



*Claimed by the*

# ALIEN RAVAGER

STAR MAVERICKS BOOK ONE

IONA STROM

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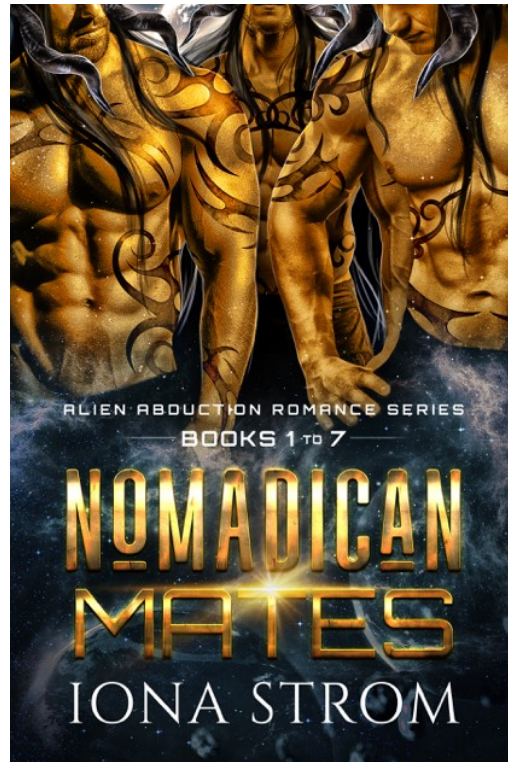
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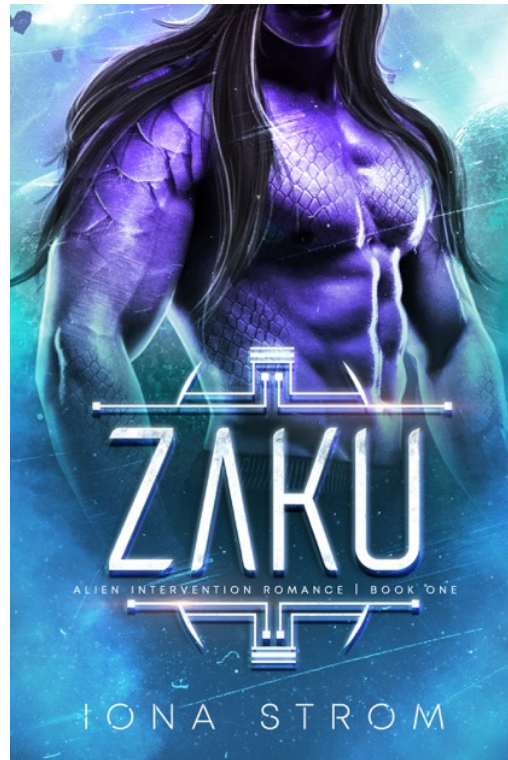
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# ABOUT THIS BOOK

I couldn't care less about this human female, though her fierceness intrigues me.

I should end her life with a mere flick of my hand. A simple twist of her delicate neck to render her lifeless... if not for the primal beast surging beneath my flesh with an unwavering passion to safeguard her at any cost.

Once she is safe, my beast wants to claim her.

Make her his.

Make her *ours*!

I have no interest in shackling myself to a mate. Females are only good for fleeting pleasure. I will make use of the flesh she bartered with for a flight home and be done with her.

Once I sample the delectable little human, one taste will never be enough for me or my beast.

## CHAPTER ONE

NAVIK

The explosion off in the distance doesn't come as a surprise. I knew the male would be nothing but trouble. Alarms blare and the dim ceiling lights running the length of the corridor start to flash the bright red of a prison escape.

I smirk, pleased he is no longer my concern, and push my way through the double doors into the arena where Warden Hyt pairs up prisoners to fight to the death before a paying audience.

Stepping onto the field of battle, I wrinkle my nose against the cloying stench of old death and the acrid sweat that hangs heavy in the air. Intricate patterns of blood spilled from countless warriors of diverse species creates a gruesome patchwork on the sandy floor. Each drop tells a story of pain and bravery in pursuit of the warden's ultimate goal: entertainment for profit.

Death for profit is a savage business. Even if Warden Hyt hadn't delivered the death blows himself, the blood of every male who fought in the arena is on his hands. He's a repulsive male that even I find ruthless, and that's saying something coming from a notorious marauder like me.

I pat the bulge of tellic weighing heavily in my pocket. Warden Hyt might be more unscrupulous than me, but his

currency was just as good as any. What do I care what happens inside this underground labyrinth? I'm not one to entertain guilt.

The sound of muted chaos permeates through the double doors that close in my wake. I head toward the exit out the back of the arena, knowing the cause of all the drama. It can be only the Nomadican named Ruze. The male from a nearly extinct species foolishly delivered into my hands by a Yulineon patroller.

That horned bliker had stolen one of my prized Moktian Galaxy Cruisers right out from under my nose. I'd thought I was alone on Neptus, well except for the Wetokian who slept soundly since I'd drugged him and stuffed his enormous, quilled carcass into a stasis pod. The remote world was only used by reavers and marauders like myself.

Outside of Universeval Rule, it was a lawless planet not worthy of habitation. The ground was barren, nothing grew there but a thin layer of dust. It made for the perfect spot to lay low, especially after single-handedly pulling off an epic commandeering of two Moktian spacecrafts.

After discovering the two Moktian vessels docked on Tyriss 3, I snuck aboard each craft, disengaged the anti-theft locking pins, and floated both vessels away from the dock and right out from under the Moktian's noses.

Those stiff-necked, do-gooder, rule followers had been too busy searching for one of their own who had fled the Moktian collective with a human female. It had been all too easy to rig the tow beam on my Bioti Nebula Slayer to haul the cruisers away from the dock. They might as well have handed them to me on a polatium platter. I left the solar system before they even realized their precious ships were gone.

Imagine my surprise when I woke to an alert that one of my Moktian treasures had left the planet. I raced to the bridge of my remaining Moktian vessel, heart pounding and furious over what I found. One of my Moktian ships was uncloaked and had indeed left the surface of Neptus. In my rush to give

chase, I left my Bioti Nebula Slayer behind in favor of getting back what I had rightfully stolen.

With my unconscious captive tucked away in the cargo hold of my Moktian Galaxy Cruiser, I'd followed my stolen craft to the edge of the Unios Galaxy and right into Yulineon territory where it was picked up on radar as stolen. The thief deserved to be caught. Stupid of him to have traveled uncloaked.

The Yulineon patroller had boarded the ship and taken a Nomadican into custody. A dangerous male on the endangered species list, I saw an opportunity I couldn't resist.

I'd painted a tracker on the Yulineon patroller's ship, landed my cloaked Moktian vessel on the dark side of a random moon, and launched a shuttle to follow the Yulineon and my stolen Moktian ship, which he was towing. Enough tellic could sway even the best of law enforcers. Even the most supposedly incorruptible could be bribed for the right price.

Not only was tellic used as currency, but it was used in long-range spacecraft for hyper-jumps. A person could travel at speeds well beyond that of light, to cross even the farthest reaches of space in the blink of an eye.

Before the patroller could reach the first Yulineon outpost, I pinged the enforcer and offered to buy the Nomadican. He refused my offer of rillium, but I hinted that Warden Hyt, the overseer on the remote prison moon of Onis, was always willing to pay hard found tellic for treasures such as Moktian technology and new fighters for his arena. The promise of tellic got him to slow his craft.

I pandered to his greed and boasted anyone who possessed an entire Galaxy Cruiser and a rare Nomadican could be rich beyond his imagination. Rich enough to shed the strictures of Universeval Rule and live free as a male always dreams.

Without hesitation, the patroller had taken the bait and altered his course, with the Moktian craft in tow, for Onis, in the farthest reaches of the Ine Sector.

It had been nothing for me to return to my Moktian craft, remain cloaked, and follow the tellic-hungry Yulineon all the way to Onis.

At the exit door in the back of the arena, I pause to unscramble the code on the keypad. The thunder of many quill-backed, Weto guards racing through the stone hallways of the underground prison echoes through the cavernous space, but I don't rush. I'm not the one they're after.

I push through the exit and stroll down the corridor that leads to another door and the surface of Onis, where my Moktian ship is docked, and laugh aloud thinking back on the shocked face of the Yulineon when I took him by surprise. I was already waiting on Onis when he landed. The second his booted feet stepped onto the frozen tundra of Onis, I had knocked him unconscious and chained him to the landing gear of his patroller while I made my delivery of the Wetokian I had been commissioned by Admiral Lorken to deliver to Warden Hyt.

In a side deal with the warden, I sold one Moktian craft, the Yulineon, and the Nomadican he had arrested. I had enough tellic in my pocket to hyper-jump around the Universe a hundred times over.

I'd been so elated over my epic deal with the notorious warden that I stayed for the fight between the Wetokian and the one the warden had labeled the Berserker, a Valosian male that had proven to be unbeatable.

The battle had been brutal, but seeing the Berserker in action was a sight to behold. His movements were fluid, precise, and deadly. His fighting skills nothing short of impressive.

Wetokian's were nearly indestructible, and the warden bet on the quilled opponent I had delivered. He'd been furious when the Berserker had come out the victor. His anger was an amusement to be savored.

The keypad on the door I just passed through beeps. I glance over my shoulder, expecting to see helmet-clad guards brandishing electro-rods in the hunt for the escapee.

Instead, I step into the shadows as the Nomadican male, Ruze, is followed by a group of females, sex slaves used as prizes for the prisoners victorious in the arena. I raise a surprised brow at seeing the flash of silver scales of the Valosian bringing up the rear.

It appears the Nomadican has made a friend. How quaint.

I roll my eyes at their frivolous endeavor. Such noble males to risk their freedom to rescue a clutch of used up female sex slaves. There's no profit to be had rescuing the likes of those bedraggled whores. However, there is reward to be had in capturing and returning the warden's property.

"I figured all this ruckus was caused by you, Nomadican," I say, stepping out of the shadows to block their exit. "But you, Valosian, I never would have expected."

