



# LISA'S LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

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RED PLANET JUNGLE BOOK TEN

**MIRANDA MARTIN**

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## KOMIK

Emptiness. An aching throb deep in my guts.

The first moment I saw the captured human female, the tight knot formed and has not eased since. She was not mine, I know that, but her mere existence, and knowledge that there are others like her out there, has made me feel less. Somehow lost.

It is something I cannot wrap my mind around. I have spent hours in meditation, used every exercise the Order has ever taught, yet still I cannot overcome this knowledge that I am only part of the whole that I should be.

Bells ring, summoning us to the audience hall. I drop the knife and tuber I was cleaning for tonight's meal, remove my apron and hang it on its hook, then leave the kitchen with the others.

"Do you have any idea what is happening?" T'kali asks.

"No," I say as the others on cooking duty reply the same.

We wind our way through the halls of the compound, which were designed with defense in mind not ease of travel, twisting and turning as they go from wide to narrow choke points. I am more acutely aware now than I ever was before of the defensibility of the buildings. Everything has changed since the humans arrived.

Before them, I would have never considered that anyone would choose to leave the Order. We were a tribe, brothers in arms, but that illusion has been shattered. And as more of my brothers have abandoned their oaths, doubt has grown in my

own thoughts. Questions. Concerns. “What ifs’ that never existed before and all of it made worse by having seen one of the human females.

The alien humans are exotic. A delight to the eye and enticing, but visual appeal can be found anywhere in the world. Tajss is beautiful and offers vistas of its own that are every bit as comparable. It is not her beauty that wormed its way into my mind. When I saw her, it awakened an instinct, some primal thing that I still have not come to terms with.

I take my position in the ranks of males in the audience chamber. The Eye stands on the dais at the front of the room. His colorful robes shimmer as he moves. His position is relaxed, hands crossed in front of himself, watching us and exuding an air of calm control.

Silence fills the hall once everyone is in their position. The Eye inspects with a haughty air. Jkaran and Zirthoan stand two steps behind him, glaring as they always do. I have never liked either of them. They feel wrong, twisted, their hearts dark in such a way that they enjoy pain. Why the Eye keeps them close, I do not understand.

“Tajss provides, brothers,” the Eye says.

“Tajss provides,” I say with all the others.

“Some of you have doubts.” Soft murmurs greet this pronouncement, but they are weak denials because the Eye is right. “And that is natural. The bijass and primal instincts that we have worked so long to overcome, they are strong. If they were not, then our Order would be unnecessary.”

Murmurs of agreement rise from those assembled, but I do not join them. Yes, I have doubts, but his words do nothing to assuage them.

“We have had betrayals,” he says. “Some have left, but Tajss provides. We received a message from one of the outposts of a group of survivors. Jkaran took charge and rescued them, bringing them here for training and indoctrination. Welcome your new brethren!”



The Eye swings his left arm wide and four Zmaj males walk into the chamber. They are young. They look like they have barely grown their full scales and all four seem to be about the same age. I frown, studying the newcomers who line up on the front of the dais one step below the Eye.

They are small, much like all of the younger males who have joined us. We were told that is because they were born after the Devastation, but whispers abound. These new Zmaj, like the other young ones, have shifty eyes.

The chamber applauds the new arrivals and I join in, if only to not draw attention to myself.

“But that is not all I have to share with you,” the Eye continues as the applause fades. “Tajss provides and we are her shepherds. A survivor from the human ship has been found. This male was one of the species leaders and I can tell you he is wise. I have taken the time to get to know him and he not only understands our situation, but he agrees that the visions Tajss has provided me is the only way forward.

With his assistance, we will bring the human females to understanding. Once that is accomplished, they will of course join us in our cause. This male is Gavis Gutier. Welcome him to our home, as he will help us achieve the design as given to us by Tajss itself.”

A human male walks onto the dais and moves to stand next to the Eye. He has shoulder length black hair, rich brown skin, and dark eyes. He smiles, baring his brightly white teeth that are all unnaturally straight, without fangs. He is slight of build, for a human, and must be no more than a quarter of a wingspan in height, barely coming to the Eye’s shoulder and the Eye is short for a Zmaj.

Gavis waves to us as he walks, displaying an easy confidence. There is no doubt that he is used to being the center of attention and the way that he carries himself screams of certainty and ego. He crosses his arms over his chest and squares his shoulders.

“Thank you,” the new human says, looking at the Eye then out at us. “Thank you all. I’m very glad to be here. I can’t tell you

what a relief it is to find such a civilized and amiable race to be rescued by. My time surviving on your planet has been informative. I understand your needs and am certain that together, we can achieve a bright future for both of our species.”

The Eye nods agreement. When the human opens his mouth to continue speaking, the Eye places a hand on his shoulder and his mouth snaps shut, but, and only for an instant, a dark anger clouds his face. It is gone almost as fast, but it is very telling about the character of this human and of the relationship between him and the Eye.

None of this is right. The new members of the Order are in a group standing to one side. They watch with zeal on their faces and in their eyes. Everything about them seems off. Unnatural. How many survivors can there possibly be out there?

The Devastation was complete. The bombs that fell destroyed the planet, the cities, and the villages, leaving almost nothing in their wake. There were but a handful of survivors, not counting members of the Order in our bunkers.

All of us know what happened after the fall. The radiation killed the females, even those who were of the Order after we emerged. The bijass of those not trained by the Order took over. Driving their primal instinct to dominate and making it impossible for them to live in groups.

Yet here, again, are these new recruits. Everything about them feels wrong. Their eyes are weak, they do not project the presence of every other Zmaj I know. And they are, clearly, loyal to the Eye.

The Eye and the human male finish their speeches, but I have not heard a word. My thoughts are consumed in a spiral of confusion. Brothers have left the Order. That was never supposed to happen. The worse part is, I now understand why.

The aching I cannot shake is not going to be filled by anything the Order can offer. I know we are supposed to share these females. That this is the way we save the planet, and that no one male should get to dominate the future race. Logically, it

makes sense. On the surface it is the right thing to do for the greater good.

But it feels wrong. I do not believe I could share a female.

Before the Devastation, I had heard tales of Zmaj who formed triads or quads, but those were rare exceptions and done from love, not for breeding. When the human females were in the cells, this plan became all too real. Since then, my doubts have grown. I do not know what I am going to do, but something must change.

*Can I break my oaths?*

---

LISA

*I* push damp hair out of my face. The mound of dishes I'm working through is slowly diminishing.

Doing dishes. You'd think surviving the crash of a generational spaceship onto a hostile, alien planet would alleviate the mundane. Not so fun fact, it doesn't. Dishes still need to be washed.

I don't have any of the skills the others do. I'm no engineer or scientist, and I'm for sure not a diva space-princess like Ziva. She's never had dishpan hands in her life. I've never been important or wonderful. I'm me. A simple girl with simple abilities and forever destined to be alone.

No guy wants to ask out the waitress. Sorry old Earth vids, all your rom-com storylines were stupid and unrealistic. I'm the living proof. I've never even been kissed. No guy, no matter how cute I thought they were, gave me a second look. I was the waitress. The help. The most attention I would get was when the chef got their order wrong.

And it's fine. Or so I tell myself. On the ship I had a cat, Mewly, whom I miss something fierce. He was my one love, confidant and companion on dark and lonely nights. I wish, not for the first or last time, that I could have found him. Sighing, I wipe the sweat away from my eyes with my arm and grab the next dish.

"One day at a time," I murmur.

"We're gathering to plan, you coming?" Allie asks.

I look over my shoulder. She stands in the doorway with a smile on her face. I'd be smiling too if I had a mate who worships me like she has. Heck, he doesn't even need to worship me, liking me a lot would be a good start.

"Yeah, be right there," I say. "Let me finish this dish."

"No problem."

She disappears, and I finish cleaning. The last plate clacks loudly as I place it down on a makeshift air-dry rack. I grab a towel, dry my hands, and then push my unruly hair back out of my face. It's at that awful stage of not quite long enough to tie back but not short enough to stay out of the way.

Following the sounds of voices, I make my way to the dining hall where everyone has gathered. My stomach sinks, only a little, when I see all the dirty dishes left willy-nilly around the table. They don't do it out of meanness, I know that, but it's still frustrating. They're all so busy with their more important jobs that they don't even notice that I'm the only one doing most of the daily necessities to keep this place from being a total dump.

The discussion is already heated, which I hate. Everyone has their own ideas about what's best. So far, everyone has always come to a consensus, eventually, but getting there isn't always pretty.

I hate conflict. My parents fought. A lot.

Sometimes it was worse than other times and I'd bury my head in my pillows, trying to block the sounds out. It never worked.

"We do not have a choice," Angota says, slamming his fist on the table.

I can't keep myself from jumping. Belle is sitting in the chair next to me and notices, which makes my cheeks flush. She puts an arm around my shoulders and hugs me.

"It's okay," she whispers. "He's passionate, that's all."

"I know," I nod, thoroughly embarrassed.

"We do," Bahr says. "Your idea is bad."

“What is yours then?” Angota shouts.

I close my eyes and try to pretend I’m anywhere but here. It doesn’t work. The yelling is too loud. I do the only other thing I can and retreat into my head. I let my daydreams consume my thoughts and the noise of the world around me retreats. The hunky Zmaj who falls in love the instant he sees me sweeps me off my feet and carries me away from all of this.

“Lisa? Are you okay?”

I snap my eyes open and everyone is looking at me. My face is on fire and I could just crawl under the table and die.

“Yeah, fine,” I say, swallowing hard to get the lump out of my throat.

“What’s your vote?” Asia demands.

I quickly look at the hard stares around the table. When I lock eyes with Belle, she leans in close and whispers.

“Raid the order for a transport, or continue hoping we can figure the one below out.”

I give her a grateful smile and shrug at the others. “Hope isn’t so bad,” I say, forcing a smile.

“Oh. My. God,” Asia snaps, throwing her hands up in the air.

I frown in confusion, looking around the table. Their exasperation makes me tongue-tied. Belle pats my arm.

“Should we continue to hold off, or do we try to raid the Order?” Belle asks.

My throat is too dry. I can’t form words, so I shake my head to buy myself time. Asia’s frustration is the worse, she’s drumming her fingers on the table.

“Can we raid them safely? They outnumber us,” I say.

“We can,” Bahr says. “The seeds are sewn. I think we have allies, and if we are smart, we can overthrow Kirmanda.”

“Which gains us what?” Ziva asks.

“A true Eye will not support the breeding of human females,” Balan says.

The other Zmaj murmur but I'm not sure if they're agreeing or not. The sound isn't the same as humans make. I purse my lips, not wanting to be on the spot so I say the first thing that comes to mind.

"I don't want to keep going, just waiting around here like we have been," I say.

"Then it is settled," Angota says.

No one argues further and the decision is made. Fear dances in the back of my head like the wings of a hummingbird.

Why did I get the last say? I wasn't even paying attention. If it goes wrong, what comes next will be all my fault.

## KOMIK

*P*hysical training lasts longer than normal. By the time it is over we are all well past exhaustion with our muscles sore, short of breath, and ready for bathing and sleep. Jkaran was the exercise leader, and he is the only male smiling as we leave the yard.

I go with my group to the springs to soak my aching body. Sliding into the warm water is a welcome relief. No one is talking. The mood of the compound has been becoming quieter with every passing day.

Change is coming faster and faster. New recruits, the human male, and new orders to redouble our efforts to find the rest of the humans. Word has come in that there are more human survivors spread around the planet and missions are being prepared to retrieve them as well.

I look around at my brothers. None of the young ones are here. I look at the tunnel that leads to the springs but cannot see if anyone is in there or not. I leave the warm water and walk over to the tunnel.

“What are you doing Komik?” T’kali asks.

I hold up a finger, not answering until I am sure we are not being listened to. Once I have checked the entrance, I return to the edge of the spring, looking my brothers over.

“This has gone too far,” I say, speaking softly.

No one replies. They look to one another and it is clear that each of them is trying to decide if they can trust the male next



to them. T'kali speaks first.

“And what do we do about it?” he asks.

I bow my head, unsure of what I am going to say before it falls out of my mouth.

“Revolt.”

I do not look up. I cannot face their reactions.

The only sound is the splash of small waterfalls. No one moves or breathes. Anticipation is a strange sensation that makes my scales itch. Staring at the pebbles that cover the ground around the springs, I wait for someone, anyone to speak.

“Can we?” T'kali asks.

“Can we not?” I return, looking up to him first then finally meeting the eyes of every one of the males present.

No one argues. Balan and Bahr have both abandoned the Order, but I do not think I can. They are hunted now and if I left, I would be too. Besides, my loyalty has always been to our cause.

“No, we must,” T'kali says and the others murmur agreement.

“Kirmanda is the problem,” I say. “The Order has changed since he rose to become the Eye.”

“The young ones also,” Cekpet says.

I slide back into the water with them, leaning my head back and letting the warmth soak in. However, the tightness in my muscles refuses to let go. Doubts swirl in my head but the one thing I am sure of is that we cannot continue on this path.

“We need to make contact with the others,” I murmur.

“Others?” Cekpet says.

“Bahr, Balan, those who defected,” I answer without opening my eyes.

A footstep grinds on the gravel behind my head and my stomach tightens into a hard knot. I feign indifference, keeping my eyes close, but every muscle is tense, ready to fight.

