

A POST-APOCALYPTIC ALIEN ROMANCE

XARC'N WARRIORS: MOUNTAINS &

HUNTER'S

Bounty

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Hunter's Bounty – Xarc'n Warriors: Mountains
Book 6

A Post Apocalyptic Alien Romance
By Lynnea Lee

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Contents

[Chapter 1: Sammie](#)

[Chapter 2: Drak'l](#)

[Chapter 3: Sammie](#)

[Chapter 4: Drak'l](#)

[Chapter 5: Sammie](#)

[Chapter 6: Drak'l](#)

[Chapter 7: Sammie](#)

[Chapter 8: Drak'l](#)

[Chapter 9: Sammie](#)

[Chapter 10: Sammie](#)

[Chapter 11: Drak'l](#)

[Chapter 12: Sammie](#)

[Chapter 13: Drak'l](#)

[Chapter 14: Sammie](#)

[Chapter 15: Drak'l](#)

[Chapter 16: Sammie](#)

[Chapter 17: Drak'l](#)

[Chapter 18: Sammie](#)

[Chapter 19: Drak'l](#)

[Chapter 20: Sammie](#)

[Chapter 21: Drak'l](#)

[Chapter 22: Sammie](#)

[Chapter 23: Drak'l](#)

[Chapter 24: Sammie](#)

[Chapter 25: Drak'l](#)

[Chapter 26: Sammie](#)

[Epilogue: Sammie](#)

[ALSO BY AUTHOR](#)

Chapter 1: Sammie

“Run, Sammie,” Billy said, holding his pack out to me. “Get out of here while you can.”

“What? No! We stick together.” I didn’t take his bag.

We weren’t running from the deadly space bugs that had destroyed the world as we knew it. We weren’t even running from the terrifying alien warriors who’d come with the creatures, set on claiming our world for themselves. No, we were running from Lucas.

“He’s my brother,” Billy said with resolve. “And he’s my responsibility. I need to stop him before he hurts anyone else.”

“He’s no one’s responsibility but his own. Come. Run with me.” I couldn’t imagine heading out without him. Billy had become like a brother to me over the last few years I’d lived in the bunker with his family. I was also woefully ill-equipped to survive out there on my own.

“Come on Sammie. You’re acting like you think I’ll fail.”

I gave him *the* look. Billy was no more than a teenager, the youngest of three brothers, and the scrawniest too. His brother Lucas, on the other hand, was not only a psycho killer; he was big and muscular. He was also armed to the teeth and had already murdered most everyone else in our bunker in a fit of rage.

“I have to do this, Samantha.” Billy never called me Samantha unless he was really serious. He shoved his backpack at me. “Now go. Before he finds you. I’ll meet up

with you at the settlement I told you about, the one at the base of the mountain.”

He released the bag, and I grunted under the new weight. Damn, this thing was heavy.

“But if I have your gear, how can you travel?”

“I have this.” He held out his rifle and then tapped the large sling bag still strapped to his body. “I’ll be fine.”

“But the bugs—”

“Aren’t as bad as they used to be. I promise.” He took a spray bottle out of the side zip pocket of his bag and sprayed me down so thoroughly I smelled like I’d crashed into the perfume section of a department store. “And now they can’t even detect you. Just stay under cover and hide from the flyers.”

I shuddered at the mentioned of the oversized, clawless flying scorpions. They even had a huge spike at the end of their tails. Unlike Earth scorpions, the spike wasn’t a stinger; it was an impaler. None of these space bugs looked identical to Earth ones, but they had characteristics that reminded me of their smaller counterparts.

He pulled my original pack off my back, transferred what little I had into the larger one, and strapped my rifle to it right next to the shotgun. It was huge on me, but he tightened the sternum and hip straps to distribute the weight of the giant bag better on my smaller frame.

“What if I get lost?” At this point, I knew that I was just making excuses not to hoof it alone. I was terrified. I didn’t have any experience surviving in this new world.

“I kept a journal,” Billy said. “It’s in the front compartment of the bag. There’s a map in there. I know you’re scared, but you’ll make it. You’re brave and smart, and I’ll meet you at the settlement.”

The realization that this teenager was better equipped than me to survive in this world had me shoring up my courage.

This was the only world we had now, and if I didn't adapt, I'd be eaten alive or worse.

"I know you guys are in here," announced a familiar voice that would forever haunt my dreams. "Come out now, and I might spare your lives."

I flinched at the sound and slapped a hand over my mouth as if worried he'd hear my gasp. My first reaction was to hide, but nowhere was safe.

"Fuck! He's here already. Go." Billy punctuated his order by shoving me out the back door of the mansion we'd been hiding in, then locking me out.

The late afternoon sun blinded me as I took my first uncertain step out into the world on my own. I'd never been alone before, not since the bugs took over. I'd lived in relative safety inside the bunker for the first year and a half. Then, when they'd opened the bunker back up, I'd gone out gathering only a few times when the fruit trees were ripening, and only with the whole group.

Spurred on by Billy's nobility and bravery, I started moving, heading to the back fence where there was a small gate. The skies were clear now of flyers, and we hadn't seen any bugs in the area when we arrived here this morning. It should be relatively safe.

We'd stayed in the mansion during the noon hours to avoid being seen by flying scorpions; they were the most active then. We'd watched the skies through the blinds and only noticed a few flyers in the area. Billy was right; there were a lot fewer scourge than when we'd gone into hiding years ago. They'd either left from lack of food, or someone had been hunting them.

In hindsight, maybe we should've continued moving. If we had, Lucas wouldn't have caught up to us. The choice between being bug chow or slaughtered by an old friend gone insane was a difficult one.

I had only made it to the next row of houses when a gunshot broke the silence.

Shit! That was loud enough to call every hungry bug to the area.

I kept moving, staying close to the high wooden fence, keeping my ears open for the tell-tale sounds of thousands of little feet hitting the pavement. Occasionally, I scanned the skies for flyers.

I only paused when I got to the edge of the street I needed to cross. There was no cover, so I'd be completely exposed while crossing. I took a deep breath and tried to calm the pounding in my chest.

I didn't see any bugs in the area, and the skies were still clear. Now was as good a time as any. I made a dash for it, aiming at the closest bush.

Just as I set foot on the lawn on the other side, a group of beady-eyed bugs turned the corner. Fear surged through me at the sight of them, so visceral I felt it like an electric stab in my gut.

I ran as fast as I could, swearing silently at my heavy pack. I reached the bushes and dove past them, panting and hoping the bugs hadn't noticed me.

I wasn't so lucky. One of the creatures stopped and turned to peer in my direction. It scented the air while several of its companions stopped and did the same.

I recognized these creatures. They were the most common bugs we saw and the smallest, too, though I'd never call a bug the size of a Rottweiler small. They each had a pair of scythe-like claws that reminded me of praying mantises. Behind the claws were eight spider-like legs. The rest of their bodies were like ants, complete with mandible mouth parts and shiny black-brown carapaces.

They hunted predominantly by scent, though they could see somewhat and detect movement. My dive into the bush

must have alerted them, and now they were trying to see if I was worth investigating.

I stayed perfectly still, my body pressed halfway into the evergreen bush. They shouldn't see me from where they stood, and I had enough scented spray on me to drown an army.

I couldn't run for it. The closest home had a broken window, so I could duck inside, but that wouldn't stop the creatures from following. And if I ran, they'd know I was here for sure.

I had a rifle, but it was useless against the creatures. Rimfire ammunition just didn't have the punch to break through the bugs' tough exoskeletons. The only way was to get them right in the eyes. I wasn't that good of a shot, especially since there were several of them.

There was always the shotgun, but it was strapped underneath the rifle. I didn't have time for that. Best to stay quiet and hope they left me alone.

Another shot rang out in the direction I'd come from, and the creatures all turned their heads that way. They continued across the street, forgetting about me.

Billy! He already had his hands full with Lucas. He couldn't handle a bunch of bugs as well.

There was nothing I could do to help, though. I couldn't make it back to warn him before the bugs, not without them catching me.

No. I had to keep moving and trust that he'd come out the victor. I'd meet him at the settlement.

I continued on, aiming directly toward the base of the mountains in the distance. I wasn't sure if the rumors Billy had heard while foraging were true, and I had no idea what I'd find when I got there. The settlement could be friendly, or it could be a bunch of cannibals.

Billy was sure the people there were good folks, even though he'd described the man he'd met as a biker covered in tattoos. Billy had always been the open-minded one in his family. I hadn't realized just how religious they were until I was stuck in the bunker with them.

Either way, Billy had said he'd meet me there, and I wasn't going to let him down.

But the farther I got, the less destroyed the homes looked, and something in my gut was telling me to stop. I bumped into two more groups of bugs heading toward gunshots, and they were all coming from the direction I was going. Worried I was heading straight into a nest, I decided to stop and rest. I needed to get my bearings.

I chose a home that had its windows intact and an open door. The door had its lock drilled through, but I could bar the door closed much easier than smashed-in glass windows.

By the time I finished securing the home by checking every floor and pushing the furniture against the windows and doors, late afternoon was slowly turning into evening. I'd stopped just in time. My night vision was horrid, even with my glasses on.

I was pulling the curtains closed when I heard a knock at the door.

What the fuck?

I peeked outside to find a massive Xarc'n warrior standing on the porch. The purple alien waved at me through the window and grinned, showing a gleaming row of sharp teeth. I freaked out and, leaving the curtains open, ran for my rifle, which I'd leaned up against the couch.

I pointed it at him through the glass, hoping he couldn't see my hands shaking.

He didn't react. Instead, he just pointed at the door.

For a moment, I wondered if I'd somehow intruded into his space. Did Xarc'n warriors live in houses? But then I saw his

shuttle on the street. It was see-through. That was probably the cloaking I'd heard about, but I saw it all the same.

When he realized I wasn't going to let him in, he frowned, his head tilting in a manner that highlighted his huge, curved horns. He narrowed his yellow eyes at me.

"Talk," he said clearly in English, loud enough for me to hear through the glass. "Safe."

Him safe? Or me safe?

At the beginning of this whole bugpocalypse, one of these alien conquerors had swooped up a woman I was hiding with. We'd never seen her again. Nope, I wasn't going to chance it.

"Go away, or I'll shoot."

He didn't go away. Instead, he disappeared off to the side. Moments later, all the furniture piled up in front of the door moved into the home a good foot, scraping along the floor. He'd shoved all that inward just by pushing at the door.

A string of growls came from the now half-opened entrance.

"Do not shoot. You are close to a nest; the scourge will come."

The translation in a robotic voice came from a device on the alien's belt. The belt was holding up a leather loincloth, which I realized just now was the only article of clothing the alien wore, aside from some armor on his broad chest and shoulders. My eyes darted a little higher and met the universe's most ripped set of naked purple abs.

A soft chuckle had me looking back up at his strangely-chiseled face.

"You like what you see."

Chapter 2: Drak'I

“No,” the little female protested vehemently. “I’ve just never seen a Xarc’n up close before.”

“I do not mind,” I said. “You can look all you want. Touch too.”

She looked flustered. This wasn’t the exchange she’d expected. What had she expected? For me to charge in, pick her up, and carry her to my ship? It was something I’d considered, but I wanted her to come with me willingly.

After living with the survivors at the clubhouse all summer, I’d gotten used to humans who were Xarc’n friendly. The females at the clubhouse weren’t scared of me at all.

This female was terrified. Her fear stung my nose, but behind the acrid smell was something else, something intoxicating. I’d noticed the wonderful scent in the area a few days ago during one of my hunts, and I’d been watching daily from my shuttle since.

There had been another pair of humans being hunted by the deranged one who now hunted this female and her previous companion. I’d found them already dead and was relieved to find that the other female had not been my mate.

I’d been so sure that I when saw my mate, I’d recognize her right away. But this female scented of so many people and so many things that I wasn’t sure. There were no other survivors though, so I remained hopeful.

“Leave.” She retrained the muzzle of her weapon on me again.

I'd been shot with one of those before. She was pointing it at my chest, and I doubted it could kill me. Xarc'n warriors were tough and healed quickly, but it would still hurt like hell. If she really wanted to kill me, she'd aim it at my face. We were standing close, and she wouldn't miss.

I put my hands up as I'd seen some of the humans do. "I will not harm you, female. I am here to help. You are traveling to the human settlement at the base of the mountains. I live there. I'll take you."

I'd overheard her talking with her younger male companion yesterday.

"I don't believe you." She pushed the plastic-framed glasses she wore higher on her face.

I'd seen them on one of the survivors back at the clubhouse before, and he'd explained to me that they were corrective and he couldn't see well without them.

Did this female have trouble seeing? Bad vision was a difficult liability to live with, especially with the scourge still scattered around their planet.

"You're calling me a liar?" I clutched my chest, feigning offense.

"Yes." She didn't even try to deny it.

"Your words wound me, little female."

"Great. Now leave." She looked around the home. "Unless you were staying here, and I barged in."

"I was not. As I said, I am here for you. How can I prove to you that I live with the humans at the clubhouse?"

"The clubhouse?"

"At the base of the mountains. Perhaps you will recognize their names." I didn't know how much she'd been told of the clubhouse. "Darius and Daryl lead many of the foraging trips. Your companion might have run into them. They have dark skin and lean, athletic builds."

She shook her head. Her hair swished behind her, the light brown strands tied in a high ponytail.

“What about Tatts and Big Bear? They ride around on two-wheel vehicles made silent with Xarc’n technology. They have paler skin, and one is almost as large as me, while the other is covered in drawings.”

She hesitated, her pert little nose scrunched in concentration. “No,” she finally said. “And I’m not coming with you.” She glared me down defiantly, her eyes full of spirit, even though the scent of fear still radiated from her. Such bravery.

I dug into the pouch on my belt, took out a nutrition bar, and offered it to her. “Are you hungry?”

“I have food.” She pulled the bolt back on her weapon. “Just leave.” She still held it pointed to my chest.

“I will go. Do not fire. It will call the scourge to your location. They are already active because of the fire fight earlier.”

In their time on this planet, the scourge had learned that the sound of a gunfight usually meant spoils of war to feast upon. Even the winners lost when they realized too late they were surrounded by scourge.

I placed the food bar on the table she’d pushed in front of the door and backed away. “Tell me what will convince you I live with the survivors.”

She made a cute face as she thought. “Billy said they had some crazy, apocalyptic, Mad Max-style, tricked-out pickups.”

My translator had some trouble with a few of those words, but I understood what she wanted. “The war machines. I will return with one of their war machines,” I promised. “I’ll be back.”

I closed her door and headed to my shuttle.

She was safe in the home for now, and it was getting dark. I doubted the crazy human would look for her through the

night. He'd abandoned his head lamp after it ran out of power.

I set a course to the clubhouse. There was time enough to head in, convince the clubhouse to let me borrow one of their war machines, and return. I could pick up some presents, too; those were part of human courtship.

Krux. I hadn't even asked her name or given mine.

That would all be remedied tomorrow when I came to pick her up.

When I'd first started following her, I'd assumed that, like other humans who had lived this long, she must be adept at surviving in the new scourge-altered landscape. But as I'd watched her flee the gun fight, I realized she was brave and intelligent, able to avoid the scourge when possible, but not experienced.

The pack on her back was much too heavy for her to run. She also didn't know the location of the nearby nest and was getting much too close to it. Though, I suspected she was becoming aware of it. She'd started veering off at an angle and then had stopped for the evening.

Even in the fading light, the approach to the clubhouse by shuttle showed exactly how close we were to eliminating the closest scourge nest. The deadly white tendrils of fungus that usually spread out from the nest opening had shrunk since spring. There had been talk of possibly going in and wiping out the nest soon. If not this year, then after the swarms of next summer.

The clubhouse itself was still bright and bustling, even though the sun had gone down. The sun set early this time of year, but the amount of work to do remained the same. Unlike us Xarc'n hunters who'd been programmed to do only one thing—hunt the scourge—the humans here had big ambitions of rebuilding their entire world.

The more time I spent with them, the more they rubbed off on me. Somehow, chasing the scourge across the stars was no longer a worthy pursuit. We kept killing them, and they kept

coming back. It was an endless battle, and I was getting tired of it.

I uncloaked my vessel so it would be visible to all and landed in the courtyard.

“Is Tatts here?” I asked as I stepped into the main room.

“He’s in the garage,” someone replied.

Perfect. That was where they kept and worked on their vehicles.

“Drak’l, you’re back. Good hunting?” Tatts picked up a wheel and walked over to the machine missing one on the front.

“Hunting is good. What are you doing?” I asked.

“I finally found winter tires for this puppy. See the thicker treads?” He pointed to the tire, and sure enough, it had thicker, heavier grooves than the one on the back. “They grip the snow and ice better.”

Puppy was a baby canine, but I suspected my translator needed an update. I grunted. “Will the war machines need these winter tires?”

“Yeah. We have people looking for more sets for them now.”

“I wish to use one of the war machines tomorrow.”

“Ah, so that’s why you’re here. You’re looking for a change of pace. Of course. You can use the one I usually take to hunt and forage with Judy. That one already has winter tires.”

“I will return it soon.” I didn’t plan on being out there with my female for long. I wanted her back here as soon as possible.

“It’s good to change up the hunting sometimes. I wouldn’t use the war machines during a swarm, but they are good any other time of the year and more comfortable for Judy than a bike.

Judy was his *girlfriend*, a term I did not understand.

Despite having lived with these people for months, there was still much I did not comprehend about their culture, especially their mating rituals. For example, why did he need a ring to propose? If she was the one, why not claim her as his mate and be done with it?

I did know that gift-giving and dates, the outing kind, not the fruit kind, were a part of the process.

With permission to take the war machine granted, I headed inside the clubhouse to find Gabby. If anyone knew what kind of presents I should bring to my female, it would be her. Instead of Gabby, I found Sarah at the kitchen table.

“Where’s Gabby?”

“She went to lie down in her shuttle with Tal’n. She’d never admit it, but the pregnancy is hard on her.”

Gabby was carrying the first human-Xarc’n offspring at the clubhouse.

“Maybe I can help. What do you need?”

I glanced around, ensuring no others were listening, especially the females actively looking for Xarc’n mates. There were several. I should know; I was the last unmated hunter. Seeing that we were alone, I said, “I need gifts that will impress a female.”

“Ooh! Did you—”

“Shhh,” I hushed, looking around again. It was still just us in the kitchen. No hopeful female had come running.

“Oh, it’s a secret. Got it.” She grinned. “I know exactly what you need.”

Chapter 3: Sammie

I took in the tray full of rainwater from the second-floor balcony and replaced it with another container as quickly as I could. Scanning the streets, I made sure there were no movements before closing the door and blinds again.

I'd thought my luck had run out when Lucas went full crazy, destroying the only home we had, but I'd been wrong. I must've had a horseshoe stuck up my ass, because I woke up to rain instead of snow. Rain I dearly needed if I wanted to survive.

There was a lot of freeze-dried food stuffed into Billy's pack, as well as plenty of rounds for my shotgun, but water was heavy, and there had only been two large bottles. I'd drunk most of it already and had used the rest to rehydrate food for breakfast.

To say I'd woken up this morning was a bit of a stretch. I hadn't really slept. It was hard to keep my eyes closed when every sound and movement outside had me wondering if Lucas had found me or perhaps the alien warrior had come back to steal me away.

Maybe I shouldn't have put that log on the fire, but I was freezing last night, even with all the blankets in the home piled on me. I'd also needed light, and had hoped that no one would notice the smoke from the chimney since it was already dark.

I was still alive, which I took to mean I'd gotten away with it.

After the horned hunter left yesterday, I'd moved again, no longer trusting that house. I'd watched the ghostly shadow of

his cloaked shuttle disappear into the sky before leaving. The sky had already been getting dark, so I didn't go far, just down the street.

With the rain still coming down hard outside, I spread all of the contents of Billy's bag onto the floor. There was no way I'd make it to the settlement with such a heavy pack. I had to reduce some weight. The first things to go were Billy's change of clothes. I was sure we could replace those when we got there. That made a big difference already.

Then there was the small camping cook set. I ditched everything but the titanium pot with fold-out handles, the camp stove, fuel pellets, and the lightweight titanium spoon.

I didn't touch the first aid kit or the fire-starting kit, though I did remove the spare water filter. The one attached to the mouth of one of the water bottles was enough. I needed to keep moving, and that meant I wouldn't have time to filter large amounts of water anyway.

The rainwater was clean, so that went straight into the bottles without need for filtration. My only worry now was the water freezing.

Now for a weapon and ammo, two things I really didn't want to leave behind but had to.

I removed the ammo for Billy's rifle. The rounds were heavy and wouldn't work in my firearms. I glanced over at my two guns, the ones I'd learned to use over the last two years in hiding. The Ruger 10/22 was reliable and accurate, even for a newbie like myself. It also had the most common ammo, but it was near useless against the thick carapaces of the bugs. Not to mention, the alien hadn't even flinched when I'd pointed it at him last night.

The shotty was my best bet if I wanted to keep one of the firearms.

I put the pack on and did a quick walk up and down the stairs. Much better. I wasn't weighed down anymore.

I tucked the rifle and ammo under the couch. If I were successful at getting to the settlement, I wouldn't be back for them, but I didn't know what the future held. I hated to leave behind the weapons and ammo, since I was sure they were extremely valuable, but so was staying alive.

With my pack lightened, I searched the home. It had been too dark last night to look for more than the blankets off the bed. I found a down parka and some warm sweatpants. I layered a turtleneck and some leggings underneath. The clothes were a little too big for me, but they were much warmer than what I'd been wearing when I'd fled the bunker.

I even found a pair of winter boots that were almost my size. Nothing a pair of thick socks wouldn't fix. Score!

The alien warrior had surprised me when he mentioned the biker, but I wasn't sure if he'd simply heard Billy and me talk about him from afar. He seemed to know that I'd been traveling with Billy before all this. How long had he been following us?

The way he'd reacted to my request to see one of the Mad Max vehicles had been shocking too. He had acted as if he'd known exactly what I was talking about. He knew more about the war machines than I did.

I wondered if he was actually going to come back with one of these vehicles or if he'd simply given up. I hadn't noticed his shuttle anywhere this morning, and trust me; I'd looked. I was sure the rain would make the cloaking ineffective.

No harm in checking again. I headed to the nearest window and peeked outside at the front of the house. The rain had turned into freezing rain, and the driveway and street were sleek and shiny with slush and ice.

I guessed my little bit of good luck had run out. This was no weather for travel. I'd be soaking wet and hypothermic in a blink of an eye.

I returned to the other side of the house. No Xarc'n shuttle in the backyard either.

Unable to start the next leg of my journey in the freezing rain, I sat my ass down on the couch and took out Billy's journal. It was best for me to study it anyway, if I wanted a leg up in this terrifying new normal. He'd made drawings and notes on everything he'd come across while foraging.

The front of the journal was filled with sketches of the various types of bugs. I recognized several of them: the basic ones, the flying ones, and the spitting ones. Everyone had seen those; they'd been all over the news.

I stopped on a page depicting a giant centipede. Unlike the others, this one didn't have a name, but according to the notes, it was longer than a bus and covered in dagger-like blades on both sides of its body. Billy had circled one of the blades and drew the symbol for poison next to it. The blades must be covered in toxins just like the scuttler's claws. Other notes on it were "extremely fast" and "hunts with all senses."

Great. There might be fewer of them, but the bugs had gotten even more terrifying than the last time I'd checked.

I flipped farther into the notebook and gasped. On the page was the insane-looking vehicle he'd talked about. That abomination couldn't possibly exist, could it? It really did look like it came from some B movie. Next to the vehicle was a quick sketch of a big, burly dude and a woman who barely came up to his chest.

The next page was the map he'd mentioned. It had the location of our bunker clearly marked and a route from it to the settlement at the base of the mountains. There were two nests marked clearly in red that the route looped around. I studied the map, trying to figure out where I was.

As I'd suspected last night, I'd been getting close to one of the nests. I'd veered away just in time. Even so, I should make a bigger loop around.

A few more pages down had me shocked again. It was a crudely scrawled sketch of a Xarc'n warrior and a shuttle. Had Billy come across the hunters? Had he known one was

watching our area? If he had, he'd kept it a secret. He'd never told anyone.

I understood why, though; it would've scared everyone. We'd already had our hands full with Lucas causing his special brand of chaos; we hadn't needed the threat of alien warriors raiding our home. One monster had been more than enough.

I didn't know what made me check the front windows again, but I was glad I had. The freezing rain had stopped, and it was lightly snowing instead. The temperature must have dropped in the past few morning hours.

I needed to get moving. I needed to get as far away as I could before the snow accumulated enough to show footprints. As much as I wanted to believe with all my heart that Billy had won and survived his face-off with Lucas, I still had to be careful.

Also, I knew I was close to a nest now, and bug activity was the highest at noon. I only had a few hours before I had to stop and regroup again.

I headed up to the second floor one last time to make sure I didn't leave anything behind. The tray I'd left on the balcony was filled with icy cold water again, so I filled the rest of my bottles and drank the rest.

I was as ready as I'd ever be. With no more plausible excuses for delay, I strapped my weapon to my pack, put it on, and tightened the straps. With several spritzes of the scented spray, I was out the door and heading to my next destination.

The map in the journal was crude, with only the major streets and notable landmarks penciled in. My goal now was to head toward a bridge crossing the river. The map showed three bridges, but two were crossed out, one for being too close to the nest and the other had the word *danger* written next to it and several stick figures with X's for eyes. That was warning enough.

I made good time despite the slippery conditions, and my confidence grew as I traveled. That was, until I turned a

corner to find a group of bugs feasting on something. I turned to circle around but ran into another group heading toward the feast.

This group seemed to come out of nowhere. I scrambled to find a hiding spot, but they were already in full sight by the time I reached the large garbage bin. The last set of scuttlers to turn onto the street spotted me. They turned in unison.

Fuck!

What the hell should I do? There were tons of bugs here, so shooting them was not an option. That would just make me a target. No. It was best to run and hide in one of the homes and lock myself somewhere secure until they lost interest.

Billy had mentioned doing that once. We'd worried and even sent out people to look for him, but he was fine. He'd just stayed quiet and hidden until the bugs forgot about him.

Before I could run, a giant vehicle covered in a hodgepodge of metal sheets, complete with spikes and a ramming bar, barreled out of a side street. It appeared like a ghost, silently and without warning.

The vehicle must be electric. The only sound it made was the screech of its tires as it turned and drifted across the icing street perfectly to face the bugs. I had not expected that from the drawing.

It rammed into the pair of bugs eyeing me. As it skidded to a halt, the alien weapon mounted on its roof fired out a shot, also quite silent, nothing more than a zing followed by a soft pop as another bug exploded in a mess of guts and innards.

Eww.

I could smell the stench from here. These bugs smelled horrible alive, and they were even worse dead.

I watched in amazement as the rest of the group of bugs were smashed, rammed, and zapped to smithereens. When there were none left, a piece of armor slid open to show a smug-looking purple face behind a rolled-down window.

“I’m back,” he said with a devilish grin.

Chapter 4: Drak'I

I waved at the little female who gawked at me from the sidewalk. She looked shocked to see me, even though I'd promised I'd be back with a war machine. Didn't she know a warrior always kept his promises?

I hoped this was proof enough to get her to trust me and get into the vehicle. If she needed more proof, I had Sarah on speed-dial. She'd said she'd vouch for me if I needed.

The female took a tentative step toward me but stopped.

