



SILVER  
*SILENCE I*

WARRIORS OF VALOSE SAGA 6

IONA STROM

# SILVER SILENCE

Warriors of Valose Saga 6

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# IONA STROM LS ANDERS



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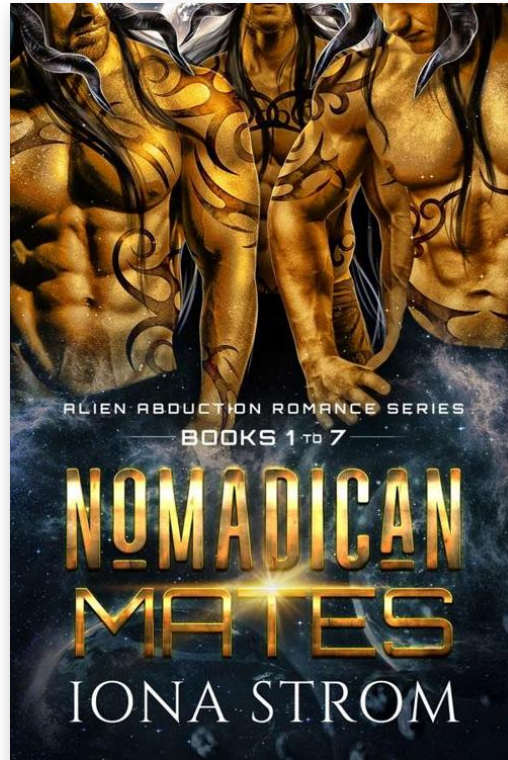
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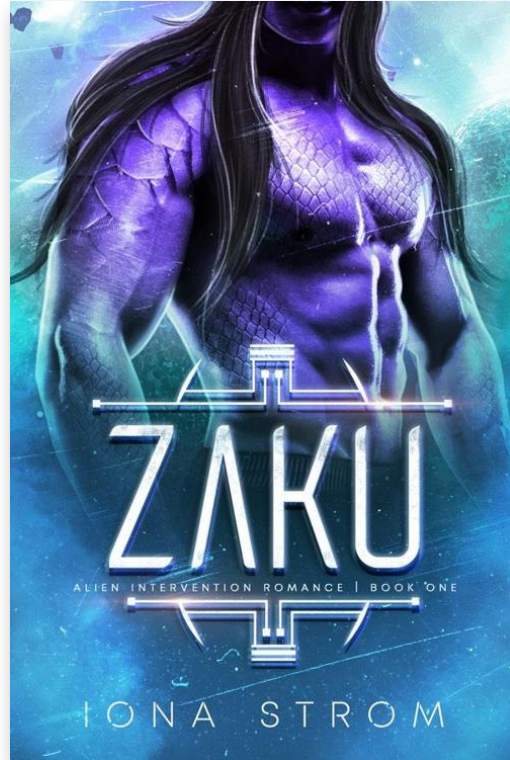
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More Warriors to Come!

## About This Book

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### *Vallon*

War with the gray invaders was imminent, and an even bigger threat loomed beyond the stars. We had obtained more powerful weapons and had a spacecraft at our disposal. For the first time in Valosian history, all three clans had reached a temporary accord to fight as one for the good of our world. Even with all that, it still might not be enough.

I worried over the survival of my species, and even more so for the future of the abducted human females—especially one in particular. My Elise—the one who awakened me—had a disability, making her more vulnerable than the others in my dangerous world. It would be a great honor to be her protector as she was my only light in the impending darkness that was to come. I know she feels the yearning of her spirit to join with mine, but she holds herself back, and I was too afraid of her answer to ask why.

As I watched her form silent words with elegant hands, a smile glides across my face. I felt like a fool to have not thought of this before, but what my spirit mate referred to as a disability on her world could be the key to winning the war on mine.

### *Elise*

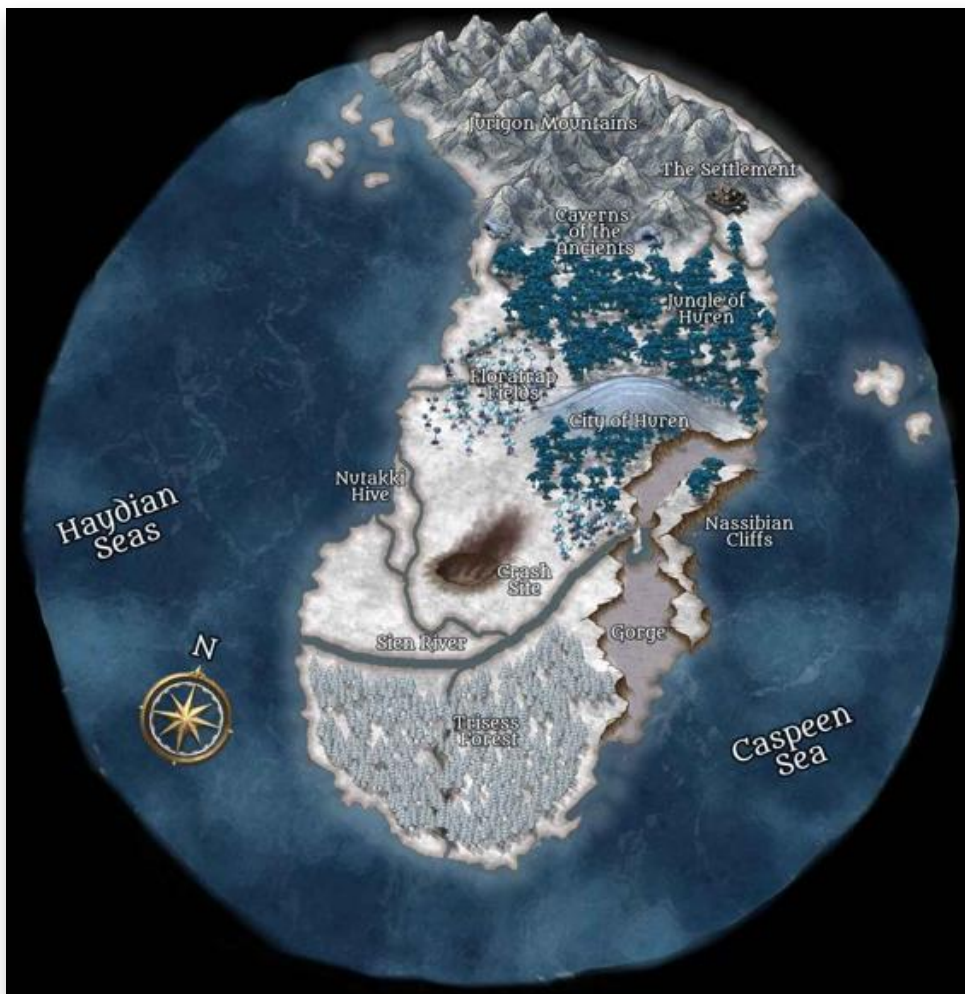
Vallon was in complete possession of my heart. His eyes drank me in as if he couldn't get enough of the sight of me. There was nothing I wanted more than to bond with him and be his spirit mate, but with my disability, I was a serious

liability. I knew he would die trying to protect me, and his world was a most dangerous place. I couldn't allow him to give his life for mine.

Not only that, but he was of another species—one that lives considerably longer than mine. Now that we knew babies were possible on Valose, what if I was taking away his chance of finding a mate in a female closer to his own species?

# Map of Valose

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## Glossary of Valosian Terms

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### Special Note:

You'll find the following **Valosian** words throughout this text. They are not misspellings but alien terms. Some of the words were kept close to the English spelling—not because I'm lazy or unimaginative as I've been accused by some reviewers—but for the sake of readability. Also, they are no longer italicized since they seemed to have been a distraction for some readers.

This is an ever-growing list and may not have captured every single Valosian word. I'm currently working on it, so please don't hate me for not being perfect.

**Adrenalyne-** A hormone secreted by the adrenal glands in males only, which increases strength, endurance, and stamina for the sole purpose of protecting their spirit mate. Also, this hormone promotes healing.

**Chiksin-** The Valosian equivalent of a chicken.

**Crikts-** Large insects that look like cave crickets.

**Dearth-** A herbivorous creature similar in size and look to a deer.

**Electro-bars-** Electrified bars of light.

**Elksen-** A herbivorous creature similar in size and look to an elk.

**Fates-** A Valosian measurement equivalent to a foot.

Fibrous tubing- Similar to fiberoptic cable.

Flites- Small flying insects that eat the dung of rexose.

Floratrapp- Is a carnivorous plant similar to a Venus flytrap, only much larger.

Hipose- A herbivorous creature similar on size and look as a hippopotamus.

Hundredths- A measurement equivalent to a hundred.

Hurs- A Valosian equivalent to an hour.

Insectoids- Nuttaki species of insect-like mammals.

Kiltus- Similar in fashion to a Scottish kilt worn only by males.

Lood- Valosian equivalent to water.

Loodfall- The Valosian equivalent to a shower. This term can also mean a waterfall.

Luminetric barrier- Impenetrable transparent shielding.

Mims- The Valosian equivalent to a minute.

Milose- A Valosian measurement equivalent to a mile.

Mothis- A flying insect with fuzzy wings.

Munthis- A Valosian equivalent to a month.

Nula- Term of endearment like sweetheart.

Nutrillium- A mineral mined on Valose with the potential to release stored energy.

Nutrone- A rare mineral found only at the highest peak of the Jurigon Mountains.

Patooga- A large feline-like beast with enormous canine teeth.

Penitentrium- A building used to house prisoners.

Rovers- A mode of transportation similar looking to a jet ski, only they are used on land. They are equipped with gravity disruptors in order to hover above the ground and use thrusters to propel them forward.

Rynose- A herbivorous beasts similar to a rhinoceros.

Sanitate system- Is the Valosian equivalent of a toilet.

Sec- The Valosian equivalent to a second.

Skypod- A lightweight metal structure meant to float using a gravity disruptor.

Solaries- Rocks which absorb solar energy and emit light as from chemiluminescence of phosphorus.

Solitarium- Isolated prison cell.

Splinth- A clear shell used to set broken bones.

Spirits- Valosian Gods.

Squidlin- Massive carnivorous sea creatures with multiple tentacles.

Suns-fall- The time in the evening when the twin suns disappear and daylight fades.

Suns-rise- The time when the twin suns appear above the horizon as a result of the daily rotation of the planet, Valose.

Thrumming or thrum- Is a low continuous vibratory sound internally created by Valosian males to comfort or enhance pleasure.

Tondru- A massive wolf-like beast.

Tragore- A device used to detect power sources.

Turculine- Very close in hue to turquoise.

Yerons- A measurement of time approximately 365 days.

# Chapter One

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The large, black craft was on the move again. A dark reminder that we were no longer alone on our world—as if we could forget.

We were supposed to have met with Tikkot, the new Sia of Clan Trisess, to finalize our plan of attack on the city of Huren when the huge spacecraft had blotted out one of our twin suns like a doomsday eclipse.

All movement between the clans had come to a halt as we all laid low, watching, and waiting for the new craft to show its intent.

Hexxus had discovered an invisible beam shooting down from the center of the craft. The tech said it was scanning. Scanning for what? He wasn't sure.

Taking down the craft before they could act was what both Clan Trisess and us, the Huren exiles had agreed. Despite our brainstorming, none could figure out how to build a weapon that could destroy the craft.

It had been considered using the single charge left on the plasma gun, Sia Jakkar had been given by his twin brother, to fire upon the Gretolic craft. It would be a waste of the most destructive force on the planet. The weapon's range was too short to effectively hit the vessel, and we had no other means with which to fire it.

The nutrone weapon Tikkot had found inside Mount Jurigon was no longer an option. It was being reconstructed

into a portable gate to break inside the dome protecting the city of Huren, by Rose and three of the most accomplished techs on Valose.

Originally, the plan had been to retake the city from the Gretolics. Not only to defeat the enemy within but to find the cure to the germ Maxxon felt strongly was inside the secret lab beneath the palace. With the new threat looming in the sky above us, now more than ever, Sia Jakkar felt under the dome was the safest place for all of us until we could design and build a weapon to defend Valose against any more invaders from the stars.

*“What do you think they want?”* Elise’s hands were fluid as they formed her words.

*“I wish I knew.”* Even though Elise could hear, I practiced the hand language we had created together by signing back. *“We could better plan our next move if we did.”*

Elise and I had been inseparable ever since our move from the old settlement that was once the city of Huren, to the Caverns of the Ancients, a couple of months ago.

The female at my side had awakened me, but not right away. It wasn’t until she had woken up from a head injury that I had felt the first beat of my ancillary heart.

Ignorant of the initial signs of my spirit finding its match in another, I hadn’t immediately realized the sudden pounding behind my sternum was my secondary heart.

I’d wanted desperately to understand her silent words, so we’d figured out a way to communicate. Elise could hear but not speak, so with the help of the translators we both wore tucked behind our ears, I’d taught her how to speak my language well enough that she could form silent words with her mouth which I could decipher.

I’d also taught her the Valosian alphabet and we’d created a hand language, similar to the one she used on Earth, to spell out Valosian words. The hand language came easy for me. Learning her Enng-lesh had not. I hadn’t given up trying to learn though.

Elise wrapped her hand around my biceps and leaned her head against my arm as we stood on the highest peak of our new settlement on the eastern island chain.

Along with so many others of my clansmen, we peered up into the darkening sky as the alien spacecraft made a slow sweep from where it had hovered above the Trisess forest for several suns-rises before a slow migration toward the domed city of Huren.

Now it was continuing north in a gradual move toward the Jurigon mountains.

*“Do you think Zikkar is right? That it’s a Gretolic craft,”* Elise signed.

“He’s one of the smartest males I know,” I replied in words rather than signing, so I could wrap a protective arm around her slim shoulders. “Zikkar said the Grites tracking device shows the ship is using the same energy signature as all the other Gretolic crafts.”

Elise flipped frightened eyes up to meet mine. *“I’m scared,”* she mouthed in Valosian.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” I swore.

She swallowed hard and nodded before looking back at the sleek craft silently drifting through the sky.

Like liquid fire, her fear caused my ancillary heart to pump a shot of adrenalyne through my veins. It was all I could do to stand still as I breathed through its energizing effects. I restlessly adjusted the strap across my back that held my spear in place. My scales flashed blues and silvers with the excess energy to which I currently had no outlet.

I hated that I could do nothing to ease her fear. There were already countless dangers on my world before the added perils of the aliens. Now it was downright treacherous.

As small and fragile as the humans were, one wrong decision could get them killed. Layla had proven that early on when she willingly ventured off with another. She had never been found. Most likely, the jungle had claimed her life as well as another’s. Rayyar. A traitor among us.

Before we had knowledge of the Gretolics and their mind control, Rayyar had been thought to be the tool of Sia Sakkar, Sia Jakkar's twin brother, sent to keep watch on the exiles.

His deception had been much worse. Once we learned that Sia Sakkar had fallen under the influence of the gray invaders, what we thought to be the truth, crumbled with the crash-landing of the spacecraft from where the females were rescued.

Rayyar had never been under the alien's influence. As more intelligence was gathered, it was discovered there were more Huren clansmen who had willingly aided our enemy from the stars.

"We're ready to test the portal," Zikkar called out from across the field, waving an arm to draw us all together.

The scholarly male stood with Rose, Hexxus and Wynnter. The latter was Clan Trisess's tech who had come to help in the making of the dome penetrating weapon we so desperately needed.

"Let's go watch." I turned my back on the constant threat looming in the distance and ushered Elise over to a flat rock.

Murmurs of excitement mixed with apprehension rippled through the crowd gathering around. Rose followed Hexxus to stand a few fates away from where the demonstration had been set up. As Wynnter knelt to power up the weapon, all went quiet.

Zikkar then crossed the short distance to where tubing formed a large upright rectangle. A switch was flipped, forming a transparent shield with a humming glow. A luminetric barrier. I was not a scholar by any means, but I knew it from our journey back to the settlement.

I'd been so impressed with how the warrior, Aggar, had made one with salvaged items from the crashed alien spacecraft. He used it to close off the mouth of the cave, where we had spent the dark hurs, from the creatures of the jungle. Powered by nutrillium, the barrier was a smaller version of the dome that protected the city of Huren.

Now, more than ever, we needed the protection the dome afforded and the only way inside was through a gate. The portable ones Hexxus had created had been used and lost, falling to the jungle floor once they closed.

Now we had something else. Something that would breach a hole in what was light solidified, allowing Sia Jakkar and an army of the combined clans to enter the city in one fell swoop.

*“You know, with everyone seated around like this reminds me of watching movies in the park.”* Elise grinned. *“It’s a shame we don’t have any popcorn.”*

I grinned back a genuine smile, even though she had combined our two languages by signing some Enng-lesh words of which I had no clue the meaning. Sometimes when she got excited, she would forget and mix our languages together. I didn’t need translation; it was enough that she no longer trembled in fear.

*“The last movie I saw was ‘Mad Max Fury Road’,”* Elise went on, doing it again. *“I think you would have enjoyed it. It was an action flick.”*

*“As long as I was with you, I would have enjoyed anything,”* I signed back.

Elise patted her hand over her heart with hooded eyes. *“You are such a sweet talker, Vallon. And with that handsome face, I’ll bet you’ve talked your way under many a kilt-dress.”*

*“Not as many as you may think.”* I laughed as I signed but didn’t elaborate.

I’d only ever shared a sleeping platform with one female, Irrie. She was one of my kind, taken too soon by the Grites germ, a biological weapon they had released on my world to infect the Gretolics who had gone rogue.

Though Irrie did not breathe life into my ancillary heart, we’d taken pleasure in each other’s company. And she had been a good friend.

Elise tapped me on the knee. My gaze had drifted from hers to stare into the past.

*“Sorry.”* Elise’s hands formed an apology. *“That wasn’t very nice of me to tease you.”*

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” I whispered and cupped her face, touching our foreheads together.

The salty breeze of the Caspeen Sea ruffled her pale mane over my hands, her tresses having grown long since she’d first arrived. I pulled away to run my fingers through the multi-faceted strands as it shone in the waning light. Softer than any pelt, I marveled over the strange but lovely hue. Blonde was what she had called it.

“We’ve completed the redesign of the alien weapon that was found inside the Jurigon mountain by Sia Tikkot. The neutrone beam it expels is capable of opening a temporary portal in the dome. However,”—Zikkar said above the pleased rumbles of the crowd—“we cannot predict how long the portal will remain open before the dome reseals itself. Any who are caught midway would be cleaved in two.”

The latter caused many gasps and hushed whispers.

“What about the ripple affect the portal causes?” Draggar asked. “It would be better for us to get inside undetected.”

“The dampener from the excavator Sia Tikkot brought back from the mountain was used to subdue the effects of the disruption caused from forcing the dome open,” Wynnter explained.

A swell of nods and agreeable grumbles ran through the crowd before Zikkar raised his hands to quieten everyone.

“The luminetric barrier will act as the dome.” Zikkar indicated the rectangular creation where he stood. “Wynnter, engage the portal.”

In the heat of excitement, Elise grabbed my hand and leaned into my side where we sat. She was the most affectionate female I’d ever known. I loved that she was always touching me, but her chaste caresses were maddening when there were so many other places, I wanted her hands.

Zikkar gave a signal and Wynnter touched a button that released a bright flash, followed by a streak of light. It hit the

luminetric barrier with a complete lack of commotion. Had I not seen the displacement of the barrier for myself, I would have thought it hadn't worked.

Elise's hand squeezed mine. Zikkar softly counted off the secs as the crowd watched with wide eyes and bated breath as the portal remained open. The shimmering outline of the opening held true until it suddenly snapped shut with a muted whoosh.

The crowd jumped to their feet. Except for the spontaneous closure, it was a successful test of the gate that would be our first step into taking back the city of Huren and housing everyone under the safety of the dome.

I quite liked our island settlement, but with the looming Gretolic ship, we were left exposed. The only clan with any cover was the Jurigons. Despite numerous attempts to contact them, for unknown reasons, they never answered the ping of their comm. Even if they had answered, none were willing to live under Sia Xennox's corrupt shadow inside his mountain fortress.

Sia Jakkar strolled from out of the crowd with his spirit mate at his side. He clasped forearms with all the scholars on the team starting with Zikkar and ending with Rose, who shook his hand in the strange greeting of humans.

Together, Elise and I made our way over to give our congratulations when the shrill of a sentry's alarm ripped through the air.

*Wetlock!*

They didn't fly across the Caspeen Sea very often, but the suns-fall was upon us, and dark was when the creatures on Valose came alive. I would bet my new Trisess spear the flash of the portal blast had caught its keen eye from the shore. Whatever the reason, the thing was here to hunt for its first meal after a long suns-rises sleep.

Elise had already turned to run, tugging my hand to follow her down the choked path into the caves that pitted the low-

slung, flat-topped mountain that was our largest island in the chain.

Warriors had brandished their swords, standing to protect the crowd of females and civilians moving in the same direction. It didn't look as though they would all make it into the shelters below before the wetlock made its first dive.

I craned my head around and looked to the sky as we ran, knowing I needed to get Elise to safety before I took my place with the line of warriors.

The wetlock had circled and was coming up fast behind us. Talon tipped claws stretched out as it began its descent.

“No, Chompers!” Amy screeched.

In all the chaos, the fuzzy patooga cub had leapt out of Amy's arms nearly tripping me as she ran back to take a stand, growling, and hissing, at the oncoming wetlock. Full-grown, the infantile patooga could have stood a chance against the flying predator. Not as a cub. She was a mere morsel for what prowled the sky.

“Fucking Helios!” I couldn't let the foolish creature get eaten alive. “Go!” I yelled at Amy and Maxxon up ahead. “I'll get her.”

An idea took shape and I snagged Elise around the waist and whisked her off the ground. My booted feet tore into the hard, blue dirt as I sprinted against the tide of the oncoming crowd.

With one eye on the wetlock and the other on the reckless cub, I bent in time to scoop the wriggling creature from the ground and dove into the jagged hole torn into the side of the Grites ship.

The craft was parked with the other vessels we'd acquired in a designated area of the island. It had been a lifesaver as I slid across the slick floor to crash into the opposite side of the hull.

A deadly shadow tracked the flight of the wetlock as it swooped over the Grites ship. Its razor-sharp talons grazed the top of the craft in an icy shrill.



We were far from safe.

It knew we were inside and would come back to try and grab us again. Without losing my hold on Elise and Chompers, I stood to peer through the clear shield of the cockpit and watched the wetlock rise higher into the sky.

My plan had worked. The wetlock had set its sights on us instead of the warriors who had braced for a fight so the others could take cover in the caves below. My blood ran cold knowing, we would have been in the middle of that crowd had we kept going.

Wetlocks were not an enemy you wanted to fight. Airborne, these creatures always maintained the upper hand. Their scales so tough, even if your sword found its mark, they were nearly impenetrable.

Chompers had inadvertently saved our lives. While the wetlock made its wide arc to come back around, I peered out through the jagged hole at the wavering silhouette of the closest spherical craft in the lineup.

The door to the craft was as invisible as the hull so finding the panel to open it was going to be tricky. And, I had my hands full.

“Elise,”—I tried to keep my voice calm despite the rush of adrenalyne— “I need you to smooth your hands over the hull of that spherical craft while I run us around it until we find the panel to open the door.”

Elise was tucked tightly under my arm. She tapped my leg, and I knew without taking my eyes off the returning predator that she understood.

With Elise under one arm and Chompers under the other, I darted out of the jagged hole and ran straight for the first spherical craft I came to. Elise’s hands were already up and at the ready, making contact with the craft as I ran us around the exterior.

A light flashed on the hull, and I skidded in my tracks, slipping on the dirt until my boots gained purchase to retrace my steps. The wetlock was closing fast as Elise slapped her

hand over the panel and released the latch to slide open the narrow door.

The Gretolic craft was made for the wiry frames of the willowy aliens. Even turned sideways, I was barely able to squeeze inside before the wetlock swooped down, narrowly missing us.

I punched the panel to close the door with my elbow before letting go of a wriggling Chompers. As soon as her oversized paws hit the floor, she bounded over to the side of the craft where the wetlock could be seen soaring into the darkening sky.

I set Elise on her feet. Her soft eyes were wide with shock and fear. A warm hue, what Elise called brown, shone brightly with the pooling of unshed tears.

“Are you all right?” I gripped her arms and looked her over.” I handled you roughly. Anything hurt?”

Her lower lip trembled with the shake of her head. “*You saved us. We almost died out there,*” Elise signed.

I gently gathered her in my arms, thrumming a song meant to soothe, and held her trembling body to mine as her silent tears wet my shoulder.

## Chapter Two

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**M**y body was in straight-up fright mode. I couldn't stop shaking as I wept uncontrollably. Held tightly in Vallon's arms, he was vibrating a soothing melody for all he was worth. Despite his efforts to calm me, his internal vibrations barely registered above my terror.

And we were still in the thick of it.

With its talon tipped claws, the wetlock could feel what it couldn't see. And it knew the last location where its snack had disappeared. The beast was proving tenacious in its hunt.

Chompers growled and hissed when the wetlock flew around for another pass then swooped down on our craft, nudging us hard enough to roll across the ground.

We were inside a type of flying gyro sphere—the craft in the shape of a ball. The floor, independent of the transparent hull, remained level as we rolled freely across the packed blue dirt.

Our craft didn't slow until we reached the cliff's edge of our island mountain. My arms squeezed tight around Vallon's neck. It was tempting to shut my eyes against the churning sea crashing into the rocks below. I kept them open, my body frozen with fear.

“You have to let go, Elise, so I can move the craft away from the edge before we drop.” Vallon's voice came from far away.

My arms were pried from around his neck. Vallon captured my face in his large palms and shoved his face in front of mine so all I could see was him.

“Look at me, Elise,” he commanded.

I focused my eyes on his. The fear that had me firmly in its grasp gave way to the swirl of his silvery gaze. So calm and sure.

“I’m going to strap you in the seat and fly us out of here before the wetlock comes back and pushes us off the mountain.”

Swept up in his arms, I was deposited in the only seat located at the control console. A strap slid across my lap to buckle me in place.

Vallon dropped a lively Chompers in my lap. “Try and hold onto this silly beast.”

The patooga cub wriggled excitedly. Apparently, this was an adventure for her. She wasn’t the tiniest bit afraid. I knew if she were outside, she wouldn’t hesitate to take on the wetlock alone.

Vallon squeezed his big body between me and the console. His backside taking center stage, which was fine with me. If I was gonna die, I couldn’t ask for a better view.

“So Aggar said this switch and then that button,” Vallon talked himself through the startup procedures Aggar had taught him along with a few of the other warriors. “Next, is to push this and... We’re up and running!”

Before we could soundlessly lift off the ground, the wetlock was back. It flew low over the other crafts clustered together, having lost track of us after our bump and roll. The creature’s wingspan was a good twenty feet across and clipped us on its way back up into the darkening sky.

It was enough to send us over the edge. The floor of the craft was as transparent as the rest of it, so I had a bird’s eye view of the churning sea rushing up to greet us. My mouth cracked open in a silent scream.

Just before we crashed against the craggy shoreline, Vallon engaged the thrusters and up we went. We bobbed and wobbled our way around the low, flat-topped mountain that was the largest of three in our island chain.

Vallon talked under his breath the entire flight as if he were giving himself directions. He wasn't the best of pilots, so I found myself white-knuckling the seat's armrest with one hand while clutching Chompers close against my chest with the other.

The cub let out a whine and I eased my grip, nuzzling her soft head with my nose. In turn, she tilted her striped head back and licked my chin. I recoiled from her fishy breath. There was no telling what she'd eaten last, always running the shoreline, and bringing back dead sea creatures that had washed up.