"Step aside, Navik!" Ruze hisses.

Undeterred, I roll my shoulders and face off with the Nomadican. The horned male makes a decent opponent, with horns that curl around his head, ending in deadly tips and a body made of solid muscle. His fangs glimmer in the feeble light of the corridor. He stands with hands curled into fists, like an animal ready to strike.

"And let you steal my ship for a second time?" I quirk a brow at him and train my gaze on the silver male. "I don't think so. Warden Hyt will reward me handsomely for the capture of his prized Berserker."

"If I was so prized by the warden, then why did he bet against me?" The fine knit of the Valosian's silver scales ripple in shades of blue and white with his anger. "Why bring a creature here he thought could beat me?"

"Rumor has gotten around the galaxies that Warden Hyt runs unfair fights," I say. "Ticket sales have diminished greatly for future fights. To show he runs legitimate fights, he commissioned me to capture and bring a Wetokian to battle against his prized warrior of Valose. But I knew odds were good you would win. Valosian warriors are too proud to lose," I tell the silver male known as the Berserker and point to the

soft glow of his shawra. “And once I saw you had a spirit mate, I knew nothing would stop you, not even a Wetokian, from protecting her. The warden thought to soften you by giving you a female. That was his mistake.”

“Then you should be afraid as well, pirate.” The Berserker moves through the crowd of females and comes to stand before me, electro-rod poised and ready to strike me down. “I will do much worse to you than I did to the Wetokian if you do not let us pass.”

I smirk. In a quick movement, I reach back to pull the blaster free of my waistband. “You don’t bring a spear to a gun fight, Valosian.”

The Valosian moves to block his spirit mate, raising the electro-rod to his shoulder as he readies to throw it like a spear. Stupid, unenlightened, inferior species. He might be unbeatable against normal opponents, but he’s never met the likes of me.

The Nomadican’s fist comes out of nowhere, flattening my nose into my face. Blood spurts in all directions as the unexpected pain momentarily stuns me. So focused on the Valosian, I stupidly lost sight of Ruze. I slap a hand over my nose to stanch the free flow of blood, then aim my blaster at Ruze’s chest.

The blaster is knocked from my hand in a shower of sparks. I underestimated the Valosian’s skills. My blaster clatters to the floor, and I dive to retrieve my weapon, but the Nomadican gets there first.

The blast to the center of my chest knocks me off my feet in a searing shower of blue mist.



CORA

Legs spread wide and shackled at the ankles, the tip of a massive sex toy probes my entrance. My arms are stretched above my head and tied at the wrists to the padded table. I lay there numbly, not the least bit interested in giving in to Warden Hyt's perversion of being fucked with his weird toys.

The alternative is worse. Given to the arena's victors as a prize to be violated in whatever orifice they see fit is a much worse fate than being a coveted pet of the warden. At least I'm well fed, clothed, clean, and have a decent bed in my gilded cage.

I hate the feel of the heat radiating from his dismal blue body as he hovers over me. Bare chested, he wears loose fitting, harem-style pants. The waistband lost under a bulbous belly and slabs of sagging muscle, which ripple down his chest and stomach with each of his labored breaths.

The shiny, metal piercings covering his body sparkle in the light as he moves. Some embedded with jewels of all colors, making him look like a giant, melting Christmas tree.

After all these years of being his plaything, I remain stubborn. No matter what he does to my body, my mind will remain my own. I refuse to bend to his will. Never will I give him the satisfaction of yielding. If he wants to watch me climax, he'll have to force it out of me.

Warden Hyt leans down to whisper in my ear, "Always so obstinate in the beginning, my beauty, but soon you'll succumb to your carnal needs."

His words make me want to jam an ice pick into my ear to destroy the translator implanted there when I first arrived. I've tried digging it out with my little finger, but it's in there too deep to reach.

His breath is hot and vile as he glides the bulbous head of the toy through my unwilling slit. I shrink into the table, turning my head away from his pungent stench. My throat tightens, knotting as I close my eyes and imagine I'm someplace else. Anywhere but here.

Impotent, he doesn't get off in a conventional way, but he thrives on power. Controlling others is his orgasm.

"So lovely," he says and parts my flesh with two thick fingers then rubs the toy through my dry sex. "I will see your body weep and convulse around the cock in my hand."

Words of protest gather on my tongue, but I know better than to talk back. I learned the hard way to keep my mouth shut, spending an eternity inside a dank hole carved out of the rock that makes up this underground labyrinth.

From what little I've seen, this prison is an enormous system of small caves connected by hollowed-out corridors. Each cave houses a single prisoner locked away behind metal bars until they're paired up and fight to the death inside the arena.

Rotund guards patrol the corridors. Outfitted with shiny helmets, a tinted visor covers their eyes. Armed with long poles that glow blue on the tips and deliver an electric shock. A sickly shade of purple, their upper bodies need no armor as they are covered in quills that stick out in all directions like the quills of a porcupine.

At least that's what I remember from my one time outside the warden's bedroom, which is not much more than a large cave with a single exit. The scenery is oppressive enough without me making it worse with disobedience. Being lowered into a hole where I can't lift my arms from my sides is why I never put up a fight despite wanting nothing more than to run away and never look back.

"Have it your way, my beauty." The warden reaches for the container of the dreaded spray. It's like Viagra in a can only it doesn't last for hours, only long enough to make me writhe for what I don't want.

The bulbous head of the alien dildo disappears and the lid of Viagra spray pops open with a metallic clink. My body stiffens as I brace for the icy heat that I know is coming next.

With my eyes closed tight, I force my mind on a journey to a tranquil mountain meadow, lush with verdant grass and

wildflowers. A small waterfall trickles over the rocks into a glassy pool below, the peaceful sound of the water providing an ethereal ambiance. I sit on the edge of the pool, dipping my feet into the cool water and—

A distant explosion followed by the shrill alarm of a prison break rips through the tranquil scene of my imagination, saving me from the warden's perversions.

With a harsh curse, he waddles over to the monitor mounted on the wall behind us. I crane my head back to see a group of quilled guards sprint down one of the long, dreary corridors armed with their electrified rods. The dim illumination of the tube lights running along the center of the roughhewn ceiling flashes an urgent red.

"What's happening?" he barks at the monitor.

"The Nomadican has escaped, along with the Berserker's female," comes the breathy response of a guard.

"Find that horned freak and the Berserker's slut, or I'll have every one of your heads on a spike!"

"Yes, Warden."

Warden Hyt grumbles his displeasure and strides over to clip a leash to the collar circling my throat, releasing me from my shackles. I immediately slide off the table and rub the rawness from my wrists where the cuffs dug into my flesh.

With meaty fingers pulling my leash for me to follow, he steers me to the only home I've known for countless years. A thin barred, gilded cage that sits on the far wall of the warden's bedroom. The ornate frame gives it an ethereal beauty that belies its purpose.

It stands six feet high and ten feet square, with a tiny flap in the door to pass my food tray. Inside there's a small bed, the equivalent of a chamber pot, and a basin with running water.

The confining creation is a fragile weaving of metallic strands that's stronger than it appears. As hard and as many times as I've tried to bend the wispy threads, there is no escape.

“Until later, my beauty.” The warden unclips my leash and shoves me inside.

I stumble forward, catching myself on my hands and knees. The door bangs closed behind me. I turn to watch the warden rush from the bedroom, and I tug at the collar around my throat, loathing the feel of it. Hating its meaning. It’s a symbol of ownership so all will know I belong to him. A pet for him to do with what he pleases.

Once he disappears from sight, I spring up from the floor and run to the basin. With frantic hands, I scrub away the unwanted touches then don one of the robes he allows me. It covers me from head to toe in soft, billowing fabric of a garish red.

I collapse on the end of the bed, thankful for the reprieve from the warden’s forced attentions. Solitude is not something to be taken for granted so I relish this unexpected hiatus. He will be back, and when he returns, so will I to my shackles.

Lying down on my side, the strident alarm continues to sound. It’s high-pitched and hurts my ears, but I’d gladly endure the noise knowing it keeps the warden busy and away from me.

There has only been one other prison break since I’d been here. The alarms hadn’t sounded for this long, and I wonder about the explosion and the human that has escaped. I hope she finds her way out of this place; if not, they’ll kill her. Maybe death is preferable to being passed around to the alien convicts.

I shudder and tighten the robe wrapped around me. My eyes pan around the same boring stone walls but flick back to the gaping seam along the length of my cage’s door.

I jerk upright, my heart thudding in my chest. The sight before me is too good to be true so I can’t trust it. Breath held, I pad over to the door, reach out a wishful hand, and give the door a little push.

Astonished beyond words, I watch as it swings open.

The report of the escape had rattled Warden Hyt so much, he accidentally left my cage unlocked. I rush to the bedroom door the warden exited from and peek into the room beyond.

A large, imposing desk dominates the center of the room. Two high-backed chairs are situated on either side like an office of an important person, and on the other side, the door to my freedom stands ajar. Many frantic voices filter in from the corridor beyond. Sounds of chaos. The perfect distraction for my escape.

If I'm caught, I don't know what he will do to me. Toss me in with the unfortunate girls to be used by the prisoners?

I take a deep breath, race across the office on nervous feet, and peek through the crack where the door stands ajar. The corridor outside is alive with flickering red lights and blaring alarms. Guards run this way and that, creating a disorderly scene.

I carefully close the door until only a sliver of the corridor remains. I don't want to risk being seen. My gaze darts around the room for something, anything, that I can carry with me as a weapon. My eyes fall on a long pole leaning against the side of the desk. I run over and grab it, twisting the end the way I've seen the warden do, and activate the glowing tip.

As soon as the guards clear the corridor, I dart out and run in the direction of the arena. I remember the exit to the outside where I was brought in on the day of my arrival.

I also remember the surface is a frozen, inhospitable place, and I don't even have shoes. But this could be my only chance to flee the warden. I take one last look around at where I've been captive for so long. The echo of forced arousals and unwanted penetrations with weird alien dildos rockets through my brain.