"I believe you," she said.

"Then come in." I leaned over to shove open the passenger-side door, which was closest to her. Too bad; I'd have liked to have her crawl over me to get to the other seat.

I was glad the humans had removed that annoying artificial sound they purposefully added to their electric vehicles. It meant I could drive right by groups of scourge without them noticing.

It had taken me a while to track down my little female. She hadn't been at the home I'd left her. She wore completely new clothes, but I'd known it was her the moment I caught her out of the corner of my eye scurrying down the street.

Hunting the scourge in this deadly machine was fun, and I understood why the humans enjoyed it. I'd never consider ramming into the ground-bound scourge with my shuttle, though I'd done it to flyers before. But that just wasn't the same.

Of course, I could have taken care of this group easily on my own with just my spear and blaster. There were no centicreeps in this group, and that was the only scourge unit that was difficult for a Xarc'n warrior to best one-on-one. There was one on its way here, however, so I needed to get the little female into the vehicle as soon as possible.

Even in the war machine, I hesitated to attempt to bring down the scourge's most elite mutation. It would just wrap its body around the vehicle, preventing us from leaving while calling in a swarm to destroy us. The vehicle could handle a few scourge at a time, but not a few hundred, especially if there were spitters in the mix.

The spitters' acid burned through everything organic and did a number on inorganic material, as well. I wanted to return this vehicle to the clubhouse in one piece.

"Come fast," I said. "A centicreep comes."

Down the street, the group that had been feasting on whatever poor creature had given up its life today stirred, their feast finished. They scampered toward us.

The little female's eyes widened and fear poured off her.

"Come," I called.

She did, running across the street to climb into the modified pickup.

She closed the door, and I leaned over her to slide the armor back into place before rolling up the window. She leaned back in her seat, trying to avoid my touch, but she was so close I could feel the heat between our bodies.

I went for her seat belt next, pulling it across her body and snapping it into place.

"Hold on."

It was the only warning I gave before stepping on the pedal and charging the group of scourge coming toward us. We crashed right through them with only a soft bump, thanks to the heavy-duty suspension the humans had added to the

vehicle. But what was soft to me wasn't to the little human in the seat next me. She gasped and, with white knuckles, clutched her bag to her chest.

"Are you okay?"

She gave a small nervous laugh. "Yeah. I expected it to be worse."

My communicator, which had been translating for me while strapped to the dash, rang out in warning. It displayed a map of the area with our location centered on the screen, represented by a purple dot. A red worm-like icon flashed. The centicreep it had detected was coming right at us, charging in from one of the cross streets on the passenger side.

I floored it, speeding by the intersection. The little human peered through the tiny gaps in the armor and gasped as we flew by the street.

"What the fuck is that?"

She must have caught sight of the creature. Her eyes snapped back to my communicator, her eyes glued to the red icon as I slowed to maneuver around several abandoned cars.

She reached for the dash and turned on a screen I hadn't learned to use yet, which pulled footage from the rear camera. I was still getting used to the vehicle and hadn't known it was available. How convenient.

The maze of cars stuck on the road slowed us down a lot more than it did the centicreep, since it could crawl right over them. It was gaining on us. She gasped as the thing lunged and barely missed us.

Luckily, we were through the worst of the area, and it was a straightaway ahead with no blockage. I depressed the pedal to the floor and mentally thanked Tatts for letting me borrow the only vehicle with winter tires as we sped away. Her grip on her bag didn't relax until the creature was far behind us.

"Phew, that was close." She collapsed back in her seat.

I was glad her fear of me had been temporarily superseded by her fear of the centicreep. It gave us a common enemy.

The red icon still followed us.

“We should use the next intersection to destroy it.” Most intersections in this part of the town were minefields of abandoned cars, and it was bound to catch up again.

“How?”

“It will catch up as I go through the abandoned cars. I can control the blasters here, but it’s hard to do while driving. There is another control in the back.”

“Got it.” She unclipped herself and climbed to the back as I tried to keep the vehicle stable. “Oh, it’s like a video game,” she said as she sat in front of the screen and found the controller. “Cool. Which button is to shoot?”

“The farthest one on the right. The left side aims.” I slowed the vehicle. “We are coming to the next intersection.”

“I see it,” she called out. “Ugh. Why is it so ugly? Do I have to wait for it to get close?”

“No, just start firing.”

She did. It took a few shots to get the hang of it, but soon she was shooting off sections of the creature’s long body. These Earth-based mutations only needed their head and front sections to keep moving. The goal was to whittle it down until it was nothing or hit it directly in the head, a feat easier said than done.

“Fuck,” she growled. “It keeps coming.”

“You’re doing great.” Centicreeps were fast, though, and hard to aim at. We were also moving, which added to the challenge.

We were through the intersection, but I stayed slow so she could try a few more times. She finally hit it in the head.

“Yes! Finally!” She laughed, and the victorious sound filled the vehicle, making my heart beat faster.

“You did great!” I said, grinning.

She grinned back at me from the back. “Thanks.”

My communicator chimed again, this time alerting us to several flyers that had left the nest early to hunt.

A look at the blaster charge told me we might not have enough juice to take them all out. And even if we did, more would replace them as the nest in the area roused for the day and sent out their scouts to find food.

“Flyers,” I said. “They haven’t found us yet, but if they do, the middle button switches the camera view. The blaster can shoot skyward as well. Keep them off us while I find a place to hide the vehicle.”

“Gotcha.”

She familiarized herself with the controller as I searched for cover. Our best option was to find cover before the flyers called out our location.

“There,” she said, pointing out the windshield at a sign for a mall parking lot.

I knew what malls were. They were good places to forage for non-perishable goods and items. This parking lot had several levels. I drove up to the second level, so we had coverage from the flyers as well as protection from any ground-dwelling scourge. The ramp reduced the chance of them accidentally finding us.

“Now we wait.” I turned off the vehicle. “You did good, female.”

“It’s Sammie.”

“Sammie.” I tested her name on my tongue. It was sibilant but not unpleasant. I liked it. I thumped myself on the chest. “I am Drak’l.”

“Drah-kil.” She said my name strangely, but I enjoyed the sound of it.

I climbed into the back, eager to stretch my legs. While the truck seats were meant for big males like Tatts, I still found them too tight.

A hybrid of Xarc'n and human technology, the war machines were made by adding sheets of armor and lots of weapons—including a Xarc'n shuttle blaster on the roof—to an electric pickup. They also replaced the power source with Xarc'n solar power.

This particular one had a Xarc'n fire cannon attached to the roof in addition to a blaster. The result was a silent and maneuverable scourge destroyer. It wasn't as comfortable or as impervious as our shuttles. It was also much slower, and ground travel was always difficult with the roads blocked by abandoned vehicles. But since it had convinced Sammie to step inside, I was willing to forgive it for its faults.

I shifted closer to Sammie and pulled her into my lap.

She inhaled sharply and tried to scramble off me. "I didn't agree to get fresh."

I didn't know what getting fresh meant. "What is fresh?" I wrapped my arms around her, hoping the mate bond would show right away, so I'd know she was mine.

She wiggled in my hold. "Fresh is...sexy things."

Sexy things? She was the one wiggling and rubbing her delectable body all over me. Lucky for us, she wore many thick layers of clothing, including a puffy outer layer. My chest started rumbling at her closeness.

"I am not getting fresh," I explained, using the odd human phrase. "I am checking for a mating bond. I do not want fresh unless it is with my mate."

I released my arms easily. I grunted, disappointed. I reclasped my hands and tried again several times, each time with the same result, but my chest never stopped vibrating. My hands hadn't figured it out yet, but my chest was adamantly filling the camper with song.

She'd stopped struggling by now and watched me with a strange look.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm checking for a mating bond." I thought I'd already told her. Perhaps my translator was acting up.

"And the result?"

"There is none." I tried once more. Still nothing.

"Oh. Okay, that's good." She relaxed, and when I released her again, she moved to sit as far from me as possible.

I frowned, not liking it. I knew she was my mate. I felt it in my being. I just had to make excuses to spend as much time together as possible, to give the bond a chance to start before bringing her to the settlement.

Chapter 5: Sammie

For a moment there, I'd thought I'd made a grave mistake by stepping into his vehicle. Sure, I would've been bug chow otherwise, but when he'd grabbed me, I was sure all the rumors I'd heard about them keeping human sex slaves were true.

He'd only been checking for a mating bond, whatever that was. We clearly didn't have one, because he'd let me go looking so disappointed I almost felt bad for him. What if that meant he wasn't interested in helping me get to the settlement anymore?

I was fully aware of him. I'd marveled at how large the truck camper was, but the moment he climbed back here, still wearing not much more than his loincloth, it went from spacious to crowded.

Suddenly, despite the cold outside, it was much too hot in here.

"Hey, that's my rifle!" I exclaimed as my eyes landed on the pink grip tape wrapped around the stock of the gun. Next to it, in a plastic bin, was the ammo I'd left behind.

"I returned to the home to find you missing. Your bag was too heavy for you, but you shouldn't need to leave your belongings behind. Especially your weapons."

Wait a minute, did that mean—

"You're giving them back to me?"

"They are yours."

“Thank you.” I was shocked he’d retrieved my things and wasn’t keeping them for himself, but it did explain how he’d found me.

“To Xarc’n warriors, weapons are extensions of our bodies. I did not want you to leave a part of yourself behind.”

That was very kind of him, and it confused me. The Xarc’n were supposed to be the enemy, but Billy wouldn’t have told me to go to a group of terrorists helping the aliens take over, would he?

I reached for my bag, took out Billy’s journal, and flipped it open to the page with the drawing of the war machine. It didn’t match all the details, but it was close enough.

Drak’l leaned over to look at the book, so I turned it around for him to see. He thought I was handing it over and took it from me instead.

“It is Tatts and Judy,” he said, recognizing the people on the page. “Making images by hand is a rare skill.”

“You guys don’t draw?” I asked.

“Only to express technical intricacies, not faces.” I flipped over to the page with the hunter. “I do not recognize him. He is not one of my group. Who is he to you?”

“Oh, I didn’t draw this. Billy did,” I said. “I can’t draw worth doodly-squat. Not even technical drawings.”

He seemed happy with my answer and continued flipping through the rest of the book before handing it back. “This Billy is talented. Is he the male that was traveling with you?”

“Yeah. We’re supposed to meet at the settlement.” I paid extra attention to his reaction to see if he still planned on taking me there.

He leaned over and sniffed loudly. “I do not smell sex on you. This Billy is not your mate.”

“Um. No.” That was weird.

“That is good. There is still hope for a mate bond between us.”

He looked so hopeful I didn't want to burst his bubble that I wasn't looking for a relationship with an alien. Maybe if I played my cards right, I'd get to the settlement, and he'd get the chance to realize I wasn't the one, and we'd both be happy. So far, he seemed decent, and he did just rescue me.

“Are you taking me back to your settlement once the flyers clear from the skies?”

He frowned. “I will. But I have work to do first. I usually hunt the remaining scourge after the flyers return to the nest. I also have a list of items to look for. I help with foraging when I can.”

I understood that. I needed to get to the settlement but hunting the bugs sounded like important business. They must've been working hard to reduce the numbers. It was already much better than when I'd first entered the bunker.

“I guess I can come along.” Not that I had much of a choice. “I'll try not to get in your way.”

“You will never be in my way. You are too small.”

The serious tone in which he said it had me laughing. He wasn't anything I'd imagined the Xarc'n aliens to be. We'd all been told they kidnapped women and kept them in their shuttles for nefarious reasons, abusing them. So far, Drak'l had been...nice?

But then Lucas had been nice at first, and he'd ended up as a familicidal maniac. I wondered where he was now. At least he'd think twice about attacking with the seven-foot-tall alien around.

“I should probably warn you that there's a madman loose in the area. Lucas is Billy's brother, and he's gone off the deep end.” If we were going to stay in the area to hunt the bugs, then he should know to beware of him.

“I am aware of this male.” He turned serious, his yellow eyes seeming to flash as they narrowed.

I shrank back, suddenly remembering I was in the presence of a predator.

Things weren't adding up, however, and since I was already in the frying pan, so to speak, I asked, “Did-did you switch sides or something? And started helping us fight the bugs?”

“We never switched sides. We have always been here to help. Our creators made us to hunt the scourge, and we followed them to this planet.”

This was fake news. Lies put out to stir dissent among humans so we fought amongst ourselves. My skepticism must have shown on my face because Drak'l's face darkened.

“Why would I lie now? The scourge has already destroyed your governments and much of your infrastructure. If we came to conquer, we would simply take over now, wiping the rest of you from the planet to take the resources here.”

He had a point there. It was past the point for lies. Perhaps I'd believed the wrong side. Things had been such a mess in those early days.

Many of us had just been realizing that the bugs were real, and not just a clever hoax by some CGI company, when the alien warriors arrived. They called themselves Xarc'n hunters and offered their help in fighting the deadly space bugs.

The timing had been suspicious, and Earth governments had unanimously agreed to turn down the alien warriors' offer. It was the first time so many nations had agreed with each other, a real unification of human minds across the globe.

There were a few who believed the aliens' story, but most of the public didn't listen to them. They were portrayed as nut jobs and called unpatriotic, anti-human, or, even worse, pro-alien terrorists.

We were told online and in the news that our military had the might to best our creepy crawly foes on our own. We had the power of science and technology on our side, while the bugs were only that: bottom-dwelling insects. Clearly, we could crush them. They'd rue the day they landed on our planet!

That was before the first large waves made it to the big cities. No one had been ready. And in the modern age of smartphones and live streaming, the world had watched, mouths agape, as the most iconic cities of the modern world were overrun.

The military had arrived only to contain the swarm. They quarantined the cities, trapping everyone still alive inside. When we'd realized that no amount of technological advances, scientific know-how, or military might, was going to stop the bugs from creating the new generation inside the cities, we'd tried to bomb them out. This happened all over the world, with all of Earth's governments coming to the same conclusion for a second time.

It hadn't worked. The bombs destroyed the cities, but the bugs just dug deeper. In places that had used nuclear weapons, there were even rumors of new types of radioactive mega bugs.

Shortly after the bugs swarmed again, the US government ceased sending out announcements. I couldn't believe that all happened three summers ago.

Thinking about those early days again had unwanted tears stinging my eyes. I'd lost so many loved ones. All my family. All my friends. And if it hadn't been for Cedrick and Mary welcoming me into their family and letting me stay in their secret bunker, I would've lost my life too.

There had been many times in the last few years I'd wondered if that would have been better. Cedrick, Billy's dad, had been so sure our mighty military would take care of it in time, and we'd emerge from the bunker in a bug-free world. That hadn't happened.

And now, I was losing everyone all over again.

“What is wrong?” Drak’l reached up and touched me lightly on the cheek to wipe away a tear.

“It’s nothing.” I ordered myself to suck it up; tears would get me nowhere.

“You are remembering the past.” He reached over.

This time, I didn’t want to push him away. I felt so small and vulnerable, and all I wanted was some comfort. Was it so wrong? I let him pull me sideways into his lap.

“I have lost many to the scourge.” The translation was emotionless, but the growls that came from him were full of anguish, and his yellow eyes showed profound grief that transcended species. “We have lost many fellow hunters in our quest to destroy them.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You have done nothing.”

“I have, though. I doubted you. But I see now that the Xarc’n hunters couldn’t have been using the scourge to take over Earth.”

“You are not alone. Humans were not the first to doubt us, and you will not be the last.”

“You’ve met other species?” I wondered what else was out there.

“Affirmative. Some are helpful. Others are not. We still do our duty to rid the affected planet. It was why we were created.”

“You mentioned your creator before. Is this like your God?”

“No. We were created by the Xarc’n military to seek and destroy their previous military failures, the scourge. The makers were wiped out soon after our production. We are genetically engineered weapons with no other purpose than our mission to chase the scourge through the stars.”

“Oh, that’s—” What was I supposed to say? That it was sad? Horrifying? I changed the topic before I could say the wrong things. “How many planets have you been on?”

“Three. Four, if you include Earth.”

I waited, but he said no more. I hated uncomfortable silences. “So you’ve saved three planets. That’s good.”

“Negative. Some hunters are luckier than me and are sent to better planets. I have failed all three times. I lost most of my contingent at the last planet and joined this one just as they were heading for Earth.”

“Oh.”

Welp, so much for being positive. I guessed Earth was doomed after all.

He took my hands in his, the dark purple of his skin contrasting against my pale, vitamin D-deficient skin.

“Earth will be my first success.” He looked determined.

“You sound so sure of it.”

“I am. Every day, more humans join our fight. The nest near the clubhouse is so weak now, the hunting there is slow. I hunt this nest instead. When the scourge is gone from Earth, I will end my mission and stay on this planet to protect it.”

“You won’t go back out there and keep fighting?”

“No. I will not let some long ago scientist from a strange planet I’ve never set foot on dictate my life.”

“You’ve never been to your home planet?” How strange would it be if I’d never set foot on Earth?

“No. Xarc was destroyed long before I was created on my mothership, to replace a fallen warrior.”

The way he spoke of his past life felt so lonely. Created, not born. And to replace another soldier, not because he was wanted. I hadn’t known Drak’l for long, but my heart hurt for him.

“This is my home now.” He tilted his head as if his thoughts were so heavy they weighed him down. “I have friends here. And there is hope for a mate and a future.”

There was that word again: mate. Somehow, I didn’t believe it meant just sex anymore, as the media had portrayed it. I felt guilty I’d believed in the propaganda.

“I hope you’re right about Earth,” I said. “And I hope you find your mate.”

He turned to look at me, his golden eyes warm and welcoming. Had they always been like that? Or was it me who’d changed now that I’d actually talked to him?

He cupped my face with hands rough from use. The purring in his chest, which reminded me of a big cat, intensified.

I gulped as I realized I was still sitting in his lap. His bare abs rippled with muscles a mere inch from my fingertips. The gap between us felt palpable, and I focused on it, feeling the heat that radiated from his body.

His tongue darted out to moisten his lip, and his mouth opened slightly, showing off his fangs. A small ache formed insidiously in my lower belly.

Then his mouth was on mine, closing the gap. He was unsure at first, but when I didn’t push him away, he grew bolder, exploring my lips and mouth with his. I couldn’t have pushed him away, even if I’d wanted to. He held my body captive with need and curiosity. There was no way I could be attracted to this. Right?

His free hand moved to caress my thighs and hips under my parka. I pressed my legs together as tingles shot down my spine and my body exploded in lust.

Oh, no. I was totally attracted to this!

Chapter 6: Drak'I

I'd watched couples share the human custom of mouth mating before, both at the clubhouse and at the hunters' ledge, but never understood the appeal. I got it now. It was as if our mouths were doing in advance what our bodies would do later. It was a promise, a trial.

Now that I'd had a taste, I wanted more.

The fear she'd had of me when we first met was barely detectable now. It had been strong when she stepped into the vehicle but had slowly faded, especially while we talked.

At first, I worried I wouldn't know what to do once our lips touched. Or that I'd accidentally smash the plastic frames on her face. I'd never experienced a kiss before. But instincts had taken over, and I explored her mouth as I would later do with the rest of her body.

Her hand, the one trapped between our bodies, pressed against my belly and her other arm wrapped around my neck. She made a desperate moaning sound that went straight to my crotch, and my body reacted to her little noises. Blood rushed down to where her ass sat on my lap, and I struggled, then failed, to hide my reaction.

She gasped into my mouth as my cock hardened, pressing up against her legs. She scrambled off my lap, leaving behind the heat of her and the unmistakable bouquet of her arousal. She might run now, but I affected her the same way she did me.

This must be the human custom of playing *hard-to-get*. It was another one of those human practices I didn't

understand, but I'd play if it made her happy. I pretended to be upset she'd "rejected" me, even though I knew her body hadn't.

Surely now, after such an unforgettable experience, my body would recognize her as my mate, but the very fact that I'd released her meant otherwise. To be honest, I had no more understanding of the Xarc'n mate bond than of human traditions. They confused me equally.

Her stomach broke the silence with a rumble. I only heard it because my chest had finally stopped vibrating.

"You are hungry." Here was my chance to feed her and share a meal with her. This was something usually done on human dates. "I have food tied to the outside of the war machine."

She looked confused for a moment until I opened the back door and stepped out into the covered parking lot. She followed, looking around anxiously for the scourge. There weren't any in the area. They usually didn't go places they already knew were devoid of food.

Protected under a piece of metallic armor were the double-bagged plastic containers of food Sarah had sent along with me. Tatts had shown me how to tie it to the outside under the shield so it stayed cold and clean even after bashing through half a dozen scourge.

I opened the lid. It was more than merely cold; the edges were frozen. If it were just me, I'd probably have eaten it as-is. It was much tastier than our food bars, even half-frozen. The foil-wrapped pieces of dough were hard from the cold.

"That looks recently cooked and smells delicious." Sammie's eyes were round. She leaned in. "There's even flatbread to go with it."

"Sarah packed it for me when I went back to pick up the war machine."

"Who's Sarah?" Her brows furrowed so slightly that if I hadn't been acutely aware of her every movement, I wouldn't

have noticed. “Does she pack you lunches often?”

Was that a hint of jealousy in her voice?

“Sarah is Fen’k’s mate. She does not interest me. The only one who interests me is you.”

“Even though your body tells you I’m not your mate?”

“My body is delayed. My chest rumbles, and my cock hardens for you.”

Her cheeks turned fiercely pink at the mention of my cock. Humans were strange. They hid their natural functions and were embarrassed by sex, even though both were clearly happening all around. I liked her red cheeks, and she looked adorable with them.

“Would you like to feel what my body thinks of you again?” I asked, watching her face. “You can get back on my lap.”

“I believe you,” she said. Her face was red, but she seemed mollified that I was not interested in another.

This was progress.

“I have a small stove and pot,” she said, eager to change the topic. “We can heat it up.”

She rummaged around in her bag and set up the small portable stove, then balanced the pot over it. It wasn’t long before the thick stew was warm enough to eat.

I wanted to feed her but thought it would be too soon, so I let her eat first, using her lightweight spoon. Despite her hunger, she didn’t eat much. She claimed her stomach had shrunk over the last two years. After confirming that she was indeed full, I finished the rest in several large bites, forgoing the spoon completely. I found human-styled eating utensils to be inefficient.

“Wow! You gobbled that up fast. It must take a lot of food to keep those muscles going.”

I raised my brows and flexed my arms. The females at the clubhouse were always admiring our muscles. “I have much to

feed.” I looked down at my stomach and rippled my abs, a trick I’d learned, believe it or not, from one of the females. She’d been teaching an impromptu *belly dancing* class in the courtyard after the last swarm this past summer.

Sammie giggled. “Show off.”

My communicator beeped from inside the vehicle, and I climbed back in to check it.

“The scent of our food has drawn in some scourge.”

“Oops. We can’t leave the lot with the flyers in the skies.”

“There’s no need to leave,” I said, rinsing the pot and containers with water from the vehicle’s large plastic tank. “If we clean up, move the vehicle to the other side of the lot, and stay quiet, the scourge will come, find our rinse water, and leave. They’re not very smart.”

“If only it had been that easy when they first arrived.” She packed away her stove and climbed back into the rear. “The bugs are stupid, and they still won.”

Squeezing myself back into the cab, I drove over to the opposite side of the covered lot. “They had numbers then, and they were an unknown factor to your people. They have not won, and as long as there are hunters and humans to fight, they will not win. Earth and her people are strong.” With the vehicle safely parked, I crawled back to join her, taking my communicator with me so we could monitor the scourge.

She rubbed her hands together. They must have gotten cold from being outside.

Remembering the gifts I’d brought her, I opened the cardboard box I’d shoved into the back and brought out a pair of mittens.

“I know a stuffed animal is more traditional, but Sarah said you might like mittens instead. It’s fluffy, like a stuffed animal. She said they are made out of an old fur coat.” I held the furry mitts to her.

I thought these were better presents too. I didn't understand the use of toy animals that didn't even look like the real thing. At first, I'd thought they were used to teach small humans to hunt their food. I'd since learned they weren't.

"Thank you." She hesitated. "But I'm not sure I should accept these. Aren't you saving them for when you meet your mate?"

"We can do what humans do. We can do the dating."

She didn't reply, though she did look a bit bewildered by my request. That was understandable; I was a lot of hunter. She didn't take the mittens either.

"Take them. They are for you. We do not need to do the dating if you do not wish but take them. You do not have anything to keep your hands warm. Think of them as from the clubhouse if you must. Many there have similar ones."

"If you put it that way, thank you." She accepted them and put them on.

Next time I had something to give her, I'd just give them without telling her they were presents from me. The next gift was easy. I dug into the cardboard box of goodies again and came out with a box of chocolates.

She eyed the box. Oh yes, she was interested.

"I am not giving a gift. I am just opening this to share."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "I'm not falling for that."

I unsheathed a claw and cut through the plastic wrapped around the box.

"You have claws!" She reached for my hand but realized she still had her mittens on. She took them off and put them in her lap. "I didn't notice your claws before."

I showed her my hand, my claws hidden. "They normally stay sheathed, or they will get in the way of me using my weapons and devices."

She took my hand in hers and pressed around at the knuckles and pads. Her fingers were cold, but still, it felt nice, and my chest rumbled softly, content with her attention.

“Very cool! They show at the top of the fingers like pointed nails when retracted, but the sharp points curve down and are hidden in the fingers so you can’t accidentally scratch anything.”

I slowly extended a claw while pulling the pads of my fingers back to expose the tip. Human hands were just as strange to me as mine were to her. They had flat, easily bendable nails, which weren’t very good for prying things open. Their finger pads were thick and fleshy with no divot in the center where we hid the tips of our claws.

Their hands were nimbler than ours and could do very detailed and intricate tasks. Things we needed tools like tweezers for, humans could do easily.

“I thought it would be like a cat’s, but it’s not. Growing up, we had a hairless cat. When the claws were covered, his toe pads made little paw cleavages.” She pressed my claw forward, then let it slide back. “No paw cleavage here.” She released my hand, her face turning pink again. “I didn’t mean to make things weird.”

“Things are not weird. I do not mind you touching my hands.” I liked it. I wanted her to touch me all the time.

I opened the box of chocolates and surveyed the selection. I knew how each and every one tasted: too sweet. Chocolate and other human style sweets were not something I enjoyed.

Sammie, on the other hand, had her eyes glued to the box.

“You pick first.” I held the box out to her. “I cannot choose.”

“I know what you’re trying to do,” she said, her eyes still on the box. “But I happen to have a sweet tooth, and I love chocolate. So, I’m going to fall right for it.”

She reached for the one in the center of the box, plopped it into her mouth, and tugged her mittens back on again.

“I do not know what you mean.”

“Mmm, so good,” she moaned around a mouthful of chocolate.

My jaw went slack, and my loins tightened at the near-erotic pleasure on her face. This was going to be a long wait.

Chapter 7: Sammie

I pressed the button and set the scourge bodies on fire with the flame thrower attached to the top of the vehicle. Drak'l had called it a fire cannon, but let's call it what it was. It was a freakin' flame thrower. Not just any old Earth-made one, either. This one sent out a stream of blue flames and was much easier to control. The first shot went where I wanted it.

I'd never imagined burning scourge and shooting down flyers was so much fun. I sure was getting lots of new experiences under my belt the last few days. Too bad I'd had to lose almost everyone I knew before it happened.

Billy would have a blast in one of these vehicles. I wondered where he was now and if he was even alive.