Her antics had been the brief distraction I'd needed as Vallon bounced us into a shaky landing on the smallest of the three islands. It was the only one not connected by a land bridge.

Once we were safely on the ground, his body sagged in relief. He turned to look at me over one hefty shoulder.

"Are you all right?" His face was as ashen as mine felt.

I nodded and gulped. That had been one narrow escape. I was still reeling over how he'd hauled me up, one-handed, and tucked me under his arm like a football to run and grab Chompers in the opposite hand.

I wasn't a big girl at five-foot-two and a buck ten, but that had taken considerable strength to lift me off the ground like I weighed nothing. Now that the danger had passed, thinking back on how Vallon had manhandled me was a serious turn-on.

He turned my seat and dropped to his haunches to unbuckle the strap across my lap. He was so tall, even crouched, his silver head was in line with mine.

Without hesitation, I reached out a hand to stroke his cheek then tunneled my fingers through his silky hair. I lifted the

length to pull across one shoulder. The silvery strands acted more like liquid than hair, flowing down the expanse of his muscled chest.

If I had a voice, this was where I would have sighed appreciatively.

Classically handsome, Vallon was impressively built. His chest was wide, and his arms were thicker than most men's thighs. Yet, he was a gentle giant with a kind disposition.

Make no mistake, beneath his soft eyes and easy smile, lived a brutal warrior. I'd seen him and the other warriors fight a full-grown patooga when we'd first arrived.

My male was a total badass. *Mine?* I wished. I cared too much about him to answer the tug banging behind my sternum or the ever-present desire to straddle his lap like a nympho with the last cock on the planet. Every day that went by was becoming harder and harder to resist those carnal urges.

I knew from the other couples, who had bonded as spirit mates, that the males were extremely protective of their females. They would put themselves in harm's way to protect them and gladly die if need be.

I refused to allow Vallon to get himself killed because of me. This world was dangerous enough. Being mute, I was already a liability. I couldn't cry out for help or alert him to dangers. Why stack the odds against him even more?

Besides that, Valosian's lived years longer than humans. He would have to watch me grow old and gray then wither away and die while he stayed young and handsome.

Amy's mate, Maxxon, was the oldest male I'd met so far and at three-hundred and two, he didn't look a day over thirty-five.

At twenty-six, Vallon was only a year older than me. As young as he was, he had plenty of time to find a mate. Now that we knew humans and Valosians could make babies together, in time, he would find a female closer to his own species. One that would most likely live longer than me.

Focused on his mouth, my thumb brushed his full bottom lip and I wondered, for the millionth time, what it would be like to kiss him. I didn't dare act on my impulses. I knew one taste of him would never be enough. As thin as my self-control had worn, one touch of his lips against mine and I would be hooked.

*"I love you,"* I mouthed, knowing full well he couldn't read my lips as I spoke the words in English.

"Use our hand language, Elise. I didn't understand the movement of your mouth."

*"It was nothing,"* I signed.

Vallon's face fell. *"All of your words are something to me,"* he signed back.

*Gawds.* This male held my heart in the palms of his hands. So attentive and kind. I'd never had a man so desperate to cross a verbal barrier with me before. But Vallon had been almost desperate to communicate with me, so we'd created a Valosian Sign Language, or VSL, as I called it.

*"I was just saying thank you for saving our asses,"* I signed.

He eyed me skeptically as if he knew I was lying.

*"What do we do now?"* I asked, peering over his shoulder into the darkness.

"I'm going to try and figure out how to use the new comm Zikkar installed and let everyone know we're all right." Vallon stood, unstrapped the spear from his back, and turned his attention to the console. "I think we should remain here until the suns-rise. I don't want to risk flying back if that wetlock is still out there."

I got up and placed Chompers on the floor. The minute her paws touched down, she was off and running around the craft to sniff everything.

*"I'll look through the compartments for something to sleep on."* I stepped into Vallon's line of sight, so he could read my signed words.



He nodded and went back to work flipping switches and turning knobs. The craft originally belonged to the Gretolics. Aggar and Zikkar were tech-minded and had figured out how to fly the thing and had taught others, whereas I would have had no hope.

The console where Vallon stood was covered in tiny switches, knobs, and flashing lights. It was more congested than the cockpit on a commercial airliner. I paused to watch his hands fly over the controls before exchanging a smile and heading to the back of the craft where compartments lined the wall.

I knew the warriors had gone through all the compartments and had stored supplies for their various missions. When Aggar had found the first of these flying bubbles, we'd gotten a ride back to the old settlement with an injured Rose, so I knew there was a table—somewhere around here—that pulled out from the wall.

I pressed my fingers to what looked like a thin drawer and a flat platform popped free. Found it. Outfitted with a thin cushion, it could sleep one.

Next, I found a bundle of folded white fabric squares. I shivered knowing those were the sheath dresses the Gretolic's had clothed us in after we had been abducted. I grab the bundle even though they creeped me out, along with the pile of fur blankets made from various pelts salvaged from beasts the males hunted for meat.

We would need all of this to stay warm. Although our bubble craft was keeping the constant breeze coming off the Caspeen Sea at bay, now that the twin suns had set taking the day's warmth with them, the air inside the craft was already growing colder.

The warriors mentioned we were entering into the cold season. We were all curious about the approaching Valosian winter. They didn't use the same temperature scale as us, so there was no literal translation.

The remainder of the compartments yielded pouches of field rations and what the males called loodskin. The human

equivalent to a waterskin, only the water inside was a thicker consistency, but still colorless, odorless, and tasteless.

I set the items on the pulled-out table and opened the last compartment. Empty—

The glint of something silver caught my eye. Way in the back of the compartment was a thin, flat rectangle. I reached inside, going all the way to my shoulder before my fingers grazed the device and I could grab it.

Thinking it was a comm that the males must have left behind, I turned to look at Vallon. Problem solved, but his back was to me. Now we could let the others know we were all right.

Happily skirting around the console to show Vallon my find, it took me a moment to recognize what was in my hand. My smile faded the longer I stared at what I held out to him.

“*Ohmygod...*” I mouthed. I hadn’t seen one of these in what felt like a lifetime. “*Ohmygod...*” On weak knees, I sank to the craft’s floor, holding the cell phone in a shaky hand.

Vallon rushed around and dropped to the floor with me. His face was etched in concern. “What is it, Elise? What is that thing?”

I pantomimed talking on the phone. Vallon shook his head not understanding, so I spelled out *human comm* with my free hand.

His body slumped. A sad expression eased across his face that broke my heart. I knew he didn’t want me to leave Valose.

“*I doubt if it works,*” I reassured him while, at the same time, hoping for the miracle of a signal.

With a hard gulp, I swiped my finger across the smooth screen to activate it. The screen remained dark, so I pushed the little buttons around the perimeter with no better luck.

Of course, the battery would be dead after all this time. “*Depleted power source,*” I signed. There was no such thing as batteries on his world, but still, I hoped to get this into Zikkar’s hands to see if he could make it work.

I turned the cell phone over in my hand wondering about the owner. It wasn't mine. I wouldn't have been caught dead with a bedazzled case with little pink flowers.

No matter to whom it belonged, it most likely held memories from Earth, pictures, and videos from a past that felt more like fiction rather than someplace I once lived. Punched with a longing for home, I pressed the phone over my heart and squeezed my eyes shut.

As always, Vallon didn't ask questions, only sympathized with my emotional crisis, gathering me in his strong arms to ride out my pain. Not for the first time, did I think he was perfect. Why, then, *why* did it have to feel all wrong for us to be together?

Other girls had done it, bound themselves to warriors through a shawra. I couldn't do that to Vallon. I couldn't tie him to me for my short lifespan. Besides, he deserved better than me—a perfect mate. One that was whole. Not one that was lacking.

Once I calmed down, Vallon wiped my tears away and smoothed my tangled hair from my sweaty face. My skin was hot from crying. I knew I looked a damn mess, but he held me in his gaze as if I were the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

I hoped I found a way off this planet before he found a mate. It would crush my soul to see him look at another girl the way he was looking at me. A fresh rush of tears rolled down my cheeks in fat drops.

Vallon frowned with a heartfelt expression that sorely tested my resolve. I had to put his interests first and it was best if we didn't mate.

I blinked away my tears and shored up my self-pity. "*We should eat something and get some rest.*" I tried for a grin, but it came off as a wobbly smile.

"We will be all right." Vallon cupped my face and swore.

I nodded at what I took as a vague declaration. Did he mean we were safe from the wetlock inside our bubble craft

for tonight or was he saying *we*, as a couple, would somehow be able to make a relationship work?

*Ugh!* As usual, I was overanalyzing his words. I was my own worst enemy, twisting things around so I could mind-fuck myself into believing we could somehow find a way to be together without putting him at risk.

Vallon coaxed me over to the cushioned table, lifting me up under my arms like I was a little kid to place me in the center. As soon as he untied one of the pouches of rations, Chompers came bounding over from where she'd finally settled down on the sleeping pallet I'd made on the floor.

"You are a pesky little beast with an appetite to rival my own," Vallon chuckled and bent to ruffle the feisty cub's striped head. "It's a good thing you're cute or I'd be tempted to boot you out of here."

I silently laughed at her. Found in the jungle by Amy, the cub's mother had been killed by a male patooga. So, the fiery redhead had adopted the cub right then and there.

It had taken the warriors a little while to warm up to her because of what she was—a dangerous predator. Her adorable face and feisty personality had won the hearts of all, and she'd been accepted into the clan.

Silver-striped and looking like a large, fluffy house cat, she acted more like a dog as she begged Vallon for a piece of the dried chiksin he'd pulled from the pouch.

I touched Vallon's arm before signing, "*We should teach her to sit for a treat.*"

"How do we teach a wild creature to follow a command?"

"*On Earth, we have animals that can be taught to do tricks,*" I signed. "*Chompers is a smart girl. I'll bet we could teach her. Hand her up to me.*"

Vallon plopped her down next to me. She was all wiggles and slobbering tongue. I patted her head and ran my hand down her back. She calmed, looking at me with her tongue lolling out of her mouth. She was such a goof.

I took the strip of chiksin from Vallon's fingers and held it up, so she could see it. She lunged, but I gently put her back and pushed her bottom into a sitting position, then made a sweeping motion with the palm of my hand in a silent command for her to sit and stay.

Once she stayed seated, I gave her the chiksin. She snapped the meat from the tips of my fingers. The cub had no finesse when it came to hand-feeding. Then she was up and wiggling again.

Vallon watched with a peculiar expression and handed me another piece of dried meat. I went through the lesson with the cub, again and again, using the hand signal, until she sat on her own. I clapped my hands and patted her head, praising her as I gave her the treat she'd earned.

"I would never have believed it, had I not witnessed it," Vallon snorted.

I flashed him a knowing smile and made the sweeping motion again. Chompers added a bit of flair by spinning in a tight circle, before sitting and waiting patiently for the chiksin. We practiced a few more times, Chompers doing her spin and sit.

"*You are too cute,*" I signed and gathered her up for a cuddle.

"Wait until Amy and Maxxon see her do that," he snickered.

"*No luck with finding a comm?*" I asked, feeling bad that Amy would be worried about her fur baby.

"Not yet." Vallon handed me a ration pouch before choosing one for himself. "You eat while I keep trying. I know Zikkar has recently outfitted each craft with our comm tech, but I'm not sure how it works."

I nodded and scooted back on the table to sit Indian-style. Chompers made herself at home in my lap and together we ate dried meat and berries. The pouches held a lot of food, more than either of us could eat. I set aside what was left of our dried meal.

Vallon worked at the console and soon tilted back his head, polishing off the contents of his pouch. He was a big male with an even bigger appetite.

With a body like his, he'd have to have some serious calories to maintain all that mass. Not for the first time, I measured the spread of his shoulders, lusting over his muscles bunching and rolling as he played with the switches and buttons on the console.

Vallon lifted his hands in surprise as a ping rang out followed by Jakkar's voice. I scrambled off the table and carried Chompers over to the console.

"Elise and I are both safe inside a spherical craft. The wetlock was hunting for us, so I flew us to the smallest island," Vallon reported. "And Chompers too."

The cub wriggled in my hold at the sound of her name.

"Everyone made it to the caves below thanks to the diversion you created." Jakkar's deep voice sounded muffled coming out of the console's speaker. "Sazzar said he caught a glimpse of you running to the spherical craft."

We both sagged in relief.

*"Ask Jakkar to make sure Amy knows Chompers is all right. Thanks to you."* I couldn't help but add.

Vallon was a superhero without a cape, always putting himself out there to help others. I was both proud of who he was but scared over the chances he took.

Vallon grinned and conveyed my message. I gave the cuddly cub a squeeze and rested my cheek on her fuzzy head with the knowledge that Chompers adopted mother would be resting easy knowing her fur baby was alive and well.

"We're going to remain here and inside the craft, until the next sun-rise in case the wetlock is still flying around the islands," Vallon told Jakkar.

"I was going to suggest the same," Jakkar replied. "There have been some loud crashes coming from above. I fear the

creature is damaging our ships. Stay safe, and we will see you on the next suns-rise.”

“The same to you, Sia.” Vallon ended the comm and met my eyes. “We are here for the duration of the dark hours.”

*“It’s safer this way,”* I signed with a smile. *“I’m glad everyone made it to the caves.”*

*“Me too,”* Vallon signed back. *“We should get some rest.”*

I followed Vallon to the back of the craft. He patted the table and I hopped up, scooting back to make room for him.

“You rest up here,” Vallon said. “I’ll take the pallet on the floor.”

I vehemently shook my head, mouthing a definite *no*. Jakkar had assigned him as our personal guard ever since our rapid evacuation after the rynosse attack on the old settlement to the Caverns of the Ancients.

Our attraction had been mutual. The constant close contact wasn’t fair to either of us, but his world was terrifying, and I’d taken to sleeping with Vallon at my back. A protective force of nature, he had become my security blanket I couldn’t rest without.

That incessant tug behind my sternum went into a tailspin at the thought of him not being next to me while I slept. My reaction was pitiful, really. With one sexual act, he could be my spirit mate, yet I continued to deny both of us what our souls cried out for.

“The table is too small for my large frame, Elise,” he argued.

*“Then I will join you on the floor.”* I didn’t wait for his reply but snagged the furs off the table and made myself comfortable on the pallet.

Vallon mumbled something about hard-headed females, before joining me to lie on his side. I snuggled my back against his with Chompers curled up in my arms.

## Chapter Three

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The twin suns were finally on the rise. So as not to disturb Elise, I pushed away the urge to stretch the stiffness from my muscles. I'd been lying on my side, in the same position, ever since my female had pressed her back against mine.

She'd fallen asleep soon after she'd insisted on joining me on the floor. She would have been more comfortable on the cushioned table, but when she'd landed panicked eyes on me, all argument had drained away.

Fuck Valosian steel, this small female could slay me with a single look.

Already at a disadvantage with the first beat of my ancillary heart, Elise didn't need spoken words to compel me to do her bidding. Just a simple pleading with her eyes would do.

From the very first moment I'd met the human females, I'd felt a responsibility toward them. They were so much smaller than Valosian women. Even the tallest among them, Amy, only reached the nipple line of our shortest male.

*"Empathy for others will be your downfall, Vallon."* My late sire's incessant warning floated through my mind. Lost to the Realm of the Spirits during the last war with the Nuttaki, his voice continued to haunt me. *"You are too much like your mother, needlessly worrying over others."*

There was nothing needless about the human females now living among us. If I hadn't cared about the snoring patooga

cub I was currently wearing as headgear, I would not have changed course to save—not only the cub—but both Elise and I, from the attacking wetlock.

I'd proven my sire wrong again. I never agreed with his warning, and I never would. Not that I ever lacked respect for the stalwart warrior, I just didn't always agree with his views. It was honorable to care about others. Sia Jakkar was proof of that, having won the hearts and respect of the Trisess clan.

Elise shifted behind me. Rolling to her opposite side, her arm slipped around my ribcage to settle her hand on my stomach. My abs crunched under her chaste touch. My cock jumped, hoping her palm would wander farther south.

After the rynose attack at the old settlement, Sia Jakkar had tasked me with being the personal guard to the females. A role I took very seriously. Once we'd relocated to the Caverns of the Ancients, Elise had remained close to my side. During the dark hurs, she edged closer and closer to me until she slept with her back to mine.

I could see the burn of desire behind her eyes as if it were my own. I knew it in my gut she felt the call of my spirit to hers, yet she held herself back. Was it because she wished to return to Earth more than she wanted to remain with me? Or was she afraid of the bonding?

I'd seen her staring at the matching shawras on the mated couples. I worried Valosian behaviors were too much for her.

Whatever her reason, it kept a wedge between us.

She silently sighed in sleep, contented, her puff of breath washing between my shoulder blades setting fire to my blood. A smile curled my lips. In sleep, her guard dropped, affording me a glimpse of what it would be like if she let go and gave in to the calling of her spirit.

Then she jolted, waking up to realize she'd been fondling my abs. She sat up, taking her hand away to leave me with cooling blood and a denied ache under my kiltus.

Stiffly, I rolled to my back and stretched. Elise's eyes landed on the erect material of my kiltus. A trail from her

fierce gaze scorched a line from my pelvis to lips. Her throat worked hard to swallow as I silently dared her to make the first move.

A simple nod of her head would be all the signal needed for me to roll her beneath my body and settle between her slim thighs. The lush scent of her blooming arousal, a prelude to the slick heat I would find waiting for my pulsing cock.

It would be a slow claiming as I made her mine. With full, even strokes, I would bind our spirits together for all time. Her release would be sweet yet powerful. Her head would be thrown back, and her mouth would be open in a soundless scream of ecstasy as she mouthed my name.

*“Vallon,”* Elise mouthed, giving me another shake.

I licked my lower lip, anticipating the taste of her. My mind had veered off in a naughty direction, but the scent of her longing for what I’d fantasized hung thick and spicy in the air.

If only she would lean down and touch her lips to mine. Just once. “Just a kiss.” The words left me on an exhale.

Cupping her face, I brought her lips, oh so close to mine. Just a breath separated us. Eyelids hooded; her body melted into me. I lifted my head to close the distance—

“Vallon, you there?” Draggar’s abrupt demand cleaved the intimate moment in two.

Elise was gone in the next sec. I was left with the warmth of her slight body still clinging to mine. That was the closest I’d ever gotten to any real intimacy with her. To have the coveted moment interrupted after all this time was worthy of a scream loud enough the Spirits would hear it.

I rose with an annoyed push off the floor and growled my way over to the console to ping back the scarred warrior. “Here!” I spat, causing Draggar to pause two beats before returning.

“There a problem, fledgling?”

*Fucking Helios!* I knew better than to use a hard tone with a seasoned warrior, especially one as brutal as Draggar. My

jaw clenched and I took the time to exhale slowly before I answered. “No, Draggar. No problem here. We will be returning shortly.”

“See that you do,” was all the warrior uttered before ending the comm transmission.

This suns-rise had turned from sweet to sour in the time it took one of my hearts to beat. Now I had an apology to construct to one of the fiercest warriors among the Huren exiles. Fear of having my face rearranged wasn't what shot a spike of anxiety through my limbs, but the insolence I'd just shown to a warrior I respected.

“Are you ready to go?” I looked over my shoulder to find Elise stowing the table we never made use of and the furs from the sleeping pallet.

Elise turned and landed an unreadable expression on me. Was she as disappointed as I was that our first kiss had been interrupted, or was she upset that we had almost given in to the desire that burned hot between us?

I opened my mouth to ask, but the human comm she held in her hand made me believe the latter. Elise wasn't the only female who longed for home.

She gathered Chompers up in her arms and sat in the seat behind me at the console. The strap to hold her in place slid across her lap, buckling her in.

I strapped my spear across my back and with a single nod, we were ready to go.

With a hard jaw, I executed the flying procedures Aggar had taught me and flew us back to the largest of the three islands. From up here, the Gretolic vessel looming in the brightening sky looked even more forbidding.

I'd watched the enormous Gretolic craft as it had settled over the Jurigon mountains during the dark hours. The hulking vessel lurked like a predator waiting to make its move. Still and ominous, it cast a dark shadow that matched my mood.

I wasn't angry at Elise or the choice she'd made. I was angry over the circumstances we'd found ourselves in. Had

she been born of my world; I know in my hearts; she would be my spirit mate. The longing reflected in her eyes matched the stirring in my chest. Words were not needed to express her desire to be mine.

I guided us near the largest craft that had once been owned by Sia Jakkar's twin brother. Stolen from the city of Huren by Aggar, we'd thought Sia Sakkar had been the pilot of all those ventures beyond the stars. Even branded him the culprit who had brought back the germ that killed all our females when, in truth, he had been acting under the Gretolic's influence.

Sia Sakkar had never once piloted the craft. Rescued from the aliens, along with a few others, the ruler was recovering in the clinic on the island under Maxxon's care. Up until recently, the Gretolics had used him as a pawn to hide their presence inside the city and the nutrillium mines owned by Clan Huren.

A group of warriors and civilians were milling about the disarray of crafts when I started my landing on the top of the small, flat-topped mountain that was our island settlement. The Grites damaged vessel had been moved several fates away from where it had been parked. The wetlock having flipped it upside down.

Scattered about were the other spherical crafts. Their transparent hulls, nothing more than wavy distortions against their surroundings. I heard the buckle on Elise's seat release before she set Chompers on her feet and came to stand next to me.

*"I hope the wetlock didn't do any permanent damage,"* Elise signed. *"What a mess."*

"I'm just glad we were able to get out of that Grites' craft before the beast returned," I said and powered down our vessel.

I went to open the door where Chompers whined to be let out, but Elise stopped me with a hand. I turned to face her.

An awkward silence settled between us, then she signed, *"I feel like I owe you an apology."*

*"For what?"* I signed back.

*“For...For what didn’t happen between us.”* Her hands rushed to form the words.

My shoulders slumped and my head sagged forward. There was no help for my exhaustion. I was weary from fighting my carnal urges, and my swirling spirit that demanded to be unleashed. With a heavy sigh, I gripped her arms and touched my forehead to hers.

“You don’t owe me an apology, Elise.” I glared at the human comm she held in her hands. “Although, I do wish things were different.”

She shrugged out of my hold to reply. *“I wish too. If only I were a whole person...”* Elise’s hands dropped to her sides as if she’d run out of energy.

Her comment confused and alarmed me. “Why do you think you’re not whole, nula?” I’d wanted to call her that for so long but thought she might not appreciate the term of endearment since she was resisting the pull of her spirit to mine.

Without lifting her chin, she peered up at me through the length of her lashes.

“What makes you not whole?” I questioned again.

Her fingertips trembled as she touched her throat.

I released a long, hard breath as I gathered her close. She was so small in comparison to me, this being from the stars, from another world which I could only imagine. Yet, she fit perfectly in my arms. My body agreed, thrumming a soothing melody to ease the pain reflected in her eyes.

I dropped my head to rest on top of hers and closed my eyes. She wrapped her arms around my waist and snuggled into me. I could spend the whole of my existence in her embrace. No words could describe how much I felt for her.

I held her for a long while before the sound of the door popped open with a whoosh, interrupting our moment.

“Oh, sorry,” Amy gasped. “Don’t mind me. My thanks can wait until later. Come on, Chompers.”

The next voice was not so contrite. “Sia Jakkar requests your presence.” Draggar shut the door and left, cutting off the salty breeze blowing in off the Caspeen Sea.

Elise was the first to pull away. *“You give the best hugs.”*

I dipped my chin as my scales flushed a deep blue.

*“And you’re even more handsome when you blush.”*

*“Who is the sweet talker now?”* I signed back. *“We need to talk later about this.”* I brushed my fingertips down her throat.

She clutched my hand and brought it to her cheek, tilting her head into my open palm, and nodded.

With great reluctance, we left the spherical craft. I went in one direction as she went in another. I paused to watch the other females who had gathered around her when Elise showed them the human comm. Tears and squeals of delight dampened my happiness even more.

That human comm she’d found had increased her longing to return home. I dreaded what that device could do if Zikkar figured out a way to restore the depleted power source inside. Could she find a way home and leave me behind?

“What is all the excitement?” Draggar was suddenly beside me. So focused on the females fussing over the human comm, I hadn’t heard him approach.

“Elise found a human comm inside one of the compartments,” I gestured toward the craft we’d just left without taking my eyes off Elise.

“You’re worried it could help take her home,” Draggar stated, flatly.

“I would not want her to remain on Valose unless she wished it.” I turned forlorn eyes to the hardened warrior, only to find understanding and not the seething anger I expected. “I should not have used such a harsh tone with you. It was disrespectful and rude. For that, I am sorry.”

Draggar nodded once. “I would not want to be in your boots. I do not take for granted the fortune the Spirits have

shown me. My Marie has given me a second chance at life I never knew could exist.” Draggar clapped me on the shoulder with a rueful smirk. “However, once we cross into the Realm of the Spirits, it is uncertain how she will get along with my first spirit mate who awaits me there.”

A burst of laughter erupted from someplace deep and suppressed by sorrow. I indulged in the unexpected humor.

“It is I who would not want to be in your boots, Draggar,” I guffawed. “Marie seems to be the jealous type. You’re going to have a fight on your hands.”

“She is a strong-willed female. That is for certain.” Draggar turned, conversing as we walked away from the scene. “It is said that the Spirits only give you what you can handle. There are some suns-rises when I wonder.”

Sia Jakkar was waiting with Aggar and Nekko. An intense quiet surrounded the trio as they looked hard at the looming Gretolic craft floating above the Jurigon mountains.

“It has been there for the whole of the dark hurs,” I offered. “I watched it from the smaller island.”

“Why does Sia Xennox not answer his comm?” Nekko rubbed his chin. “Does he even know the craft is there?”

“Maybe he can’t answer for some reason,” Sia Jakkar speculated.

“Should we send a messenger?” Aggar asked. “Let him know there’s danger hovering above his mountain.”

“I don’t think that’s wise.” Sia Jakkar placed hands on his hips. “I would not risk any of you to fly near that craft. Zikkar said the ping was going through. He’s just not answering the hail.”

“He must know we’ve stolen his weapon by now,” Aggar offered. “He’s most likely locked down his mountain.”

“That fool thinks his fortress is impenetrable,” Nekko cuffed.

“Yet, Sia Tikkot and Synnox were able to find a way inside,” I commented and waved a hand at the Gretolic craft.



“What is it doing just hovering there?”

“Hexxus said there is an invisible beam streaming down from its center.” Nekko waved his hand up and down through the air. “He believes it’s some kind of scanner.”

“What is it they’re scanning for?”

“That is anyone’s guess.” Sia Jakkar broke away to go watch a group of warriors and civilians turn the Grites craft back on its base. We all followed. “Tikkot will be arriving soon. Our plan to infiltrate the city of Huren must be decided. It is still imperative we find the cure to the germ. Even more, we must defeat the Gretolics left inside and retake the city. With the uncertainty of the new craft, under the dome is the safest place for all of us.”

Draggar cracked his knuckles, ready for the same long-overdue fight I was. No more sneaking around. No more reconnaissance missions to learn the weaknesses of our enemy. The time for war was now.

Sia Tikkot’s spherical craft landed with a silent distortion in a dusty blue puff from where it touched the ground. Isobel, Tikkot’s spirit mate was the first to disembark, followed by my new Trisess friend.

Isobel gave a friendly wave to us males but veered off and headed to the excited females waiting to greet her.

The two Sia’s clasped forearms in a show of respect from one warrior to another. Nekko had warmed up to the new Sia of Trisess but maintained his façade of dislike. The two had butted heads more than once, but there was still underlying respect despite their differences.