If I don't get out of here, I'm afraid my spirit will eventually break. As strong as I pride myself on being, what I've survived has been a repulsive nightmare I wouldn't wish on anyone.

Decision made. I'd rather take my chances at escape and possibly freeze to death on the surface of this frozen rock than withstand another day of perverted torture from the warden.

Once a group of guards passes, I run as fast as my feet can carry me toward the double doors I know lead to the arena. Focused on my escape, my gaze never wavers from my destination.

When I finally reach the entrance, I'm stunned by the sheer enormity of the arena. The ceiling stretches up to heights that seem impossible, and the walls are lined with balconies to seat hundreds of spectators. Sheltered for so long inside the warden's bedroom, I shrink inside my skin as I take it all in.

I don't have time to stand here gawking. Steeling myself, I race across the sandy floor until I reach the exit I know leads to a corridor and to the outside. I curse and slap my palms against the cold, metal slab, finding the exit door locked with a keypad embedded in the wall adjacent to the door.

I press my fingers to the smooth surface of the keypad, squinting at the alien scribblings on its face. I don't know the code and my knowledge of their language is less than nil, offering no help to decipher the keys. My heart sinks and I try to think of another way out.

Guards explode through the double doors, spilling into the arena. I duck behind a row of spectator seats. With breath held, I tremble in my hiding spot, hoping they don't see me as they march closer.

Electrified rod squeezed tightly in a white-knuckle grip, I peer around the seat where I'm hunkered down. They're too focused on the exit door that I couldn't open to take notice of me. One taps in the code, and the barrier between me and freedom opens with a beep and the clunk of a disengaging lock.

One at a time, the group of guards file through the door. As the last guard passes, I slide my electrified rod across the floor and wedge the door open just as it closes. I scoot back up and wait, listening intently for any signs that they noticed my maneuver.

I jerk and yelp from the loud claps of blaster fire echoing from the exit. The guards grunt in pain and I silently cheer on whoever is doing the shooting.

After a furious exchange of fire, the blasting dies down to a deafening silence. I pause for a bit, listening. Waiting.

When I hear nothing more, I scurry to the exit, push open the door, and grab my weapon. I race down the dimly lit, narrow corridor only to find a huge male with glossy blue skin and long white hair lying on the floor in a pool of bright blue blood. A charred wound is splotched between his pectorals, but his muscled chest still rises and falls with each shallow breath.

I inch closer, recognizing the male. He's the marauder Admiral Lorken, the commander of the Bioti Spacefleet and an ally of the warden, hired to capture and deliver a monster called a Wetokian and bring it here to fight the Berserker at the request of Warden Hyt.

My ears are always open. Either the warden forgets I'm listening or doesn't care that I hear and speaks freely around me. According to what I've overheard discussed between the warden and his guards, this glossy blue alien with long stark, white hair—this Kaul—is among a group of elite space pirates known as Star Mavericks. Whatever group he's in, he got here in a spaceship.

And that means he's my ticket off this frozen rock.

## CHAPTER TWO

NAVIK

“Wake up, space pirate!”

I’m roused by a strident female voice, but I do not comply with her request. I keep my eyes tightly shut, refusing to obey. I don’t follow orders from anyone, let alone a female.

The rhythmic pulse of pain where my nose was smashed flat to my face, beats in time with my slowing heart. I give up my life’s blood to the hard floor of the exit corridor. An azure river leaks from a gaping blaster wound in the center of my chest.

I groan in response to the swift kick to my booted foot. “Leave me to die in peace, female,” I croak out with more strength than I realize I had.

“Good. You can understand me.”

“A regrettable circumstance due to my translator implant,” I sneer.

Perhaps I’m not as close to death as I thought. Then again, there’s nothing that gets a male riled up more than a nagging female. Even with my eyes shut tight, I can sense her vexatious presence looming above me, demanding my compliance, which she will not be getting.

I remain motionless in my determination to deny her what she demands. Surely after all the blood I've lost, I'm close to the end of my days.

My body goes limp as I surrender to my fate and accept death with peaceful resignation. My muscles release their tension, relinquishing any remnants of struggle. Calmness washes over me like a gentle wave as I accept death's embracing peace.

The vicious female jolts me back with a hard kick, this time higher up on my thigh. Sharp pain lances through me like a laser bolt, igniting all my nerve endings.

With a groan of frustration, my eyes fly open, momentarily surprised to see that my nemesis is human. "Spare me your insufferable presence. Can a male not breathe his last breath without a female pestering him into the afterlife? Be gone with you!"

"By the sound of your bitching, there's plenty of life left in you." She pokes my shoulder with the glowing tip of an electro-rod. "Now get your ass up and fly me off this rock."

I hiss and flinch away from the stinging shock piercing my shoulder.

The female glares down at me, her electro-rod poised and ready to deliver another sizzling jolt. Small in stature, she radiates a fierce energy. As much as I hate to admit it, this little human intrigues me.

Humans are usually beneath my disdain, but this petite starfire stirs my weft. The last time that appendage was coaxed to erection was with a kylari female who could do this delectable trick with her forked tongue on the underneath side of my—

"Why are you grinning?" the human hisses at me.

"Recalling a moment of pleasure," I snarl at her interruption of my erotic musing.

"Well stop it." She threatens me by waving the electro-rod that I could so easily rip from her hands. "It's creeping me out. Now get your ass up and fly me out of here."

“And why would I be doing that?” I rake my gaze from her tiny toes peeking out from the hem of her flowing robe to the top of her raven head.

My gaze flicks back to the collar circling her throat, leaving no doubt to whom she belongs. Once thought to be a rumor, it would seem the warden’s coveted pet is real after all. I can see why he chose to keep her hidden away. She is a most rare and exotic morsel.

A pair of pale, steely eyes glare down at me. Her courage is impressive. Yet there’s an underlying vulnerability that speaks to something deep within me. Something which has lain idle for millennia.

*Impossible!*

The sudden surge of energy exploding from every cell of my being can only be imagined. I refuse to believe this tiny human has triggered an ancient ability that’s laid dormant in my species for millennia.

Ever since the emergence of powerful female warriors of the Kaul species, the sivot, an ability for males to morph into beasts, has been silenced. The need to protect a chosen female is no longer needed as they have become even more fearsome fighters than the males.

The fluid essence of my beast surging under the surface of my skin can be nothing else. Eager to be released, I feel the sivot’s lust for carnage, but it’s not hungry to take her life. It wants to shelter her, blanket her fears behind fangs and claws.

I have not chosen this pathetic *human* to mate!

The harder I work to suppress the transformation, the more painful the ache driving me to morph into the creature pulsing within me. I refuse to accept this female as my chosen mate. I will not give myself over to the sivot determined to protect her and claim her as mine.

“If you haven’t noticed, there’s a prison break in progress,” she says with urgency. “And I’m the one holding the weapon.”

“I noticed.” I gesture to the charred blaster wound in the center of my chest. “Compliments of the escaping prisoners

who already exited.”

“The guards are coming.” She points to the door leading to the arena where the thunder of many footsteps echoes under the massive dome. “Now fly me out of here, or I’ll zap you until your eyeballs turn to liquid and ooze out of your skull.”

“That was descriptive.” I wrinkle my broken nose, which oddly no longer hurts, and push myself into a sitting position. “Hostile little thing, aren’t you?”

When my movements don’t immediately wrack my body in excruciating pain, I glance down at the blaster hole in the center of my chest. Already healing at a rapid pace, I smooth my hand over the charred splotch that’s now no more than raw flesh that’s tender to the touch.

Remarkably, I can feel my body working hard to repair itself. The wound has closed up in a matter of seconds, the edges of it knitting together under my fingertips. My glossy blue flesh has taken on a liquid sheen of iridescent light, and I can feel the power coursing through my veins, invigorating me from within.

“This could come in handy,” I mutter and push to my feet, wishing I had paid more attention during physiology teachings at the Academy during my youth.

My sights had always been cast on joining the brotherhood of Star Mavericks, not stuck inside the oppressive walls of the Academy. Feared and revered, the Mavericks hold no allegiance to any world, but instead follow their own code of honor. They live free, above any laws, and plunder whatever they can get their hands on.

Adventure runs hot through my veins. Cruising the galaxies in a sleek spacecraft, taking what I want, and living life on my own terms is all I’ve ever wanted.

My newly awakened sivot makes me an even more formidable opponent. I will be nearly impossible to kill with as quickly as I can now heal. And with the ability to morph into a beast, I can easily out fight anyone who dares challenge me.

The only downside is the female who triggers it. I'm not interested in any permanent female entanglements, but the sivot shifting inside me demands I claim her and keep her safe.

*Her?*

Not that I cared, but, "What is your name, human?"

"Cora Gale Vogel," she blurts. Panicked eyes swing to the exit door where the guards can be heard tapping out the code on the keypad. "Now can we go?"

"I'm Navik T'Jarik—"

"I know who you are," Cora cuts me off with a venomous, narrowed glare. "You're the space pirate Warden Hyt hired to bring the giant porcupine here to fight the Berserker."

A hard clunk echoes through the corridor, proceeding a loss of power. We're left in complete darkness except for the glowing tip of the electro-rod Cora clutches in her delicate hands.

I shake my head with a harsh curse, "Bliking Nomadican!"

Smart of Ruze to jam the power grid with a Moktian tritus surge, but that also means the bliker stole one of the Moktian Galaxy Cruisers. Both were cloaked, though I know where they are docked.

At least I knew where they were docked.

The one I sold to the warden was at the main entrance to the prison. The other was just outside this exit corridor where I left it. The Nomadican was proving savvier than I gave him credit for. I would bet my left seed sack the bliker had stolen mine!

"Power is out, which means the guards will have to break down the door to get in here." I nod to the exit door and hike a thumb over my shoulder at the door leading outside. "It also means we will have to do the same to that door if we want to get to my ship."

The undeniable urge to get Cora to safety flexes my hands into fists. My sivot shifts through me, surging forth until the heat of power flows through my veins. The primal energy

swells and ebbs like an incoming tide. My skin is alive, rippling with sensation as my muscles bulge, expanding and morphing into the beast.