“And why, *brother*, would you want to talk to them?” Zirthoan asks.

Nonchalant, I open my eyes and turn my head to look up at him. His twisted grin and dark eyes stare waiting.

“Did I say talk?” I ask, looking at the others in the pool. None of them speaks up but they all shake their head negative, since it is the truth. “I said contact, we were discussing how we might capture the traitors.”

“Were you?” Zirthoan asks. “And you have some brilliant idea that the Eye has not already conceived of?”

“The Eye is our leader, but never in our history has he done everything himself. Is it not the duty of every brother to do our part? Is the capturing of them not a priority? The Eye himself ordered it.”

Zirthoan’s lips twist into some weird mockery of a smile that looks as sadistic as I know he is. Something in his soul is broken. No Zmaj besides him and Jkaran enjoys pain the way they do. They take pleasure in hurting others. Another sign that something is wrong with Kirmanda as Eye, since they are his right hands.

“Your loyalty is admirable,” he says, but his tone is anything but admiring. “I will be making sure that the Eye is aware of it.”

“Good,” I say, standing up.

While standing down in the pool I am half a wingspan shorter than he, but I meet his glare defiantly. When he does not look away, I raise my hand towards him. On instinct he takes it and I pull, forcing him to help me to step out of the water.

On level ground I am half-a-hand taller than him. I look down on Zirthoan while wet and naked, waiting. Daring the higher ranked Zmaj to start something. I do not want to fight, but if this is the moment that sets off a revolution, then so be it.

His eyes dart around, barely staying on mine. He looks at the others in the water, then to his other side and seeing no one he does what all cowards do. He backs down. He nods his head sharply then takes one step back, followed by another.

“Very well, Komik,” he says. “Carry on.”

He takes two more steps back before he turns and walks away. I look at my brothers in the water. All of us know what this means. We are on notice and the Eye will be watching. Intentional or not, we have begun the revolt. Not with shouts and cries of battle, but with a single act of defiance.

There is no turning back now.

*M*y hands shake as I reach into the bag. Riley gives me a reassuring smile. I try to return it, but it feels like my face weighs a thousand pounds. The corners of my mouth won't turn up. I close my eyes and feel the cool stones. They rattle as I let them run through my fingers.

They all feel the same. I hesitate, nervous to pick one. Giving up on finding the right one, I close my hand and pull one out. The stone is heavy in my palm. I turn so that everyone can see. Staring at my closed fingers, I have to force them to open.

No one speaks. We're all afraid, but this is the only fair way we could come up with to decide who will join the raid. The odds are that we won't survive, much less win. And it'll be my fault.

One finger opens, then another. The stone lying on my palm is dark. I'm going on the raid. My stomach drops to the floor and cold sweat trickles between my breasts as I stare at the stone. A soft giggle slips as something snaps in my head.

*This is fate. I deserve this.*

My face probably looks manic right now and my earlier giggle becomes a full on laugh. I close my hand on the stone and now instead of cold, it's warm. A calling. A sign.

The others look on with obvious concern. I get it, I probably look like I've lost my mind. I step aside to let the next person pick their stone and Charlie slides up next to me.

“You okay?”

I look at my closed fist still holding the black stone. “Yes,” I nod. “I am. Really. I think it’s fate.”

Charlie is studying my face and doesn’t answer immediately. She purses her lips then she smiles.

“Fate?”

“Must be, right?”

She nods and puts her arm around my shoulders. “I didn’t believe in it,” she says. “But observation is the key to any scientific study. Only a fool can think there’s not something more going on here.”

I slip the stone into my pocket. It’s happening and there’s nothing I can do about it now.

The others choose their stones. When it’s over, there are five of us going on the mission with eight Zmaj. The full details of the mission aren’t clear yet, but I do know that the five of us are supposed to be a Trojan horse. We’ll get captured. While we are, we’ll find out how the rumors Borysk and Asia planted are working.

It’s a simple plan which Michael says is for the best. He apparently studied old battles on Earth or something. He’s been spouting off pithy proclamations that may or may not be true. What do I know of battles? Things like no plan survives contact with the enemy. What does that even mean?

“We leave tomorrow,” Rakstan says. “Tonight, pack and sleep well. We will succeed because Tajss pro—”

“ANG!” Riley’s scream echoes off the stone walls of the bunker and all of us jump.

Angota moves so fast he’s a blur. He’s gone before I can blink. A moment later everyone is rushing towards the hall and we predictably collide with one another.

“Hold on!” Leah yells to be heard over the commotion. “Wait.”

It's chaos for a few minutes and fear is heavy on the air. I'm at the back so I move away and eventually everyone else does too, so they're standing around in loose groups.

Riley is making a panting, grunting sound that fills the whole building. The acoustics in this place are crazy.

"Oh my god," I say, hand flying to my mouth.

"No," Ziva says. "Now?"

"It must be," Allie says. "What else?"

"What?" Michael asks, looking at each of us and not understanding what all the women do.

"She's having the baby," I say.

"Now?" Michael asks. "Is it... is that.... I mean, now?"

"Yes, Michael," Mick says, lightly punching him in the arm. "Keep up man."

"What do I know about—" he cuts himself off, rubbing his arm where Mick punched him. He shrugs and shakes his head.

"What do we do?" Belle asks.

"Anyone have any medical training?" Allie asks.

Everyone looks at each other but no one steps forward.

*Great*, I think to myself. I don't want to be put in the spotlight, but I don't think I've got any choice, so I hesitantly speak up. "I had a customer once who gave birth at the restaurant. I got towels and water for the doctor who delivered it."

"At the restaurant? What restaurant?" Ziva asks.

"Cosmos," I say. "I thought I'd told you all that?"

"You helped deliver a baby at Cosmos?" Ziva asks, her eyes widening with shock.

"Is this really the time?"

"No," Ziva agrees. "But still, that kind of thing... I mean, I ate there."

"So did a lot of people," I say.

A long, low moan cuts the conversation off and causes my belly to knot in fear.

“Does this matter? Can you help Riley?” Michael asks.

I look around the group, hoping someone, anyone, will step forward with a magical gynecological degree, but no such luck. A few of the girls hold their hands over their bellies, nervous for themselves because sooner or later, they will be facing the same thing. There isn't much in the way of birth control on Tajss and odds are not in their favor if they don't want kids.

“Right. I've got this,” I say, mostly to myself but they all hear it.

“That's right!” Belle yells.

“Go Lisa, go,” Eve says, patting me on the back.

Everyone gives encouragement as I walk to the hall. The Zmaj men form a line to either side so I'm walking through a tunnel of hunky warriors. It's a surreal moment. My thoughts stray to the stone in my pocket.

Is this the start of a life that will balance the loss of mine on the raid?

## KOMIK

The buzz of conversations fills the dining hall. I barely notice my food as I eat. My attention is on my brothers. Studying each one, trying to decide who I can trust and who I cannot.

Many have expressed small signs of discontent. The seeds of doubt began when Angota was arrested and then disappeared. But who really sees? Who still believes we are right? Knowing who I can trust and who I cannot will mean the difference between survival and whatever happened to those who go against the Eye.

That alone is enough to make one wonder at what we have become. There was never a banishment or a disappearance under the old Eye. It would have been inconceivable. Now, though, we take it in stride.

“Jkaran is watching,” Cekpet murmurs.

“He is a broken male,” T’kali curses and Cekpet snorts in agreement.

“Let him watch,” I say as the dragon rumbles. The red fog of the bijass surges as anger rises but I push it down, maintaining control with a simple mental exercise. “I will—”

I cut myself off before finishing the thought. Anger will get us nowhere but banished or dead.

“He is watching you,” T’kali says. “Not us.”

He motions a finger between himself and Cekpet.



“It matters not,” I say. “Are you both willing?”

The two of my brothers nod.

“We have no choice,” Cekpet says. “My oaths are to the Order, not Kirmanda. This is not what we swore to do or protect. Tajss cannot support this plan.”

“It is corrupt. Wrong. This is not the way,” T’kali says.

I start to say something but see Jkaran marching towards our table and shut my mouth. He comes to a stop at the end and leans in to express his dominance. I clench the utensil in my hand as I struggle with the bijass triggered by his aggressive stance. He is toying with me. I will not give in to such a petty game.

“Komik,” he says.

“Jkaran.”

“You will have cleaning duty tonight.”

“It is not my scheduled night.”

“Did I ask?” he growls, leaning in closer.

The primal instinct surges and my dragon roars. I close my eyes and repeat the simple mantra taught us by the first Eye. It is barely enough. I am clinging to a cliff by my fingertips.

My own growl slips out.

“You have something to say?” he asks.

He is taunting me, trying to get a reaction. He wants me to display insubordination so that he can punish me. I am not going to give him the satisfaction.

“No.”

“Good. You need to remember your place. The Eye is watching.”

“Always,” I respond.

Jkaran straightens and turns on his heel. Before he takes more than a step I add. “Tajss provides.”

He spins, his wings opening and his tail smacking against the table opposite ours. It bounces, spilling food off trays and the brothers sitting there yell their anger but he ignores them. His narrow, beady eyes are focused on me. Slowly, I smile.

His hands ball into fists and his wings are partly open, ready to attack. It plays out on his face as clearly as a written communication. He is struggling to control the urge to attack me, to prove his dominance. Behind that though is something else. Something he and I both know. He has never beaten me in a fight.

We have faced off many times on the training grounds and never, in our long years together, has he ever been the victor. He cannot win in a fair fight, and he will not challenge me to one. Which is his only opportunity at this moment. He cannot punish me for my statement, no matter how much he wants to. After all, it is the truth on which the Order is founded.

His game is to manipulate me into breaking a rule. Of giving him some excuse he can use to punish me. That is the only win condition he has. If I keep my own primal urges under control, he cannot win. Right now, too many eyes are on him and the confrontation between us. The tension in the room is rising as everyone waits.

If he moves, it also works in my favor. It will push those on the fence, of which I am sure are many, towards action. The Order is deadlocked. Locked into tradition and long history. A lifetime of obedience is not something one shakes free of on a whim. The inertia of life is a truth that few ever truly face. To break it will take action. Violent action that shakes them awake.

All these thoughts flash through my head as Jkaran and I stare at one another, each waiting for the other to break. His chest heaves, his muscles tense, he is going to move. I am sure of it and the more seconds that tick past the greater my excitement. It ca not be this easy, can it?

Zirhoan steps into my field of view, placing a hand on Jkaran's shoulder. He doesn't speak, but his presence breaks

the moment. Jkaran's wings snap closed and his balled fists relax. A smile spreads over his face and he nods.

"Tajss provides," he says.

He and Zirhoan turn and walk away without another word. All eyes in the room are still on me, or it feels as if they are. Anger surges. I grab my tray of food, muscles tensing to throw it, but T'kali puts his hand on my forearm and shakes his head.

I set the tray back down and take a deep breath. The tension in the room drops and the buzz of normal dinner conversation resumes, accented by the clatter of utensils on plates.

I look at my two brothers in revolution and they nod.

"This is good," Cekpet smiles.

"How?" I ask.

"I know who was ready to jump to your aid, brother," he says. "And it was a lot. We will be working while you do your new duties tonight. Believe me, it will be worth it."

"Good," I say. "Because sooner or later, I am going to beat his tail into the dirt."

I grab my plate and head for the kitchens to do my new duties. Several eyes follow and their gazes warm my scales and give me hope.

“Good Riley,” I say.

Her groan increases in volume until it’s barely shy of a scream. She clenches her eyes and her jaw. Sweat soaked hair lies across her face as she pushes again.

“I can’t,” she huffs as the latest contraction comes to an end. “I can’t. I’m done. It’s too much.”

“No, my love,” Angota says. He cradles her in his arms, wiping her face with a cool cloth. “You are a beautiful warrior. my treasure. You can do this. Tajss will provide.”

Riley nods. Her eyes closed while she leans back against Angota.

“Not much more Riley,” I say, trying to be encouraging, but what do I really know?

I’m not a doctor and even if I was, I don’t think anyone is prepared for the delivery of a human-Zmaj hybrid. We all know the pregnancy has gone long past the nine-month expectation, but how far past? And is that a good thing or a bad thing?

We don’t have calendars and only a vague idea of when we crashed. Those first weeks were entirely too busy trying to survive. None of us were worried about tracking the days.

“Ohhhh,” Riley cries as another contraction starts.

It hurts her, obviously, but as far as I can tell her body is doing what it’s supposed to do. I’m only here to wait and catch. If

something does go wrong, I have no idea what I'm going to do.

The pitch of Riley's groan rises and rises until it must crescendo, but it doesn't. Then Angota surprises me.

He shifts slightly so that his mouth is next to Riley's ear. Then he hums. It's a lowing sound but the moment he starts, Riley calms. Her face relaxes and she eases her grip on the sheets. The two of them close their eyes. The volume of his humming increases, and as Riley relaxes, her body does its work.

Looking at the two of them, my throat tightens and tears swell in my eyes. It's the most beautiful, loving thing I've ever seen in my life. It's too much to bear witness too. I want to look away, and at the same time I want to commit every single detail to my memory.

Motion at the bottom of my gaze pulls my attention back to my duties. Riley's stomach clenches and then the baby is emerging. The head slips out as easily as could ever be asked, and I grab and pull. It slides free and I'm holding their baby.