I offered my forearm to the Sia of Trisess. “Sia Tikkot—”

“Stop with that,” Tikkot clasped my forearm and clapped me on the shoulder. “Just Tikkot. We’re friends. It doesn’t sound right when you say it, anyway. Spar with me while I’m here. I want to make sure you haven’t forgotten what I taught you with the spear. I promise not to beat you up too badly.”

“You won’t.”

“He’s been practicing,” Nekko interrupted with a smirk. “Looks more and more like you every suns-rise.”

“That’s good to hear,” Tikkot smirked back. “My protégé has not let me down.”

“Soon he will be shedding his kiltus in favor of that strip of cloth you sport between your legs,” Nekko poked. “Tell me, Sia Tikkot, does it make it easier to climb trees with no boots?”

“Enough with the bantering.” I caught Sia Jakkar’s slight grin before growing serious. “Aggar. Collect our team of techs. We need to strategize our next move before this threat can get any worse.”

## Chapter Four

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The meeting Jakkar held was lasting an eternity. The team of techs had all been included, so all of us girls waited, on pins and needles, for Zikkar in the cave, he'd claimed as a workshop for all their technological gadgetry.

I was dying to know the particulars of what they were discussing. We all knew they were planning to infiltrate the dome protecting the city of Huren. My anxiety spiked with images of Vallon storming the dome to take on the Gretolics.

He was a formidable warrior, but that didn't stop me from worrying about him getting hurt.

Now was the best time for an attack. According to Hexxus, more than half of the Gretolics inside Huren had left the planet in their largest craft. They'd taken with them an unknown number of Valosian males and human females to a planet called Tirius to be traded for something called krips.

With Lily's pregnant belly growing rounder with each passing day, it was crucial to get our hands on the cure to the germ we knew as rubella that Maxxon was sure could be found inside the secret lab he and Kayyot had discovered under the palace.

Lily's baby would be half-human, but we were all concerned if the child were born female, her Valosian side would succumb to the germ like all the other Valosian females. No one was willing to take that risk.

“Elise. Stop pacing and come join us,” Isobel fussed from where she and the other girls sat on the floor and patted the empty cushion next to her. “Zikkar promised he’d help with the cell phone as soon as he gets out of the meeting.”

There were no cell phone towers on Valose, but that didn’t deter my mind from visualizing signal bars on the screen and a call to home.

“I don’t blame her for being antsy,” Willow said. “I’m dying to see if Zikkar can charge it.”

“If anyone can get it working, it’s Zikkar,” Rose declared. “Or Wynnter. He’s as smart as Zikkar.”

“What’s the deal between you and the Trisess tech, Rose?” Amy asked the question we were all curious about.

“Everybody knows you and Zikkar are bumping uglies.” Marie leaned in and whispered. “Are you banging them both, you little whore?”

Rose’s porcelain complexion turned four-hundred shades of red. “No! Ohmygod, Marie.”

“No? So, you and Zikkar aren’t doing the nasty? Or, no, you aren’t doing them both?” Marie brazenly questioned. “I need clarification.”

“Leave her alone, Marie,” Lily defended. “You don’t have to tell your business, Rose.”

“You don’t owe her or anyone else an answer,” Jane backed up Lily.

“No offense to everyone except Marie,”—Willow eyed the lewd talking brunette— “but I still can’t believe some of you are having sexual relations with aliens.”

“Well, honey.” Marie made a show of smoothing the skirt of her kilt-dress where she sat cross-legged. “You haven’t seen what they’re packing under those kilts.”

“I agree,” Isobel giggled. “These guys aren’t made the same as what we’re used to.”

“You definitely can’t beat the alien extras.” Marie’s candid remark perked up my ears. I’d been so close to finding out firsthand. So close to my first taste of what Vallon had to offer. I could still feel the warmth of his breath brush across my lips.

“I don’t care how good you sluts say the sex is, there’s not a silver cock on this planet worth staying for,” Willow remarked with a twist of her lips. “I’m off this death rock just as soon as I can find a ride.”

“With who?” Marie lifted her hands in a shrug.

“The Gretolics brought us here, they can take us home,” Willow stated, flatly.

“In what, Willow?” Marie countered. “You gonna get Aggar to fly you over to the Gretolics hovering above the mountains and ask them for a ride home?”

“Kiss my ass, Marie.” Willow dismissed her with a roll of her eyes.

“Anyway, back to Rose and her menage of Valosian cocks,” Marie wagged her eyebrows.

The new girl, Rowan, who had recovered enough from her prolonged captivity under the palace at Huren to join our ranks, shifted uncomfortably from her place on the floor. I don’t think she knew what to make of Marie’s bawdy talk.

Marie was born without a filter, so there was no telling from one moment to the next, what was going to fly out of her mouth. I appreciated her lack of pretentiousness. You got what you saw in all her foul-mouthed sassiness.

However, we needed to go easy on the new girl. She was looking a little green around the gills.

I waved annoyed hands in the air to put a halt to the bantering and settled on the cushion between Isobel and Rowan. She had remained leery and mostly silent, having woken up babbling about the Sidhe race of fairy folk from Irish folklore, and asking for her twin sister, Breena.

She’d said her dad was an Irish transplant from Dublin, Ireland, but her mom was American. Her dad must have had a

heavy hand in her upbringing since she was well versed in Irish folklore.

When she'd figured out that Nullar and Maxxon, the pointed-eared medics looking after her, were real people and not mound-dwelling fairy folk—that hadn't been the worst of the news. The shock of abduction to an alien planet aside, being without her sister had been what pushed her over the edge. It had taken Amy and Jane to talk her down from the brink of a mental collapse.

*"Are you doing okay?"* I wrote on my tablet that I'd retrieved from the cave where I slept and held it up to Rowan.

"I'm good," she gave me a wavering grin. "Just still trying to get used to all this."

*"I understand."*

Zikkar finally stepped through the entrance of the cave. Rowan's eyes rounded as they landed on him.

*"He won't hurt you."* I wrote and tapped Rowan's arm until she turned to look at me. *"He's one of the most congenial males here."*

"I know," she squeaked. Going by the alarm sparking in her clear green eyes, she was terrified.

*"You're safe here."* And I meant it. So far, the safest place I'd been on this planet was this island chain. Besides the wetlock, she hadn't been privy to all the jungle's beasts. I just hoped she toughened up before we were able to move back to Huren.

All the males were larger than any men on Earth. Both large and tall, the civilian males, like Zikkar, weren't quite as muscular as the warrior class, but still impressively cut.

Vallon had explained to me about the different bloodlines of males. You were either born a civilian, warrior, or of a royal family, like Sakkar and Jakkar, depending on your sire.

So much for an occupation of your choosing. If your sire was a warrior, you were born with Valosian steel in your hand. If you were born a civilian, the trade of your sire was passed

down to you. And royalty was royalty, whether you wanted to wear the crown or not.

I often felt sorry for Jakkar. The weight of Valose rested on his shoulders. Now he carried the burden of worry over his unborn child.

Those guys just had to get inside the dome and get that cure.

“Vallon is still discussing the mission with Sia Jakkar,” Zikkar’s eyes flitted over Rowan before addressing me. “Do you have the device you’d like me to repair?”

I nodded and hopped to my feet, handing him the cell phone.

“Vallon said it was a human comm.”

I nodded.

“Not a comm in which you’re accustomed,” Rose stepped up to help. There was a tangible awkwardness between them that hadn’t been there before, making the vibe in the room feel all weird. “It doesn’t send signals the same as your communications.”

Rose prattled on with some tech jargon that made my head hurt. I was grateful for her explanation, because, I honestly had no idea how a cell phone worked. I basically knew it needed a tower to move a signal around and that was about the extent of my wireless knowledge.

Zikkar looked over the cell phone with an expert eye then carried it over to a workbench laid out with all sorts of weird tools. It didn’t seem to bother him when I looked over his shoulder as he removed the blinged-out case and set it aside.

Next, he used what looked like the equivalent of a butter knife to pop off the back panel to reveal the inner workings. He studied all the small components then used different hand tools to make tiny adjustments before turning to address the crowd of expectant faces.

“The technology is rather primitive,” Zikkar explained. “The source of power is unlike anything I’ve ever seen. With



some slight modifications, I can make it work with a nutrilium chip.”

A ripple of excitement sped through the room.

“Not to sound pushy, but how long do you think it will take?” Willow asked.

“Only a few secs,” Zikkar answered, reaching for another tool. “The screen is small. I can project it onto a larger tablet so it’s easier for all of you to see.”

“Yes, please!” Willow clapped her hands, wearing her first genuine smile.

Finished with the modification, Zikkar handed the cell phone to Rose. My gut clenched at the crestfallen expression Zikkar was trying hard to hide. *Ugh*. They’d had some kind of falling out. It hurt me to see them both looking so forlorn.

I didn’t know Rose all that well, so asking her what had happened would feel like an invasion of privacy.

“That’s a weird-looking cell phone,” Rowan quietly remarked to me. “The one I had wasn’t flat. It was more like a small brick.”

I turned and studied her shy features. I’m sure someone had asked what year she had been abducted. To save her from rehashing fresh wounds, I didn’t question her. There was no telling how long the girls rescued from under the palace had been unconscious and caged. If the phone she remembered was a brick, then she was missing quite a few years.

We all sat around the large tablet Zikkar had set up like a TV. As soon as Rose tethered the cell phone to the tablet, it lit up, projecting the first picture of home. My heart leapt to my throat, living there as my chest tightened with longing.

I hadn’t remembered trees being so beautiful. All the ones here were variations of blues and silvers—beautiful in their own right. But back home, they were normally shades of green.

The images Rose slowly scrolled through were taken in a park during early fall and the touches of autumn were almost

too much to comprehend. Many of us rubbed at deprived eyes against the explosion of so many colors we'd long been denied.

Sniffles replaced the peels of excitement with every swipe of Rose's finger.

"Your world is exquisite." Zikkar's voice was husky with awe. "Are those your males?" The tech pointed to the screen where a man was smiling for the camera.

"Yes," Marie said. "So very vanilla, aren't they?"

"Va-nell-aw?" Zikkar repeated. "I don't know this word."

"Don't pay any attention to her, Zikkar," Jane said. "She's just being Marie."

"What's that supposed to mean, five-o?" Marie clucked her tongue.

"Just that you speak before you think," Jane said. "Don't be offended over the truth."

"Oh, I'm not," Marie shrugged, unconcerned.

We flipped through the fifty or so pictures stored on the phone several more times. None of us were able to get enough of looking through the colorful images of home. Especially Zikkar. The male had wandered into our group, easing to his knees next to a surprised Rowan.

With careful movements, as if not to startle her, he asked questions about every shot. Wanting to know about our strange modes of transportation, why we dressed in confining garments, and the names of the bright hues that seemed to hurt his eyes as he squinted at the screen.

After a time of him engaging Rowan in conversation, she visibly relaxed, answering him in her soft, unsure voice. Something that didn't go unnoticed by Rose.

"Does anyone recognize any of the people in the pictures?" Jane asked.

A round of noes circulated the room.

“Now that Zikkar’s got the phone working, who should we call first?” Isobel cackled. “911?”

“And say what?” Rose snorted. “Send help. We were abducted by aliens and need a ship home.”

“Don’t be stupid, Rose.” Marie playfully swatted at Rose’s leg where she stood next to her.

“Maybe I could finally get a message to my dad. Tell him that I’m okay.” Lily rubbed her belly in a tight circle. “And that he’s going to be a grandfather.”

Lily’s heartfelt remark was a sobering reminder of what we had all left behind. The daughter of divorced parents, I was closer to my mom than my dad. I missed her. Missed our chats about the college classes I was taking and the boys I found attractive. Even though, a relationship was something I never thought to find.

Being mute made me a natural introvert, whether I chose to be or not. I’d always wished to be more outgoing, but not being able to talk to people had made that hard.

I’d found that people tended to shy away from those with disabilities as if my lack of vocal cords was a disease they could catch. But not here. Not on this world. There was even a hot as fuck guy who had swirling silver eyes only for me, and a second heart that beat to prove he was mine for the taking.

The shuffle of booted feet at the cave entrance got my attention. I turned to see Vallon’s ethereal face wide open in disbelief at the sight of the images as Rose continued to scroll through them.

I might never see my mom again, and that was a tragedy I could do nothing about. The chances of us getting off this planet were slim to none. What I’d lost could never be replaced, but what I’d gained was beyond compare.

Vallon was here for the taking. Silver eyes silently pleading with me to choose him. I waved him over and he took a seat behind me on the floor. I was lifted from my cushion as if I weighed nothing and deposited on his large, warm lap.

His strength was swoon-worthy. My mom had taught me to be a strong, independent woman, but nestled in the warmth of his embrace, it surprised me how much I enjoyed being the weaker of the two sexes.

“Tell me what I’m seeing,” Vallon whispered close to my ear.

A shiver cascaded down my spine. Right here was a male that wanted so desperately to understand my silent words that we had made up a sign language of our own. Vallon was one-of-a-kind in the Universe. I knew in my heart and soul that I would never find a love like him back on Earth.

## Chapter Five

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The images on the tablet were as fascinating as they were devastating. That was Elise's home, and I had no right to force her to stay with me on Valose if she were able to find a way to return.

The soft brown eyes of my spirit mate were laden with a burden I'd placed there. Her grin was teary but warm as she turned in my arms to look up at me.

*"What happened at the meeting?"* Elise signed.

*"We need to talk in private,"* I signed back.

*"Oh, no! Why? What's happened?"*

*"It is still being planned."* I hadn't meant for it to come across so ominous, but I wanted to speak with her in private. The mission was going to happen soon and there was still a level of uncertainty about how we were going to pull it off. *"Come on. We can talk in the food storage cave."*

It wasn't time yet to begin preparations of the mid-sunrises meal, so no one would be about. I could feel the tension in her body as she walked stiffly ahead of me down the path carved out of the side of the low mountain that was the island.

Once we were inside the cave, she turned anxious eyes on me. I didn't keep her waiting. "The mission needs to happen soon," I said, starting to pace inside the small space. "Sia Jakkar may not wear his anxiety on the outside, but with every sun-rise that passes, his concern for Sias Lily and their

unborn nursling grows. That Gretolic craft isn't helping matters."

Elise made herself comfortable on one of the many food crates, arranging her kiltus-dress over her lap, and stayed quiet while I talked.

"Zikkar, Wynnter, and Hexxus have an idea of how to keep the portable gate open," I said. "First, it will need to be attached to the dome."

Elise's hands started to fly. *"They want you to be a personal guard while they work. Don't they?"*

"Yes. Sazzar and I."

She visibly gulped. *"Why does it always have to be you?"*

I knew she wasn't going to take this well. "Sazzar and I work well together."

*"I have no doubt that you do. The both of you just returned from a mission as a distraction for Aggar and his team to enter the city. Why do you have to go again? Can't they send somebody else? The jungle of Huren is dangerous. Why do you even need the gate? Didn't Draggar and Marie get inside the city through a mine shaft?"*

"Remember the mine shaft was filled with Gretolics and civilians under their influence. The confines of the shaft would act as a chokehold. We would be trapped with no place to go. Not a very strategic move for an army of warriors."

Her eyes glistened with concern. I stepped in close and cupped her face, tilting her chin up to touch her forehead to mine. I loved my face this close to hers. To feel her breath mingled with mine and to breathe in her sweet scent had become an addiction.

I pulled back and tucked soft tendrils of her mane behind her ears. "We need that portable gate to operate properly. There is no safer place on Valose than inside the dome at Huren. Especially with that Gretolic vessel looming above the Jurigon mountains.

“The island may not have the danger of the jungle’s creatures or the threat of a Nuttaki horde, but that wetlock proved the reach of Valose’s predators were limitless. We have to get everyone inside the dome.”

Elise loosely crossed her arms in defeated defiance.

“Once the gate is established, Sia Jakkar will march us and the warriors of Clan Trisess into the city and attempt to take it back.”

*“Attempt?”*

“We are all confident in our fighting skills and know we will slaughter many Gretolics before...” My words trailed off as I thought of the dilemma which still plagued us.

*“Before what?”*

“Before the Gretolics are given a chance to use their mind control over us.”

*“I thought Maxxon and Hexxus were designing a comm that acted as an earplug so you could hear each other while blocking out the Gretolics.”*

“We tested it. It doesn’t work,” I said. “Our auditory systems are too sensitive. Outside noises bleed through the plug when combined with the comm.”

*“You didn’t mention Clan Jurigon in this fight to take back Huren. I thought Jakkar had allied with them against the Gretolics.”*

“Lennox, Sia Xennox’s tech, captured a comm transmission between the ruler and two of his clansmen.” I clenched my jaw so hard it cracked. “They talked of a nutrone powered machine being crafted in secret beneath the mountain. Sia Xennox lied. Clan Jurigon has been working with the Gretolics all this time.

“The machine Tikkot found was a miniature prototype of a larger scaled weapon. One that could destroy a large spacecraft in a single nutrone blast.”

*“How can you trust anything Lennox says? He was forcibly taken from Clan Jurigon.”*



“Like Clan Huren, not all of Clan Jurigon are guilty of collaborating with the aliens. Lennox was thoroughly questioned by Draggar. He’s one of the innocents.

“There’s more.” I speared troubled fingers through my mane. “Aggar and Tekkon have finished listening to the Gretolics ship’s logs downloaded off the Trisess craft. The Gretolic faction hiding inside Trisess had plans to steal the weapon and use it to destroy the other faction’s craft as it left the city of Huren. They took to the stars before the plan could be carried out.”

Elise’s mouth dropped open. “*So, it’s confirmed the Gretolics are fighting among themselves?*”

“Yes.”

Elise turned her eyes skyward in exhaustion. “*We can’t get a fucking break!*” she signed with hard hands. “*So once the guys fix the gate and can maintain a stable portal, Jakkar is going to march into Huren and try to take back the city, or die trying? All the while, Clan Jurigon is sitting on a weapon of mass destruction?*”

I groaned and scrubbed my hands down my face. “Yes.” I hated her summary of the events, but that’s exactly what we planned to do.

“*What if us girls were to cause a distraction like we did at Trisess. We could—*”

I cut her off by capturing her hands with mine. “That idea was barely brought up before it was squashed. Sia Jakkar will not allow you and the other females to put yourselves in harm’s way again.”

She forcibly pulled her hands free. “*Why? Because we’re women?*” Her eyebrows snapped together. “*I thought we did a pretty damn good job with those Gretolics at Trisess. Jane will go off the rails when she’s told she can’t help defend Valose.*”

I paused to study the storm veiling her features. “You are even more beautiful when you’re fierce.”

“*Do not think flattery will get you out of that sexist mindset, Vallon.*” Elise painted me with a brutal glare. “*Just*

*because we're girls doesn't mean we're powerless."*

Valosian females had been naturally passive, happy to allow a male to shield them. Not these humans. Human females were as delicate as they were aggressive.

There was something exhilarating about the turbulence brewing within my normally kind and compassionate Elise. Images of her taking control as we mated triggered an erotic melody that vibrated the cave walls. I was thrumming so hard, it hurt my ribcage.

"Does this feel powerless to you?" I placed her palm over my sternum. "Feel what you do to me. I'm a warrior. Trained to wield Valosian steel with deadly accuracy against the most lethal foes. Yet here I stand, knees weakened, from simply being in your presence.

"None of us doubt the strength or fortitude of any of you," I spoke with unsuppressed passion. "When you all stood against the Gretolics, it went against every fiber of our beings to watch you all face off against our enemy while we simply stood by and did nothing."

*"You didn't stand by and do nothing, Vallon!"* Elise's hands formed her words so hard; I could almost hear them. *"You all took those assholes by surprise and slaughtered them."*

"We all agree that each and every one of you are treasures from the stars. Placing you in harm's way is not the way of a Valosian warrior." When she raised her hands to argue, I intervened, holding them in mine. "Let me finish. You asked us once to go against the grain of our beliefs. We did so with great reluctance. Please don't ask us to be so reckless again. I, for one, cannot watch what matters to me the most, face off against our common enemy again."

Her face softened and she ducked her head before meeting my eyes once more. She gently tugged her hand out from under mine.

*"I want... I want so badly to be your spirit mate. If only..."*

"If only, what?"

*“If only I knew you wouldn’t risk your life to save mine. I know how the males turn aggressive once the bond is made. I can’t allow you to risk your life for me. It would be selfish of me to put you in that position.”*

“Oh, Elise.” I smoothed my hand over her soft cheek. “My most precious nula. Whether we are connected by a shawra or not, I would gladly give my life to save yours.”

Elise rubbed at the center of her chest, at the place where I knew her spirit gathered. Mine banged behind my sternum, demanding to be released to join with hers.

*“I don’t want you to die for me.”* Her tears spilled in giant droplets from her lashes. *“I don’t want you to die at all. This place—this planet is just waiting to gobble us up. I would be too much of a liability. You deserve a mate that is whole. One with a voice that can speak words of love you deserve to hear.”*

*“I can hear you just fine. You don’t need to speak from here,”*—I signed and touched her throat— *“you only need to speak from your heart.”*

*“Oh, my silver silence. You’re like a fairy tale. You know that? Everything you say, or don’t say, is always perfect.”*

“As long as I am by your side, I vow to never let any harm come to you.”

*“I know. And that’s what scares me the most.”*

As I read the words Elise’s elegant hands were forming, it was as if the clouds parted, and an idea revealed itself.

The answer to our dilemma was right in front of me. Elise was the key. What she viewed as a disability was the key to saving my world from the gray invaders.

*“Fucking Helios!”* Why hadn’t I thought of this before? “You’re the smartest being I know.”

I kissed her soundly before snatching her off the trunk to race out of the food storage cave and barreled into the cave where Sia Jakkar and his most trusted council, Nekko, Draggar, Aggar, and Tikkot, still sat with their heads together.

“Something on your mind, young warrior?” Draggar grumbled.

“Elise. My beautiful spirit mate will be instrumental in us winning this war. She is the key!”

“It has already been decided the females will not be placed in harm’s way,” Nekko grouched.

“She won’t be,” I said aloud then spoke with my hands. “*We can use the sign language Elise and I created to speak to one another.*” When all the males looked at me as if I’d lost my senses, I spoke out loud, “Could you not hear what I just said?”

Nekko pursed his lips in annoyance. “I can assure you; we are in no mood for games, Vallon.” The male was losing his jovial disposition thanks to the Gretolics. Maybe my idea would put him in a better frame of mind.

“Neither am I,” I signed as I spoke the words. “If we use our hands to speak to each other, we can fully plug our ears without the comm device. We won’t need our ears to hear, and the Gretolics will be unable to use their mind control against us.”

Every jaw went slack as silence filled the cave.

“Will you teach us how to speak with our hands?” Sia Jakkar asked a weeping Elise.

## Chapter Six

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**J**akkar approached me. His regal head respectfully bent. “Will you teach us how to speak with our hands, Elise?”

I nodded, eager to help. *“It would be my honor to help in this war with the Gretolics.”*

Vallon translated my signed words. As discussions erupted all around me, I swelled with pride. For once, my silence was no longer viewed as a disability. Who knew my lack of speech would come in handy?

My mom always said things happened for a reason. That you didn’t always know that reason right away. Sometimes you had to wait, but the reason would always become clear.

It was clear as a bell now.

Vallon had said I was the key to winning the war. *The key!* Never would I have dreamed that I would play such a crucial role in something so important all because I had no voice.

And this would put me back in the fight. I couldn’t physically swing a heavy-ass sword, but I could do this. I could help Vallon, and the other males win the war against our mutual enemy with silence rather than steel.

The ground began to tremble with a low-level vibration. All the faces in the room grew perplexed. I’d felt something similar when in the jungle of Huren. That time had turned out to be a rynose stampede, but I very much doubted a herd of grass grazing animals were running across the ground above us.

As the vibrations deepened, it felt less like the pounding of animal hooves and more like—

“*Earthquake,*” I signed to a confused Vallon. They must not have those here or never experienced one before. If that was what all the shaking was about, we didn’t need ten tons of rock over our heads. “*We need to get out of here.*”

All the males were of a like mind, and we raced up the path to the top of the island mountain. Many others were already there. All eyes cast toward the Gretolic craft which now had a wide, transparent beam shooting down from its center. A hazy white, it appeared to be pulsating.

What was more ominous than the strange beam was what it was doing to the Caspeen Sea. The turbulence of the ever-churning waves had been tamed into heavy ripples as if sound waves were being pushed through the salty liquid.

The techs were gathered together at the Grites ship with Lennox at one console and Zikkar at the other. Wynnter and Hexxus each held a tablet that was directed at the beam.

We followed Jakkar over to join them along with a few of the other warriors. “Tell me you know what that is?”

Wynnter touched his finger to the tablet in his hand and shook his silvery head. “Some kind of luminary ray used to detect power sources.”

“Like a giant tragore device?” Aggar questioned, peering over Wynnter’s shoulder to get a better look at the tablet’s screen.

“Yes. Exactly like that.” Wynnter tapped and swiped his fingers across the tablet’s sleek face.

“The only power source beneath the mountain is nutrone,” Jakkar commented with a wary eye at the beam.

“That’s correct. Let’s not forget the Gretolic’s weapon being built under the mountain. Maybe that’s what the craft has been scanning for.” Hexxus tapped on his own device. “By the looks of the increasing energy signature emanating off that beam, the ship is powering up.”

“Powering up to do what?” Vallon’s normally calm voice rose higher with every word.

“I can’t be sure.” Hexxus tapped faster. “It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

“The wave is intensifying,” Lennox called out from inside the Grites craft. “And... it appears to be solidifying.”

All eyes swung to the beam that was developing from a smokey shaft to a solid purple.

“What in the Spirits are they doing?” Aggar gawked.

“Try and ping Jurigon’s comm again!” Jakkar shouted and cursed. “Now that the Gretolics are making a move, maybe someone will finally answer.”

The world exploded in a single bright burst. As one, all the spectators on the mountain dropped to the ground in a protective posture. Vallon draped his body over mine. Caged in heavy arms, his breadth consumed me. I trembled despite the safety he offered.

The eruption of light dimmed into a softly glowing orb that rested at the base of the craft. It just sat there pulsating in an ominous sphere. All were silent except the tech males, who were rapidly chatting amongst themselves, comparing readings from their various devices.

Before anyone could determine the Gretolic’s intentions, the orb grew brighter than the sun. I shielded my eyes and blinked away the hot spots. Just as my vision cleared, a high-pitched sound caused all the males to slap their hands protectively over their sensitive ears. The pitch increased until it pierced every eardrum.

The worst was yet to come.

In a blinding pulse, the orb shot down the purple shaft and into the mountain at a velocity that shook Valose to its core. The ripples of the Caspeen Sea developed into huge, rolling waves. One after another, the seawater beat against the sides of our island mountain, soaking every horrified face in a salty spray.



I clung to the support of Vallon's hard body. Just as I thought the world would never stop trembling, all went oddly quiet as if nothing had ever happened.

The waves dropped as if poured from a glass to rejoin the sea. We were showered with a dark ash. The effect reminded me of the fallout from a nuclear explosion. Off in the distance, Mount Jurigon smoldered like a volcano on the brink of eruption.

Whispered voices of the shocked who had ridden out the Gretolic attack inside the caves below, cautiously climbed the path to mingle with us on the field above.

The Gretolic's craft, which had remained above the Jurigon mountains suddenly zigzagged before streaking across the sky. Then the sky came alive with a swarm of smaller, one-man crafts following in its wake. Laser fire flashed in quick, short bursts, pelting the hull of the larger craft.

The hulky Gretolic vessel was surprisingly nimble as it bobbed and weaved through the onslaught of the smaller ships. Vallon moved us to take cover near the hull of a bubble craft. Crouched low, we watched the fight rage in the skies over the jungle of Huren.

