pit. The forest is high above us. The walls that surround us aren't made of dirt and

rocks but are smooth and metallic. Like we've fallen into a shaft.

Nature has taken over. Leafy vines and plants grow from the surface and hang down the sleek walls. Dried forest debris covers the uneven floor beneath our feet. It feels solid although it makes hollow sounds as we shift our weight.

Drax sets me to the side and leaps at the wall, his claws slipping off the surface in piercing scrapes. It's like nails on a chalkboard, I cover my ears against the shrill sound. I step back out of the way of his whipping tail.

He doesn't climb far before he drops down with a hollow thud. He tries again but to no avail. Drax extends his claws fully on one hand and strikes. His attempt only bounces off and he shakes off the reverberating ring.

He doesn't even dent the metal wall.

On his next attempt, he lands hard and the hollow ground beneath our feet shifts and drops another foot, leveling off from where it had been tilted.

"What the hell—"

The ground above us starts to close. A sliding door slowly covers the sky and forest canopy with a metallic clunk. Trapped in complete darkness with no way out, I whimper and wrap my arms around myself.

Strong arms gather me close in the darkness. Even after I betrayed his trust, Drax doesn't hesitate to comfort and protect me. He's proven time and time again to be an honorable male which makes the guilt churning in my guts that much worse.

Just when I think I will die in this hole, a sliver of light splits the darkness.

"What is this place?"

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# CHAPTER ELEVEN

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## Draxyn

I HOLD Stacy closer when a door slides open. I've never been to the xedon mine and wonder if we've fallen into a lift shaft. It would make sense why the lift lacks a control panel. If you have prisoners working the mine, you wouldn't give them free rein of an exit but control the ascent and descent from a remote location.

What doesn't make sense is why the entrance to the lift was hidden from view on the ground level. The xedon mining operation wasn't a secret, but the reason all of us were brought to Zune. And what happened that forced the platform to get stuck cockeyed at the bottom with the overhead door wide open?

"What is this place?" There is a questioning tone to Stacy's intelligible words.

"If we are to use the lift to get out, we'll have to find the controls to operate it," I answer in Ziarian even though I know she doesn't understand me. I glance behind us at the lift that is now closed from above and worry about the time I have left before my collar begins its terrible countdown. "Going by the stagnant, dusty air, this place has been abandoned ever since the guards left twenty cycles ago."

The door at the other end of the long, metal tunnel has a card swipe type of control panel like the one I tripped breaking into the control room at the Ambassador's complex during my botched attempt to download restricted files off the General's mainframe. The very job I was hired to do that landed me here.

“It’s a typical Ziarian entrapment area,” I tell a stiff-legged Stacy, tugging her along with me as we step inside the long metal tunnel. “Once the sensors inside the tunnel pick up our presence, the door to the lift will close. I can trick the door at the other end to open even without the code.”

The door slides shut behind us and Stacy jumps. “We’re trapped in here!”

She trembles with panic-filled eyes. I want to properly console her, but my vocabulary is still so limited that I can’t.

“Stacy trust Drax,” I grit out. Anger over her fleeing me is still so fresh. I did nothing to frighten her, and I want to know why she ran from me, but that conversation will have to wait until later. We have to get out of here and back to the surface. Every second that passes is lost travel time back to my pod. I point to the door at the end of the tunnel. “I can open that. Come on.”

Our footsteps sound out as muted thuds as we sprint to the door at the end of the tunnel. Stacy clings to my arm the entire way.

I crouch and study the control panel on the wall adjacent to the door before hooking a claw under the edge and prying off the cover. Inside, wires to the inner workings lay coiled. I pluck the yellow and green wires from the colorful tangled nest and detach them from the power board.

“This should work,” I absently mutter to myself, focusing on the task. “Remove the casings and short out the motor. Easy enough.”

My confidence shatters when the door fails to open. Sparks fly out of the open panel but nothing else happens. I exchange a concerned look with Stacy who keeps her hand wrapped around my biceps. I wish I had some encouraging words to impart, but I’m as confused as she is scared.

I reconnect the yellow and green wires to the power board. Whatever is behind this door must be important to have equipped the control panel to scramble the electrode combination with every card swipe. There are seven other wires coiled within. I’ll have to try them all, and in different

combinations, until I find the pair that will override the control panel and force the door to open.

“I don’t give up that easy, Stacy,” I murmur to her while I try the red and blue wires. “That didn’t work. How about orange and pink.” Nothing happens except more sparks, but white and purple are the winning combination. “See.” I side-hug Stacy with one arm. “I told you I could do it.”

Her eyes search my face for the meaning of my words before dropping to the control room the door reveals. We step inside, where a console and a bank of monitors take up one wall in the small space. Most of the monitors show various rooms, while some are blank and offline.

I straighten a stool lying on its side as if someone was in a hurry to leave and tuck it under the console and out of the way. I lean in close to study the rooms displayed. What shows on the monitors aren’t mining tunnels or excavation equipment.

“We’re inside some kind of underground lab,” I utter in complete confusion.

The console is lit up with all kinds of knobs and buttons on one side and touchscreen controls on the other. I need to find the controls for the lift, but nothing is labeled, so I start flipping switches and turning knobs. All those do is operate the various cameras set up in all the rooms shown on the display of monitors.

Stacy points to one of the offline monitors that have flickered on. “Look.”

It’s the lift shaft we fell into. The roots and vines that had taken over with the passage of time have been lopped off with the closing of the overhead door. The platform is now completely covered with fresh cut vegetation. Set up with night vision, the camera shows the platform ascending to the surface.

I scan the controls, wondering what I did to trigger the lift. As the platform draws closer to the overhead door, the door remains closed. I watch in utter dismay and despair as the platform slams into the overhead door, crushing the cut plants

and other forest debris littering the floor. The platform remains tight to the overhead door, gears whining and churning until the platform falls, crashing to the bottom of the shaft in a shower of dirt and debris with the overhead door remaining tightly closed.

I swallow the hard lump in my throat. I've seen this before. It's a fail-safe. The lift was rigged to fail. No one in. No one out.

"Fuck!" I curse. "We'll have to find another way out."

I turn to Stacy whose brow is scrunched in fear and confusion. I gently grip her shoulders and take a fortifying breath, so done with the language barrier. I must find a way to make her understand. "Drax Stacy out," I explain and gesture to the console.

Stacy nods then shrugs. "How?"

I look around the small room and cross to the closed door at our backs. I touch the adjacent control panel on the wall. Instead of a card swipe, it illuminates a touch keypad with twenty numbers. These types of cypher locks are difficult to break. I know because it's the same one I used on my security door to my pod.

Then I remember the one thing I forgot and release a string of curse words sure to make a space pirate blush. "I forgot to lock my fucking security door." I had been so focused on getting Stacy past Rooke and the other inmates that it completely slipped my mind. "Everyone will have free rein of my pod."

No one would be able to access my computers, but they could take them, along with all my other shit I so painstakingly collected over many rotations. None of that will matter if I can't get us out of here.

"It could take forever to figure out the right code." I rub the collar around my neck. "And I don't have forever."

Stacy takes notice of my actions and frowns. "Time is ticking for you, and this is all my fault. Had I trusted you, we wouldn't be in this mess. I was so determined not to live in

another cage that I've signed your death warrant, and here we are, stuck in a much worse prison."

"Drax Stacy out," I reply to her frantic rambling.

Her face is a mixture of distress and regret. I know she doesn't like being stuck in here any more than I do, but what more can I do to comfort her when I can barely communicate? My life will soon come to an explosive end if I can't get this *fucking* door open!

No more me, means Stacy will be on her own. She will slowly die, trapped inside here with my rotting corpse to keep her company. That's not an option.

"Think. Think." I tunnel my fingers through my mane and tug hard hoping the sting will manifest an idea. "Maybe I can reset the code internally instead of trying to crack it numerically."

I pry off the cover of the control panel and scowl at the internal workings. It's more complex than the cypher lock I reset for myself. There's a mapnet card and relay points. It's a complicated design but still has the same features as my lock.

I fiddle with the mapnet drivers on the card. It's a painstakingly slow process, but I've finally determined the order in which the tiny dip switches are arranged.

With that done, I can recalibrate the relays. Another tedious task. If I had an entire cycle to do this, my hands wouldn't be shaking so badly, and my brow wouldn't be soaked with sweat. Using the tip of one claw, I recalibrate the relays to a new combination of numbers and replace the cover.

Stacy jabbars on with what sounds like encouraging words while I work.

"Please let this work." I replace the cover and scrub my hands down my face and tap in the code I created.

The control panel makes little clicking sounds. A good sign that the mapnet is resetting. Just when I can't hold my breath a second longer, the door slides open.

"Fuck, yeah!" Stacy cheers and flings her slender arms around my chest. I hug her back and stand, lifting her and swinging



her in a tight circle before setting her on her feet.

“We aren’t out of this yet.” I gulp knowing I’m reaching the mid-point of the cycle. Once I go past that, I’m as good as dead. No matter how fast I run, I won’t make it back to my pod in time.

The door I opened leads to another metal tunnel with a door dead-ending the way. Whatever place this is, they sure did believe in entrapment areas, and one door must be closed before the other opens. The problem is, the door at the opposite end of this tunnel has been damaged. The thick metal is twisted like someone extremely strong bent the slab. But then how did I open the last door when that one remains cracked open?

Something to ponder for later. If there is a later for me.

I clasp Stacy’s hand and together we step into the tunnel. The door slides closed behind us. I approach the crooked door with caution. It would take a heavy-duty piece of machinery to bend a metal slab this thick. When I get a closer look, cold shiver races down my spine making the tip of my tail twitch.

“Not fucking possible.” There’s a handprint embedded in the slab.

I reach out to compare my hand to the print stamped in the metal. It’s easily twice as large as mine with claws nearly the same.

“Maybe they have a hulk,” Stacy rattles off.

The crack isn’t wide enough for us to pass through, so I wrap my fingers around the twisted edge and tug with all my strength. The door is good and jammed, sitting off-kilter on the sliders.

“We need something as leverage to get the door back on the tracks.” I think for a moment and the stool in the control room comes to mind. “That might work.”

I race back down the tunnel and enter the new code. The door slides open. With no time to waste, I sprint to the stool, snatching it out from under the console where I stowed it, sliding on the sleek metal floor as I turn to leave.

I grin at my Stacy who stands in the doorway, keeping the door held open so I don't have to waste more precious time typing in the code. She's a smart female, catching on quickly to how things work.

The metal legs of the stool are a perfect fit to wedge between the door and the jamb. I brace my feet wide apart, get a good strong grip on the stool's seat—even wrapping my tail around it—and haul back.

The door remains stubborn. I keep up the pressure. My brow beads with sweat. My teeth clench until my molars crack, but it won't budge.

Stacy gets in on the action, bracing her back against the stool and planting her feet against the wall.

My arms begin to shake. My feet start to slip on the metal floor and my sweaty palms are about to lose their grip.

The door finally gives in with a groan, settling back on the sliders with a hard clunk. I heave it open enough to make room for the stool and nod to Stacy. She gets the idea without a word from me and uses the stool as a wedge, keeping the door open enough for us to pass through.

“Good work, my female,” I praise her. “I don't know how long that will hold, so let's get moving.”

“I don't know what you said, but let's get the hell out of here,” Stacy utters.

I peer through the opening and curse. “What were they doing down here to need so much security?”

Another fucking tunnel!

Only this one has huge dents in the walls and the internal illumination flickers from damage. Dried blood marks the walls in enormous, streaked handprints. Whatever creature they had down here must have attempted an escape.

At the opposite end of the mangled tunnel, the door has been ripped from the sliders and now lays in a twisted heap at the threshold.

“I’ll go first,” I gulp, worried about what we are about to walk into.

It’s a tight fit for me, but I force my girth through the space. The stool creaks and groans out a warning for us to hurry before it loses its integrity.

The legs start to bend as I reach back for Stacy. With no finesse whatsoever, I yank her through the opening. She lands sprawled on top of me where I’ve lost my footing and landed on my back. And not a moment too soon. With a final groan, the bent door wins out over the stool and crushes the thing into the doorjamb, flattening it into an unrecognizable shape.

“That was close.” Stacy eases off me, and her eyes widen as she looks around. “What happened in here?”

“Drax Stacy hurry.”

We run the length of the damaged tunnel and come to a skidding halt at the threshold of the next room.

“What is this place?” she breathes out.

My bewildered gaze joins hers. The room is in complete disarray. Judging by the contents that haven’t been obliterated into the indescribable, we’re inside a medic bay. One with a male-sized specimen tube that’s shattered on one side. There’s a dark spot staining the floor from whatever contents were spilled.

The floor is littered with thick shards of glass from the tube, so I reach over and gather a barefooted Stacy in my arms. Cradling her to my chest, I wade through the wreckage, perplexed and horrified at what I can only imagine happened here.

The door leading out has also been ripped off the sliders and lays crumpled and discarded on the floor leading to the next room, which is large and empty and divided with a clear wall. With no time to stop and investigate, we keep going, following in the wake of whatever monster tore its way out of here.

I hold Stacy tight in my arms as I sprint through another entrapment tunnel and into a long hallway with many twists and turns, all with doors torn away, leaving gaping holes for

our escape. What worries me the most is the trail of blood left behind. The monster was clearly injured and leaking on his way to freedom.

It feels as if we've run for miles with no exit in sight. I have no sense of direction under here. No stagnant sun or planet to follow in the sky. For all I know, I could be running away from the compound instead of toward it.

I do know I'm long past my mid-point of safe return. Still, I keep going. If I can't make it back to my pod, maybe I can see Stacy safely out.

It's an infinite maze down here with a plethora of closed doors that I don't have time to open. There is no telling the complete layout of this underground labyrinth without mapping it as we go, but who's got time for that.

I run through another torn off door and skid to a halt where the hall dead-ends into a circular space that's locked down tight. I turn in a panicked circle. There're three doors to choose from. I set Stacy on her feet and pick one at random.

"Ohmygod!" Stacy exclaims. "Does this place ever end?"

I don't have time to reset codes and recalibrate relays, but I have to get Stacy out of here. Using my claw, I click off the control panel's cover and frantically rearrange the dip switches on the mapnet driver and rearrange the relays. The door blessedly opens.

"It's a dead fucking end!" I bark out a harsh curse.

I hear my collar click and begin to pulse. I don't need to look down to know that the light is no longer blinking green but flashing red. I tug at my mane and let loose a string of profanity that I'm glad Stacy can't translate.

There's no time to mourn my inevitable demise, or fume over the injustice of time served to no end. I must hurry and teach her how to tinker with the control panels so she can open the doors herself. She's a smart female, I know she will learn fast.

"Stacy!" I grip her shoulders and plant my face directly in front of hers. "Drax show Stacy. Stacy learn."