It takes my breath away. Still curled into a fetal position, the head is conical shaped from its birth, but the face. Oh my god its beautiful face.

The baby has tiny little lips and a button nose. I see Riley in the distinctively human shapes to the face, nose, ears, and mouth. It has a thick shock of dark hair and at the hairline are tiny horn buds. Its itty-bitty tiny scales catch every stray beam of light and glisten, making it look like rainbows are dancing from it.

The baby opens its eyes, which are a richly vibrant purple, and then its mouth. It takes in its first breath of air in a mighty gasp, then proves its lungs are in perfect shape, letting out a scream so loud that it leaves my ears ringing.

It snaps my attention back to my duty and I inspect the rest of the baby for any problems or defects. That's a thing doctors do, right? It makes sense anyway. It waves little arms, stretching and finding freedom for the first time.

It's a big baby. Must be over thirteen pounds. I'm amazed at Riley being able to birth it. Tiny fingers unclench and grasp air as it continues crying. I let it cry because that's what I saw the doctor do at the one birth I've witnessed. Those little fingers have fingernails! The Zmaj have more claw like nails, but these are purely human looking.

My inspection reaches the baby's mid-section and I finally stop thinking of it as an it, because this is a beautiful baby girl. The chubby legs kick and thrash. I have to shift my hold so I can make sure she has all ten toes, and she does. Turning her over, I gasp.

"What? What is it? Is my baby okay?" Riley asks.

She is exhausted. Her voice trembles with it, but she's watching my inspection with eyes that, though sunken and bruised looking, are wide and worried. Angota has stopped his song and is also watching, waiting.

"You have a baby girl," I say. "And she has wings. And a tail."

"A girl?" Riley asks, even as a wide smile spreads across her face. She turns her head against Angota's chest, looking up at him. "Are you okay with a girl? You're not disappointed?"

"Disappointed?" he asks, and the surprise in his voice is so genuine it makes my heart skip a beat. "You have given us a gift I never, in all my long life, thought to have. My love, I am so far from disappointed that I do not know a word to encompass the distance."

Riley smiles and raises her arms. I move around the bed and lay the beautiful baby in her arms. She cradles the crying little girl while I take a wet towel and clean her up. The baby fights and fusses but it doesn't take long. Riley moves her around, helping the process then she cradles her in the classic football hold and frees her breast. The baby latches without the slightest bit of difficulty.

"Thank you, Lisa," Riley says.

She and Angota are staring at their nursing daughter, and I am too. There are no words for my feelings. Elation, excitement, and much as Angota just said, words are not all encompassing

or big enough to contain emotions like this. I feel like my body is on an overload. Ready to explode with the joy and excitement I'm feeling.

"You did this," I say. "All I did was stand by."

"You were a much bigger part of this than you believe," Angota says. "A female needs another female to draw strength from. This is Tajss' design."

I can't even pretend to understand that, so I nod.

"What are you going to name her?" I ask.

Riley turns her head to look at Angota. He smiles and nods and she smiles too, then looks down at the baby.

"Nadiya," she says.

"I don't know that, what does it mean?" I ask.

"Hope," Angota says. "It means hope."

My tears begin to fall as I take my leave to let the others know everyone is okay. Hope. A beautiful name for a beautiful baby. And the one thing we all need now more than ever.

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LISA

“*T*his changes the plan, doesn’t it?” Eve asks.

“No,” Bahr grunts.

“If anything, it makes the mission more important than ever,” Urokol says, speaking softly.

Leah is at his side, their hands resting on each other over the table. I swallow the lump in my throat because he’s right. Silence lays heavy around us. Everyone except Riley and Angota have gathered to discuss.

The mission to disrupt the Order was put on hold by the surprise birth of Nadiya. I want to agree with Eve. I want this to change everything, but the truth of the matter is that Urokol is right. It makes it more important than ever.

We’re not only fighting for our own lives now, but we’re also fighting for hers. She may be their daughter, but I am sure everyone is feeling what I do. She’s all of our futures. Over the last two days everyone has been to see the new arrival and welcome her. And Nadiya has stolen every one of our hearts.

She is, in my limited experience, the most peaceful, joyful baby I’ve ever met. She is living up to the meaning of her name. We were all fighting to survive, but now it feels different. We’re not only fighting for our lives, but for the future. For her future.

“If we do not, we lose,” Velyk says.

Silence sits heavy, like a weighted blanket encompassing all of us. Pressing down and holding back what we all know must be



said and done.

“This changes nothing,” Thar says. “The mission goes.”

He doesn't say it loudly. It's barely a whisper, but that and the tone of his voice gives a reverence to what we're deciding. Except there really is nothing to decide. We don't have a choice. Now, more than ever, it's time for the Order to pay the price. We have to stop them.

“What is this?” Angota asks. He entered the dining hall silent as a predator and I'm not the only one who jumps.

“Deciding if the mission goes, or if we hold,” Borysk says.

“Of course, it goes,” Angota says.

“I agree,” Allie says.

“And I'm going too,” Angota adds.

Almost as one, every person at the table snaps around to stare at him in shock. An instant later the room erupts in protests and competing shouts of disagreement. He stands taller, massive arms crossed over his broad chest, listening to everyone argue at once. He waits, silent himself until the noise stops.

“Angota,” Rakstan says, rising to his feet. “You have a newborn. Your duty is here.”

“And who are you to tell me my duty to my treasure and my child?” Angota challenges.

Rakstan raises his hands then drops them to his side. He moves around the table to stand in front of Angota then puts his hands on his shoulders, staring into his eyes.

“I am only a brother,” he says. “I understand your thoughts. You have obligations. A need to protect your family. This is natural and right.”

“I am going,” Angota repeats, defiant.

“But,” Rakstan says. “This duty is not only yours.” Angota frowns, the first sign of any wavering on his face. “It is ours.”

“How is it yours, brother?” Angota asks, his voice low and almost threatening.

“Because of that word,” Rakstan says. Angota arches an eye ridge. “Brother. Are we not, all of us here, your brothers? And these females, are they not your sisters? Is this,” he motions one arm wide, “not a family?”

My throat tightens and a new round of tears causes my sight to glisten. When I look at the others, it seems they’re feeling it too. Rakstan is right. We are a family. Not of birth, but of choice. Thrown together by circumstance, but we’ve grown together.

An empty ache so deep in my guts that I can’t place it throbs and I realize a new truth. Not circumstance. Fate. And that fate is pushing us towards something. Me towards something. Something that will, I hope, fill this emptiness I feel when I’m by myself.

Angota stares around the room, locking eyes with each of us in turn. When he comes to me my heart is racing and I nod.

“Family,” he says. No one speaks, waiting to see what he does next. An audible sigh happens as he lowers his arms to his side and gives a nod. “My family.”

He turns and leaves the dining hall, returning to his treasure and child. Any doubts about the continuation of the mission are gone. No one says it. No one has to. This is about more than any one of us.

Each of us goes to prepare.

Every muscle hurts. Muscles I do not think I knew I had hurt, but I will not let anyone see my discomfort. I will not, while I draw breath, let Jkaran see my pain.

“Again,” Jkaran orders.

Nodding, I raise the training lochaber and drop into a defensive stance. The four warriors facing me look askance at each other, knowing that I am hurt and too exhausted to continue. We have been training for four spans of the suns. An unheard of, grueling session. While my opponents have been switching in and out, I have stood in the ring for the entire time.

“Come,” I bark.

Twenty of my brothers watch in dismay, but the four on the sands attack. I block a flurry of blows but first one, then another, slips through my defense. The first wooden haft cracks against my ribs and the second is a glancing blow to my head, hooking behind my left horn. As my opponent tries to pull the lochaber free, it catches, jerking me off balance. Three more blows land.

I drop to my knees. Pain blossoms from the points of contact and then the bijass surges. My vision goes from blinding white to red and I roar. Leaping to my feet, I attack without reservation, swinging the lochaber over my head. It whistles through the air in a rising pitch that sounds like a scream.

More blows land but the bijass dulls the pain. I leap forward, thrusting my weapon. The base of the shaft strikes into the gut

of one who doubles over, his breath rushing out. Jerking the lochaber back, I swing it up then reverse the motion.

The shaft arcs over my head in a downward arc. The warrior I am aiming for dodges to the right and I change my motion from down to a sideways swing. The lochaber slams into his neck. His eyes widen and his mouth drops open. Spit and blood fly out, then his eyes snap shut and he drops like a sack of rocks.

The bijass surges harder but my awareness of what I have done is a dawning horror. This is not an enemy but a brother. I have hurt him, badly, if not outright killed him. I am thrown forward by a blow to my back but I ignore it and the pain.

I drop my lochaber and then fall to my knees next to my fallen brother. I put two fingers on his neck and breathe a sigh of relief when I feel a pulse.

“Do not stop!” Jkaran barks. No more blows come. My brothers move to form a protective circle around me. “What are you doing? Attack. Finish this.”

No one verbally denies his order but no one acts either. I try to rise but everything hurts so incredibly much that it is a lot harder than it has any right to be. Bowing my head, I stare at my injured brother. I did this. I gave into my basest instinct and hurt him.

I take a deep breath. Pushing through the pain and exhaustion, I force myself onto my feet.

“Enough,” I say.

“All of you will be on report,” Jkaran wails. “None of you will obey a direct order? Attack. Now.”

“No,” I say. I do not raise my voice. It is a statement, pure and simple.

“You do not get to say no,” Jkaran rages. He storms towards me but the three who were attacking me moments before shift their positions to keep him from reaching me. His eyes widen and then narrow as a sly smile twists his lips. “Insubordination? You know how the Eye feels about this.”

I step between my protecting brothers and Jkaran to stand before him. Every breath is a sharp pain, but it does not matter. The rest of my brothers standing around the edges of the training sands move to join us in the middle.

“Vpav is hurt,” I say. “He needs medical attention. Now. This is over.”

Jkaran’s shifty eyes dart from me to the prone form of Vpav on the sands. He looks around, reading the mood, then purses his lips and the evil smile returns.

“Right,” he says. “Of course. What was I thinking? Get him cared for. We are done. For now.”

He turns and walks away. Only when the door closes behind him do I turn and look at my brothers.

“Thank you,” I say. “Let us get Vpav cared for.”

No one speaks up but their thoughts are in their actions as it should be for a warrior. Four of them gather Vpav up and Cekpet comes to my side, slipping my arm over his shoulder and taking most of my weight.

We follow those carrying Vpav to the medical facility. One thing is clear, I have more allies than I thought.

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LISA

I have become the foolhardy heroine from an old Earth vid. Somehow I've gotten myself into a situation where I'm giving up safety and a good life just to be miserable and chase a silly ideal. Love. I might find the Zmaj who calls me his treasure.

I'm choosing not to think too hard about it.

My life has taken more twists and turns in the past year than anyone could have possibly predicted. I don't think the most imaginative of Earth writers could have come up with all the bullshit that's happened to us. Yet, it's about to get worse because of me.

Sometimes truth really is stranger than fiction. We're here. No, I'm here. Tramping through the jungle. Sweaty, sticky, sore, tired and hungry, but we keep on marching. Because this spunky mix of Zmaj warriors and humans are going to raid an entire compound of alien warriors who want to capture and breed us.

Good idea, Lisa. Just the right thing to do. Why did I have to be the last and deciding vote?

"Come close," Rakstan says, motioning our group of ten around.

Six Zmaj and three human females, also known as bait. Or distraction. The plan isn't set in stone which way yet, but one way or another, our lot isn't to fight.

Velyk and Thargar stand a distance off, both scanning the jungle in different directions. They must already know what Rakstan is going to say. Borysk, Urukol, and Bahr position themselves in a loose circle around Leah, Mick, and me.

“We are well within the range of their regular patrols,” Rakstan says. “We are going to split up into groups. Leah, you go with Velyk and Urukol. Mick will go with Thargar and Borysk. Lisa you will remain with Bahr and myself.

As we spread out, we will remain within shouting distance, but move silently. After this, no further talking. Examine each step before you take it. Avoid noise as much as possible. As soon as we come across a patrol, the female in whichever group is closes will act as bait. Then we will take them out. Any questions?”

I raise my hand. When he looks at me my stomach tightens but it's too late to turn back now.

“What if you can't take them out?” I ask.

Leah and Mick nod agreement with my question.

“We will,” Rakstan says with utter confidence. “Because we must.”

I nod, and as silly as it may seem, he is reassuring. We break our huddle then each girl follows their assigned two Zmaj in different directions. How they know we're still within shouting distance I have no idea. The jungle is thick and full of noises that, though I've gotten used to them, make it impossible for me to know what's happening any distance away.

That isn't my problem though, really. My problem is to watch my step, which I do with every bit of care that I can. Rakstan and Bahr make it look so easy. It's like they're cats, slipping through underbrush and debris without leaving a single trace of their passage. Despite the fact that I'm not much more than a third of their size, I feel like the proverbial bull in the china shop.

I'm so busy picking my steps that I lose track of time and distance. Only my sore muscles and aching arches tell me

we've been doing this a long time. When Rakstan stops and holds up his fist, I immediately freeze.

He and Bahr look at each other. It's strange because I know that in that one look they communicated a lot, but I have no idea what. Something caused them to stop though. Bahr nods and walks back to me, moving so easily and casually that I suppress a bit of jealousy. I've worked my ass off to not make noise and he acts like this is nothing.