Shush! Of course, he's alive.

I had to keep believing that he'd meet me at the settlement. That was the only reason I was going there. Unless Billy had hotwiring skills I hadn't known about, it would take him a few days to get there on foot. The wait would be painfully slow.

I hated not knowing. The last few years had been full of nothing but not knowing.

The stench of burning scourge seeped in through the vents, making me gag.

"We go," Drak'l said, turning for the main road.

As we drove, I peeked out through the cracks between the armor, looking for signs of life. The town was so still that any

movement would be painfully obvious, a fact the flyers took advantage of.

It was late afternoon now, bordering on evening, and the sun was starting its descent. We were on our way to this unknown settlement, and it made me nervous. What if it wasn't anything like I imagined?

What if Drak'l wasn't even who I thought he was? What if he'd stolen the vehicle? He almost seemed too good to be true, and I was afraid to trust.

What were the chances of me bumping into a helpful purple alien the first day I had to travel on my own, who just happened to live with people I was traveling to? So far, he was good company too. And that kiss. How could I forget how my body reacted to his touch?

On the dash, Drak'l's communicator flashed on, catching my eye. On it was a message in English. More proof that he lived with other humans.

"Pick up the phone, you butt crack," I read out loud.

Next to me, Drak'l grunted.

The screen flashed again.

"Quit ignoring my calls," I continued reading as the image of a clean-shaven young man with dark hair pulled back in a ponytail flashed on the screen.

No men at the bunker had stayed clean-shaven for long. At first, Cedrick and his brother, Uncle Tom, had been diligent with their hygiene, determined to show the rest of the families there was still hope of things going back to normal. That hadn't lasted long, not with water being rationed.

Drak'l grumbled something unintelligible, tilted the communicator toward himself, and picked up the call.

"About damn time! I sent Bre'k to look for you. He said you weren't at the clubhouse even though your shuttle is clearly there."

“I am busy.”

“Where the hell are you? Is that one of the war machines?”

“Affirmative.”

“You finally took one of them out for a spin. They’re fun, aren’t they? No wonder you haven’t picked up since this morning.”

“What do you need?” Drak’l called him a strange word the device did not translate. It couldn’t be his name though, because it didn’t sound English.

“I need something from a factory. UV lights. I’m working on something I think might help us take down the nest close to the clubhouse sooner rather than later.” The man was very excited about his work. “You know how the bioweapon worked really well on some nests but not on others?”

Bioweapon? Once again, I’d been hiding for so long that I was completely out of the loop. I had no idea we’d developed a bioweapon.

“Yes?”

“Well, we know it’s dependent on the strength of their fungal counterpart. That’s why even the nests that were susceptible had plenty of survivors. So what if—” the man tapped the air in front of him with his hands “—we weaken the fungus at the source? In the nest. In the queen’s chamber, with all her eggs and larvae. An entire generation will have a weakened fungal partnership. We know the fungus acts like an immune system for them.”

The man continued to talk for long minutes. We sure knew a lot more about the bugs than before.

Dark’l glanced over at me for a split second. He seemed to be used to this man’s long explanations.

“Where can I pick up these lights?” Drak’l asked when he was finally done.

“I’ll send you the location. I think it will still have what I need. It’s in an industrial area, and most people leave factories alone.”

Drak’l pressed something on his device. “We are not far from it.”

“We?”

Drak’l stayed silent. Was he trying to hide me? He hadn’t mentioned me the whole call, and he’d angled his phone away in what I realized now was a video call.

“Spill it. You’re a horrible liar.”

“Is Pip there?” Dark’l asked.

“No, it’s back in Bre’k’s shuttle. I don’t have a copy of it on my phone, and it needs permission to hop on my laptop. I value what privacy I have.”

His reply just made me more confused on who this Pip was.

“Now, enough stalling for time. Who is *we*?”

Drak’l gestured for me to scooch in.

“You found your mate!”

Oops! Maybe that was why Drak’l had been avoiding showing me.

“Oh, we aren’t. We’re just—”

“Dating,” Drak’l finished for me with a smile. “We are doing the dating.”

Okay. I was going to say we are just friends.

“I’m Sammie,” I said quickly before any more harm could be done. “I was on my way to the settlement, and Drak’l convinced me he lived with you guys at the clubhouse.”

“I don’t live down at the clubhouse with Drak’l. I’m up on the ledge with the other hunters. But close enough. I’m Aaron.”

“He is our Tech Wizard.” This time the device did translate the words he’d used. Drak’l repeated it in English, his mouth having just as hard a time as if I were to growl the way he did. “Tech Wizard.”

Their what now?

Aaron sighed again. “It’s a long story. It’s an official position in their military. Just go with it.”

“Okay; when in Rome. I do have one question. Who is Pip?”

“Pip, or PIP, is Bre’k’s ship.”

That didn’t help.

“It’s an artificial intelligence. Pip is horrible at keeping secrets.” He turned to Drak’l. “Which is why I knew you were hunting your mate. It got the information from your shuttle, but I wasn’t supposed to tell you that.”

“Pip talks a lot,” Drak’l explained. “I do not want everyone talking before they meet you.” He turned back to Aaron. “I promised to take Sammie to the clubhouse. I can return for the lights.”

I didn’t want to hold up Aaron’s project, especially since he seemed to think it would take down the nest near my possible future home.

“It’s not that far from us now, and I don’t mind the detour. I’m supposed to meet Billy at the settlement.” If he was still alive. I tried not to dwell on the possibility that he was gone. “But I’m supposed to be traveling on foot. With this—” I gestured at the mechanical abomination I sat in “—we can go pick the lights up, and I’ll still be on time.”

Drak’l seemed more than happy with my response. “We can head over now, find a safe place for the night, and find your items in the morning.”

That solution worked for everyone.

“I’ll meet you in person soon, Sammie. Bye.”

That had been an interesting call. It confirmed that Drak'l did indeed live with these survivors. The more I learned about them, the more they sounded like an interesting bunch. They sounded legit, not some band of cannibals. I was glad Billy knew about them and had sent me their way. I hoped they had space for both of us.

I didn't mind delaying my arrival at the settlement. I'd be stuck waiting for Billy once I got there anyway; my brain wouldn't let me do anything else until I knew he was safe. A short overnight trip was just the thing to take my mind off it.

We plotted a route to our new destination and were soon on our way.

Chapter 8: Drak'I

I craned my neck to look up at the formidable beast towering before me. It stood impressively tall in the illumination of the lantern, and the light glinted off large claws. Too bad it was only a likeness similar to stuffed animals, except these ones were made of tougher stuff. Sammie had explained that all the creatures in this part of the museum were long extinct.

I liked this area much more than the last. The previous section had old artifacts displayed under glass. The faded tapestries, statues, and sculptures were useless to me. It must have had no value to the humans in the area, too, because aside from the front of the museum, much of the place was left undisturbed and unlooted.

Ancient chamber pots and back scratchers had little use in a scourge-ravaged landscape.

"The utahraptor lived in North America during the Early Cretaceous period," Sammie read from the information plaque. "The heavily-built, ground-dwelling, bipedal carnivore could grow up to eighteen feet long and weigh over six hundred pounds."

"I wish it was still alive so I could test my skills against it." That would be fun.

"You want to fight that thing? That's crazy."

"It has fewer blades than a centicreep, and it did not mention any toxins."

She chuckled. "You have a point."

Sammie had wanted to stay the night in the museum, and since it sounded very much like a date, and the area was cleared of hostile humans, I'd agreed. Few scourge were out at night, only the ones that had failed to make it back to the nest. They were usually scuttlers or lungers, and those were easy to handle. Flyers and centicreeps rarely got lost.

The building was also very close to the factory we planned to visit in the morning.

We continued from display to display. Me musing at the sheer size of some of the creatures that once lived here and Sammie reading me the descriptions.

The next section of the building was filled with ancient weapons that reminded me of the collection decorating the walls of the Lodge on the Ledge.

"Ooh! I have an idea." Sammie turned to me with a sparkle in her eye. "Can your communicator take photos?"

"Yes. Image collection is a basic task for all our communicators and shuttles."

"You said you wanted to best the dinosaurs in battle. We can't bring them back to life, but we can do the next best thing."

I frowned, not understanding.

"We can have a photoshoot," she said, as if that would explain everything.

She approached the largest long sword in the room, which was behind glass. I realized after a moment that she wanted to retrieve it.

"Move aside."

I carefully broke the glass on the smallest side of the case and reached in to pick up the sword. To my disappointment, it was much lighter than it appeared, and the edge was beyond dull. "It was not a quality weapon." I hefted the sword in my hand.

“Of course. It’s a reproduction. Not the real thing. The real thing is probably at another museum.” She took the fake weapon from me. “We don’t need it to be real. We’re only taking pictures with it.”

“What is this photo shoot?” I did not understand how an image could fire a blast.

“I’ll show you. But first, let’s gather more reproductions. The showier, the better.”

We gathered a few more. I chose a strange curve-bladed weapon called a khopesh. I’d never seen something like it in my travels. To my surprise, the weapon actually had heft. Then I followed her back to the wing with the giant extinct reptiles.

“Alright, I’ll take the first photo. You be the model. Just teach me how to use your communicator’s camera.”

After a quick tutorial, she had me pose in front of the utahraptor with the khopesh held at the ready. She positioned the lantern to shine its light at an angle on us.

“Ooh, that’s perfect!” She lowered herself onto her belly and pointed my communicator at me from the floor. “Okay, now look mean, and pretend you are about to cut the dino’s head off. But don’t move.”

I did my best, pretending I was facing down the beast. It was a difficult task without moving.

“Hold it!” She moved to another location. “These are great. One more...perfect!”

I relaxed, taking a few experimental swings with the oddly-shaped weapon. It was different but didn’t feel bad. I wondered if I could convince Arron to infuse it with plasma technology to make it more useful. It was a shame to leave this here, forgotten. This was the only piece that felt of good quality.

Sammie was giddy as she skipped over to me. She turned my screen over.

The image showed me, larger than life, facing the gigantic beast. The lighting and angle made the creature look alive, and the fake backdrop of open woodlands and floodplains added to the illusion. It was as if I'd been transported back in time to a prehistoric Earth.

I stood there gaping at the wizardry she'd performed. I'd seen these fake images and watched clips of what the human called movies but had never thought of how they were made.

"It is wonderful. The humans insist I give them a photo to represent myself on their devices. I will send them this."

"The other humans you work with have cell phones too? Not just Aaron?"

"All the mated females have them, as does each of the foraging teams. There are extras that are shared by the clubhouse. Another hunter and his mate brought back many phones during a foraging trip."

"But how are they still working? The system went down years ago."

"They are connected to the Xarc'n network," I explained. "Much of what humans call the internet is saved on our network. The humans have a forum in which they share information with other groups around the world."

I thought she'd be happy with the information, but she looked sad instead.

"You are upset."

She shook her head. "I'm happy that we've come such a long way. I'm just a bit upset that I missed all of it. I've been hiding all this time while everyone else was busy rebuilding."

I understood now. "You have not missed much. The clubhouse was just established this year. Things progressed quickly once hunters and humans started working together. There are many groups around the world who have been working together longer."

“Aaron said he lived on the ledge with the other hunters. When did you start living at the clubhouse?”

“I was sent to live with the humans this spring to teach them how to fight the scourge before the summer swarms.” My heart swelled at the memories. “They are warriors all. Even the youngster was ready to pick up a blaster and face down the scourge.”

“These people mean a lot to you. I see it in your face.”

“They make me proud. They are why I believe Earth will be my first and only victory. I will give up the stars and stay for them and my future mate to keep Earth safe.”

I avoided looking directly at her. I knew she wasn't yet receptive to being my mate; she'd just learned recently that Xarc'n hunters were not the villains she'd thought we were. But I knew in my heart that she was my future.

I took one more look at the image of myself facing down the prehistoric beast. “Was this what you did before the scourge arrived? Make scenes of fantasy?”

“Oh no. Photography is, or was, just a hobby. I was just finishing up nursing school.”

“You are a medic?” I perked up.

We had several medical units at the clubhouse, but they could be better calibrated for healing humans. Humans were fragile compared to hunters.

“Oh no.” She waved her hands in front of her chest. “I had no practical training except for whatever I needed to get my degree. And it was nursing, not med school. I didn't have the grades for that.”

“There is a vet at the clubhouse and several people who know first aid. You will be a good addition.”

“You think so?”

“I do.”

“That makes me feel better. I was worried I’d have nothing to offer.” She laughed. “I guess I can always offer to take photos of people slaying dinosaurs.”

“I wish to slay more beasts.”

We continued across the wing, taking different photos of me with the ancient creatures. In some, I was besting them with steel. We even did a few with my spear, its plasma edge glowing. In others, I was riding them or taming them like a canine. It was the most fun I’d had, and we shared many laughs. I loved the sound of her laughter.

“Let me capture images of you.”

“I’m not photogenic like you,” she protested. “You look the part with your harness, armor, and loincloth.” She looked down at herself. “My clothes don’t even fit, my glasses are crooked, and my hair’s a mess.”

I reached out and raked my fingers through her hair. Unlike the day I’d approached her, her hair was down around her shoulders instead of tied up. She stilled, then licked her lips. With all her clothes on, the scent of her interest was faint but it was there. She enjoyed my touch.

Since she didn’t pull away, I continued to comb her hair with my fingers, arranging it neatly to frame her face.

I didn’t know how to fix her glasses. I tried to straighten them, but the moment I released them, they were tilted on her face again.

“You look perfect to me. I wish to capture your likeness.”

“Okay, if you insist. Let’s find a good spot.”

I searched the room, and my eyes landed on the flying creature suspended from the high ceiling. “On that. I wish to capture you riding that beast.”

It took some work, but I got her up on the display safely. She was worried about her weight on the cables at first, but when the cables didn’t snap, she relaxed. My images of her weren’t as realistic as the ones she’d taken. The cables

showed, and the lighting looked wrong, but her smile was mesmerizing.

“I’ve always wanted to go hog wild in a museum.” She was all smiles. “That was fun! Now how do I get down?”

“Jump. I will catch you.”

She hesitated for only a moment before she slid off the creature. I caught her, and she wrapped her arms around my neck.

“Thank you, Drak’l.”

She leaned in and kissed me on the cheek, and my chest exploded in thundering rumbles.

“We should get some rest,” she said, not even asking me to put her down. “It’s pretty late now, and we have to forage tomorrow. Let’s sleep in the lake.” She pointed to the last display we’d been in.

The lake was a piece of foam carved with waves and painted blue-green.

“That’s a great idea.”

“Too bad we don’t have a blanket.”

“I will keep you warm but not fresh,” I said solemnly.

That had her laughing again.

Chapter 9: Sammie

I sat alone in the vehicle as Drak'l went out to make sure the building was safe. This place once manufactured ultraviolet lamps and lighting, and from what I could tell, it had been sitting untouched for years.

It was morning and we'd driven over after waking up in our prehistoric world.

The factory was large, and Drak'l didn't want any scourge surprises. Those critters could live for weeks stuck behind doors or other barriers with no food or water, even in subzero temperatures. They hunkered down and stayed still to conserve energy, looking dead, but once the scent of food was in the air, they sprang to life, ready to consume. Those buggers sure were resilient.

Despite the heavily armored vehicle, I felt exposed here in the parking lot without Drak'l. He'd assured me that any stray scuttlers or lungers would be unable to break in before he came back. Lungers were built like basic scuttlers but had pneumatic hind legs to leap at their prey.

"What about flyers?" I'd asked.

"As long as the vehicle is still, they will not give chase."

"And those big centicreeps?"

"They are rare and cost the nest a large amount of resources. The nest in the area isn't large, so it probably only has a few, and you took down one already yesterday."

He was giving me credit for shooting down the terrifying creature, but the MVP had been the vehicle and his driving.

My shooting was horrible, and I'd missed more than I'd hit. But the mention still put a smile on my lips. It was the first bug I'd ever killed.

I knew that was a rare thing for someone who'd survived this long, but I hadn't survived by fighting. I'd done so by hiding.

Last night, at the museum, Drak'l's face had lit up when he spoke of the survivors at the clubhouse and how he'd trained them all to fight. He'd called them warriors and expressed how proud he was of them. I wondered if I'd ever be so brave.

We'd cuddled up on the blue-green foam, and I'd even surreptitiously unzipped my coat so I could feel the warmth of him closer to my skin. The guy was a heater, and with the chilly winter air and the unheated building, I needed to stay warm.

As he'd promised, he kept me warm but not fresh. He hadn't pushed for anything else, even though his body reacted to our closeness in unmistakable ways. He didn't even kiss me again, and a part of me was a little disappointed but grateful at the same time. I was still trying to come to terms with the fact that I was attracted to him.

Our impromptu photoshoot had worn me out, though, and the thought didn't keep me up. I'd fallen asleep easily with the purring in his chest surrounding us like a lullaby.

I'd woken up this morning with his thick arousal pressed against my ass. We'd been spooned together, and I was using his arm as a pillow. The soft yet supportive foam provided just the right support for the position. I'd pretended not to notice it, though how believable that had been was questionable. His loincloth did nothing to hide his condition, and it was hard to miss something that impressive.

I thought of his suggestion to "do the dating" yesterday. I hadn't replied because all this was so new to me. I was still coming to terms with the fact that the species I'd believed

had been behind Earth's demise had been here to help all along. I wasn't sure what was real.

After talking to Aaron, and our evening together yesterday, I was certain that Drak'l told the truth. I was also sure now that we got along well—more than well. I hadn't had that much fun in years!

I was glad my arousal at the feel of his cock against my body hadn't been as obvious. Now that I'd gotten used to his differences, I found my attraction to him growing every second we spent together. I'd noticed his impressively muscular body from the get-go, but now, I found his fangs, his horns, even his golden eyes, sexy.

But he was an alien! It wasn't right for me to have feelings for him. I was so confused.

Movement at the door caught my eye, and I blew out a breath at the sight of purple skin. All clear; how fast the color purple had come to signify safety. We put the ramps down and drove our vehicle right up into the factory loading dock. As the metal doors closed, we were plunged into darkness.

A hand touched my thigh. "There is no need to fear. This building is secure."

"We didn't think this through. I can't see in the dark like you."

The lantern hadn't been fully charged yesterday, and our unconventional use of it for the photoshoot had used up the rest of the juice.

"We will use the lights from the vehicle." He turned on the headlights, the only things on the vehicle that were still stock.

"Won't that drain the energy?"

I'd noticed the gauge was less than half full this morning. Drak'l had explained that the truck had been modified to use solar power with a Xarc'n power system, but unlike their shuttles that could go for weeks with a single charge, it was a

power hog and could only last days. Yesterday and today had both been cloudy, so I worried.

“We will be quick. Help me find the things Aaron needs, and we’ll be on our way back to the ledge.”

Spurred on by the possibility of being stranded until the next sunny day, I hurried out of the war machine and got to work, looking for the lights the Tech Wizard wanted. It still stunned me that while I’d been hiding out in an underground bunker for the past few years, humans on the surface had been learning to work hand-in hand-with the Xarc’n warriors, including taking on their traditional military roles.

Despite having been volunteered for the position, Aaron had seemed to be taking it in stride. However, he did roll his eyes ever so slightly when Drak’l had introduced him as their Tech Wizard.

On top of the lights and bulbs Aaron had asked for, we found a bunch of grow lamps. Drak’l had insisted we bring them back since the survivors had mentioned needing them to start seeds for the coming growing season. He cared a lot about these people.

With our foraged goods loaded into the back of the war machine, we opened the large garage doors, ready to head to the ledge to deliver the goods. We were stopped by a group of zombie-like figures blocking the exit to the road.

“What the hell are those?”

They looked more like zombies from a movie than people. They had large sores all over their bodies and skinny, hollowed-out faces. Some of them had white webbing over parts of the large, oozing sores. Even with the window closed, a horrible stench drifted through the vents. I hit the button to recycle the air inside and not pull in the air from outside.

I’d only smelled that putrid odor when I was close to the bugs, but there were no bugs in sight. I held my breath, glad we hadn’t had breakfast yet.

When the ghoulish mob saw us, they slowly turned en masse and shuffled toward the vehicle.

“Infected,” Drak’l growled in disgust. “These humans are infected by the scourge’s fungus.”

I remember reading about something like that before the internet shut down. It had been all conjecture, though, and the scientists who’d suggested it had been portrayed by the media as a little wacky and spreading fake news.

“How did they get infected?” I worried, since Billy and I had been around the scourge.

“Either through consumption of the scourge, and therefore the spores, or through contact with other infected humans. It is rare to catch it from the scourge themselves, unless you accidentally get their ichor into your body. Do not worry. You are not infected. I do not smell it on you.” He leaned over as if to check. “You smell very good to me.”

I’d noticed him sneaking sniffs of my hair last night while we cuddled, and each time, the purring from his chest would intensify.

Two of the zombies lunged forward, swatting the air with their arms. “The ones at the front look violent.”

Even as I said the words, one of the infected started stumbling faster toward us. Instead of bulldozing through them as he had the bugs, Drak’l put the vehicle in reverse and backed into the parking lot.

“The fungus is less likely to jump species when it is on the scourge, but once it has already made the jump, it is very contagious.” He continued driving backward as he explained, curving around in a large arc. “I do not want any of their parts on the vehicle or on us.”

Considering how bad they smelled, I didn’t want any part of them on me, either.

He continued backing in an arc until he had enough space to drive forward. He led them around the complex until the

last one was clear of the entry to the lot. Then, he drove around the mob, giving them a wide berth.

“Flyers!” I said, looking skyward.

It was still mid-morning, so instead of a whole bunch of them, there were only two.

“They are here for the infected. The stench of the oozing sores calls to them. That is how the fungus completes its life cycle; it needs to get back into the body of a scourge, so it calls them in to consume the infected.”

“Ugh.” Just the thought made me feel sick.

The fetid stench didn’t call to the flyers enough, however, or maybe they knew the infected would be there for them when they returned, because they followed our vehicle instead.

I climbed into the back and started up the blaster. I’d taken out a centicreep before with it; I could take on a flyer.

It took a moment for the blaster and camera to move into position. I only managed one shot before one of the flyers dive-bombed us.

Drak’l swerved, and the flyer missed, but the second flyer dove at us a millisecond later, and Drak’l was unable to avoid it. It crashed into our vehicle and then seemingly disappeared.

At first, I thought the impact had taken out the camera. All I saw was black. Then a flash of the morning sky showed for just a moment before the screen turned black again. It took me a few seconds to realize the flyer was latched onto the roof of our truck, obscuring the camera and my ability to fire.

“Hold on,” Drak’l warned before swerving to the side, trying to dislodge the creature.

It didn’t work. A loud sound reverberated through the vehicle as something smashed onto the roof again.

“It’s trying to spike through the roof with its tail.”

The sound rang out again, and a small dent appeared in the ceiling just a foot from me. It must have hit between the armor. I was glad it wasn't smart enough to move forward and stab through the windshield.

"Kruux!"

The vehicle slammed to a halt as the first flyer returned. This time, it held onto the front of the truck. The underside of its belly showed clearly through the windshield. I'd never in a million years thought I'd ever have such an up close and personal view of this angle without being dead a split second later.

Drak'l crawled back into the camper with me and started strapping on his armor.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to get them off the vehicle."

"You're going out there?"

"It's only two flyers. I can handle them."

"What about the infected?"

"I am faster. And they will help distract the flyers if more come." He gestured to the driver's seat. "Get in the front."

"But—"

"I promised to bring this back in one piece, and there are supplies here our Tech Wizard needs. We can't lose this vehicle. I am a good fighter. Do you doubt my skills?"

"No. Of course not, but—"

"You worry for me then. Good." He cupped my face with his massive hands. "Worry means you care. This dating thing is working." He leaned in and touched my lips with his ever so lightly.

I breathed him in and realized it was the truth; I was starting to care for him. We stayed there for a short moment, pressed forehead to forehead.

“Once both flyers are off the vehicle, drive.” He was all business again. “Find somewhere sheltered and wait for me. If more scourge come or it gets too dangerous to stop, the settlement location is programmed in the map. Go there, and I will find you.”

Before I could protest, he'd opened the back door, jumped out, and slammed the door shut, leaving me alone in the truck. Moments later, the flyer attached to the windshield leaped away, and I climbed into the driver's seat.

Drak'l yelled at the creatures, waving his weapon in the air. He stayed just out of reach, playing a dangerous game of chicken with the two flyers. In the distance, the groups of infected humans were closing in. He was leading them into each other.

The driver's seat was pushed all the way back, and I couldn't even reach the pedals. I adjusted the seat quickly and was off, leaving yet another person I cared about temporarily behind.

Chapter 10: Sammie

Drak'l's alien phone flashed on the dash. He'd left it in the truck, and whoever was now trying to contact him was out of luck. It wasn't Aaron. No image flashed on the screen. In its place instead were several strange alien glyphs arranged vertically.

Not feeling comfortable enough with Drak'l to pick up his calls, I ignored it.

I drove on, heading in the direction of the settlement until I found a mechanical shop at the side of the road. A good thing, too, since noon was fast approaching. The garage doors had been left open, and after a quick step outside of the truck to check for dangers, I drove in.

I debated whether to close the garage door to stay better hidden or to keep them open to make it easier for Drak'l to find me. A roving group of scuttlers and spitters made the decision for me. Seeing someone dissolved to the bone by spitter acid once in my life was enough.

I held still as the group continued down the road, following the highway. Once they were out of sight, I counted to ten to be sure they were gone, then quietly got out of the truck to close the garage door.

It was dark in the garage, with only a small window on the side to let in the sunlight, but my eyes adjusted well enough. I'd gotten used to living in dim light for years in the bunker. If anything, bright sunlight still bothered me.

The first time anyone had left the bunker had been to clear debris off the solar panels. Cedrick and Tom had taken turns

braving the outside world to do basic maintenance. One time, Tom had brought back a whole bunch of bugs with him, and they'd clawed at the door for days and days. I still had nightmares about that.

Until the first spring after the long winter, only Cedrick and Tom had ever left the bunker, and only to do maintenance. They never roamed far, and they never foraged. Then Lucas had started exhibiting violent signs. It wasn't terribly noticeable at first. He'd picked verbal fights with his brothers and yelled at his parents.

Then he'd started getting physical, pushing them around.

I'd been the only woman in the bunker his age who wasn't related to him, and I was pretty sure that, aside from my paltry medical skills, I'd been allowed into the bunker because they'd planned for Lucas and me to be a couple one day. They couldn't come out of the bunker and help repopulate the world with God's children with only a bunch of boys.

Desperate for a place to stay, I'd pretended to be a virgin, prayed every night, and carried my Bible around everywhere. Mary had loved me, calling me the future daughter she couldn't wait to have. She was one of the first to notice her son's erratic behavior. She would also become his first human victim.

We never found out what happened to Bebe, the family dog, but I highly suspected Lucas was involved.

After witnessing Lucas's erratic behavior, Cedrick had pushed Lucas's and my nuptials farther and farther into the future at his wife's request, thank goodness. He and Tom had also decided that it was time for the menfolk to brave the new world, and started foraging to replenish stock.

I knew the truth, though. I was responsible for tallying up the stock every week. We had plenty. They were trying to separate the brothers to avoid fighting. They took turns leaving the bunker. Billy went with Neil, the middle brother, and Lucas chose to go alone. That had helped a bit.