“Drax, no.” Stacy shakes her head at me, her eyes falling to the red flashing at my throat. “Is this it? Is this the end?”

“Stacy.” I give her a little shake as she starts to cry. “Drax show Stacy,” I say then switch to Ziarian. “We need to hurry so I can teach you how to rework the control panels to the doors.”

I haul her over to another closed door and pop the cover to reveal the inner workings. “I know you can’t understand me,” I say in my native tongue. “But watch closely at what I do. Drax show Stacy.”

She nods and swipes away the tears streaking down her cheeks with the backs of her hands. I go slowly, exposing the inner workings. I point to the mapnet driver card and show her how to flip the tiny dipswitches, rearranging the relay points.

“Stacy show Drax,” I say and lift her hands to the internal workings.

She echoes exactly what I showed her as if she’d been doing it her whole life. It’s no wonder my body chemistry responded to hers. She is my perfect match.

Lastly, I show her how to recalibrate the relays to create a new numerical code.

She repeats the process, and the door glides open. Inside, is another room that comes to a dead end. It’s some sort of lab filled with lots of equipment. Most seem to still be running, the machinery humming along, ignorant of the passage of time.

The red flashing on my collar has increased. I’m out of time. The best thing I can do for Stacy is lock myself inside, so she doesn’t have to witness what I saw happen to Truyn.

I take a step inside. When she starts to follow, I push her back over the threshold. “No Stacy.” I touch my collar. “No help Drax.”

“Drax! No, Drax!” she pleads. “There has to be something else we can do. What about the other door we haven’t opened yet?”

My gaze follows the motion of her hand. She doesn't have claws and will need a tool to remove the panel covers.

"I won't be needing these anymore," I say, biting off the claw on my forefinger and handing it to her. It stings and bleeds from where I bit too close to the meat, but soon enough, the pain won't matter. "Flip off the cover like I showed you and recalibrate the code for the door. Keep going until you reach the forest. It might take you a little longer to recalibrate the relays, but you're a smart female. I know you can make it out of here."

"Drax, no," Stacy sobs and tries to return my broken claw.

I cup her small hand around it and brush a wistful hand down her silken cheek. "I never thought to find a mate," I tell her, and brush away her tears with the pads of my thumbs. "Never really wanted one until I saw you. I was wrong to think your species lesser than mine. I would have been very proud to have you as my mate. I just wish I had more time to show you I am worthy to be yours."

"This is all my fault. If I hadn't run," Stacy sputters and rambles in her human words. "I knew you would follow, but I thought you'd give up and go back before it was too late. I never wanted you to come out here and die because of me."

I memorize every nuance of her sadly spoken words, absorbing them so I can replay her voice inside my mind as my life comes to an end. I nudge her farther away from the door, keeping my arm outstretched so the door doesn't close on her.

I press my lips to hers in the lightest of kisses, then rest my forehead against hers. The salty rain of her tears invades my senses and I inhale deeply of her sweet scent.

"We never officially mated, but in my heart, you were always mine." I ease away. "If I am to die, I'm glad it is with the taste of you on my lips and your sweet scent in my nose."

The door closes and I lean my head against the metal slab separating us. I pound a fist over the injustice and pray my Stacy can make it out of here on her own.

My collar angrily flashes as it did the cycle of Truyn's death. I know it won't be much longer before the flashing turns solid and the collar explodes.

I turn and look around at my coffin. So, this is where I will die. Inside some strange underground lab. My gaze skates over all the whirring machines and tables lined with medical devices.

My eyes flick back to a familiar object. It's the tool the guards used to lock our collars. I run to it, hoping I still have time to figure out how to operate it.

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## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

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## Stacy

“NO, DRAX!” I pound on the closed door until my fists ache and turn an angry red. “Please! There has to be something else we can do.”

This is all my fault. I lean my head against the door trying to hang onto the feeling of Drax’s forehead touching mine. I rub my lips together and lick out my tongue, tasting the remnants of his reverent kiss.

A deep ache sets up shop in the vicinity of my heart. Running away had been hard enough when I thought he would simply return to his prison cell. I even fancied the idea of sneaking back to spy on the compound to catch a glimpse of him once the girls and I found a good hiding place far away.

Now he’s gone. Lost to me forever. I’ll never see the dimple on his cheek when he smiles at me so openly. Never will I see the—

Suddenly the door slides open, and I fall headlong into the room. And into a big blue body. I push away to look up into his smiling face then launch myself at him, kissing him soundly.

Drax returns my kiss and then crushes me into a bruising hug. I don’t care that I can’t breathe. He’s alive! Drax murmurs excitedly into my ear. His words are lost in translation, but the soft words he speaks are full of gratitude.

My mind is blown. Believing this was the end, I never thought to see him again. Afraid he’ll disappear, I cling to him for all I’m worth as tears fall in torrents down my cheeks.

Drax doesn't seem to be in a hurry to let me go and we stay wrapped in each other's arms for a long time before I finally ease away.

"Drax. How?" I shrug and shake my head in pure disbelief.

He lifts the collar he's holding in one hand, showing me. My eyes fall to the collar with its steady yellow light then flick back up to his face.

"Bli trik leu frunt," Drax says and holds up his other hand. In it is a rectangular device much like a garage door opener. "Plur lif druthic."

Drax fits the end of the garage door opener thingy into a key shaped hole under the collar's lip. He depresses a circular impression and the light on the collar clicks to blue, then he repeats the action, and the collar clicks to yellow and falls open.

My jaw drops in awe as my gaze roams his face. "The last room you opened had the device that saved your life. You're the luckiest person on the planet... or moon. Whatever." I cut my hand through the air. "I'm so glad you're not dead."

I spontaneously hug him again, turning my head to lay on his muscled pectoral. His big body is a perfect fit pressed against mine. There's no denying how good all that warm, male flesh feels against my skin. Even the scales armoring his spine are hot and smooth beneath my roaming palms.

"Drax Stacy mate?" I ease away and Drax lifts questioning glossy black eyebrows.

I search for an answer, and even though I'm beyond thrilled that his head didn't explode off his shoulders, I'm not sure if I'm ready to say yes to being his wife. I know nothing of his culture or what accepting a proposal from a... What species is he anyway?

"Look, Drax," I begin. "If there's a chance I can find a way back home, I'm going to take it. I'm so grateful for everything you've done for me, and even more thrilled that your head didn't explode, but it wouldn't be fair to you if I said yes and

then left on the first flight out of here. Would it? I can't be what you want me to be. I'm really sorry."

Drax's big glowing eyes search my face as he tries to read my expression. How can I make him understand without completely crushing the guy?

"Just friends," I say with a slight shake of my head. "Sorry, but that's all I can give you."

"Frreenz," Drax repeats with a deeply furrowed brow. "Drax no."

"I know you don't understand, big blue." I pat his chest. "It isn't that I'm not attracted to you, because you're the first male anything I've seen since my abduction I would ever consider having sex with. If it was a friends-with-benefits situation, I'd be all in. It's been a long time for me, and honestly, I could use a good orgasm." *Did I just admit all that out loud?* "Once we break through this pain in the ass language barrier, I need to make you understand that I want to go home. Back to Earth."

"Earth." Drax nods as if he understands. "Stacy, Earth. Drax, Ziaria."

My face falls into a sad smile that matches his. "Zeye-r-e-a? Is that the name of your home planet?"

Drax nods and points to the ceiling. "Ziaria."

He's from that swirling rainbow planet hanging low in the sky.

"We saw that planet from space before this moon pulled us down. So, what are you called?" I ask. "Stacy human. Drax is?"

"Ziarian." He pats his chest, longing ghosts across his bright yellow gaze. "Drax Ziarian."

We both want the same thing, and that's to go home. I hate that I've broken his heart by not saying yes to his proposal, but I just can't commit to him.

Clutched in my hand is the claw he bit off. A selfless sacrifice that means more to me than any gift. His last courageous act before his untimely death was to make sure I had the

knowledge and means to find my way out. I open my hand to give it back, but he closes my fist around it.

“Stacy only,” Drax says and brushes my hair away from my temple before placing a soft kiss there. “Kri lue to gounta.”

“I wish I knew what you were saying,” I murmur, trying to get my heart rate under control. I swear, every time he touches me, my heart goes all jackrabbit, and my belly gets all fluttery like I have a schoolgirl crush. On a big blue alien. “I’m so fucked.”

“Drax Stacy out,” Drax finally says something I understand.

“Yeah, we need to keep looking for a way out of here,” I agree. “Whatever that thing was that smashed through all those doors might still be down here with us. So far, we haven’t found an exit, only a dead end.”

Drax motions for us to open the third and final door off this circular hall. “Stacy show Drax.”

He wants me to show him what he taught me.

“Okay,” I say. “We might be here for a while. I’m not a professional like you. But at least we have all the time in the world now that the timer around your neck is no longer ticking.”

Drax gestures for me to get started. I squat and use the claw he gifted me and start to pry off the cover. He made it look so easy, but the claw isn’t attached to my finger, so I don’t have the same leverage to pop it off that he had. It takes me a minute of struggling, but I eventually flip the damn cover free.

“Tah-dah!” I joke and flip my eyes up to Drax whose face is a mask of infinite patience. “Now for the tricky part.” I start to flip the tiny switches on the circuit card looking thing, then pause. “What if the creature that trashed all these doors is in this room?” I stand and walk over to the damaged door lying on the floor and sweep my hand all around, shrugging. “This is the last door to open in this hall and so far, no creature. The damage ends here. If it went back the other way, it would have gotten stuck at the cockeyed door. So, where did it go?”

Drax stands with me, rubbing his chin, and considering the circular hall with its dead-end rooms. Now that we aren’t

pressed for time, Drax joins me at the mangled door laying near the threshold and studies it. I crouch next to him and look at the dark stains I believe to be blood, splattering the door. It's dark blue instead of red. Drax bleeds blue. The blood evidence is on his fingertip where he bit off his claw.

Drax fits his hand inside a partial handprint that's been left, except the print is twice as big as his hand. The claw marks extend way past the tips of his.

"Blut cru?" Drax looks just as confused and concerned as me. My blood runs cold. He doesn't know what did this and that scares the shit out of me.

"Should we just leave the last door closed? Maybe the people who used to work down here captured the creature inside."

Drax's brow falls into the usual furrow.

"Yeah, this language barrier is a pain in the ass." I rub my thumb between his heavy eyebrows and joke. "You're gonna need Botox if you don't stop frowning so much."

Drax captures my hand and brings my fingertips to his lips. He brushes a kiss there before melting my heart with the warmth of a breathtaking smile.

"Why do you have to be so irresistible?" I huff with false annoyance. "Before I caved to your charms, I think we should leave the door closed and find another way out. We passed a shit load of closed doors on the way here. Chances are good, the creature didn't backtrack. I would bet money, it's inside that last locked room." I point to the third and final door, shaking my head in a slow, foreboding way.

I stand and tug on Drax's hand still holding mine. "Come on, big blue. Let's go explore our new cage."

I can't help but inwardly groan over the irony. I hadn't wanted to be a cage mate to Drax, but here I am doing just that.

Drax follows me out the wrecked door and back the way we came. We follow the twists and turns of the endless hallway, opening as many of the doors as we can. Some remain locked no matter how hard Drax tries to force them open.

So far, we've found a kitchen with a small refrigerator packed with food containers like what Drax had in his cell, and a cabinet full of cylinders of water. One of which I immediately crack open and down the contents of. Drax does the same and then works his magic on the control panel, so the door remains open.

The other rooms we can open are like holding cells, sparsely furnished with a table and stool, a small bed, and an attached bathroom. Yellow tube lighting outlines the corners of the room and around the doors. If I'm right about the yellow light on Drax's discarded collar, whoever occupied these cells was set free.

None of the beds look like they've been slept in. Each has a thick mattress and a neatly folded blanket lying across the foot.

We make our way back to the room divided by the glass wall and into the creepy lab with the huge broken cylindrical tube. It stands upright, looking like a specimen container from a science fiction movie. Drax wades through the shards of glass from the tube and over to the cockeyed door.

The stool we wedged between the jamb and door is flattened like a pancake. I shiver knowing how close I'd been to getting smashed flat. Flat Stacy would not be a good thing.

He fiddles with the control panel to try and reopen the door. It whines and groans as if it's trying to comply but begins to release a burnt motor smell. We both cough and cover our noses and mouths.

Drax gives up trying to force it open and starts to carry me back through the creepy lab but pauses and squats next to the specimen container. He holds me in his lap and reaches out to lift a discarded collar from the floor of the specimen tube.

The light on the collar has been extinguished and the collar is open. We exchange an uneasy look. Drax stows the collar in a cargo pocket on the side of his pants and stands with me in his arms.

We move on to the next room and focus on the glass wall that divides it. On our way through, we had only given it a passing glance. Curious, we walk up to the clear wall, but it's too dark to see what's on the other side until Drax plays with an adjacent panel. The room suddenly illuminates.

I scream and trip over my feet to land on my ass as I rush backward to get away from the horrific scene on the other side. Lined up in a row are nine males like Drax strapped down on tilted platforms. Going by the level of decay of the bodies, they've been here for a while.

Nothing more than scales stretched over skeletons, it's still obvious they were in various stages of deformity when they died. Some are grotesquely larger from the waist down while their upper skeleton looks normal sized when compared to Drax's frame. Others are the exact opposite: their arms and upper torso are huge in comparison to their bottom halves.

The only thing they have in common is that they are all headless. Dark blue stains cover every surface as if buckets of paint were thrown all over the walls and floor.

Drax curses in his language. His horns have flattened against his head in shock, and his tail is tucked tight to his body. Horror etches his face into a twisted mask. He seems to shake himself out of a daze and slaps his palm over the panel to cut the lights.

"What were they doing to those people? Experimenting?" Whatever creature they created in this lab somehow escaped. If it were still wearing a collar, then maybe it was dead somewhere inside this underground maze. Its head exploding like the others.

The scene rocks Drax on his heels. The male looks panic stricken and emotionally wrecked. He grabs me off the floor and races to a random cell. The door closes and he leans against it, cradling me close to his body. Unsettled by what he saw, fine tremors rack his body.

He stalks over to the bed and sits with me in his lap. I stay quiet. It seems a comfort to him to hold me, so I let him without question.

Only when he's gotten his erratic breathing under control does he lift his head from where he's resting it on the top of mine. He leans back to look me over, brushing my hair from my face with fretful hands.

"I'm okay," I say in a reassuring tone. "Drax good?"

He releases a shuddering breath and presses his full lips into a grim line. "Drax no," he says shaking his head, then anxiously rambles out. "Bru skilute druut na cu taoff."

"I wish I knew what you were saying." Whatever happened here came as a total shock to Drax. The male's eyes are wide and haunted by what we saw.

"Drax Stacy stay." Drax indicates the room. "Rest."