"Stay here. When you cannot see us, make noise," he whispers in my ear.

My heart is running its own marathon and my mouth is too dry for words. I nod. This is it. Is that cold trailing down my spine the hand of fate? I hope so. I don't want to be a fool and coming out here to be bait really seems foolish.

Blood is rushing to my head so fast I'm a little dizzy. I'm weaving in place while watching the two Zmaj, my protectors and only real hope against the jungle dangers, disappear. It's okay that I'm afraid, I tell myself. Fear is the appropriate emotion right now. Only an idiot wouldn't be afraid.

When I can no longer see either of them, which happens much faster than I expect, I begin a count. One, two, and on to ten. When I reach ten, I stomp forward. Sticks snap and the thick leaves of a bush slap against my chest. I yelp at the unexpected sting.

Then I hear it. It's subtle but something is moving through the jungle, coming towards me. On instinct I freeze, but then I remember that's not my job here. I'm supposed to be attracting attention.

I climb over the massive roots of a tree and step into a clearing. The bright red sky and double suns are directly overhead, glaring down like angry eyes at the audacity of this bitch who is making all the noise. I take a couple of steps forward, still stomping my feet to make noise on the fallen leaves and branches.

Nothing happens but it feels like someone is watching. The hair on my arms and the back of my neck is standing on end.



My stomach is a hard knot with a slight hint of nervous nausea. A shape emerges from the far side of the clearing.

Not a shape. A Zmaj.

A huge, hulking Zmaj. He raises his arms, each one of which is as thick and as strong as a log. The arms curl, showing off his huge biceps. His barrel chest rises and falls. The edges of his dusky tan scales have a sharp yellow tint that alternates with a jolting green.

But his face.

He has a strong, wide jaw. His nose is flat and broad. His horns are more pronounced than most Zmaj, protruding from his forehead then curling sharply back towards his head. His eyes are a burning crimson and his lips! My heart stutters looking at those lips. Full, plush, and demanding to be kissed. No demanding that they be of service. My core burns, the knot in my stomach tightens for an entirely different reason.

We stare at each other for a long, impossible moment. Then he bursts into a run and I, acting on some instinct that is completely irrational, run towards him.

We meet in the middle of the clearing and he sweeps me off my feet, twirling me as our faces smash together and our lips find one another.

A storm rages in my entire body. I'm convulsing with desire. I grab his hair and hold him close. He grabs my ass and one of his fingers slips between my legs. My pussy screams as he pushes up against my lips, soaking the fabric of my pants.

I groan into the kiss. His cock is rock hard and digging into my leg. I grind against him, trying to find relief. His tongue drives into my mouth, but it's not forced, I invite it in willingly. I want him. All of him.

As my lungs scream for breath, burning like a bonfire has been ignited, he breaks the kiss. His crimson eyes bore into mine.

"Mine," he growls, not letting go and I gush.

The roar of the dragon drowns all other sound. Her body molds against mine, fitting perfectly. Her flesh is soft. So incredibly delicate. Her lips are silky and radiate warmth. As I kiss her, she kisses me back with equal fervor.

She moves her hips, grinding on me, and my cock is so full and hard it begins to leak. I push my tongue into her supple mouth and her own welcomes it, then wrestles with it.

Her scent is as sweet as a fihib, though that plant's sweet nectar cannot compare to the taste of her. My tongue is alight in the delight of my human female. I grab her full, round ass and squeeze each cheek. She has her legs wrapped around my waist and I shift her so that the tip of my cock, straining against my pants, is where her opening should be.

I must have her. Now.

She grabs my horns and pulls my head back, baring my throat and I let her. In this single act I give myself to her fully. She is all. The empty ache that I have been feeling is gone. She fills that hole.

Her eyes stare into mine and time stops. There is only the two of us in this moment, and in her I recognize a truth that can never be denied. No training, no mantras, and no long hours of mediation or attempts to control the dragon, will ever work.

“My treasure,” I say.

“Mine,” she says, then she kisses her way from my shoulder up the length of my neck.

As she moves, she alternates between gentle, wet kisses to nibbles and thus makes her way to my jaw and over. She bites the lobe of my ear and tugs. All while her hands twine in my hair and she grinds against my cock.

The sensations are overwhelming. Too much to withstand, so I give in to the demands of my body. I grab her hair, jerk her back, then quickly move to lie her on the ground of the clearing. Nothing else matters, I must have her. Now.

She is all too willing. As I lower us to the ground she is undoing her shirt, and though I do not stop, most of my attention is on the pale white skin being revealed. The mounds of her chest are pressed together, forming a tight crevasse and I immediately want to bury my cock between them.

*Her breasts. Exposed. Tajss provides.*

I have never imagined anything like this human female. The lifegiving part of my treasure being exposed in such a way is extraordinary. It is incredibly alien which makes it all the more erotic. Her shirt falls open to reveal another piece of cloth that binds them together.

This piece of cloth is sheer and a soft tan color. Her nipples are mushed by the constraining cloth. The pink buds are surrounded by perfectly dark circles and they strain through their confinement.

My mouth is watering. I must taste them. It is an incredibly dirty, unreal thought. No Zmaj female would entertain such an idea. Nipples are for nursing, but a Zmaj female's breasts are hidden behind protective plates and only emerge for that function.

My treasure's are on full display and, like her, demand attention. No, they demand to be worshipped, as she deserves. And I am her zealous devotee. Having found her, I will forever and gladly serve.

Dimly, below the aches and the need and the overwhelm of desire, are my oaths to the Order. The troubles and the worries. But they are distant. Here, in this moment, this female is all. She has always been all. The missing piece of my world.

Those problems will not stand in our way. I will overcome them, or I will destroy their source. For her.

“Beautiful,” I say and even I hear the awe in my voice.

She smiles and her face colors a rosy pink like the first rays of Estejan, the primary sun, dawning over the horizon. She drops her emerald eyes from mine and shakes her head, but her lush lips form a tentative smile.

“Thank you,” she says, then looks back into my eyes as she reaches behind herself.

Suddenly her expression changes to shock. In that instant, I am acutely aware that in my obsession with my female, I was not aware of our environment.

“No!” she screams.

The world spins.

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LISA

*B*ahr appears behind the new Zmaj from out of nowhere. The shaft of his lochaber swings at the base of the newcomer's neck.

"No!" I scream, trying to intercept the blow, which part of me knows is a terrible idea but I still can't let this happen.

The crack of the thick wooden haft echoes around the clearing like the shattering of my heart. The Zmaj, I don't know his name, but I know he is mine, is thrown forward. I'm crushed beneath him, which in any other circumstance would be one of the hottest and sexiest things ever. But now my body is suffering from the whiplash of going from hot and horny to scared and angry.

Adrenaline dumps into my system, my nerves are alive and jangling, but my lower belly is tight, my pussy soaking wet, and my nipples are uncomfortably hard and pressing against my chest bindings. And now it's hard to breathe because the Zmaj, who I was this close to fucking, has dropped onto me.

Seconds become small eternities. A thousand thoughts and ideas flash through my head at the speed of light. A confusing hodge-podge of possibilities, actions I might take next, things I might say, none of them working to fix this mess.

He opens his eyes. Crimson, burning with a fiery rage the likes of which I've never seen. He takes only a single moment to brush his thumb along my cheek before he explodes off me.

He slams into Bahr and the two of them tumble to the ground in a tangle of limbs, wings, and tails. They roll over and over

as they pummel one another with their fists. Instinctively as much as from any conscious thought, I roll clear of the fight.

Once I'm safe I stand up. Rakstan is moving with the two rolling on the ground, looking for an opportunity to help. His lochaber is held in two hands and it's clear that the instant he has an opening, he's going to take out the new Zmaj.

"No," I call out, running to Rakstan. I grab his arm and jerk, which accomplishes absolutely nothing because he's like a massive boulder. "No. Stop. Please!"

He spares me a glance but then sees an opening and raises his lochaber. As he starts the swing down that will probably either kill or seriously injure the newcomer, I do the only thing that comes to mind to stop him. I slap his face.

"Ouch," I yelp, my hand stinging.

Rakstan turns and looks at me in shock. I am sure I didn't hurt him, part of me is surprised he noticed it at all, but he frowns and his brow furrows.

"Why?" he asks, touching his cheek.

"He's friendly," I say. "Stop this."

Bahr and the other are growling and fighting the entire time. Neither of them are able to get an advantage. Rakstan and I move back as they roll towards us. He shakes his head as he watches them, then looks at me.

"How do you know?" Rakstan asks.

"He is mine," I say.

What a strange thing to say. I literally met this guy what, a couple minutes ago? But strange, weird, or even stupid, I don't care. I know the truth because I feel it in my soul.

This newcomer, name as of yet unknown, and I are meant for each other. There you go I've said it. Well thought it at least.

Rakstan nods understanding and follows that with the most important of things, action. He slides the lochaber back into its holder on his back. He puts his arm out and pushes me gently back as the two on the ground roll closer again. His head tilts

to one side, he purses his lips, then he moves as quickly as a snake.

He grabs the newcomer's protruding arm as he swings to hit Bahr again, hooking it at the elbow and pulling back. The newcomer jerks with the motion and rolls partly away from his opponent. Bahr lands a stomach-churning blow on the newcomer's midsection. It hits with a dull thud that makes me hurt just hearing it.

The newcomer grunts and strains to break free of Rakstan, but his positioning isn't going to allow it. He shifts tactics and rolls into Rakstan, slamming into the other Zmaj's legs, knocking him to the ground.

Rakstan hits face first with an oomph. Bahr leaps to his feet as the newcomer continues his roll, but he's too slow to stop the new Zmaj who bounces up next to me. Objectively, all the stress and current problems aside, it's an incredible display of skill and awareness.

One of his arms wraps around my waist and he lifts me off my feet as he backs away, keeping his free arm in front, moving back and forth defensively.

I press my head into my mate's neck and he growls, not taking his eyes off the other two.

"What?" Bahr asks.

"She is his treasure," Rakstan shrugs.

He says it so nonchalantly like this is the most normal, expected thing in the world. And in testament to that being the case, Bahr grunts, shaking his head.

"Oh," he says.

They both drop their defensives postures and, in a mirroring of one another, they cross their arms over their chests, one foot forward, and wait with an air of impatience. My treasure backs further away, breathing heavily and grunting.

I twist inward and get my legs around his waist so I'm riding on his hip. I'm acutely aware of the pressure of his hip bone

pressing directly onto my clit which is the most delicious and unnecessary distraction possible in the moment.

“It’s okay,” I murmur, but I’m not getting through to him.

He doesn’t relax but continues to back away, still primally grunting like an illiterate barbarian. We’ve backed into the jungle proper, out of the clearing, and this isn’t where I want to go. I have to get him to stop. I know the Zmaj struggle with some primal urge they call the bijass, but I don’t really understand it. But I’m sure that’s what I’m dealing with.

Primal urges. Fight or flight. Eat, sleep, and fuck. Right. That gives me an idea.

I grab him by his horns and twist with all my strength, forcing him to turn his head towards me then I kiss him. As I claim his lips, I reach down with my hand, slip under the hem of his pants, and grab his cock.

He stiffens, tightening his grip until it’s almost painfully tight, then his tongue is greeting mine and his huge cock is throbbing in my hand. His muscles relax, and as I watch his eyes, the cloud of rage fades.

Only then do I break the kiss but keep my grip on his cock.

“Hi,” I say. “I’m Lisa.”

“Lisa,” he growls, and oh my god I’m going to come just from the rumbling sound, but I barely keep myself under control. “My treasure.”

“Mine,” I agree, cupping his face with my hand that isn’t busy softly stroking his cock.



I stiffen and growl at Rakstan's approach, turning so that Lisa is protected behind me. She removes her hand from my cock, which is aching and throbbing. I miss her touch already.

"Mine."

"Of course, brother," Rakstan says.

"Brother? You left."

Bahr walks up alongside us.

"As did you," I say accusatorily.

"Yes," Bahr says. He makes a nodding motion of his head towards Lisa. "And you know why. Now."

I turn my head so that I can see her without taking my eyes off the two males. The instant her face comes into my vision, there is no doubt he is right.

"You have yours?" I ask.

Bahr nods.

"We both do," Rasktan says. "We could not stay. The Eye's plan is wrong."

"Yes," I agree.

"Why are you alone?" Bahr asks, looking around the jungle.

"No one patrols alone."

"I am being punished," I say. "Jkaran wants to get me killed, so he sent me on my own."

“And the others allowed this?” Rakstan asks, his eyes widening with surprise.

I frown. “Are you blind? Do they have a choice?”

“We always have a choice,” Bahr says. “That is what Kirmanda has tried to fool us out of believing, but we do. Our oaths are to Tajss, not to him.”

“Well said,” I agree. Lisa clears her throat. “My treasure?”

“Yeah, hi, still here,” she says with a shake of her head. The fiery curls of her hair bounce around her face. “Thought maybe I was being forgotten.”

“Never,” I growl.

“Good,” she says, then looks at the other two. She unlocks her legs from my waist and I lower her to the ground. “Does this change our plan?”

Rakstan and Bahr look at each other, then shake their heads.

“No,” they say in almost unison.

“Plan? What plan?” I ask.