Like pissed off bumblebees on a mission, the small ships circled the Gretolics, zipping and buzzing, until they surrounded their larger vessel.

The Gretolics didn't return fire, only took what the small ships were dishing out and struggled to outmaneuver the determined pests. In an evasive movement that defied all laws of gravity, the Gretolic craft dropped out of the sky like a stone. Before it hit the ground, it changed direction and swooped down to race across the treetops, disturbing a clutch of nesting wetlocks.

Agitated, the winged beasts scattered in all directions before amassing and flying in an elegant formation like a predatory flock of geese before returning to their nests.

The Gretolics craft cleared the jungle and dove down to skim over the shore until it hit the sea and skated across the

surface of the water. Full speed ahead, it charged toward our island.

Behind it streamed a trail of the smaller ships, still firing shots at the hull. The blasts that hit their mark did so in a shower of sparks. The shots that missed whizzed by over our heads in a frightening light show.

Nestled in Vallon's hold, I squeezed him tighter as the Gretolic craft grew closer. It was going to hit our island head-on. I tucked my face into the heavy pad of his pectoral, afraid to watch the impending impact.

Like witnessing a train wreck, I couldn't stop myself from turning my face for a peek just as the massive vessel pulled up hard. I held my breath as it glided up the side of our island mountain. The bottom of the vessel becoming a wall of matte black metalloid, casting a shadow to rival that of a solar eclipse.

The smaller ships followed suit, zipping over us like a swarm of giant silver locusts before aiming straight up for the sky. We were hit with a gust of wind that tugged our hair at our scalps and left behind a spray of seawater in a thick cloud of blue dirt.

Once all had settled, and the storm of spacecraft had disappeared into the clouds, people began to emerge from where they'd hunkered down. The aftermath of the battle in the sky and the attack on the mountain fell like burning snowflakes to cover the ground in a nasty ash.

Shellshocked faces of the girls met the blanched scales of the Valosian males. None of us having ever experienced anything of the like. Warriors scanned the sky with swords drawn while the girls clung together.

"Sia Havvar was right," Tikkot, the Sia of Clan Trisess, was the first to speak. "He said the skies would fall upon us and they have."

"Yet, here we still stand," Sia Jakkar pointed out. "Hale and hearty. Valose is not lost as he predicted, and it never will be as long as my hearts still beat."

“Not that I doubt your ability to lead, Sia Jakkar,”—Tikkot swung his gaze to the clearing sky— “but, how do we fight an enemy that flies?”

“Weapons!” Draggar barked. “Weapons that can be fired from the ground. That’s how we fight them.”

“I need to pick Sakkar’s brain and see if he remembers where he acquired the plasma gun he gifted me. With him under the Gretolic’s influence, how had they allowed him to keep such a destructive weapon?” Jakkar ruminated then curled his lip in disgust. “To think, I wasted all those plasma charges on target practice.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. The plasma gun has too short a range to have hit the Gretolic craft from the ground,” Nekko reasoned.

“Those things came out of nowhere, with no warning whatsoever.” Vallon flicked his hand toward the puffy clouds where the storm of smaller ships had exited. “Even if we had a long-ranged weapon, we weren’t given time to react before they were on us.”

“They weren’t after us, but the Gretolic craft,” Tekkon pointed out. “Maybe those are the Gretolic’s enemy, the Yulineons, they spoke of in their ship’s logs.”

“Maybe.” Aggar turned troubled eyes to the sky. “How do we know for sure?”

“I was able to record the event on the Grites’ console,” Lennox yelled from where he had remained inside the Grites’ ship. Then he popped his head out of the hole torn in the hull. “We can analyze the footage. Study both types of vessels. Perhaps we can even figure out a way to set up an alert to detect them when they breach our atmosphere. I can get a closer look at that beam, too. Maybe even determine what it was they were after.”

“Make that happen, Lennox.” Sia Jakkar looked around until he found Hexxus. “I need you to try again to raise Clan Jurigon on the comm. Find out what kind of damage the beam caused.”

Hexxus's normally frazzled expression focused, giving me a glimpse of the tech in a rare moment of lucidity. "I will see what I can do, Sia." Hexxus raced down the path to the tech's cave.

With Lennox at the console facing a large screen, as many of us who could crowd inside the Grites's ship. Rose squeezed in to stand with me. The moment Lennox ran his finger along the bottom of the screen to rewind the footage, Rose grasped my hand.

The male zoomed in on the hazy beam and she squeezed harder. I tore my eyes away from the screen to watch her jaw tighten. Rose was the only girl among us who had a clue about all this tech stuff. It concerned me that she looked more nervous than I felt.

I tugged her hand to gain her attention. The fear I saw in her face was startling.

*"What is it?"* I mouthed.

Her throat worked hard to swallow. "Something bad, Elise. Something really bad."

My face blanched white, unprepared for such a foreboding response.

Lennox replayed the action in slow motion. The screen became a blinding purple before showing us the weird orb at the base of the ship.

I was glad for the support Vallon's arm provided wrapped around my middle. His hand splayed and rested on my belly and just under the swell of my breasts.

We watched in horror as the orb dropped and hit the highest peak of Mount Jurigon like a bomb. He was able to track the orb's power signature as it burrowed its way down through hundreds of feet of rock and continued until it exploded about twenty feet beyond ground level. So much for Xennox's impenetrable mountain fortress.

What came next was a plume of ash and debris from the hole drilled out by the orb. Frighteningly, the orb remained and began an ascent as it returned to the base of the craft. Only

now it carried a cluster of glowing material in its belly that was deposited inside the ship.

“Pause that and go back.” Zikkar leaned over Lennox’s shoulder touched the screen with two fingers and zoomed in on the image. “That is nutrone. A large core of it.”

“Were they targeting the weapon?” Jakkar asked. “Did they destroy it?”

“That remains uncertain,” Lennox answered. “But it does appear that they mined the vast majority of nutrone.”

“It was a mining vessel?” Aggar sucked a hiss through his teeth. “Since when have the Gretolics had one of those?”

“Since now,” Draggar grunted.

“What kind of damage did the orb do?” Jakkar’s voice was grave.

“If I were to guess.” Wynnter studied the text on his tablet. “Going by the power levels of the beam, I would say the orb destroyed everything in its path, including a portion of the Caverns of the Ancients.”

“I told you,” Rose whispered. “It was going to be something really bad. I hope Clan Jurigon aren’t all dead.”

“Can someone go ask Hexxus if he’s been able to raise anyone from Clan Jurigon on the comm?” Jakkar rubbed a tired hand across his forehead.

“I’ll go,” Tekkon volunteered. With as many of us crushed inside the small craft, it took some shifting of bodies before Tekkon was free and racing across the field to the tech’s cave to find Hexxus.

Lennox started the playback. Our collective breaths were held as we watched the swarm of ships descend from the sky and fire upon the Gretolic craft. I wanted to cheer them on, but at the same time, the hair on the back of my neck stood on end.

Lennox paused the action and zoomed in on a single craft. He fiddled with a few buttons and knobs on the console

bringing up some text that looked to be a cross between hieroglyphics and Japanese that I knew to be Valosian writing.

“The power signature is nothing I recognize,” Lennox said. “As small as the ship appears, I would say only a single person could fit inside.”

No one commented as Lennox restarted the playback. The chase went into full swing. The smaller ships did only minor damage with laser fire that appeared to ricochet off the hull. I wasn't a techy, but it appeared the Gretolics had some kind of invisible shielding protecting them.

Once all the crafts ascended into the sky and beyond the clouds, everyone stood still and remained unblinking, simply trying to absorb what had taken place.

“What is that?” Aggar pointed to a spiraling tendril of smoke that reminded me of airplane contrails.

Lennox paused and rewound the footage. He zoomed in on the smoke and the distinct triangular object in the lead.

“*Oh, fuck!*” I mouthed and shared a look with Rose.

“It isn't Gretolic, nor is it the Grites,” Zikkar said. “Comparing the power signature with the unknown ships, it isn't one belonging to them either.”

We followed the contrails as they swept across the jungle and disappeared off the screen. We all rushed out of the Grites' craft and searched the horizon for any sign of the strange triangular craft.

Lost to the curvature of the planet, the contrails evaporated in the sky, erasing the existence of the craft we had watched hurtling through the air.

Tekkon came racing across the field to where we all stood. “Murrox says the fortress has sustained major damage. He's requesting assistance to help evacuate the survivors from the mountain.” Tekkon slid to a halt. His face ashen. “Sia Xennox... is dead.”

Just then, Tikkot's comm pinged. He answered it to a male who sounded winded as if he were running.

“Something has crashed to the south of our settlement,” the male on the other end huffed in harsh breaths. “We are headed there now.”

“Synnox!” Tikkot called out in alarm. “Stop where you are and wait until I can join you. Do not approach.”

To my horror, Vallon volunteered to assist Tikkot. I know they’d become friends, so I shouldn’t be surprised, but Vallon in danger made me crazy.

“Yes. Go with Tikkot and report back to me as soon as you know what we’re dealing with.” Jakkar approved Vallon’s request to help his friend. “Aggar. Take a spherical craft and lead a squad to Mount Jurigon. Rescue any survivors and bring them back here. Take Nullar with you to assist with the injured.”

“Yes, Sia,” Aggar bobbed his chin.

“Elise will begin teaching the exiled warriors her hand language.” Jakkar’s hard eyes softened when they landed on me. “Tikkot. As soon as your warriors are able, she will teach them the same. We need to join our forces and prepare to take back the city of Huren as soon as possible. Under the dome is the safest place for all of us.”

The weight of what I must do hit me for the first time, and I gulped. Not in fear, but with pride. This magnificent leader of the entire planet had turned to *me* for help.

My mom had always said I would do great things in my life. I never believed her, thinking she was just tooting my horn. She had an uncanny way of always being right. Here I was, a million miles away, and she was once again, proving me wrong.

“Sazzar and Tekkon will escort Wynnter and Zikkar to the dome,” Jakkar ordered further. “I need that gate up and operational. Ping me as soon as it is ready.”

Sazzar and Tekkon nodded their agreement.

“Count me in.” Rose stepped forward.

“No females will be put in danger.”

“I won’t be on the frontlines, Jakkar.” Rose stood tall against the ruler. “It wasn’t just the guys that worked on converting the weapon into a solidified light displacer. I had something to do with it too.”

“I would never discount the work you’ve done. You’ve been a great asset to this clan,” Jakkar defended. “Yet, we all agreed protecting the females is the most important thing above all.”

“I appreciate the chivalry, Jakkar, and I’m in no hurry to see one of those gray freaks again, but they need my help to get the gate reconfigured,” Rose gently countered. “I promise to hide in the bubble craft when the fighting commences.”

Jakkar exchanged a look with Zikkar. The tech opened his mouth to speak, but Wynnter abruptly cut him off.

“She will be kept safe and out of harm’s way.” Wynnter cut fierce eyes at Zikkar.

“Rose is correct,” Zikkar returned the intensity of Wynnter’s glare. “We need her assistance. She will be kept safe—“

“I will make sure of it,” Wynnter finished with a cross of his arms.

Rose’s porcelain complexion heated up to a bright red as the males fought over her. No wonder there was an awkwardness that had settled between her and Zikkar.



# Chapter Seven

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**E**lise was safe on the island with Isobel and the other females. That was what I kept reassuring myself as Tikkot flew us over the Caspeen Sea toward the Trisess forest. My spirit mate would be well taken care of and guarded by the remaining warriors, but not being the one doing the guarding made me nervous.

Not that I didn't trust the skills of the other males in my clan, but the only way I knew for certain my female was safe was to have eyes on her. There was no echo of her spirit living within me to communicate her emotions.

As we grew closer to the mainland, the scanner was no longer required. We could position the crash site of the triangular alien spacecraft by the tendrils of sooty smoke that clung to the bushy tree boughs of the forest before breaking up and floating away with the cooling breeze that marked the change of seasons.

I shifted uneasily as we flew closer. Valose had changed so much in such a short amount of time, we were all floundering to keep up. Just when we thought we had a handle on the current alien invasion, a new threat had swooped down from the stars with laser fire, to make a mockery out of our swords and spears.

No one had said it out loud, but we were so out of our league compared to these otherworldly beings. Now I was on my way to intercept yet another.

My hand found its way to the center of my chest as it had so many times before. I rubbed over the place where my shawra should be. Over the hollow ache where my Elise's presence should be living. I wished with everything in me that I knew what she was feeling right now. The feel of her there, to know she felt safe, would make it easier for me to concentrate on the task at hand.

Her face had dropped into a mask of fear when I'd volunteered to help Tikkot. I wished I could take away her worries, but my heart was that of a Valosian warrior. It was ingrained in me to fight for and protect the people of Valose. She and the other females were now a part of my world, whether they wanted to be here or not.

Every alien being who had ventured to Valose was considered an enemy until proven otherwise. To protect not only the people of Valose but my spirit mate, I had to confront whatever was at the base of that smoldering wreckage.

Tikkot flew us over the site. The trajectory of the craft's descent had carved a path, leaving a trail of broken boughs in its wake. I peered down through the transparent floor of our craft. Jagged metalloid glinted off what I could see of the wreckage.

The dense canopy kept most of the smoldering vessel hidden, but from what I could see, it was like none of the other ships we'd seen so far. The body of the craft was cylindrical with wings like a wetlock jutting out on either side in varying shades of silvers and grays.

We went around for another pass. Nothing seemed to be moving. Whatever alien had crashed here was either dead or incapacitated.

"Fuck a dome over the city of Huren," Tikkot cursed. "We need a shield over our whole damn planet."

"Smart thinking for a tree-climber," I smirked. "You should pitch that idea to the scholars."

"Which just proves what I've always suspected."

“Oh.” I loosely crossed my arms and tilted my head. “And what’s that?”

“That the warriors of Clan Trisess are smarter than the warriors of Huren.”

“The wishful thinking of a young Sia,” I returned.

“You’re getting faster and better at the brash comebacks.”

“A skill I learned from you,” I volleyed back.

“I’m a good teacher.”

“So, it would seem.” My comment ended our nervous banter. Neither one of us would ever admit to the anxiety flashing over our scales in rabid blues. Warriors were trained to never show unease when faced with an enemy, even an unknown one.

Besides, the jesting between us didn’t belong in view of his clan and not because of the gravity of the situation, but out of respect for what he was—the ruler of Trisess.

Tikkot activated the comm to announce our arrival. Synnox stepped out of the tree line and raised his spear high in the air. He landed us near where his chief scout stood. As we touched the ground, a group of Trisess warriors emerged from the forest to stand before their new Sia.

Synnox greeted Tikkot by offering his forearm to clasp. The males exchanged a mutual show of respect in the way of warriors.

I took my place among the Trisess warriors and listened to Tikkot give a briefing on what we knew about the alien craft, which wasn’t much. His clan absorbed every word, regarding him with trust and reverence to his station. I was proud to call him, friend.

Each male carried a spear, the preferred weapon of Clan Trisess. Only a scant few were tipped with nutrone reminding me anew how ill-equipped we were against the aliens who found our world so intriguing.

“The craft lies at the southernmost edge of the forest,” Tikkot explained. “It could not be identified by any of our

scholars, so we don't know what we're walking into."

A ripple of whispered curses swept through the warriors.

Tikkot flashed silver palms to silence the crowd. "Take every precaution. We don't know what kind of weapons they might have on board. I want nutrone spears to the front. We surround the craft before we attempt to make entry. It's not as large as the Gretolic craft that remains in our forest to the southeast, but big enough to house several males. Be at the ready to give them a fight."

On silent feet, we cautiously approached the craft, keeping to the trees. My booted feet were heavy and worked against me on the debris-littered ground. I had to concentrate on stepping lightly so as not to make noise. Now I knew why the Trisess' males never wore foot coverings. The lack of a sole made progress stealthier.

I copied the Trisess warrior's movements, staying hidden behind tree trunks and low-hanging branches, our scales shifting colors to blend with the surroundings of the icy blue foliage. These males were experts at becoming one with the forest.

Tears welled in my eyes, and I blinked hard against the sting of charred metalloid. My nose began to run as we stepped through the debris field.

The craft seemed to go on forever, much larger than what we'd originally thought from the air. Wings jutted out on either side, giving the craft its triangular shape, but were now twisted, and embedded in the blue dirt.

Tikkot gave the signal to pause. I crouched low, clutching the spear he had gifted and taught me to use when we'd first met. A lighter weapon than my twin blades, the preferred weapon of the Trisess clan had taken some getting used to.

Tikkot made a gesture for us to fan out around the craft. He waved me forward and pointed to a crack in the hull. Without being able to properly communicate, I had to assume he wanted me to peek inside.

If Tikkot had known the language Elise and I had created, we could have conversed without making a sound. Now that our planet had become a hot spot of alien activity, there wasn't a warrior of Valose that wouldn't benefit from her teachings.

I tightened the grip on my spear and eased forward until I reached the hull. Then I flattened myself against the steaming metalloid, focusing my sensitive auditory system on any sounds coming from within. Met with silence, I swallowed a breath and leaned toward the crack—

“Looking for me?” The shock of baritone was like an explosion in the dense quiet. “My ship is leaking proethinal into the main cabin. I wouldn't advise going inside until it fully dissipates.”

Every muscle in my body tensed as I whirled on my heel to face in the direction the voice originated. Ready for battle, the males carrying nutrone tipped spears stepped in front. We squinted into the thick of the forest, but none could get a look at who had spoken.

“I would appreciate it if you didn't fire,” the disembodied voice said. “I am not your enemy and didn't mean to crash on your world. I want no trouble, only help.”

“Show yourself!” Tikkot demanded.

“Only with your vow as a warrior of Valose that you will do me no harm.”

Tikkot and I shared a look. How did this stranger know about the ways of Valosian warriors?

“I cannot vow such a thing. I will not walk my people into a trap.”

“You can point your weapons. I will emerge slowly with palms up, but only with your vow that you will not fire upon me.”

Tikkot thought a moment. His eyes shifted to the warriors with the nutrone spears and nodded. “Do not engage unless he gives you cause.”

Tikkot quickly clipped out orders to split up the warriors. Half kept the craft surrounded in case the male was trying to create a diversion, while me and the others focused on the area where the voice filtered through the trees.

“Ready?” Tikkot flashed his palms.

The warriors nodded their agreement, remaining in a fighting stance with weapons at the ready.

“I vow as a warrior of Valose and Sia of Clan Trisess that you will not be harmed unless you give me a reason,” Tikkot announced, scanning the thick of the trees for any movement.

“Agreed.” Twigs and dried foliage crunched beneath a heavy gait.

“Come out slowly,” Tikkot warned.

A huge form began to emerge. “You may find my appearance alarming,” the voice said before breaching the foliage with an enormous body of a strange hue. He was wearing a dull heavily woven material like a second skin.

“I am Zaku,” the male said. “My mate is injured, and I cannot access the clinic inside my craft for medic supplies. I require assistance.”

“You speak Valosian, yet you are decidedly not,” Tikkot addressed the male with wide eyes.

Taller than any male I’d ever seen, his shoulders were as wide as a mountain. By the measure of his biceps, I’d wager he could single-handedly take on a full-grown patooga and win.

From his head sprouted a mane blacker than a bottomless pit that fell in a liquid sheet down his back. Besides the shock of his colorful scales was the unholy glow from his eyes. The pupils weren’t round like a males should be, but slitted like that of a wetlocks.

“That’s correct, Sia.” Zaku bowed slightly to Tikkot. “My people are known as Moktians. I do not wish to offend by cutting short introductions, but my mate needs help. If I could trouble you for some medic supplies to treat her injuries.”

“Be quick and bring Riccof here,” Tikkot instructed the closest warrior before turning back to Zaku. “Where is your mate?”

“Just inside the trees,” Zaku made a slight gesture with his hand.

“Go to her,” Tikkot nodded. “We will follow. Be of care that you make no false moves.”

“Of course, Sia.”

Whoever this alien was, knew enough about our world to show Tikkot the respect of his station. As we followed at a distance behind Zaku, I took notice of the male’s pronounced limp and wondered how badly he and his mate had been injured in the crash. Judging by the look of his ship, it was a wonder they lived at all.

Zaku slowed as we neared a recognizable form then crouched with a painful grunt. “Ivy. Open your eyes. Stay awake for me.”

A feminine moan floated over from where she’d been carefully laid on a soft mossie pad. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

My head cocked to the side as my translator deciphered a familiar language. This alien had switched from Valosian to the human language, the females called Enng-lesh.

Tikkot whipped out his arm to block me as I stepped curiously forward. “Keep your distance,” he warned.

“Your mate,” I addressed Zaku. “What species is she?”

His peculiar eyes flashed to me. “My mate. My Ivy is a human.”

“Where did you come by her?” Tikkot questioned suspiciously.

“Earth.”

A piece of me died when the name of my spirit mate’s world dropped like a stone from his lips. He knew the way to her home. Knew how to fly her there. Given an operational



spacecraft, he could easily return her. And I would never see my Elise again.

Riccof came to a skidding halt at his first sight of Zaku. With a sideways glance at Tikkot, the medic warily approached the newcomer and dropped to his haunches next to the female, Ivy.

Zaku didn't wait for permission but dove into the medic's bag and pulled free an internal scanner. With a competency that raised as many questions as it did eyebrows, the alien operated the device as if he'd been doing it his whole life.

He rattled off each injury he came to while Riccof began treatment of the most serious wounds first. Both males worked quickly and efficiently until Zaku sat back with an exhausted slump of his mammoth shoulders.

"Many thanks." Zaku shared a relieved look with us all. "Humans are so fragile. I was fearful she would not live. I owe you all a debt of gratitude..." As if drained of all energy, the male suddenly collapsed to his side in a crumpled heap.

For several heartbeats, we all stared, dumbfounded. Riccof was the first to spring into action.

"His body chemistry is nothing like ours." The medic began a body scan of the unconscious alien. "But it appears he suffers from internal bleeding." The medic worked fast over the body of the lifeless male. "Help me lay him out flat. Careful to move him gently. As much blood that has pooled around his organs, it took everything in him to save his mate first."

"His actions speak of great character," I mumbled.

"Perhaps," Riccof replied with a concerned brow. "We will only know for certain what kind of male he is when the female wakes and reveals whether she went with him willingly. She could very well be an abductee like all the others."

"Ping Sia Jakkar," Tikkot looked to me. "Tell him what all we've found."

# Chapter Eight

---

I was beyond thrilled to be traveling to Trisess with Lily and Jakkar to join Vallon. My heart pounded with the need to set eyes on him again. My body tingled to be wrapped in his immense embrace.

Vallon's words played, over and over again, inside my head, squashing one of the reasons why I held myself back. *"My most precious nula. Whether we are connected by a shawra or not, I would gladly give my life to save yours."*

I wanted so much to be his, to wear matching shawras that deemed me his mate. The pull behind my sternum tightened the closer we got to the forest, culminating in an urgency that needed to be answered. I was on the verge of giving in to the call.

This trip wasn't just about me rejoining Vallon. Jakkar was desperate for me to begin teaching as many warriors as possible the sign language Vallon and I had created. A group of Huren warriors would soon be arriving from the island to join the Trisess warriors and my first class would begin.

For the first time in my life, I didn't feel like a charity case but someone useful. Someone with a purpose.

Valose had become a hive of alien activity and Jakkar wanted all the clans under the protection of the dome. And the only way for that to happen was to take it back from the Gretolics entrenched within.

I was afraid for Rose. She was proving to be as stubborn as she was smart. She'd boldly set off with Wynnter and Zikkar in a bubble craft to make the portable gate operational.

Sazzar and Tekkon had gone along as personal guards, but I'd seen the jungle's inhabitants. Badass warriors or not, this planet rivaled that of prehistoric Earth, boasting some serious dinosaur-like beasts.

Then there was the issue of Rose having two males ready to duke it out over her. All of them stuck together inside the confines of a bubble craft with all that testosterone surging was not gonna make for a fun mission.

As we flew over the forest, I could see the wreckage of the alien craft smoldering in the distance. Many silver heads were milling about the site, but I easily picked my warrior out of the crowd. Even from this high up, just by the breadth of his shoulders and his easy gait, I knew which male was *mine*.

Jakkar sat us gently on the ground. I was the first at the exit, poised and ready to bolt out the door just as soon as Jakkar released the latch.

I was out like a shot. The first real taste of winter stole my breath as I raced across the distance to reach my warrior. The temperature here was considerably colder than on the island. It wasn't helping that the twin suns were dropping below the horizon and taking with them the warmth of the day.

He turned with a bright smile that melted my heart. His arms were held wide, the perfect landing pad, as I shamelessly launched myself at him. He caught me up in a fast swirl before hugging me tightly. In his arms, I felt as if I'd come home.

"Does this mean you missed me?" he asked, rocking me in place.

I answered him with a tap on his back instead of signing. My arms were stretched to encompass as much of his big body as I could, and I wasn't ready to give up my hold on him just yet. It felt too right to be where I was.

"I'm going to need your help," he said after a time.

Reluctantly, I released him, and he set me on my feet.

“A human female has been found with an otherworldly looking alien male,” Vallon said.

My curiosity peaked over Vallon’s perception of an “otherworldly” male as my gaze flashed to his pointed ears, yet I was more interested in the human he said had been inside that triangular craft.

“Both the human and the alien male have been injured in the crash,” Vallon went on. “The alien claimed her as his mate. We aren’t sure if the human has been abducted and is being held against her will, so we’ve separated them until the female is lucid enough to tell us.”

*“Smart idea,”* I signed. *“What do you need my help with?”*

“Watch after her until she wakes up?” Vallon asked. “Let us know if she needs protection from the alien.”

*“You got it.”* My curiosity was in full swing. *“What does he look like? This alien.”*

“Big.” Vallon’s hand went high above his head, then wide across as if measuring shoulder width. “He has a black mane, weird slitted eyes that glow like a wetlock’s, and claw-tipped fingers like a patooga. His scales are not normal. They’re a peculiar hue.”

My eyes grew wide, and I shuddered, envisioning a monster. There was no way any girl in her right mind would shack up with what Vallon had just described.

I gulped and nodded.

One side of Vallon’s beautiful lips turned up in a lazy grin. He reached out a hand and smoothed it down my cheek, his gentle touch pulling at my heartstrings.

*“We should talk more...”* My hands slowed, unsure of what I wanted to convey. *“About us.”*

His smile faded and worry creased his brow.

*“Nothing bad,”* I signed then smoothed the furrow away with my fingers. *“I only want to do what is in your best interest.”*

“That sounds like something *bad* to me, Elise,” Vallon frowned. “What would be in my best interest is for you to accept the call of your spirit and become my mate. I know you feel the connection between us.”

*“I won’t lie and say I don’t.”* I didn’t want to be having this conversation here, but I couldn’t leave Vallon looking so dejected. *“I know you said you would treat me as a mate with or without a shawra, but what about the differences in our lifespans? You can live hundreds of years longer than me. I can’t let you give up all those years of being happily mated to another for a handful of time if you’re stuck with me. After I’m gone, there’s no guarantee you’ll get a second chance for another spirit mate like Draggar did.”*

Vallon took a step into my personal space. The heat from his body chasing away the cold I’d forgotten was there. I shivered as his callused, warrior hands cupped my face and brought our foreheads together. He inhaled deeply as he always did before slowly releasing his breath.

“You have to trust in your spirit, nula.” Vallon lifted his head and looked me in the eyes. “It recognizes its match in me. If not that, then trust what you feel in your heart. This tug I see you rubbing in the center of your chest speaks volumes. If you’re only withholding yourself for my sake, please don’t. I would rather have a short time of happiness with you in this realm, knowing we will be together again in the next, than a lifetime of grief and die knowing you will not be there waiting for me in the Realm of the Spirits.”