"Yes." I nod. Sounds like a great idea to me. Besides the day's worth of traveling, I'm exhausted from the mental stress alone. "Eat."

After what I saw, food should be the very last thing on my mind, but Drax agrees, and off we go to the kitchen. Inside is a counter with stools. Drax indicates I should sit while he heats a container of food over the same weird hotplate that was in his cell.

Soon enough, Drax is setting a hot meal before me. I spoon up some kind of casserole dish and then pause, thinking about what the girls might be doing at this very moment. I might be lost inside some crazy underground maze, but I have food, water, and a place to sleep.

What do they have? A broken ship and a limited amount of food and water. Depending on how long I've been gone, they might have already consumed it all.

I place my eating utensil beside my steaming bowl. It's past time I trusted my big blue buddy.

"Drax," I say touching his forearm where it rests on the counter. He's staring down into his bowl, swirling the casserole around, lost in thought. He startles and looks over at me. "Drax. I need to tell you something." I pause wondering how to convey my secret in his limited vocabulary. "Stacy human."



He nods knowingly. “Drax Ziarian.”

“Yes. That’s right.” I grin, hoping I can make him understand. “Stacy ship. Five humans.” I hold up my hand with my fingers splayed. “Stacy one.” I point to myself and tuck my thumb inside my palm. “Four humans Stacy ship. Help humans.”

Drax nods and, at first, I think he’s just trying to pacify me, but then he holds up his hand and repeats back what I said. “Drax help Stacy. Help humans Stacy ship.”

“You knew this whole time there were others like me?” I look at him in shock. How did he know? “How Drax know four humans Stacy ship?”

“Strastica,” Drax says and mimes holding a device then scratches his head in thought. “Stacy word... scan.”

I blink a couple of times absorbing what he’s just told me. “You have a scanner that can find people?” I rush out and then remember to use his words. “Drax scan humans Stacy ship?”

“Yes.”

“Drax scan?” I shrug, hoping he still has this device on him.

“Drax no.” And my heart sinks. “Drax save Stacy water.” Drax opens his hands and displays empty palms.

“Fuck.” He lost it going over the waterfall.

“Grust,” he agrees.

“Grrroost,” I repeat what I assume to be the Ziarian equivalent of the f-bomb.

My shoulders slump and I release a deflating breath.

“Stacy eat. Rest,” Drax orders. “Drax Stacy out. Help humans.”

“Good plan.”

I do as my big blue ally says and eat my food that’s more reminiscent of a thick chicken soup than a casserole as I first thought. As tired as I am, I’m useless to the girls. I’ll need rest and the energy to help Drax find the way out of here and back to the ship.

I drink more water and feel my eyes starting to droop. Drax looks positively wiped as I help him clean up. But we don't go directly to the room. Instead, Drax heads back to the dead-end space and the room where he found the garage door opener thingy that unlocked his collar.

He collects a computer monitor before we make our way back to our room. Drax sets up the monitor on the table near the end of the bed and takes a seat on the stool.

I collapse on the mattress, finding it amazingly soft and comfortable. With no pillow, I lay on my side and cushion my head on my arm. I try to keep my eyes from closing, curious as to what Drax is doing.

He feels my eyes on him and he turns to face me. "Stacy rest." He stands and shakes out the blanket at the foot of the bed to cover me with it.

"Drax rest too," I reply sleepily.

"Soon." Is the last word I hear before sleep claims me.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

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## Stacy

I WAKE TO A WARM, muscular body tucked behind mine. Our legs are intertwined. This bed is not much bigger than a twin-sized mattress, so there's nothing for Drax to do but wrap his arms around me or risk falling off onto the floor.

But there's no reason for his hand to be palming my breast or the other to be cupping my pussy. I'm not complaining. The steel rod pressing into my backside is a solid promise of an explosive orgasm.

My back arches and I strain into his unconscious touches, wishing for the material of my romper to disappear. Shamelessly, I grind my ass into his massive morning erection. The empty ache of my greedy flesh demands what's pulsing at my back. My blood turns fiery and my skin hot and needy.

I want what's pulsing behind me, but I need to set some boundaries to make sure he knows where I stand.

"Drax Stacy friend only?" I ask and place my hands over both of his.

I don't discourage him from circling the taut peak of my nipple with a lazy finger as he slowly wakes. Nor do I protest when he rolls the pebbled peak beneath his palm, the fabric of my garment causing a delicious friction that leaves me gasping and straining for more.

The hand cupping my pussy gets in on the action, massaging over my pubic bone. As I rub my thighs together, I'm shocked to feel how wet I already am. His fingers brush over the swollen nub of my clit, and I automatically part my thighs to

give him better access. I'm a little afraid of his claws and what they could do to my insides, but my flesh aches to be touched and filled.

Where my hand covers his, I slide my fingers down to check his claws and find them gone. Retractable? I've only ever seen them displayed. My pondering thoughts scatter when Drax impatiently pushes aside the fabric of my makeshift romper and glides his fingers through my slick folds before slipping one thick appendage inside.

"Stacy, lur le grust Drax," he growls in my ear and pumps his finger, mimicking what he wants to do to me, scattering my inhibitions. I bend my knee and lay my leg across his, giving him better access to my aching pussy. He gifts me with a second finger, stretching my small tunnel. His cock grinding into me from behind.

The deep rumble of his words vibrates down my spine. Then there's that word. Grust. It has to mean fuck. His alien dirty talk ignites a fire low in my belly, undamming a flood of desire.

"So, Drax want to grust Stacy?"

"Yes." Drax hisses and rolls me to my back, hovering above me.

"Drax and Stacy friends only," I pant, needing to establish the terms of our relationship before we go any further. I can't even think to breathe with the heat wafting off his perfectly sculpted body.

Drax's answer is a snarl and I'm divested of my romper in two blinks.

"No grust until you answer," I plead, needing his answer as much as the girthy alien cock jutting from between his muscular thighs. "Drax and Stacy friends only."

Finely knitted scales of a deep royal blue cover his masculine perfection. Ridges run along his length like a spine, bulging larger at the base. The dull point of his tip weeps a viscous fluid the longer I stare. It kicks, slapping against the ridges of his abs with the approval of my appreciative gaze.

“Jesus.” I suck back a gasping breath imagining how amazing he will feel filling me up. “Drax friend,” I urge him to agree.

He dips his head and sucks the peak of my nipple into his mouth. His spicy scent grows stronger until I’m drunk on his musk. I arch off the bed, his tongue flicking across the sensitive pebble. He treats my other nipple to the same tongue lashing until I’m squirming, babbling incoherently.

I open my mouth to repeat my words, but he shuts me up by flicking his tongue along my bottom lip before dipping inside for a mind-blowing kiss.

As soon as he pulls away, I utter against his lips still brushing across mine, “Drax friend only.”

“Blut fri lev ute,” Drax releases a string of curses. His eyes are bright with want. His expression speaks of an internal battle. I hold my breath, hoping he will agree. “*Grust!* Drax Stacy friends only,” he barks the words at me, then grips my hips and drags me to the end of the bed.

The points of his horns have moved to the back of his head and my legs are hooked over the breadth of his shoulders before I can blink. What happens next sends me soaring. The thrust of his tongue to my core explodes a million stars behind my tightly closed eyelids. Robbed of breath, no sound comes from my parted lips.

I undulate under his hungry invasion, gasping and writhing when his tongue fully penetrates me and his lips touch mine. He growls while he tongues me, sliding his hands under my ass to keep me pressed against his brutal kiss.

He drags a guttural moan from me. He likes the sounds I make and strokes harder and deeper before sucking my clit into the heat of his mouth. I moan with unrestrained pleasure and shatter into a million tiny lights, my body seizing on his questing tongue. I hear him audibly swallow, lapping up my climax until I’m a puddle of liquid bones.

I stare up at the metal ceiling, dazed by the intensity of my long overdue release. Drax still licks at me, flicking his tongue along the petals of my swollen pussy. With every teasing touch

of my clit, he grins, pleased with himself over my body spasming to his tune.

Two could play at this game. Despite a second orgasm beginning to build, I push myself away from his talented mouth.

“Stacy’s turn.” I sit up and scoot to the end of the bed.

Drax tilts his head, perplexed. He won’t be confused for long.

“Drax up.” I motion for him to stand and as soon as his massive cock and heavy balls are in line with my face, I take him in hand and lick the tip of his alien cock, lapping up the clear fluid dripping from the tip to find it sweet.

Drax jerks as if I bit him. I peek up at where he stands before him, my mouth stretched over his tip. I gently suckle and caress his heavy sack. For the rest of my life, I will never forget the look on Drax’s face.

Shocked surprise turning to utter bliss.

His hands touch the top of my head in reverence. To have this massively dangerous male under my full control is a heady thing. His balls cinch tight against his body, and the base of his cock starts to swell. Before I reap the reward of my efforts, he pulls away.

With one hand around my waist, he scoots us up the mattress. His body heavy over mine, he settles between my welcoming thighs, his hard length sandwiched between us. But when he raises up to position the hot tip of his leaking cock against my slick entrance, my tunnel is already convulsing, the velvety feel of him almost too much.

Then he eases into me on a careful stroke, giving me time to adjust to his thick invasion. The delicious stretching of my body as I take the girth of his massive erection teeters on pain. I relax, panting through his inhuman penetration. Drax’s forward thrust doesn’t stop until I feel his balls brush my ass.

He holds there, lips peeled back from gritted teeth. His fangs clenched in restrained display. The first lick of fear races through me when I feel the base of his cock swell, stretching

me further. He will tear me apart with that thing if it grows any larger.

Legs spread wide, I'm at his mercy. Impaled on his massive cock, there's nothing I can do but lay here and take what I initiated.

The base of his cock pulses and he pulls out only an inch. When he drives back into me, I feel a hard knot that has formed a couple of inches from his root. And, oh my sweet lord, that knot pops back inside my pussy and presses perfectly against the spongy tissue of my G-spot.

Drax knows exactly what to do, rocking into me, rubbing that knot in just the right place to send me over the edge. Every muscle in my body grows taut. My walls clench at his invasion, milking his cock as I'm blinded with the deepest pleasure.

Head thrown back, feet planted on the mattress, I raise my hips, shamelessly offering my pussy up for him to plunder. Now that I've sampled what he can make me feel, I'm greedy for more.

Drax roars like a predator pleased with the prey he's caught. His thighs widen to keep my legs spread wide. His fists punched into the mattress on either side of me as he extends his arms fully, settling the weight of his torso above me.

When he begins to move with full, deep strokes, I roll my hips in time with him, pleasuring myself on his perfect cock. The spine running his length bumps against my clit with the precision of an expensive sex toy.

But what is driving me wild is that blessed knot popping in and out of my drenched lips to rub against my over-sensitized G-spot. My tunnel spasms with every stroke, pulling from me mini orgasms until drips from pleasure run rivulets down my ass. My pussy squelches as he fucks me. I should be mortified by the sound, but I'm too overcome to care. And by all the gratified snarling Drax is doing, he's well pleased with how he's working my body.



My thighs tremble with the promise of an explosive finale. I tense, trying to delay my climax. I want to indulge in the tiny eruptions of pleasure a bit longer before I give myself over to the ultimate bliss.

The inevitable is cresting to a painful peak. With an animalistic grunt, I release with a force so great, it dims my vision. My body grows taut, and my pussy grips Drax's cock, now buried to the hilt. His hands grip my hips, holding me tight to his body as he rocks into me.

His delightful knot grows, pressing against my G-spot, forcing another orgasm to build. I bow hard off the bed and open my eyes in time to watch Drax release into me. The scales along his shoulders and backs of his arms are fully extended, his horns are erect and pointed backward, his fangs out on full display as he pants through his nose like a bull, his tail slashing through the air behind him. A beast in the throes of ecstasy. Such a hedonistic turn-on to know it's my pussy that's driving him wild.

His hot seed spurting, splashing into me, I reach another impossible summit, seizing around Drax's swelling cock.

He collapses onto his elbows, making sure his considerable weight doesn't crush me. I shiver when he burrows his face in the column of my throat and breathes me in. Warmth fills me as he murmurs soft, appreciate sounding words into my ear. I don't want to like Drax as much as I do, but there's no help for it.

He saved my life, kept me safe, fed me, healed me, and fucked me into oblivion. What's not to like? The horned fucker has wound his way into my traitorous heart. Now that I've given into my baser instincts, that niggling of a connection I've been adamantly denying has grown stronger.

Friends only my ass.

Drax rolls us so we're lying on our sides. I snuggle into his strong embrace with his cock still nestled deep inside me like he owns my pussy. And after what he just made me feel, maybe he does.

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## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

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## Draxyn

MY STACY HAS BLOWN my mind, treating my cock to the warmth of her mouth and the delicious licks of her tongue before spreading her lush thighs for me. I would be content to stay on this cot all cycle, exploring my Stacy's delectable little body.

I swallow, my tongue still coated with her sweet juices. Her body's response to my sacred kiss was more than I could have hoped for. So responsive, rewarding me with little spasms of pleasure as I lapped and sucked at her tight heat.

I am certain she isn't aware of Ziarian mating traditions. If so, she would never have allowed me to gift her with the most sacred of kisses. To allow a male's fangs so close to her most delicate parts is the most sacred of trusts. I could have torn her to pieces without much effort.

Yet, she made me avow we were to be *friends* only. I knew what her words meant, learning her language as fast as I could grasp while she rested. Despite the affirmation, she had spread her creamy thighs wide, welcoming me to feast on her delicate flesh. I could have tongued her pretty cunt forever.

Then she shocked me by gifting me with a sacred kiss of her own. I had never known a female could give such decadent pleasure to a male. Her mouth stretched over my girth had shattered my self-control. The lashes of her little tongue stripped me down to my most feral need to rut.

I had sunk my cock fully into her slick cunt, rubbing my knot against her most sensitive flesh until she was dripping for my

mark. I hadn't meant for the rutting to go that far. Her cunt begged to be taken, so I had claimed it as mine, filling her full of my seed. This little human has ruined me for any other female.

I shove aside the idea of mating anyone but my Stacy. Aside from my scent she carries in her tight channel, it is not possible for me to claim another mate, as this little human holds my heart in the palm of her tiny pink hand. Persuading her to relieve me of my promise of *friends only* will have to wait until we can find our way out of this underground maze of horrors.

Once I finished studying more of Stacy's words, I hacked into what I could of the lab's files. Most of the information stored inside their hard drives is locked down tight. I haven't seen security like that since the time I was hired to break into the Drite's mainframe on Tolle.

From what I could access, I don't believe we were brought here to mine xedon. We were brought here to be experimented on.

The first ten males who never returned to the compound had personal files marked as failed test trials. I can only imagine they met the same fate as the nine headless males behind the clear wall.

Then I found files on the second set of ten chosen to work the mine. Nine personal files were marked as failed test trials like the others, but the tenth was marked as successful.