“We have to stop the Eye,” Bahr says.

“You were going to attack the compound?” When they nod, I scoff. “The two of you? With a human female? Has life in the wild twisted your brains to madness? You cannot possibly win.”

“Not attack,” Rakstan says. “Not directly.”

“Then what?”

“Infiltrate,” Bahr says. “We have already been sowing discontent. Now is the time to reap.”

“Sowing discontent what do you—” I cut myself off when it comes clear. The human females. Bahr’s earlier return.

“You understand?” Rakstan asks, squeezing my shoulder.

“Madness,” I say.

“No,” Bahr says. “The Eye is madness. We know what he has been doing. More than you probably do. He must be stopped.”

“What do you mean? The young ones?”

Bahr seems surprised at my guess and I smile.

“He’s smart,” Lisa says, sliding her arm around my waist. Her warmth radiates into my scales, anchoring me in the moment.

“There is no time for long discussions,” I say. “How do I help?”

The four of us huddle together and they share their plan, but the entire time I listen to them, my eyes are on Lisa. Studying her. Feeling her. Mine. I do this for her. Everything is for her.

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LISA

*S*trip over a root and fly forward. I raise my bound arms to protect my head as I yelp in surprise and fear. Before I hit, I jerk to a stop. When I open my eyes, I'm staring at the ground a couple of inches away before being lifted up and set back on my feet.

"Be careful," Komik whispers. The ground is very treacherous."

He has a tight grip on the hem of my pants, holding me like I weigh nothing in one hand. Which is nice and impressive, but I'm acutely aware of his cool fingers that rest on my ass. I close my eyes and try not to let the touch completely distract me. It's ridiculous because we've only just met and I haven't stopped having thoughts of him since.

Dirty thoughts. Fantasies. Desires. Deep, thirsty, needy desires.

"Right," I whisper too.

We don't know if anyone is close enough to hear us. We are, he says, close to the compound. There will be other patrols and guards and such.

His hand lingers on my ass for a little too long. He presses forward and his rock hard cock pushes into my ass, parting my cheeks through the cloth of our pants.

I bite my lip, trying to hold in a groan. The distractions are welcome. Anything is better than thinking about what we're

doing. Infiltrating the Order compound. One final attempt to stop them. Forever.

I resume walking, trying to watch my step the best I can, but it's dark and next to impossible. I stumble a few more times but Komik always catches and steadies me. I'm not tripping on purpose. Or I don't think I am. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe I am.

"Are you sure this will work?" I whisper.

"This is not my plan," he says.

"No, but you're on the inside. You said the place was about ready."

"All but the young ones," he says. "The tensions are high. I think it will."

"I hope so."

"If not, I will protect you. No male will touch or harm you. Nothing ever will. I will not allow it, you are mine."

My knees shake when he says mine. It's a claim. A marking of his territory. When Komik says it, it's loving, protecting, nurturing, and hot. Really hot and sexy and everything I never knew I needed or wanted.

"Good," I say, forcing a lump out of my throat. "Because you're mine, too."

"Always."

There are no more words necessary. We walk in silence.

"They are coming," he says at last.

I don't know what he noticed that made him say it, but I trust him. I don't hear or see anything, but his senses are much sharper than mine. It isn't long before two Zmaj emerge from the jungle around us as if they were shadowy apparitions formed out of the darkness itself.

"T'kali, Pralik," Komik says.

His voice drips with disdain when he says the second name. That one, Pralik, is smaller than either Komik or T'kali.

There's something about Pralik that makes my skin crawl. A creepy untrustworthiness that I've never felt with any other Zmaj. He's definitely a strange one.

"What is this?" Pralik asks, reaching for me.

"No," Komik barks and knocks his arm down with a single swift motion. "You do not touch."

Too aggressive. I'm supposed to be a captive, infiltrating, but Komik is ready to throw down. He's leaning in aggressively and his voice is low and dangerous.

"You mean ours," Pralik says, a twisted grin on his face. "I like this one. I will put my lot in for her first."

"You will—"

Knowing I have to do something to stop this before it goes off the rails completely, I do the only thing I can think of. I turn and run.

The Zmaj shout and it sounds like they're stumbling over each other to give chase. I dodge around a tree and make my break into the jungle. My arms are bound by ropes up to my elbows. I hold them up and throw them side to side to keep my balance.

I'm not trying to escape. That would ruin the entire plan. All I need to do is give Komik a chance to get himself under control. Before we parted, Bahr warned me how hard this would be for Komik.

There was no accounting in our original plan for me finding a Zmaj mate. I'm the only girl left without one and no one considered that fate would throw the two of us together at the worst possible time. None of the girls' mates are with them, that was a key part of the plan. They Zmaj had to put their faith in the others going with their mates to protect them, which wasn't an easy thing for any of them to come to terms with.

"Catch her!" someone yells. I only know it's not Komik.

One of my feet slips. Sliding forward, I fall onto my side and come to a stop underneath a massive fern-like bush.

“Where is she?” someone yells, followed by the sounds of stomping feet.

My heart is racing. I’m struggling to not breathe too loudly. I close my eyes and try to force myself to relax. Moments pass and nothing happens. I open my eyes and stare at the branches over my face. An electric blue bug the size of my finger climbs its way along the stem. It has two antenna that it feels its way along with. Watching this creature live its best life is calming.

I don’t think I’ve been lying here long when I become aware of Komik. I don’t hear him. Don’t think I smell him or anything like that, I just know he’s there. Close. Moving slowly, not trusting this new awareness, I twist and roll myself over so I can look out past the branches of the fern.

Crimson eyes burn into mine and then Komik smiles. He is crouched just past the branches of the fern, looking directly at me. He reaches out his hand and I crawl forward until I can take it. He helps me to my feet.

“Sorry,” I whisper. “You were losing it.”

“Yes,” he says. The hard abs of his stomach look like they spasm as they tighten, and his tail slaps the ground loudly. “I am sorry. I will do better.”

I touch his face then quickly drop my hands down. “Do not be sorry,” I say. “I love you.”

He opens his mouth then jerks his head up and snaps his mouth shut.

“What was that?” T’kali asks walking up to the two of us.

The approaching Zmaj looks between Komik and I with arms crossed over his chest. He knows. There’s no doubt of it in my mind.

T’kali’s eyes are a soft yellow color, warm and kind. He seems welcoming rather than scary. Looking between the two, I can tell his love for Komik. These men are brothers in a way that goes far beyond any title of the Order.

“I captured—” Komik says but T’kali gives him a look that stops the lie before he finishes it.

T’kali looks quickly around then moves in close. “No time. Plan?” he asks.

“Just go along with what I do,” Komik says and T’kali nods.

T’kali takes my arm and tugs me into motion. The three of us move through the jungle without further conversation. Butterflies with wings of ice flutter in my stomach and my mouth is dry but I keep my focus and walk. We only go a few steps before the other Zmaj emerges out of the gloom.

“You caught her,” Pralik says when he sees us.

“Yes,” T’kali says.

Pralik looks me up and down with an eagerness that reminds me of a teenage boy. I know that no female Zmaj survived for long after the Devastation. I also know that these younger Zmaj are supposed to have been born after that event, so I am probably one of the first females of any species he’s seen in his life.

Zmaj are long lived. I don’t know how that affects their maturity in comparison to a human. All of which kinda explains why he’s acting like a horny teenager. He likely wouldn’t know what to do with a woman if he had one, but he vibrates and stares in that awkward way. His body telling him this is what he wants and needs.

“She is pretty,” he says, and the hoarseness of his voice is further proof of my theory.

Pralik hesitantly reaches a hand towards me but T’kali pushes it aside. “The Eye wants them unharmed,” he says.

“Yes,” Pralik nods, but his eyes never leave me.

Not my eyes, but my chest and my hips. He never once meets my gaze or looks at me like I’m anything more than an object of fascination.

“Go, take point,” Komik barks.



Pralik jumps then nods. I feel him tearing his eyes off me like they were velcroed. Komik and I look at each other. I give him a reassuring nod to let him know that I'm okay. It doesn't assuage the anger and guilt on his face, but it's all I have to give my mate as we walk into the devil's den. Literally.

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LISA

This must be the same cell Belle, Asia and Charlie were in. It fits the description and besides, how many cells can they have?

I sit on the stone floor and lean my back against the wall. Tilting my head back, I close my eyes and breathe. Now it's a waiting game. Komik has his part to play as do I. I'm scared, but that's to be expected. This is dangerous and there are a lot of unknowns. Fear is kept at bay by not letting my thoughts remain idle.

I pass what must be hours thinking about Komik, there's no way to measure the passage of time. I push my memory to recall every detail of him. Focusing on all the little things even though we've only just met. It's an exercise to pull so much out of vague memories, but it keeps me from being crushed by the terror of what might happen.

The problem with this exercise is that it not only pushes aside the fear, but it makes me horny. My pussy aches with a need to be filled. If I weren't sure I'm being monitored, I'd get myself off, but I can't imagine that someone isn't watching. Masturbating in here, under some watchful eye, would definitely send the wrong message. I'm not interested in being breeding material, thank you very much.

I shift from memory to imagining. Dreaming of a future with the man who rocked my universe by walking out of a deadly jungle and looking at me. We're going to get off this continent and go somewhere far from the Order. A safe place where we aren't being hunted.

A new home. Where we can create our future. And kids.

Nadiya fills my thoughts, Riley and Angota's child. The fact that our two completely different species are compatible and able to breed, that's something isn't it? What are the odds? Of all the life that existed on Earth, no species could crossbreed with a species that wasn't in some way already related, genetically speaking.

How can it be that after three generations, almost four, of traveling at almost the speed of light to some mathematically enormous distance from Earth, we happen to crash on a planet with a fuckable alien-dragon-man species? Impossible. The odds must be billions to one, or even trillions. Insane, yet, I helped deliver Nadiya.

The gestation period was much longer than normal for a human, had to be closer to twelve months. And the end of the pregnancy was rough on Riley. None of that though changes the truth. Our species are compatible.

And that's what the Eye somehow knew. Planned for. Worked with someone on our ship, somehow, to make happen. There are so many incredible odds involved that it can't be simple chance. Chance would never have brought all these events into perfect order like this.

Someone is coming.

I hear the footsteps first, then the sound of the guards at the end of the hall standing to attention. I consider not rising. Just sit here and make whoever it is get a crick in their neck looking down. Consider it, then discard the idea. It's silly and petty and there's absolutely nothing to be gained by being antagonistic.

A Zmaj I don't know comes into view of my cell door. He's wearing shimmering, colorful robes that flow around his ankles. Long strips of different colored cloths are cut and sewn together so it looks like an explosive rainbow of changing colors with every motion of his body.

The scales on his hands, face, and the tip of his tail, are the duller colors of any Zmaj I've ever seen. He's also small for a

Zmaj. Smaller than the two guards who stand aggressively behind him.

I stand in the middle of the cell and wait. I don't know who he is, but I have a guess. I don't think anyone else would be traveling with two personal guards. The Eye studies me in silence, tilting his head and rubbing his chin like I'm some exhibit in a zoo.

"Hello," he says at long last.

"Hello," I return, then wait.

Neither of us speaks again for a long time. I'm not sure what he's waiting for or thinking but it makes me uncomfortable. My skin itches and it's taking all my willpower not to give in to the desire to scratch myself everywhere.

"Bring her," he says, turning and walking down the hall.

My stomach drops and cold sweat beads on my chest. I shake my head, stepping back from the door. The two guards smile and they also have those dark, shifty eyes. I've heard stories of who these two must be. That they delight in pain and hurting people. One of them unlocks the door.

As the lock releases, he pulls it aside to let his partner in. I open my mouth to scream.

“His cannot continue,” I say and T’kali nods.

“What do you propose?”

I pace my sleeping quarters. T’kali sits on the edge of my bed, leaning forward and resting his arms on his legs. He has his head bowed and his tail is slowly twitching. He’s thinking but needs a plan. As do I.

“We confront the Eye,” I say.

“How? We cannot control who will do what. It would be madness.”

“It will push things ahead.”

“At what price?”

The dragon is rumbling and then the bijass surges. Red rage fills my thoughts and I punch the stone wall. The pain is enough to cut through the fog and returns me to my senses. My knuckles are imprinted in the stone as is the red of my blood.

“The price does not matter,” I answer. I am in control, not shouting, and speaking softly so any others will not hear. “My treasure is all that matters. I must protect her and by virtue of her, the other human females. This plan is wrong.”

T’kali stands up and puts his hand on my shoulder, turning me to face him. “I am here,” he says. “I am with you.”

“Tajss provides.”

“Yes, brother,” he says. “We must open our eyes to see what it is providing now.”

He is right and because of this I shut my mouth and empty my mind. The Order trained us in mental exercises to control our thoughts. To empty our heads and instead of trying to force conclusions or answers, to observe and see.

Seeing is the first step in knowing. If you see, truly see what is before you, then answers are there. Most do not see them because they are too engaged with the noise in their own heads. This is what preceded the fall of Tajss. Our once bustling planet full of billions of lives. All of them slaves in a gilded cage, their chains held by a Galactic Empire that only cared about epis.

“We have allies,” I say.

“Yes, we do,” T’kali agrees. “But how many? Is it enough?”