My corium, the design which has adorned my right arm since birth, shifts and coalesces to encase my arm like a sheet of armor. I know from my Academy teachings that it can expand into a shield.

Cora scrambles away until her back hits the wall. Brave eyes now fill with terror. I can only imagine how frightening I must look as I transform before her eyes.

My boots strain to restrain my expanding feet as the seams of my pants split with a sharp rip, barely containing the unimaginable power that is swelling within me. The leather holster holding my Klaxis steel sword forged across my back grows tight, squeezing me like a rosquivan constrictor until it snaps and my blade clatters to the floor.

I lift unfamiliar hands to my face. Black claws extend from underneath my nail beds, razor sharp talons glint in the blue light from the weapon Cora holds in trembling hands. My head brushes the ceiling as I reach new heights of power and size, the magnitude of which I can scarcely comprehend.

My mind remains my own yet I'm aware of the sivot's presence. *I* feel indifferent toward the female's wellbeing, yet the sivot lives to keep her safe. It's a strange inner conflict as two parts of my consciousness battle for control.

With a roar I can hardly believe just came from my lips, I lunge forward and slam my fist into the door, stamping an impression of my knuckles into the metal slab. The door remains closed. I pause to study the claws jutting from my fingertips. Lethally sharp, I swipe my lengthy new blades across the handle and lock. The metal yields like churned zoeth would for a hot dagger.

Frozen air rushes inside when I slam my foot into the slab, throwing it open to the outside. The moon—Onis is nothing more than a chunk of ice orbiting the planet Xont—in the farthest reaches of the Ine Sector it's the perfect place to house criminals. Unless you have a long-range craft and enough fuel

to fly back to civilization, there's no way off this inhospitable rock.

I whirl around and stalk over to Cora. She shuffles away, pressing her back into the wall, but there's no place to flee. The business end of the electro-rod is thrust out front, but I easily pluck it from her hands and toss it to the floor.

"Leave me alone, freak!" No begging for her life. No pleas for mercy from my female. Cora is a fierce little warrior to the marrow of her fragile human bones.

Her panting breaths are puffs of white clouds in the frozen air, And the pink of her full lips is already turning blue. She will freeze if she stays in this weather for long. I must get her someplace warm, and quickly.

"Time to go, starfire," I say in a voice so deep it can't possibly have come from me. "You are mine to protect."

*Bliker!*

Did that dribble just come out of my mouth? Stupid sivot will give the game away, then she'll be the one holding *my* leash.

Cora puts up a fight, her legs thrashing and fists futilely pounding against me. I scoop her up in my arms and cradle her against my monstrous chest. She stops fighting the moment I step outside and race across the frozen tundra toward the Moktian craft that's cloaked outside the main entrance.

I dodge and weave through the crowd of convicts running blindly across the icy tundra and attempting to find freedom in the cold. The guards follow close behind, shouting orders to halt. Blaster fire lights up the night sky, some hitting their marks while others whiz past their targets.

The prisoners lucky enough to commandeer the few docked ships, launch themselves off the moon before they're caught, leaving their fellow inmates behind to be recaptured.

Icy gusts of air howl all around us. The terrain is a frozen wasteland, blanketed in snow and ice. Patches of permafrost glitter in the low light, while jagged rocks dot the landscape like islands in an endless sea of white.

My fur cloak, having fallen off when I was blasted in the chest, remains in a heap on the corridor floor, but I'm strangely not bothered by the cold. My sivot's internal temperature keeping the worst of the chill at bay.

Cora curls into me, snuggling closer, and something inside me loosens. A warmth blooms in the center of my chest. I don't like where this is going. If it wasn't for my sivot, I would dump her on the ground and leave her on the moon's surface to freeze.

Attached to my waistband that's squeezing me in two, is the Moktian imager that begins to bleep the closer I get to the hull of the cloaked spacecraft. With one arm easily holding Cora close, I tap the release on the imager and lower the ramp.

Racing up the ramp, I turn the corner toward the bridge and draw up short. I growl at the creature who dared board my craft, surfing the tide of protectiveness over the female shivering in my arms.

I go still at the revelation.

I'm facing off with my own reflection casting off the shiny metal of the interior walls. The snarling beast with fangs the length of daggers is me! Atop my head is a mass of stark white hair whipped wildly about my shoulders.

I lean in for a closer look, turning my face this way and that. The thing before me retains only the slightest likeness to who I used to be; now I am a monstrosity with bulging muscles, flashing white eyes, and skin that flows like liquid metal.

I take a long look at where the corium marking my right bicep is no longer a thick swirling design—a warning to all of the sivot lurking within my biology. It has completely morphed into the armored plate all Kaul males are taught is impenetrable even against blaster fire. With one arm, I easily hold the female, and shift to the side to examine my new armor that can expand into a shield.

Footsteps bang up the ramp only to skid to a stop. I whirl around on the intruder, releasing a mighty roar. The armor on

my biceps shifts with a mere thought, creating a circular disc large enough to cover Cora and my upper body.

The Quahe male, who was stupid enough to think he can steal my Moktian craft, tucks the length of his whiplike tail between gangly legs and retreats.

A deep chuckle rumbles up my throat as I will the shield to recede and slap my palm over the control panel to raise the ramp. My imagination runs wild, dreaming of all the ways my sivot will come in useful.

“To protect the female in my arms,” my sivot utters aloud.

I shake off the beast’s absurd thoughts. The human is merely a tool to trigger my beast. Nothing more. I might have to protect her to maintain the connection with my sivot, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it or *her*.

What matters is, with the strength and power I now wield, I will be the preeminent Star Maverick, a conqueror of the Universe who can take what I want with impunity. No one will stand in my way.

I will be a legend among my brethren!



CORA

“You are safe now, starfire,” the beast that used to be Navik says in a gentle voice.

Well, as gently as a gigantic blue Sasquatch with a rumbling baritone can sound. Not that the beast is covered in hair like the legendary ape-like creature, but there’s no other word that comes to mind to describe him.

He carefully places me in one of three seats at a long, curving console and activates a seatbelt-type thing that buckles me in. As he meets my gaze, blazing white eyes soften to a gentle gleam.

I shrink in the presence of his towering height. He stands at least eight feet tall and five feet wide, with a mop of long, wild hair the pristine white of newly fallen snow. It sticks out in thick tufts all around his head like a lion's mane and down the backs of his arms and back.

Claws as black as sin and sharp as razors protrude his fingers like knives. Where Navik's skin was a glossy blue, the beast's flesh swirls and shimmers like liquid metal. His right arm, where Navik wore a thick tribal tattoo, is encased in a matte sheet that somehow transformed into a shield.

I gulp past my heart pounding in my throat as I sit here trembling. I can't tell if it's fear or from the bitter cold that's chilled my bones, shaking me to my core. Maybe both.

I stare up at the beast in bewilderment. No longer is this male leering at me with a mixture of lustful curiosity and disgust, his gaze now holds something akin to fondness. It's strange and confusing why the beastly side of the notorious space pirate shows me kindness where Navik does not.

"You are cold," Navik's beast states flatly and marches off.

I swivel the chair around and watch the beast squeeze through the door in the rear of the bridge. It isn't long before he returns. Crushed in one meaty fist is a wad of material. He stands before me, carefully unfurling the tawny fabric between claw-tipped fingers.

My body tenses as he carefully lays the blanket over my legs. I stare at the soft fabric, unsure of what to do. The beast's thoughtfulness is baffling. Is this Navik's alter ego manifested into a huge monster?

I feel his stare on me, waiting for my response.

"Thank you," I manage to say, my voice barely above a whisper.

He grunts in response before turning away. It's almost comical as he wedges his hulking frame into the seat next to mine and works the controls that fly the ship. Everything looks so tiny in comparison to this beast.

Wrapped in the softness of the blanket, I sag in my seat, relieved to finally be leaving my gilded cage and Warden Hyt behind. Tears press behind my eyes knowing the forced sexual acts of a perverse monster are behind me.

My throat works through a knot of emotion. I relax back, watching the frozen rock of my prison fall away through the large window before me, letting the soft whirring of the engines lull me as Navik's beast lifts us silently off the ground.

But the peace is short-lived, as an alarm rips through the calm of the ship.

Navik's beast jumps into action, his clawed hands dancing over the controls. I watch in awe as he maneuvers the ship, dodging and evading the blasts of red light whizzing past us. His muscles bulge beneath the fluidity of his skin as he takes evasive action to keep the ship from taking fire. I can't help but feel a sense of admiration for him, even as fear grips my heart.

"What's happening?" I loudly ask over the blaring alarm.

"We are under attack by a Yulineon patroller," Navik's beast growls, his eyes focused on the screen in front of him. "The bliker just painted us with a tracker."

My heart races in my chest even though I don't completely understand what he's talking about. All I know is we were home free, and now we're in trouble. Navik's movements become more urgent as he speeds up and tries to outmaneuver the Yulineon patroller.

I yelp and white-knuckle the seat's arm rests. The ship lurches and shakes beneath me as we take our first hit.

"We need to hyper-jump," Navik's beast growls through gritted teeth.

"Hyper-what?" I'd been a prisoner on another world for years and had learned much from keeping my mouth shut and my ears open, but that was from inside the warden's bedroom not on a spaceship. I knew of all sorts of weird alien species brought to the prison to fight to the death in the arena but nothing of the technology.

“Hyper-jump,” Navik’s beast repeats and pulls a large, bulging sack out of his too-tight pant’s pocket. “It is a way to travel through space faster than light. I need to add tellic chips to the transflux compositor before we can do it.”

Panic grips me when he unasses the driver’s seat and sprints to the back, pops open a hatch in the floor, and drops inside. We’re still moving. The ship seems to be flying itself.

I yelp when we take another bone-jarring hit. My body is slung to the side like a rag doll, my breath leaving my lungs in a hard whoosh. If it weren’t for the strap holding me in the seat, I would have fallen to the floor.

“Navik!” I go pale. The blood drains from my face at the sight of a small, sleek craft coming around and flying backward to face off with us. “Navik!” Each wingtip glows hot. The red pinpoints of light growing brighter, increasing in size as if it’s revving up to fire. “Navik’s beast!”