More notes regarding the continuation of the experiment were added to the tenth personal file. The scientist had taken the next step and had created a monster from one of the Ziarian inmates.

I didn't know any of those prisoners personally. We didn't begin to socialize until after the guards had up and abandoned us. However, what had been done to those males was incomprehensible and inexcusable. The Ziarian government was corrupt. There was no disputing that. There were plenty of things Ziarian citizens tolerated for the favors the government provided, like giving away parcels of land for free so every

citizen could have a home. But experimenting on people was beyond excusable, I don't care what the inmates had done to land themselves in prison. What had happened here was inexcusable. If I ever find a way off Zune, I plan to expose what took place here.

The discarded collar I'd found had to have belonged to their creation who had broken free. Without the collar, the monster who ripped off all the doors was still at large.

That's not why a shudder zinged through me. Never will I forget the horrific scene of what Stacy and I found behind that clear wall. Strapped on tilted platforms and left for their heads to explode, those males had been failed test subjects.

A similar image of a friend lost the same way flashes through my mind. I sit up quickly to chase the image of Truyn away, catching Stacy as she tumbles where she lay sprawled across my chest. I rub at my temples to dissolve the terrible image.

"Drax good?" Concern laces her voice. "What's the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost."

My smile is withering. Most of what she says is lost on me, but I get the gist of what she's asking. "Drax lost friend."

"Oh," she sighs sadly. "Sorry. Was he one of the people we saw in the..." Her words trail off.

I shake my head. "Friend, Truyn, lost prison."

"Sorry," Stacy says again.

"He was the closest thing to a friend I ever had until you came along," I say in Ziarian. My words are as gibberish to her as most of hers are to me, but it feels good to share with her the horrendous experience. "There was nothing I could do help him. My collar forced me back into my own pod. He was determined to end his life. Had he just hung on for a few more cycles, I could have set him free. His loss weighs heavy on me. I sense that it will for many rotations to come."

Unable to remain still, I move to stand. "Us eat, pack food water. Us out. Find ship. Help Stacy friends."

"Drax learn more English."

“Yes. More English.”

Stacy captures my hand, stopping me as I head to the galley. “Drax. I wanted to say that I’m sorry for running away.”

“Words no.” I shrug feeling inadequate. How can I be so apt at hacking computer networks and fail so miserably at learning an alien language? I must sound like a fucking idiot to her speaking her native tongue in stilted words like a youngling.

Stacy stands, placing her hands on my waist, and peers up at me through her lashes. “Stacy sorry,” she dumbs down her words for me. “Stacy run from Drax.”

My Stacy must be disappointed in me. That is why she does not look at me as more than a friend. I was a fool to think I could learn her language in just a few cycles.

Her attraction is obvious, the exotic scent of her lust still fresh in my nose, yet she’s made it abundantly clear I am not worthy of her as a mate. Good enough for pleasuring but not for mating. I should have abstained until she agreed to be mine, but when she looks at me with desire burning in her eyes and her sweet cunt is slick with need, I am powerless to do anything except succumb to my own carnal needs.

“Drax.” Stacy touches my cheek with worried fingers. “Stacy sorry.”

I nod and place my hand over hers. “Stacy leave Drax help friends. Stacy no trust Drax.”

Stacy recoils a little as if the truth has stung. “Yes,” she sheepishly admits. “Sorry. Stacy trust Drax now. Try to understand. Stacy no prison.”

Ah! I can understand her aversion to living in a cell. It never occurred to me that could be an issue.

Shame settles around me on how unfair it was of me to expect her to share in my confinement. The crime was mine. The punishment is my burden to bear, not hers.

“Drax sorry. Stacy no prison.”

“Thank you for understanding.” Her gibberish words are spoken so sweetly. I wish I knew what it was she said.

“Stacy trust Drax?”

“Yes. Trust.”

We stare at each other for a long moment. My head is a jumble with confusion. I’ve earned her trust, but not her approval as a mate. She didn’t want to be inside the prison. I know she longs for her home as I do mine. Are those the reasons holding her back, or is it just me?

I must prove to her that I am a worthy mate. “Drax find exit. Help Stacy friends.” I stand proud and slap my tail on the floor to punctuate my determination.

“Clothes first,” she rakes me with a sultry gaze and gestures to my cock hanging long and satisfied between my thighs. “You’ll scare the girls with all that on the loose.”

Her words are a mystery, but her grin is mischievous. I watch as she collects her discarded garment from the floor and shakes it at me. “On second thought, I’m grabbing a quick shower first.” Stacy heads into the cleanroom and closes herself in the purifier.

I wander over and grab up my pants where I dropped them on the floor before I used the purifier at the end of the cycle. I couldn’t stand the thought of climbing in bed behind my Stacy with pants in need of washing. Right now, I’m not interested in washing away Stacy’s sweet scent from my scales just yet.

So far, none of the rooms we’ve gained access to have clothing. The pants I wore last cycle will have to suffice.

It isn’t long before Stacy steps out of the purifier all fresh and clean. She casts a brilliant smile that rocks me back on my heels. How can a tiny human female melt me with a single look?

Dressed and anxious to get moving, we head to the galley, share a quick meal, and stash dried rations and water in a wide swath torn from Stacy’s garment.

“I really like my makeshift romper, but I’d gladly sacrifice a piece of it to carry food and water to the girls,” she had muttered with a smile.

The last stop before we begin our search for an exit is the medic bay, the room I thought was to be my tomb. I grab a basic medic kit and strap it around my waist, hoping Stacy's friends won't need it. Many cycles have passed. Human bodies are soft and vulnerable. Was anyone hurt in the crash?

Stacy wears a concerned expression when she talks about her friends. I hate to see her so troubled and hope she does not have to face a loss as I had with Truyn.

We return to the doors I had no luck opening the previous cycle. But that was before I found and modified the grygore device I pull from my pants pocket.

While Stacy slept, I searched the medic bay. A grygore is meant to recalibrate medical equipment based on a patient's weight, but I tinkered with it to read the arrangement of dip switches on a mapnet driver and recalibrate the relays to set new codes for the cypher locks.

With a cocky grin, I show my repurposed tool to Stacy, hoping to impress her.

"What is that?" Her eyebrows raise with interest.

"Grygore. Drax make." I tip my chin up at her, proud of my retooling. "Open door."

The control panel covers I removed from the doors I was unable to open the cycle before are where I left them on the floor, the inner workings already revealed. My tool works exactly like I hoped it would, recalibrating the relays by rearranging the dip switches with a single touch to the mapnet drivers.

Before the grygore recodes the lock, I move Stacy behind me, my hand automatically reaching for my lost hunting knife. Some protector I am with no weapon. However, I did pack my collar knowing it was still operational with working explosives. Worst case, I could arm it with the key, but I'd have to get up close and personal with whatever I planned to explode.

With that altered male on the loose, I can't be too careful where my Stacy's safety is concerned. Though, I am of the



same mind as her. It's very possible the altered male was trapped inside the third room we left locked in the circular hallway. It would make sense as the trail of damage stopped there.

The door soundlessly glides open. What I find inside is worth more than a million xedon nuggets. I stand from where I am crouched at the control panel and have a good look around before signaling it is safe for Stacy to enter.

"What is this place?" Stacy says and wanders inside. Her jaw hangs open in awe of the many backlit blaster racks and dagger hooks lining the walls.

"An armory," I say in Ziarian. "A nearly empty one." I walk over to where a couple of weapons have been left behind in what was a hasty exit.

Stacy shows interest in a wicked looking blade with a mortit bone grip and missing the protective sheath. "Hurt," I warn and point to the serrated edge of the blade.

"Yeah. Wish I'd had it back on Tirus," Stacy seethes, reaching out to run her fingers down the smooth, frosty green grip. "It looks dangerous. Like it could cut a troll in half, no problem. Or a jaundiced freak who thought to make me and my girls into his personal stash of sex toys."

Through Stacy's rant, there was only one word that rang true. "Tirus," I slowly repeat.

"You've heard of it?" Stacy's eyes swing up to meet mine. "Drax know Tirus?"

"Tirus." I nod. "I'd wager you were taken from Earth and displayed on the wall there," I surmise in Ziarian what the truth could only be given the short-ranged Starskip she and her friends crashed in. "Probably sold to the highest bidder like a piece of meat then you stole a ship and escaped your captors." A new respect blooms within me for my fierce little human.

I'm met with her puzzled stare, so I simply nod and remove the dagger from the hook, stowing it in my empty hunting knife pouch on the side of my pant leg.

There's another, smaller blade inside a sheath that's been knocked from its hook and hangs near the bottom of the wall. I bend to retrieve it and hand it to Stacy, grip first.

"For me?" Stacy gladly accepts the small dagger. "Thanks, Drax."

I show her how to release the blade from the sheath, then search the room, finding several sets of fingerless leather gauntlets left behind in the wake of the guards' mass exodus.

Was it the male they transformed into a monster who scared them enough to leave Zune and the rest of us behind?

I don a pair of gauntlets then outfit Stacy in a pair. Not much in the way of armor for her, but it's better than nothing. I would wrap her in a protective bubble if I could, to keep her safe.

"These are a little big on me." Stacy wrinkles her too cute human nose and grins up at me.

The gauntlets hang loose from her forearms even though I've cinched them down as far as they will go. I can't resist leaning down to brush a kiss across her perfect pink lips. Lips that were once stretched around the width of my cock. Lust nails me in the base of my spine sure as if I'd been shot with a blaster.

Tingles erupt across my scales in a fluttering wave. My horns uncurl, ready for a repeat of our *friends only* rutting. As tempting as my little human is, we must find a way out. I motion for Stacy to follow.

"We need to get moving," I grate out, my voice heavy with desire.

The next door I use the grygore to force open turns out to be the guards' barracks. Stacy and I riffle through all the cabinets and lockers, pulling out everything we find, which isn't much. A few extra blankets that Stacy stacks on the cots and uniform pants in various sizes.

I chose a pair in my size and shuck my dirty pair for clean ones. They're the drab gray of a typical prison guard uniform but they fit better than what I had and have lots of cargo

pockets sewn the length of the legs. I transfer all I carried in my dirty pants into my fresh pair, careful to stow my collar with the key in the chamber in case I have to put it to use.

We move onto another door, finding it to be another stretch of corridor. Yet another entrapment area, but this is a good sign we might have found an exit. There would be no need for added security measures if there wasn't something worth protecting, like an entrance.

We exchange a hopeful look and rush to the door at the opposite end. It's but the work of a moment with my new tool to recode the lock and open the way. We're met with steep, winding stairs. The metal stairwell is illuminated from within just like the corridors.

I tilt back my head and give the stagnant air inside a deep sniff. There's only a scant trace of Ziarian males left behind. There are too many scents to sort through as if many males used this stairwell at once.

I step inside and look up. It's a long way. Thirty feet or so. About the same distance as what we fell into the lift shaft. Dagger out, I take the lead with Stacy right on my tail, which I keep curled around her to make sure she stays with me without taking my eyes away from the front. There's only visibility a few feet ahead, the curve in the steps hiding what lies beyond.

At the top of the landing, there's another door. My grygore easily opens it to reveal another short entrapment corridor, only this one dead-ends at a set of double doors with a huge, ragged hole torn out of the center. The metal bent outward indicating something large broke out.

A hot breeze rushes around us in a welcoming embrace. We both breathe deeply of the rich earthy scent of the sultry forest.

Fresh air equals an exit. It's tempting to rush headlong through the double doors, but this stretch of the corridor has sustained heavy damage as if the altered male had gotten this far, only to get trapped inside. The metal walls have fist-sized dents, and the corner lights flicker with damage. The sporadic illumination casts the nasty tear in the center of the double doors in an eerie warning to approach with caution.

I glance back at Stacy and catch her fearful expression. Her smaller knife is unsheathed and held in a white-knuckled grip. We step lightly through the damaged corridor, peering through the monster-sized hole. Beyond that, another set of steps, only these are bathed in sunlight from above.

I ponder the readings from the lifeform scanner I lost going over the waterfall. There had been two Ziarian males detected in the forest. One had vitals normal for my kind. But the other? The other one had abnormalities I had attributed to a glitch with the scanner caused by the moon's magnetic field.

I trade an anxious look with Stacy and together we step through the hole left behind. It's so large, both of us can easily pass through it. I keep my weapon up and at the ready, coming to crouch at the base of the steps. The sliding door built into the ground above has been left open just like the lift shaft. Vines and roots have grown down into the stair pit. The treads are littered with forest debris.

"Watch your step," I whisper back to Stacy as we carefully ascend.

We reach the top and I throw out my arm to pause before we stick our heads out into the open. I lift my nose to the air, sucking in great pulls to scent for danger. The monster left a long time ago. There is nothing but the slightest lingering scent of many males and something not quite Ziarian.

I turn to find my little female holding tight to her knife, her face set in a fierce mask as if she's ready to slay anything that comes her way. Through this entire ordeal and ever since she awoke inside my pod, my Stacy has shown great strength and fortitude. If only she would agree to be my mate. I would be so proud if she were mine.

"Drax out first," I say, pointing to my eyes and then gesturing around. "Safe. Stacy out next."

She nods and I creep up the last couple of stairs until I'm looking at the thick of the forest. I sniff the air again but scent only the past and the creatures of the forest. I peer up through the slight breaks in the heavy canopy to locate the sun and my home world. I'm a bit disoriented to find the sun closer and the

planet farther away. We have traveled far inside the underground labyrinth, away from the prison compound and the river. I can barely hear the raging rapids over the chirping insects and the hoots and calls of the forest creatures.

I'll need a view from up high if I'm to orient myself and find Stacy's ship. "Stacy stay." I point to an exceptionally tall tree nearby. "Drax climb. Find ship."

"Okay," Stacy says and presents me with her raised thumb.

Never having seen her do this, I repeat the gesture, thinking it must be a positive thing. Stacy settles on the steps with her weapon up. She looks anxious but content to remain there.

I sheath my dagger and extend my claws on both my feet and hands. The sting of my missing claw still aches, but I put the slight discomfort behind me and leap onto the massive tree trunk and start my climb. My tail flexes and twitches as I go, aiding my momentum.

Once I reach the top of the canopy, I look down to see my tiny female hunkered inside the stairwell. Her little peach face is tilted up toward me and her mouth is slightly open. I hope that I have impressed her with my climbing skills. I have much to prove to her if I'm to win her over.

I peer out over the vast forest. Odd that I don't immediately see the damage done by Stacy's crash landing. Until I turn my head. I'm dumbfounded to find that our unground travels have taken us this far past the ship.

I climb down faster than I climbed up, skating down the trunk with my claws dug in deep enough to keep me from falling.

"Ship close," I tell her, knowing she will be pleased. I crouch, flattening my scales, and motion for her to climb onto my back. Her feet are bare, and her flesh is delicate compared to mine.