Cedrick had been so sure that it was just cabin fever, and some fresh air and a change of scenery would fix his son. Then Neil and Paige had gotten married on account of she was already pregnant; they'd been messing around in the walk-in pantry. How they'd managed in a bunker filled with family was beyond me, but good for them.

Pissed off that they'd allowed his younger brother to get married first, Lucas had gone on a rampage, making everyone's lives miserable.

Lucas had in it his head that God had chosen me as his bride, and I was rightfully his. Mary had been protecting me when Lucas pushed her to the concrete floor, smashing her head. She'd survived, but nothing was the same in the bunker after that.

Mary'd needed help to do everything. They'd broken off my betrothal to Lucas, and I was officially made her full-time nurse. Tom or Cedrick hovered around constantly, making sure Lucas wouldn't get to us alone. Mary and I were shielded from a lot of the infighting that happened before Lucas lost it all the way and pulled a knife on his uncle.

Suddenly, I had two patients.

They'd locked Lucas up after that, not sure what to do with him.

I still felt guilty for leaving Mary behind. Cedrick had been bleeding from a knife wound when he'd walked in with Billy a few days ago. He'd shoved a pre-packed bag into my arms, then sent us, along with Neil and Paige, out into the world.

"Go! Run. Get away from here!" he'd yelled from the door. "I'll slow him down."

I'd been so confused, not knowing Lucas had gotten loose and had already killed his aunt and his cousins. Lucas had been hunting us since.

And so here I was. Neil and Paige were gone, and I wasn't even sure if Billy was still alive.

Hell, I worried I'd be waiting here forever for Drak'l. It had to be noon by now, and he was stuck out there at the height of bug activity.

I thought of his last words to me. If things got bad, he wanted me to go to the settlement and meet him there. It was *déjà vu* all over again.

This settlement was like some sort of magical place where I was going to see the only people left I cared about. Like some sort of heaven on Earth. I hoped I wouldn't be disappointed.

I planned on waiting in the garage for a while before heading out, though, to give Drak'l a chance to catch up. I liked traveling with him a lot more than alone. And he was right; yes, I was starting to care.

I picked up the communicator and fiddled around with it, trying to make it show me the photos we'd taken at the museum. I didn't understand the icon and glyphs on the screen, and no matter how hard I tried, nothing happened.

The communicator was lightweight but ruggedly built. If I hadn't known it could do everything it did, I would've thought it was a toy by the way it felt in my hands. This thing felt as if it would survive being chucked off the side of a cliff. With the way these warriors fought, I wondered if it was a common occurrence for their devices to get slammed on rocks or dropped into rivers.

I squeaked and almost dropped the alien device when it vibrated in my hands. I turned it around, and when I did, I accidentally pressed something and picked up the call.

Oops.

The purple face on the screen looked just as surprised to see me. Behind him were gray metallic walls. He let loose a string of growls, but no translation came.

"I'm sorry. I can't understand you, and I don't know how to make this thing translate. I picked it up by accident. I was holding the phone." I didn't know if the Xarc'n warrior on the screen understood English.

His face told me he did, but it wasn't him who answered.

"Ooh, Drak'l found his female! I knew it!" The words were said in English and needed no translation.

"Who said that?" There wasn't anyone on the screen except for the warrior, and the voice had sounded like it was right by the speaker.

"I did. I'm Pip."

"You're the shuttle."

"You've heard of me?"

"Yes. Aaron told me all about you." He'd also said that Pip was a gossip. I was sure the entire settlement would know about me by the time I got there. Who knew I came with an early warning system?

The warrior growled something again.

"Bre'k wants to talk to Drak'l," Pip said.

"He was fighting some flyers. He told me to drive somewhere safe and wait for him. But I've been waiting for a while, and I'm getting a little nervous."

"Don't you worry," Pip chimed in. "Xarc'n warriors are exceptional fighters, and Drak'l is one of the best. He'll find you soon. You've made a good choice in a mate."

"Oh, we aren't mates." Why did everyone assume this? "He's just helping me get to the settlement."

One of the wall panels moved in the background, and a woman with red hair stepped out. "Who is this?" she asked, narrowing her eyes at the warrior.

"He was calling Drak'l," I answered quickly, not wanting any misunderstandings. "I have his phone, er, communicator."

"You're also in one of those war machines. I'm Yvette."

"I'm Sammie." I explained my situation again.

"He's probably just hunkering down somewhere else until the flyers head home. He'll find you." Having Yvette say it to

me made me feel much better.

“That’s what I said.”

“Pip’s a know it all.” Yvette winked.

“That’s right. I know everything.”

I grinned. The ship hadn’t quite figured out all the English nuances yet.

“Can I take a message? Or should I get Drak’l to call you back when he gets here?”

The warrior said something to Pip.

“He said just go straight to Aaron. He’s sick of being the warrior in the middle.”

“Okay, will do. Oh, before you go, can you show me how to access the images inside this device?”

“Sure thing.” Yvette held up a device and showed me how to get to the images. She also showed me how to call the last person, them, if I needed to.

“Thanks!”

“You’re very welcome. I’ll see you at the ledge when you drop off those lights.”

I waved goodbye before fiddling with the phone to hang up.

Following her directions, I pulled up the images stored on the device. I was greeted with a photo of myself on the pterodactyl. I chortled.

I was glad he’d convinced me to pose at least once. The photos weren’t amazing, but they could be easily edited. The wires would be easy to photoshop out, and I could adjust the lighting, fix up my hair, and... I stopped myself.

I didn’t have any of the apps I needed to do that. It was so easy to slip back into the past, into a world where we had cell phones, and data plans, and endless cat videos, and friends and family who were still alive. Those days were long passed. I had to remind myself of that.

I continued scrolling through the photos, grinning like a mad woman at the pictures of Drak'l slaying his prehistoric beasts. He had really gotten into the photoshoot once he'd realized how much fun it was. Like that, it was easy to forget he wasn't even human.

Sure, his skin was purple. And he had horns. And fangs. Retractable claws. Giant, clawed feet. But at the heart of it, we were just two people having fun. We might look completely different on the outside, but inside, we might be more similar than I'd first thought.

The next image was a picture of a chicken in a colorful, floral print diaper. Huh! Interesting.

We'd had chickens in the bunker until we kept finding them dying mysteriously one-by-one. Looking back, it had probably been Lucas. That had been before things got really bad with him.

The following image was of a dog and a young boy. The kid couldn't be more than eight or nine. The dog was a mutt with perky ears and white and brown patches.

The next photo was of a calico.

I kept scrolling, and every image was of an animal. Sometimes a human made it into the background, but the animals were the main subject. There were dozens of pictures of a chipmunk. That had me smiling. Drak'l liked animals; that was kind of sweet.

Securing the device onto the dash mount, I looked at the doors again. I couldn't make sense of any of the icons on the device, so I had no idea what time it was, but it had to be way past noon by now. A feeling of cold desperation filled my belly as the minutes ticked by. Where the hell was he?

I'd already left enough people behind. I don't want to leave him too.

Chapter 11: Drak'I

I hated having to leave Sammie alone for hours as I waited for the flyers to clear the skies.

Two flyers I could handle, especially since they'd come for the infected and hadn't yet called in the scuttlers and lungers to help cut the infected humans apart and bring them back to the nest.

As I'd expected, they'd gotten distracted by the infected easily, and I'd sent a stream of fire into the mess with my portable fire canon, setting them all ablaze. Then I'd hurried to catch up with Sammie.

She'd taken the highway, a route I knew was programmed into the truck. There were several stops along the way which would provide shelter. I just hoped she didn't drive past one and get caught in the open with the flyers out. In that case, the best bet would be to keep driving until she got far enough away.

She wasn't at the first location, a refueling station for human cars. This location was too exposed anyway. She could've hidden in the small building, but she'd have had to leave the vehicle, and there was nothing to protect the truck.

The flyers started showing up shortly after I left that location, and I ended up doubling back and staying in the small building for shelter. I ran into a group of lungers and spitters on the way. Instead of fighting them, I spotted them early and got off the road, taking a small detour.

I could have taken them easily, but it was never smart to fight the scourge alone at high noon. I might destroy this

group only to find myself surrounded by flyers, their calls bringing in more scourge from all around. It hadn't been so bad before the centicreep mutation arrived on Earth. Now, all it took was one centicreep to turn the tide of battle.

Even if hunters hadn't already started working in groups, we would have needed to, once those creatures became common. The only time smart hunters fought wave after wave of scourge was if they had set up the battlefield already and were prepared, and most of the time in teams. Prepared hunters lived to see the next sunrise.

I was not prepared now, so I hid.

I waited until the scourge had thinned before following the road to the next destination. We were out of the town now, and there wasn't much cover here, not in these parts. The road seemed to stretch out into the great plains, straight and nearly featureless, until the mountains.

The terrain made fighting the scourge very different from the mountains. There, we had to worry about many tiny nests dotted throughout the caves. There were tons of hiding spaces for both hunters and the hunted. Here, with nothing but open skies, the hunters became the hunted easily.

The closed garage door to the mechanic shop was a welcome sight. I was sure it had been open when I'd driven by on the way to Sammie with the war machine. There didn't seem to be any scourge surrounding the building. That was another good sign.

Not accustomed to the style of door, it took me a few moments to figure it out and open it. I was greeted by the barrel of her shotgun pointed through the windshield.

"Drak'!" Her cry was one of relief. She put down her weapon, opened the door, and ran out of the vehicle.

I didn't expect her to launch herself at me, throwing her arms and legs around my body. I caught her, holding her weight up with my hands on her ass. My chest filled the garage with happy sounds at the sight and touch of her.

“Oomph.” This was one attack I’d like to endure every day of my life.

“I was so worried. I didn’t want to go without you.”

“I had to wait for the flyers to thin out. I didn’t intend to leave you for so long. I’m sorry.”

“You’re here now. That’s all that matters.” She gave me a loud kiss on the cheek before unwrapping her legs from my hips and reaching for the ground.

Every touch of her body pressed against me as she slid down my front was electric. I wanted to touch her forever and never let go. I wanted to explore, learn, and possess every part of her until she was etched indelibly into my soul.

When she reached the ground, she didn’t let go. Instead, she wrapped her arms around my waist, and I wrapped my arms around her shoulders. We stood there in the garage, the door still half-open behind us, letting in the crisp and clean winter air for a short eternity.

“If all it took was some time apart to have you latched onto me like this, I should have done so earlier.”

“It was a moment of weakness. We’ll never speak of it again.” She laughed and let go. “Let’s get these lights to Aaron.”

I reached for the door of the truck, but my hands did not move. I ended up jerking Sammie around instead.

She laughed. “You have to let go, you know.”

“I cannot.” Realization filled me with joy. “It’s the mate bond.”

“It is?”

“Yes. I’m sure of it. I knew it. I knew you were my mate.”

She shook her head. “But we just met a few days ago. How do you know for sure?”

I hadn't explained much about the mate bond to her, and now I wished I had. "I just know. Xarc'n warriors bond to one mate and one mate only. I was lured to the area you were traveling in because of your scent. Just by that alone, I thought you were mine. You also make my chest rumble. But those two things do not make a bond. They just signal the potential." I squeezed her lightly. "But this—this does. It means my body has chosen, and you are it from now until forever."

Her brow furrowed in the cutest way, and I lifted her so I could kiss the wrinkles on her forehead.

"This is too much too fast," she said. "I just found out you weren't the bad guy." She tried to push away. "I just admitted to myself I actually care about you. I'm not ready for whatever this is. I don't even know if I can survive in this world yet."

Humans had difficulty understanding our mate bonds. They didn't feel the instant connection, not like we did. Though some of the mated females had said they felt something.

"Our mate bonds are never wrong. You are it for me. There is no need to worry if you can survive on your own. You are mine and I will take care of you."

She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. "Don't I get a say?"

"You get to say anything you want. I enjoy the sound of your voice."

"That's not what I mean," she huffed. "What if I don't want to be your mate?"

I snarled. "You are mine. You enjoyed our date together, and your body reacts to mine."

"That's not enough."

"What will be enough?"

"I—" She paused. "I don't know. Time? Time for me to get used to this new world. Time for me to get used to you?"

“Then I will give you time.” I would not call her my mate until she was ready, even though I knew she was in my heart. “But I still cannot release you. It is not my choice. I have no control over this.”

“Argh!”

She pushed and shoved in my arms and pounded on my chest with her little fists, but nothing she did was effective. If it made her feel better, though, I didn’t mind, as long as she wasn’t hurting herself. Finally, she gave up and relaxed in my arms.

After a long moment of her catching her breath, she said, “Fine. Whatever. Listen; I like you Drak’l. I had more fun these past few days than I’ve had in years, and you make me feel safe. But this is a lot to take in.”

I grunted. “I understand. We will just do the dating.”

She glanced over to the truck. “If you can’t let go of me, how do we drive? You barely fit into the driver’s seat as it is. And how long does it take before it lets us go?”

“It takes however long it takes. It is impossible to guess.”

A gust of wind blew in from outside.

“You are not wearing your coat. You must be cold. Let’s get inside the truck and figure out what to do.”

I walked us over to the garage door, and Sammie closed it in case any roving bands of scourge came by. I went to the back of the truck and opened the larger back door and climbed in, bringing Sammie with me.

“You know how I control the blasters with a video game-like system? I wonder if there’s a way to let us control the vehicle from the back.” She looked at me expectantly.

“Aaron could probably rig something like that up with enough time, but it’s not something I can do. I’m not mechanically adept.”

“What about removing the front seats completely? We’re in a body shop. We have all the tools we need, and it shouldn’t be that difficult.”

“I have a better idea. We saved much of your internet. If someone put a tutorial on there, we can follow it.” I took my communicator and brought up the old Earth interface before handing it to her.

Very soon, we had a video demonstrating exactly what we needed to do to remove the front seats. It was challenging since we were stuck together, but also enjoyable work. We made a good team, even though Sammie had to do most of the detailed tasks since my hands were still stuck together.

Eventually, we got the passenger seat folded down flat and the driver seat removed. We propped the seat up farther back, the best we could with the bins and boxes we had. This gave us access to the pedals and steering wheel.

From this position, Sammie couldn’t reach the pedals, but I could. And with her sitting raised on my lap, she could see well over the dash and control the steering wheel. It wasn’t perfect, and we’d need to work together, but it would work.

We had to drive carefully. Any fast corners or sudden acceleration would knock the seat, and us, out of place. There was nowhere to secure the seat this far back, we’d pulled it right off the track to make room.

“We should wait until night,” I said. “We are less likely to run into scourge.”

“Good idea.” She twisted around on my lap. “Being stuck together isn’t so bad. We can do this.”

I hoped her words were true for the rest of our lives.

Chapter 12: Sammie

I gawked at the large ski lodge-style building set into the side of the cliff. They hadn't called this place the Lodge on the Ledge for nothing.

We'd started our drive just as the sun was setting and now it was dark. That didn't stop me from seeing the lodge though, even with the headlights of the monster truck turned off. The building was lit not just by the warm glow from the windows, but it had a little lamp at the front door.

This place had electricity. I didn't understand why that surprised me. I'd been lucky and our bunker had been powered as well, though we'd had to be careful to conserve energy, especially in the winter when the sun was weak and the nights long and cold. We'd piled into the largest room most nights, not just for the body heat, but to share the one tiny light we were allowed to keep on until bedtime.

I thought of my little collection of books that had kept me from going insane during those hard times. I'd even picked up crocheting just to pass the time. It had kept my brain and hands occupied as a missed stitch or mistake was hard to spot and fix in the dim light.

They didn't need to worry about that here. There were several windows aglow.

We'd driven by the clubhouse earlier, and their lights had been on as well. This told me two very important things. One, they had enough resources to keep several fires going and keep lamps and lanterns lit. And two, they were large and

well-armed enough that they didn't worry their lights would attract an attack for said resources.

That had been one thing we'd been terrified of back at the bunker. In the beginning, we'd been in contact with another group. A good friend of Cedrick ran that bunker, and we'd kept in touch through walkie-talkies. I remember us daring to open the bunker door and stick our heads out on quiet nights to get a better signal.

The other bunker hadn't been careful enough. Raiders had launched an attack that first long winter. They'd managed to get one last call out to us before the place was ransacked and the women stolen. We'd taken in a few of the survivors for a few months, but they talked often about revenge and going to save their women. They'd gone out one day and never come back.

We'd done everything we could to hide our existence, including using the fireplace only after dark to warm the bunker and to cook. During the day, we tried to stay warm with multiple layers.

The clubhouse had no such worries. They did nothing to hide their existence. They knew they were the only settlement nearby. Or perhaps they had already gotten rid of any rivals in the area. By the looks of it, and how Drak'l and Billy had spoken of them, they were a decent-sized group.

I really hoped they were as friendly as Billy had said.

The drive up to the ledge had been harrowing, especially with how we had to control the truck. The narrow path up the mountain threatened to tumble us down steep, sloping sides. The snow and ice from yesterday's storm hadn't helped.

The road and conditions had tested our patience with it and each other as we struggled up to the ledge. Lucky for us, we'd already had plenty of practice working together on the way here, merging his foot work and my steering into a cohesive command of the vehicle.

That narrow mountain path had only almost killed us twice. I called that a victory.

I was feeling pretty confident about Drak'l and me by the time we drove onto the wide, flat, and not-deadly ledge. We made a great team. Sure, he was an alien, and our meeting and everything about our relationship was unconventional, but what did convention matter now? It wasn't like there was anyone to judge us.

For some reason, I didn't think Billy would care. The rest of his family would have thought it scandalous. Mary would have clutched her pearls. Cedrick would have cast me out of his bunker. But as much as I missed them, I didn't need to live my life in the memory of their judgement and values.

Out here, in this bug-infested landscape, I was free to be me. And I liked Drak'l a hell of a lot. So much I worried it was too good to be true. Did I really care about him? Or was I just so desperate not to be alone that I was falling for the first living soul I'd come across on my own? Would things change once I met other people?

Or what if I fell for him, and lost him afterward? Just like I'd lost everyone else?

"You are nervous," he said from behind me.

"Nah, I'm just cold," I half-lied. I was nervous, but I was also cold.

We hadn't been able to get my coat on with his arms around me, and while he was plenty warm, the wind was high on the ledge and every gust had me shivering.

"Then let's get you inside."

The warmth of the lodge hit me when I opened the door. That wasn't the most noticeable thing, though. That prize went to the smell of food, which had my nose perked up and my stomach growly. We'd shared some of my rations back at the garage before we left, but nothing was quite like fresh-cooked food.

The large entry way was empty for all of two seconds before a lady popped her head out from one of the open doorways. I didn't recognize her. She had big, light brown eyes and her dark blonde hair sat loose in soft waves around her face. Her hair was light and fluffy-looking: clean.

I immediately felt disgusting and dirty. I hadn't been able to let my hair down for weeks. It had been that long since I'd washed it thoroughly. Hair washing day was a big event, with the entire bunker heating up enough water to clean everyone at once, then we'd spare the extra fuel to keep the bunker warm as our hair dried. It was cold in the bunker and air drying wet hair sucked. We did it only once a month in the winter to save both water and fuel.

At least my clothes were clean. I'd had them for only for a few days.

The lady gasped. "Oh my god! Drak'l brought home a girl!"

She was rushing forward to greet me in the blink of an eye. I shrank back against Drak'l's chest, hoping his nice masculine scent would overpower mine.

"I can't believe you've been hiding her, Drak'l. No wonder everyone's saying you've been hard to reach the last few days." The blonde turned to me. "Look at you! Don't worry, the bond will release you when the time is right." She stuck out her hand. "I'm Sandy."

I stared at her hand for a moment, standing there like an idiot until I realized she was asking for a handshake. I took it, my face heating up. I was making a horrible impression.

"Sandy, I think you're scaring the poor girl." Aaron stood in the doorway of what looked like a library, except the desk behind him was overflowing with gizmos and gadgets.

"Oh, no, no. It's me. I've been stuck in a bunker for years, and I think I've forgotten how to be social." I looked around the inside of the lodge, finally seeing it. "This is all a lot to take in."

“Don’t mind me. I get really excited every time another hunter finds his mate.”

“Oh, we’re not mates. We’re just, um, dating.” She looked so happy, and I hated to burst her bubble.

“Of course.” She eyed the fact that we were attached. “I was the first woman to start living here with the hunters.” She turned to the big purple warrior who was standing behind her.

The guy was at least seven feet tall. How had I missed him there? I’d been so focused on finally meeting another human being.

“This is Turr’k, my mate.”

Not knowing what was customary for greeting a Xarc’n warrior, I just smiled politely and nodded. Dang it, I should have asked Drak’l about all this before. I remembered hearing that some species considered the baring of teeth aggressive, but Drak’l never reacted badly to my smile, so I hoped it was the right thing to do.

Turr’k tucked his chin and grunted, which I took for a hello.

By now, three more couples had come in from the room on the opposite side of the foyer. I recognized one as the couple I’d talked to over the phone. I smiled and waved to Yvette. She smiled back warmly.

This wasn’t so bad. These people didn’t give me any bad vibes. I could do this.

“Drak’l, close the door and bring your lucky woman in. We can get to know each other in the dining room instead of standing in the entranceway.” The dark-haired lady had a hunter of her own.

This lodge was filled with hunters and their mates, along with one lone Aaron. To be honest, coming here first instead of the clubhouse was probably a good idea. The group here was smaller, and I didn’t feel out of place attached to Drak’l. The women looked at me like they knew exactly how it felt.

“The powder room is over there.” Sandy gestured to a room off to the side. “Everything’s working if you want to wash up before dinner.

I thanked her and stepped inside, where Drak’l and I ran into our first problem. There was absolutely zero privacy with him glued to me like a bug on a windshield.

“I will close my eyes,” he said dutifully. “Humans are embarrassed about natural functions.” When I still hesitated, he added, “My ears also, I will close.”

That had me chuckling. “Is that even possible?”

“For you, everything is possible.”

Business done and hands washed, I washed my face quickly, getting the grime from traveling off my cheeks. I regretted it almost immediately as my face dried and the dryness of winter set in. I’d need to hunt down some moisturizer; that was one thing Cedrick hadn’t thrown into the pack.

As I walked into the dining room, I looked around the interior of the lodge, finally having the time to take in my surroundings. There were weapons on the walls that reminded me of our little visit to the museum. Everything was big in this building, as if it had been made for the hunters themselves, from the heavy wooden furniture to the massive, exposed beams across the ceilings. But that couldn’t be. This was built long before they’d arrived on Earth.

“Quite a place, isn’t it?” Aaron said. “Some rich guy built it for his family and to entertain and impress his rich friends. I found the schematics in the library. There’s supposed to be a helicopter pad up front, but they never finished it.”

“Wow, fancy.”

“Yup. And now it’s ours.”

I hooked my pack next to an empty seat, and Drak’l sat us down.

Something orange and white caught my attention. It was the cat from Drak’l’s photos.

“That’s Reese’s Pieces,” said the woman with alabaster skin and dark hair, as she put down two plates of food in front of us, a huge one for Drak’l and a normal-sized one for me. “Don’t let her boss you around for food. She gets fed plenty. She doesn’t need roast beef.”

How had they gotten a roast? Last I checked, there were no more cows left. They’d been easy targets for the bugs and were probably responsible for the huge surge in population that fateful spring.

Maybe they had a freezer here that hadn’t been affected by the loss of power? Even if that were the case, that freezer must have been huge to still have meat in it. At the bunker, we were down to freeze-dried ground beef, which was closer to little chewy pellets. I had a good bit of that in a plastic bag in my pack, thanks to Cedrick’s last-minute packing.

The roast looked and smelled like beef. These people weren’t cannibals. I hoped. Because if they were, I was screwed.

“The Xarc’n supply delivery guy added frozen roasts to our list instead of just pre-formed food bars,” Sandy explained after seeing the look on my face. “They have several islands dedicated to food production that the scourge can’t get to.”

“They try,” Drak’l said. “But food production facilities are heavily fortified. Any flyers getting close are shot down. The other scourge don’t swim. They sink. Several groups had tried to get to the islands underwater, but waterlogged scourge mold easily and suffocate when their spiracles fill with water.”

“Let’s not talk bugs at the dinner table, eh?” said the final woman, who was of Asian descent. She, too, had her own hunter.

“I never caught your name.”

“I’m May, and this is Xik’n.” She turned to the lady who’d told me not to feed the cat. “And this is Morgan and Rhaz’k.”

I waved across the table.

“If you forget any of our names,” Morgan said, “don’t feel bad. It’s a lot of new people to meet at the same time.”

She could say that again.

Chapter 13: Drak'I

I was supposed to be the one feeding my mate, but instead, with my arms stuck around her, she had to feed me. I didn't mind, but I made a note to return the favor in the future.

I was glad Aaron had convinced me to come to the ledge first. I missed the connectedness and closeness of the people here. I hadn't sat down for a human-style meal for a while. It was a lot more chaotic at the clubhouse with dozens of people going in and out. With that many people, meals were made and people ate whenever they had time, often in small groups.

It was also better for Sammie here. She didn't admit her nervousness, but it was palpable. She was hesitant to meet other humans and I didn't blame her; not all humans were friendly. Yvette and Bre'k had faced off with a group of cannibals earlier this year and would have been in a lot of trouble if it weren't for Pip.

With us stuck together, being here at the lodge was much easier. All the humans here understood what was happening. They'd explained the mate bond to Sammie better than I could.

To my surprise, she didn't deny our mate bond publicly to the others. She simply listened and nodded as they explained everything to her.

We also didn't need to deal with the females at the clubhouse that had been hoping I would find a mate in them. None had been particularly aggressive, but they tried to be around me when I was there. They'd be disappointed, but

they would live. Besides, more hunters were coming to join the group thanks to Pip.

The tiny bites Sammie fed me on the fork were ridiculously inefficient. At this rate we'd be here all day.

"Just hold the piece of meat for me."

She did and I tore off a large chunk.

"Hungry?" she said, looking amused. She looked around the table at the other hunters who were devouring their food as they always did.

"So, tell us a bit about yourself," Yvette prompted.

She was the group's amateur anthropologist and always had questions. She was putting together a collection of stories of how different people survived the first few years of the scourge invasion.

"Well, there's not much to tell. My neighbors had a secret bunker and they let me in. I lived there with them and their extended family until recently."

"What happened?" Yvette put her hand up. "There's no obligation to answer. Especially if it's too soon."

"It's okay. I think I need to say it out loud anyway. The oldest son, Lucas, went bat-shit crazy. It was a long time coming. We'd all seen the signs. Everyone's gone, except for maybe Billy and him."

"I'm sorry."

"Billy spoke of a settlement at the base of the mountains. I'm supposed to meet him there. I think he means the clubhouse." She reached down to her pack, brought out Billy's journal, and opened it to the page with the likeness of Tatts and Judy, then turned it around to show the group. "He spoke to this couple."

"Hey, that Tatts and Judy!" Sandy exclaimed with a clap of her hands. "They live here part-time and down at the clubhouse the other times. You've got the right place."

“I just hope Billy makes it, and I’ll see him there in a few days.”

“Why wait?” Sandy paused to take a sip from her glass. “You and Drak’I can search for him once you’re back in his shuttle. Everything is easier to see from the skies. He could just be stuck somewhere. You don’t even need to wait for him, you can look for him tomorrow and save him the trip.”

“I did not think of this,” I said. We had been close to the male’s location, too.