I tug at the strap holding me in place, ready to try my hand at flying. If I can reach the controls, maybe I can move us out of the line of fire.

Navik’s beast comes barreling back to the console, stuffs himself into the driver’s seat, and straps himself in. His hands fly across the console, expertly steering the ship and easily evading the Yulineon patroller’s laser fire.

Suddenly, the weight of tremendous speed presses me back into the seat as the stars outside blur together then stretch out like ribbons of light. The force of the acceleration is like nothing I’ve ever felt before. As if shot out of a cannon, we are flung into darkness, racing toward an unknown destination, leaving the patroller and Onis far behind.

We slow until the blurred streaks of light become an endless expanse of stars stretching out before me. They twinkle and sparkle against the void of space like diamonds scattered across an infinite blanket of black velvet.

The stars soon give way to distant galaxies dotting the backdrop in a variety of swirling colors and shapes in a mesmerizing display of beauty.

Navik's beast lets out a triumphant roar, and I can't help but laugh in relief and exhilaration. I turn to him, ready to thank him for saving us, but my words die in my throat as I take in his appearance. His face is contorted in pain, sweat beads on his forehead, and his breathing is ragged. I reach out to touch his arm, but he flinches away from me, his eyes shut tight.

"Navik, what's wrong?"

He doesn't answer. His body shrinking then swelling as if in a struggle for control.

"Time to go, sivot," Navik snarls.

"She still needs protecting," Navik's beast argues in his guttural baritone.

"I'll take it from here," Navik grunts.

My eyes widen in shock as Navik's beast begins to shrink back into Navik. Claws recede, his wild hair pulls back into his scalp, shortening to its original length and smoothing against his head. His fangs retract and his face returns to that of the space pirate—strong, angular, and harshly humanoid with a square-cut jaw.

I would call him classically handsome if it weren't for the scathing expression he turns on me. "Stay in your seat and do as I say."

My initial fear of his beast evaporates in the haughtiness of his tone. The terror of being blasted into a million pieces, over.

"Bring back the beast." I cross my arms in defiance. "I like him better."

"As if I care what you want, *human*," Navik sneers and dismisses me with a flick of his hand then focuses on manipulating the controls under his fingertips. "Now shut up while I find a place to land."

"Is rudeness a hobby or does it simply come natural?"

Navik barks out an abrupt laugh. "Tell me something, little slave," Navik turns his head and narrows his gaze on the collar still locked securely around my throat. "Did Warden Hyt keep

you muzzled, or did he get off on your sharp tongue as well as your human cunt?”

“Fuck you, scab!” I tuck the two halves of my robe under my chin, hiding the width of leather that’s been circling my throat ever since the warden clapped eyes on me all those years ago.

“Perhaps later.” I barely hold back a shudder when his bright blue gaze rakes over me with possessive heat.

“Definitely never.”

“You don’t have to be willing,” he smirks and my blood runs cold. “I like a fight.”

“Probably the only way you can get laid with a face like yours,” I blurt.

Fear is a fickle thing, emboldening me when it shouldn’t. The brutal stare he pins me with gives me pause but still not enough to keep my mouth from flapping.

“Oh! Did I hit a nerve?” I poke at his sore spot. “Boo-fucking-hoo. I wasn’t aware you had any feelings to hurt.”

Navik snarls at me before refocusing on flying. “I would just as soon eject you into space.”

Icy tingles skitter down my spine, finally putting a halt to my verbal banter. I have no doubt he would, and I wonder why he hasn’t. Maybe the beast, sivot is what Navik called him, keeps the space pirate from acting on his threat. The beast had said I still needed protecting.

Protecting from who? Navik?

I will be sure to ask the beast the next time he makes an appearance.

After witnessing Navik transform into a beast, his species is a bit of a mystery. I’d seen visuals of the space pirate on Warden Hyt’s monitors, but the conversations I’d eavesdropped on between the warden and his guards made no mention of a monstrous alter ego, only his notoriety as a Kaul who could get his hands on anything for the right price. He

belonged to some elite group of space pirates called Star Mavericks.

It was also said he is extremely dangerous. After seeing what he morphed into, I knew firsthand how dangerous he could be.

With Navik's attention elsewhere, I tug at the leather collar circling my throat, desperate to remove the symbol of my enslavement. I've worn it for so long, I'd grown used to the feel of it, but I'm free now, no longer owned by another, and I want it off, but I'm not about to ask for Navik's help.

His beast would help me though, I know it.

I settle back into my seat, snuggle into the blanket the beast gave me, and watch out the panoramic window as we travel through space. Navik steers us into a spiraling galaxy made up of a dazzling swirl of milky green. A tapestry of stars streams past, most with orbiting planets of vibrant colors. Wide-eyed, it's hard to comprehend the vastness of what's before me.

As the ship hums a soft lullaby, the adrenaline rush from my escape fades to exhaustion. I'm hardly safe, but I'm finally out of Warden Hyt's clutches and surrounded by stars that twinkle like diamonds in the night sky.

I don't recall anything about my abduction, and this is my first real look at outer space. The vastness of it is both overwhelming and comforting. I could get lost out here, go far, far away where the warden will never find me again.

The planets look like jewels floating in darkness, each one a different color and size. Some are small and round while others are massive with swirls of blues and greens. I can't help but wonder what's on those planets and if anyone lives there.

The beauty of it all has my eyes growing too heavy to hold open. Warm and cozy in the blanket the beast gave me, the fabric soft against my skin, I let the hum of the ship lull me into a heavy slumber.



I SLOWLY AWAKEN to the unbuckling of my seatbelt. I open my eyes to find we've landed. Navik is already up and gone from his seat, leaving me alone on the bridge. I stretch my arms above my head, feeling more refreshed than I have in a long time.

My gaze is drawn to the panoramic window, and I lean forward, eager to take in the scenery outside.

A strange alien landscape greets me. A barren desert of red and orange stretches out before us, dotted with tall spires of rock that look like they've been carved by a giant's hand. The rocks are massive, stretching up to the sky, with gaseous clouds billowing from the top of each one. The whole of the alien scenery glows eerily in the light of a nearby star.

I'm so transfixed by the view, I almost don't notice Navik is back on the bridge and removing panels from the walls in the rear. He moves quickly, his body a blur of motion as he works. His movements are precise and efficient, like he knows exactly what he's doing.

A bag of weird tools sits next to him on the floor where he crouches before a small access tunnel to the ship's inner workings. Bundles of wires run the length of the walls that blink with thousands of tiny lights.

I watch as Navik low crawls into the small opening. He settles on his side with his booted feet sticking out of the entrance. On soundless feet, I move closer, curious as to what he's doing.

He wiggles back out, reaches for the tool bag, and bumps his head on the low ceiling. A string of alien curse words filters through the translator surgically implanted inside my ear.

"Wow!" I scoff, rubbing at my ear. "My mom would have washed my mouth out with soap if I'd said half of what you just did. And that one word, *bliking*. I'm guessing that's equivalent to an F-bomb."

Navik scoots completely out of the access tunnel. Seated on the floor, he peers up at me with his brows pinched into a deep furrow.

“Do you always talk this much?” he grumbles. “It was bad enough having to listen to your snoring for hours.”

“I don’t snore.” I loosely cross my arms across my chest.

“How would you know when you’re asleep while you’re doing it?”

Navik makes a valid point, but I’m not about to admit it. “Do you need help? I can hand you tools so you don’t have to keep coming out to get them.”

“You are a strange creature, starfire.” Navik shakes his stark white head at me. “Most humans would be cowering in the corner, soaking in a puddle of their own piss had they been abducted by me. But you,” he wags a finger at me, “you show courage where most would not.”

“Abducted by you?” A sudden surge of dread washes over me, but I keep my gaze fixed firmly on him, not wanting to show any sign of fear. “*I* was the one who took *you* hostage.”

“Where’s your electro-rod, little human?” Navik surges to his feet, coming toe to toe with me. “You no longer have a weapon to prod me with.”

He rolls a heavily muscled shoulder. No doubt recalling the zap I gave him while he was down. The wound now healed, as well as the charred hole in the center of his chest.

Rapid healing abilities? Interesting.

A fully healed Navik is way more intimidating than a wounded Navik, yet I stand my ground, refusing to cower before him even though my knees quake beneath my robe.

“I’m not afraid of you, Navik.”

His arm darts out to snake around my back, drawing my body tightly against his. “Aren’t you?”

Startled, I gasp and my palms land on the heavy pads of his pectorals. My heart races as his body presses against mine.

His rigid muscles meld with my curves, igniting a tiny flame of arousal that shouldn't exist.

"I can feel you trembling," he accuses.

"That's your imagination."

"Is it?" His dark chuckle peppers me in gooseflesh.

Fear courses through my body in the form of white-hot chills and something else even more disturbing—a tingle of *anticipation*?

What am I hoping will happen?

My eyes drop to the hard sculpt of Navik's lips. I've been entertainment to a perverse savage for years, locked in a cage like an animal and only let out when the warden wanted to play.

Wondering what Navik's mouth would feel like pressed to mine is the absolute last thing I should be pondering. Anything sexual should be revolting after all I've been through, but Navik isn't Warden Hyt and something about the glossy blue pirate compels me.

Navik is a pirate, a thief, and a marauder—known for his lack of scruples and untrustworthiness. His inner beast may feel the desire to protect me, but I'm without his help right now. I wonder how much of Navik is truly his own personality and how much is that of the beast.

"I'm not sure what to make of you," he drops his head and murmurs against my ear. A delicious shiver skates down my spine.

"Don't make anything of me." My breath hitches, my mouth suddenly gone dry. With fear? With lust? I'm not sure. Feels like both.

Navik's grip tightens, closing around me like a vise. Panic claws at me while at the same time, I relish in the hard length of his body. Trapped in the pirate's embrace, his heart thrums against mine. The warmth of his breath bathes my throat as he lowers his head, stirring an inordinate desire within me. I battle with the urge to turn my face and drink in his dark scent.