She holds tight around my neck, and I run through the forest at a blinding speed, not slowing until I see the hull of the ship peeking through the foliage. I scent the air as we travel, grinning when I pick up the unique scent of many humans.

“There it is,” Stacy says excitedly from where she holds on tight to my neck. “There’s the ship!”

As soon as I reach the hull, Stacy wiggles to be let down. I would prefer she move with caution, but she’s anxious to be reunited with her friends.

I take stock of our surroundings while Stacy knocks on the ship’s hatch. With my dagger in hand, I sniff at the air. The scents of the forest haven’t changed, and I detect nothing unusual.

“Girls. It’s me, Stacy,” my female says in her native tongue. “Open up. Please open up.”

Long seconds pass then the clunk of the hatch unlocking rings out. I swing around to make sure it is another female that answers. It is and Stacy is suddenly surrounded by four other humans, all excitedly chattering at once.

The tree leaves rustle with a hard breeze and the hint of a peculiar scent floats along with it. I sneer at what most people would dismiss as an anomaly with their scientiatry glands. For a criminal hacker like myself, it is an old trick used to hide a male’s presence.

Normally, a camo-chemical mist is used. On Zune, there are no chemical scent camouflagers. What we do have are husti flowers. They are rare but not impossible to find. The acrid oil wrung from the petals works the same as the camo-chemical mist.

I recognize Rooke’s scent but the male attempting to hide his presence is not a familiar one, raising my scales in silent alarm.

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## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

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## Stacy

“DU LEBST!” Romy rushes out first. “Wir dachten, du wärst tot.”

“English, Romy,” I laugh and hug her back.

“When you didn’t come back, we thought you were dead,” Romy says.

“I was worried you might not have made it back to the ship,” I ease out of her embrace as the other girls surround me. “I thought you might have been lost in the forest.”

“Your orange breadcrumbs saved me.”

“I’m so glad to see you.” Zoe slyly wraps slender arms around my waist.

“You too, Zoe.” I return the hug of the girl who has become the little sister I never had. “I’m relieved you girls are all okay.”

“What happened to you?” Tasha touches my arm as if she can’t believe it’s me. “You look so different.”

“Yeah, you’ve gained some weight.” Darcy’s dark eyes roam over me from head to toe. “You look good, Captain Stacy.”

“Stop that with the captain bit. I’m serious,” I scold. “But thanks. More like thanks to Drax for saving me,” I say and turn to where Drax has his back to us. He’s scanning the forest like a personal bodyguard, his twitching tail telling of his unease. “I slipped on some rocks at the riverbank and fell in. He jumped in after me and nursed me back to health.”



“How did you heal so quickly in just a few days?” Romy looks me over. “The cut on your head is all gone. Not even a scar left behind.”

“Drax has this weird cuff that works magic,” I say. “I’m not sure how it works, but it healed me. My shoulder doesn’t even hurt anymore.”

“Good thing he found you.” Tasha gives Drax a slow once over that should not make me feel jealous. She was the one who had expressed an interest in meeting some *hot alien guys*, but Drax has some monster qualities I figured these girls would find frightening.

“Wait.” I hike my thumb back. “You all aren’t freaked out by him?”

“I would have been a few days ago,” Tasha says. “But we found a friend of our own.”

“He brings us food,” Zoe chimes in.

“And refills our water canisters,” Romy adds. “We found him standing outside the ship the day after we lost you.”

My mouth hangs open as I picture the monster who broke out of the underground lab fetching water and food for the girls.

“Don’t worry. We don’t let him inside the ship or anything,” Darcy reassures me. “Trust only goes so far.”

I’m afraid to ask but, “What does he look like?”

“Just like your guy.” Romy looks over at Drax.

“He’s not a huge beast with massive claws?” I blurt.

“Um... no,” Darcy looks at me sideways. “Why? What would make you ask that?”

“We have a lot of catching up to do,” I say, not wanting to alarm the girls but suddenly feeling very exposed. Who is this other Ziarian lurking around the ship? Could he be out there watching us right now? “Let’s take this inside. Drax,” I call out and wave him over.

He must have sensed danger because the scales on his shoulders and spine are raised in warning. His horns have

moved forward, the points out front like he's ready to charge. He shifts all that muscle on agitated feet as if he's gone into attack mode, and that makes me nervous.

"Wait." Darcy throws up a hand. "You're not gonna let him inside the ship, are you?"

"I trust him," I defend, my body warming with pride. "I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for him. He's proven himself to be honorable and a perfect gentleman."

"Wait." Tasha narrows eyes on my flushed cheeks. "Did you have sex with him?" When I don't immediately answer, her eyes pop wide. "You did! I would recognize that blush anywhere. You like him."

All eyes are fixed on me. My face erupts into flames under the girls' curious scrutiny.

"Fine." I fold my arms across my chest.

"You did!" Tasha snaps her fingers and points at me. "I knew it. You had sex with an alien."

"Maybe just a little." If that isn't the understatement of the century to describe what Drax and I did back in that lab. I quickly change the subject. "How long have I been gone?"

"About five or six days." Romy taps her lip. "I think. It's hard to tell since the sun never sets."

"Really?" I look up at where the sun sits in the pale green sky. It does seem to always stay in that one position. I'll make it a point to ask Drax. Maybe someday he will learn enough English and we can have a real conversation.

"Let's get back to your previous comment," Tasha retraces. "Explain what *just a little* means. You either got freaky between the sheets with the lizard dude or you didn't."

"Drax isn't a lizard, he's a Ziarian from the rainbow planet that looks like it's about to fall out of the sky." I point toward the giant colorful orb peeking through the break in the canopy. "He's a prisoner, or was, on this moon that's called Zune."

The girls all seem to shake themselves out of a stupor and then the questions start to fly.

“You can understand his weird language?” Darcy asks.

“Prisoner?” Zoe casts Drax with a fearful glance. “What did he do?”

“We crashed on a moon prison?” Tasha sweeps Drax with a curious look that triggers another bout of jealousy.

“What do you mean by *was* a prisoner?” Romy narrows eyes on me. “You mean, he broke out? Won’t someone be looking for him?”

“I wonder if our guy is a criminal too.” Zoe shudders and looks around nervously.

“Your guy?” I ask, dreading the answer. “What color is his hair?”

“Black with red streaks.”

“Oh, shit,” I glance at Drax who is slowly backing up to where we stand just outside the hatch. “That’s Rooke.”

“Rooke?” Darcy tilts her head.

“Yeah,” I turn to Drax. “He wants to steal parts off the ship.”

“Our ship?” Tasha’s eyes widen. “Why? It’s totally fucked.”

“To fix a ship he has. To leave us all behind when he does.” I turn to Drax when he’s within range and motion between us. “Drax. We need to talk.”

“I don’t think so, Stacy,” Tasha defends. “Our guy hasn’t made a move to rush the ship or anything and he’s as big as your guy. It wouldn’t be hard for him to kick the rest of the broken windshield out and come on in. He could easily overpower us considering we have no weapons and take what he wants, but he hasn’t. He leaves us food and water, keeping his distance when we open the hatch to get it.”

“Yeah, we wave at him, and he lifts his hand in return.” Zoe demonstrates.

“And he tries to chat up Darcy in this crazy guttural language none of us can understand,” Tasha grins and winks.

“Hush,” Darcy swats at Tasha who’s making kissy faces at her.  
“He does not.”

“How is it you can talk to Drax?” Romy asks ignoring the antics of the other two girls.

“He learned English. Well, some. Enough to where we can communicate. Mostly,” I say.

“Stacy friends.” Drax juts his chin up and makes a sweeping gesture for us to go inside. “Safe ship.”

“Okay,” I nod. “All right girls, let’s take this inside.”

I bring up the rear. Drax follows, having to duck and squeeze his big body through the hatch.

“You’re letting him come inside?” Darcy squeaks.

“I swear Drax is harmless,” I vow.

Drax isn’t following our conversation, overly concerned with something else. He familiarly clasps my shoulders and I can feel the girls’ curious stares boring into me from where they’re huddled together inside the door leading to the cockpit.

“Stacy friends leave ship,” Drax says frantically. “No safe. Scent male. Drax no like.”

His face is a mask of concern that cannot be ignored. He’s scented something outside that he doesn’t like and who am I to question that?

“Are you scenting the monster from the lab?” I lean in and whisper not to alarm the girls. Drax searches my face, looking for the meaning of my words. “Okay. Okay, Drax. I’ll tell the girls we’re leaving. Where are we going? Back to the underground maze?”

Drax huffs out a breath and runs an aggravated hand through his hair.

I need to make him understand what I’m asking. “Drax scent,” I say. “No safe ship.”

“No safe ship,” he agrees with a clipped nod.

“Us,” I motion between me and Drax, then include the girls who haven’t budged an inch. “Where safe?” I shrug.

Drax says with no hesitation, “Down.” He points at the floor, and I know he wants us all to head back to the underground lab.

I agree, knowing with all the doors and entrapment areas would be safer than our wrecked ship, but I’m hesitant because of what has taken place there. To say it’s creepy to be locked underground with a room full of dead aliens is an understatement.

I don’t want to panic the girls, but I have to come clean about the creature on the loose and what I know about the underground lab before we take off into the forest. They have a right to know what I know.

“Drax part Stacy ship.”

I nod, understanding what he wants to do. Which reminds me, “Drax. Rooke here.” I point to the hatch.

“Yes. Scent males,” he confirms and holds up two fingers.

My face pales. He said males as in plural.

“Yes. Friends saw Rooke Stacy ship.” I point to the corner of my eye to verify the sighting. “Who’s the other male, Drax?”

“Rooke lue tue steal part Stacy ship.”

“Friends say Rooke no steal. Rooke friend.”

“No.” Drax barks out a skeptical laugh. “Rooke no friend.”

“He looks a lot bigger inside the ship than he did outside,” I hear Zoe whisper over by the cockpit door.

I know the girls are worried about Drax being inside the ship, but I trust him. I have no reason not to. If he says Rooke is up to no good, then I believe him. I also believe in his keen sense of smell.

Although Drax never answered my question, probably because he didn’t understand it, he had held up two fingers. He mentioned one male was Rooke, so who was the other one? I

hope it isn't the creature from the lab. If Drax thinks we're in danger here, then we must be.

"Probably because the top of his head is brushing the ceiling," Tasha whispers back.

"You know we can hear you even when you whisper," I smirk, then take a deep breath. "Listen, girls. We need to go. Let's pack up what we can use and get ready to travel."

"Drax Stacy ship part," Drax says and heads to the engine room, then tosses a warning over his shoulder. "Travel soon. Hurry."

I give him a thumbs up that he returns. He looks odd doing it because his brow is scrunched in worry, and I don't think he knows what it means. Plus, there's a huge black claw growing out of the tip of his thumb.

"Are you sure about us leaving?" Romy looks worried.

"Where are we going to go?" Darcy rubs her arms nervously. "To the prison, or does he have a hideout?"

The girls start to pepper me with questions, but I throw a hand up to stop them. "I'm positive that we need to leave. We're going to the underground lab we fell into in the forest."

"Underground lab!" Tasha blanches. "What kind of lab?"

"It's safe down there," I rush to explain as panicked eyes hit me from all angles. "There's tons of doors that we can lock behind us."

"Why do we need tons of doors to lock?" Romy probes. "What's on this moon that's so dangerous?"

"What are you not telling us?" Darcy pushes.

"I'm trying to tell you if you'd stop with the questions and give me a chance." I open my mouth to start with what little I know about the lab and the creature that broke out when Drax storms toward me from the back of the ship. The girls startle and back up, pushing Zoe behind them.

A wide smile splits his face, that dimple in his cheek I find so appealing out on full display.

“Drax find.” He opens his large hand to reveal a handful of small white devices. He takes one and puts it into his ear. Then he does the same to me. I flinch a little, not knowing what this is all about until he speaks. “Can you understand me?”

“Holy shit!” I stare at him in surprise. “Yes. I can understand you. I have a million questions to ask you!”

“I know. Me too,” Drax rushes out. “Right now, we all have to get out of here and down to the lab. Rooke and another male have been here recently. I think it’s Mordox. We need to leave before they come back.”

“Okay... Wait. Who’s Mordox?”

“A lifer whose collar fell away as soon as the guards left. He’s dangerous and I don’t know what he’ll do if he finds all of you.”

“Why is he so dangerous, Drax? What did he do?”

“Mass murder.” Drax hands me the rest of the little white devices. “Give these translators to the females.”

“Why did the guards leave? Because of the creature that got loose?”

“That’s my guess. Now get the females ready to leave.”

Drax starts to return to the back of the ship, but I stop him with a hand to his leather clad forearm. “What was your crime?”

Drax steadily holds my gaze as he answers. “Mainframe hacking.” Drax grins, noticing me visibly deflate with relief. “What? You thought I was a killer or something?”

“Well, you were a prisoner wearing an explosive collar,” I say dryly.

“Yet you welcomed me between your sweet thighs.” Drax licks the tip of one fang before leaning down to brush a quick kiss over my lips.

My face erupts in flames. I’m thankful I haven’t given the girls their translators, because they can only understand my half of the conversation and I want so badly to apologize and explain to Drax why I didn’t accept his proposal.

“Drax.” I hesitantly look around at the many inquisitive gazes,  
“We need to talk about... us.”

“I know, but not now. We will have plenty of time to talk once we are all safe inside the lab,” Drax interrupts. “I need to finish removing the thruster and starter from the engine. Get the females ready to go.”

I stare at Drax’s retreating form before turning to the girls.  
“Put these translators in your ears.”

“What is a Mordox, Stacy?” Zoe’s voice shakes.

“Another prisoner on the loose, Zoe. Mordox is dangerous and so is the... creature that escaped out of the lab.”

“I’m sorry.” Tasha side-eyes me. “What did you say?”

“Did you say, creature?” Darcy takes one of the translators and plugs it into her ear.

“What kind of creature?” Romy asks and does the same.

“We didn’t see it, but we know it was a Ziarian male who was experimented on,” I say, plugging a translator into Zoe’s ear.  
“Drax scented them in the forest, and they are on the way here. That’s why we have to leave now.”

“Shoe us up, Zoe,” Romy starts to tear strips off the bottom of her toga dress. “We need to get ready to travel.”



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## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

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## Draxyn

I PEEL off from the front of the line and circle behind the females, who are running along single file, and think we must look like a shepherd herding a flock of alope. The forest is too thick for us to run in a group. They run as fast as they can go, but they are slow. I wish I could carry all five on my back, but that's not possible.

I worry that Mordox has recently been to the ship. I know why Rooke was there, but what was Mordox doing? Scoping out the scene to attack and slaughter the females at a later time?