I scratch the back of my neck then sit on the edge of the bed. For all my control and the exercises to control my thoughts, there is one thing that is my downfall. One thing that creeps into my thoughts and interrupts the conscious emptiness I am striving to achieve.

Lisa.

Her face, her body, the smell of her. The feel of her skin. The way she makes my hearts beat faster. Most of all the way she makes me feel complete. Filling a need I did not know I had. A loneliness that was masked by circumstance.

“I do not want a war,” I whisper. “Kirmanda is wrong, but a war does not serve Tajss.”

“How do we avoid one?”

I think on the question, but no easy answers come to mind.

“Confront Kirmanda in private,” I say at last. “You gather those we know who are discontented. I will try to convince the Eye that this plan is wrong. The humans and defectors are trying to leave the continent. Those who wish to will go with them.”

“You know this is not going to work.”

I look over my shoulder at him. “It must. It is the only way to avoid conflict.”

The thick iron shackles are cold on my wrists. They're so heavy it's an effort to even lift my arms, much less do anything excitable like attack the Eye. Which is probably the point.

I fought the guards but it was pointless. They quickly overcame my efforts, put the shackles on me, then dragged me down the hall and into this hidden room. The one that the other girls told me about with tubes on the walls and workstations. The cloning room.

I don't know why I'm here, but I know this place isn't common knowledge. I don't know if Komik even knows where it is. My one hope is the other guard who stood at the end of the hall. The look of horror and disbelief on his face screamed his disagreement with the way I was being treated. Maybe he knows Komik. Maybe he'll tell him. Maybe, just maybe, I'm not alone with this very terrifying Zmaj amid what looks like a mad scientist's laboratory.

The Eye waves a hand and the two guards leave. A tremble traces its way down my spine making me shudder. The chains connecting my wrists rattle loudly.

"You have nothing to fear," the Eye says.

He has his back to me, standing at a workstation and doing something with the crystals that serve as a keyboard. There's a screen with scrolling information on the wall at head level and he's watching it.

"Why am I here?"



“To help you understand,” he says. “Understanding is vitally important, I find. Do you agree?”

“Understanding what?”

“Everything. The more we understand, the wiser we are. Understanding comes from observation. Seeing the obvious that is right in front of us is the most important,” he says talking to the wall while he works.

“Nice. Inspirational speech, just the thing. Can I go now? Or do you still plan to use me and my friends for your breeding program?”

He spins around. His tail rises stiffly behind his head, his wings open part way and his hands ball into fists as he hunches. “It is not a breeding program!” His fists slam onto a table. Containers, notes, and machines jump and rattle. I stumble blindly back. I didn’t expect this reaction and I don’t want it.

Fear and retreat are instinctive. I do it, but then anger blossoms and rages into a bonfire that consumes fear. We know what his plan is. No matter how he tries to gussy it up in a pretty package it’s the same evil. No matter how many nice words he wraps it in.

Shaking with rage, my hands curl into fists. I am not going down without a fight. Everything I’ve feared for the past year is right here. I stride forward and meet his anger with my own.

“No? Then what do you call it? You want us to be baby making machines for your minions so you can what? Repopulate an entire world with a dozen women?”

He closes his wings and drops his tail. The tension leaves his body, and he shakes his head.

“I apologize,” he says and at least sound sincere. “I should not have lost my temper. It has been a trying time. You humans are... recalcitrant.”

“Yeah, sorry, not sorry. We don’t take kindly to being used.”

“My entire race has been used for ages,” he says. “Before the Devastation, we were slaves.”

“Not that it matters, but what does that mean?”

“Our chains were pretty, the cages gilded, but we were no less slaves. Tajss was being violated, her resources stolen and over farmed. She was dying and would become little more than a dead rock.”

“That doesn’t change what you’re now trying to do to my people. How is your plan for us any different than what was done to yours?”

“We had no choice,” he says. “I want your willingness. I want you to see that this is the way forward.”

“Why? Why should we even consider this? It goes against everything we believe. What about love? What about... fate?”

“Love,” he snorts, his face twisting not in anger but in grief. His voice is tight like he’s choking on the words. “A construct. A lie to trap you. The only true love is between a parent and their child. And that has been stolen, from the Zmaj, from me.”

He pounds his chest with a closed fist. His mouth works soundlessly, his eyes narrow, pulling his horns down. I swear if a Zmaj could cry, tears would be streaming down his face. I’m not immune to what I see or a cold-hearted bitch who or doesn’t care when someone is in pain.

“Who hurt you?” I ask.

He stares like he forgot I was there. His face contorts then becomes a smooth mask. He shakes his head. “The history of Tajss is not pleasant,” he says. He raises his hand then drops them to his side. “It does not matter. What does matter is that I need your cooperation.”

I hesitate for an instant, fear telling me what I’m about to do is a stupid idea. I’m not sure it’s bravery that pushes me forward because it might actually be stupidity itself.

I walk closer. “You want my cooperation? Then be honest. What is all of this?”

I swing my arm around to encompass the lab of horrors.

He chuckles, shaking his head.

“Some success, some failures,” he says. “What matters is you. I need females. Willing females who understand.”

“Show me,” I say.

There’s nothing in the entire universe he could say that’s going to make me okay with becoming a breeding machine but that’s not the point. Part of my mission is to gather information. Ammunition to use in the coming revolution.

The men who’ve joined us most recently say this place is ready to explode. That we only need a spark. That spark is information. The right information and, better still, proof of it. Proof of the Eye’s plan and how wrong it is.

*Keep him talking, Lisa. That’s your job right now.*

“Scientist tried experiments,” he says, motioning at the tubes on the wall and the half-formed monstrosities floating in liquid. “This started before the Devastation. Genetic altering, combining sequences, grafting parts to Zmaj to make better warriors. Clones that they could use in their wars.

The galaxy was always at war. Some race would try to claim too much, or someone would cross an imaginary line. And at the center of it all was Tajss. The only place with epis.”

“What is epis?”

“A unique plant, the breath of life from Tajss itself,” he says. “Here, on this continent, you do not need it. Everywhere else on Tajss, your kind struggles to survive the heat and environment. Epis adjusts your body. That is only one aspect of it though. It extends life and that was the key. I am sure you can imagine what people would do to extend their lives.”

“I’m familiar with the history of my own planet,” I say. “So yeah, I can figure that out.”

“Some experiments worked, some did not,” he says, walking over to stand in front of a tube.

I move closer so I can see what he’s looking at. Inside the tube a Zmaj floats. I don’t know if it’s dead or asleep, but it’s not moving. The liquid around it is murky and the glass distorts the sight, but something else is odd. I wipe the tube with my

sleeve then I see it. The creature inside has an extra set of arms. Angry, swollen scars edge the point where the arms were grafted to him. I can't imagine how much that must have hurt.

"What kind of sick mind does this?" I ask in horror.

"Our former masters," he says. "Working in secret of course. They hid behind the military. Top secret government funded experiments. When I discovered it, I brought the data to the attention of the former Eye."

"How did that go?" I ask, feeling strange making such casual conversation with the leader of the enemy Order.

"He did not see the value in it, only the unnaturalness. The horror of it." The Eye puts his hand on the tube, resting his fingers against it before walking to the next tube. This one I can see into clearly. It's a baby Zmaj. "The horrific parts of the information I discarded," he says. "But the base of their work, that I kept. My children."

The baby floats in a green liquid, curled in on itself like its sleeping. I'm not sure if its alive or not, but then its small wings flutter and I jump. It hits me what he's saying like a punch to the face.

"Your children?" I ask. I'm in shock. There's a massive pressure on my chest making it impossible to take a full breath. "Cloning?" I gasp. "You can't be, you mean, the young ones, the new people..."

He glances over his shoulder, studying my face.

"Bahr did not inform you? I assumed he figured that out," the Eye says. "Yes. My children. The former Eye did not see the value, not like I do. I know, they are not perfect. Science cannot take the place of Tajss' gentle, guiding hand. But until your ship came into communications range, it was my only hope."

My stomach churns hard and fast. Bile creeps up my throat. The baby floating in its unnatural womb stretches then resumes its curled position. It's alive, but not. A wave of nausea hits and its all I can do to keep from being sick. I

swallow that down, stepping away from the tube that's making my skin crawl.

*Focus on something else. The ship. He mentioned our ship.*

"How?" I ask, shaking my head. "How did you know about our ship?"

The look on his face is pitying. He shakes his head with a rueful smile then sighs. "The Order is everywhere," he says. "In that, Tajss provides. Or Riley."

"Riley?" I ask, my throat dry. "What did Riley do?"

"I need you," he says, all hints of humor disappearing. "I prefer willing."

"And if not?" I ask, but even as I ask, I realize the implied threat is clear.

I step back until my back comes up against the wall. He doesn't move but his eyes are cold and hard.

"Tajss does provide," he says, taking one step forward. "This is the way. Willing. Or not."

The door slides open on some silent command and the guards reenter the chamber. Desperate, I look for any escape but there's nothing. They stalk towards me and I scream.

“*B*rother, I need an audience with the Eye.”

“He is not available,” Rhuklyv replies.

“Where is he?”

Rhuklyv looks carefully around before leaning in close. “Is it true?” he whispers.

“Is what true?”

“You found the defectors? The humans?”

My stomach tightens. How far has this rumor spread? Is this from T’kali? Is this a trap? I choose my words carefully.

“Defectors?” I ask, but I let my voice quiver to show a hint of doubt.

“Brother, I am no newcomer,” he says in reassurance, but it is not enough for me to trust him. He seems to read this in my face. “The Eye is wrong.”

An Order brother would never say such if they were still loyal. I nod. “What would you know, brother?”

He swallows hard as his tail scrapes the ground, shifting nervously. He furtively looks around again. “I do not know,” he admits. “But this is not the Order I gave my oaths too. These females...” He trails off and I wait for him to finish the thought. “They are not willing. That is not the way it was supposed to be.”

I clasp his shoulder in solidarity. It eases his nervousness, and he meets my eyes levelly for the first time.

“You are right,” I say.

Before I say more, running steps echo off the stone walls. We quickly step apart right before Cekpet rounds the corner. He is moving so fast his feet slip, causing him to slide and hit the wall as he turns. He bounces off, sees Rukhlyv and I, runs to us then stops. He stares at Rukhlyv breathing heavily.

“He is a true brother,” I say.

Cekpet studies Rhukhlyv for a moment longer then nods. “They Eye took her,” he says, still heaving.

“Where!” I yell, my voice echoing off the walls.

“No one knows, it must be a secret area,” he answers.

“Took who?” Rhukylv asks.

“My treasure,” I growl, hands balling into fists, wings opening and tail rising. “Show me what you know.”

Cekpet does not hesitate. He turns and runs, and I follow. The dragon is roaring, filling my head with the smoke of the bijass, making my hearts beat faster and my muscles sing with the need to commit violence.

The Eye has Lisa. My treasure. No one else may touch her. She is mine. I am going to destroy the Eye. All the plans to avoid violence, to find a peaceful resolution, burn away in the fire of the dragon’s breath.

My brothers go about their duties, oblivious as usual. As I was, before she opened my eyes. Fooled by the lies of the Eye. I dodge some and push others out of my way. Their cries of outrage and inquiries of why are drowned out by the rage of the dragon.

Cekpet leads the way. We run through the dining hall which is filled with a dinner shift. Dozens or more are eating, and all look up as we burst into the room. The door slams against the wall, raising a cry, but Cekpet ignores them as do I.

The wide-open space between the tables is perfect for gaining speed and we do, rushing the opposite door, but as we get closer, diners rise.

“What is it?” “What is happening?” “Why are you running?”  
“Is there an attack?”

Their questions are meaningless distractions. I do not have time or attention for them, but they will not be left unanswered. They abandon their meals and follow. Let them come, I will fight any of them that I must to protect her.

As we approach the containment area, the guard rises. I know him too, he is an older brother. One of the first Oathtakers, an original member of the Order. He sees our approach and raises his empty hands.

“Prysyah, do not stop us,” Cekpet barks.

“Follow me,” he says, instead of arguing.

Our growing mob pushes forward as Prysyah runs down the hall of the cells. He stops at the dead end.

“What is this?” I ask, my voice deep and growling with rage.

He does not answer but runs his hands over the wall until something clicks and a passage opens. He steps to the side and motions with an arm.

“Thank you, brother,” I say with a depth of gratitude that there are no words to express.

Cekpet keeps the lead only because the revealed passage is not wide enough for two of us, yet I am on his tail as we run. Then there is a scream. Not just a scream. Her scream. The cold that rushes through my veins does nothing to cool the rage.

I roar and grab Cekpet by the shoulder, forcing my way past. My wings and arm scrape on the rough stone walls but nothing matters except getting to Lisa. We turn a corner and there is an open door. Her screams come through it.

“Lisa!” I roar as I burst into the room.

Jkaran and Zirthoan stand in the center of the room on either side of a medical table. Bound to the table with wide leather straps is Lisa. She is fighting against the restraints and screaming. Jkaran glances over his shoulder and sees me. He smiles.



Zirhoan is on the far side holding something sharp that glints in the overhead light. He stabs it into Lisa and the bijass takes over. I charge Jkaran.

I strain against the broad leather straps but it's no more use than fighting the hulking Zmaj warriors who put me here. These are designed to hold a Zmaj and my mere human strength is nowhere near enough.

"Let me go," I scream.