“No duh,” May said. “You were too busy getting your mate somewhere safe. The war machines are fun for a few hours, but overnight trips are brutal.”

“That’s my fault,” Sammie said. “I didn’t believe him when he said he lived with the survivors. So I asked him to bring back one of the Mad Max trucks as proof. I sure got what I wanted.”

“The war machine is fun, but I prefer my shuttle,” I said. “We can head back to the clubhouse after food.”

“Stay a little longer,” Aaron said. “I don’t want any of those lights damaged. We’ll get them out of the truck tomorrow morning and you can head back before noon.”

“Yeah,” Sandy said. “Sammie just got in. Let her rest a bit.” She turned to Sammie. “When’s the last time you had a hot shower? And hot chocolate? And a warm bed?”

They were bribing my mate with promises of comfort and sweet drinks. I wanted to be in my shuttle as soon as possible, but Sammie turned in my arms and sent me the most hopeful look, and I knew I could deny her nothing.

“We will stay until tomorrow.”

“Thank you!”

Aaron helped install a set of translators in her ears, something I’d thought I would do. I hated how close the other male had to get to her, but I had no other choice if I wanted

her to understand me without my device. This mate bond was really testing my patience.

That done, I took her on a brief tour of the lodge, glad to have her to myself again. Then we went upstairs to claim a room. In the time I'd been living at the clubhouse, they'd added chalkboard placards to the doors with the names of whoever had claimed the quarters written on them.

There were plenty of unclaimed rooms to choose from, and we decided on one with a large king-size bed to accommodate my large frame. The attached bathroom only had a small shower stall, so grabbing some white, fluffy towels, we headed over to the large bathroom with the big blue and white tiled walk-in shower.

"Wow! The builder really didn't spare any expense. This place is gorgeous." Sammie's eyes were wide as she took in the place.

But the fancy shower wasn't what had my complete attention; that was Sammie.

"We can't get clean dressed. I am still in my harness and armor."

"That must not be very comfortable. Let me help you."

I felt every movement as her hands moved over my body, unbuckling my harness. I tried to relax my arms and give her some space. The mate bond seemed to be content as long as she was still within the circle of my embrace.

I wanted to free my arms so I could undress her—tear the wrapping from her and see the prize beneath—but the mate bond tested my patience, forcing me to wait for her to do all the work.

As she worked, the scent of her arousal grew, perfuming the air. My little prize enjoyed my body. That much was certain. I flexed my abs as she leaned back just enough to reach for the waistband of my loincloth. The tip of her tongue stuck out of her lips as she concentrated on the fastening, and I wanted nothing more than to capture it with my mouth.

Just the thought of it was enough to have me rising with need, and her hand brushing over my leather covering did the rest. By the time she loosened the garment, I was fully hard.

She gasped as my leathers fell away. "It's different."

I didn't sense any disgust, however, just curiosity as she reached for me. It was difficult with the little space between us, so I shifted her body so that her side pressed against my right thigh, my cock jutting out in front of her.

"Interesting."

Soft fingers caressed my length. Instead of one head with a shaft, Xarc'n cocks had three head-like sections, one after another, each one bulging wider than the last. Between each section, it dipped in before flaring out again.

I groaned as her fingers tightened around one of the dips, and my dick bobbed in her hands.

"Kruux. You are killing me."

"I'm curious. I'm not ready for forever, but I'm willing to explore."

"Then, explore. But you are still killing me."

She giggled softly and gave me a squeeze. My hips bucked in response, and she sent me a victorious smile as if she'd won the game. The little tease.

"If my hands were free, I'd have you bent over in front of me screaming my name."

"Then it's a good thing your hands are still stuck."

In a way, the mate bond was giving her confidence to explore me, knowing I was stuck. I growled low in erotic frustration, but the sound only had her lust exploding in the small room. She took pity on me and released my shaft to undress.

"Perfect and beautiful, just as I imagined."

"Flatterer."

“Xarc’n hunters speak only truth to their ma—to their females.”

That had her cheeks turning pink as she turned on the water. When the temperature of the water warmed, I stepped under the flow. Artificial warm rain was still a new sensation to me. I was more accustomed to the decontamination unit on my shuttle. Warm rain felt unnatural, but with Sammie in my arms, I could learn to love it.

Sammie stood under the steaming water and sighed. She was smiling, and her eyes were closed with a peaceful look on her face. She was beautiful all the time, but she was ravishing when she smiled. I wanted to see her smile all day, every day.

When she opened her eyes, the peaceful look faded, and she was the same as before: a female lost in a new world she didn’t understand and unsure of her future. I wanted to assure her that she was safe, not just now but forever.

She looked around and found a bottle, then she squeezed some of the fruity-scented product out on her palm. This was another thing I did not understand about humans: why did they insist on cleaning with things that smelled like food?

“Let me wash your hair,” she said, but when she reached up, she was too short.

I bent down on my knee, and the mate bond allowed me to release her just enough to slide my arms down her body so they were now wrapped around her thighs.

She removed the leather thong that held it back out of my face in a low ponytail before lathering the cleanser between her palms and working it through my hair. She scratched at my scalp lightly to get it all clean, and it felt wonderful.

I closed my eyes, and a rumbling from my chest filled the shower stall.

“Should I clean your horns?” she asked. “Do they need cleaning?”

“Yes, please.” My voice was low, the words barely coming out of my lips.

She rubbed the remainder of the soapy lather on my horns, and as she did, my cock, which was already hard, bobbed and pulsated against her leg.

She giggled. “Does it feel good to have your horns touched?”

“Yes.”

I stood, and we moved under the stream to rinse out my hair, then Sammie reached for another bottle. Each one was meant for something else, which was too confusing for me. I was glad she seemed to know, without even reading the words on the packages, what was for what.

This must be a body wash because this soap lather went all over my body. I clenched my jaw, trying not to react as her hands rubbed over my skin. She was small compared to me, and she had to plaster her front to mine to reach my back. My cock pressed against her front.

My entire world turned upside down when she moved back to the front and soaped up my cock, twisting her hands around the sections.

Krux! I felt as if I was out of control. I needed her now.

“Sammie,” I warned. “Stop now unless you want to get fucked against the wall. I prefer to take you for the first time in a soft bed.”

“Fine, I’ll clean myself instead,” she said, as if she’d only been helping me clean. The little minx. I was glad to see this side of her, though.

She washed her hair quickly and started on her body.

I willed my hands to release her so I could touch her and revel in her perfection, but the best I got was one arm around her and one hand exploring her body. The bond was appeased as long as I was still touching her with both hands.

I used it to my advantage. Using some of the soapy lather, I slid my hand over her breasts. Her nipples were hard little nubs against my palm. The water from the spray sluiced off the soap, and I reached up to wrap one hand possessively around her throat. She gasped.

“We are still connected; the bond is still happy.” I was lucky. This bond was giving me room to play.

With my free hand, I reached down between her legs, and she pressed them together.

“Open them, Little Prize.”

I kned her legs open, and she leaned back against my body. I slid my soapy, slippery fingers through her folds, and she moaned. Her hands reached up to clutch at the arm that held her to me by the throat.

I went in search of the little nub between her legs, which gave human females so much pleasure. The jerking of her body against my hold told me when I'd found it. I rubbed it in small circles.

“This isn't fair,” she said.

“I'm only cleaning you.” Revenge was great.

Her breathing got shallower with every circle of my fingers, and soon, she was gasping and moaning, her body writhing against mine.

By now, most of the soap had washed off, but her channel was wet and slick. I didn't need the soap anymore. I reached lower and pushed two fingers into her wet cunt. I continued working her clit with my thumb.

A cry escaped her lips, and her pussy tightened around my fingers. I didn't let up. Instead, I kept fucking her with my hand until she was shaking and crying, and she leaned against me as if she couldn't stand on her own.

“There,” I said, victory all mine. “You are clean.”

Chapter 14: Sammie

Taking clothes off had been easy. Putting them back on was a challenge, even with the new ability to move his hands on my body.

This whole mate bond thing was hella confusing. The other ladies had explained the process to me. It was unpredictable, and everyone had a slightly different experience. Sometimes the couple was stuck together only for a few hours, others, for days. Some hunters got the ability to move one hand at a time, while others didn't.

I didn't have the bandwidth to figure out our clothing situation, not while I was still up on cloud nine. I just dried us off the best I could, wrapped a towel over my head, and we ran back to our room naked with our clothes clutched in my hands. No one saw us, but it was exhilarating nonetheless.

I'd gotten brave in the shower and let my curiosity run. The truth in my words had surprised me. I wasn't ready for forever, but I was ready to explore—more than ready. I was starved of affection and physical touch, and with his hands stuck around me, I felt safe, like I was in control.

When he finally did get the upper hand, it had been to take care of me and my need.

We'd only been back in our room for a few minutes when there was a knock at the door.

"We're not dressed," I called out. "We can't figure out how to."

Yvette's laughter came through the door. "I don't need to see Drak'l's naked ass. One hunter's enough. I come bearing gifts from Aaron. We figured instead of telling you everything we'd just show you. I'll leave it at the door. Talk to you soon."

I cracked the door open after she left and found a phone on the ground. She'd called it a gift. Did that mean I got to keep it? Moments later, it rang, and Yvette's avatar flashed on the screen. I picked up the call.

"Just use the phone like normal. You're connected to the Xarc'n network, and they have the old internet on there. It charges anytime it's close enough to a Xarc'n shuttle. I saved a few special pages for you to visit. If you have any questions, this is my number. Feel free to text or call."

I didn't even know how to react. Just a week ago, I was using a chamberpot. Cell phones had been a long-forgotten thing of the past. Now, I'd just had a hot shower, and I was holding a cell phone.

"Thank you."

"The phone is yours. There's only one rule here. You must take a photo of yourself and use it as your avatar. It'll update for everyone that has your number. Got it?"

"Got it." I had just the photo for the job.

I spent the next few hours learning about the post-bug world. Drak'l came along with me, adding his own comments and twist to events. Yvette had a page where she collected dozens upon dozens of stories, names redacted, of course. Many of the human groups working with the hunters had their own webpage where they documented their progress as well as listing ties to other groups.

The groups were named after the towns they lived near or their region. The ledge and clubhouse were collectively referred to as the Colorado Mountain group, and their range extended just shy of where Cedrick's bunker had been.

There were several recognized nests in this region, along with a scattering of possible small nest sites. Other groups

only had one much larger nest to worry about.

“In the mountains, there are many places for the scourge to hide and start new nests. These nests are tiny and easily destroyed, but they make it hard to exterminate the scourge completely. We have blocked most of the entrances to the caves that we know of.” Drak’l surveyed the map. “This map is out of date. We cleared those out already and only have the nests in the nearby towns to take care of.”

“The one closest to the clubhouse is highlighted.” I scrolled down to see what the highlight meant, but the words only confused me more. “What does that mean it’s a contestant?”

“The survivor groups are making bets on which nest will be destroyed first. The tiny nests in the mountains do not count. The one by the clubhouse is a nominee.”

“Bets? What is there to bet?” The bunker didn’t have enough excess of anything to place bets, even friendly ones.

“I do not know. Hunters do not gamble, but humans seem to enjoy it.”

I quickly read through the rest of the information on this group and then moved to the next link Yvette had provided me. It was a forum. There, I found everything from food preservation to vehicle conversions to general survival tips. It was a booming community of survivors.

I also found the source of the betting. It looked like Aaron had a lot riding on this nest, his nest, getting wiped out first. He’d put down a decent amount of alcohol and electronic components on the bet. Winning items wasn’t the most important thing to him, though. When I read his posts, it was clear that it was a matter of pride.

The Tech Wizards had a section on the forum where they shared findings and worked on projects together. But there was also a friendly competition on who would discover the next big thing that made a dent in the scourge population. He was working hard on the next big weapon.

There was also a place to post your name, photo, and who you were looking for. My immediate family was gone, so I tried searching for a few lost cousins, but none of their names showed up.

“This is a lot to take in.” I grabbed my head, feeling overwhelmed by all the information. “Just last week, my entire world was inside a bunker.”

“Take your time. The information will be there tomorrow. It is late.”

I checked the time.

“Wow! It’s almost midnight.” The last few years had gotten rid of my staying up late habit. Midnight was long past my bedtime.

“We should rest.”

Drak’l got up, taking me with him to turn off the lights. Then he settled us comfortably on the bed and used his feet to kick the blankets over us.

It was soon evident that sleep wasn’t coming. I stared at the ceiling. The snow reflected the moon through the cracks in the curtains, and everything was new and strange. I closed my eyes, but they popped back open moments later.

The survivors here on the ledge were friendly, but I wasn’t sure how they would react to me at the clubhouse. I was glad for Sandy’s suggestion to look for Billy instead of waiting for him to show up. The wait would kill me. Even just thinking about it now had me chewing the inside of my cheeks.

What if we couldn’t find him? What if we found Lucas instead? The thought of him had me feeling sick to my stomach. How could he do what he did? They were his family. We’d all seen the signs too, but none of us had taken heed.

I forced my mind to think about something else, and I was suddenly very aware of the massively muscled warrior wrapped around me. Mate. I understood what it meant now. It wasn’t just someone they had sex with. It was forever. Like

getting married, except they didn't have the concept of divorce.

"I know, it sounds crazy," May had said. "I didn't believe it either. But the mate bond has an exceptional batting average. It just knows."

Maybe they all just had great luck. What if my luck wasn't as good? I didn't want to be a statistic that proved the mate bond wrong, but I didn't believe in love at first sight, smell, or whatever, either. I was just getting used to the idea of dating a Xarc'n hunter, I wasn't ready for a long-term commitment.

I tossed and turned in Drak'l's arms, feeling bad for keeping him up. The poor guy didn't sign up for this.

"I'm sorry," I finally said, after accidentally elbowing him in the belly for the third time. "All this is new to me, and my mind is racing."

"I will distract you from your thoughts."

He adjusted us, and suddenly he was caging me under his massive body. His hand was all over me, touching, feeling, and owning me. His other arm was wrapped around me, unable to let go. His chest exploded into a needy rumble.

I tilted my head, and hard lips covered my mouth. I kissed him back desperately, wrapping my arms around his neck. I welcomed this little distraction. Each nibble, lick, and kiss made all thoughts empty out of my head. I could do this forever, just kissing him and touching him and never coming up to breathe.

I had to give us that; we had passion and lust in abundance. Drak'l was all raw masculinity and power, yet was gentle with me as well. How could you not be attracted to that?

He traced his lips down my jaw so reverently, I felt as if he worshiped my very existence. He trailed little nibbles across my collarbone before kissing down to the swells of my breasts. His every touch set my skin on fire with need. I didn't want to deny myself anymore.

I reached for his cock and stroked it gingerly, wondering how the flares and dips would feel inside me. His thick member pulsed in my hand. I cursed the bond for not letting us apart enough for me to taste him. I wiped the droplet of precum from the tip and brought it to my lips.

“Sammie.” My name was no more than a choked growl.

“I want this, Drak’l.” I was tired of denying myself. My release in the shower had given me a taste and awakened something in me. Now I wanted more.

Drak’l kissed a line down my belly, then growled when the bond would not let him release me to go lower. “I wish to taste you.”

I wanted him to do that too, but I was wet and ready for him.

“It’s okay.” I pulled him back up to cover me. I wrapped my legs around his hips and rolled my hips, pressing my core along the length of him. “You can do that another time. I need you.”

He reacted, thrusting against me. The flared ridges of his cock rubbed against my clit, and I hissed. His hands tightened on me with a sense of urgency, losing any gentleness they had. His kisses turned desperate and needy, and his sharp teeth nipped and scratched at my skin. He was losing control.

Yes. This was what I wanted. I wanted him.

I reached up to give his horns a squeeze, urging him to continue. I rubbed my pussy, already soaking with need, along his length.

“You are already wet for me.”

“Yes.” I rolled my hips again, enjoying the way his ridge rubbed against me. But I wanted more.

I shifted and reached between us to line us up.

“Are you sure, Sammie? Once I have you, I’ll never let you go.” He held still on top of me, clinging to the last shred of his

control.

“You won’t let me go anyway.”

“This is true.” He shuddered and let out a guttural moan as he pressed in.

He was big, and I struggled to let him in. I reached down between us to touch myself.

He pushed in again, and I moaned. He pulled back slightly and drove forward, this time not stopping until I’d engulfed one of his three sections. My muscles stretched over the first thick ridge, and I gasped at the feeling of fullness.

He struggled to move despite how wet I was. My body shook, and my hands clawed at his biceps. He rocked in a slow, deliberate motion, and each time our bodies came together, he sank in a little more until I had taken all of him. I’d never felt so full in my life.

“Oh my god,” I moaned.

I wasn’t sure I could handle when he started moving. I wasn’t given a chance to think before he started thrusting into me.

Each flared section of Drak’l’s cock felt amazing, as if designed to hit my G spot; a spot I’d thought a myth until now. Pleasure hit me hard and fast, giving me no warning, no time to prepare. Stars exploded in my vision, and I screamed.

Then I was tumbling over the edge, falling into never-ending rapture as he continued to drive into me. Each time I thought it was over and I’d have my reprieve, it started again. I kept climbing, each peak a little higher than the last until time itself lost meaning.

Chapter 15: Drak'I

I took a deep breath and filled my lungs with Sammie's addictive scent. This was everything I wanted and more. Now that she was in my arms, I'd never be happy without her.

I pounded into her again, and she rewarded me with a keening cry. Her look was one of pure bliss. In this moment, Sammie became my everything. There was nothing but her. Nothing but us. The mate bond had chosen well.

I gritted my teeth as Sammie pulsed around me. Her channel squeezed me relentlessly, and every time I thought I'd be given more room to move, she'd milk and flutter around me even harder.

I could not last like this. I snarled and drove into my female with abandon, driving into her as she cried out into the room. I couldn't hold back anymore. With one last thrust, I emptied my seed into her with a snarl.

I rolled to the side, my arm still stuck to her, careful not to crush her with my weight. Her heartbeat was slowing as she relaxed in my arms, sweating and covered in the scent of our sex.

Her eyes were closed, and they fluttered open when I nuzzled her cheek.

"Mmm, that was amazing." She cuddled into me, burying her face into my armpit.

It was. I tested my hands to see if they were still stuck on her. They were. I grinned.

I'd heard of stories where hunters bemoaned a delayed bond. My bond came at the right time.

"Are you sniffing my armpit?"

"Yup," she answered sleepily. "You smell good."

That had me smiling. I was already addicted to her scent. My chest, which had been singing this whole time, changed its tune. Our sexual urges assuaged, the vibrations turned calm and soothing.

She yawned. "If you were trying to distract me and tire me out, you did a great job. I don't even remember my own name."

"I do not mind this job every night."

She giggled softly. "Of course, you don't." She yawned again.

She mumbled something incoherent, but by the end of her sentence, she was already asleep.

Good. I was glad she finally slept, exhausted from my attention.

Her thoughts had been so loud I'd almost heard them scurrying around in her head. She was going through many changes. She'd lost many people dear to her recently and been cast out into a world she was ill-equipped to survive. Then, she'd been forced to rethink her beliefs of us Xarc'n hunters, and mere days later, she was mated to one.

It must have been her acceptance of me that had finally triggered the mate bond. During our night at the museum, something had changed. She'd gone from wary to trusting. She'd spent the entire night cuddled next to me.

Change was never easy; I knew. Meeting new people was challenging. When I'd joined this new contingent after they'd dissolved the remnants of my old one, it had been hard on me. After losing so many close friends, hunters I'd called brothers, I didn't even want to fight anymore. I'd wanted to give up completely and end my existence.

I'd been created to kill these scourge, and yet, I'd failed again and again. What use was I? I was only a waste of resources.

I didn't know any of these new hunters. Each contingent had slightly different tactics they'd developed in their time together. I didn't know any of theirs, and they didn't know mine. I only got in the way.

Eventually, I grew to care about the new hunters I worked with. Then, with the realization that Earth held the secret to our future, compatible females, I learned to care again.

Perhaps that was why I was the last hunter in the group to find a mate. I hadn't been ready before. I was ready now, and Sammie had stumbled right into my path.

I wondered how other remaining hunters from my group were faring.

There were several others from my old group that came to Earth as well, but we were scattered across the planet. I'd thought we'd keep in contact more, but we didn't. I understood why though; we reminded each other of all the comrades and brothers we'd lost. I tried to avoid thinking of them much; it was too difficult.

I knew their locations, and I was sure they knew mine. We just chose not to make contact. Sometimes it was easier to believe they were all lost rather than to think of the injustice of a few being allowed to live.

There was only one hunter from my original mothership nearby. Haax'l fought with a group of hunters out on the plains east of here. I wondered if he'd found his mate yet. Or if he'd gotten used to working with new hunters.

Here in the mountains, we'd needed to devise entirely new strategies, and my differences hadn't been too obvious. Still, it had been a struggle when I'd first joined this hunter group.

Tomorrow, I'd bring Sammie down to the clubhouse to meet everyone there. Those people were not her bunker family, but I hoped she would eventually find friends there to

call her own. Life was difficult enough, there was no reason to try to live it alone.

And of course, I'd do everything I could to help her find Billy. The male had given her his journal to help her survive. He'd faced off against the mad one to give my Sammie a head start. He sounded like a good addition to the clubhouse. I also owed him for keeping my mate safe before I found her.

Sammie snored softly in my arms. Now that she was mine, I'd be there to support her, no matter what challenges she faced. She might not admit we were mates yet, but she was mine.

Chapter 16: Sammie

A pregnant Latina with a warm smile ushered me to sit at the kitchen table. She might not be officially in charge, but people here respected her as if she was. The kitchen was the only place in the entire clubhouse that wasn't buzzing with people.

"I knew something was up when Drak'l stopped answering his calls. Congratulations on your mating. I know it's a lot to take in right now, but I promise you it's all worth it."

Gabby spoke as if she had a hunter of her own, but she was pregnant. Had she gotten pregnant before meeting her mate?

"How long have you been living here?" I asked.

"We just moved to the clubhouse this year, but I've been with this group for a long time. I joined with Tatts and Big Bear early on."

Maybe I'd mistook her words. Maybe she didn't have her own hunter but knew from secondhand experience.

My phone rang in my bag. It was a message from Aaron reminding me to post a photo. I'd totally forgotten to ask about a photo editing app before leaving this morning.

"Aaron got you hooked up already. That's great. I'll be able to reach you directly instead of going through Drak'l—" she narrowed her eyes at him "—who sometimes doesn't pick up."

"Yeah, he's reminding me to post a photo on my profile."

"Oh yeah. Now that there are enough phones to go around, the ledge insists everyone, especially the hunters, have an

avatar. The foraging teams each have two phones, and they've started getting creative with theirs." She dug into her apron for her phone and, after a bit of searching, showed me her screen.

I laughed. It was a staged scene of them in black-and-white striped costumes and black masks pretending to rob the home they were in. One of them wore pantyhose over his head with the eyes cut out. Was it pretend, though? Foragers literally robbed the dead.

"That was the first one." Gabby scrolled through her phone again. "This was another group's reply."

This one had everyone in superhero costumes, and they were all posing with super soakers around a pile of dead bugs.

"This one's better."

"Want to see mine?"

"Of course."

The photo was of Gabby and a mauve-colored hunter dressed up as cave man and woman. Gabby wore a leather wrap dress and had a bone decoration in her hair. Instead of a dark leather loincloth, the hunter wore one made of obviously fake leopard faux fur. A fake club, a la Bam Bam, completed the look.

"People here still refer to Tal'n as the caveman hunter."

"And Tal'n is your mate?"

"Si."

And I was confused all over again. I didn't want to ask though, in case I came across as rude.

"I know what you're thinking. It's okay. You're new here, and you've literally been hiding under a rock for years. That's why you're in here alone with me. I'm making it my job to tell you so it won't be a surprise. The Xarc'n are biologically compatible with us. That's why Earth is so important to them." She cradled her belly. "We are their only chance at a

future. Without us, they'll be clones forever until clonal decay takes them out."

I was speechless. I was glad I was already sitting down. Drak'l had explained that he was a clone, built on a ship to replace another fallen hunter, so I knew they were clones. He'd also explained that Earth was the first planet they'd found mating-compatible females. But for some reason, I hadn't thought it was possible for us to procreate.

"Before you freak out, most of them have their fertility turned off. That's how they are all made: according to the original blueprint. Their military didn't want their super soldiers accidentally getting anyone pregnant and spreading their proprietary genes."

The door to the kitchen swung open, and Drak'l walked in with an unhappy look on his face. He plopped down in the seat next to me and pulled my chair closer, making it drag on the ground with a loud sound.

He'd been in the garage with a silent, dark-skinned man named Darius. They'd sent me off to the kitchen to meet Gabby while they re-installed the driver's seat. Gabby had since introduced me to the masses before sitting me alone at the kitchen table to chat.

"What happened?" I asked.

"They are coming."

Oh. Them. He'd warned me about them on the way here.

We'd separated during our drive to the clubhouse. I'd been happy about it since I didn't want to meet everyone attached to Drak'l, but he'd looked panicked. He'd then explained to me that he'd been relying on us being stuck together to avoid a few admirers. He'd called them hunter-chasers, women who sought out hunters in hopes of a mate bond.

As the last hunter at the clubhouse, he'd taken to hunting the scourge far from the clubhouse just to avoid them because it was awkward.

Not only were relationships with hunters not frowned upon, they were sought after? This was all very strange to me, but at least it meant no one would judge us.

“They are good females, but I do not feel a bond to them,” he’d explained.

“This I can handle,” I said. I squished in next to Drak’l, took his hand in mine, and rested my head on his shoulder.

“I’ll help,” Gabby said. “They’re nice girls but don’t know when to give up.”

The door to the kitchen opened again, and two young women came in giggling. Their eyes landed on me getting all cuddled up with Drak’l, and the giggling stopped.

“Sammie and I were just talking about the phone avatars,” Gabby said to Drak’l. “Did you need me to take a few photos of the two of you?” She looked up as if just noticing the girls walking in. “Perfect. I needed some help grabbing a few things from the pantry. Come here, Allie. I’ve got a list for you.”

Allie stepped over reluctantly as her friend disappeared behind the door, not wanting to get roped into chores. She eyed me.

“Who are you? I’ve never seen you here before.”

“I’m Sammie,” I said without skipping a beat. “I came in with Drak’l.”

“Oh,” she said awkwardly, her eyes on our hands.

I felt her disappointment through the air between us.

“Tell Val she’s not off the hook just because she disappeared on you,” Gabby said. “You need two people to bring up those crates. Bring those to me, and you’ll get first dibs on dessert.”

I grinned to myself. That was how Mary had gotten everyone to behave and finish their chores: by promising something edible. It seemed to work in a larger group too,

because Allie was off to find her friend before Gabby could give them more work to do.

“She’ll go tell everyone else the bad news that you are no longer available. They’ll be sad for a while, but I heard more hunters are joining us from Tal’n’s contingent.”

“They are,” Drak’l said with a grunt. “But this is not bad news.”

“It’s wonderful for you, but bad news for them.” Gabby turned back to me. “I was serious about helping you take photos for your phones.”

“Thank you, Gabby, but Drak’l and I already have great photos.” I exchange a knowing look with Drak’l. “They’re going to have to try really hard to beat ours.”

The door to the kitchen opened again, and to my relief, it wasn’t another pair of hopeful females who entered. It was Tatts and Judy. I only recognized them from Billy’s sketches.