His face wavered through the tears that welled in my eyes. His words left no room for an argument.

“Look within yourself for the answer. If you’re holding back because you want to return home, I don’t like it, but I understand.” Vallon pursed his lips as if trying to keep his composure in check. “Love is not all that complicated. Just follow what feels right to you and the rest will work itself out.”

*“Love?”*

“Yes. Love.” Vallon kissed the tip of my nose. “I love you, you foolish female.”

Well, shit. Just *shit!* I’d said the words to him when I knew he couldn’t understand me. Now that he had voiced my own sentiments, I was struck dumb. Mute for the first time in my life. If I returned the expression now, my decision to stay would be sealed with a shawra. That was what I wanted. Wasn’t it?

He must have seen the uncertainty play across my face because he grabbed my hands as soon as I raised them to speak.

“I’ll take you to where the female is recovering. Take time to explore your feelings. Don’t make a hasty decision and don’t do it for me. It must be your choice with no regrets.” Vallon pulled away and I shivered from the loss of his body heat. He looked at me strangely.

*“It’s a lot colder here than the island,”* I signed and rubbed my arms. *“Why are you not shivering? You’re half-dressed.”*

Vallon looked down and ran a meaty hand across the expanse of his naked chest and down his torso. Heat rushed between my legs, and I licked my lips, wanting to feel the ripples of his abs under my palm. *Gawds.* Vallon was a delectable temptation beyond compare.

“My body regulates my internal temperature with the change of the seasons.”

*“Lucky you.”* I couldn’t seem to tear my eyes from the display of muscles within my reach.

Vallon pulled me into his body. I melted against him in more ways than one. He was like a furnace and the throb between my thighs was warming me up from the inside out.

“I’ll make sure you have lots of furs to keep you warm.”

He could keep the furs; I’d rather be covered in him. I kept my naughty thoughts to myself not wanting to lead him on any more than I already had until I could decide whether I planned to make Valose my home.

Vallon led me down a path through the thick of the forest. This was my first visit to Trisess, and I looked like a total tourist, chin back and gawking up at the enormous trees. Similar to pines, the ice-blue clumps that grew from the branches were fuzzy rather than needle-like.

I reached out a hand and brushed it along a low-hanging branch finding it soft to the touch.

“From the images I saw of your world, the trees on Earth are quite a bit different than here.”

*“We have pine trees that sort of look like these, but they have prickly needles rather than these soft puffs.”* I smiled up at Vallon as we walked. It wasn’t fair that I was going to have to choose between my mom and him.

A frigid breeze took my breath, washing over me in a blanket of cold. Vallon wrapped a heavy arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his side as we followed the winding path. That persistent tug behind my sternum twisted into a tighter knot. My body and soul aching for the male at my side. Me boarding a spacecraft for home no longer felt right.

We stepped onto a fenced-off platform next to the base of a tree. I tilted my head back to see the ropes of the elaborate pulley system attached to the platform disappear into the fluffy boughs high above.

I didn’t know what I had been expecting. Amy and Isobel had both talked about the tree houses of Trisess, but it never occurred to me how we planned to reach the rooms within the giant trees.

Up! *Way* up.

Vallon turned a wheel and the ground fell away. I wrapped my arms around myself as the soles of my feet began to tingle with the ascent, reaching an alarming height before coming to a smooth stop.

We walked out onto a deck jutting out from the trunk. Just as Amy described, the opening to the hollow inside the enormous tree looked like a giant knothole.



The room inside was what I expected from a squirrel's eye view, surreal with rough walls and a wooden plank floor. Softly illuminated with a scattering of solaris rocks, it was sparsely decorated with rustic furnishings.

Lily was already there with Jakkar standing over the woman injured in the crash. Lying on a twin-sized bed, she was covered from head to toe in fur blankets. All that was visible was her feminine face and the length of her blonde hair. I gave Lilly a little wave when she turned to watch our approach.

"She's still out cold," Lily said when I reached her. "You just missed Riccof, that's the Trisess medic. He said she's healing fast and should wake up in a few hours."

I didn't have long to envy the mysterious woman's fur coverings before Vallon was draping one across my shoulders. I snuggled into the fur, tucking the ends together under my chin.

Jakkar wrapped a fur tighter around his pregnant mate and pulled Vallon aside. The males turned just enough to where I couldn't read their lips and kept their voices low as they conversed.

"She looks a little older than the rest of us. Doesn't she?" Lily commented, staring down at the woman.

I only nodded. I had my tablet with me, but I was too warm in my new fur to dig it out of the pocket sewn into my kilt-dress.

We had all drawn the same conclusion that the Gretolics had targeted a particular age group since we were all in our early twenties. But this blonde beauty looked to be closer to thirty. If she was an abductee, maybe she had been taken years ago.

Cold air waft inside the knothole and straight up my dress. If it got any chillier, we were going to have to fashion pants. My shivering triggered Vallon to pull an accordion divider across the entrance to block the breeze.

The males carried over two seats near the bed. Lily and I sat down to begin our vigil over the sleeping stranger.

“I’m going to take Sia Jakkar to see the alien.” Vallon tugged the fur tighter around me. “There’s a supply of loodskins in that trunk against the wall, along with some dried chiksin. The white fruit in the bowl on the table grows only on the trees in Trisess. You should try one. They’re sweet like the noobian berries you favor.”

*“I will.”* I quickly tucked my hand back inside the fur after signing.

Vallon pulled a comm from his pocket and found my hand under the fur. “Ping me as soon as she wakes.” He bobbed his head at the woman. “Just key the comm three times and I’ll know it’s you. Or, if you need me.”

*I always need you,* I wanted so badly to sign, but I kept my hands still. *“I will,”* I mouthed in Valosian and squeezed the comm he’d placed there.

After the males left, Lily and I sat together letting the quiet settle around us. Reminiscent of a time that seemed so long ago, I shyly smiled over at her and pulled out my tablet. *“I never properly thanked you for watching over me when I first woke up.”*

“You don’t owe me any thanks. I was glad to be there for you.” She beamed back at me. “When I first saw you lying so still in the cage on the spacecraft, I feared the worst. Then I saw you take a breath.” She sighed in relief. “I’m so glad you recovered.”

*“Scary times,”* I wrote. *“I don’t remember much. Only glimpses of gray faces and being touched by clammy hands. I don’t remember the cages at all.”*

“Be glad. It was horrible.”

*“I’ve heard the stories from the other girls. They told me how brave you were to go search for help on your own with an injured ankle. Marie said you were like a superhero with no cape.”*

She read my words and giggled. “I don’t know about all that shit. I did what I had to do to try and help all of us.”

*“You don’t give yourself enough credit. You’re a natural leader just like Jakkar. I can see why you are soulmates. The two of you make sense together.”*

Lily studied my face. Her mouth parted, and she sucked in a breath as if she were about to speak. Then she closed it as if she’d changed her mind.

“*What is it?*” I flashed her my tablet with a scrunched brow.

“Can I ask a personal question?”

I nodded.

“You and Vallon... Are the two of you a match?”

As soon as she asked, my cheeks burned hot. The fur that was keeping me cozy, turned stifling.

“You don’t have to answer. It’s really none of my business,” Lily rushed out and waved her hand through the air. “You two just seem close.”

I fiddled with the edge of my tablet before deciding to confide in Lily. Who better than a mated woman with a shawra to ask advice?

*“I’ve been holding back, waiting to see if we can find a way home. I feel like a total bitch leaving Vallon in limbo, but I miss my mom so much.”* I swiped at a stray tear. *“Having to choose one over the other feels impossible. How did you choose between Jakkar and your dad?”*

“I had to do some serious soul-searching. It wasn’t an easy decision to make, so I went with my gut. My gut told me I was meant to be with Jakkar. Once I decided to stay with him, everything shifted into place and just felt right. Like a puzzle solved. Even though I miss my dad like crazy, and I wish every day I could see or talk to him one more time, even just to tell him that I’m okay and not to worry, I don’t regret my choice.”

*“Are you afraid?”* I wrote and pointed to her rounded belly.

“Yes.” Lily smoothed her hand in a circle over her stomach. “But I would be scared even if I was having an all-human baby.”

I gulped and sat back in my seat, absorbing Lily’s words. I knew the thing she’d felt. Every time I pictured myself making a life on Valose with Vallon, my heart would soar with happiness and that incessant tug would warm in approval.

Imagining myself on a spacecraft en route to Earth just made me want to vomit.

This spirit mate business was the real deal. Why this phenomenon didn’t occur on Earth was a scientific mystery, yet for some unknown reason, human women responded to the Valosian males as if we were of their kind.

I absently rubbed the center of my chest, knowing in my heart and soul what the right decision was for me. It was time to stop fighting my feelings. My life on Earth was my past and Vallon was my future. There was only one thing left to do.

“I wonder who she is.” Lily nodded to the woman. “What’s her story?”

*“I don’t know, but Vallon said the alien she was with is really strange looking.”*

“This coming from a male with pointed ears and fangs?” Lily remarked dryly.

I silently giggled.

“What did Vallon say he looked like?”

*“Tall and huge,”* I wrote then curled my hands into claws and made a growling face.

“He doesn’t sound like someone she went with willingly.”

I shook my head and frowned.

“I don’t understand why the Gretolics keep abducting girls from Earth,” Lily sniffled. At first, I thought it was from the cold until she swiped a tear off her cheek. “Not that I regret

my decision to stay, because I wouldn't have met Jakkar otherwise. It's just that not all the girls are as lucky as me to have found my soulmate on another world. Why can't they just leave Valose and Earth alone?"

I turned in my seat and reached over to pat her hand. "*Don't cry,*" I mouthed.

"I'm not usually a crier. *Gawd!* These pregnancy hormones have me all out of whack. I cry at the drop of a hat."

"Oh, no. Not here," a voice weakly strained. "I didn't want to come back."

Our heads swung over to meet the heavy eyelids of the stranger. I fumbled the comm in my lap and keyed it three times to alert Vallon that the stranger was awake.

"Hi," Lily leaned forward. "I'm Lily. How are you feeling?"

"I know you," the stranger said before her eyes blinked and closed. "I've seen your face on TV."

Lily flipped eyes to me before returning to the stranger. "You must be mistaking me for someone else. I've never been on television. So, what's your name?"

"Not you. Your picture," the stranger said without opening her eyes. "I don't want to be here. I want to go back."

"To Earth?" Lily hesitantly asked.

"No. Not to Earth." The stranger rolled her head on the pillow. "Back to the ship with my mate. Where am I and where is he?"

Lily looked at me with questioning eyes. I knew what she was asking, and I nodded.

"Valose," Lily said barely above a whisper. "We are on a planet called Valose."

The stranger went quiet. We'd thought she'd fallen back to sleep because her head lolled to the side. Then, unchecked tears began to roll down her cheeks.

“Oh, sweetie,” Lily fretted. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have told you. You’re probably not ready to hear something like that. Don’t worry. You’re not alone. There are lots more humans here.”

I felt useless just sitting here unable to verbally sympathize with her.

“I want my mate,” she sniffled. “Where is Zaku? Please tell me he lived through the crash. That he’s okay.”

“He was injured, but he’s recovering in another room,” Lily assured her. “What’s your name?”

“Ivy. Ivy Cronus.”

“Okay, Ivy.” Lily licked her lips nervously before she asked. “So, your mate is an alien?”

“Yes. He’s a Muktian.”

“So, he didn’t abduct you from Earth?” Lily questioned.

“No. I left on my own after we fixed the cure. He came back for me, and I left with him.”

“*What cure?*” I wrote on my tablet and showed it to Lily.

“What cure?” she repeated to Ivy.

“There was a pandemic. Zaku came to Earth to help us,” Ivy said weakly and started to cry in earnest. “I want my mate,” she sobbed. “Where is he? I need my mate.”

“I’ll get him for you,” Lily reassured Ivy with a pat on top of her furs. “This is Elise.” I gave Ivy a small wave when her watery eyes bounced to me. “She’ll sit with you while I get Zaku. Okay?”

Ivy continued to sob. My shoulders slumped, powerless to help her. I couldn’t even voice sympathy or comfort. All I could manage was a weak smile while I dried her tears with the corner of my fur blanket. My heart hurt for her. I hoped her mate was well enough, so they could be reunited.

Thoughts of what my life would be like without Vallon rushed over me in a wave of despair. I swallowed hard and blinked back tears, coming to terms with the only option that

felt right. Lily said to search my soul and I had. Sitting here with the girls, it hadn't taken me long to search my heart to find the answer. An answer that I already knew was the right choice.

At the same time, I was shocked to my toes at the mention of a pandemic. There hadn't been anything like that happening before my abduction. I imagined the world in chaos and turmoil. An image of my mom flashed in my mind. Lost to concern over her well-being, Vallon's return ping went unnoticed.

"Jakkar." Lily had risen from her seat and crossed the room to the entrance to ping her mate using a comm I didn't realize she had. "The woman, Ivy, is awake and says the male is her mate. She's asking for him."

"You're certain?" Jakkar's muffled reply came without delay.

"Positive. She's asking for him by name. Is he well enough to join her? She's pretty upset."

"That's a relief." Jakkar blew out a hard breath. In a muffled voice, he said, "Let him go."

The device in my hand pinged again. I keyed the comm and tapped it three times.

Vallon's voice came out in rushes as if he were running. "Zaku is coming. He's a male on a mission to get to his female, so you and Lily move back to a safe distance. Jakkar and I are on the way, but he's moving fast, and we're falling behind."

I tapped three times to let him know I heard him and turned frightened eyes to Lily. If Vallon's description of Zaku was as scary as what I imagined, I did not want to be anywhere near this male.

Lily returned to Ivy's side and smiled down at her. "Zaku is on his way." Then she turned to me. "As for us. Jakkar said the male is in a frenzy to get to her, and we should move as far back as possible."

“*What is making that noise?*” I mouthed and touched my ear.

A scraping sound from far below, like a cat sharpening its claws on a scratching post, filtered up to us. It grew louder as we stood there shaking our heads.

Lily’s comm pinged, and she answered to a panicked Jakkar. “He’s climbing the fucking tree! Get to the farthest wall.”

“We’ll be just over there,” Lily said to Ivy and pointed over her shoulder. “Come on, Elise. Let’s get out of the male’s way.”

We moved to the farthest point of the room. It felt awkward to be standing way over here while Ivy lay on the bed sniffing... Until the huge male burst into the room, knocking back one section of the divider.

“Holy fucking shitballs!” Lily swore and grabbed me.

My mouth fell open in a silent scream as I clung to her. Our backs hit the rough wall behind us as we instinctively stepped back.

The guy was freaking *purple*! And enormous.

A goliath of a male. Zaku was everything, and then some, that Vallon had described. He dwarfed the Valosian males by a foot, both tall and wide. The bodysuit he wore had been torn in several places—most likely damaged in the crash—showed glimpses of distinctive diamond-shaped scales.

Ivy fought her fur coverings to free her arms. He stormed to her side and for a stuttered heartbeat, I thought he might hurt her. Once he reached her bedside, she threw out her arms and embraced her male who had dropped to his knees before her.

“Are you all right?” Ivy blubbered.

“I am well enough,” Zaku answered and pulled away to cup Ivy’s face in his clawed tipped hands. “How are you feeling?”



“Better now that you’re here,” Ivy said and hiccupped. Fresh tears fell in relief to be reunited with her mate. “I was so worried it had all been a dream when I woke up to those girls.”

Zaku had immediately zeroed in on Ivy when he reached the room that he hadn’t so much as spared us a glance. He did so now. I recoiled in shocked horror from the golden glow of his slitted pupiled eyes.

“Thank you for looking after my mate,” Zaku said to us in perfect English. His expression full of gratitude.

Dry-mouthed, Lily and I just nodded with our mouths hanging open.

Now I knew why Vallon thought him otherworldly. Zaku was a beast with hip-length black hair and a heavily sculpted masculine face. By no means was he ugly, just imposing and so very alien. Nothing like the ethereal Valosians who were more beautiful than handsome.

Where the feline eyes and claws gave me pause, Ivy was clinging to him as if he was going to disappear before her very eyes at any moment. I could wholly empathize. Every time Vallon left on a mission, I had to fight the urge to wrap my arms around his leg, so he couldn’t leave.

The elevator platform came to a clanging halt. Our males rushed to our sides, knocking the divider completely over that was blocking the wind. Swords and spear drawn; both were out of breath when they came to a halt where we stood huddled together.

Two additional warriors blocked the entrance. Nutrone glowing from the tips of their spears and pointed at Zaku.

## Chapter Nine

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**Z**aku stood and whirled around, taking up a defensive stance the moment we entered the room. His body was placed in front of his mate as if to protect her.

My eyes took in the entirety of the room at once, finding a wide-eyed Elise huddled together with Lily against the far wall. My shoulders sagged in relief to find her unharmed, yet I kept my spear up and at the ready.

Zaku was an unknown alien species. He claimed not to be our enemy, yet we had no reason to believe that he wasn't. No chance was to be taken that he would turn on us or that he had taken the human against her will, so Sia Jakkar had ordered him shackled while he lay unconscious and healing from his injuries.

"We meant you no harm." Sia Jakkar eased toward Lily and Elise the same as I did.

"I suppose the shackles were my imagination," Zaku hissed, keeping his body between the female and us.

"You are unknown to us," Sia Jakkar defended. "It was a real possibility that the human female you travel with was an abductee like all the other humans we've come across. We were acting in the female's best interest."

Zaku's posture relaxed. Sia Jakkar's explanation appeared to calm him. "Ivy is my mate. I did not abduct her."

"I left Earth with him willingly," Ivy's thin voice came from behind the huge male. "Please, don't hurt him. We didn't

mean to land here.”

The female sat up with a groan and clasped Zaku’s hand. The male whipped around to help his mate. She held her arms out for him to gather her close.

“I will not be shackled and separated from my mate again.” Zaku glared at the two warriors armed with nutrone spears at the exit before searing us with glowing eyes.

“We only meant to protect Ivy,” Sia Jakkar repeated. “Now that we know for certain that she is your mate, you will not be separated again.”

“Does that also mean we are free to go?”

“Yes.” Sia Jakkar held out his hand and lowered it slowly. As one, we pointed our weapons to the floor.

“Swear to the Spirits we will remain together, and we are able to leave at any time.” Zaku looked pointedly at Sia Jakkar.

“What do you know of the Spirits?” I heard myself say, becoming agitated that this alien knew of us while we knew nothing of him. This seemed to be an ongoing theme, how we were ignorant of the Universe beyond our clouds while so many others had vast knowledge of our race.

Zaku only glared at me, bowing up. His slitted eyes flitted around the room as if he were assessing his surroundings. I got the impression the only reason he hadn’t already grabbed his mate and bolted was because of her injuries. “I know enough. Now swear on your Spirits.”

“We do not wish to be your enemy, Zaku,” Sia Jakkar ensured him. “We have enough of those.”

“Then don’t make one out of me, *Sia*.” Zaku spoke Jakkar’s title with a hiss.

“You will remain with your mate. Humans take longer to heal, so you can have this room for as long as you wish to stay. I swear it on the Spirits.” Sia Jakkar inclined his head.

Zaku returned the gesture and visibly relaxed, settling his mate back down on the bed.

Sia Jakkar gestured for the armed warriors guarding the exit to ease their stances. They remained watchful but complied. Still holding tight to the shafts, they kept the pointed end of their nutrone spears to the floor.

Elise came up from behind with a loodskin and a pouch of dried chiksin. She moved past me and started to offer it to Zaku with shaky hands. I rushed ahead, using my body as a shield. My hearts pounded, adrenalyne setting my veins on fire with a burst of strength.

I eyed Zaku, the aggressive flashes of my scales daring him to make an aggressive move. When it came to Elise, I could take on any opponent, no matter the size. “Not so close, Elise,” I warned.

Elise tapped me on the shoulder before skirting around me, so I could read her words.

*“If he wanted to hurt me and Lily, he could have done so before you got here. He only wanted to find his mate,”* Elise fussed. *“You would have acted the same way had someone taken me away from you. Put yourself in his shoes.”*

I couldn’t deny that what she said made complete sense. Zaku hadn’t shown aggression until after he woke to find his mate gone and himself in restraints.

*“You’re right,”* I signed back to Elise. *“I would have acted the same way.”*

Even still, I took the loodskin and pouch from her and handed it to Zaku.

“Thank you, Valosian.” Zaku accepted the offerings.

“Vallon,” I said. “This is Elise and Lily. You’re already familiar with the Sia of Valose, Jakkar.”

“Thank you again, females, for watching over my Ivy.” Zaku nodded with a faint smile before holding the loodskin up to his mate’s mouth for her to drink. She was weak from her injuries, taking small sips. Zaku helped her lie back down and pulled the furs to her chin.

An image of a frail Elise recovering from a head wound flashed back. Like Ivy, she had been completely vulnerable.

Whether I understood Zaku's aggression or not, I couldn't help my leeriness of this strange male and backed Elise away slowly.

The room fell silent as Zaku tended to his mate. I exchanged a questioning look with Sia Jakkar. How far could we trust this alien male?

Sia Jakkar cleared his throat. "Since you claim to not be our enemy, how about you tell us why you crash-landed. It seems an odd coincidence that it coincided with a battle raging in our skies."

"The only coincidence was we happened to be in the path of the Yulineon patrols when they came out of their hyper-jumps." Zaku's answer perked up every ear in the room. "I was surprised to see them as this sector is not inside their jurisdiction. We were hit and knocked off course. Once Valose's gravity caught hold of us, I had no choice but to try to land."

"Yulineons?" I asked and looked at Sia Jakkar. Aggar had learned of them from log entries found on the crashed Gretolic craft where Elise and the other females had been rescued.

"That's right." Zaku perched on the edge of his mate's bed.

"What do you know about the Yulineons?" Sia Jakkar asked.

"Everything." Zaku's eyes gleamed. "The Yulineons are guardians of infant galaxies. What you humans call the Milky Way,"—Zaku's eyes flashed to the females— "is included as one of three galaxies located in the southernmost region of the Universe known as the Luartick Sector."

"Guardians?" Lily scrunched her brow. "Doesn't seem like they're doing a very good job guarding jack-shit. The Gretolic's have stolen a hundred or more of us right off the planet. And that's just the ones we know about."

"In their defense, the Luartick Sector is quite a large region to patrol. And the Yulineons do catch ninety-nine percent of

abductors.”

“*So, they’re like galactic cops?*” Elise signed to Zaku, and I translated for her.

“Yes. Exactly like that.” Zaku answered Elise. “Except the Yulineons are not friends to Earthlings. If you’re found off-world, they don’t return you home. You’re killed for knowing too much.”

“What! Why?” Lily shouted.

“They believe humans are not ready to accept the truth of what lies beyond their known Universe. As a primitive culture, your way of life, your perceptions of the world you think you know, would be rocked to the core. Worldwide hysteria would have catastrophic results that would affect more than just planet Earth.”

“*Ready or not, here we are,*” Elise signed with hard hands.

I felt her aggravation as if it were my own. Zaku hadn’t said it, but Valose was among what he referred to as a “primitive culture.” Until Sia Sakkar took to the sky and began exploring the stars, we knew nothing beyond our own world. Little did we know, Sia Sakkar had been under the mind control of an alien race, and within a few months this time, everything about our world had changed.

“That’s total bullshit!” Lily raged.

“No. That’s Universeval Rule.” Zaku’s explanation was utter nonsense to me. “The Luartick Sector is controlled by supremacy unmatched by all. No one will go against their control.

“Recall it wasn’t that long ago humans thought the Earth was flat and you were the center of it,” Zaku pointed out to Lily. “Can you imagine the implications to religious beliefs alone, if humans were to know that Earth and its inhabitants were a mere speck to what lies beyond? Your Milky Way is one galaxy among trillions, and that’s just the ones that have been charted.”

My head spun with Zaku’s words. Traveling to the stars had never interested me. I was of a like mind with Sia Jakkar;

a warrior's feet were meant to stay on the ground.

The weight of his knowledge was suffocating. My chest hurt with what it could mean for my spirit mate's future.

"How far away is Earth from Valose?" I dreaded the answer to the question I heard myself ask.

"Many hundreds of light-years away," Zaku supplied.

"I am not familiar with that measurement," I said. It sounded far. Selfishly, I wanted the distance to be unreachable.

"In Valosian terms, it took Ivy and I ten munthis to travel from Earth before we ultimately crashed here," Zaku said. "That also included a stop at a trading post."

"What were you trading?" Sia Jakkar asked with his ever-suspicious mind.

"Vessels." Zaku's vague answer made me twitchy.

I flexed my fingers around the shaft of my spear still pointed at the floor.

"Care to explain?" Sia Jakkar asked, white-knuckling one of his twin blades.

Long moments passed before Zaku answered. His glowing, slitted eyes scanning every person in the room, evaluating the exit as if he were weighing his chances of grabbing his mate and making a run for it.

With the two warriors positioned at the only exit, nutrone spears pointed at the floor or not, he wouldn't get far.

"What if I were to tell you my people consider me a fugitive?" Zaku tensed.

"That would depend on your crime," Sia Jakkar glowered.

"My only crime is choosing a human as a mate," Zaku admitted with pride. "It is against Moktian law to mate another species. When Ivy decided to join me, I became an outlaw. I am only guilty of falling in love with a human."

The tension in the room bled away. He valued his mate above that of the laws of his species. In my eyes, that made



him an honorable male.

“For my mate and I to put distance between us and those that would seek us out, I traded my short-range pod for a Nomadican Starskip.”

At the perplexed looks aimed Zaku’s way, he went on to explain.

“The Starskip is untrackable and a long-range craft.”

“Since the Yulineons will kill me if I’m caught, I’m an outlaw too,” Ivy said in a weak voice. “We needed to find a new world to settle far away from both our planets.”

“Why did you think you saw me on television?” Lily asked Ivy from Sia Jakkar’s side.

“Your face was all over the news a couple of years ago.” Ivy coughed. “Your dad was relentless, going to all the news stations begging for help to find you.”

“A couple of years ago?” Lily staggered back. “I think I need to sit down.”

Sia Jakkar sheathed his sword and eased Lily down into a seat at the table on the opposite side of the room, maintaining a distance between Zaku and his mate. Elise sagged against me, the color draining from her face.

“The battle waged in your skies. Your mate mentioned Gretolics. Is it safe to say the Yulineon patrols were after one of their crafts?” Zaku aimed his question at Sia Jakkar.

Sia Jakkar and I exchanged an uneasy look.

“I understand your hesitancy. I would not easily trust a stranger either, but I swear on my mate’s life, I am no friend of the Gretolics,” Zaku swore.

Sia Jakkar dropped his chin and released a long breath. “They have infested Valose, taken a ship full of our males and human females to a planet called Tirius—“

“To be traded for rillium,” Zaku interrupted with a sneer.

“You know of this world?” I sucked in a breath. If he knew where the Gretolic’s had taken our clansmen, then there was a

chance for a rescue.

“Unfortunately,” Zaku grumbled. “Desolate and barren, the only thing there is a seedy trading port for undesirables and renegades.”

“What is this rillium?” Sia Jakkar inquired.

“A fuel source refined from raw rilliamot used to power most spacecraft,” Zaku explained. “In solid form, it is commonly used as currency at most trading ports.”

“How have we been gone for two years?” Lily asked. The guttural dismay in her voice was a knife wound to my heart. “Where have we been all this time?”

Elise sniffled and clutched my hand. If I were able to sense the echo of her spirit within me, I know she would feel shaken and confused.

“I don’t know.” Zaku’s glowing eyes softened with pity for the females. His compassion earned him a little more of my trust. “I’ve heard the Grites had lost control of their genetically engineered abominations.” Zaku rubbed his chin in thought. “You said the Gretolic’s have brought hundreds of humans to this planet?”