I adjust the straps of the pack I carry, which is filled with parts from Stacy's ship. I'm curious as to why Rooke didn't bust his way inside and take what he wanted. It's odd why the marauder is acting out of character. For a notorious space pirate, he should have no qualms about stealing from females.

That's a mystery to solve once I get everyone to safety. I need to figure out his motives, question the females about how long Rooke has been snooping around their ship, and find out about the interactions they've had with him.

With what all I've found, I have much to protect.

I'm undecided about what to do with the key to the collars. I could free the rest of the inmates. If I did, there would be that many more criminals I don't trust on the loose, making it harder for me to protect the females. Or I could simply hide the key and tell no one. Let the prisoners wait out the lifespan of their collars.

What of the parts I pilfered off Stacy's ship? I'm not a ship mechanic, though I'm familiar with tinkering with more intricate technology. I think I could repair the emergency shuttle on my own with instructions found off the universal network. If a space pirate can do it, then I can too.

If I repair the shuttle, then what? If I don't free the other inmates and leave everyone behind, I'm no better than Rooke.

When I only had myself to think about, the answer would have been a simple one. Now that I have Stacy and four other humans to protect, I'm not too keen on setting the others free. What harm would those males do to the humans? Ziarians look down on lesser species the same way I used to before I got to know my Stacy. I can't take the chance the females would come to harm at their hands.

My plans to leave Zune are forever changed. I figured the cycle would come when I would return to Ziaria and my bungalow on the Grouch Sea and pick up where I left off.

That's no longer possible now that I've marked Stacy as mine. I might have conceded to her *friends only* request, but my body had other plans. Once I sheathed my cock inside her tight heat, what tiny bit of self-control I was grasping had fled. Then there was no stopping the primal impulse to mark her with my scent. A warning to all other males that she is mine.

Even now, the base of my spine tingles to mark her again. My cock thickens to claim her once more, even as I run through the forest.

I will have to decide how best to protect my mate and her friends. What planet will be best to settle on since returning to Ziarian is no longer an option and neither is Earth. Not with all the Yulineon activity around the border. We would never make it past the patrollers undetected and the females would be killed on sight. Their crime? Being off-world.

It was Universeval Rule law to exterminate any potential threats to the infant life on Earth as well as to advanced life in the Universe. The lawmakers believe humans are not ready to know about life on other worlds. Off-worlders would return with that knowledge. As destructive a species as humans are to

their own planet, they couldn't be trusted not to turn it on other worlds.

I have much to take into consideration, that is *if* I can get everyone to safety.

"Don't slow females," I urge encouragingly. "We are nearly there."

The return trip is taking way too long. I continue to guide them as I watch their backs, uttering supportive words to keep them moving. They pant as they run, their steps not as sure as they were when we started. They are tiring.

A stiff breeze sweeps through the foliage and what I fear the most crosses my scentia glands. I lift my nose to the sultry air and draw in a full breath. No longer one male scent but three.

Rooke follows at a discrete distance. The male I believe to be Mordox, who tries to hide his scent doused in husti flower oil, is fast approaching. The one that chills my blood is the third one who I scented at the lab. The one with the redolence of a Ziarian male but with an underlying oddity I can't explain.

It's the altered male they created there.

Rooke has been tailing us ever since we left Stacy's ship but the other two are traveling from different directions. Their scents grow stronger with each passing second. We will be lucky if we make it to the sunken stairwell before they catch us.

"We are being followed," I whisper to Stacy, not wanting to panic the other females. I dig the grygore device from my cargo pocket to give to her. "You know how to use this. Make sure you get yourself and the females down below no matter what happens."

"What?" Stacy pants as she runs. I want more than anything to snatch her up and run for safety, but she would never forgive me if I left her friends out here. "Who's following us? That Rooke guy?"

"More than him."

Her face pales and her step falters. “Are you saying the creature from the lab is too?”

“What’s going on?” The one with the dark spiraling mane overhears and turns her head.

“I don’t know, Darcy,” Stacy tells her friend then looks at me for answers as we continue to run. “Drax?”

“Female,” I call to the purple-maned female in the lead. “Keep your eyes on the tallest blue tree. Our destination is there.”

The purple-maned female doesn’t look back but holds up a hand with her thumb in the air. My Stacy has made that same hand gesture. I took its meaning as an affirmation, but I wonder.

“What does that mean to hold up a thumb?” I ask my Stacy.

“Means all right,” she puffs between labored breaths. “Please tell me we’re almost there, Drax. My thighs are on fire.”

“We are close, though not as close as I’d like to be,” I reply, worried over how strong our followers’ scents have grown. “We need to pick up the pace.”

“Then take the lead,” the red-maned female calls back to me from the middle of the line. “Romy is getting torn up trying to push through this jungle mess.”

There was no time for introductions when we hurriedly left the ship, but I think Stacy called the red-maned one Tay-shaw, or something. She is right. The purple-maned female is starting to struggle through the thick vegetation.

“Tasha’s right,” my Stacy says. “We can go faster if you clear a path. You also need to tell us all what you’ve scented. It isn’t right to keep any of us in the dark. We need to know what we’re up against.”

“Agreed.” I run ahead, taking the lead from the purple-maned female. Her skin bears many scratches and abrasions.

With my dagger brandished, I cut and push my way through the thick of the forest while imparting the news of the males who follow. “The male you think is your friend is named

Rooke. I can promise you, as a convicted marauder and murderer, he has an ulterior motive.”

Gasps sound out from behind me. I glance back often to make sure all five still follow. I hate that my Stacy insisted on bringing up the rear when we first set off. She reasoned that she had the only other weapon. That small blade she carries won't do much damage against the natural armor of my species unless she knows where to slice.

“We have picked up two more followers,” I continue. “One I believe to be a male named Mordox. He is one of the most notorious inmates set free twenty rotations ago. He's extremely dangerous and won't think twice to slit your throat. The other is a male that has been altered. He broke out of the underground lab where we are headed.”

“Altered into what?” Tasha asks between labored breaths.

I clear the path, breaking through a tangle of small branches and vines with my leather clad forearm and serrated blade, leading us into a less dense field. I motion for the purple-maned one to continue while I run the line of females back to my Stacy and toward the front again.

“Altered into what, Drax?” insists Tasha as I jog past.

“Something much larger than a normal sized Ziarian,” I say. “I don't know. We never saw him, only the damage he left in his wake.”

The females exchange uneasy glances as they travel. Fear of the unknown fuels them to run faster. I study the line of females as I pass. None seem overly fearful of me, casting me curious looks, but unafraid to meet my eyes. All except the pale-maned female who stays quiet with her eyes downcast. I notice the others tend to watch over her.

I retake the lead when the forest begins to choke in around us again, keeping one eye ahead and another on my Stacy at the rear. I'm pleased the females are now moving at a faster clip despite their panted breaths and grunts of exhaustion.

Rooke stays with us. His scent a constant since we left the ship. The other two are nearly on us, having gained ground

from our slower procession. I pick up my pace in hopes the females will too.

It is a relief to look up and finally see how close we are to the entrance of the underground lab. I run out ahead and clear the path, then turn around and head to the back of the line.

“The stairwell is just past that blue tree,” I say to Stacy and point to the enormous clava tree in the close distance. “The one I climbed to get my bearings before we set off for your ship. I’ll distract the males while you get the females to safety.”

“No, Drax,” Stacy argues. “I’m not leaving you behind.”

“I’ll soon follow.” I hope. It’s three against one. If I had a nutrone blaster, maybe I could win. Armed with only a dagger? Odds were not in my favor. “You know how to use the grygore device. Lead the females to safety and lock the doors behind you.”

“If I do that, how will I know when you’re waiting outside for me to let you in? It isn’t like the lab has a doorbell.” My face must have given my thoughts away because Stacy stops running and faces off with me. “You don’t expect to make it out of this. Do you, Drax?”

A rhetorical question that I have no interest in answering. I swing Stacy up into my arms and sprint to where the females have run ahead.

“Purple-maned female!” I call out to the one in the lead.

“Romy,” she tosses over her shoulder. “The name’s Romy.”

I easily catch up to her. “All right, Romy. My Stacy is going to lead you the remainder of the way.”

“Drax, no.” Stacy wiggles in my arms as I jog alongside Romy.

“If you want to help your friends, do as I say.” That stills her in my arms. “You have the grygore device and know how to use it. When I set you on your feet, show them the way, get behind locked doors, and stay put.”

“What about you?” Stacy rebels as I set her on her feet. “With the doors closed, I won’t hear you knock.”

“Stop arguing and go!” I hate how Stacy recoils. I never want her to fear me, but there’s no help for it. She needs to be in a safe place before this fight begins. “Sorry I yelled,” I cup her shoulders and speak softly. “I don’t want you to get hurt. Allow me to protect you.”

Her eyes glisten. “Okay, Drax,” she utters through lips that tremble. “Promise you’ll be careful, big blue.” Stacy flings her arms around my waist and squeezes me for all she’s worth. “Promise you’ll come back to me.”

I return her hug, but I won’t lie to her. “I will be as careful as I can be, and I will do what I can to join you in the lab.” I ease away and peer down into her upturned face. “Time is up. The males are upon us, and you need to take the others and run.” I gently push her away and turn her toward her destination. “I love you, my mate.”

She gasps at my words and turns away from me, directing the females to run toward the clava tree like I asked. My heart fractures when she doesn’t reciprocate. I should pretend it doesn’t matter, but the hollow ache in the center of my chest says otherwise.

No matter. As my chosen mate, I will protect her with my life.

I watch the females go, anxious for them to reach the sunken stairwell before the inevitable battle begins. Just as the foliage closes behind Tasha, a roar rings out behind me.

My scales ripple and stand on end. The deadly points of my horns move to point outward, readying me for battle.

Dagger in hand, I wheel around to defend myself against an attacker only to see Mordox leap through the air, not at me, but onto the back of a giant beast. The tackle from the huge, green-maned male doesn’t even faze the beast, only distracts him from me.

Claws the size of daggers were up and ready to swipe, the beast had been about to strike me with a killing blow when



Mordox jumped him. Mordox saved my life! Something I never thought would happen.

The beast flings Mordox off his back as if he were no more than an insect. Mordox hits the ground in a practiced roll, popping up to leap again. He slashes the beast across the face with his claws, slicing him open.

No longer a Ziarian, his face is distorted into that of a monster. A product of vile experimentation, he's easily twice my size and weight. His orange-streaked mane sticks out in every direction from his enormous head, shaggy and wild around horns large enough to leave a hole in the middle of a male's chest.

Lips peel back in a feral snarl, his fangs drip with a viscous goo. His orange eyes gleam with a sinister hunger. Enraged, the beast lashes out, his claws twice as long, catching Mordox across his chest. Both combatants bleed from their wounds.

The mass murderer has met his match. He circles the beast, contemplating his next strike. The beast tracks Mordox, turning to give me a view of his back. Armored scales stand erect like triangular knives across the breadth of his shoulders and down his spine to the base of his lashing tail.

We must keep the creature busy to give the females ample time to reach the underground facility. Dagger up, I keep low to avoid those massive scales, and am careful to avoid his whipping tail. I storm the beast, aiming for his side. A quick jab and I roll away. Unnaturally dark blue blood leaks from the wound.

If it bleeds, it can be killed.

On a mighty roar, the beast swipes at me with raking sweeps. I duck and roll; his claws narrowly miss me, whistling overhead as they cut through the air.

Incensed, he lunges for Mordox, grabbing him around the throat with one meaty hand, and dangling his feet above the ground.

I should make a run for the lab while the beast is distracted, but Zune will never be safe with this thing on the loose. And I

owe Mordox my life.

I think of the unused explosives in the collar I carry in my pocket. The beast's neck is twice the size of mine, so closing the collar isn't possible. Without being in the closed position, the key won't work to activate it. I'll have to think of something else.

I rush back in, dagger leading my charge. I aim for the beast's opposite side, but before my jab reaches its target, I'm slapped away. Flung through the air and into a tree trunk, my back cracking into the wood. I fall limply, momentarily knocked stupid, but my attack was enough to jar Mordox loose from the beast's death strangle and the male unceremoniously crumples to the ground at the beast's feet.

It's clear the two of us are no match for this thing.

As the wind shifts direction, the beast tilts back his massive head and pulls hard at the air. He wheels around with grim determination and heads in the direction of the underground facility.

He has scented the females.

I push myself up from the base of the tree, my ribs screaming in broken agony. Mordox is doing the same limping run as me. We exchange a look, but I can't read his pained expression.

Why is he trying to kill the beast? Is he so determined to kill the females himself that he will take out any opponent necessary? Whatever the reason, I need all the help I can get to slow this thing down.

As we near the heels of the beast, Rooke comes flying out of nowhere. Feet first, he plants his kick into the beast's belly. He hits hard but ricochets off, only forcing the giant male back a single step.

Rooke lands a few feet away, holding his shin and howling in pain.

The beast recovers and takes off at a sprint, plowing through the thick forest at an amazing speed. All three of us lamely run, unable to catch him as he nears the sunken stairwell to the underground facility.

I see a flash of red as Tasha is just descending the stairs. I don't see Stacy and hope she is at the bottom, opening the door. The other females hunker down on the ground, frozen in fear.

I hear someone utter, "Godzilla."

I don't know what that is. Everything I've read about Earth never mentioned indigenous species like this altered male.

"Fuck!" I curse to my unlikely allies. "They aren't even inside yet."

"No, you don't!" Rooke is faster than me and Mordox, leaping headlong into the beast with the sharp point of his horns leading the way. He barely makes a dent in the tough scaled armor of the beast's back, but Rooke's attack does slow him down, giving me and Mordox time to catch up.

I dive and hack at the soft bend in the back of the beast's knees. He whips his tail around and slaps me stupid. I'm tossed backward to roll across the forest floor.

Mordox is next to make a move, jumping on the beast's back and hooking an arm around the male's neck, using his considerable weight to haul him back. Caught off-guard, the beast stumbles backward, arms pinwheeling to regain his footing.

Rooke seizes the opportunity to sink his fangs into one of the beast's calf muscles. He roars in fury, slinging his body from side to side, trying to shake off his attackers. But Mordox and Rooke hang tight, not giving in.

An idea blooms and I see my chance to put my collar to good use. I pull the confinement device from my pocket and race to help the others. Careful to avoid the whipping tail, I leap and clap the collar around one thick bicep, depress and activate the key, rapidly clicking through the various colors until I reach the flashing red.

"Everybody run," I shout and pull the key free. It's a short countdown to an ultimate demise for the beast and anyone within the blast's range.

I don't get far before I'm hit in the back by the searing plume, but I keep running until my legs give out, and I collapse facedown onto the debris-littered forest floor.

The pounding of footsteps vibrates the ground and I'm rolled to my side. Blackness threatens to steal my vision. I blink hard through the agonizing burn to remain alert.

Rooke's face swims into view. "You crazy fuck. You still alive?"