“Drak’l, they said you were back.” Tatts did a double-take. “Well, well, who is this?”

“This is Sammie. She is my mate.”

“Congratulations!” Judy clapped her hands together.

I glared at Drak’l. “We’re just dating,” I clarified.

Last time I checked, I hadn’t agreed to the whole mating thing yet. So much for agreeing to take it slow. He was laying his claim every chance he got.

“I understand.” Then, the woman covered the side of her mouth with one hand as if telling a not-so-secret-secret. “We talked to Bre’k and Pip already let the cat out of the bag.”

“Right. Of course.” I stuck out my hand. “You must be Judy. And you must be Tatts.” I took out Billy’s journal. “This belongs to a really close friend of mine.”

“Billy!” she said, recognizing the journal before I even showed her the drawings. “Where is he? Is he here?”

“No. He’s not here yet.” Then, as if the dam had opened up and I couldn’t close it again, I let it all out. “I’m supposed to meet him here. It was the last thing he told me to do before giving me his things. I’m worried about him, and I’m too impatient to wait. Drak’l and I are going to go out and look for him. There’s someone after him, and he may be in danger.”

I didn’t know how much these people knew about our situation at the bunker, and I didn’t want to drag them down with my worrying.

“He mentioned his brother was unstable.” Tatts pulled up a chair and sat down across from us.

“Yeah. Lucas. He finally lost it. Just went on a killing spree.” I choked up at the memory of all the people I’d never see again. “Billy was distracting Lucas so I could get away.”

“I have met them both,” Tatts said with a frown. “At different times. Lucas kept his distance. Billy was friendly, and I told him about the clubhouse. He’s a smart kid, and we could use more people like him. He must still be alive.”

“We’ll go to search for him when the flyers clear out,” Drak’l said.

“We’ll help you,” Tatts said. “We’ll take the spare shuttle. We can cover more ground that way.”

He made as if to get up, but Gabby told him to sit his ass back down. She had lots of experience ordering big men and hunters around.

“You’ve got at least an hour before the flyers thin out. At least stay for lunch.”

Then, as if timed to a tee, the timer for the oven went off. Gabby pushed herself up from the table and waddled over to the oven.

I got up as well. “Let me help you.”

She handed me the oven mitts, and I leaned in to take out the first of two casserole dishes as Gabby laid some trivets onto the counter.

“This smells delicious.”

“I try to do everything in the oven in the winter since it helps warm the clubhouse as well. If we’re going to use the fuel, it might as well do double duty.” She started scooping out portions onto plates. “I’m calling this Hawaiian rice. It’s got spam and pineapples. And those diced-up bits are Xarc’n food bars for extra protein. They aren’t half bad soaked in the pineapple juice from the cans. The enzymes tenderize them.”

That was probably the only way they were edible. Those bars were tough and flavorless. I’d tried a piece of Drak’l’s bar on our trip to the ledge yesterday. Yuck.

I looked a little closer at what looked like pieces of eggs. They couldn’t be eggs. They must be freeze-dried, reconstituted eggs. Then, I noticed the cracked eggshells on the counter.

“You’ve got eggs? I didn’t notice any chickens in the courtyard.”

“Oh no, those are from the ledge. Courtesy of Henrietta and friends. Didn’t you meet her when you were up there?”

“Henrietta is a chicken,” Drak’l said helpfully. “We got in late last night and were busy this morning.”

“Any plans on chickens here?” I asked.

“We’re still trying to figure out how to keep chickens in here,” Gabby said. “As you can see, it’s pretty busy with people coming in and out, and there’s not much room. We have a few people working on an outdoor coop idea that won’t alert the flyers. But that’s for next spring.”

The smell of food must have alerted everyone because people started streaming in with their own bowls and utensils. Gabby shoved an extra-large portion into my hands for Drak’l and me before the place filled up and there was a line right out the door.

I gawked at the number of new faces. I swore there were more people now than there had been when Gabby had

introduced me earlier.

“How do you remember everyone’s names?” I asked Drak’l under my breath.

“I don’t.”

Chapter 17: Drak'I

It was great to be back in my shuttle. I'd missed everything about it. It was even better now with Sammie in it.

She lay belly-down in my sleeping nook, her elbows at the edge of the mat and her chin resting in her hands. She scanned the town below, looking for signs of life. She pushed her glasses up on her face every so often.

I'd loved her reaction when I first turned on the internal display, and the walls disappeared into scenes of the outside world. It was such a simple thing, but it amused her so much. I couldn't wait to show her the scenes inside my sleeping nook, but that would have to wait until tonight.

The entire shuttle smelled like her, and it made me happy. Tonight, I would claim her here and welcome her to her new home. I didn't mind spending a night or two inside the lodge, but in my heart, my shuttle was my home.

Every hunter was given a shuttle when we were created. We spent most of our time in here chasing down the scourge. When we were not in our shuttles, we were fighting. This ship had been with me my entire life. My contingent had disbanded, and my brothers had fallen, but my shuttle was still here.

Sammie was the last piece to the puzzle, and I wanted her to be happy here too. I wanted her to love it here. I wanted her to love me.

She might have given in to her bodily needs and desires last night, but she'd denied being my mate at the clubhouse, claiming we were still dating. I knew that humans sometimes

dated for years, but I didn't need years to know that she was mine. I didn't want to wait years for her love. I needed it, craved it, now.

The bond between humans and Xarc'n were mostly one-sided until human females developed feelings of love. And even then, we needed to continually make them love us.

I didn't know how I was going to accomplish that, but Sammie was worth the challenge.

She'd looked a little disappointed at the interior of my shuttle, until I'd turned on the display. My shuttle had only the basics and was not very large, but I was willing to add whatever she wanted to it to make her happy. I knew humans liked decorations.

She scanned the town below again, and her glasses clattered to the shuttle floor. Sammie huffed with annoyance and reached for them.

"Give them to me." I held out my hand.

I wasn't particularly good at fixing things, but I did have the tools to fix this problem. With the delicate contraption of plastic and glass on my table, I dug through my drawers for the heating apparatus. I used it often to fix my gear.

Her glasses were bent, and they refused to lie straight on my counter. I did my best to fix them, warming the plastic to make it more malleable. When the glasses looked straight, I handed them back.

She put them tentatively on her face. "It's not crooked anymore."

But when she bent her head to look down at the world below, they fell from her face again. I picked them up. After several tries, we had them staying on her face securely. She sent me a grin that lit up the shuttle.

"Thank you! Those are my only pair, and they've been crooked since—" She shook her head. "Lucas is a jerk. I was

lucky they didn't break. I don't know what I'll do without them. I'm blind as a bat."

"I will be your eyes," I swore solemnly.

She met my gaze, her head tilted to the side. I couldn't quite read the emotions fluttering across her face. I hoped I hadn't said anything wrong.

After a long moment, she said, "That's really sweet. I've never had anyone say that before."

She looked pensive as she turned her attention back down to the town below.

"There's a group of scuttlers over there," Sammie said, pointing to the right. "They look like they are feeding, but on what?"

"The town looks barren, but there are still many things living here. Small and medium-sized animals still survive in the ruins."

"That's good to know. But bad for whatever is over there."

The group was already starting to thin out. There hadn't been enough food to carry home to the nest. Whatever had been there was devoured.

"It was probably one of those small mammals with fluffy tails or maybe one of those big, black birds. They like to tease the scourge, and sometimes they misjudge."

"Oh yeah, there's a lot of ravens here. They say not to piss one off because they remember the rest of their lives. I'm glad they're still around."

"They are usually too smart for the scourge."

She turned her attention back to the streets.

Since it was winter, we had a short window between the time the flyers went back to the nest and the sun setting. Even though it wasn't midday anymore, some still patrolled the skies. But one or two of the creatures my shuttle could handle no problem. That was what our blasters were for.

The problem came only during the noon hour. The scourge had learned long ago how to ground our shuttles. When there were many flyers, they simply flew at a shuttle, piling on one by one. They had a special call that signaled flyers from other nests to come to join the pileup. Then, when we crash-landed, the scourge ground army arrived.

We were good fighters and could take on dozens as long as they streamed in several at a time. Being swarmed by hundreds was a death sentence. It was the first recorded instance of the scourge purposefully hunting and killing a hunter. Since then, it had happened many times, and we no longer flew during those hours.

“There’s a flyer on the radar. Sit back while I hunt it. Every flyer down is one flyer less tomorrow.”

“Yes, let’s get it. Can I shoot?”

That reminded me of her taking down the centicreep, and my chest filled with pride.

“Come sit in my lap. I will fly, and you can shoot.”

She beamed, and my shuttle filled up with her light as she skipped over and plopped her ass down in my lap, her hair flying in my face.

“Sorry. I lost my only hair tie, and didn’t have any more.”

Perfect. I had been waiting for this moment to give her the next gift in my arsenal. Leaning over, I opened my cupboard and reached into the cardboard box. Sarah had chosen the gifts well, deciding against traditional items like flowers and jewelry and opting for useful ones instead. I pulled out the velvety *scrunchie*.

“Use this.” I smoothed her hair back carefully, and she closed her eyes as I tied her hair at the back of her head. “It looks good on you. It is yours.”

“Did you just sneak in a present?” she asked, calling me out.

“Yes.” I pulled the harness over us both before she could protest. “I will uncloak and lure the flyer to chase us, then turn the ship around fast. Shoot it when I do. I will warn you before I turn.”

“Got it.”

I uncloaked my shuttle and took a deep breath, readying myself for the hunt. I’d done this a thousand times, but this time was different. This time, I was hunting with my mate. I flew toward the blip on the screen. We’d wipe every flyer in the vicinity off the map, and we’d do it together.

The flyer spotted me and gave chase just as planned. It called out and flew after my shuttle.

“Get ready.” I waited for the right moment. “Now!”

I whipped my shuttle around to face the creature. Sammie reacted quickly, hitting the blaster just in time. The shot hit the scourge right in the middle of the chest.

“Yes! Got it!” Sammie laughed victoriously.

I turned my ship back around and made an arc so we could watch the downed flyer tumble to the ground.

I surveyed the sky, but no more flyers came. Too bad.

“That was fun!” she exclaimed.

“It is more fun with you here.” I put the ship’s cloak back on and instructed the ship to hover. “If you enjoy this, I will take you hunting again.”

Her thrill at taking down the scourge might fade, but until then, she would hunt by my side. We would rid this land of those pesky creatures. Together.

“Is that a date?”

“My research tells me this is not a common romantic date.”

“We don’t live in a common world.”

“Then yes. It is a date.” I released the latch to the harness and turned her in my lap.

She draped her arms casually over my shoulders. “Thank you for showing me that there is hope.” She leaned in and kissed me.

I growled and kissed her back, running my hands over her body. What started as something light, a thank you for letting her shoot the flyer, turned into something more demanding. It was always like that with her. A little was never enough, and I loved it.

I reacted to her as I always did, my chest bursting into song and my cock hardening. I didn’t want to just kiss her. I wanted to celebrate our hunt with her screaming my name. I adjusted her so she straddled my hips and stood, taking us to the sleeping nook.

In a flash, I had her under me, her legs still wrapped around my hips, and her core pressed to my crotch. I ground against her and swallowed moans. Her tongue darted forward to drag over my teeth, and I sucked it into my mouth

A sharp sound pieced through the connection between us, but I tried to ignore it. Whatever that was needed to wait. But it was insistent, and the irritating noise sounded again. She stiffened.

I pulled away with a snarl, annoyed at the sound that was piercing through the magic between us. It was an alert from my shuttle. How long had it been going off?

I look down at the transparent-seeming floor of the shuttle to where the ship had marked a large circle. Someone was waving a large piece of red fabric from a window.

“Zoom in,” I demanded.

“Billy! It’s Billy!” Sammie’s hand tightened on my forearm.

He looked skyward as if sensing our presence. The flyer had called out during our fight, and a group of scourge was heading toward us by land. That was probably how the human male knew we were here; flyers didn’t just fall out of the air, half burnt to a crisp, on their own.

There was a centicreep among them, its sinuous body weaving in and out of the streets and easily climbing on top of the buildings. It spotted the red fabric and reared up.

All the scourge turned, beady-eyed and hungry, and scurried toward the building.

Chapter 18: Sammie

I aimed the ship-mounted net thrower at the disgusting, overgrown mutant centipede barreling down the residential street toward Drak'l and Tatts, who had just arrived with Judy, and waited for my signal. The two stood in the center of the road like a pair of post-apocalyptic superheroes.

Judy and I were inside the shuttles, ready to set off the traps and shoot at any flyers that might show up, drawn by the sounds of the fight.

As the centicreep got closer, I got nervous, and my fingers grew itchy. I wanted to shoot at it now, but I needed to wait for Drak'l's signal. It was so close now that I could make out its snapping mandibles.

Ugh! It was fucking ugly.

Drak'l raised his hand and yelled, "Wait!"

The shuttle was soundproof, but it was set to relay any external sounds through to me. With the walls displaying a 360-degree, live and life-sized feed all around me, it almost felt like I was outside with them, even though I was safe inside the shuttle.

"Now!" Drak'l brought his hand down.

I smashed the button harder than needed, and a net flew out at the creature and landed on it. The net, Drak'l had explained, was made of nearly indestructible fibers. It was slash-proof and, most important of all, heatproof. That was particularly useful, as the hunters liked to use fire when facing

large groups. While dangerous to both the scourge and the hunters, fire served both as a weapon, and for clean-up.

The creature continued moving, dragging the net with it. The net hadn't stopped it, but it had slowed it down considerably. Tatts and Drak'l shot at the long bug. With it trapped under the net, it was much easier to aim at the body joints, effectively cutting the creature shorter and denying it the use of its many legs.

The blasts went right through the plasma-proof material to the writhing mass of legs and blades beneath. The shots barely affected the net, except maybe heating it up a bit; nothing it couldn't handle.

The heart-pounding fear from a moment ago turned into a rush of excitement. "Take that, you asshole!" I shouted from inside the shuttle.

With the creature writhing angrily in place, unable to attack but not yet dead, Drak'l switched weapons, taking out the large flamethrower he called a fire cannon. He sent a stream of flame at the mass in the net until the cable of the net turned a fiery red.

By now, the scourge ground crew had arrived, led by a bunch of scuttlers and followed closely by a few lungers. Sometimes the lungers would leap ahead, only to be outpaced by their more basic counterparts as they prepared their next jump. Behind them, bringing up the rear, were two spitters.

I rubbed away goosebumps on my arms. Spitters were terrifying. No one wanted to die being melted into goo.

"Flyer at eight o' clock," Judy announced through the shuttle's connection.

A lone flyer surveyed the fight, eager to join the fray.

I think not!

"Judy, the net!" yelled Tatts from outside.

Judy fired her net at the incoming scourge, but I didn't have time to see if it hit. I had another job. I switched over to the ship blasters and turned them skyward. This was a new modification they hadn't had until they arrived on Earth and started working with humans; before, the blasters had only aimed straight ahead.

I fired at the flyer just as it started to dive, hitting it in the wing. It shrieked and began to spiral out of control. It pulled out of the dive, trying to correct itself, but could not with a big hole in its wing. It struggled to stay airborne. My next shot hit it square in the chest. It tumbled out of the sky and smashed into one of the spitters.

Ha, take that!

This was actually kind of fun! I could honestly imagine myself shooting these nasty buggers from Drak'l's ship all year long. It sure was better than staying inside a damp and dark bunker, hoping someone else took care of the problem.

For the first time in years, I felt useful.

I recalled the first swarm I'd witnessed that fateful summer. It had been early in June, right before we'd retreated to the bunker for good, and I'd never forget the carpet of bugs moving toward me. They were everywhere, and they devoured everything. Nothing made it out alive.

If you'd asked me then if I thought I'd ever be able to face these monsters and fight them, I would have answered with a resounding *no*.

But now? It didn't seem so impossible after all. Not with Drak'l by my side.

Besides, I couldn't continue living in the past, as the old Sammie. I'd only be kidding myself. This was the new Earth, and Earth was the only home I had. It was time I stood up and fought for it.

I looked out through the transparent walls of the shuttle at my purple warrior as he danced a deadly dance with the scourge. I couldn't look away from his perfect body as he

fought the bugs. He looked to be having fun. He was even smiling. Perhaps for hunters genetically modified to destroy the scourge, fighting them *was* fun.

Hell, who was I kidding?

Shooting down that flyer had been ridiculously fun. I wanted to do it again. It was something even I could do with my horrible eyesight. The shuttle and my glasses made it possible.

The two warriors—Xarc'n and human, because if Tatts wasn't a warrior, then I didn't know who was—took care of the group of bugs easily. Soon there was nothing left but a burning mass of has-beens.

If the scourge had language, they would be telling their eggs and larvae stories about the terrifying purple hunters and the equally scary human warriors for generations. The thought that the space bugs had met their match here on Earth gave me the warm fuzzies. They'd made a mistake landing on this planet.

With the scourge taken care of, Drak'l and Tatts signaled to us to wait in the shuttles as they went inside the home.

I cleaned my glasses obsessively with my shirt as I paced the shuttle. I hated waiting.

"I know. I hate waiting too. Drak'l is just being extra careful." Judy was on the screen, keeping me company. "Tatts get that way too. He insists on checking a place out before I go in."

I was sure the only living thing in there was Billy and his red bed sheet.

The front door opened, and Drak'l stepped outside, giving me the go-ahead to step out. He stood with his spear, ready to take out any scourge that might arrive late for the battle. He looked so noble, I couldn't believe I'd ever believed the hunters to be the bad guys.

Behind him, Tatts supported an injured Billy. He had a makeshift bandage wrapped around his right arm, and he limped as he stepped toward the shuttle. My friend had seen better days.

He looked up as the shuttle door opened and I stepped outside. "Sammie?" He squinted, trying to see through the cloak, which was still on the shuttle.

"Billy!" I hurried toward him. "You're alive."

I hugged him, and he wheezed.

"My ribs. I think they're cracked."

"Oh shit, I'm sorry," I jumped back. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine. You should have seen the other guy."

"Is Lucas—"

"He's still alive somewhere." He waved out into the town. "The gunshots called in a bunch of bugs, and they separated us before we could do each other too much damage."

"Saved by the scourge. Never heard that one before," I teased.

"Saved? Nah. I was winning." He cracked a grin. There was the Billy I knew, always happy and lighthearted.

"I'm so happy to see you." I resisted the urge to hug him again.

Instead, he leaned in and kissed the top of my head.

Drak'l growled low and glared at him menacingly.

Oops. I didn't want any misunderstandings.

"It's not like that," I said.

It didn't stop Drak'l from pushing me back behind himself possessively.

Billy eyed Drak'l warily. "You two a thing?"

"Yeah." I rubbed the back of my neck, unsure of his reaction.

He turned to Drak'l. "I'm definitely not interested in Sammie like that. I've seen her destroy a toilet after too much dairy."

"Thanks for reminding me, twerp." I huffed under my breath. Of course, he had to remind me that lactose and I were not friends. He'd never let me live that down. The whole bunker had suffered.

"Sammie is like a little sister to me." Billy faced Drak'l as an equal, ignoring the fact that Drak'l towered almost a foot over him. "I might not look like much now, but if you break her heart, I will break you."

Aww. I knew I could always count on him.

Drak'l grunted. "My research tells me this is what brothers usually say." He relaxed.

"Aw, man," Billy said, looking back and forth between me and Drak'l. "Lucas is going to freak the fuck out."

"Forget Lucas." I didn't want the thought of him to ruin such a great moment. "Did you see me shoot down that flyer?"

"I did. You took it right out of the sky. I'm so proud of you."

I beamed. "Me too. I can't believe we were hiding when we could've been fighting."

Judy approached with the small device I'd seen in the back of the war machine.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's a Xarc'n healing device. They all work for humans in a pinch, but this one's altered to work better with our bodies." Judy sent Drak'l a grin. "We're not genetically engineered freaks of nature who could recover from almost anything."

"Huh, I guess my job is obsolete. I'd just finished my nursing degree when the bugs arrived."

"Sammie stitched up every little boo-boo in the bunker," Billy added.

“No way. You’re still needed, these things are far from perfect, and not everyone trusts alien technology. I’m glad we have a human nurse with us now. So far, we’ve been working with a vet. Kristen’s great, but her bedside manners are better suited for horses. We’ve got a small team of volunteers who’ve had lots of practical experience stitching people up through trial and error, but that’s about it.”

“Sounds like they need you, Sammie,” said Billy.

“Where is Lucas now?” Drak’l scanned the street as if worried about an attack.

“I’m not sure. I haven’t seen him since.”

“Do you think he’s still around?” I asked Billy.

“Oh yeah. He’s kicking. Cockroaches like him survive anything.” His expression darkened. “But we’ll be fine now. I’m glad you found these people.”

“We’ll meet you back at the clubhouse,” Tatts said. “I’ll call for Sarah to get an air mattress set up for him. We are fresh out of beds.”

“Would the ledge be a better option?” I asked, thinking of how busy the clubhouse was.

“That’s a good idea. They have spare rooms there.”

We headed back to our shuttle as Tatts and Judy helped Billy into theirs.

“Thank you.” I helped myself into Drak’l’s lap, reaching up to give the base of his horns an affectionate scratch. “Thank you for helping me. Billy is the only person I care to know from my past life.”

“Anything for my mate,” was his rumbled reply.

“We’re supposed to still be dating.”

“Anything for my date does not sound as good.” He nuzzled my cheek with his nose, and I laughed softly.

“You’ve got a point.”

I didn't say the next part out loud because I didn't want to jinx it, but I was ready to start a new life here, with new people in a new place. I didn't know what lay ahead, but I did know that I'd be okay.

Chapter 19: Drak'I

Sammie was hugging a chicken in a colorful floral diaper. I never understood why human females played with their food, but I knew better than to say it out loud.

Bre'k had tried to explain it to me once. His mate was particularly close with Henrietta, and he sometimes entertained the fowl in his shuttle. Pip had not been amused at the droppings left behind, which was why they'd started wrapping her back end with colorful fabric. I didn't think I would ever understand it, no matter how long I lived here or how much time I spent with humans.

A small robot, complete with a little face on the screen, zipped around on the large dining room table. Pip was temporarily controlling the tiny machine. Apparently controlling a whole shuttle wasn't enough. It wanted to be able to join us inside and not just be stuck in Aaron's laptop.

"—weaken them from the inside," Aaron finished. He had been explaining to everyone how his UV-C bombs would work.

They weren't really bombs. They didn't explode or shoot projectiles. They shot light, which didn't sound very scary to me.

"How is this different from what the military was trying?" Sammie asked. "I remember them talking about burning the bugs with light in the news."

Something about Sammie had changed, and it wasn't just because her not-brother-brother Billy was safe. There was

something else. Whatever it was, I liked it. She seemed happier, and more present.

“This is completely different,” Aaron said with a wave of a hand. “They were talking about shooting UV lights at the bugs. That won’t work at all. They’ve tried, trust me.”

Militaries from around the planet had tried many things. Some had even planned the very thing that had destroyed Xarc for good. They had been willing to aim their nuclear bombs at their own cities and people. Even after the first trial in the city they called New York had failed, Earth governments continued to entertain the option.

There’d been talk of sending the elites of the world into hiding and bombing the entire planet, as they’d done on Xarc, turning it into a dead planet. With nothing to eat, they’d predicted the scourge would leave, and they would return to rebuild.

We’d prevented that by disconnecting their systems and effectively disarming all nuclear warheads planetwide. That option was unacceptable, especially since we’d finally found compatible females.

That had been the elites’ last option. After that, everything had fallen apart.

That first year, I tried my best to ignore the politics and play of power around me, instead focusing my energy on destroying as many scourge as I could. Our species were compatible, and I had only one goal: to make this world suitable for my future mate and offspring.

My chest filled with happiness and love at the sight of Sammie next to me.

“I’m not talking about aiming the lights at the bugs. I’m aiming for the fungus.” If there was anything Aaron loved most to do, it was to explain how his ideas worked. “We have the bacteria now, and we know it works by attacking the fungus on the scourge, weakening it.”

“Wait. Go back. What bacteria?” Billy asked.

“Last year, we discovered a bacteria that weakened the scourge, but the bacteria only worked on some scourge and some nests. Nests with a strong fungal network fought off the infection. It was clear that the fungus worked as some sort of immune system for the colony.”

Billy nodded. “And you want to use UV light to weaken the system.”

“That would work,” Sammie said. “We use UVB light to treat things like toenail fungus. They even use UV-C to treat candida in burn patients. I don’t see how this fungus would be any different.”

“We start with the larva and the eggs,” Aaron said. “They’d all come out with a weakened fungal connection. A whole generation of weak-ass scourge.”

“Then we send in the bacteria!” Sammie clapped her hands together excitedly, scaring Henrietta, who had dozed off in her lap. “Oops, sorry girl. I got excited about killing some bugs. I bet you wish these bugs were fungus free and much smaller so you could eat them, don’t you?”

Pip made a robotic laughing sound, probably the only voice the small robot could make. “A chicken army!” It zoomed over to Sammie and shone a series of lights onto the table in front of Henrietta.

She took the bait, flapping her wings and hopping out of Sammie’s arms onto the table to chase after the blinking lights.

“We’ll just need to engineer a giant breed of chicken immune to the bug’s fungus.” Sammie watched Henrietta peck at the moving lights. “See. Natural born hunters.”

“Then we’d be running from deadly giant chickens,” Billy said.

Sammie was beaming now. “But think of the chicken fingers!”

I realized what had changed in her. She wasn't hiding anymore. She wanted these creatures gone from her world. She'd gone from hunted to hunter. I'd witnessed this change in many of the survivors at the clubhouse, but this was the most important because she was my mate.

We'd fight these abominations together.

"Do you need help testing your light bombs?" I asked Aaron.

"I'm trying to find a way to coat it with something irresistible to the scourge so they'll bring it into the nest. But I don't want them to actually try to eat and possibly break it. Once inside, they shouldn't attack it, and we can control it to find the center of the nest where the queen is with her eggs and larvae."

"Why not just drive it in?" Billy asked.

"I tried that already. The flyers and scuttlers guarding the opening see it as an intruder. There is always a set of guards, even at night. I've had several robots smashed already. We can use the cloaking technology, but I can't guarantee I'll get the device back out in one piece, and it would be a waste. The spare cloaks are better used on our vehicles. No, we'll have to get through the front door through trickery."

"What about something stinky, like fish guts?" Sammie suggested. "Isn't that what they used to bait bears?"

"Might work. We can try a few things and see which one they take."

"The food production facility should have lots of options," I suggested.

"Great idea. I'll get in touch with delivery and see what they can give me." Aaron typed something into his laptop. "How busy is the clubhouse right now? Can they spare a hunter? I have a job for you."

"Tal'n and Fen'k are more than enough to keep the area clear of the scourge. And they have many fighters there. I

have been hunting to the east.”

“Good, then they won’t miss you if I send you to several nests to monitor them. I’ll need data from the early morning, during the height of their activity at noon, and in the evening just before sunset. I’ll need data from each one.”

We often monitored the nests right before a swarm to give ourselves ample time and warning. The other time we did so was to check whether a nest was ready to be cleared out. It was boring work. We had to sneak our shuttles in as close as possible and stay cloaked and unnoticed.

Some of the flyers, and possibly the centicreeps too, had the ability to detect our ships even when cloaked, but only while flying. As long as we stayed still, we were safe, but it meant that we were stuck there for hours.