“Yes.” Lily scooted forward in her seat. “What do they want with us?”

“The Gretolics?” Zaku shook his head. That black mane of his shifting like a sinister loodfall. “To acquire rillium, I suppose, since their destination was Tirus. Females from other worlds are a hot commodity in the illegal markets, especially humans. The Yulioneon’s don’t make it easy to abduct them. Most die trying. That’s why the Grites would send the Gretolics to abduct females from Earth and the surrounding galaxies, for fear of being caught. The Grites don’t care if their subordinates died in the process, they would simply grow more to replenish their ranks.”

“Grow more?” I flinched. “What does that mean?”

“Gretolics are clones created by the Grites using their own genetically altered DNA.” Zaku described the unimaginable.

“Filthy little beasts, and apparently, an abomination gone wrong. I had heard their own creation had turned on them.”

Sia Jakkar and I exchanged an apprehensive look. This alien had just confirmed what Aggar had discovered from listening to the log entries from the Gretolic’s ships. How much did we reveal to this stranger of what we already knew?

“I would like to salvage what I can off my ship,” Zaku announced.

“Only in the accompaniment of armed warriors,” Sia Jakkar laid out the condition.

“I would expect no less,” Zaku agreed. “Do I have your vow as a warrior of Valose that my mate will be kept safe up here while I’m away?”

“I so vow it.” Sia Jakkar slightly bowed.

*“I will stay with her,”* Elise abruptly volunteered.

I hesitated to translate, but the pleading in Elise’s eyes won out. I couldn’t blame her for wanting to visit with one of her kind. There was still so much to be learned from these two.

“Me too,” Lily chimed in. “We can both hang out with Ivy while you guys go do your thing.”

“I would like that,” Ivy said before closing weary eyes.

“It’s settled then. The dark hours are upon us.” Sia Jakkar took notice of Zaku’s shifting attention to his injured mate. “This sun-rise has taken its toll on us all. It is time we all rested.”

Sia Jakkar ushered Lily to the platform. I followed with Elise tucked at my side. She paused once and looked back at the newcomers. With a final wave, she stepped onto the platform next to Lily followed by the pair of armed warriors.

The females clasped hands with dazed expressions as the platform lowered to the ground. I was sure there were many unanswered questions running through both their minds.

“He knows of the rogue Gretolics,” I whispered to Sia Jakkar the moment we reached the ground. “Do you think he

knows of the germ unleashed upon Valose that killed all of our females? He might consider us weakened by it.”

“I want to trust him,” Sia Jakkar said, tilting his head back to peer up at the tree where we’d left Zaku and his mate to pass the dark hours.

“What do you make of him requesting to salvage his ship?”

“That remains to be seen on the next suns-rise.” Sia Jakkar placed his hands on his hips and considered my words. “I do not believe the male would turn on us. Not while leaving his mate unguarded.”

“I agree. Her welfare seems paramount to him.”

“I swore to the Spirits they could leave Trisess at any time.” Sia Jakkar released a burdened sigh. “Yet, it will take time before I’m comfortable leaving him unguarded.”

Sia Jakkar pulled the Trisess warriors aside, giving them direction on keeping a covert watch on Zaku. Then pinged Tikkot to make arrangements with other warriors of his clan to continue the watch for the entirety of Zaku’s stay.

We agreed to meet back here on the next suns-rise. Elise hugged Lily before we broke away from the other couple and followed a different path through the forest. She stopped me once we were out of sight of the others.

*“Your tree house or mine?”* Elise signed with a mischievous glint to her gaze.

“What?” I shook my head, not understanding where she was going with this strange question.

*“I’ve made up my mind. My heart wants you.”*

It took a moment for her signed words to sink in.

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” I held my breath afraid to move a muscle that she would change her mind, or I hadn’t deciphered her signed words correctly.

*“Yes. I want to be your spirit mate.”*

“What about Zaku? He knows the way back to your home.”

*“You’re right. He does and this is the closest we’ve come to returning to Earth, but that’s no longer my home. My home is with you. I know that if I return and never see you again, I will be forever broken on the inside.”*

I couldn’t believe I was questioning her decision, but I had to be sure this was what she wanted.

I leaned down and cupped her sweet face in my hands, looking her directly in the eyes. “You are certain this is what you want? Once the shawra has formed, you will be bonded to me for all time.”

I swallowed hard. Afraid for the first time in my life. As a Valosian warrior, I didn’t feel fear. Anxiousness, uncertainty, but never fear. Right now, standing before this petite human female, I was terrified.

On edge, my voice came out a raspy mess as I laid it all out for her. “Your chance of returning to your world will be lost.”

*“I know. Wherever you are is where I belong,”* Elise signed. Her hands were slow and fluid as she formed each word with care. *“I love you with all my heart and soul.”*

I hugged her to me so tightly, neither of us could take a full breath. “I love you, too, Elise. You’ve made me the happiest male on Valose.”

Elated with relief and joy, I wanted to climb to the top of the tallest tree and shout it out to the whole of the planet. Elise was finally going to be mine.

# Chapter Ten

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Vallon swept me up in strong arms and ran with me the entire way to his tree house. Once there, he set me on my feet for a crazy ride up on the platform. He spun the wheel to work the pulley system so fast, my knees buckled, and I fell to my hands and knees in silent laughter.

“Are you all right?” His head whipped around when I dropped.

I nodded and wiped joyful tears from my eyes.

Once we reached the top, Vallon wasted no time carrying me inside. The twin suns had given way to the moon’s silvery glow. Despite the darkness of the room, the bold patterns of his nocturnal camouflage, adorning his chest and arms, came alive.

The consummate gentleman, he gently deposited me on the bed and took a seat next to me.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Vallon cupped my cheek, sweeping a lazy thumb across my chin.

I covered his hand with mine and leaned my face into his touch, savoring the feel of this moment. Once we mated, nothing would ever be the same between us again. That wasn’t a bad thing, only a different thing.

When it came to Vallon, every emotion, every feeling, deserved to be savored, treasured, and etched into memory. Our friendship would end this night and blossom into something I had yet to comprehend.

Without another thought, I stood before him, toed off my boots, and rid myself of the belt around my waist. Next, I loosened the single strap that circled my neck of my Betty Rubble inspired kilt-dress. The heavily woven material puddled around my feet in a soft, weighty cloud.

Vallon's gaze traveled my naked body like a lover's caress. His scales flashed hot blues. I shivered under his intimate perusal. Dampened when the swirl of his silvery eyes remained on the juncture of my thighs for a beat too long before a slow, heart-stuttering journey back to my face. I rubbed my thighs together to relieve the burning heat.

Vallon licked his lips and rubbed the palms of his hands on thick thighs as if he were itching to reach out and touch me—or maybe lick me. Either was totally fine with me.

I knew he was too much of a gentleman to snatch me up and take what he wanted. In a way, I wished he would. It would take the pressure off me of making a damn fool of myself with my inexperience. I had no idea how to seduce a man much less a hunky alien.

I also knew he was waiting for me to make the first move, so I did what came naturally and widened my stance. The rush of cool air against my sodden flesh hardened my nipples to tender points. His sharp intake of breath as I bared my slit, sent a fresh surge of wetness to my core.

I was surely going to spontaneously combust. Heated from the inside out, I no longer felt the brisk wind of winter kissing my bare flesh. All I felt was the fire of his gaze. The heat of his body as a hard length outlined itself beneath his kilt.

The pervert in me was dying to know what he looked like under there.

My skin itched to be touched. My sex pulsed to its own heartbeat as his eyes explored me. The back of his hand wiping across his mouth to squelch his salivation was my undoing. It was all too much. The bob of his throat as he worked hard to swallow was a kissable temptation that I gave into.



I stepped between his spread knees, trailing my fingers up his thighs, and leaned down to graze his fevered scales with my parted lips. I kissed the frantic pulse pounding there. With a brazenness I hadn't known I possessed, I reached a curious hand under the hem of his kilt and palmed what hung heavy between his legs.

He hissed when I took him in hand—his turgid flesh a torch in my palm. We both shuddered as I blindly explored him beneath his clothing. Vallon grunted as I stroked him from tip to base and back again, getting acquainted with his unfamiliar parts.

Fluid leaked from his bulbous tip, lubricating my palm. My body answered in kind, doing some leaking of its own. My breath hitched as my fingertips bumped along his alien embellishments that my core wanted intimate knowledge of.

Vallon bucked his hips, his erection kicking in my grip. His tongue traced his lower lip as his eyes locked onto a bead of my desire rolling down my inner thigh. His hands fisted in the material of his kilt, revealing what I'd been stroking.

*Good lawd!* I trembled at what I held in my palm. Could my body accommodate something so large?

With my free hand, I guided his fingers to my sex, inviting him to touch. He halted our progress.

“I won't be able to stop once we start,” Vallon gritted out.

I tugged until he relented and cupped my sex with his palm. Vallon's scales flashed hot blues in time with his heavy thrumming that shook me to the core.

His touches, featherlight, parted the sodden petals of my sex. The probe of his fingertip barely breached me before he pulled away, bringing his hand to his mouth. With a long flick of his tongue, he sampled me. His eyes hooded and his lip curled back in a wicked snarl displaying glistening fangs.

“I want your taste on my tongue when my cock claims you.” Vallon released a feral growl that curled my toes. Then he grasped me around the waist and pulled me close.

I widened my stance in answer, and that was all the permission he needed to plant his face between my thighs. I released his cock as the air was forced from my lungs when he drove his tongue to the center of my being, spurring me up on tiptoes.

Nothing else mattered, the world could explode into a million pieces, and I wouldn't care. All that mattered was the hot probe of his tongue lapping at the inner walls of my sex. I grabbed onto Vallon's head, tunneling my fingers in his silky strands. He pressed my body tighter to his face and ate at me until I saw stars.

Vallon suddenly released me. Moving fast, he took me down on the bed and rid himself of his boots and kilt. With a silver fire licking in his eyes, he paused above me. The muscles in his jaw clenching with uncertainty.

“Are you positive this is what you want?”

I slowly nodded and spread my knees to welcome him inside. Vallon's fierce gaze locked onto my exposed sex, and he thrummed so hard, the vibrations shook the bed. His silvery hair was tousled from my fingers digging into his scalp. His lips still glistened from my release.

There was a wildness about him that I didn't recognize. He was ferocious as he prowled up my body, snarling and baring his fangs as if he meant to take a chunk out of me.

I shivered when the points of his fangs skimmed down the hollow of my throat. His chest expanded as he breathed me in. The second he touched our foreheads together; he became the lovable Vallon I knew.

Scales deepened with purpose as he palmed his cock and placed the hot tip to my entrance. This was it. The turning point of our relationship. I trembled, both nervous and excited for the next step.

“I love you,” he said, claiming my mouth in the tenderest of kisses before nudging between my folds.

I returned the kiss, loving the combination of his taste mixed with mine. I held my breath as the head of him

stretched my opening. I panted as he eased himself inside. His erotic thrumming unfurled an uncontrollable hunger from within me. I planted my feet on the bed and thrust my hips in the air.

“Fucking Helios, Elise,” Vallon hissed. “I’m trying to go slowly so I don’t hurt... You’re so fucking tight. If you don’t stop that...”

Vallon lost his voice when I rolled against his invasion like a bitch in heat. I was desperate for him to fill me. That persistent tug behind my sternum, now a pounding, ready to break free.

We moved as one until he seated himself fully. My back arched off the bed at the glorious fullness when his body became sheathed with mine.

As if a dam had erupted, the pressure behind my sternum released with a rushing force in a combination of relief and urgency. Months of pent-up sexual tension exploded into a soft glow that swirled hot and ferocious between us as he began to move in deep, languid strokes.

The echo of his essence filled me, and his pleasure combined with mine, creating a vortex of hunger so great, my body shook from the need to release.

Something teased my clit on every inward stroke. I forced open my eyes to look down my body at where we were joined. Triangular flaps at the base of his cock now stood erect, bumping, and stroking against that tight bundle of nerves until I writhed beneath him. His thick shaft glistened from the lust of my sex.

I closed my eyes against the visual of our mating. It was too much. The wicked sensations of his cock moving inside me. The scent of our sexes coming together. The sounds of our bodies slapping together in a perfect rhythm.

My breath hitched and despite the white-hot lick unfurling low in my belly, I held onto the sharp edge of completion for as long as I was able. I wanted to savor our first time together.

Ultimately, I let myself go and fell off the edge into a blinding maelstrom of endless waves. Vallon's climax joined mine and together we rode out a relentless tide of blazing pleasure.

As Vallon gently kissed my lips, I knew what Lily had described. I was a puzzle solved. The missing piece of myself falling into place as Vallon's soul entwined with mine. I was a person made whole even though I lacked a voice.

# Chapter Eleven

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**M**y limbs were deliciously stiff. I stretched and yawned so wide my jaw cracked. Vallon shifted with me in a lazy move that turned into more of a caress than a stretch. I sucked back a breath as his thumb grazed over one highly sensitive nipple before he covered my breast in the warmth of his palm.

I had lost count of my many orgasms from the night and on into the wee hours of the morning. Sex with Vallon had been indescribable. He was the most sensual male I'd ever known, kissing, and caressing every inch of me.

The illumination from our combined shawras lit our room in a soft blue glow like a nightlight. When they had begun to form, I hadn't been prepared for the echo of his emotions or the intensity of the mating.

Vallon's head lay on my shoulder with his face nuzzling the side of my neck. His hot breath washed over me with every languid exhale. The sultry probe of his tongue trailed along the column of my throat before his lips latched on, and my tender flesh was sucked into his mouth. Then those naughty fangs of his went to work, scraping lightly over my skin, showering me in goosebumps.

The walls of my sex clenched, aching anew to be joined with him. Words were not needed. He could feel my desire as if it were his own, the same as I could his.

In a fluid move, he positioned himself between my thighs. I was worn out, sore from all the sex, but without him inside me, I felt empty. My hips rolled with urgency as I planted my feet on the bed and spread my knees wide apart to welcome him back inside.

My lower lip took the abuse of my teeth when I bit down as he pressed the head of his alien cock to my tender folds. Slick and swollen from use, he easily glided himself to the hilt. Touched again with the triangular flaps at the base of his girth, my clit started to pulse.

I knew I wasn't going to walk right for a week when he started to swing his hips in that perfect, measured rhythm. If I had a voice, this was where the unladylike grunts would have filled our tree house as he fucked me until my eyes rolled back in my head.

Not a sexy look for me, but when your mate had ridges and teasing flaps that catered to every nerve ending attached to all the girly bits, it was all I could do to remain conscious from the stimulation overload.

I came with a toss of my head, and my mouth opened in a silent scream. My inner muscles seized and convulsed around his turgid flesh.

The swing of his hips faltered, losing their fluid pace when he released inside of me on a carnal growl that sent an electric jolt down my spine.

"We are going to be late meeting Sia Jakkar," Vallon panted above me. "You are too much of a distraction."

I play-pouted and rubbed under my eyes with fisted hands, pretending to cry while fighting back a saucy smirk.

"You're a naughty female," Vallon chuckled with a disbelieving scrunch of his brow. "I think the shawra has brought out your wicked side. You need to be punished for your insolence." Vallon flipped me over and gave my backside a playful swat. "Loodfall time. I can't meet my Sia with the sweet scent of my female covering my scales."

He had complete control over my body, rolling me back over and lifting me from the bed as if I weighed nothing. I silently giggled and playfully batted at his chest as he carried me to the back of our tree house and into the Valosian equivalent of a bathroom.

What they called a sanitate system was a small basin for a sink, a pedestal with a hole for a toilet that emptied to who knew where, and a loodfall that acted as a shower.

Vallon turned a handle and started the flow of water, or lood, as they called it. He stepped in with me wrapped around his front. I inhaled sharply, the tepid temperature a shock to my heated flesh.

I was thankful for the convenience of having a bathroom in our tree house, and I shouldn't complain that the water wasn't as hot as I liked it—but holy *shit*—the stuff spraying out barely qualified as warm.

Vallon had always taken care of me before our mating, but now that he had liberty to touch me everywhere, I was quickly becoming a spoiled woman. Like a pampered princess, he washed my hair and body until everything was squeaky clean.

I returned the favor, wearing a blush high on my cheeks. Vallon stood shamelessly before me wearing nothing but a sexy grin. I'd only ever been with one other guy, so standing together in our birthday suits, with Vallon's muscles all out on display, was both erotic and intimidating.

My sudden shyness was ridiculous. It wasn't as if we hadn't spent the entire night fornicating or anything. Maybe it was just hard to believe someone as gorgeous as Vallon found little ol' me attractive.

He tilted back my chin with the tips of his fingers as I tried really, *really* hard not to gawk at his alien man-bits. "You shouldn't feel like that." He touched his shawra, reminding me that our emotions were intertwined. "You're more beautiful than you give yourself credit for."

My face went up in flames and my heart pounded, threatening to break out of the cage of my ribs. I sucked at



accepting compliments. Probably because they only ever came from my mom.

*“You are being biased because I’m your spirit mate.”* I signed cynically.

Vallon caught my hands in his and shook his wet head. “There is no room for being biased when I’m speaking the truth. If I say you’re beautiful, then you are, so just accept it, say thank you, and move on.”

My mouth opened in a silent laugh. My smile so wide, it hurt my cheeks.

*“All right. You win.”* I lifted up on my toes and kissed his lips.

That chaste peck on the mouth was all that was needed to ignite a spark and trigger Vallon to thrum, the erotic cadence of a lover’s song. His cock jumped between us, the blunt point of his head bumping my thigh. I wouldn’t have believed it possible to ache for him after so many times of being intimate until a flood of wetness readied me for another round.

Vallon’s hands gripped the fleshiest part of my hips and lifted my feet off the floor. My legs instinctively wrapped around his tight waist. The head of him acted like a heat-seeking missile, finding its way between the slickening petals of my sex.

The fevered kiss he laid on me blistered the marrow of my bones. His lips and tongue expertly coaxing a silent moan from someplace deep and feral.

My body tingled and pulsed with renewed urgency as I shamelessly groped every inch of his flesh within my reach. Beneath my wandering palms, his scales were as subtle and smooth as suede. I could never get enough of touching him.

“I told you.” He punctuated his words with a solid upward thrust, filling me on a sharp inhale. “You’re a wicked distraction.”

His scales were a riot of silvers and blues expressing his excitement. Blinded with sensory overload, the echo of his building climax mixed with mine.

Impaled on Vallon's cock, I was stuck between his surging body and the wall at my back. I let my head fall back, surrendering to the sensations while digging my fingers into the massive width of his shoulders.

If I had a voice box, I would be mumbling incoherent words of encouragement to never stop as I rode out the erotic storm his cock was brewing deep inside my core.

The triangular flaps at his base came out to play, erecting to tease my clit until I was writhing and pushing against his shoulders and chest with balled fists.

My legs stiffened and my back arched. I turned my head to the side and came in a shower of sparks behind tightly closed eyelids. My inner walls clamped down around Vallon's girth in wave after wave, until I was boneless and shaking from the pleasure of it all.

Vallon rested his forehead on the wall beside my head and continued to hold up my weight like it was nothing. We stayed like that for a long time, just catching our breaths. The water from the loodfall hit Vallon's broad back, splashing all around us.

The passion he felt for me was a heat that ribboned around my heart and filled me with so much affection, there was hardly room for the air in my lungs. Surrounded in his glorious strength, I had never felt so safe or protected.

This was what being in love was meant to feel like. I was over the moon with gratitude to be experiencing it with Vallon.

From the moment I was well enough to join the others, Vallon had been there, a steadfast protector, watching over us girls. Instantly drawn to him, we'd become fast friends. Yet, it had been more than that, and the niggling tug behind my sternum had been persistent. No matter how hard I tried to deny the attraction that had bloomed between us, my spirit had won the tug-of-war.

Here I was, well and truly mated to a warrior of Valose. Despite my joy of finally joining with my soulmate, remained a kernel of grief.

The chance I would ever see my mom again was lost.

Vallon slipped free of my body and gently set me on my feet. “I know I am the cause of your sadness, and it slays me knowing that I’ve hurt you.”

*“Don’t you dare shoulder that blame, Vallon.”* My hands moved sadly. *“We were meant to be together. My mom is a loss to be mourned. I knew that and accepted it when I chose to bond with you.”*

“That may be, but it hurts me no less.”

*“You are the most compassionate male.”* I touched my shawra. *“I can feel how much inside. I’m thrilled to be here with you, but this loss I feel will never go away.”*

“I understand.” Vallon wet his lips. “When all of our females perished from the germ, I lost a good friend of mine.”

I laid my hand over his shawra, the resonance of an old loss knifing through our combined bliss.

*“Will you tell me about her?”*

“Sometime, but not this suns-rise. We are late for our meeting with Sia Jakkar.”

We dried quickly and padded into the main room to dress. I lifted my hastily discarded kilt-dress from the floor and sniffed. I wrinkled my nose and tossed it aside in favor of the spare one I had stashed in my bag.

I gratefully slipped on a clean pair of panties we’d made from soft fabrics Jane had brought back from her time spent inside the mountain fortress at Jurigon.

A recent luxury, we had been living undergarment-free since waking up on this other world. Using the roughly woven material the males used for their kilts to make them had been out of the question, choosing to go commando over chafing.

Lastly, I shoved my feet into fur-lined boots an exiled Huren craftsman was kind enough to make for us. Vallon draped a fur around my shoulders and pinned the two halves together with a metal clasp in the shape of a wetlock, the symbol of Clan Huren.

Vallon strapped his spear to his back and down we went, the platform lowering us to the forest floor.

My steps were light and my heart full as we followed the path with me hanging onto Vallon's arm as he escorted me to visit with Ivy. He and some of the other warriors would be taking Zaku to salvage what he could from his crashed spacecraft.

Ivy had left Earth willingly, and I was more than curious about how she had met her alien. To think, a giant purple alien had been on the planet, and none were the wiser. How often did shit like this happen, and we humans remained ignorant?

*"Please, be careful,"* I signed as we neared Zaku's tree house and laid my head on Vallon's biceps. I could feel curiosity growing within him of what they'd find on Zaku's crashed spacecraft mixed with his unease.

"I will." Vallon kissed my hand. "There will be many of Tikkot's warriors with us. I doubt the Mektian will cause us any trouble. Still, I don't fully trust him."

I agreed. We knew little about him or Ivy. I aimed to find out more. The tablet stowed in the pocket of my kilt-dress bumped my thigh as I walked. I intended on putting it to good use to ask all the questions banging around inside my skull.

Lily had a timeline of her abduction. For me? I could have been taken any time before or after her. Then there had been all those girls Marie found under the palace in the city of Huren. Hexxus had said they had been hidden there for about a year. How long ago had they been abducted?

It was all so scary. The most alarming thing for me was not knowing how much time I had lost, or what had been done to me while I lay unconscious. Probably better not to know.

I shivered despite the warmth of the fur Vallon had wrapped around me before we left. Vallon drew me into his side with a great sweep of his arm. Not meant to warm but to comfort. Because of our special bond, he knew me as well as I knew myself. I could not ask for a more perfect husband.

A smile split my face. I hadn't thought of it like that, but for all intents and purposes, Vallon and I were married. The coordinating shawras etched over our hearts acting as our wedding rings.

At the base of Zaku's tree were gathered a small group of Trisess warriors. Scantily clad in only breechcloths, I marveled at how they were able to stay warm in the brisk winter breeze.

"Sia Tikkot waits for you," the Trisess warrior I remembered as Synnox pointed up.

"I thought to meet Sia Jakkar," Vallon eyed the warrior, perplexed.

"His mate is not feeling well," Synnox said. "She suffers from what he called moor-neeng sickness. He said there was nothing to worry about and will join us later at the crash site."

Morning sickness was a common ailment for pregnant humans, but I couldn't help but worry since Lily's baby was half Valosian. If the baby was a girl, she may not survive the rubella the Grites had used as a biological weapon against the Gretolics once she was born.

Vallon dipped his chin and we stepped onto the platform. With a crank of the wheel that operated the pulley system, up we went in a stomach-dropping ascent. I sidled up to Vallon as he took us higher.

"You're safe. I promise." He peered down into my face as he turned the wheel.

The echo of his spirit enveloped mine. It was like being hugged from the inside out. The feeling was miraculous, and I wished I'd bonded with him sooner.

Inside, Tikkot stood waiting in the center of the room. Assuming a cocky stance with his spear held lightly at his side, the Sia of Trisess was hardly relaxed. The sharp swirl of his eyes gave away his disquiet.

As we joined Tikkot, all eight feet of Zaku uncoiled from where he sat perched on the edge of his mate's bed. The alien cut a foreboding presence. I could sense the thick of Vallon's

distrust, a sour mixture of apprehension that settled in my gut as if I'd swallowed spoiled meat.

Despite having a human mate, Zaku was a stranger that had not yet earned anyone's trust.

I swallowed hard as I took him in from head to toe. Hair like an oil slick flowed to his waist. His masculine features were as sharp and defined as the scales that covered the mountains of muscle, making up his bulky frame. I'd always been impressed with Vallon's size, but Zaku made him look small in comparison.

He was the most interesting being I had ever seen. From all the aliens I'd met so far, I could only imagine what else was out there in the Universe.

Ivy was lying on the small bed with furs covering her lap. Her color was better, and she sat, propped on rolled-up furs used as pillows. I returned her little wave when she saw me.

Vallon tucked a comm into my palm. "Remember to key the comm three times."

*"I know."* I smiled at his reminder. *"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine here with Ivy."*

Vallon cupped my upturned face and smoothed a thumb over my cheek. He bowed his head to join our lips in a measured kiss, before touching his forehead to mine. My heart fluttered behind my sternum, awash with all the love Vallon had for me.

*"I love you,"* I mouthed in Valosian, remembering all the times I had mouthed the same sentiment, only in a language I knew he wouldn't understand.

His smile was brighter than the noonday sun. "I love you back, my spirit mate." Vallon gave my face a quick kiss and hugged me before pulling away.

Zaku turned and leaned over to kiss his mate. He whispered soft words that didn't reach my ears but swiveled the super-sensitive auditory systems of the two warriors around me, leaving her with a tender smile on her face.

“I was just about to send someone after you. I had wondered at your tardiness.” Tikkot smirked at Vallon’s shawra, then winked at me. “No need to explain, the reason is obvious. I hope to be reunited with my Isobel soon. She is still on the island helping Maxxon look after the unconscious females who have yet to recover.”

I blushed from head to toe over Tikkot’s casual scrutiny. Our shawras still softly glowed from our recent mating. There was no hiding what we had just been doing.

“My apologies.” Vallon didn’t even flinch. I sensed no embarrassment from him, only pride.

“No apologies are required,” Tikkot said. “I understand the influence the spirit has over the mind. There was an age, not so long ago when new spirit mates were given the time needed to strengthen their bond. I hope that time can be returned.”

“We will all keep fighting until that happens, Sia.”

“Tikkot, Vallon.” Tikkot bro-punched Vallon in the shoulder like men did to each other on Earth. “How many times must I remind you? We are friends.”

“I know. I only want to voice my respect.”

The males clasped forearms in the way of warriors then turned their full attention back to Zaku. I was escorted to Ivy’s bedside with a spoken truce between the males that no harm would come to either of us females.

With a reluctant goodbye and a promise to return soon, Vallon left me with Ivy.

He and Tikkot flanked Zaku with Ivy’s concerned gaze marking his retreat. Their spears pointed up at their sides as all three males stepped onto the platform, leaving Ivy and I alone.

We looked at each other with awkward glances until Ivy broke the silence first, “Elise, right?”