"Is he dead?"

"Most definitely."

"Are you sure?"

"There are pieces of him all over the forest, Draxyn. I'm positive he won't be getting back up."

"And Mordox?"

"Alive the last time I saw him. He's gone now. Didn't see where he went."

"Drax!" My Stacy is suddenly at my side, her pretty human face etched with concern as she looks me over.

"Why are you not locked inside the facility?" If it weren't for Rooke and Mordox, the beast would not have been defeated, but that doesn't mean I should trust them. They have their own agendas.

On shaky arms, I push to my knees. Through Rooke's protests, I stand and the ground tilts beneath my feet.

"Where the fuck you think you're going, Drax?" Rooke circles his arm around my waist.

"I don't want your help." I try and push the marauder away.

"Tough shite because you need it."

I shove myself out of his hold and collapse to my knees.

"Stacy, go inside."

"I'm not leaving you out here." My stubborn mate drops to her knees in front of me. "Let me help you inside."

Stacy ducks under my arm and wraps an arm around my waist, helping me limp over to the sunken stairwell.

“We can’t let Rooke in. I don’t trust him,” I say, gritting my teeth through the zinging pain of her simple touch. The scales on my back are fried and my ribs are fucked.

“Well, that hurts my feelings,” Rooke snorts and hobbles along after us. “Especially after I tried to save Truyn. I could have been killed by the blast from his collar, but still, I risked my own life to save your friend.”

“Why are you here?” I stumble and Rooke moves in to help. “The crashed ship is back that way.”

“What interests me is here.” Rooke nods to where the females stand in a tight group.

I start to chuckle then cough, my cracked ribs tortured by the effort. “Snared by the scent of a female.”

“The same as you,” Rooke retorts dryly. “I helped you fight that beast for my fated mate. What more must I do to earn your damn trust, Draxyn?”

I shuffle forward, determined to get my mate to safety. What can I do about Rooke? He’s going nowhere, helping me walk. I can’t fight him off in my condition, yet it is ingrained in my soul to protect her. As injured as I am, I can feel what remains of my energy leaching out.

My vision swims and I know it won’t be long before darkness takes me.

“Do you got a medical cuff in that hidey-hole, techie?” Rooke asks.

“Whyshould I tellu?” I slur, rapidly losing my grip on consciousness.

As I lose my fight with darkness, my mind mulls over Rooke’s words. It now makes sense why he didn’t storm the ship and take the parts he needs to fix the broken shuttle, and why he helped fight the beast. I know all too well the power a chosen female has over a male.

And as I relive the cycle of Truyn's life, Rooke's gut-wrenching apology tugs at me.

Have I misjudged the space pirate?

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## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

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## Stacy

DRAX GOES limp in my arms. The weight of his arm across my shoulders is tremendous, buckling my knees. Rooke and I help ease him to the ground.

“Don’t you dare die on me, Drax.” I cup his face in my hands. “Not after everything we’ve been through. You can’t die on me now.”

I slap at Rooke’s hands when he removes the translator from Drax’s ear.

“I’m trying to help him, female.” Rooke scowls and plugs the device into his ear. “Where do those stairs lead?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“Because I’m all you’ve got!” Rooke yells in my face. “Drax needs a medical cuff to heal from his injuries. Is there one in that underground place?”

I search my memories of the medical cuff Drax healed me with in his cell, then think hard of the items I’d seen inside the rooms Drax and I gained access to.

When I don’t answer right away, Rooke grabs my arm in a bruising hold and shoves the key to Drax’s collar in my face. “Where did Drax get this? In that underground place where you are headed?”

“You’re hurting my arm, dick!” I try and jerk out of his hold. His grip only tightens. “I liked you better when you were flat on your back with a bloody nose.”



Rooke laughs. “Drax was smart to hide you from the other inmates.” He dips his face to the hollow of my throat and inhales deeply. “I would have done the same for my mate.”

“We aren’t mates.” My denial hurts and as I utter the words, I don’t believe them. “We’re just friends.”

“Does he know that? He’s marked you as his.” Rooke nods down to Drax where he lies between us.

“Drax doesn’t trust you and neither do I,” I blurt. “You’re not his friend.”

“But you are?”

“That’s right.”

“All right, *friend*,” Rooke gets in my face. “If you want to save him, the only way is to put him in a medical cuff as soon as possible. The only ones I know of are at the prison compound, which is a long fucking way from here. I can carry him, but with my bum leg, it will be slow going and he might not make it, so if there is one on your ship or inside that underground hiding place, we need to get it on him fast.”

“The first time I’ve ever seen one of those things was waking up in Drax’s cell. I don’t know if there’s one on the ship. I’ve never seen one there,” I admit. Scared and distrustful, what other choice do I have than to let Rooke help Drax. “There might be one in the room where he found the key. It looked like some kind of lab with lots of machines.”

I glance over to where the girls are huddled tightly together, talking frantically, near the sunken stairs. There’s some kind of drama, but it looks like Romy is handling it and I need to help Drax.

“Show me.” Rooke lifts an unconscious Drax from the ground and hauls him over his shoulder.

I shiver with fear over the extent of his injuries. His back is worse than his front. The layers of scales look melted and charred. I’m just an interior design student and a human. What do I know about healing cuffs and taking care of an alien?

Drax moans in pain and panic streaks through me. “You’re hurting him!”

“Look, female! I tried to help Truyn and failed. I don’t want to lose another friend.” Something about his tone rings sincere but I don’t wholly trust him. “His breathing is already shallow. The longer we stand here eyeballing each other, the longer he remains in pain. He needs that cuff!”

“What if we don’t find one?” I counter.

“Then I’ll run back to the prison compound if it means helping him.”

I search Rooke’s face. His expression is one of pain and exasperation. He favors one leg and bears multiple injuries of his own. Maybe he wants the cuff for himself, but I can’t carry Drax, and we need to get him inside.

“Fuck,” I curse and turn toward the sunken stairs. “Let’s go. No tricks, Rooke.”

“No tricks,” Rooke grunts under Drax’s weight.

“I can’t believe I’m going to let a murderer in,” I murmur as we hurry.

“It was self-defense,” Rooke defends.

“Drax called you a pirate, a marauder, and a thief.”

“The techie doesn’t think as much of me as I do of him,” Rooke huffs. “I freely admit to the pirating. Marauding and thieving are redundant.”

When we get close to the stairs, I look over to where Romy and Tasha stand nearby, looking into the forest.

“Romy. Come on. Get the girls over here. I’m opening the doors.” She turns wide eyes on me, and I know something terrible has happened. “What?”

“Zoe is gone, and Darcy went after her.”

As if a bucket of ice water has been dumped on my head, my blood freezes in my veins. I’d been so worried over Drax, I hadn’t checked to see about the girls after the explosion. When

I turn back to Rooke waiting at the top of the sunken stairs, his face is as grave as mine.

“Let’s get Drax settled, then I’ll go after Darcy and the little pale-maned one.”

“Romy! Tasha!” My hands shake as I pull the grygore device from where I stashed it inside the folds of my romper. “Come on, get your asses down here before something else happens.”

“We have to find them!” Tasha argues.

I remember Tasha teasing Darcy about Rooke chatting her up. If Rooke proves half as protective of Darcy as Drax is of me, he is our best option for getting them back.

“Rooke will find them,” I yell back, my eyes pooling with tears.

The second the door opens, we all race inside. We run through all the entrapment tunnels and doors and halls until we reach the room where Drax found the key that saved his life. Now it’s my turn to help save his.

Rooke places Drax on a padded gurney while I start a search for a medical cuff.

“What is this place?” Tasha asks from the open door.

“Nothing good,” Rooke utters, joining me in my search. “Found one!”

Rooke reaches Drax before I do and does exactly as he promised. He removes the leather cuff from Drax’s forearm, replaces it with the medical cuff, and attaches it to the gurney’s frame.

“Come here, female.” Rooke beckons me with a turn of his hand. “Quickly. Let me show you how this works, then I’m off to find the others.”

He taps a green button, then a sequence of white buttons with weird patterns etched on them. “I activated it and input his weight.” The cuff comes alive with tiny blinking lights and a soft whirring sound. Drax’s face pinched in pain, now begins to relax. “Once he’s fully healed, the cuff will switch from these colorful lights to white. Press this,” Rooke points to a

button, “and the cuff will open. Don’t take it off him until the white lights come on.”

“Okay.” I nod and repeat his directions in hushed words. “White lights and he’s healed.”

“He might sleep longer after the white lights engage,” Rooke explains while donning a second medical cuff from inside a cabinet that looks to be filled with them. “That’s normal for extensive injuries. It’s a healing sleep, so don’t wake him. Let him wake up on his own.”

“Okay.”

“I’m going after the females.” Rooke doesn’t wait for my answer but limps as he sprints from the room. “Are you coming? You need to use that grygore contraption to open the doors so I can leave.”

I go numb, my mind switching off. I’ve gone into survival mode, like when I was caged. It’s what kept me from going crazy all those years locked up with only myself for company. I suppose it was a kind of shock to feel nothing.

This time it’s shock over seeing the beast, seeing Drax taking the brunt of the explosion, and now the anxiety over two missing girls. It all feels like too much dumped on me at once. I want to stay strong, but I feel like I’m breaking under the weight.

“I’ll watch over him while you let Rooke out,” Tasha says gently, wraps her arm around my waist, and leads me to the door. “Go on now. Darcy and Zoe need his help.”

I numbly nod and follow a limping Rooke, hurrying through the tunnels and halls and up the winding steps until we reach the last door to the sunken stairs.

Rooke digs around inside his pocket and hands me an egg-shaped object. “It’s a comm.” He explains and shows me how it works. “I will keep you updated when I find the females.”

“Thanks, Rooke.” I startle at Romy’s voice behind me. My head is so fucked up, I didn’t even realize she followed us.

“Yes, thanks,” I murmur.

Rooke dips his head humbly and takes off into the forest. We climb the stairs after him, watching until he disappears into the lush foliage. Romy's arms circle my shoulders, side-hugging me to her.

"If anyone can find them, it's him," she says. "He has eyes only for Darcy, but once he finds her, she will insist on going after Zoe and that guy with green hair who took her."

"Zoe is with Mordox?"

"Darcy saw him sling her over his shoulder and take off into the forest. I turned my back for one second, and Darcy went after them. Me and Tasha ran after her, but we lost her in the thick vegetation before we could stop her."

I close my eyes, just absorbing all the shit I've been through over the past two years. The only bright spots were escaping with the girls and meeting Drax. Now two of the girls are missing and Drax is gravely injured.

"Come on." Romy nudges me along. "There's nothing more we can do but wait. Let's go check on Drax."

I let her lead me through the maze until we reach the lab where Drax lays quietly on the gurney. Tasha sits on a stool she's pulled over next to him.

"He hasn't so much as twitched." Tasha climbs off the stool. "Was this where you and Drax hid out on your way to the ship?"

"More like got trapped." I go to his side and clasp his hand. He's out cold and I hate how lifeless his hand feels in mine.

I recount my misadventure of running from Drax then falling into the lift shaft, and our temporary entrapment while absently rubbing my thumb over his warm flesh.

"We thought his collar was going to explode, and Drax locked himself inside this room to protect me from the explosion and the aftermath. But before that, he knew his time was running out, so he taught me how to hotwire the door locks, then bit off his claw." I pull it from where I stashed it inside the folds of my romper and hold it up to show the girls. "He gave it to me so I would be able to pry off the covers after he was dead."

My numbness wears off and something inside me cracks. I start to weep. Wracked with regret over words I should have said to Drax and tormented with fear for the girls lost in the forest, my body shakes with my heavy sobs.

Romy and Tasha envelop me in a caring embrace. Cocooned in their compassionate hold, they utter soothing words that calm me until my tears lessen to just a few tumbling strays that I swipe away.

“Drax will make it, Stacy,” Tasha says, smoothing my hair from my face. “I just know it.”

“He looks better already,” Romy adds.

I peer down into Drax’s face. His color is no longer a pale blue but back to its original deep turquoise, and his shallow breaths have deepened. If it wasn’t for the angry slashes across his chest and the bruising along his ribs, I would think him asleep.

“I should clean his wounds.” I turn to Romy and gasp as if seeing her for the first time. “We need to clean your wounds! Good lord, did all this happen while running here?”

“It’s mostly scratches,” Romy admits in her accented English. “It looks worse than it is. I’ll live.”

“Why not use one of those healing cuff thingies.” Tasha pulls one off the stack in the cabinet and I notice her limp. “Isn’t this what Drax used to heal you?”

“Yes.”

“Then it should work to heal Romy.” Tasha goes to hand it to her, but she adamantly shakes her head.

“Nein.” Romy puts up a hand. “I watched Rooke type in Drax’s weight on that weird keypad. We don’t know what those symbols mean. Obviously, they’re numbers, but we would be guessing as to what they are. We could do ourselves more harm than good. I’ll heal on my own.”

“You’re still limping from the crash.” I point to Tasha’s leg.

“Yeah, I think it was just a sprain.” Tasha hisses in pain as she lifts her foot off the ground. “I babied it, and it got better.”

After running on it, it hurts like hell again. I'd almost chance this cuff thing to get some relief."

"You need to get off your feet," I say to Tasha. "Both of you need to get cleaned up and rest. I have the comm Rooke gave me. All we can do is wait."

"Got any crutches in this place?" Romy wanders the room, opening cabinets and searching through drawers.

"I don't think so."

"Any idea what all these glass jars are for?" Romy lifts a bottle containing pale blue fluid from one of the drawers, and I think about the horrible experiments and the headless aliens inside the glass room.

"You're right, Romy. We don't know what any of this stuff is. It could be dangerous to us. We do have plenty of food, water, and beds. Oh, and mist showers. That should work to clean your wounds. I can clean Drax up with water and a clean cloth."

"What are we waiting for?" Tasha claps her hands. "I could use a shower."

I pat Drax's hand and lean down close to his ear. "I'll be right back. I need to show the girls around our place."

Warmth blooms within me. Maybe being mated to Drax wouldn't be so terrible after all. I like the thought of us having our own place together. As for going home, back to Earth, I'm not the same person I was. Forever changed by my abduction, I would never fit in. Not with all I've seen. I would never view the world through the same eyes as everyone else. I would feel like an alien among my own kind. And I would never feel safe again knowing an alien could abduct me at any time.

Drax makes me feel safe.

I smooth tangled tendrils of his silky hair from his face. Regret sits heavy on my heart. He said he loved me, and I didn't say it back. So shocked to hear the words, I froze up. I'm not nearly as brave as the girls give me credit for being. I can't even accept love without being terrified of the consequences.

“Why don’t you give us a quick tour,” Romy prompts and offers Tasha her arm to lean on.

I nod to her and then whisper to Drax. “I’ll be right back. My love,” I try out the L-word and marvel at how right it feels rolling off my tongue.