I usually dreaded this task, but this time, it was different. I only needed to gather data. If I fell asleep by accident or looked away at the wrong time, I wouldn’t miss the first signs of the swarm and endanger my entire team. I also had Sammie.

It would give me hours upon hours to spend with her every day uninterrupted, and in the evenings, we’d return to the clubhouse or the ledge so she could spend time with other humans.

“I’ll do it.”

“Thanks, Drak’l. I know it’s a boring task, and you’d rather be out there hunting, but this will help me figure out which nest is our best test subject. I really hope it’s the one for the clubhouse. If it is, we’ll be able to clear it out sooner rather than later.”

“I heard about the wager,” Sammie said.

“Yup. I’m in it to win it.”

“If it means taking out a nest of these ugly assholes, I’m down. I say we hit them where it hurts.”

My Sammie was turning into a little hunter herself. I loved it.

“Hey, a little help here?” Pip circled the table, a panicked look on the little robot face.

Henrietta wasn't chasing the lights anymore. She was chasing him. The tiny robot was no larger than the size of my hand, and the avian towered over it. She ran after it and pecked at it.

“Help! She's going to eat me,” Pip wailed.

All three humans looked as if they were trying very hard not to laugh.

“She cannot eat you, Pip,” I said. “You can just jump back into your shuttle and be much bigger than her.”

But Pip wasn't listening. It was too busy evading certain doom. Sammie took pity on it and reached over to pluck Henrietta off the table, stifling a giggle of her own. She put the chicken down, and she ran off to find the feline.

“Next time, I demand a bigger body,” Pip announced matter-of-factly. “With hands. I want hands.”

“I hope I'll be healed enough by then to help with the fight.” Billy yawned from his side of the table. “I know all I've done is eat, but I'm exhausted.”

“It's the healing device. It makes you ultra sleepy and hungry, but it does miracles. Go get some rest.”

Billy excused himself and shuffled to the stairway.

“Is there anything for me to read up on for these medical devices?” Sammie asked.

“There's a database somewhere. A lot of the different groups have been working on altering them or changing the settings to work better with human bodies. I think I saw a link to it in the forums in the tech area. Give me a moment.” Aaron clicked furiously on the tiny device called a mouse.

It didn't look like any mice I'd seen here on Earth. Mice were a type of rodent. The device didn't even have a tail.

"Ah, there it is. I'll send it over to you."

"Thanks."

"Now, before I forget, and since I have both of you here, you need photos for your profiles."

"We have the photos, but they need a little polishing up." She sent me a grin. "We're going to give the teams a run for their money. Is there a photo editing app floating around?"

"You heard about that, did you? There's a thread on the forum with salvaged apps too. Anytime we can save a useful one, we do and throw it in there."

"I'll look for the thread. You won't be disappointed."

"I can't wait."

Chapter 20: Sammie

“Hey! You’re the lady who rode the dinosaur! That’s sooooo cool!” the kid exclaimed, putting at least five O’s in there.

I’d just stepped into the clubhouse after a long day at the nearby nest. It was our last day, and tomorrow we’d head over to another one Aaron had marked on our map. He hadn’t been kidding about it being a boring chore, but I didn’t mind. It gave me tons of time to read through the forums and catch up on what I’d missed.

It also gave Drak’l and I tons of time together to get to know each other. It sure beat trying to find some privacy here at the clubhouse. As much as I enjoyed meeting new people and making new friends, I appreciated some peace and quiet.

“Can we do a photoshoot? I want to ride a T-Rex.”

“Caleb, there you are!” The woman noticed I was still halfway in the door. “For goodness’ sakes, at least let the poor lady in the door. I’m sorry. Caleb got really excited when he saw those pictures. Come on in. You’re just in time for dinner; the food is almost ready. I’m Sarah, by the way.”

“Johnny has a photo on his phone as a pirate,” the kid continued as we walked into the main room. “Well, it’s not his phone. It’s his mom’s. But *my* mom said I can put my picture on her phone.”

“I said we can put a family photo. You, me, Fen’k, and Finn.”

Fen’k was one of the hunters I hadn’t met yet. Sarah must be his mate. I hadn’t realized they had a kid. Clearly, this one

was born long before the bugs arrived. But who was Finn? A brother?

“We can be dinosaur wranglers!”

“Let’s stay close to the clubhouse, Caleb. The museum is pretty far away, and we need to stay here to protect everyone.”

The kid made an exasperated sound.

I looked around the main room. There weren’t any more seats left, with everyone waiting for food.

“I’ll go in and see if I can help with dinner.”

“Oh no.” Sarah stopped me with a hand on my arm. “You don’t want to go in there. Gabby got pissed at everyone getting in her way. She’s in a mood. She even sent me out, and I usually help her. Don’t worry about her. She’s been feeding us lot for a long time.”

She reached behind the row of couches and dragged out several floor pillows. We arranged them on the floor and sat down. As we did, a dog ambled through the people and flopped down next to Caleb.

Oops. Finn was a dog.

“How about we be cowboys?” Caleb asked. “There’s the restaurant down the street that looks like an old-time cowboy place.”

“It looks like a saloon,” Sarah clarified. “That might work. But only if Sammie has the time.”

“We’ve been on nest monitoring duty.”

“I heard. Aaron’s got another crazy idea. This one just might work. The area has gone down a lot since the summer swarms. I can’t wait until this place is officially bug-free.”

“Come onnn. It’s my birthday tomorrow,” Caleb said. “Let’s be cowboys!”

I was sure it was tough for a kid growing up during the bugpocalypse. Caleb was lucky to be here with his mom and these supportive people, but I doubted he got to do many things kids his age did. I looked around the room. There were no kids his age to have a birthday party.

Watching the nest was boring, and I didn't want to leave Drak'l with the task alone, but I also wanted to give this kid something fun to remember his birthday by. "I'll talk to Drak'l."

"Hey! It's the new girl."

A group of foragers strode in. I hadn't met them before, but I recognized them from their super hero photo.

"I'm Steve, and this is my team." He smoothed his dirty blond mop of hair back and sat down on the cushion next to me and stuck out a hand. "I'm impressed. You've got everyone talking about your romp with the dinosaurs."

I shook it, and this time without staring at it like an idiot first. I was remembering how to socialize, one person at a time.

"Have you figured out what you want to do around here? The foraging teams are always looking for volunteers."

Ah, so this was a recruitment effort. He probably thought I had experience surviving out there. He was going to be so disappointed.

But before I could let him down, there was an angry growl and a wall of purple rushed in front of us. Drak'l picked up the man and tossed him onto the floor.

"Do not touch. She is mine." Drak'l bared his teeth and snarled.

What. The. Hell. I stood and faced Drak'l. He might be intimidating to everyone else but it wasn't going to work on me. "Hey! Don't throw him. We were just talking."

I appreciated that Steve had come up to introduce himself. I wanted to feel a part of this group. If I was going to be staying

with these people for the foreseeable future, I needed to make friends. I couldn't have Drak'l throwing every man I talked to around because he got jealous.

Steve wasn't even trying to make any moves on me. If anything, he was recruiting for his foraging team.

All Drak'l did was growl.

The entire clubhouse was staring now. Amazing. I covered my face. This was exactly the opposite of what I wanted. All I wanted to do was make some friends and feel like a part of the system.

Steve looked at me, then at Drak'l, then he just laughed. "You hunters are so predictable."

A woman on his team helped him up. "Your fault for sitting in his seat." She sent me a sympathetic look, then they went to grab cushions of their own.

Drak'l continued to glare at them.

"Hey, stop that!" I sat back down, my face heated from all the attention he'd drawn. The last thing I wanted was to cause problems with the people here.

"He was touching you," he grumbled.

"Yeah, it's called a handshake. You can't just throw someone for shaking my hand."

He'd almost attacked Billy too, for kissing my forehead, and that was how his family showed affection. Just like this time, there had been nothing sexual about it.

"You are mine," he grunted, as if that explained everything.

Argh! How frustrating.

With the big, brooding hunter hovering next to me, no one else came to introduce themselves.

"Great. Now no one's going to come say hi to me," I mumbled under my breath.

Sarah nudged me. “It’s okay. They’re used to dealing with grumpy hunters here. Steve had a run-in with Bre’k a few months ago, so he knew what to expect when he sat down next to you.”

Steve didn’t seem too offended. He was grinning and laughing with his team as if nothing had happened. I was glad it hadn’t caused anything permanent.

“These hunters get all protective. It’s normal. He’ll mellow out.”

He’d better.

“Psst.” Caleb eyed the grumpy hunter. “Does that mean we’re not going tomorrow?” he asked, sounding disappointed.

“Going where?” Drak’l asked, his face softening when he spoke to Caleb.

Caleb explained about the restaurant and how he wanted to go take photos there.

“You can stay here tomorrow,” Drak’l said. “I can watch the nest.”

“Are you sure? It’s awfully boring on your own.”

A photoshoot did sound like fun, though. Amazing that just a few weeks ago, I’d never have thought it possible. Back then, I couldn’t even imagine leaving the bunker. Now I was considering scouring the post-apocalyptic landscape for photoshop material.

“It is one day. I will survive. I know of this place; it is nearby. You will be safe, especially with Fen’k there.”

“And the rest of the clubhouse is just a call away,” Sarah said.

I grinned, getting excited for a new project. I imagined living in the bugpocalypse wasn’t the epitome of fun for a kid Caleb’s age. It’d be good for him to get out and experience something that wasn’t doom and gloom.

“Okay, you don’t need to convince me.” I held out my hand to Caleb for a high five. “Let’s do it!”

“Yes! I’m going to be cowboy. Yee ha!”

Chapter 21: Drak'I

The sound of soft sobbing woke me from my sleep. It came from my shuttle's facilities.

My first reaction was to go to her, gather her in my arms, and prove to her that there were no reasons for tears. But instinct told me to hold back. Her tears were not from fear. They were from grief.

She grieved for those she'd lost, and there was nothing I could do. I could not change the past.

Sammie hid in the bathroom because she did not wish to share her pain. Didn't she know I'd bear it all for her if I could? Maybe one day she'd feel close enough to me to let me share the burden.

She put on such a brave face during the day. If I hadn't been here or known of her plight I'd never have guessed her pain.

Her muted crying broke my heart, and I swore that from this moment on, I'd do anything to protect her from such anguish again. I wanted to find the one they called Lucas, who'd caused all her suffering, and rip him limb from limb. This scourge shit stain did not deserve to walk this planet while my mate mourned those she loved.

I closed my eyes, jaws clenched, and listened to her sobs until they quieted.

I made soft breathing sounds, pretending to be asleep as she climbed back into bed. I exhaled and hummed lightly and turned to wrap an arm around her. She didn't push me away.

Instead, she curled up in my arms and buried her face into my chest.

When I was done with this mission at the nests, I'd hunt down this male who had done so much to harm my Little Prize. He would hurt people no more.

Tomorrow, Sammie would spend time with Sarah, and she'd make new friends. I knew it would never fill the void, but it would help. That was why I'd encouraged her to go.

Every new hunter I met and worked with helped me make peace with those I'd lost. They'd never replace them, but it helped to make new memories.

I'd help Sammie with that however I could.

Perhaps she'd see Fen'k's little family and want one of her own. We were only a short visit to the mothership away from that future.

My chest started rumbling at the thought of a tiny hunter with Sammie's gray eyes, completely calling out the lie that I was asleep.

"You're awake." Her voice was hoarse from crying.

I grunted.

"Did I wake you? I'm sorry."

"No. I am hungry," I lied.

"Do you want a midnight snack? I have some MREs in my bag."

"There is no need. Hunters are always hungry."

She guffawed. "I bet."

Since we were both awake, I programmed my sleeping nook to display my favorite scene: nighttime in a wooded landscape on Xarc.

"Oooh, it's pretty." She looked around the sleeping nook. "It almost feels like we're there."

“These scenes are all I have of Xarc. This is my favorite.” I looked up at the Xarc’n night sky through the branches.

“It’s magical. Look at those leaves. Are they purple? Or is it just the light?”

“They are. The daytime scene shows the color better, but I like it most at night.”

“I like it too.”

My shuttle simulated a soft wind that blew through the trees, and the branches above us swayed gently in the warm breeze.

She pulled the blanket—another sneaky present, as I’d slept with no blanket before—up to her chin and cuddled in next to me. She tossed the blanket over me too.

I massaged her head lightly with my fingertips until she yawned and closed her eyes. We fell asleep with the stars of Xarc twinkling above us.

It was clear within the first few hours that this nest was in a much healthier position than the one near the clubhouse.

“This nest has a food source we aren’t aware of,” Aaron said, coming to the same conclusion. “Or they have a lot of food stored away in the larder from the first year.”

Whatever the reason, this nest had a lot more resources to work with, and as a result, they had more flyers and centicreeps. The last few days at the clubhouse nest, I’d only seen flyers. That nest couldn’t afford to create centicreeps anymore.

“I don’t think I need to know any more,” Aaron said. “Why don’t you sneak out of there the first chance you get and check the last nest today?”

“I will do that the moment I can move.”

Currently, I was pinned down not just under the watchful eyes of two flyers, but there was also a centicreep eyeing my shuttle, despite it being cloaked. I wasn't even moving, and I swore it could see me.

It made me nervous. If centicreeps were able to detect stationary shuttles, we'd be in trouble. As it was, there were reports of the mutations hunting hunters.

“The centicreep is watching. It has not looked away since I landed,” I explained. “I worry that if I move now and confirm its suspicions, I'll help teach it how to detect us.”

“That is a terrifying thought. Xarc'n cloaks are the only reason some of our teams are safe when they forage.” Aaron watched the feed I sent him of the creature. “Yeah. On second thought, don't move until it leaves. I'll check the forums and see if anyone else has run into this.”

I was just glad the creature didn't slither over to check anyway. It just sat there, staring at my shuttle.

“Where's Sammie?” the Tech Wizard asked.

“She's with Fen'k and Sarah. They are having a photoshoot.”

“Oh yes. Those photos for your avatars are amazing! Of course, Caleb would want some photos taken.”

“It is his birthday.”

Xarc'n hunters did not have birthdays. For that, we'd need to have been born. But I understood that for young humans, birthdays were special times.

“It is? He never told me, and he was just here the other day. I'm supposed to be his *science teacher*.” Aaron rolled his eyes. “He comes up once a week. I try to make it fun, though, and just be a friend. That kid needs friends, not another adult. I'm glad they're getting out and having fun.”

Another group of scourge scurried out of the nest opening and Aaron added them to the tally. I made a note to hunt this

nest more often. It was closer than the one near where I'd found Sammie.

Sammie and I were going through all the actions of a mated couple, but something still felt off. She'd opened up a lot since finding Billy, but she was still guarded, as if she was afraid to care too much about me. I thought of her crying last night when she'd thought she was alone.

She still told people we were "only dating." I tried to pretend it didn't matter to me, but it did. She was my mate. The mate bond had confirmed it.

I knew what was missing. She did not yet *love* me.

I loved her. I knew this with every fraction of my being.

What would it take for her to love me? Perhaps we needed more dates. Or more presents. Or maybe I should do what Tatts was doing and search for a ring for her to make a proposal.

Perhaps it was something I could not control, like her grieving.

I did not pretend to understand any of it. Why couldn't human relationships be easier?

I did know that I needed to learn to control these strange new feelings I had around her. Possessiveness and jealousy were new to me, and I was not proud of my reaction yesterday at the clubhouse.

"Centicreep's on the move," Aaron said.

It was. Luckily, it didn't come to check me out; instead, it was speeding toward a set of flyers. They must have found something interesting.

"I'll catch up with you at the other nest." Aaron disconnected, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Chapter 22: Sammie

The saloon was the perfect backdrop for the photos I had in mind. With Fen'k standing guard, Sarah and I got ready for the shoot. She helped Caleb into his costume while I tied a red handkerchief around Finn's neck.

"Look at you! Such a dapper dog." I gave Finn a scratch behind the ear.

"Can you believe he was surviving in town on his own? Finn was the name on his tag. He was thin, and his fur was all ragged. He must have lost his owner a while back. We searched the area for any survivors who might be looking for him afterward but found no one."

"Wow. I had no idea." I looked at Finn with newfound respect. He'd probably lasted longer out there than I would have.

I put a cowboy hat on him and tucked the strap under his chin, but he pawed it off. That would have to wait for right before the photos.

"How do I look?" Caleb asked, posing in his mini sheriff costume, complete with a hat, badge, and a pair of shiny toy pistols.

"Ready for a shoot-out," Sarah said.

We'd spent most of the morning looking for costumes and props before breaking for lunch once the flyers made it hard to move around. We couldn't find a saloon girl costume for Sarah, so we made do with a *tavern wench meets burlesque dancer* style. It was close enough and gave the right feel.

Finding anything to fit Fen'k was a challenge. They simply didn't make costumes for giants. Even the cowboy hat looked ridiculous perched atop his head, but it would have to do. I'd need to work my post-shoot magic.

The restaurant had half a horse statue up front, just the front half, and with a little finessing and some creative camera angles, I made it look like a whole horse. I started the shoot with Caleb on the horse and got a few shots with him on it, showcasing the front of the wild style tavern.

While we were outdoors for that photo, I kept looking up in the sky for signs of flyers, but there were none. They hadn't been exaggerating when they said the nest was on its last leg. Drak'l and I saw a few when we were monitoring the nest, but they only came out at noon. There were always a few by the entrance the whole time, their eyes vigilant.

It wasn't the bugs that eventually interrupted our photoshoot. We'd gotten several family photos, a few of Caleb and Finn, and a few more with Fen'k and Sarah, when all our phones and communicators went off at the same time.

"Shit!" I ran over to turn off the ringer.

I'd left mine on ring, and I panicked for a moment, worried that the ringtone would call in the scourge. Then I realized that we'd been laughing and having fun this entire time, and not a single bug had arrived. It was hard to shake a years-long habit.

I checked the screen of my phone. There was a fire at the clubhouse!

"I will go," Fen'k said. "Our shuttles are good at putting out fires."

"Aww, I was having fun." Caleb pouted.

The serious warrior, who I'd learned had a fun side when it came to his family, looked around the deserted restaurant. "It is safe here. You can take more photos."

"Yes!" Caleb did a fist pump.

“Stay inside until I return. Keep the door locked and listen to your mother.” Then he was gone.

He’d almost sounded like a human father there, except the words were said in the guttural Xarc’n language. I wondered if kids growing up with the Xarc’n warriors around them would naturally understand the words with time. Or if I’d pick it up, as well, with the help of the translators and not need them in the future.

What about a baby born to both? I knew I’d never be able to speak the Xarc’n language. I couldn’t make those sounds. I struggled with the hunters’ names, and I was sure I was still mispronouncing Drak’l, though he didn’t seem to mind. What about a mixed baby? Would it speak English? Or Xarc’n?

I thought of Gabby. Tal’n’s and her baby would be surrounded by people and have a huge extended family. He’d probably pick up English first. Would he have the ability to pronounce the Xarc’n language?

I hoped Gabby was doing all right over at the clubhouse.

“Mom, I’m hungry. Can I have a snack?” Caleb said, coming back from locking the front door.

“You’re worried about the clubhouse. I can see it in your face,” Sarah said to me, as she dug into her purse and produced a homemade granola bar wrapped in wax paper for Caleb.

“I am.” I didn’t know these people well, but they’d welcomed me in with open arms, and I was grateful.

“Don’t worry. With the hunters in the area, they’ll put out the fire quickly.” She pulled out a chair, sat down, and checked the message on her phone again. “According to this, they called a code yellow, which isn’t that bad.”

“How do the Xarc’n hunters help?” I sat down across from her. Fen’k had said his shuttle was good at putting out fires. Did it shoot water too?

“They just release the entire contents of their water tank over the fire. It’s more effective than pumping water through a hose.” Sarah’s brow furrowed. “It’s a little suspicious where the fire started, though.”

I opened up the message. “Yeah. Out near the back. A strange place for a fire unless someone started a bonfire there, away from everyone else for some privacy. I imagine privacy is in short supply at the clubhouse.”

“That’s why Fen’k and I spend most nights in our shuttle. They’ve got every room filled in there, and there’s talk about expanding into the next building. All the ground floor windows are smashed out, though, so it’ll need extensive work.”

“I overheard someone talking about covering the gap between the buildings and making it a chicken yard in the spring. It sounds like a good plan.”

Finn made a low huff and turned to face the door. He moved protectively to Caleb’s side.

“What’s wrong, boy?”

A sinking feeling filled my gut at the sight of a shadow outside the door. I didn’t know how I knew, but my past had caught up with us. The figure rattled the door handle. I couldn’t make out the face clearly through the stained glass of the door and the frosted windows, but I knew it was Lucas.

“Crap!” I ducked under the table and pulled Sarah down with me. “Caleb, get down and hide.”

“Someone you know?”

“A madman. Murdered almost everyone in the bunker I came from. Only Billy and I got away. I should have known something was up.” I wrung my hands. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know he’d follow me here.”

The loud bang of him slamming into the door had us all running to hide behind the bar. I grabbed my phone and wrote a hurried text to Drak’l while Sarah did the same to her

hunter. I'd gotten soft in the past week, leaving my rifle in Drak'l's shuttle. I hadn't felt I needed it, since I was surrounded by kind and generous people.

People I'd put in danger. I was willing to bet he was behind the fire at the clubhouse. And now, Sarah and Caleb were in danger because of me.

Lucas smashed into the door again.

When that didn't work, he smashed open a window. I could see his face now in the reflection of the mirror behind the bar. It was Lucas, alright. He looked downright insane. This was not the man who'd walked into that bunker years ago, the one I was supposed to be married to by now.

"I know you're in here, Samantha," he sing-songed. "You think you can get away from your wifely duties and hide with these people? You're wrong. You were promised to me by God. You are mine."

"You married this asshole?" Sarah mouthed.

"No way," I mouthed back. "Bunker politics."

She rolled her eyes.

If we just stayed quiet back here, help would arrive soon. Drak'l had to be close if he'd answered the call to put out the fire.

Lucas went back to smashing the windows, trying to get a hole big enough to crawl through. He was absolutely crazy enough to climb through the broken glass; I didn't doubt it.

Finn jumped out of Caleb's arms and ran in front of the bar.

"No, Finn!" Caleb whispered.

The loyal pup barked at the intruder still working on the window.

"Look, a dog. How cute. Remember Bebe, Samantha?" Lucas asked. "She was a good girl. She didn't even defend herself when I smashed her head in." He cackled.

The monster! I gritted my teeth, wishing once again that I had my rifle. I wouldn't hesitate to shoot him in the face.

"How about I make you a deal? You come out without a fight, and I won't shoot the dog. I have a perfect view of this good boy."

"Finn!" Caleb called out.

Sarah pulled him back down and covered his mouth while Lucas continued.

"How about a better deal? You come out without a fight, and I won't shoot this dog or your friends."

Come on, Drak'l. Get here, already. I was squeezing my phone so hard my knuckles were white.

"You have until the count of three before I start shooting. Three, two—"

Fuck! I couldn't let these people get hurt on account of me.

"Stop!" I cried, standing up from behind the bar. "I'll come with you."

Chapter 23: Drak'I

I leaned against my shuttle and urged my water tank to fill faster. I'd emptied the water from my shuttle over the fire at the clubhouse, but it hadn't been enough. There'd been an accelerant used, and the fire had spread to a nearby storage shed as well. Luckily, the tools in the shed were easily replaceable, and so far, no one had been injured.

Someone had started the fire. No one admitted to being behind the clubhouse at the time, and all the survivors had alibis in each other. There was a video camera pointed in that direction, but unlike Xarc'n security systems and the one Aaron had up on the ledge, which broadcast straight to our shuttles and devices, this one sent the footage to a computer inside the clubhouse.

Until we got the fire under control and the smoke aired out, we wouldn't have access to the footage.

I checked my tank again. It was only half full.

The crisp winter air, sparkling icy water, and bright afternoon sun that shone through the barren branches above were a contrast to the impatience pounding in my chest. Why wasn't this thing filling any faster?

Across from me, Fen'k paced back and forth along the riverbank. Luckily we'd left our mates at the restaurant, far away from the flames. But despite knowing that my mate was safe from the fire, an uneasiness settled in the pit of my stomach.

The sound of branches breaking had Fen'k freezing mid-step.

I turned my nose to the wind and couldn't detect anything, but there was something here. It must be downwind of us. I turned in that direction and stared into the trees.

Nothing moved. I listened carefully, but there were no more sounds, either.

My gut knew there was something there though, and so did Fen'k. He drew his dual blades from his back, and I reached for my spear.

Something moved in the woods so fast it was nothing more than a blur. I knew what it was immediately, just by its speed. Centicreep.

I replaced my spear and drew my blaster. Fen'k and I had fought side-by-side often. Before the clubhouse was established, we'd monitored a portion of the mountains together as partners. We'd dealt with centicreeps before.

We backed away toward a more open spot on the river bank, never letting our eyes stray too far from the woods where the creature lurked. When it struck, it would do so quickly.

The seconds ticked by; there was nothing but silence and stillness. Centicreeps were not brainless like the scuttlers and lungers. They were as intelligent as flyers, perhaps even more so. It cost a nest a lot of resources to mutate one from a normal scuttler, and it showed. It was faster, stronger, and eerily smart for a scourge. This one was waiting for us to let down our guard. It was hunting hunters.

My communicator vibrated from my belt, but I ignored it. Whoever it was would have to wait until we finished this fight. Distraction was a common hunter-killer; every hunter who'd lived long enough knew that.

It came at us from behind a conifer, the tree's needles having hidden it from view and muffled its noise. Fen'k and I both dodged away. I was awed each time anew at their speed. I felt the woosh of air as one of the thing's many blades passed by my calf. That was close.

Fen'k rolled to his feet and waved his swords at the creature, shouting loudly, but instead of turning on him, the centicreep kept its eyes on me. That wasn't the plan. Fen'k was supposed to be the one to lead it around.

It was soon clear we were forced to reverse the roles. I ran, leading the centicreep in a wide arc, giving Fen'k time to draw his blaster. The plan was simple yet effective. The faster hunter led the creature around, distracting it, staying right out of its reach, while the one with better aim whittled away at the long sinuous body with well-aimed shots from the blaster.

The most dangerous parts of the centicreeps were the many blade-like protrusions along their bodies, a pair for each of the many body sections, dozens upon dozens of them. Each blade was tipped with neurotoxin. They were particularly deadly when they went into their signature attack, thrashing wildly about.

During swarms, one hunter would lure the centicreep while two or more human sharpshooters would aim at the beast, breaking off chunks of the scourge's long body. This was one area where humans excelled. They had better aim than us. The sections, once removed from the head, were no longer dangerous unless one was careless.

With the centicreep's attention focused on me, Fen'k shot at the back of the creature. Each shot needed to hit a body joint in order to be effective. Simply hitting the carapace was not enough. This was easier said than done. These creatures were quick and difficult to aim at.

Fen'k was a good shot, but this was not how we'd practiced. I looped around the clearing again, staying just out of the creature's reach, this time getting a little closer to Fen'k to give him a better angle. A smaller circle was more dangerous, giving me less room to maneuver, but my ploy paid off when Fen'k got in several good shots, taking off a good chunk of its body.

My communicator buzzed again at my belt, the vibrations giving off a sense of urgency.

Krux!

The situation at the clubhouse must be getting dire. We needed to finish this beast off now and head back with our life-saving water.