I nodded and lifted my hands to sign, then dropped them, feeling like an idiot.

“You can hear but not talk?”

I nodded again and self-consciously touched my throat.

“You don’t have to be shy with me,” Ivy said. “Pull up a seat. It’s been a while since I chatted with another female. A human one, at least.”

My sideways look made her laugh. She laid a hand over her abdomen and groaned. I rushed to her side mouthing words of concern.

“I’m okay.” She heaved out a breath and settled back against the roll of furs. “Since you were abducted, I guess you have a lot of questions for me. Huh? Like, what’s a nice girl like me doing with a purple alien like that?”

I huffed out a silent laugh, over her unexpected remark and pulled up a seat. I sat on the edge in anticipation over her next words.

“Well, I’ll tell you why, Elise. Zaku is the smartest male I’ve ever met. Aside from being attracted to the opposite sex with big brains, Zaku just does it for me. You know?” She chuckled and held her side. “Alien males aren’t built the same as what we’re used to.”

I scrambled to retrieve the tablet from my pocket. “*Marie says Earth men are vanilla.*”

“I can’t argue with that.” Ivy’s smile withered. “Is that another one of the girls you were abducted with?”

I nodded.

“How many?” she breathed the words.

“*On my ship, only nine survived the crash. Layla is still missing and presumed dead. Jane was found later in the wreckage with no memory of her past.*”

I showed her the tablet and her eyes widened. “You crashed here?”

I nodded and wrote more. “*Later, ten more girls were rescued from the city of Huren. They were there for about a year, but we don’t know how long ago they were taken. One girl, Rowan, is awake, but she doesn’t have a lot to say.*”



“That’s terrible.”

*“They were the lucky ones who weren’t taken to the other planet to be traded.”*

“That is very lucky for them.”

*“Back to you and Zaku.”* I was anxious to pick her brain. I wanted to know more about the pandemic she’d mentioned and Zaku’s involvement in that. *“You said he helped you fix the cure to a pandemic?”*

“That’s right,” Ivy started. “I was given the task of discovering why the cure was killing some and saving others. I couldn’t have done it without Zaku’s help. At first, I thought he was nothing more than my overworked brain finding an outlet while I slept. Then I discovered my late-night fantasy man was real and had been suppressing my memories of what we’d been doing in the lab, which had been more than just work.”

I felt my jaw unhinge as she retold her story of the pandemic that ravaged Earth, of meeting Zaku, why he had come to Earth, and of their adventures as they traveled the stars looking for a new place to settle.

“Does that hurt?” Ivy gestured toward my chest. “Zaku said it’s called a shawra. Do you really share a soul with the Valosian?”

*“Vallon,”* I gushed as I wrote. *“Not share a soul, but our spirits intertwine when we mate.”* I couldn’t help the blush that splashed my cheeks. *“It leaves behind an imprint, so we can sense each other’s emotions.”*

“That is crazy cool, Elise.” Ivy looked at me in awe. “What’s it like?”

I considered her, then wrote, *“Like connecting with someone on the deepest level. Intimacy times a hundred.”*

“That’s amazing,” she said. “What do you remember of your abduction?”

*“Not much. Only glimpses of gray aliens like recalling the haziness of old nightmares,”* I wrote. *“Now that we know how*

*long it took for you and Zaku to travel here. Instead of what we thought had only been a week or two. We now know we had been locked in the Gretolic's cages while they flew us away from Earth, pumping us full of that green shit."*

"Green shit?" Ivy cocked her head.

*"The Gretolics injected us with this green fluid. Maxxon—he's the Huren medic—said it was a life-sustaining serum. He thinks it put us in some kind of stasis."*

"Maxxon is right," Ivy said. "It's a serum made from purified jakato beans. If taken in small doses, it acts to prolong life by helping the body repair damaged DNA that happens naturally as we age. It slows down cellular degradation and prolongs lifespans."

I sat in stunned silence. Her words playing over and over again in my mind. *Prolongs lifespans*, was what she had said. That meant Vallon and I would have more time together.

I tamped down my excitement. No need to get my hopes up until I knew more about what she was saying.

*"How do you know all this?"*

"Back on Earth, I was a geneticist. The cure to the virus was attacking a specific gene sequence, and that's where I came in."

*"So, you work with viruses?"*

"Not typically, but since the virus was DNA driven, the government secretly contracted the company I worked for, for help. Zaku is the virologist, so together, we made a great team."

No two better people to help find the cure to the germ could have dropped out of the sky. Aside from the possibility of a longer life with Vallon, this was the best news ever!

I started to write on my tablet when a shrill alarm shattered the unprecedented moment.

## Chapter Twelve

---

**Z**aku led the way to his crashed vessel. “The proethinal, that was leaking from the hydraulics array, should be fully dissipated. The sermonian crystals will continue to make oxygen and the air inside should be breathable.”

“You only have the one plasma gun aboard?” Tikkot asked for a second time.

“Yes.” Zaku looked over his shoulder at us. “I’m not stupid enough to lie. You are many. I am one. The only way to ensure my mate’s safety is to earn your trust. Dishonesty is not the path to get me there.”

Despite the intelligent glint in the bright depths of his piercing gaze, I couldn’t get past the creepiness of his slitted pupils that were so much like a wetlocks. My scales bristled with unease.

This male would make a formidable ally. I prayed to the Spirits he was as honorable as I hoped he was. The knowledge he carried alone would be an asset in defeating the Gretolics.

Now we had a new threat to guard against. The Yulineons. I feared if they discovered the humans, they would put them to death for just being found off their planet.

As we approach Zaku’s mangled ship, he paused to study pieces in the debris field.

“What are we looking for?” I stooped near Zaku.

“Anything salvageable.” Zaku brushed off a layer of blue dirt before lifting a chunk of metalloid from the ground. “I want to collect all the pieces from the ship. As bad as the crash-landing was, there’s still a chance I might be able to rebuild it.”

“You’re planning to leave Valose with your mate?” Tikkot asked.

“This was not where we planned to come. So, yes. If it’s possible, I would like to continue on to our original destination.”

“And where was that?” I asked.

I felt a moment of panic, my mind going into a tailspin. If Zaku left, he would also be taking with him vast knowledge of our enemies. As he pointed out, it would get him nowhere to lie, so whatever he could tell us would help us win the war.

He had our vow as warriors that he would not be separated from his mate and was free to leave at any time. He knew that vow would be null and void if he were to betray us.

“A new Nomadican settlement on a distant planet in the Unios galaxy,” Zaku answered.

“No-mad-e-can.” I annunciated the word. “You’ve mentioned this before. What does it mean?”

At Zaku’s request and Tikkot’s permission a few of the warriors fanned out, collecting pieces of his broken ship while the majority of us continued to the bulk of the wreckage, remaining close to keep a watch on Zaku.

“Nomadicans are an endangered people whose home world was destroyed because of their government’s greed.” We walked with Zaku as he talked, running his hands over the hull until we came to a small hatch in the side. He stopped and turned to us, telling the rest of the horrific story.

“Unbeknownst to the general populace, the Nomadican government attacked the Bioti cities to try and overthrow them and take control of their rillium production. Millions were killed. The Bioti struck back with weapons of a much more destructive nature and imploded the Nomadicans’ planet of

Riosis to dust. No one saw it coming. Everyone on the planet was obliterated, whole families gone in the blink of an eye. The only survivors were the few hundred fortunate enough to be off-world at the time.”

“You said this rillium is what the Gretolic’s are trading our males and the human females for?” I inquired.

“That’s right.” Zaku popped a lever to release the hatch and narrowed shrewd eyes on me. “Only your males? Count yourselves lucky the Gretolics didn’t take any of your females.”

The undercurrent of anguish that swept over our small group was not lost on Zaku.

“What has happened?” Zaku spoke gravely.

Tikkot and I exchanged an uncertain look. Before we could decide whether to reveal our horrid truth to the newcomer, Sia Jakkar made the decision for us.

“The Grites unleashed a biological weapon on Valose in an attempt to destroy the rogue Gretolics.” Sia Jakkar stepped out of the tree line to join us. “It had an adverse effect on our females. All succumbed to the germ.”

“All?” Zaku paled. “What germ did they unleash?”

“My spirit mate and her friend, Amy, identified it as rubella,” Sia Jakkar said.

“A human virus?” Zaku’s eyes widened in surprise. “What effect did it have on the Gretolics?”

“Sickness and dying,” Sia Jakkar answered.

“Were any of the human females affected?” Zaku asked.

“What concern would it be of yours if they were?” Sia Jakkar growled low.

“My Ivy is a doctor of genetics,” Zaku said in way of explanation. “On my world, I was taught in the virological arts. Perhaps we can help with a vaccine.”

“And why would you help us?” Tikkot’s knuckles turned white as he tightened the grip on his spear.

“What reason would I have not to?” Zaku turned to look at Tikkot. “You are not my enemy.”

I wanted so badly to trust Zaku. After all we had been through, believing the word of an alien was going to be difficult.

“Assuming you earn our trust,” Sia Jakkar began. “Would you be able to create a cure to the germ?”

“A cure? Yes. As well as a vaccine for any newly birthed females.”

Sia Jakkar froze in place over Zaku’s insightful words.

“My olfactory system is as acute as yours.” Zaku tapped the side of his nose. “I can scent your mate’s delicate condition.”

“Can you now?” Sia Jakkar stepped into Zaku’s personal space and bared his fangs. “Then you’ll understand my unremorseful aggression if you so much as look like you’re going to betray us.”

“You won’t hurt my mate even if I did. The only life I must be concerned with is my own. Warriors of Valose vow to protect those that cannot protect themselves.”

“How is it you know so much about us?” Sia Jakkar flexed his fists at his sides, and I knew he was readying to unsheathe his swords if he didn’t like Zaku’s answer.

“Part of my education as a youth was the study of charted planets and their indigenous species. The study of the Valosians was one of my favorites. I even dreamed of being a warrior of one of the clans,” he said. “Your people have grit and an integrity that I respect. Unlike my people who are unyielding and brutal because of their closed-minded ways. I was always in trouble for having my head in the clouds and spent many a moon in solitary.”

That seemed to pacify Sia Jakkar, and he stepped back giving Zaku room to open the hatch and peer inside his mangled craft. He sniffed at the air.

“The air inside is breathable. I don’t scent anymore proethinal.”

Tikkot stopped Zaku before he could enter the ship through the hatch. “I’ll go first.”

Zaku stepped back to make room for Tikkot to enter.

“You dreamed of being a warrior of Valose?” I wanted to know more about this giant male with a desire to be like us.

“That’s right.” Zaku shrewdly eyed me. “Interesting, though, that you wield a spear while wearing the symbol of the Huren clan.”

“It was given to me by a friend.” I spun the shaft in my palm, admiring the spear Tikkot had gifted me. “If you favored Valose so much, why settle on another world? Why not come here with your female?”

“Valose is off-limits. Your people know nothing of other species and what lies beyond your clouds. At least, not until recently.” Zaku rubbed his chin. “After our conversation last night, I’ve had time to think about the implications of the presence of the Yulineon patrols.

“Now that your world has had contact with an alien race, prepare yourselves for a visit from the Hightous Council. According to Universeval Rule, now that you are enlightened, Valose will be counted among the collective. I would hide the humans. If they know of their existence, they will be hunted by the Yulineon patrols.”

“Then the Spirits help any Yulineon who dares lay a single finger on my female or any of the others,” Sia Jakkar growled my sentiments exactly.

“It’s a mess in here, but all clear.” Tikkot’s head popped out of the hatch. “And no sign of a plasma gun. Zaku is going to show us where he’s hidden it.”

One by one, Zaku, myself, Sia Jakkar, and two of Tikkot’s warriors made entry into Zaku’s mangled craft. Everyone kept a sharp eye on Zaku as he familiarized himself with the wreckage.



“The inside is in worse condition than I expected.” Zaku began to sift through scattered contents as he moved around the control room.

“The plasma gun, Moktian,” Sia Jakkar prompted.

“I stashed it in a compartment inside that console.” Zaku pointed to a twisted heap of metalloid. “Help me to move it.”

Three of us gathered around to lift the console to reveal the compartment. We heaved until we were spent. Despite all our grunting and shoving, the thing hadn’t even budged from where it lay smashed into the strange, black spongy floor that appeared to twinkle against the twin suns’ rays piercing the many tears in the hull.

Zaku reared back to consider the console, placing beefy hands on his hips. “We’ll have to cut it out—”

The shrill siren broadcasting the Nuttaki attack wasn’t what jolted every muscle in my body. It was the sudden punch of stark fear echoing from my spirit mate.

“Elise...” I slapped my palm over my shawra bending with the weight of her anxiety.

My instinct to protect her overrode all else. On an adrenalyne rush that pounded through my veins, I ran for the hatch and launched myself into the forest, tucking and rolling as I hit the ground.

Sia Jakkar was right on my tail.

A hard thud sounded out behind us. We both whirled around, brandishing our weapons, and prepared to attack. It was Zaku, who had leapt out of the craft. His enormous body landed hard enough to shake the ground.

“What is it your female feels?” Zaku eyed me.

I opened my mouth to tell this overgrown alien to fuck off when he stopped me.

“My female is with Elise. My emotions are not tied to my mate as you are with yours. Are they all right?”

“Afraid,” I gulped and lowered the point of my spear. “Elise is scared. She needs to be taken to a more secure location.”

“My Ivy does as well.” Zaku’s slitted pupils had rounded out in fear.

I pinged Elise, and she keyed the comm three times in answer.

“Are you and Ivy all right? Key once for yes and two for no.”

Elise keyed once and I blew out a hard breath, exchanging a relieved expression with Zaku.

Sia Jakkar was doing the same with Lily, his comm to his ear and his shoulders loosening with her answer.

Tikkot lunged out of the hatch to join us. “My Isobel is still safe on the island, but your females are not. The safest place is the youngling refuge. Take them there. We’ve got this. Join the fight when your spirit mates are safe.”

“We will, thanks” Sia Jakkar said. “Draggar and some of the other warriors were due to arrive on the next sun-rise to begin learning Elise’s hand language. I will ping them to come now.”

“Good. Now go!” Tikkot took off like a charge shot out of a plasma gun, barking out orders to the Trisess warriors who fell in behind their ruler.

“Elise. Stay there. We are on the way to get you.” I attempted to keep my voice calm.

My spirit mate keyed the comm and some of the hot anxiety churning behind my sternum subsided.

The three of us raced down the path and into the thick of the forest. My scales flashed hot in urgent whites and silvers.

I’d seen how fast Zaku could move and could tell he was intentionally slowing his pace, so we could keep up. I was tempted to tell him to run ahead and protect the females until I arrived, but the trust wasn’t fully there. And the last thing I would trust him with was Elise.

Erupted into chaos, the normally tranquil forest was teeming with armed males, all racing north toward the Sien River. Normally, the rushing lood and sizeable width of the river kept the Nuttaki at bay.

Given the raised alarm, it sounded like that race of primitive insectoids had finally figured out a way past the natural barrier. I wondered if the recent alien activity was the catalyst that had pushed them to overcome their fear of drowning.

At a fork in the path, Sia Jakkar veered off, yelling at me over his shoulder. "I'll meet you at the base of the largest tree after I grab Lily."

"We'll be there," I shouted back.

Tikkot had mentioned Clan Trisess had moved all the younglings to a secure location after the Gretolics had landed in their forest, but I hadn't known where.

Off in the distance, the clash of weapons rang out through the heavy boughs. For the first time in Valosian history, the Trisess forest had been invaded by the Nuttaki.

A fresh shot of adrenalyne zinged through my veins, fueling my thighs, and I surged forward at a speed I didn't know I had in me.

Zaku snarled an approving grin and picked up his pace. We reached the base of the tree where our females waited.

Zaku looked up into the canopy, his claw-tipped hands flexing as if he were debating on leaving me behind to scale the tree. He looked at me and reluctantly stepped onto the platform. I took the wheel and hauled us up faster than I ever had before.

"I could easily disarm you and climb the rest of the way."

"You could, but then you would lose what little trust you've earned with me." I glared. "And you don't know the way to the largest tree. If you go too far north, you'll run into the Sien River and the Nuttaki horde attacking. Without a bridge, you won't be able to cross. Even if you could, you must be cautious of the floratrap fields. Go too far south? You

run the risk of getting too close to the seashore and in snatching distance of the squidlin. I know this planet better than you. If you want to ensure your female's safety, you'll have to be cooperative."

Zaku looked up to the approaching room high above and sneered. We were only halfway there.

"Let me take the wheel." Zaku held out a hand with a tilt of his head. "I can get us up there faster."

"I'm trusting you." I kept turning while I talked. "Don't disappoint me or I won't hesitate to run you through with my spear."

"I want to reach my female as badly as you do yours. I have no ill intentions."

I halted our progress and gestured for him to take the wheel. Zaku took over my position while I assumed a defensive stance with the tip of my spear pointed at his side.

Wheel in hand, Zaku hauled us up so fast, I lost my footing with my ass hitting the floor of the platform. An acrid stench hit my sinuses with a sting as black smoke waft off the thick cable of the pulley system from the friction.

We reached the deck jutting out from the room in secs. Zaku secured the pulley. Both of us lunged off the platform and stormed into an empty room.

I could feel fear echoing off Elise's spirit, so I knew she lived. Where in the Spirit's was she?

"Elise!" I shouted and raced to the sanitare system, finding it empty.

"They're here, Vallon!" Zaku had found the females hidden inside an emptied supply trunk. The stored furs had been dumped on the bed.

Elise's face was scrunched with tears as she ran to me with arms wide open. I met her halfway, sweeping her up into a tight hold.

"I've got you." I pressed my face into the curve of her neck and breathed her in. Her little body shook with the hot

tears spilling over my shoulder and down my back.

I closed my eyes to savor the precious moment of simply holding my female. The crescendo of the battle at the Sien River was a hot prod that called me to action. My spirit mate needed to be taken to safety and Tikkot needed my help.

# Chapter Thirteen

---

“**W**e have to go now.” Vallon readjusted the spear strapped on his back and wrapped an arm around my waist, rushing me toward the platform with Zaku and Ivy on our heels. “A Nuttaki horde is attacking.”

*Ohmygod!* I’d never seen a Nuttaki, but the girls had talked about the times they’d seen them. Marie had said they were like a cross between a man and a praying mantis.

*“I thought we were cut off from the rest of the continent because of the whitewater rapids.”* My hands flew as I was hustled onto the platform.

“I thought so too. The horde must have found a way to cross.”

*“Where are we going?”* I signed before Vallon turned away and spun the wheel that lowered us to the forest floor.

“A refuge with the younglings,” Vallon said and plucked me from the ground. “It’s the safest place in the forest.”

I was wrapped, monkey-style, around Vallon’s front as he hauled ass down the eerily vacant path. The sounds of war filtering through the forest were muted with the distance between us and the raging Sien River.

Weapons clashed and males shouted. The most disturbing sounds were the ear-puncturing clicks and chirps from the creatures I’d only imagined.

Over one of Vallon's massive shoulders, I made eye contact with Ivy. Zaku carried her cradled against his wide, purple chest. We exchanged shaky smiles, still terrified but relieved to be in the arms of our mates.

We had both tried to stay brave when the alarm first blared its warning. We hadn't known what it meant. Then the echo of Vallon's emotions had spiked within me, triggering me to scramble for a place to hide.

I had felt undiluted fear coming from him. It hadn't been for his own safety, but for mine.

Even after Vallon had told me they were coming for us, Ivy and I couldn't just sit still and wait. We had dumped the contents of one trunk out onto the bed and squished inside. We held onto each other in a tangle of trembling limbs until I heard Vallon's voice called out my name.

The shelter of his arms was a comfort even though the heat from his body was making me sweat. I pressed my cheek against his shoulder and relished the feel of his power. At the same time, I was nervous over how much he itched to join the fight.

That was who my male was. He was a warrior of Valose and that was his occupation, keeping people safe. Just like a Marine or an Army soldier. I'd married a military guy.

Vallon ran until we reached a giant, gnarled tree. The thing looked positively ancient, appearing to stand on legs of thick roots growing halfway out of the ground. It was massive and the surface roots were as wide as some old oaks I'd seen on Earth.

At the base stood Jakkar and Lily with a Trisess male holding a nutrone spear. Vallon set me on my feet.

"This is Kabbon." Jakkar gestured to the male. "He will watch after you until we return."

I turned troubled eyes up to Vallon. With our spirits entwined, I didn't need words to express my sudden panic. We didn't even know this guy. Were we just gonna stand out here



under this tree until our males came back to pick us up like we'd been dropped off at the babysitters?

"If Sia Jakkar trusts him, then I do as well." Vallon cupped my face and touched his forehead to mine. "He will keep you well-hidden until I come back. I love you."

*"I love you,"* I mouthed in return.

"I will return as soon as I can." Vallon breathed me in and thumbed away my tears. "You must be strong. For me. I need to draw from the strength of your spirit."

*"You have it."*

With an echoing swirl of sorrow and determination, Vallon nudged me toward the male, Kabbon. I wanted to protest. To beg him not to go, but I would be depriving him of his true nature. And I didn't bond with him to tie his hands.

I shored up my courage, even though my lower lip trembled, and gave him a firm nod. *"Be careful,"* I signed.

"I will." With that Vallon and the other males turned and took off down the path toward the fighting.

I straightened my spine. I could be strong for him. The various missions he'd been assigned had been stressful enough. This time was different. This time was the first of many battles where lives would be lost and the face of Valose would be changed forever.

Ivy wrapped her arms around me in a loose hold as we watched the backs of our retreating males until the thick of the forest swallowed them whole.

A throat cleared. "We must get below," Kabbon said in a patient but authoritative tone as if he were speaking to a child.

"Come on, girls." Lily tugged on our hands. "Let's go. It's not safe for us out here."

"Where are we going?" Ivy looked all around and up into the immense canopy overhead.

"Kabbon knows the way." Lily waved us over to where the male had disappeared between two tree-trunk-sized roots.

“Are you sure it’s safe for us to be here?” Ivy clasped my hand. Her skin was as cold with fear as mine.

I fished my tablet from my pocket and wrote, “*Vallon would not leave me if he didn’t know for certain it was safe.*”

“Well, shit. All right, then.” Ivy rubbed at her injured side and threaded her arm through mine. “Looks like we’re going down the rabbit hole, Alice.”

Lily patiently waited for us between the roots. Once there, she turned and ducked under a natural arch in the tree as if she’d already been here before.

The way through was dark as sin and smelled richly of dirt and moss. The only light inside was coming from the nutrone glowing in the tip of Kabbon’s spear up ahead.

It was slow going because of Ivy’s injuries so I reached out a hand to snag a hold of the fur Lily was wearing like a shawl. She slowed her pace at my tug.

Once we reached Kabbon, he turned and moved farther forward. We started down a steady decline. Wherever our destination, it seemed endless. The air was growing colder the deeper we went. I shivered, wishing I’d grabbed a fur before we’d left the tree house.

Kabbon made a sudden sharp turn to the right and disappeared out of sight. One second he was there, and the next, he was gone. Panic sent my heart racing.

“Where in the fuck did he go?” Ivy muttered.

I shook my head in the dark.

“It’s okay, girls.” Lily glanced back and reassured us. “We’re almost there.”

I trusted Lily implicitly and followed her while tugging along a reluctant Ivy by the hand. Another right and then a left until a door of sorts presented itself.

Kabbon patiently waited for us, then opened the door.

We stepped inside a room hollowed out of wood. Kabbon closed the door behind us, dragging across a heavy wooden

post to barricade it. Was this where we were supposed to wait?

“What is this place, Lily?” Ivy asked.

“We aren’t waiting in here,” Lily smiled and winked. “Wait for it.”

Kabbon rapped his knuckles against the smooth, wooden wall in a series of knocks. To our utter dismay, a panel I hadn’t noticed opened, presenting a second male. He was introduced to us as Jullen. Light spilled into the room, washing our faces in the blue glow given off by the twin suns.

“How in the hell is there sunlight below ground?” Ivy voiced the question I couldn’t.

“Come and see.” Lily was all smiles, which surprised me given her mate was about to be engaged in war.

Lily went first, following the second male into a rounded top hallway. Ivy and I trailed along behind her.

The hallway was short, carved from blue dirt, and shored up with wooden posts at regular intervals. Soon, it opened into a larger chamber. Tree roots tangled all around, creating a spherical room with a wooden plank floor like what was inside the tree houses.

On the far side was a panoramic window framed out with thinner roots. The scene beyond was a mile of jagged rocks that gave way to the churning sea. The twin suns were just beginning to rise higher in the morning sky, bathing the room in soft light.

Beside me, Ivy gasped and gripped my arm. I knew it wasn’t the amazing scenery or the surreal chamber, made from an ancient tree’s roots, that caused her reaction, or was the reason my eyes had gone all buggy.

Scattered about the chamber, boys of varying ages paused what they were doing and turned as one to take in the sight of us. Smiles greeted Lily while Ivy and I were met with curious stares.

Jullen introduced me and Ivy to the boys and them to us. Their names escaped me. I was just as transfixed by them as

they were of me. Vallon had said we would be going to a youngling refuge. I wasn't prepared for my first look at Valosian children.

“What is this place?” Ivy breathed in awe.

“This is an underground bunker used in case of attack. We're under the oldest tree in the forest. All the children were brought down here when the Gretolics first landed,” Kabbon explained. “They have all been fitted with translators, so they can understand your strange language.”

I could almost forget the reason we were here. The atmosphere was all so calm and filled with the laughing voices of children.

Jullen and Kabbon left us to mill around the boys. Each one in the middle of performing different tasks. The older males sat at a long table with unrolled scrolls in front of them while the younger ones worked on various projects.

“Valosian daycare,” Ivy mumbled and ventured over to the table piled high with scrolls.

Yeah. Except their parents weren't at work, they were fighting a battle against an indigenous enemy hellbent on annihilating all Valosians.

The tiniest version of a Valosian male toddled over to me. “You play?” He smiled up at me all cherub cheeked and guileless eyes.

I sank to the floor and smiled back, placing a hand over my heart, so I wouldn't lose it to this precious scamp. He was freaking adorable with little pointed ears and short baby fangs.

I never pictured the mighty Valosian warriors, with all their muscles, anything but fierce. Peering into the face of the chubby-cheeked toddler before me, I could totally envision Vallon as a baby. His heart-melting smile would be doing a number on his mother as he begged her for something that she would ultimately give into.

A picture of my own mother giving me that relenting smirk just before she caved to my will, hit me square in the

heart. This little guy had lost his mother too. Maybe not the way I had mine but lost all the same.

“Why sad?”

“*Not sad,*” I signed, not realizing tears were streaming down my cheeks. “*Just very happy to meet you.*”

He eyed my hands strangely and touched the translator behind his ear. “Hand talk not work.”

I dug the tablet out of my pocket and wrote, “*I have no voice, but I would love to play with you.*” I showed it to Lily to translate.

He nodded happily and took my hand, leading me over to his play area. We sat on a fur rug, and I was immediately handed a wooden toy carved to look like a wetlock while he chose the wooden warrior with a spear.

Looked like I was to play the villain. I flew the thing around through the air, diving at the toy warrior the toddler held in his small hand. I must have been doing a good job because he squealed with delight as he bobbed and weaved my attack.

Lily came to sit with me on the floor. A trail of younger males gathered around her, vying for her attention.

“*How long have you known these little guys were here?*” I paused playing and wrote on my tablet to Lily.

“I just met them before you all got here. Our tree house is within throwing distance. Jakkar escorted me below to meet the two caretakers while we waited for you all to arrive,” Lily said.