“Maybe I should claim you as my pet.” His deep baritone vibrates through me on an aching wave of unease. “Use you for my pleasure.”

Fear whips me into action as a tiny flame licks at my core. His threat stiffens the peaks of my breasts.

“I’m no one’s pet. I belong only to myself.” I shove against his massive chest. I need to catch my breath, clear my head of his enticing musk, but my feeble attempt to put distance between us doesn’t budge him an inch. He’s a wall of solid muscle, hard and unyielding. Muscle I have to fight to keep from rubbing myself against.

Navik finally relents to my struggles, turning me loose with a rumbling laugh that melts the marrow of my bones to liquid fire.

“The collar you wear says otherwise.” Navik takes a step back. His cool gaze glides over me from head to toe.

I stumble back on legs that shake, trying to process the wild mix of emotions raging inside me.

Navik had snatched me up before I ever saw him move. I felt the strength of his body pressed against mine. Felt his lust in the hard ridge of his erection pressing into my belly. It would be so easy for him to overpower me, take what he wanted.

The thought of him stripping me of my robe and ravaging my body should make me want to scream and run away, not leave me hot and aching for his touch.

“I wonder what Warden Hyt would pay to have you returned.” A cruel grin plays at the corners of his lips.

“I’m no longer that pervert’s pet.” I jut my chin up in defiance as cold realization settles around me that Navik could decide to return me to Onis. “I’m free.”

“Are you, starfire?” Navik reaches out a hand and tugs the collar around my throat. “You think you are free, huh?”

The pull of the leather against my throat dowses the flames of my unnatural desire and ignites an insurmountable rage.

Years of servitude to another has brought me to this precipice, and I snap. Before I can think better of it, I slap his hand away.

He growls at me, low and approving. A feral gleam erupts in his glacial gaze, and I hope I haven't just made a terrible mistake. Navik said he prefers to take his women fighting and I shouldn't provoke him. But I refuse to surrender to my fears, and I will never give him the satisfaction of knowing how afraid I am.

"I know that I am," I vehemently state even though I'm quaking with terror on the inside. "And you are going to fly me back to Earth."

"Am I?" Navik studies me through narrowed eyes, his expression unreadable. "And how will you be paying for my services to fly you back to your precious Earth, starfire?" The pet name he's given me rolls off his tongue like a searing caress.

"Stop calling me that." I swallow hard as raw need seeps through my rage.

"Why? With your fiery temperament, it suits you so well." Navik reaches out to trace long, thick fingers along my collar bone and lower. "If not currency, what else do you have that might interest me, starfire?"

"Nothing." I suck in a soft breath as the rough pads of his fingers brush across the swell of my breast, enticing a wicked heat to coil low in my belly.

"Oh, I very much doubt that." Navik's gaze never leaves mine as his hand slips under my robe to cup the weight of one breast. "You have ample curves to purchase a flight home. Unless you're hiding rillium or tellic under the folds of your garment."

I shake my head, my voice lost in tremulous sensations. His touch has me quivering, my breath coming in sharp little gasps. My body ignites when he trails his thumb across the stiff peak of my nipple. I strain into the palm of his hand, needing to satisfy the gnawing ache coursing through me.

My breath hitches in my throat as Navik traces lazy circles around my hardened bud, the sensation echoing in my clit. He's both gentle and demanding, sending sparks of pleasure shooting through my limbs.

"So, no currency to bargain with." His lips curl into a wicked smile. "All that leaves is the bartering of your flesh." He finally releases me from his wicked touch, a satisfied grin playing on his lips. "Shall we make a deal, starfire?"

I gulp, shaken to my throbbing core.

"I gorge myself on your succulent flesh in exchange for a flight to Earth?"

"Only if you promise not to return me to the warden." I find my voice, deep and husky with need. "And you'll return me to Earth."

"On my honor as a Star Maverick." He pounds a fist over his heart.

Do pirates have honor? Taking Navik at his word is risky, but what choice do I have? The deal is struck. Besides that, I'm stuck on a spaceship I have no hope of flying, with a professional criminal.

Navik returns to the access tunnel and curls a finger, beckoning me to join him. "You offered help?" His smile is slow and wicked. "Then come here, starfire. I accept what you offer."

Why did his summons sound innately more provocative than just me passing him tools?

Now that my head's clearing from a lusty fog, I'm filled with panic and a desperate urge to run away. My feet shuffle nervously as I consider the proposition I've made—my body in exchange for a ride home.

Navik is enormous. Muscular chest bared, he wears only ripped black pants which have been stretched thin from his beastly transformation and heavy soled boots. His alien anatomy is unmistakable beneath the dark fabric of his clothing, and I can't help but wonder—will it hurt when he claims me?

My knees tremble as I crouch on the floor across from Navik, making sure the tool bag is between us like a shield against his advances. I know it's a false sense of security, but I'm scared to get too close to him. Afraid he'll grab me up, ready to take his first payment from my flesh.

He reaches out, but instead of tearing my robe from my body and taking me on the floor of his spaceship, he lifts out each tool and names it.

"Can you remember all that, starfire?"

"Yes." I roll up the long sleeves of my robe, relieved the feral heat in his eyes has faded and ready to keep his mind occupied on something other than my body. "My dad was an auto mechanic," I nervously blurt. "He used to let me help in the garage."

"Your sire repairs conveyances?"

"Repaired," I correct, sadly. "He died of cancer when I was ten."

Navik simply grunts and crawls back inside the tunnel. I'm not surprised when no words of sympathy come from him. He doesn't seem the type to feel sorry for anyone or anything.

I tuck my robe around me and sit by the tool bag, waiting for instructions.

"Helic," he commands.

I sift through the bag until I find what looks like a cross between a wrench and a screwdriver. It has two prongs on one end and a curved handle on the other. The metal is cold to the touch, but it's surprisingly light for its size.

I place it in Navik's outstretched palm. His long, blue fingers curl around the tool, grazing mine. Tingles shoot up my arm, and I rub away the sensation. There is nothing I should find attractive about Navik. He's been nothing but rude and nasty to me, except for his beast.

"What is it that's broken?" I ask, needing to break the awkward silence.

Navik goes still in the access tunnel. My stomach knots with panic as I realize I should just keep my mouth shut. He accused me of talking too much, and I've already pissed him off with my rude remark about his face. With each word I utter in defiance, his interest in me seems to grow. I am just making it worse on myself when he decides to use my body for payment. I already know he won't be gentle.

"Broken?" he says. "This craft is not broken, human. The Yulineon marked it with a tracker. I need to remove it. We won't make it to Earth if he catches up to us. He will kill you on sight and do worse to me."

A million questions manifest at once, but I bite my tongue, not wanting to annoy him. Warden Hyt once mentioned Yulineons. They were like space cops, so it made sense why law enforcement would be after Navik given his vocation.

What I didn't get is why he said the Yulineon would want to kill me. I've done nothing wrong. I'm the victim, abducted from my home and forced into servitude. The Yulineon should be coming to my aid, not wanting to kill me. Could Navik be lying to make sure if he's caught that I won't ask the Yulineon for help?

Cops are supposed to help people, right?

The kernel of a plan starts to take shape. Maybe Navik isn't my only hope. If I can avoid his advances long enough for the Yulineon to catch us, maybe I won't have to keep my side of the bargain. What lay long and hard under his pants would surely split me in two.

We work in silence, except for Navik's demand of one tool after the other, with me lost in thought over how I can avoid my half of the bargain.

"That should keep the Yulineon off our trail for a while," Navik says, sliding out of the access tunnel. "We'll need to ditch this ship. I was only able to dampen the tracker, not completely remove it."

With any luck, Navik will be caught and I will be saved from the ravages of the space pirate. Just as soon as hope

flares within me, it is just as quickly doused.

“Come along, starfire. I will have my first taste of what my flying skills have bought.”

## CHAPTER THREE

NAVIK

Cora's face falls into a worried frown. It irritates me that she doesn't follow when I summon her.

"Have you forgotten the terms of our accord already, starfire?" I loom over her where she's still seated on the floor. So small. So fragile is *my* fiery little human.

I grow still.

*Mine?*

She is not *mine*. I vowed long ago to never take a mate. A nagging female always yapping at my heels is nothing I would willingly subject myself to. I didn't need to be told when to eat, shit, and sleep. Didn't need a yipping mate's jealousy when I chose to fuck another.

Yet this petite, alien beauty peering up at me with soulful gray eyes engorges my weft for the sole purpose of pleasuring her. The curves she hides beneath the folds of her robing need exploring. I must clear the haze of this carnal urgency if I'm to outmaneuver the Yulineon. My mind is hardly my own with the promise of her sheath milking my cock.

"Come along." I curl my fingers at her. "I won't hurt you. I'm feeling generous. I promise you'll scream my name as you find your pleasure."

"I seriously doubt that," she snips.

“Enough talk!” I didn’t strike a deal with her for the lip service unless it’s her mouth sucking the clume from the end of my cock.

Cora scrambles back as I stalk forward. My sivot stirs, not liking it when I snatch her from the floor and toss her over my shoulder.

She flails about, kicking and punching my back with her tiny fist as I carry her to the back of the ship. So adorable how she fights, her blows nothing more than hard pats against my thick flesh.

I choose the first sleeping bay I come to and engage the lock with a swipe of my hand over the control panel in case she decides to try to renege on our bargain.

She bounces once when I toss her to the center of the sleeping platform. I grab her ankle as she flips over onto her belly and attempts to crawl away. She weighs nothing and I easily drag her back. A wicked chuckle escapes me as she thrashes and claws at the bedding.

There’s nothing better than a romp with a feisty female.

Her thrashing accomplishes nothing, and when I flip her over with one hand, her robe parts, falling open to reveal her treasures beneath.

“What a bountiful feast for the eyes,” I murmur, catching both her thin wrists in my hand.

Her lush tits rise and fall with her quick and ragged breaths. My gaze falls to her nipples, hard and begging to be touched. With one hand, I knead her plump flesh while continuing to hold her wrists above her head with the other.