"I said willing," the Eye says, "or not. You and yours will participate."

"I'm not going to be a breeding machine."

The two guards chuckle in a way that makes my skin crawl. Their eyes are cold, uncaring, indifferent. Despite the futility, I fight. I will not die like a helpless victim. The Eye stands behind the one on my left, watching and directing.

"But no, you will not be a breeding *machine* as you say," the Eye continues.

"We would never do something so crass," a new voice says.

I turn my head and strain my neck to see this newcomer. The instant I do I wish I hadn't. I recognize the face only from commercial vids back on the ship.

When I first see him, I'm sure I must be hallucinating, but he walks up to stand next to the Eye with nary a shimmer. When the Eye nods to acknowledge his arrival, any thoughts of him not being real are banished.

"You?" I ask.

“Yes, me,” Gaius Baltar says. “I see you know me. I do not, of course, know you in particular. Do not think you were so special as to be chosen for this project. Luck is all it is. You were lucky when others were not.”

“What the actual fuck are you on about?”

“Creating a future,” Gaius says with a broad smile. “This is exactly what I was elected to do.”

“Kill millions?” I scream, straining to break free. “You caused this?”

“This?” he asks, arching an eyebrow. “Oh, you mean the wreck of the ship. No, not exactly. That wasn’t the original plan, but plans change, and we make the best of them.”

“You bastard,” I hiss.

“Possibly.”

“This is fruitless. Zirthoan, gather the samples I need,” the Eye orders.

The Zmaj closest to him picks up a stick that’s as thick as my pinky. The tip of it is covered in a pink looking substance. Zirthoan grabs my jaw. His grip is like steel, holding my face in a vise. He forces my head back so that I’m staring up into the bright white light on the ceiling.

I clench my jaw and grit my teeth. He tightens his grip and I struggle to keep my mouth shut but there seems to be no limit to the strength in his hands. He increases the pressure until I can’t take it and I give in, opening my mouth.

He shoves the pink end of the stick into my mouth and swabs it around. It tastes salty but leaves my mouth dry with a hint of mint. He pulls the swab out and lets go of my jaw.

“What is this? What are you doing?”

I’m trying not to panic, but I’m not able to hold fear fully at bay. My voice cracks and screeches. Zirthoan slides the stick into a tube then puts a lid on it which he then twists tightly closed. I know what this is, but panic is making it hard to have a single train of thought. And I don’t want to know. I look past

the looming men around me to the tubes on the wall. Two of them have occupants but there are several empty ones.

“Continue, Zirthoan,” the Eye orders. “Our time may be limited. The samples must be preserved.”

Zirthoan nods and moves back to my side. He lifts a syringe off the table. As he raises it, the light glints off the sharp needle end which right now looks massive. Too massive for my frail human arm. A fresh scream rips free, tearing at my throat as it escapes.

The door to the room hits the wall with a resounding bang that echoes around the small space. Everyone’s attention jerks to it.

“Lisa!” Komik roars my name and for the first-time hope blooms in my heart.

As I turn my head to see my mate, I hear him roar again and then he’s racing across the room, head down, wings open and fists before him.

“Zirthoan, the sample,” the Eye orders.

There’s no panic in his voice. Looking at him, he is calm and collected, looking like this is all part of the plan. In my peripheral vision, Zirthoan nods and the needle dive bombs towards my arm. I scream before it makes contact.

When the needle hits, its driven into my flesh and the pain is unbelievable. It takes a moment before I realize the screeching sound echoing through the room is me.

The look of excitement and delight on Zirthoan’s face makes me ill. My blood bubbles into the syringe as he pulls back on the plunger. Only when it’s full of my crimson life does he pull it free without bothering to cover the puncture wound.

He holds the syringe up to the light and inspects it then, apparently satisfied, he nods and turns to the Eye who takes it. The Eye looks past the table at the sounds of the fighting. I look back and see that Komik is not alone. Dozens of Zmaj have poured into the room.

The table I’m on is a dividing line. On my right are the dozens of newcomers, on my left is the Eye, Zirthoan, and Gaius. The

Eye does not seem concerned in the least.

“Brothers,” the Eye says, and through skill or some trick his voice is booming. Loud enough it feels like it reverberates in my bones. “Jkaran, enough. Do not fight your brother.”

I look to Komik and Jkaran who are tangled in a mix of limbs and blurring motion. Jkaran leaps back, landing free of the entanglement. He immediately stops fighting but Komik isn't going to be swayed so easily. He rushes forward, but several pairs of hands grab him and hold him back. He roars, struggling to break free, then T'kali whispers in his ear and he calms.

Komik unclenches his fists and shrugs free of the gripping hands. He steps forward and the group behind him lets him in an act of silent accord. Komik walks to my side, glancing down and in his crimson eyes I see roiling anger.

He undoes my bindings quickly. Blood rushes back into my limbs leaving them tingling. Before I can regain full control, he scoops me into his arms and steps back, cradling me. I rest my head on his chest, letting the thundering beats of his dual hearts reassure me. I hook an arm around his neck as soon as I'm able, then wait to see what's going to happen next.

“This is over,” Komik says.

“No, Komik,” the Eye says. “We all serve the will of Tajss. This is far from over.”

“We will not capture and share the human females,” Komik snaps and the sounds of agreement that rise from those assembled with him fill the space.

“No,” the Eye agrees. “You will not.”

“That was your plan!” Komik yells.

“Yes,” the Eye says, matter-of-factly without any attempt to deny it. He shrugs like it's an inconsequential thing. “Plans change.”

“What is this place?” T'kali asks.

“T'kali,” the Eye sighs. “Practice observance. You are better trained than that. Do not deny what you see in favor of some

preconceived notion of what is. Have you abandoned all the Order has taught you?”

T’kali growls and takes a step forward but some of the others stop him.

“Clones,” T’kali says, his voice so deep it rumbles.

“Yes,” the Eye says.

The room erupts into an explosion of voices. Gasps, disagreements, and cries of dismay echo from the stone walls. Komik stands stoically at the front of it. His only response is to tighten his grip on me.

“Give me what you stole,” he says.

“I have stolen nothing,” the Eye says.

“This is the only way for our two species to survive,” Gaius says.

“Because you crashed us here,” I say.

“No, not exactly,” Gaius shakes his head. “And it doesn’t matter for we are here now. This is the only way to survive. You have no idea how harsh this planet is. We need this. We need to ally with this Order.”

“Give. It. Back,” Komik repeats, not looking away from the Eye.

“That, I will not do,” the Eye says. Tension is rising in the room as dozens give voice to their anger and disagreement. “I will, however, make you an offer.”

Komik growls, but T’kali steps next to him, placing his hand on top of mine where it rests on Komik’s shoulder. T’kali’s hand is cool but reassuring.

“Speak,” T’kali says.

“I have held back many truths,” the Eye says. “Harsh realities that none of you were ready to confront. I will make this one-time offer. Those of you who wish to leave, may do so. You will be banished from the Order. Offered no succor or comfort as you will be betraying your oaths, but the Order will not bother you or yours ever again.”

“Why?” Komik asks. “What do you gain?”

“I have what I need to fulfill the vision Tajss has given to me,” he says. “And I will not see the Order tear itself apart.”

“And what if everyone leaves?” T’kali asks and there’s a loud murmur of agreement.

“They will not,” the Eye says, fully assured of himself. “Those of you here, of course you will all leave. You think I am blind to your discontent? I am the Eye. I see all. I do not need malcontents. There are plenty others who are still loyal to their oaths, here and around the planet.”

Komik turns to face those behind him. “What say you?”

I watch as they debate in soft tones. Some nod immediately, others are hesitant, but in the end the majority give their agreement. Only then does Komik look down at me.

“Are you okay with this?” he asks.

I’m confused why he’s asking me then I realize that part of what he’s agreeing to is that the Eye will be keeping the samples he took from me. Instinctively, I want to say no. I don’t want any part of myself left here with the monster, but then I look at all those gathered.

They’re all watching. Waiting. Their future hangs on my decision right now.

Why is this happening to me again? Anxious despair threatens to drown me in indecision.

I glance up at Komik and find in him the anchor that I need.

I am so deeply aware of his love for me. If I say no, he will throw all these other concerns to the wind in favor of mine. He will go to war. For me. His love resonates in my soul. He gives me the power I need to make this feel like my choice. Not enforcement.

“Yes,” I agree.

He turns back to the Eye. “We agree,” he says. “On one condition.”

“What is this condition?”

“We be allowed to take a transport ship big enough to carry all those who wish to leave. We will leave the jungle behind.”

The Eye considers this for longer than I would expect. He frowns then shakes his head.

“The humans will not survive without epis,” he says at last.

“And why is this your concern?” Komik counters.

“Tajss is not finished with them,” he says calmly, like that’s the kind of natural thing one would say.

“Then we will get them epis,” Komik says.

“And you remember how hard that is?” the Eye asks.

Is he showing genuine concern? I don’t know what to make of this entire exchange. I analyze the conversation, trying to figure out what the game is. It feels like there’s something here that I’m missing. Some piece of information that will make this entire puzzle make sense.

“I do,” Komik says, and others give voice to their agreement.

“Very well,” the Eye says. “Sound the bells. We will gather in the main hall and those who wish to leave will be given their chance to go.”

The Eye turns and walks to the far wall. He presses his hand to a blank spot and a door slides open. He steps aside. Zirthoan goes through, carrying the samples of me. The Eye motions and Gaius goes next. Before he enters himself, he looks at Komik.

“Tajss provides,” he says.

His final words echo in my head as the door closes behind him. We’ve won, yet it feels like a hollow, empty victory. Somehow, even though we got what we want, it feels like the Eye got what he wanted more.



The carrier bucks. I yelp and grab for something to hold onto but Komik pulls me tight.

“I have you,” he whispers in my ear.

I shiver even as I can't contain a smile. The strength of his arm is reassuring, calming my nerves when I'm sure nothing else would. The carrier is noisy. The engines sputter and whine while the walls and floors vibrate with a constant rattle. The machine has seen much better days, but then how old is it? The fact that it works at all is a testament to something. My main concern is if it's going to decide to reach the end of its useful life while we're all on it.

Or that this is part of the Eye's plan. Not to let us go, which seems entirely too easy, but to put us all on a deathtrap. Problem solved.

The side door is open, but I avoid looking out. I did that early in the flight and immediately regretted it. My stomach flipped and hasn't stopped roiling since. It's been all I can do to keep from being sick.

“Hold on, we are arriving,” the pilot shouts to be heard over the noise.

Komik tightens his hold around my middle for which I'm grateful. If the pilot is warning everyone to hold on, I can only imagine how bad this is going to be. The floor tilts hard as he banks. It feels like we're lying on the side and turning a tight corner.

A confusion of inertia, gravity, and momentum crashes against my body and I don't know if I'm going to fall, fly, or throw up. I try to hold in a moan, but a low keening still emerges. Komik wraps his tail around my legs, further securing his hold.

Metal screeches in screaming protest and there's a split moment that seems to hang in time as the various forces perfectly balance. In that instant, we're stuck between two possible outcomes. Landing, or being torn apart and freefalling.

The pilot must be skilled enough to handle it because we jerk free. The ship levels then tilts forward. A moment later there's a soft thump. The engines power down, the rattling stops, and only when there's no motion and no sound for a few seconds am I sure we made it.

The Zmaj pour out of the ship. Komik waits, not releasing his dual grip and I take the moment to bask in his presence. A stolen moment with so much happening and, like a thief, I'm going to enjoy the thrill of it.

When we are the last ones left, T'kali sticks his head in, looking with an arched eyebrow then grins. There's no mistaking that in a single look he and Komik have had an entire conversation.

An old piece of my heart twists in jealousy, but I know it's ridiculous. I'm discovering that I'm not that anxious, lonely, prone to envy girl I used to be anymore. My mate's ferocious love of me is helping me find in myself a new, stronger woman.

In time, Komik and I will also share looks like that. We barely know each other right now. We haven't had a date or more than the briefest of moments alone. We haven't even...

*What if he doesn't like it? What if I'm not good at it?*

I shake my head free of the old voice, still trying to creep back in my thoughts. It's ridiculous. Komik and I are meant for one another. In all ways.

“We should move,” Komik says. “There will be many questions.”

“If you insist,” I say, twisting my head around to smile up at him.

He takes the offered opportunity to steal a kiss. No quick peck, Komik is not a man of half-measures. He claims my lips, my tongue, my mouth. He takes what is his and I give it all.

“Are we sure?” Angota asks. “The desert will be very hard on the females.”

“I do not believe the Eye will hold to his agreement if we stay. Close, we are a threat he will not tolerate,” I say. “Distancing ourselves from the base is the smartest move.”

Angota nods understanding. The suns stare down in judgment, as if they know the importance of this decision. There are too many warriors to fit into any of the rooms of the compound at the same time, so we have moved this meeting outside.

The females are inside, not because they are not welcome, but because they know they do not understand what this means to us. When the one named Riley suggested it, they all agreed. It was a touching moment.

Three dozen of our brothers assemble to decide our future. Angota was the first of us to find his mate, and somehow that has conveyed on him a mantle of leadership. I knew Angota when he was the communications operator and liked him then, but he has changed. He is more thoughtful and slower to speak than I recall.