“*In all the time I’ve been on Valose, I’ve never seen any kids. I knew they had to exist, but I didn’t think to ask where they all were.*”

She ruffled the hair of one of the males before placing her hand over her swollen abdomen. “They’re amazing, aren’t they? I wonder what my baby will look like.”

“*Beautiful,*” I signed the word in ASL.

Lily didn't know sign language but got the gist of my hand gesture and thanked me.

*"What are their names again?"*

Lily pointed to each male around the room, rattling off a name for each. "And the little cutie who has eyes only for you is called Gavvon."

I resumed playing with my tiny admirer but knew the moment Vallon joined the fighting. I was hit with a fierce surge of aggression so strong; I clutched my chest. Lily followed suit.

Overcome with the sudden myriad of emotions, fear for his safety threatened to drown me.

"They've engaged the enemy." Ivy looked at us knowingly.

I had to stay strong for Vallon. I tried to temper my turbulent anxieties. I didn't want Vallon hurt because the echo of my spirit had been a distraction.

Gavvon's soft baby fingers touched my hand. "You hurt?"

I shook my head and opened my arms to him. He climbed onto my lap, and I wrapped my arms around his cuddly little body.

Gavvon was just what I needed to compose myself and shore up my courage. Now was not the time to cave. Now was the time to stay calm so Vallon could focus all his energy on fighting the Nuttaki.

## Chapter Fourteen

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I was swarmed with a host of echoing emotions that belonged to my spirit mate. Unused to feeling another within me, I was going to have to make the adjustment quickly. Now was not the time for distractions.

There had been no expectations of how she'd feel when meeting the younglings for the first time. I was not prepared for the complete and utter adoration that burst through my ferocity to cut a smile across my face. Here I was, nearing the field of battle, and I was smiling like a loon.

The rushing lood of the Sien River normally drowned out all sounds. Not on this sun-rise. The clang of weapons against the exoskeletons of our enemy rang out with every strike.

I unstrapped the spear from across my back and clutched my weapon, ready for battle. Sia Jakkar did the same. His twin blades sang as he pulled them free of their sheaths.

Zaku remained empty-handed, running alongside us.

“What about him?” I glanced at Sia Jakkar. “We can't expect him to take on a Nuttaki horde barehanded.”

Sia Jakkar's brow pinched in thought as we forged ahead. He sheathed his swords as we slowed and stopped on the edge of the fighting.

“You claimed to have dreamed of wanting to be a warrior of Valose.” Sia Jakkar gave Zaku a hard look. “Do you still desire that?”



“Yes.”

“Then prove it by fighting with us. Be our brother-in-arms. Fight for the safety of your mate. Fight for Valose.”

“I accept you as my rightful Sia.” Without hesitation, Zaku presented his forearm to clasp. “Your enemies are my enemies.”

Sia Jakkar clasped what Zaku offered. His eyes swirled hot as he appeared to be looking into the spirit of the alien male. As if seeing what he needed to see, Sia Jakkar broke away. Hilt-first, Sia Jakkar presented Zaku with one of his swords.

“On this field of battle, Zaku of Moktu, you will prove yourself worthy to be called a warrior of Valose.”

“I will not let you down, Sia Jakkar,” Zaku growled proudly.

“Then let’s go show those Nuttaki we are males with which not to fuck!” Sia Jakkar snarled.

Roars erupted from all three of us as we plunged ahead. As soon as we broke through the trees and rushed onto the shoreline of the Sien River, it was clear from the slain bodies of our enemy littering the ground, that Clan Trisess was putting up a serious fight.

Yet, the amassing horde on the opposite side of the river was an impending threat. They carried with them a multitude of crudely made bridges that looked as if they’d been slapped together with twine and sticks.

Narrow and rickety, the insectoids could cross only single file, which created an easily defeated logjam. With well-placed spears and nutrone blasts, the bridges were easily dislodged from the shoreline, plummeting the crossing Nuttaki into the raging lood below.

The Nuttaki had no finesse when it came to fighting, snapping their jaws, and using the points of their spindly legs to randomly poke at the fighters. Their only advantage was they had the numbers with hundredths waiting to cross. The moment one bridge had been dispatched; another took its place. The warriors couldn’t take them out fast enough.

The males cutting down the Nuttaki as they crossed onto Trisess territory were starting to wear down as was the few spears tipped with nutrone. The power source no longer glowed as brightly and diminished with every well-placed shot.

“I will be better service to those fighting at the river’s edge. That’s where I’m headed,” I shouted to Sia Jakkar above the clamor of battle.

“Go with him, Zaku,” Sia Jakkar yelled back. “I’m going to help the warriors finish off the freaks that have managed to cross before any can enter the forest.”

I nodded to Sia Jakkar and turned to our new ally. “Let’s go, Zaku.”

With the huge alien at my side, we plowed our way through the fighting, felling any Nuttaki in our paths.

My spear never felt so good as it did in my hand when it penetrated the thick exoskeletons of my enemies with satisfying crunches. I spun and kicked, easily blocking every Nuttaki in my path. Dark blue blood spurted and sprayed from the wounds my spear tip inflicted.

Zaku impressed with the wielding of his borrowed weapon, cleaving in two the insectoid bodies stupid enough to get within his striking distance.

In our wake, we left a trail of twitching, bleeding bodies and reached the Nuttaki bridge just in time. An overwhelmed warrior tired and took a knee.

Zaku’s reach exceeded mine. In a single swing of Valosian steel, he relieved the Nuttaki of his head. The body twitched before falling harmlessly to the ground. The head rolling off the river’s edge.

“Thanks, friend.” The Trisess warrior recoiled when he turned to look at who had saved his ass. “Fucking Helios!”

“He’s with me,” I grinned and stabbed the next Nuttaki to cross the bridge. “He’s a fledgling warrior of Clan Huren.”

“Fledgling my ass!” The warrior stood and got back into the fight. “He’s a beast. Glad to have you as an ally.”

“Glad to help.” Zaku didn’t miss a beat and sliced two Nuttaki in half with a single swing.

The male had a serious sword arm that I was glad to have fighting on our side. I made a mental note to ask Sia Jakkar for a set of twin blades for the alien. I imagined the damage he could inflict if swinging two.

With adrenalyne fueling my fight, it was a long while before my arms began to feel the first signs of fatigue. We’d killed countless, the stinking corpses piling up around our legs, but it wasn’t enough. There were still hundredths on the other side waiting to cross.

The power remaining in the few nutrone spears were dwindling fast, and the warriors were tiring just as quickly. I watched as some of the fighters fell, overtaken by the endless wave of Nuttaki.

Zaku didn’t appear to be slowing, but even as good as a swordsman as he was proving to be, he couldn’t take on the remainder of the horde by himself. And wetlocks were beginning to gather and circle overhead.

Despite the nocturnal nature of the jungle’s beast, on the Huren side of the river, a rexose charged the Nuttaki horde. I watched in horrified fascination as they swarmed the largest of Valose’s creatures, taking it down with sheer numbers. The points of their spindly legs stabbing in rapid succession until the rexose succumbed to their attack.

I refused to allow my thoughts to entertain defeat, but this was worse than what we’d gone up against when they’d attacked and destroyed the original city of Huren.

We’d ultimately won that fight but not without great loss of life. As the tide turned and the bodies of Valosians began to pile up, I feared this would be the end of Trisess.

My spirit swirled around the echo of my mate’s. I didn’t want Elise to grow concerned, but this was the only way I

could touch her. If I was to succumb to my enemy, I wanted my final moments to be spent with her.

Just when I feared all was soon to be lost, an invisible force crushed a group of Nuttaki on the opposite side of the river.

“It’s the hand of the Spirits showing us favor,” a Trisess warrior near me cheered after stabbing his next target.

As the force cut a line through the horde, the blue blood of our enemy began to lend shape to our unseen ally. Laughter bubbled from deep within me as I recognized it for what it was—a spherical craft.

“No. That is not the Spirits. That is Draggar!”

Another craft joined the first, crushing the Nuttaki as it rolled across the ground, leaving a trail of the broken bodies of our enemy in its wake.

They attacked what they couldn’t see, leaping onto the invisible hull and stabbing with their spiked legs. It was no use, the Nuttaki were no match and ultimately rolled off to be crushed beneath the vessel.

The Nuttaki eventually gave up and began to scatter, disappearing into the thick foliage of the Huren jungle, leaving behind the stinking carnage of their defeat.

The hastily slung bridges were quickly taken down. No more Nuttaki could cross and the ones on the Trisess side of the river were easily dispatched.

The last Nuttaki alive was at the point end of Zaku’s sword. The alien paused his deathblow, head tilted as if listening to the clicks and snaps of the Nuttaki’s beak.

Sia Jakkar came to stand next to me on the bloody field, looking as perplexed as I was over Zaku’s actions.

“Kill that thing already, Zaku,” Sia Jakkar snapped.

“They call you silver demons,” Zaku started to translate the insectoid’s bizarre language we were never able to decipher. “He blames your people for this battle because you lured the sky creatures here. He says that his race, the mighty

Nuttaki, will lay waste to what is left of the silver demons and the sky creatures and take Valose for themselves.”

“Tell that piece of rexose shit that the Nuttaki will never best us,” Sia Jakkar spat. “And the alien invasion was not our doing.”

“I cannot speak their tongue, Sia, only translate it.”

“Dispatch him, Zaku,” Sia Jakkar ordered. “I have no use for his kind.”

Zaku didn't hesitate to relieve the insectoid of his head. The body and head dropping to the ground with consecutive thuds.

“Seek cover!” My head swung around to my first sighting of Tikkot since the battle began. He was running towards us and waving his arm skyward. “Mind the wetlocks.”

The winged beasts began to swoop down, indiscriminately snatching bodies from the ground with taloned-tipped claws. One made a dive close to a downed Trisess warrior. Spurred into action, the living hauled the dead off the battlefield and under the safety of the tree's canopy.

They could feast on Nuttaki meat for all I cared, but I would be damned if a warrior of Valose would become food for nestlings.

Zaku carefully laid the last body of a warrior on the ground with the others. We hadn't lost many, but even one was too much.

“Draggar and Wexxor are headed south to land near Zaku's ship.” Sia Jakkar pointed up to the spherical crafts.

Now bathed and dripping with Nuttaki blood, they cautiously flew around the sky teeming with hungry wetlocks.

“They got here just in time, too. For a mims, I thought we were done.” Tikkot said and milled around the dead we'd removed from the battlefield, memorizing the faces of his downed warriors.

Sia Jakkar clapped Tikkot on the back. “Your loss is mine. We will honor the dead with a pyre worthy of their courage.”

“Yes,” Tikkot agreed. “They have earned their place among the Spirits.”

Not a single warrior was without injury, but no one moved. All eyes were on the wetlocks as they picked clean the shorelines littered with Nuttaki.

The battle had been started by the insectoids but ended with a victory for us. Yet, none celebrated. A somber blanket cloaked the forest. We all knew this was just one of many fights to come. I wondered if Valose would ever be safe from invaders from the stars.

Riccof arrived with two males in tow, carrying shoulder packs full of medic supplies. We assisted him to triage the injured. He worked fast to clean and dress the worst of the wounded first.

When it came to be my turn—even though I didn’t wholly trust the medic and his shifty eyes—he proved himself proficient in treating my wounds.

“As for you.” Sia Jakkar turned his attention to Zaku, who had just risen from the ground where he had cleaned off the blade of his borrow sword on the soft grass.

“Yes, my Sia.” Zaku slightly bowed and returned Sia Jakkar’s sword, hilt-first.

Sia Jakkar accepted and sheathed the sword, then extended his arm and announced to all. “You have proven yourself worthy.” The males clasped forearms—one huge alien and the only Sia I have ever served. “Zaku of Moktu, possesses the heart and spirit of a warrior of Valose. I proclaim you an adopted member of Clan Huren.”

One by one, every warrior came forward to congratulate and thank the huge alien for his help. I hung back, waiting to be the last to welcome him into the fold.

“I never dreamed I’d witness a union between a being from the stars and the ruler of Huren.” I squeezed the spear in my hand and chuckled. “Then again, I never imagined I’d befriend a male from an enemy clan. Or a giant purr-pell Moktian.”

Zaku tossed his head back and laughed. “Yet, I have always dreamed of being a warrior of Valose.”

“Thank you, my new friend, for fighting with us.” I squeezed Zaku’s forearm.

“It was my honor.” Zaku squeezed back.

The warriors started to disband. The worst of the wounded helped to their tree houses to recover while the rest of us carried the bodies of the dead to the south end of the forest where we met Draggar and Wexxor, who were already assisting Tikkot with the construction of a pyre to usher the dead into the Realm of the Spirits.

“It’s time we collected our females,” Sia Jakkar said to Zaku and I while peering up into the darkening sky.

Now that the fighting had stopped and I was more at peace, Elise’s spirit had relaxed considerably, lazily swirling around with mine—content and joyous.

My body was battle-worn. My muscles strained and tired from carrying the fallen from one end of the forest to the other. The spike of adrenalyne that lit up my veins at just the thought of seeing my Elise, recharged my flagging energy.

The three of us took off down the path toward the youngling refuge at a dead run. Zaku set a grueling pace, but I took it as a challenge, and we raced the remainder of the way. Of course, I lost to the Moktian, though it didn’t matter. All I cared about was reuniting with my female.

Sia Jakkar pinged Kabbon. The male stepped out of the tree’s roots as if he’d anticipated our return and escorted us down an underground path, through an antechamber carved from the tree, and finally through a hidden panel.

Inside the main room, I found my Elise. Seated near a large window framed with thin roots that looked out over the sea, she cradled a sleeping youngling in her arms which explained her level of contentment. Her head was bent to admire his sleeping face.

After all the carnage I’d witnessed, the beauty of my spirit mate was almost too much to behold. She sensed my presence

and shot me a radiant smile that weakened my knees.

I approached quietly as to not disturb the youngling in her arms and dropped to a crouch next to her.

*“I’m so happy to see you,”* Elise carefully shifted the youngling, so she could sign one-handed and still cradle him. *“Even though I could sense you were alive and well, having you here in front of me is what I needed to convince myself you were really all right, but it looks like you’re hurt!”*

*“They’re only scratches. I will heal by the next suns-rise. I’m perfect now that I’m with you.”* I skimmed my fingertips along her delicate jaw.

*“It scared me to feel your rage.”* Elise sniffled as she signed. *“I had no idea that much fury lived inside you.”*

*“I am a warrior at heart, nula, but you should never fear me.”*

*“I’m not afraid of you”* she signed. *“I know you would never hurt me, but I can’t stop worrying about you.”*

I leaned in and touched her forehead to mine and breathed in her unique scent but pulled back as the youngling stirred in her arms. *“Who is your new friend?”*

*“This is Gavvon,”* she cooed. *“Isn’t he the cutest thing ever?”*

I nodded and smiled down at the tiny male who I could feel was wheedling his way into my spirit mate’s heart.

*“How do you feel about adoption?”*

Her questioned surprised but delighted me. We’d only just begun our mating, but I should have known with as much compassion my mate held in her heart that she wouldn’t hesitate to embrace one so young and innocent.

*“He is without a sire?”*

Elise nodded. *“Kabbon said his sire was one of the four warriors who went missing just before the Gretolics landed in Trisess.”*



*“I will ask Tikkot if we may become his guardians.”* I paused not wanting to break her heart. *“With Zaku’s help, we all hope to find and return all the missing Valosians. If Gavvon’s sire is among them, you will have to return the youngling.”*

*“I wish with all my heart that all your people as well as mine will be found and brought home.”* Elise glanced down at the sleeping youngling and smiled. *“For now, we can be Gavvon’s family until his sire returns.”*

Elise’s face bloomed with joy. So much love and happiness poured into me, she rocked me off my feet. My ass hit the floor and I scooted in close, lifting her and the youngling into my lap.

My world was changing fast, I could hardly keep up. With Elise in my hearts, her love was what I needed to keep me grounded. She had so much to give. I couldn’t have asked for a more precious spirit mate.

I’d left for battle, freshly mated but returned to find myself a surrogate sire. I could never be happier than I was now.

# Epilogue

**T**hree weeks later...

BABY BLUE SNOW had been falling in wet, heavy flakes ever since the twin suns had begun to rise. The trees were now coated in the stuff, the smaller branches bowing under the weight, and reminded me of the sugary frosting that covered Pop-Tarts. All we lacked were the colorful sprinkles.

I was waiting until the last second to go inside and teach my morning VSL class. This was the first snow I'd ever seen on Valose, and I couldn't take my eyes off it. I was glad to be witnessing it in the Trisess forest. Filled with enormous trees that looked so much like pines, it was a picture-perfect winter day. Except the snow was blue and the trees were the size of skyscrapers.

The last of the warriors had arrived and were taking their seats inside the tree house I used as a classroom. It surprised me how fast they had learned, devouring every lesson. I was sure it had something to do with the ultimate goal of a long-overdue war with the Gretolics.

In the beginning, I had only taught them key words they'd needed to communicate once they made entry into the dome, but Rose and her team of techies had run into trouble. Instead of the portable gate taking a couple of days to set up, weeks had passed, and they'd called for help, so I had time for more

lessons and was teaching the warriors as much VSL as I could before they would be called in to fight.

I tugged the ends of my fur cloak tighter around me against the gust of wind billowing in off the Caspeen Sea. The forest was colder here on the southern edge because of the constant movement of air over the water, but it held the most beautiful view.

And, most importantly, I could see the ancient tree where my Gavvon would be spending his day in safety inside the youngling refuge.

“You needn’t worry about Gavvon.” Vallon came up from behind and wrapped his arms around me. “He’s playing with the other younglings, not giving us a second thought.”

“*Me?*” I signed, peering over my shoulder, and teased. “*I thought all that separation anxiety I felt was coming from you.*”

Vallon chuckled but couldn’t deny the low-level worry I’m sure all parents had for their children. “Maybe, a little from both of us. Is it bad that I already miss his smiling little face?”

I shook my head and let my heart swell with all the gratitude and joy I felt for the family I’d created here on this strange world. Vallon hugged me tighter feeling the echo of my emotions swirling with his.

Activity in the field below caught my eye. Zaku and Ivy walked together to one of the bubble crafts. The Moktian was positively enormous in comparison as he gathered her up in a huge, purple embrace.

“*Do you think Zaku can help them fix whatever is wrong with the portable gate?*”

“If anyone can, it would be him.”

My heart went out to Ivy as she gave Zaku a final wave before he boarded the bubble craft. Synnox followed and the door slid closed, disappearing them from sight.

Ivy backed away as the wavy spherical distortion lifted off the ground and flew in the direction of Huren. She watched the

craft until it disappeared from view. She turned and wandered back toward the lab she, Lily, and Amy had set up using the equipment Zaku had salvaged from his ship.

Rubella samples had been recovered from the lab on the Gretolic's vessel still parked on the edge of the forest. Zaku and the girls labored every day trying to create a vaccine before Lily's baby was born.

Now Zaku was on his way to help the techs create a stable portal so the Valosian army, I was teaching to speak with their hands, could safely enter and eliminate the Gretolic presence.

Zaku wanted a look at the cure the Gretolics had in the secret lab under the palace. And we needed the supply of green serum Marie found in the storage room that would aid us in lengthening our lifespans.

Under the protection of the dome was the safest place for all of us. Zaku claimed he could increase the power of the shielding once they got inside. And the sooner the better.

There wasn't a day that passed, I didn't look to the sky. Not to enjoy the silver clouds floating overhead, but to make sure no silver ships were lurking. Yulineons had become an ever-looming threat.

After all I'd been through, I'd found and embraced a happiness I never knew existed. I didn't want some outer space supremacy to swoop down and take it all away from me.

"Ease your mind, nula," Vallon turned me in his arms and touched his forehead to mine. "I will never let anything happen to you. No Nuttaki horde, Gretolic, or Yulineon from the stars, will ever take you away from me."

*"Will I ever get used to you knowing my feelings better than I do?"* I rubbed my hand over my shawra.

Vallon grinned and placed a tender kiss on my lips. He didn't need words to tell me how much he cared. All the love he had for me poured into the echo of his spirit that lived within my heart. He was my silver silence.

Our moment of calm didn't last. The sleek, black spacecraft Aggar stole from Huren landed with a muted crunch

in the snow-covered ground.

Many of the warriors waiting patiently for me to start their lesson, filtered out to join Vallon and I on the deck to watch the new arrivals disembark. The survivors from the Jurigon Mountain walked down the ramp and into the forest to be greeted by Tikkot.

After their rescue, Aggar had taken them to the island to recover from their injuries. Now they were here and would soon join the warriors standing at my back in lessons on how to speak with their hands.

A final male struggled down the ramp with a pronounced limp. He paused at the end and looked around. I remembered him from our short time in the Jurigon fortress.

*Murrox.*

Snowflakes fell in hushed whispers on his silvery head and mammoth shoulders. He brushed them away with an impatient hand and glared at his new surroundings.

Murrox's predatory gaze scanned the forest until his eyes swung up to latch onto mine. A shiver ran down my spine and Vallon shifted possessively behind me.

Inside my skin, I shrank away from Murrox's vile mood. This male was a bomb looking for a place to detonate. I knew he was the calm before the storm.

Coming Up Next!

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### *Wynnter*

My spirit mate had eyes for another, yet her spirit called to mine. While my ancillary heart pumped andrenalyne through my veins, I warred with my instincts to pummel the male she favored, but her preference can't be forced. She must choose me.

Another battle takes precedence to mine when an unimagined conflict wages in the sky above us. The clouds burned with the battle as their ash rained down on our heads, making my role in the survival of my species paramount. It was vital that I tempered my rage, so I could work together with the male I wanted to thrash.

### *Rose*

A nerdy girl from the inside out, I had never been faced with having two males vying for my attention. Never considered a pretty girl, it's both strange and exhilarating to feel so desired. Who should I choose? The male I've grown attached or the newcomer who called to my soul?

There was no time to savor my novel situation. With the safety of so many resting on the success of our mission, I must set aside my personal needs until later. For now, the three of us must work together as a team to penetrate the dome so the warriors can retake the city of Huren.

AMAZON!



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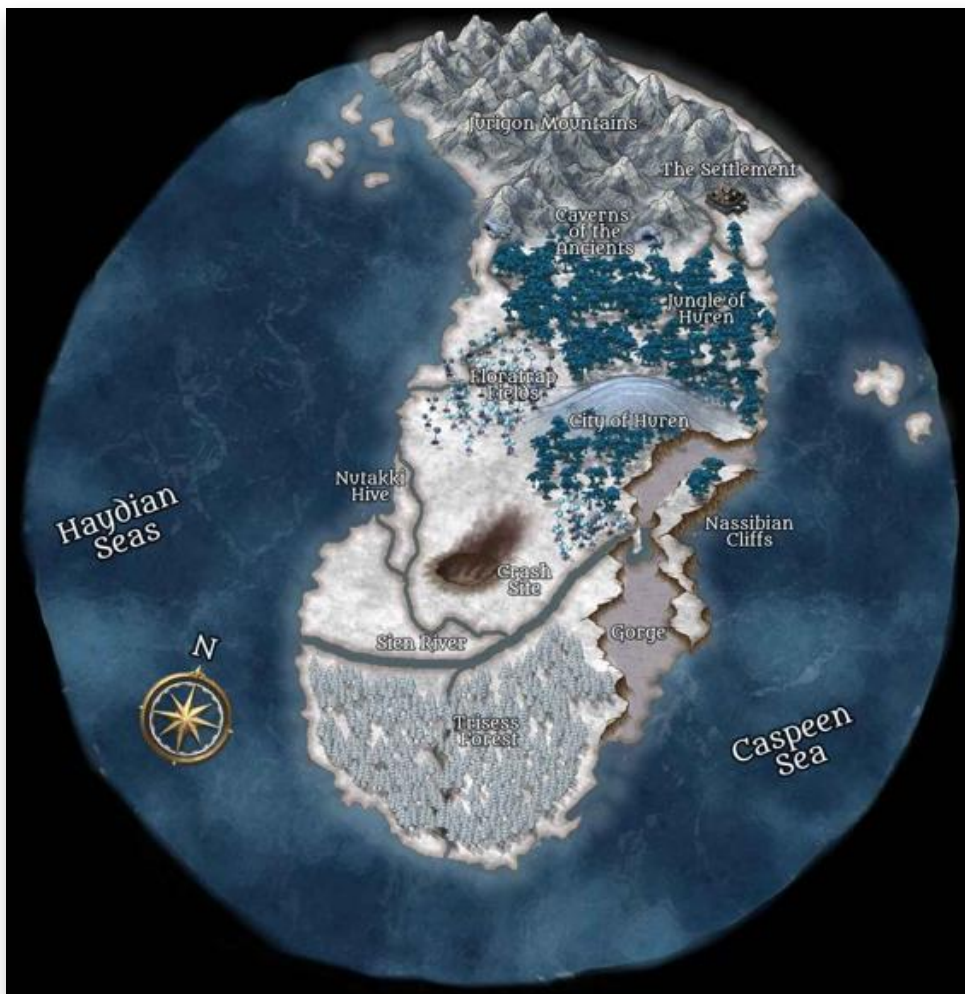
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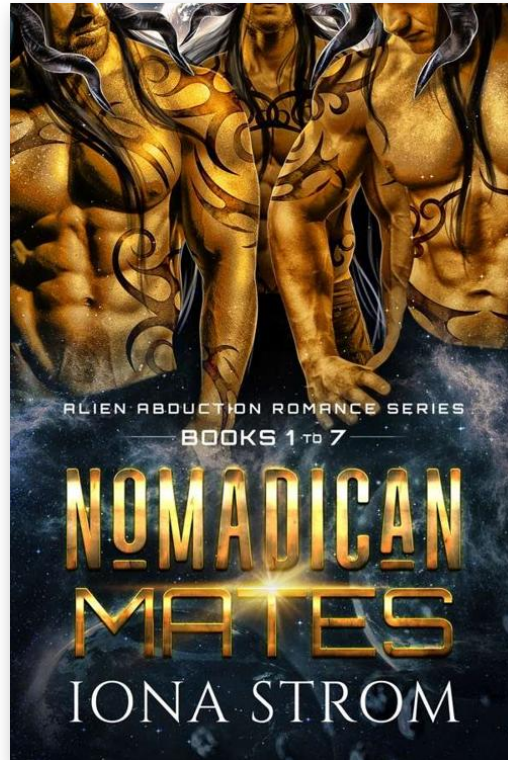
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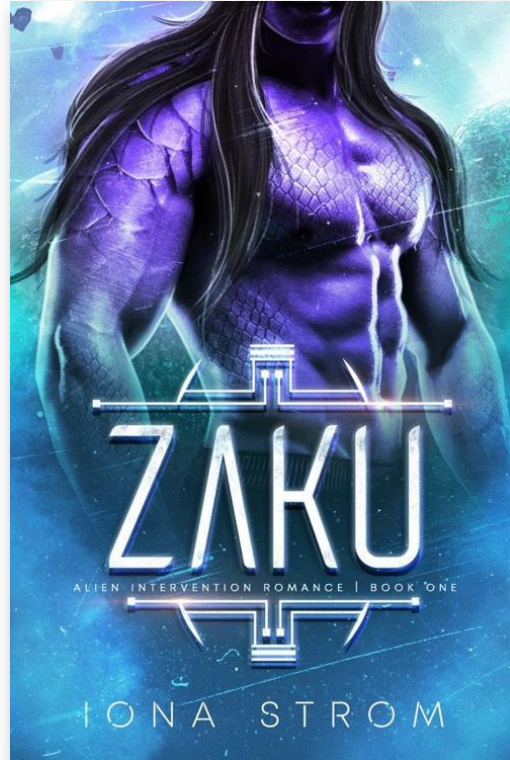
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