“It is no wonder the warden kept you hidden away. A prized pet indeed.”

“I’m no one’s pet!” she seethes, squirming in my hold.

“Soon I will have you writhing against me in the throes of passion.”

“Not possible,” she spits venom. “I may have agreed to let you use my body but I won’t enjoy it.”

Her mouth can utter all the denials she wants, but I know better. The glassy haze of lust already brightens her gaze, giving away her true desire as well as the tart bouquet of her weeping cunt.

I trace her hardened peaks with the tips of my fingers. Her body undulates as if straining into my touch while a soft plea of rejection falls from her lips. I pinch and roll the taut buds between my fingers, eliciting a moan from my fiery little human. I lean down to suckle, pulling one pebbled peak between my lips.

My tongue swirls around the tight bud as I suckle and nip with gentle pressure, coaxing a series of pleased whimpers from her. I move to the other breast, lavishing it with the same attention before rising above her.

The stifled noises that escape her throat as she attempts to suppress her response inflame my desire to force moans of pleasure from her lush body. She will remember no other lover before me. Pine for no other cock to fill her silken tunnel once I'm done rutting her. My cock kicks hard in approval.

I slide my hand down her belly, pushing away the robing from her legs and hips. I can feel the heat radiating from between her legs, smell her heady arousal. I shove her thighs wide apart, propping them open with my knees. The flower of her human sex is ripe for the plundering, swollen and leaking the nectar of her lust.

“I shall have a taste of what my bargain has wrought.”

She moans, biting down on her lower lip when I plunge two fingers into her slick core. Her cunt squelches with every thrust of my probing appendages.

“You can deny it all you want, little one, but your body betrays you,” I growl, my cock throbbing and leaking pre-clume, more than ready to be buried deep inside all that moist heat.

I find her nub nestled in the petals of her sex, hard and sensitive. I circle the pad of my thumb around the swollen bud,

increasing the pressure with each pass. Her hips thrust against my hand, her legs trembling.

She is nearly my undoing when her tight channel spasms around my fingers. So tight. Milking. Squeezing. Her hips buck into my hand, wetting my palm with her release.

I slip my fingers free of her heat, studying her glistening aftermath before licking clean my reward.

She looks at me with a glazed expression. No longer fighting but docile and replete.

“It is time to fulfill the rest of our bargain, starfire.”



CORA

I just climaxed at the hands of the space pirate. *Hard!* And it was indescribable.

I hadn't wanted to like it. Tried so hard to fight the urges of my traitorous body. His mouth and hands felt too good. He knew just where and how to touch me to send me spiraling over the edge. Not even the spray Warden Hyt would slather on my sex to force me to orgasm had brought me to this level of pleasure.

Navik peers down at me with a knowing smirk. My inner walls still ticking with the aftermath of pleasure, I'd like nothing better than to slap the smug expression from his face.

At least I kept his name from flying out of my mouth on an indecent moan.

I could feign indifference all I wanted but there was no denying the wetness pooling between my thighs or the swollen tips of my breasts. I would never live down crying out his name, no matter how well he played my body. Never would I give him all of what he wanted.

“It is time to fulfill the rest of our bargain, starfire.” Navik releases my wrists. His hands fall to the straining buckles on his pants, holding back his monster erection which pushes to break free.

“You haven’t flown me anywhere yet, Navik,” I wrack my brain for any excuse to keep him from claiming me.

“That was not our agreement, starfire.” Navik is not to be deterred. He’s already unclipping the buckles and pushing his pants down his hips. “I promised to fly you in exchange for the use of your body.”

I try not to gawk at what springs forth as he frees himself. It’s thick, girthy, with veins and ridges. A glossy blue, though a little darker than his skin tone. It curves like a horn and has finger-like protrusions at the base like bunny ears. I knew what those could do. My vibrator back home had that same delectable feature, sure to roll my eyes back in my head.

“Fly me to Earth first,” I demand with a lick of my lips. “Then you can have me.”

The head of his cock is broad, full and wet with pre-cum that glistens in the room’s soft illumination. My pussy clenches in anticipation of what is to come if I can’t talk my way out of this.

Did I really want to? Talk my way out of this?

“No, starfire.” Navik’s fingers slide around the base of his cock, pumping it a few times before he slides himself between my legs. “I will rut you all the way to Earth. Once there, I will bend you over with your face pressed against the view screen so you can see your world while you convulse around my thrusting cock.”

My body flushes with heat at his naughty words. I should be traumatized from my captivity. Not feeling a fresh rush of wetness pool in my core, readying me to take every inch of the pirate’s pulsating blue cock.

The warden violated me with a variety of sex toys in all shapes and sizes. Each one I loathed more than the last. I hated

every second of the warden's abuse of my body. The forced arousals. The unwanted penetrations.

So what was wrong with me that I crave what Navik holds in a meaty fist?

"It isn't right." I thrash my head against the dark cravings I can't control. "That's not what I agreed to."

He moves closer, forcing my legs wider apart. "You failed to negotiate limits on the number of times I make use of your slick cunt."

"No." I barely contain the arching of my back. "Only once and after you fly me home."

I'm certain Navik will fill me perfectly, stretching me in all the right places. I can imagine his length pushing inside me, stretching me, filling me to capacity. His ridges rubbing against my inner walls, coaxing out more and more pleasure with each thrust. The finger-like protrusions at his wide base teasing my clit until I explode into a million pinpoints of light.

"No, starfire." The width of his head nudges against my entrance, teasing and testing me. "I will sheath myself with your sodden tunnel whenever I bliking well please, and I'll be taking the first of many payments now."

My body loosens, hips curl up tight, my body hot and eager to be relieved of this hollow ache. I gasp and arch as his cock glides through my slick folds. The cold blue of his eyes glitters with amusement and promise.

I shouldn't want this. Shouldn't crave this. I should struggle as his hand slides under me, lifting my pelvis, readying me to take every thick inch of his thick, blue and very alien erection.

Cock in hand, he rears back, preparing to slam home. I take a deep breath, steeling myself for a hard coupling that will leave me hobbling for a week. I didn't expect anything less from the marauder. There would be nothing tender about his technique and I'm glad.

I'm ravenous to erase the feel of the warden's abuse with a good, hard fucking. If anyone can replace the years of vile

memories, it would be Navik and his enormous erection.

Navik's eyes blaze with hunger as he watches me watch him. He hasn't even kissed me but this is about satisfying a hunger of the flesh and nothing more intimate than the exchange of bodily fluids.

The head of his cock slips past my entrance once, twice, before he breaches my core, pushing through the tightness and resistance until I'm panting and straining against him. There is no slow build up. No tender caresses or soothing words. Instead there is pure animalistic pleasure as Navik plunges inside me, his pelvis meeting mine in a wet slap of bodies.

My core burns with a painful pleasure. Navik doesn't wait for me to grow accustomed to his girth but drives into me with animalistic grunts and groans as he fucks me like a wild beast.

This is what I want. This pounding is what my body needs to forget all of what the warden forced inside me.

I didn't have to make a deal with Navik, but I had. One touch from the space pirate had whet my appetite for what the glossy blue alien had to offer. Call me a slut to have bartered my body, but right now, I couldn't care less as my breasts bounce in sync with his pistoning cock.

There was no one here to judge me as every nerve ending fires in a symphony of pleasure that builds and builds until I'm writhing and straining, rolling my hips, my climax cresting.

On every inward thrust, the finger-like projections at the base of his cock tease against my clit, triggering waves of heat to radiate outward from my core. His length stretches and fills me, every thick inch of his steel rod is heaven.

His thrusts become more urgent, his face contorting into a feral mask until he's snarling down at me. Fangs elongate. Fingernails grow to claws. His body grows. Swelling. Morphing. Hair, wild and long, halos his head in wild disarray. His glossy blue skin swirls into a glimmering liquid.

Oh god, he's transforming into the beast.

Panicked pleasure rips through me as his cock swells to match the size of his beastly form. The ridges and veins of

Navik's cock were a gentle caress but now become an exquisite torture as they bump and rub against my inner walls. The beast's cock swells to an impossible width, stretching me to the brink of pain.

The sivot slips free of my body. I look down to glimpse what was just inside me. Navik's bulbous head has spread and flattened into a cap lined with fat nubs. The finger-like projections have grown, and there's a bulge at his base that appears to be swelling.

The sivot presses his transformed phallus against my slippery sex, nudging and bumping against me until my flesh gives way to his urging. My pussy is on fire as he drives into me with an intensity that both frightens and thrills me. Lost in a sea of pleasure, my body is wracked with the force of his thrusts as I spiral up higher and higher into oblivion.

The beast's roar fills the room as his thrusts become more frenzied and urgent. Just when it feels like it might be too much, the intensity builds into a crescendo until finally the waves of pleasure ripple through me, and I scream out in ecstasy as he erupts inside me in hot splashes.

My euphoria ebbs, and I open my eyes to find Navik's beast gazing down at me, his bright white eyes hooded in reverence. The cruel slash of his mouth is pulled up in a feral grin, far different from the smirking face of the space pirate he'd been moments before.

With a cupped hand, he curls his claws inward to carefully caress my cheek with the backs of his fingers. His touch is gentle, affectionate. Warmth blooms behind my sternum and I turn my face into his soulful touch.

"My sweet starfire." The sivot curls his hips to bury himself deep, pressing the finger-like projections against my clit. I arch off the bed as the vibrations rocket through my core. "You are mine to pleasure for always."

*For always*, rings out inside my blissed-out mind. Does the beast mean to keep me?

The sivot reaches down and hooks one sharp claw under my collar and slices. The wide leather gives way, and just like that, I'm no longer marked as the warden's pet.

"Milk the seed from my knot." The beast grinds into me, the bulge at the base of his cock swelling until I will surely split in two. "As I claim you as my mate."

I'm not given time to process the meaning of his words as he keeps the vibrations on my clit. Trapped on his knot, I'm stuck in an endless orgasm. My body is wracked with waves of pleasure that ripple through me over and over again, teasing me to the brink of madness. The beast's hands curl around my waist, holding me in place as I'm stuck in a maelstrom of ecstasy.