Most of the creature's body had been taken off by now, and I decided it was safe enough to deliver the killing blow. I turned and stood my ground, ready to strike.

It went into its death thrash, twisting its body about, but with most of its blades already on the ground, it was easily avoided. I stabbed at the creature, aiming for its eye. When I realized it was too quick, I switched tactics, slashing around its neck instead. It took several well-placed slices to behead the critter, but I soon stood victorious.

I leaned against the trunk of a tree, panting. Fen'k was already gathering the blown-off pieces of its body into a pile on a large flat rock. I stabbed the creature's forebody with my spear and carried it over to join the pile, kicking the head along with me. We made it a habit to burn the remains whenever we could to prevent the fungus from affecting the wildlife.

That was one way to kill the persistent micro-organism: a long meeting with fire. Too bad burning the nests from the outside was useless, as the flame consumed all the oxygen and burned itself out long before it reached the heart of the nest. Because of this, the nest must be burned from the deepest reaches outwards.

As the creature burned, I held my breath and retrieved my shuttle's hose from the water. Our tanks were filled, and we were ready to go back.

"Krux!" Fen'k swore from the river. He held his communicator in his hand.

"My communicator has been going off too. We must hurry back to the clubhouse." I stuck the spear of my blade into the fire before cleaning it off in some fresh snow.

“The message isn’t from the clubhouse,” Fen’k said through gritted teeth.

I froze, somehow knowing immediately that my mate was in danger.

“It is from our mates.”

Chapter 24: Sammie

I pulled at the neckline of the cheap, scratchy wedding dress as we continued down the highway. I recognized this. He was taking me back to the bunker. I was heading right back to where I'd started.

Lucas had driven us straight to a deserted church and ordered me to put on the gown. He'd acted as groom, witness, and officiant. I didn't know where he'd found the paper, but he'd filled in our names and forced me to sign it.

It was so messed up that he'd insisted on this farce of a wedding when he'd been responsible for the death of his family. Didn't he know he was going to hell anyway?

The worst part? Lucas had made me leave my mittens behind, the ones Drak'l gave me. According to him, they didn't match my dress.

"Aren't you excited, my love? I've got the perfect honeymoon planned for us."

I kept silent, as I'd done the entire car ride. He seemed perfectly happy just talking to himself.

"Then after, I know of a settlement near Albuquerque. They'll take us in when they see you're pregnant. And you're going to be the perfect wife, aren't you?"

I clenched my jaw, trying my best not to tell him off. The goal now was to stay alive, and not to rouse the beast.

"Aren't you?"

"Yes," I squeaked.

That seemed to appease him.

As we passed by the mechanic shop, I remembered my time there with Drak'l. I'd been so worried he wouldn't show that I'd jumped the guy when he got there. Sure, I'd been worried about being alone, but it was more than that. We'd had so much fun at the museum that I still thought of it as one of the most memorable positive things that had happened since the bugs arrived.

I had to find a way to get away from Lucas. Drak'l must be looking for me by now. After all the things he'd said about me being his, I had to believe that he'd come looking for me. And if he wanted to start a fight with Lucas for touching me, I'd be cheering him on.

I had to get away soon, though, because once we reached the town, we wouldn't be far from the bunker. That would mean my time was up. I tried to remember the layout of the town from my drive out to the mechanic shop. I wished I'd paid more attention.

Lucky for me, Lucas had let me keep my bag. I wasn't sure if he even noticed it. That meant I still had my phone on me. He probably thought the bag was full of food and water. It might not have even occurred to him that I'd have something like a cell phone.

The moment I was free, I'd be able to call for help. All I had to do was find somewhere to hide and lie low until Drak'l arrived.

We turned onto a familiar street. There was the mall. There were plenty of looted-out stores for me to hide in. If I could get a head start, I might have a chance.

He slowed as we came to an intersection. I waited for him to weave through the intersection, then, just as he was accelerating again, I opened the door and rolled out of the car.

My heart was pounding as I rolled to my feet. My arms had hit the pavement first, and the stupid wedding dress hadn't

been protective at all. I needed to get this horrible thing off as soon as I could. At least I was still wearing my boots and didn't have to deal with heels.

I ignored the pain in my arms and ran for the mall, holding up the unwieldy skirt. The entrance to the big box store was the closest, and I aimed for it.

Behind me, his car screeched to a halt.

"SAMANTHA!" he bellowed.

I didn't dare look behind me, and I didn't dare slow down. He could be pointing his gun at me right now, and I wouldn't know. Bugs could be moving in on us, drawn to his yells. I didn't care. I only had one goal: get to that door.

Why the fuck was it so far? It seemed like the faster I ran, the farther away it got. My lungs were going to explode, and I struggled to stay upright as I floundered through the snow.

This was another reason why the mall was the best solution. Foot prints in the snow would give me away out here.

I leapt over the broken glass at the front door, glad again that I had my boots on when I landed on several small shards. The pieces stuck to my soles, making me slide and stumble into the store. I aimed for the carpeted area where they had racks and carousels of mass-produced clothing.

I was short and the racks hid me well. It was dark in here, with the only light coming from the broken door and the occasional small skylight. I'd expected my glasses to fog up from the temperature, something it had always done when walking indoors in the winter, but nothing happened.

No heating meant no foggy glasses. Wonderful. Even the little details reminded me that I wasn't in Kansas anymore. It was just as freezing in here as it was out there.

Unzipping the dress, I let it drop to the ground. I shivered in the cold, but I was better off half-naked if it meant I could move faster and more silently.

Loud swearing at the door had me dropping to the ground, and peering from this angle I could see his legs under the rows of rotating racks. He hadn't been ready for broken glass. I froze, holding my breath. After a few seconds, Lucas turned left. The glass sticking to the bottoms of his shoes clicked with every step he took.

I turned to the right, toward the mall exit of the big box store. All was fine until I got to the edge of the carpet. The glass sticking to my soles tapped on the concrete floor and I froze. I wasn't about to pick out glass with my hands, so I kicked off my boots and ran half-naked and shoe-less to the door.

The mall was much brighter, with the glass top letting in the afternoon light. Worried Lucas would see me, I dove behind the information kiosk. The screen had long stopped working but the map of the mall was still there.

The sporting goods store would be a good place to start. It would have clothes for me, so I wasn't just in socks, underwear, a bra, and my bag, but it wasn't an obvious place, either. When Lucas found my dress, he'd know I'd be looking for clothes. I wasn't stupid enough to run around naked in winter. If the bugs didn't get me, the cold would. He'd check clothing stores first. I peered over the edge to make sure Lucas was still inside the store, then ran for it.

It was fucking freezing, and by the time I got there my teeth were chattering and my body shaking, despite my exertion.

It had been summer when the shit hit the fan, and the few winter clothes that had been at the sporting goods store had already been foraged when the weather turned cold. I layered on several thin layers instead, and picked a comfortable pair of running shoes. It was nice to finally have shoes in my size.

Dressed and not in immediate threat of dying from exposure, I grabbed my phone. Drak'l had called several times. I'd had to ignore the calls to avoid Lucas finding out about the phone. Too afraid to make noise and give myself

away, I sent him a message giving him an update on my location.

Just seconds later, my phone flashed with a message that he was on his way.

Lucas's voice echoed through the empty mall. He was roaming the abandoned hallways now, looking for me. I curled up behind a display and watched the door through a crack.

As he walked by the entrance, I froze, rooted to the spot. He squinted as he looked into the store, scanning for signs I'd been here. I broke out in a cold sweat and gripped the strap of my bag tightly, hoping my clammy hands wouldn't drop it and give me away.

After an eternity, he moved away to the next store. I stayed frozen; he was still too close for comfort.

I eyed the external exit from the store, which led back out to the parking lot. If Lucas was in here looking for me, I planned to be out there making my escape. With any luck, he would've left a weapon in the car. I dashed outside and made the trek around to the other entrance.

He hadn't left any weapons for me; he'd done one better. He'd left the keys in the ignition!

Hallelujah!

I got in quickly and started the car, but instead of starting smoothly, the vehicle choked, making loud sputtering noises before dying. That probably gave me away.

"Shit! Come on, come on."

I tried again. And again, it sputtered before calling it quits.

I'd been surprised Lucas had gotten the vehicle working after all these years. Most batteries were long dead, and the cold didn't help. He must have given this one a boost.

I turned everything off, trying to remember what I'd done to start my old lemon on cold winter days. I waited a good thirty seconds, counting out loud in my nervousness.

“—nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, fuck!” I saw them in my rear view first: a dozen or so scuttlers and lungers. I’d been too worried about Lucas, so I’d forgotten about the scourge that I’d seen following the car earlier. The sounds of Lucas’s shouting earlier and of the car starting must have called them in.

Calm down. Calm down.

“—twenty-four, twenty-five—”

The door to the mall slammed open and Lucas stomped out, looking angrier than a hippo on a rampage.

Fuckity-fuck.

“—twenty-seven, twenty-eight—”

Screw it. That was long enough. I turned the keys again, this time keeping the accelerator fully depressed.

Success! The roar of the engine was music to my ears. The scourge thought so too, apparently.

Lucas strode toward me, unslinging the shotgun from his back. He’d rather shoot me than let me go.

Suddenly, I was all out of fear. I was angry. If he thought I’d be one of his victims, he was wrong. I’d rather die fighting and take us both down. Instead of turning toward the exit and the oncoming scourge, I floored it, aiming my car right at him.

I braced for impact but was still nearly jerked out of the seat. A seat belt would’ve helped but it was too late for that. I rolled down the window to look back. Lucas was on the ground but he was getting back up.

“That’s for Mary!” I shouted. I backed up and ran over him again. “And Cedrick! And Neil! And *everyone!* Why won’t you just die?”

Lucas was still alive, but the sound of many little feet hitting the pavement was getting close, and I checked the rearview.

Shit! They were already here.

“See you in hell, Lucas.” I drove away, leaving him to the bugs.

Unfortunately, only a few stayed behind to finish him off, but the rest chased after me. I floored it down the empty, snow-filled parking lot to the next exit. I doubted this car would survive bulldozing over the curb. As it was, something had already rattled loose from my impact with that asshole.

Something large landed on my car. It was a lunger.

Soon, the car was covered in the creatures and no longer moving. I was surrounded by bugs. They crawled over the vehicle, trying to bash their way through the windows. A lunger smashed at the windshield and it cracked.

So this was the end. I was glad I'd taken Lucas out with me, but there was still so much I wanted to do.

I wanted to see Aaron's new creation and witness the nest being destroyed. I wanted to be there in the spring for clubhouse chickens. I wanted to celebrate Caleb's ninth birthday.

But most of all, I needed to tell Drak'l that I didn't need any more time; I was ready to be his mate. I loved him, and I wasn't done spending my life with him.

Then, something tore a lunger off my car. Something purple, with a big glowing spear.

My warrior was here!

Chapter 25: Drak'I

"You have to let me go to put on clothes."

"Uh-uh," Sammie said, still pressed to me. "And you can't make me."

I grinned. I didn't mind having my naked mate attached to me.

We'd made it back to the clubhouse courtyard and had cleaned up in the decontaminator on the way home with my shuttle set on auto pilot. Taking our clothes off to get clean had been easy, even with her latched onto me. Putting them back on was another story.

"They will want to see you and make sure you're okay," I said, though I much rather stay here and hold her forever.

"Tell them we're stuck together and naked from the mate bond."

"You wish to tell them we are mates?" I wasn't sure if I'd heard that right. Sammie had always insisted that we were just dating.

"Yup! You're mine, and I'm never letting you go again. I totally understand this mate bond thing now." She held onto me tighter.

Warmth and happiness flooded my chest at her words and it started to vibrate.

"I'm taking that to mean that you love me, because I love you too."

“You do?” My chest was rattling so hard now it shook the both of us.

She only nodded. I tilted her face up to meet mine and her eyes were full of tears. Happy tears. I’d heard about these.

I leaned in to kiss the salty droplets. “I love you, Little Prize. You are everything I ever asked for.”

She made a small squeaking sound, which I assumed was her agreeing with me. She buried her face into my arm pit and sniffed. I grinned. I knew she did that because she loved how I smelled. She wasn’t trying to hide it anymore. I felt the same about her and would bathe in her scent if I could. Except I’d rather bury my nose between her legs.

The survivors could wait to see her. I needed to get my fill of her first. Besides, I’d already sent a message back saying she was safe with me. They’d have to make do with that.

I had more pressing matters to take care of, like making sure my perfect little mate only had happy thoughts of me.

I pressed her down onto the sleeping nook mat and smoothed my hands all over her skin as if I were the cleaning light, touching and memorizing every inch of her body. She moaned softly and closed her eyes, her back arching when my fingers grazed over her breasts.

I crawled over her, trapping her in the protective cocoon of my arms, then bent to kiss her, savoring her taste. She was needy and kissed me back fiercely. My cock hardened between us, and she wrapped her legs around my hips, rocking her body so that her already wet pussy rubbed against my length.

She pressed against me, her nipples peaked and begging for my attention. They called to my mouth. I left her lips swollen with my kisses and trailed a line down her throat, nipping lightly at her tender skin. I went slow, not wanting to rush anything. We had plenty of time, and I wanted to love her like this forever.

I teased a hardened nipple between my lips before pulling it into my mouth.

“Yes,” she hissed and arched, thrusting her perfect breasts into my face.

She was so reactive, so pliant under my touch. It was a heady feeling knowing I affected her so much. No male should wield such power.

I rolled her other nipple between my fingers and she moaned before her hips bucked against me. Closing my eyes, I committed the needy sound to memory. Her hands, which had been gripping the mattress, came up to tangle in my hair and urge me lower.

I gritted my teeth as dull nails scratched at the base of my horns, turning my need into urgent desire.

My mouth resumed its travel down her body, meandering here and there to enjoy the trip. My hands took a more direct path. I slid one possessively up her leg, unwrapping it from my body before dipping a fingertip into her heat. I pressed the pad of my thumb to the little nub above her slit and she keened under me.

I pulled my lips from her body and sat back into my heels to watch her as I fucked her slowly with my fingers. Her eyes were closed and her cheeks flushed. She panted, the shallow breathing filling my shuttle like music. She had her head tilted back, exposing the tender column of her neck to me.

My erection grew painfully hard. It bobbed above her, her tiny frame and the unique perspective from my angle making her look too small to ever take something this big. She'd done it before, though, and would again, but she needed to be ready and slick from her release.

I rubbed harder, faster, pushing another finger into her. I slid my body down to wedge my shoulders between her knees, then covered her mound with my mouth. I replaced my thumb on her little nub and played with it, licking and twirling my tongue.

Her hands came down to grab me by the horns, and I groaned as the touch shot right down to my cock. I panted, wrestling for control.

I continued to fuck her with my fingers as I lapped at her clit. Her breaths matched the in and out rhythm as her channel tightened around my fingers, squeezing me as she would soon squeeze my cock. She came with a cry, tossing her head side to side on the mattress.

She was beautiful. The most beautiful goddess I'd ever seen.

After pulling my fingers from her, I licked the wet digits clean as she watched with heavy-lidded eyes. I groaned at the taste of her, unable to wait any longer.

I grabbed her under the knees and hoisted her hips up to meet mine. I didn't want to cover her today; I wanted to stay on my heels so I could watch her come apart again.

Holding her in place with one hand, I positioned my pulsing length at her entrance and pushed, so that the first portion of my cock pressed into her. She squirmed, trying to help.

"Needy little mate."

"You're going too slow." She hooked her ankles around my hips and pulled, trying to force me in a little deeper.

"Patience, Little Prize. Slow is good." I rocked my hips and the second section of my cock slid inside her. Her channel tightened around it.

She moaned, and I pulled back to thrust again, not slowly or gently this time. The last section of my cock speared into her and she let out a cry, throwing her head back in pleasure.

In this position, I had more access to her body. I reached down with one hand to grab a breast possessively. Her nipples were hard, and when I gave them a soft pinch she wailed and her body arched up off the mattress. Her pussy fluttered around my cock, making it hard to control my instinct to pummel into her wildly.

But first, I needed to hear that she was mine. I slid my hand up from her breast to her throat and pressed her to the mattress, wrapping my fingers around the fragile column.

“Tell me who you belong to, little mate. Tell me whose mate you are.”

Her eyes fluttered open. “I’m all yours, Drak’l.”

Her words filled me with elation.

“Yes. You’re mine. Mine. Mine. Mine.”

As the words rung out, I knew they were true. I’d spent my life searching for something, not knowing what it was. And now, she was here in my arms, and she was all mine. My prize, my bounty. My search was finally over.

My hands still rested on her throat as I set a ruthless rhythm, thrusting and hammering into her depth while she screamed with every movement, filling the shuttle with the song of her rapture.

Chapter 26: Sammie

I was having another best day of my life. Those had been happening a whole lot lately.

It had started with meeting Drak'l, which had been a great day. Then, the mate bond; that had been amazing in hindsight. Running over Lucas and realizing I loved my big purple warrior proved to be doubly superb.

Then came the good news that the UV-C lights were in place and were royally messing up those bugs. We'd celebrated when we'd sent in the bacteria just two weeks ago. Finally, today was the day we took out the nest for good!

It wasn't even spring yet, but this nest would never have the chance to swarm again. It was too weak, and we were ready to wipe it off the face of the planet.

I sat strapped in a war machine, ready to run over any bug that made it out of the nest alive. Tatts and Judy were in another. There were teams of survivors on the ground behind us, mopping up any that got past.

So far, only one scuttler had reached my quadrant, and I'd reveled in squashing it.

Drak'l and the other hunters were inside the nest, burning what was left of it. I worried about him, especially after learning that many hunters had perished in nests, trapped behind walls of flames.

Aaron had assured us that this nest was not very complicated inside.

“I’ve studied these unfortunate events,” he’d said. “They usually happened in medium to large-sized nests due to bad communication. This nest has always been on the small side.”

All the nests near the mountains were small, mostly because the human population here had been small to begin with, and there wasn’t access to any livestock. Humans and our food sources were the determining factors of nest size. But if this nest was considered small, then I didn’t want to imagine what a big nest was like.

I’d done my research on the different nests around the continent. We’d been the first small nest to go. They expected most small nests to be gone in the next year or so. Our job was to prevent them from re-establishing. It was a full-time but relatively easy job here. We just had to stay vigilant and diligent.

We’d start in the next town this year. The mountains were on track to be one of the first scourge-free zones, and rightly so. It would give a chance for the wildlife here to recover.

Then, the focus would be on the medium nests. Those were primarily situated east of the plains and a few in California. Franklin, where Morgan’s sister lived, and Pasadena were both gunning to be the first medium-sized nest destroyed. It was hard to tell which one was doing better at this point, but the bet was on.

Aaron had mapped our little nest the best he could, and each hunter’s location was recorded live. He even had Pip doing all the calculations and calling out warnings to prevent any mishap. We were as ready as we’d ever be.

Drak’l had gone in wearing flame-resistant gear and a special mask that prevented him from breathing in the fumes or the burning fungal spores. With his plasma spear in hand, he’d looked like a futuristic grim reaper. Bugs beware!

“I’m sending another scuttler your way, Little Prize.” Drak’l’s voice blared on the intercom.

“I’m ready.” I pushed my glasses up my face and eyed the nest entrance.

“Drak’l!” Aaron’s voice came through the link. “Stop letting them pass you on purpose. There are still plenty of scuttlers to ram at other nests.”

I grinned. Drak’l was making sure I had some of the fun too. He was always thinking of me and putting me first. I couldn’t believe it had taken a kidnapping for me to accept the mate bond. Old me was stupid; I was cured of that now.

I still had horrible eyesight. I’d heard some engineers were trying to program the Xarc’n medical units to fix that. I didn’t plan on being the guinea pig though.

Lucky for me, running over these bug bastards didn’t require twenty-twenty vision. I spotted the scuttler and grinned.

“Take that, you little freak!” I ran over it a few more times for fun.

“I think that’s the last scuttler in this entire nest,” Turr’k said. “Ugh, this queen is sick.”

“She sure is,” Aaron agreed.

That had been why the nest had deteriorated so quickly. It wasn’t just the eggs and larvae that had suffered. The queen had stopped laying once exposed to the UV light, and the numbers of scourge had dwindled quickly. Despite a half-full larder, the nest had fallen.

“Pip, work your magic,” Aaron said. “Hunters, follow Pip’s directions.”

One-by-one, Pip instructed the hunters to burn out the passages and chambers. We’d started our fight in the morning. It was early afternoon when the last hunter stepped out of the nest.

The smile on my face was so wide it almost hurt. I climbed out of the war machine and ran to Drak’l. He stank like burnt bugs, but I didn’t care. It was another excuse for us to get

naked in the decontaminator. I threw myself at him in my usual fashion.

“I’m covered in smoke and scourge.”

“I don’t care!” I held him tightly.

Around us, the survivors were cheering and shouting. This was our victory. There would be a huge celebration tonight. Gabby, Sarah, and those back at the clubhouse were preparing a feast. They must be so relieved to hear the good news.

Fen’k and Tal’n were already in their shuttles heading back to their mates. Rhaz’k and Turr’k were holding their mates a few feet away, and Bre’k and Xik’n were on their communicators with May and Yvette.

We didn’t have a single casualty, just as Aaron had predicted.

And Aaron looked so proud of himself. Without him, this would have never happened so quickly. He’d won his bet and, at the same time, freed this area of the scourge.

The early afternoon sun beamed down on us, unfettered by flyers in the sky.

“I’m so happy, Drak’l. We did it.”

“We did.” His arms tightened around me as we headed to our shuttle. “This nest is the first of many. There will be many more victories ahead. I plan on celebrating each and every one with you. “

“Maybe we should celebrate alone, just the two of us, before we join the others at the clubhouse,” I suggested. A successful hunt always had Drak’l ready for another kind of action, and this time was no different.

Our clothes and armor came off quickly, and we crowded into the decontaminator.

I tried to hold still as the tingling light passed over our bodies. This was always the hardest part. We had to stay apart

long enough for the decontaminator to do its job, and it always felt like an eternity. That beep signaling the end couldn't come soon enough.

Drak'l tossed me, still naked, into the sleeping nook the second we stepped out.

I landed with a giggle.

"I will never tire of celebrating with you. I love you, Little Prize."

"I love you, Big Warrior."

This was what I'd been missing when I'd stepped out of that bunker. Love. Life. Hope. Home.

Drak'l gave me that and more. He'd given me everything. As his arms wrapped around me and his mouth covered mine, I knew that, no matter what happened from now on, I'd be alright. Because I was home.

Epilogue: Sammie

I fixed the corner of the picnic blanket and adjusted my glasses nervously as I waited for Drak'l to join me in front of his shuttle.

I eyed the chipmunk chattering at me from the branches. "Don't worry, you'll get your share." I knew Drak'l would end up tossing her some food by the end of the evening. "Isn't it getting late for you?"

She just eyed the food I had laid out and swished her tail. Drak'l wasn't just friends with the one chipmunk I'd seen in his photos; he was friends with all of them on the ledge. I guess word got out that he was a gentle giant who was generous with his nuts.

Today was a big day. I'd worked so hard to get it all set up. I'd made sandwiches with Sarah earlier, putting extra meat in them, just the way Drak'l liked them. I'd packed them in a secret picnic. I was supposed to be out with Sarah for a girls' day, but that was a lie. I'd even gotten Fen'k to set up a mattress and the tent May had lent me. He was in on the surprise.

Drak'l walked out from his shuttle, a concerned look on his face, and I got up to greet him.

"What is wrong? Sarah said you needed me."

"Nothing is wrong. I thought it was time we went on another date."

His eyes landed on the open tent with the mattress inside, then on the spread of food on the picnic blanket. "You went

through a lot of effort to put this together.” He frowned. “Have I been neglectful? I should have taken you on more dates.”

I put my hand out to calm him. “No, no. You’ve been great. I wanted to give you a surprise.” I pulled him to the blanket and sat down before patting the spot next to me. “I thought a picnic would be nice with this great weather.”

We ate as the afternoon sun started down the western sky. We didn’t need to worry about scourge anymore. Not here. This was in the heart of the mountains. We worked hard to keep this area a bug-free zone, and nature rebounded quickly.

The one-two-punch combo of the UV lights and bacteria worked wonders on smaller nests, and there were plenty of places like this now. Survivor groups in these locations protected these places fiercely, guarding them from both the bugs and human poachers.

Too bad it wasn’t as effective on larger nests, though the lights did help weaken them. Still, it was the general consensus that we were winning this war.

I never got tired of watching Drak’l eat as if he was always starved. He finished several sandwiches before he slowed down. Of all the Earth foods, my big Warrior appreciated the basic ones best. He liked his roasts, barbeque meats, and sandwiches, but only when piled high with more meat than was suitable. He was very predictable. Meat, meat, and more meat. It made my job much easier.

“This is a good surprise,” he said, between mouthfuls of sandwich.

I couldn’t wait till we got to the real meat of tonight. I just nodded and bit into my sandwich. As expected, Drak’l tossed bits of crust to his four-legged friend, who had been waiting with as much patience as her little body could muster. He really couldn’t help himself around these cuties. I don’t think I’d ever seen him not give in to their pleading.

Meal done, we cleaned up, putting all the leftovers into a bear-proof container. I turned on the lantern and the music and crawled into May's tent. It had a mesh ceiling, letting us watch the sunset while protecting us from the bugs of the small biting sort.

"Tell him already," whispered Pip from my phone.

"Hush, you're supposed to be DJing."

"Tell me what?" Drak'l sounded worried.

This was supposed to be a happy occasion. I squeezed his forearm, hoping to reassure him.

"You're going to be—"

I muted my phone before turning it off completely to prevent Pip from interrupting again. Letting Pip record the moment had been a mistake. This moment would just have to be remembered by the two of us instead.

I brushed a hand over Drak'l's brows, and massaged the base of his horns. "Relax. You're worried over nothing. There is only good news today."

"What is it?" He didn't sound any less worried.

I cupped my hand by his ear and whispered the good news.

At first, I thought my news had been too much. He stared off into space as he processed my words. Then he broke out in the goofiest grin ever.

"I'm going to be a father." He said it as if he couldn't believe it.

He sounded surprised, as though we hadn't been trying to get pregnant for the past three months.

"Yup! All that trying paid off, Daddy."

He'd gotten his fertility turned off soon after he met little baby Miguel. Miguel had his mother's tanned skin but with a purple tint. He had all the other Xarc'n features but somehow

still looked like Gabby. He was adorable, and I knew at that moment that I wanted a little Drak'l of my own.

Drak'l had been even more eager than I and had visited the mothership the next day.

"Thank you." He cupped my face. "Thank you."

He pulled me into his lap and kissed me all over until I was wiggling and laughing.

"You're going to kiss my face off."

"I'm so happy." He looked up into the sky. "When I joined my new contingent on their way to Earth, I was mourning the loss of almost everyone I knew. I couldn't see this planet as the gift it was. I was so wrong. I'm glad I never gave up."

I held him and buried my face in his chest. "I know how that feels. I'm glad I never gave up, either."

I'd lost almost everyone I knew, too, and I'd wanted to give up many times over the last few years. I was so glad I'd held onto that thin thread of faith. And for my faith, I was gifted with the best thing of all.

"You and me." He tilted my chin up, and I was lost in his beautiful golden eyes. "We're going to start a family."

"Yes. Yes, we are."

THE END

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