Those who joined us in leaving the Order are still trying to find their way. They came because they disagreed with Kirmanda, but they do not have females. Their voice counts for less in a vote because they are not deciding for their treasures. That is natural, the way it is supposed to be. The ten of us who have found our treasures will carry any vote.

“May I speak?” T’kali asks.

“Of course,” Angota says, acknowledging him.

“Thank you,” he says, stepping forward to stand in front of the assembly. “Those of us who do not have mates, there is hope for us.”

“What do you mean?” Rakstan asks.

“When the human ship crashed, it broke into multiple pieces. We know there are more survivors scattered across the planet,” T’kali says.

“Tajss provides.” Every male gives voice to the mantra.

“There is hope for all of us to find our treasures,” he says. “But not if we stay here. Here we will be only Outcasts. Defectors. And I, for one, do not feel I am forsaking my oaths to the Order. Kirmanda has twisted our brotherhood and what he is doing is unnatural. We are not capable of stopping him, but in time...”

He trails off, not daring to say aloud the blasphemous thought that all of us have thought.

“Is there any disagreement?” Angota asks.

I look over the assembled and not one tail rises. It is settled.

“We have the two transports that the Eye let us take. We have supplies and can gather more before we leave. Do any of you have locations of more of the human survivors?” I ask.

“Not precise, but an area, yes,” Shukach offers.

“That is better than traveling blind,” Angota says.

“Agreed. We do not know how far those transports will take us. We all know the condition they are in, despite our efforts to keep them maintained,” I say.

We kept them up as part of our duties, but they were rarely used in recent years because there are parts we do not have the capacity to manufacture.

“I will take charge of supplies,” Rhuklyv offers and Angota accepts.

We are used to working together and in short order everyone has divided up the necessary duties to prepare for a trip across the ocean. The distance is not great. The majority of Tajss is desert and there is ocean only around the two poles.

Once, perhaps, long ago, there was more water but that was before the memory of even the oldest of us, even if it was the case. The desert has always been our home. We retreated to the jungle under the guidance of the first Eye of the Order. Now, under the last Eye, we begin our exodus.

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LISA

*S*lip the strap over my shoulder then adjust the fit. Biting my lip, I study the results. Butterflies dance in my stomach as I try to look at myself objectively.

*Why is this so hard? No. This looks terrible.*

The cups of the lacy brassier are a size too big but Ziva thought it might work. I reach behind and unhook it then toss it on the bed with the rest of the pieces littering the cover. Naked, I walk over to the water basin and splash cold water on my face.

The reflection in the mirror makes me unhappy too. My cheeks aren't as full as they were, my eyes have bags, and my hair really needs a trim. I push random curls around trying to find a place where they'll stay and look good. It's an impossible task.

If only I had some foundation. A touch of blush would be nice. And some hair product. All those little things I took for granted on the ship. Things I haven't thought about since the crash. Until now.

Tonight, Komik will come here, to our room. Our first night together. And I want it to be special. I want him to be happy with what he sees. No, I want him to be horny as hell, ready to ravish, and not have any doubts or regrets about my being his treasure.

*He will be. We are meant for each other.*

Valid or not, I don't feel pretty. And I want to, badly. How am I supposed to be ready for sex if I don't feel sexy? I'm a ragdoll. Tossed, torn, and worn by some careless child. I've been drug through a jungle, literally, and struggled to survive one day at a time. None of which is conducive to self-care and indulgence.

I've done what I can. Bathing, shaving, and preparing myself in all those basic ways. But now that it's almost time, I'm a nervous wreck.

What if I'm not good at it? What if he's too big? Not a concern I would have with a human because obviously same species, but we all know that the Zmaj are big down there. Really big, what if he's *too* big? What if it doesn't fit?

No one is going to want hand jobs for life. I don't and he won't either. Will it hurt? Will it feel good? Will I do it right? I felt his cock, sure, and it felt enormous. But I haven't seen it. And I've never had a really big one.

Stupid concerns. All of them. Worries because I'm nervous.

All the girls have loaned me what they have to try and make tonight special. It's very sweet of every one of them, but none of us are the same size and nothing here makes me feel sexy. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

Keeping my eyes closed I run my hands over my breasts. Down and across my stomach. I draw my hands up my thighs, over my hips, then pass my left over my newly trimmed mound. I don't know what Zmaj like but I hope this is good enough. I should have asked one of the girls.

As I move my hand, my finger parts my lips and lightly brushes my clit which is already wet and swollen. I shudder with pleasure. My body screams for more and before I can think about it, I rub harder.

The scent of my sex fills the room. Being turned on pushes aside my nerves and self-doubt. I stop rubbing because I'm dancing too close to an orgasm and he'll be here soon. I'm not going to waste one on self-pleasure. One thing all the girls



gossip about is the multi-orgasmic experience of being with a Zmaj.

Forcing my attention off the pulsing demand of my clit, I look at the clothes strewn about and decide to go simple. I slip on a loose-fitting dress with nothing underneath. I want him, he wants me, no point in making the fulfilling of that desire harder than it needs to be.

I gather up the mix of clothing and hodge-podge lingerie and put them in a box in the corner that I use for a dresser and storage. As I stand, there's a soft knock on the door and my breath rushes out as cool perspiration forms on my chest.

"Lisa?" Komik asks. "May I come in?"

I open my mouth to say yes. Of course you can, this is your room too. My mouth moves, my tongue forms the syllables, but the sound doesn't emerge. My throat is clenched tight, as is my stomach, and it feels like my pussy is spasming.

I inhale, bite my lip, then walk over to the door and open it. His crimson eyes, which I love but man are they not almost demonic, take me in. He gasps and a broad smile spreads over his face. He doesn't have to say anything, the tenting of his loose-fitting pants speaks louder than any words. When his mouth opens, a growl emerges. It's an instant, no more, but it stretches. I'm acutely aware of tiny things. The way his chest expands as he inhales. The flutter of his wings. The bounce of his cock hidden behind thin cloth.

He bursts into the room, sweeping me off my feet as he barrels through the door. His mouth smashes onto mine and we're joining. I throw my arms around his neck and my legs clench on his waist.

My dress rides up and his erect cock bends to grind against my exposed pussy. I gasp and moisture gushes over his pants. He grabs my hair then jerks my head back, kissing his way across my face and down my neck.

I grind my hips on his cock and already I'm about to come. He spins in a circle and his tail slams the door shut as he does. He

lavishes my neck and down my exposed skin. When he reaches the hem of my dress he growls, wanting more.

“Bed?” I gasp.

He growls denial but we can't move forward like this, so he lowers me to my feet. He curls his tail around my waist. It gives me enough room to maneuver while keeping contact between us. He unties his pants. As they drop lower, I trace the most delicious v-line I've ever seen or even dreamed of.

I can't stop myself. I lean over and lick his skin. His pants don't uncover his cock, hanging up on both his erection and his tail but I don't care. I kiss, nibble, and suck my way along the rock-hard muscles as they form the V that dives to his penis.

He groans loudly and that makes me even hotter. Barely taking my mouth off him, I pull the dress over my head then drop to my knees so I can fully appreciate and taste my way down. I grab the loose fabric of his pants, pulling it out and over his cock which bounces free slapping me in my face.

It's the hottest thing I've ever experienced. I moan with pleasure as his big, hard dick slaps into my face. I grab it with both hands and stroke the sides as I study it. It's thick and long but not as ridiculous as I was worried about.

He is breathing faster as I stroke up and down the shaft. I look up and give him an impish grin because I'm going to blow his mind.

I take his cock in a tight grip and wave it around, making it bounce up and down then side-to-side. As I do that, I move my head so that it's slapping my cheeks, then passing over my extended tongue before slapping the other side.

He gasps, groans, then grabs a handful of my hair. He jerks my head back then shoves the head into my open and willing mouth. He doesn't stop until it hits the back of my throat and I gag.

The feeling and the sound makes me even hotter. I slap my free hand onto my pussy and rub my mound. He fucks my mouth, moving my head on and off with the tight grip.

He grunts louder and louder and then his cock begins to swell in my mouth. I rub faster and faster, then I slip two fingers inside as he jerks his cock out of my mouth and explodes.

Hot sperm splashes across my face and tits. I close my eyes as the load keeps coming. It's an incredible amount, but I'm only dimly aware of it as my own orgasm is rushing through my body.

When my own passes and I open my eyes at last, Komik is kneeling in front of me. He has grabbed a towel and is cleaning me up.

"I am sorry," he says. "You are so beautiful, I lost control. I did not intend to make you—"

"Stop," I say, putting two fingers on his mouth. "You didn't *make* me do anything. I wanted that every bit as much as you. If anything, I made you."

His crimson eyes bore into mine, verifying the truth of my words even as he continues cleaning up the mess we've made.

"My treasure," he growls dropping the towel and kissing me. Somehow, he lifts me without breaking the kiss. He lowers me to the bed and only then does he pull away. "My turn."

He kisses down my neck and onto my chest. He takes his time. Slowly tasting, teasing, and exploring each of my breasts on his way lower. And lower.

When he reaches my middle, he kisses from hip to hip then down one thigh and back up. As he passes over my pussy his warm breath makes me quiver, but still, he doesn't go for it. I struggle to let him take his time. I want his face buried deep in me, now.

He kisses down my thigh and as he slowly, so slowly, comes back up he parts my thighs with both hands. Cool air on my hot pussy is a contradiction in sensations.

His mouth moves closer and I'm shaking with desire. Closer. He's almost to my core. Anticipation is killing me.

Then his mouth covers my pussy and I grab his hair bucking my hips against his face. His tongue is magical. In moments

there's no stopping the body shaking orgasm.

He holds me until the last quakes pass then climbs onto the bed with me and we cuddle together in a tangle of legs and arms. My worries are gone like the morning fog dissipating at the rising suns of Tajss. A barely remembered thing.

"My treasure," he murmurs in my ear. "Did I please you?"

"Please is not a strong enough word," I laugh. "Yes, Komik. Are you satisfied?"

"No," he says.

"No?" I ask, jerking up onto an elbow. "Did I do it wrong? What can I do?"

His broad smile widens at my alarm. He brushes a curl of my hair out of my face then rises onto his knees. He grabs my hips and pulls. I move with him, and he places himself between my legs. When I look down his second cock, something I'd almost forgotten, is at attention and driving towards my waiting pussy.

## EPILOGUE

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LISA

“We lost the secondary engine,” the Zmaj piloting the transport I’m on yells as the transport tilts sharply left.

I’m not alone in my suppressed scream. The great machine rattles, bucks, then finally rights itself.

“Can we make it?” Komik yells to be heard over all the noise.

“If not, we’re going down in the ocean,” the pilot responds.

“Land!” Cekpet calls.

Komik has one arm tight around my waist and with his other hand he’s holding onto a grip fastened to the ceiling. The transports are loaded to the maximum weight and probably beyond what they were intended for. That combined with their age and decay... we all knew this was risky.

I stare out the window, watching the white cresting water rush past. My stomach is gurgling and flipping but so far none of us has gotten sick.

“How is the other transport faring?” Komik asks.

“About the same,” T’kali says.

“What is that?” Cekpet asks.

He’s standing on a rail outside the loading bay door. The rushing wind pulls at him, fluttering his wings and mussing his hair, none of which seems to bother him. He’s been out there for a while, acting as a spotter. Now he’s pointing off to the east of the ship.

“Instruments are picking up a big shape. Really big,” T’kali says.

The transport turns, and as it does, the view out the window changes from ocean to rolling dunes of sand. The dunes are striated shades of red occasionally broken by stark streaks of white. It’s beautiful in an oddly empty way.

“It is something,” Cekpet says. “We should check it out.”

“We do not have much fuel left,” the pilot says.

“Fly low. Land before we run out and we will make the best of it,” Komik says.

I look at my fellow human survivors. This is it. We made a home in the jungle but now we’ve left that behind in hopes of finding a new home and safety. No longer hunted by the Order. They told us the rest of the planet was a desert, but seeing it for the first time makes it a lot more real.

“That’s the ship,” Leah gasps. “Part of it anyway!”

I shift position so I can see out the open transport door and when I do my jaw drops. She’s right. A massive section of the ship lies partially buried in the sand. The transport bucks, shudders then suddenly the roaring sound of the engines stops.

“Hang on,” the pilot says as the ship tilts forward.

Heartbeats later, the transport hits the sand. It blows in the open door, painfully pelting exposed skin. Komik holds me tightly until the ship skids to a stop at last.

“That is it brethren, welcome to your new home,” the pilot says, climbing out of his seat.

We pour out of the downed transport. The heat is incredible. The double red suns of Tajss beat down on us in a way none of us humans have experienced. In the jungle there was always coverage to lessen it.

“Look!” Ziva cries, even as the second transport lands with more grace under its own power a dozen yards away.

I follow her pointing finger and gasp. Six humans stand on top of a dune in the direction of the large ship section. They are

black blobs at this distance but they're coming in our direction. As it turns out, we're not alone.

"My treasure," Komik murmurs softly, keeping his arm around my waist as his tail flits tossing sand around us.

"Always," I say. "Let's go greet them."

"As you wish, my love."

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Thank you for reading! Reviews are the lifeblood of indie publishing and if you enjoyed this steamy quick read, I'd really appreciate it if you left a review.

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## **About Miranda Martin**

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

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

Visit her website <http://mirandamartinromance.com>