“So, what’s the deal with the exploding collars? What was the prison like? How many prisoners are there? Where is this place at?” Tasha peppers me with questions as we start our tour.

I catch them up on what all I know and show them the room next door with its many beds and en suite bathroom. Then we travel through the many doors and hallways until we reach the kitchen. By the time I’ve shown them how everything works, I must have answered a zillion of their questions.

I leap out of my skin when the comm pings. I fumble through the folds of my romper, palm the device in shaky hands, and answer the way Rooke showed me.

“I found her,” Rooke states gruffly.

“Put me down, brute.” Darcy’s muffled voice comes through and we all sag in relief.

“Stop wiggling around, female.” Rooke’s voice sounds like it’s coming from a distance. There are lots of shuffling sounds as if a struggle is happening. “I’m not letting you go until you promise not to run off.”

“I’m going after Zoe and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

“I already said I would search for her,” Rooke complains. More rustling sounds out through the comm as if it’s been dropped.

“I don’t trust you,” Darcy hisses. “Now put me the fuck down.”

After some muffled grunts and curses, Rooke is back on the comm. “She’s as stubborn as a rynhurt.”

“Can we talk to her?” Romy asks.



“Hi, girls,” Darcy says and curses. “Tell this asshole to untie me.”

“What?” Tasha talks into the comm where I have it held out between us. “Why are you tied up?”

“Because every time I set her feet on the ground, she tries to run off,” Rooke speaks loudly and from someplace close by.

“Darcy, you need to come back here and let Rooke look for Zoe,” I plead. “He can scent her out.”

“Nope.” Darcy is resolute and I imagine her shaking her head. “It’s my fault she’s gone. I had a hold of her hand and promised her I wouldn’t let go. The explosion flung us apart and I lost her. I lost her! It’s my fault that awful Mordox guy nabbed her.”

“No. It’s not your fault,” I say, feeling a measure of guilt. I had made a promise to them all that I wouldn’t let anything happen to them, but Rooke is our best chance of getting Zoe back. “It’s too dangerous out there. Let Rooke bring you back here before he searches for Zoe.”

“No,” Darcy replies curtly.

“We would all feel better if you were safe down here with us,” Romy adds.

“I would feel better if Zoe was safe,” Darcy grits out and sounds as if she’s struggling. “Untie me, brute. I’m going after my friend.”

We all talk at once, trying to convince Darcy to come back, but she’s not having it, and time is wasting. Zoe is out there somewhere in the hands of a mass murderer. That’s what Drax had said he had been convicted of.

We stop talking at Rooke’s resounding curse. “Have it your way, female. If I untie you, you will promise me no running off. We search for her together.”

After a stretch of silence, Darcy agrees.

“I’ll keep her safe,” Rooke says to us. “We’ll find Zoe. I’ll keep you posted.”

The comm abruptly ends.

“Sounds like Rooke has his hands full.” I look at the egg-shaped device in my hands, a mixture of unease and amusement filling me.

.....  
**EPILOGUE**  
.....

## Stacy

I STRETCH my arms over my head and arch my back. I've barely moved off this stool in the days since Rooke carried Drax down here. He appears all healed up, but the medical cuff still hums away with its multi-colored lights flashing. I impatiently wait on the edge of my seat for them to turn white and for Drax's eyes to open.

The girls have settled in, and even fallen into a routine. This underground labyrinth is becoming a home of sorts as we wait to hear more from Rooke and Darcy. The last comm transmission was yesterday and it wasn't good news.

Rooke lost Zoe's scent. It seems Mordox is covering his trail. He doesn't want to be found. Rooke says Zoe still lives, otherwise he would have scented her remains. For what purpose is Mordox keeping her alive if he's a notorious murderer?

I shudder over what that could mean for Zoe.

My gut churns with the hollow ache of worry. The comm sits next to me on a little rolling table. My eyes wander to it often, willing it to ping again. Wishing to hear Zoe's sweet voice tell me that she's okay.

"You've been sitting here for hours." I startle when Tasha is suddenly there. "You need to eat something."

"Aren't you supposed to be off your feet and keeping that bad ankle elevated?"

"I'll get bed sores if I sit much longer." Tasha sets the bowl of what we call chicken stew on the rolling table. "Besides, I

have this handy dandy cane Romy made for me, so I can keep my weight off of it.”

Tasha holds what looks like a U-shaped pipe out for me to see.

“Where did you get that?”

“From the place next door.”

“I don’t remember seeing anything like that in the bedroom,” I say, referring to the room the girls have been using to sleep.

“No. The locked room.” Tasha points in the direction of the third door Drax and I never opened thinking the altered male was locked inside.

Her response sends chills racing down my spine. “No more exploring, Tasha! You and Romy know that beast was created in this underground facility. We don’t know what else is down here. Stay only in the rooms I showed you.”

“Okay,” her face pales. “Sorry, Stacy. It’s pretty boring down here. We didn’t think it was any big deal.”

“Just be careful. Okay? What did you find in there?”

“A long hall with a door at the end. Then it opens up into what looks like a storage room with shelves and shelves of all kinds of stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Alien looking stuff,” Tasha shrugs. “Romy said we shouldn’t mess with any of it until Drax wakes up, but we did take this pipe thing. It looked harmless enough.”

“Let’s keep that door locked.” I worry about what’s in there.

“Romy said the same thing.” Tasha puts her cane pipe to work and heads for the door. “I’ll be wandering the halls for a bit and then propping my foot up next door if you need anything.”

“All right. Thanks for the stew.”

“Anytime.”

The door swooshes closed and I’m alone again with my mate. My big blue mate with the yellow streaked hair. It feels like a lifetime ago since I last saw the sparkle in his bright yellow

gaze or the dimple in his cheek that charmed me so thoroughly.

I bow my head and close my eyes, wishing with all my heart that Drax will come back to me. “I miss you more than I’ve ever missed anyone or anything in my life,” I speak aloud, as I often do, hoping he hears me and opens his eyes. I replaced the translator Rooke took with a new one so Drax can understand my words. “Please wake up so I can tell you that I love you too. I should have said it back all those days ago, but I was scared. I’ve never felt this strongly about anyone. I was wrong to fight it. And I should have never made you promise we were only friends. You are so much more to me than that.” I sniffle and squeeze his hand.

He squeezes back.

My head snaps up to find his hooded gaze trained on me. His smile is bright but lopsided with lethargy. I reach out to brush my fingers over the dimple I love so much.

“Am I dreaming?” Drax’s voice is rough and deep.

“No.” I blink away the blur of tears pooling in my eyes.

“Where are we?” His eyes float to the ceiling and then back to me.

“In the underground lab.” I slide off the stool and stand at his side. “Rooke carried you down here and then went to search for Darcy and Zoe.”

“What happened to them?” Drax fights to keep drooping eyelids open.

“Mordox took Zoe and Darcy went after them. Rooke found Darcy first, and they’re searching for Zoe together.” I lift the comm from where it sits next to my bowl of cooling stew. “Rooke gave this to me. He checks in to keep us posted on his progress.”

Drax’s eyes narrow on the egg-shaped device. “Fucker stole my comm. I knew he’d pilfer my shite. Fucking pirate.”

“He admitted to being one,” I say. “But I think we can trust him, Drax. I know how you feel about him, but if it weren’t

for him, you would have died.”

Drax searches my face with tired eyes. “He still bears watching. Now get naked and hop up here before I fall back to sleep.”

“The medical cuff is still blinking all different colors,” I giggle. Is he joking? He was nearly killed just a few days ago. “I didn’t think you’d wake up until you were fully healed.”

“I need a different kind of healing.” Drax rolls his hips, showing off a massive erection tenting the sheet I covered him with after cleaning his wounds.

“It’s so weird to understand all your words.” I touch my ear that has the translator. “I miss your stilted English and reading your body language.”

“You can read my body language from up here,” he coaxes with a sexy smirk.

The sudden burst of his spicy scent saturates the air, and my body instantly responds. A deep ache of lust shoots to the heart of my pussy, sending a wicked wetness to pool between my thighs.

I don’t waste another second and shuck my romper before carefully climbing onto the gurney, straddling Drax’s wide hips. It’s awkward at first, with him taking up all the space. As soon as he thrust under me, all I can focus on is the solid rod of his erection. My thighs are already shaking for what I know he can make me feel.

I lift up on my knees and shove the sheet aside, impatient to feel his heat against mine. Drax is stronger than he lets on, circling my waist with one hand while the other is trapped inside the cuff Rooke attached to the gurney, and he urges me to grind against his steely shaft.

Drax’s sexy groan sets my body on fire. A delicious arousal pulls heavy at me, coiling into a needy ache. I squirm, desperate to have him inside me as my pussy glides over his velvety ridges.

His hand leaves my waist and greedily cups my breast, smoothing circles around my areola before thumbing the

pebbled peak, sending searing swirls to lick at my hungry flesh.

Unable to take another second of our combined teasing, I reach between us and stand up his cock. His length reaches past my mons. I plant a foot on the gurney and raise myself higher, splitting my pussy with the blunt point of his weeping head.

Inch by glorious inch, I ease down until my bottom touches his lap. The knot near his base begins to swell. I pleasure myself on his massive girth, feeling the stretch of my flesh as I glide up and down on his shaft. I seat myself fully, rocking my hips to grind against the spiraling pleasure that presses a magic button inside that sends me soaring into a fiery bliss.

Drax's climax surges on the heels of mine, his big body tensing up tight. His preternatural abs flex and bunch under the onslaught of his release.

I half collapse on top of him, careful to keep my weight settled on my outstretched arms.

"You won't hurt me." Drax urges me down with his hand on the small of my back. "Kiss me first."

I brush my lips across his, flicking out my tongue to taste the seam of his mouth. He opens for me, and our tongues tangle and dual in a lover's dance.

I lay my head on his pectoral and snuggle into him. "Are you sure I'm not too heavy?"

"I'm sure. You're exactly where I want you." Drax flexes his arm, pulling me tighter to him. "I thought I heard you say something earlier."

"You heard me?"

"I would hear it again."

"So demanding." I teasingly swat at his chest.

"Only when it comes to you."

I lift my head and scoot up his body. His gaze locks with mine and I'm overcome with gratitude that I get a chance to tell him



what I had been denying to both myself and him.

“I love you, Drax. I should have said the words before, but I was afraid of how much you make me feel. After so long of numbing out my emotions, you are a sensory overload.”

His smile lights up the room. “And I love you, my most cherished mate.” Then his expression turns serious. “You realize being mated to me means you can never return to your world.”

“I know,” I sigh with a blend of happiness and sorrow. “I’ll miss my family, but I would grieve myself to death if I was without you. I’ve already experienced nearly losing you twice. I don’t ever want to feel like that again. You are here, so Zune is my home.”

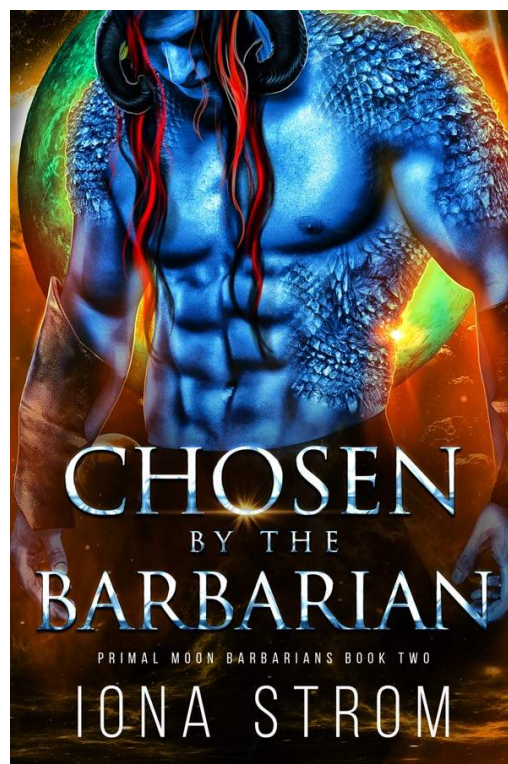
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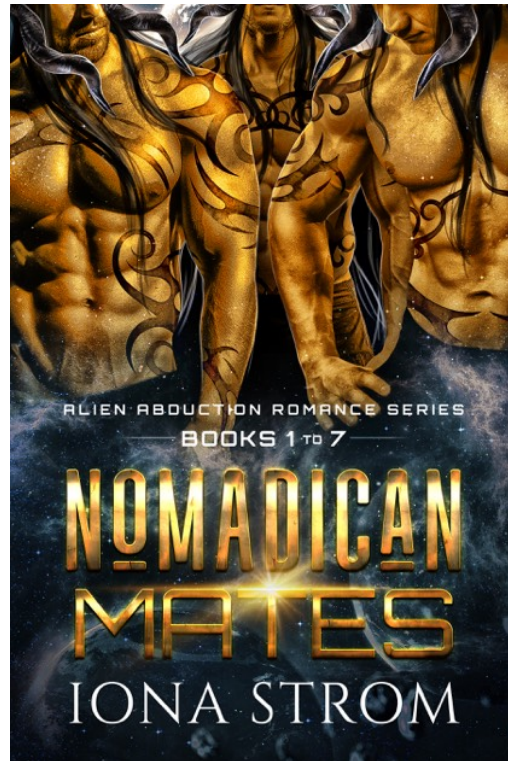
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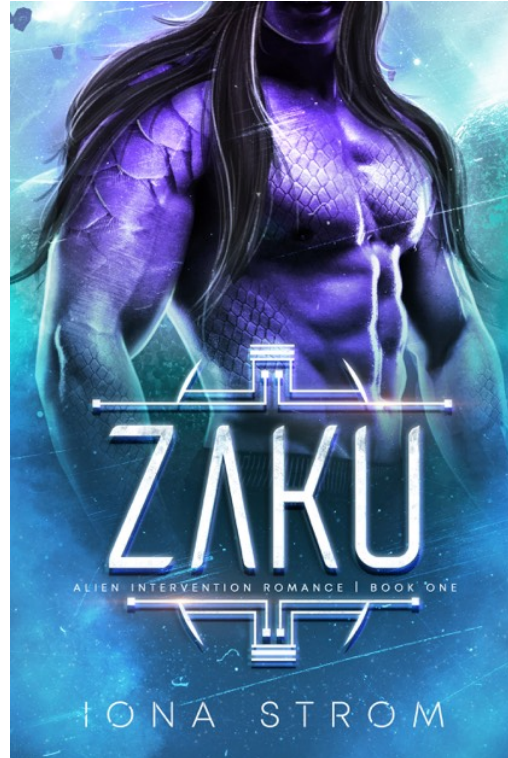
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*Iona Strom* writes for readers who love hot, erotic romance featuring exotic alien males who believe human females are a delicacy to be devoured—over and over again.

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