## CHAPTER FOUR

NAVIK

The sole purpose for the human's presence is to trigger my sivot, not for my beast to grow attached. When I was buried deep inside her silken heat, my mind had slipped and I lost control. The sivot had emerged, forcing his way to the surface.

The first taste of her sweet cunt sent my sivot into a wild frenzy. I fought to stay in the moment as I claimed my prize. Caught up in the rapture of her tight sheath, the sivot pushed past my addled mind and finished what I started.

Even though our minds were one and the same, and I could feel her convulsing around the beast's phallus, the sivot's pleasure was my own, but it was supposed to have been my cock she milked, not his knot!

My heedless sivot had filled her slick tunnel with seeds meant for a proper Kaul mating.

I slammed my fist down on the console, rattling the monitors on either side, infuriated that my sivot had claimed her as our mate. Fury was a living thing, boiling and bubbling in my veins like the fiery rivers on Hagon.

I could feel the sivot wanted her. Wanted to keep her for himself. But that will never happen. Cora is not a Kaul's mate but a plaything to be used. A delicious snack to slake my lust

and trigger my sivot so I can pillage and plunder what I want without opposition.

My beast stirs in protest. I can almost hear him snarling at me. After he plundered what was mine, filling her tight heat with the beastly seed of his mating knot, tender feelings had developed.

*Imprudent sivot!*

Rutting was rutting and lust was not to be mistaken for love.

Feelings of the heart. What utter nonsense. Females are meant for pleasure and nothing more. Attachment to the owner of a tight sheath is pure dribble when there are millions of other wet tunnels to pummel.

The ecstasy of release should never be mistaken for anything else except a fleeting pleasure to be repeated. I rub at the niggling kernel of warmth centered deep inside my chest. His mating seed had filled her body, and now I have an emotional connection to contend with!

“Bliking dund!” I curse aloud.

“Something wrong?”

Cora’s soft voice washes over me in a tingling wave. I turn to find her standing at the entrance to the bridge, wrapped in a sheet. Beautifully disheveled, her hair is an ebony halo tousled around her flushed face. Her pale gray eyes, still heavy with desire, are filled with concern and confusion.

I turn away, ripping my eyes from her seductive curves. I can’t look at her. With a rigid concentration, I focus on the view screen in front of me, on navigating through the Boshe Galaxy, while trying to keep the swirling tumult that she evokes within me under control. I shudder with the effort of suppressing the sivot.

“No,” I snap. “Nothing is wrong.” I can’t let her know how she affects me.

My beast stirs wildly, undulating at her presence. He wants out. Wants to keep her, protect her, *pleasure* her. The swell of

his demands bulges through my veins as he claws at my ribcage. My flesh ripples with swirls of the sivot's anticipation to be buried deep inside her fragrant heat. To knot her and spill his mating seed deep inside her convulsing cunt.

She has unleashed a monster that I can barely contain.

"Well someone isn't a morning person," she scoffs.

My head swivels around at her clipped tone. A low growl escapes me as she marches forward, her hips swaying seductively. I grip the edge of the console until my knuckles turn white, ripping my gaze away and fighting the urge to grab her.

My sivot is a raging inferno, demanding his prize. I'm not sure how much longer I can keep him at bay.

She takes the seat next to mine. "How long until we reach Earth?"

"We're not headed to Earth." I can feel her eyes on me, but I don't look at her.

"Why not? We had an agreement and I held up my end of our bargain."

The sivot churns just below the surface, excited and ready to take control. I'm afraid if I glance in her direction, he'll burst forth and ravish her right here and now.

I lick my lips. And what would be so wrong with ravishing her now? I set the ship to auto pilot as my sack grows heavy with clume. My eyes flash across the console for a clear spot to place her so I can step between her spread thighs and ease the ache of my thickening cock.

My sivot roars with approval, but I squelch him.

I clench my jaw, grinding my molars to dust. The beast undulates for release, but I ignore him. I won't be ruled by my newly awakened feral half, no matter how much he demands it. I will remain in control.

Cora is a human and not a Kaul female! I will rut her body, fill her with my clume. Not allow my knot to swell within her.

Not spill my mating seed even if my sivot has already made that fatuous mistake.

“Navik!” she barks.

“Did you want something?” I ask, gruffly.

“To be flown back to Earth.”

“Not in this ship.” I strain to push the words out through gritted teeth, my cock a painful throb that demands attention. “I only dampened the Yulineon’s tracker. Bought us some time until I find another vessel.”

“Then where *are* we headed?”

“Tirius,” I bark.

“Is that a planet?”

“Yes.”

Does this female ever shut up? I squirm in discomfort from my painful arousal. Perhaps a good rutting will distract her from her endless barrage of questions.

“Can we get food there?” she asks. “I’m hungry.”

“Demanding little thing, aren’t you?” I grumble, making the mistake of turning my head to rake my eyes down her body.

The sheet wrapped across her body slips to display the swell of her full breasts. My gaze drops, skimming over her nipples that tighten, twin buds taunting me through the thin fabric. I can almost taste them on my tongue. Feel them against my palms.

My sivot howls. A wave of heat scorches through me, awakening a savage instinct to lay claim to the mate I must protect. My lips curl back in a snarl as I imagine tossing her up on the console and rutting her tight slit until her screams of pleasure fill the ship. I nearly cave to the sivot’s rampant lust.

Is she deliberately trying to tease the beast from me?

“Come with me,” I bark, grabbing her by the wrist and exiting the bridge.

Down the narrow corridor, Cora stumbles along behind me to keep pace with my angry strides. My cock throbs inside my pants that squeeze with a painful pinch, pressing a relentless erection against my stomach.

What makes Cora's cunt so special?

No female has ever had a lasting effect on me. One hard rutting, and I was done, ready to move on to the next sodden slit. It must be the sivot, the ancient bonding of beast to mate that makes me crave the gash between her creamy thighs.

"Where are you dragging me?" Cora tugs at my arm, trying to free her wrist from my bruising grasp.

"To feed your mouth, so you'll stop talking," I snarl, pulling her behind me to the galley. "Unless you'd rather I feed your cunt."

We enter the room and I release her. "This is the galley." I gesture to a panel embedded in the wall above the counter. "That's a replicator. You can use it to create any meal you wish."

I step closer to her as she examines the replicator, the heat from her delectable body a temptation I almost can't resist. My hand reaches out, ready to snatch the sheet from her body. Toss her up on the counter and make a meal out of her.

Instead, my fingers move over the controls of the replicator as I demonstrate how it works. My gaze drops to her lips, and I can almost taste their sweetness. It would be a simple move to lean down and capture her mouth with mine. To delve my tongue between her plump lips and know her taste. Capture her moans of pleasure as my knot locks her down tight on my throbbing member.

"Anything I want?" Soft gray eyes drift up to meet mine.

The longing in her voice deflates my erection and pierces me with a familiar pang I wished to never feel again.

*Bliking dund!*

I stagger back as if I've been gut-punched. I haven't felt anything for anyone since I was naive and foolish enough to

care about others. Until I was betrayed by the one person I trusted the most. That day, I vowed never to trust again and never to care for another being.

My sivot is the cause. My beast is an idiot, harboring affections for a female. And a human at that.

“Most anything,” I keep my voice cold and distant despite the tender spot swelling in my chest. “Moktian replicators have extensive memory banks.”

“I haven’t eaten anything but grainy bars that taste like dirt for ages.” Cora’s gaze grows watery and bright. “Thereres so many foods I miss. I don’t know what to ask for.”

My chest tightens and I swallow hard, pushing aside the tugging sensation that draws me to her. I must not care about this female. I must not let my sivot get the better of me. He might have mated her, but I have not.

“Just pick something,” I say gruffly tearing myself away. “I’m needed on the bridge.”

I stride out of the galley, my boots thudding against the metal floor. I must remain strong and resist the urge to stay and console Cora. Ignore her soft eyes and the caress of her velvety voice. I must resist the urge to feel the plumpness of her lips against mine. Kissing was for mated pairs, and not meant for rutting.

Resist the urge to knot her, to fill her tight sheath with my mating seed.

She is not my mate, but a trigger for my beast! That is all and nothing more.



## CORA

I watch Navik storm out of the galley. His abrupt tone hasn’t changed, but I swear something in the cold depths of his eyes

softened while he showed me how to use the replicator. Was it the sivot shining through the callous facade of the space pirate?

A flurry of questions blew around inside my mind like a freshly shaken snow globe. The most pressing being what the sivot had meant when he'd uttered that I was his to pleasure for always. *Always* has me worried, because there is no *always* between me and Navik. I never agreed to be a permanent fixture in the space pirate's life.

The other was the sivot claiming me as his mate. That concerned me the most. I knew nothing of his species and what the implications of his claim on me meant.

The agreement was for him to fly me home in exchange for the use of my body. I worry since we aren't on a heading to Earth that he is stalling my departure by declaring we need to trade this ship for a different one.

The Yulineon attack had been real enough and Navik crawling into the access tunnel had come before we struck our bargain. But what if he was lying about a tracker altogether? How trustworthy could a space pirate be? Just because we had made a deal didn't mean he wouldn't renege on it.

Delaying my flight home also meant more time in bed with Navik and his beast.

A wash of heat rushes over me. My body is stiff and sore in all the right places. Though it had been a bit of a shock when Navik morphed into the beast while buried inside me, I can't say I hated it.

The truth is, I was thoroughly sated by Navik and his beast. I could still feel the echo of his rigid girth and his knot stretching me. His length massaging my inner walls as I mewled from the extreme pleasure. The vibrating finger-like projections at the base of his cock had me climaxing one after another until I begged him to stop. Limp as a noodle by the time he was done, it was an erotic event I wouldn't mind repeating.

The tender gaze and soft caresses from the beast at the end had shaken and confused me. Navik's dual personalities were at odds with themselves. The pirate seemed to not give two shits about me other than what lie between my legs, but I got the impression the beast has tender feelings for me.

Can I trust the sivot or was he just as untrustworthy as his space pirate counterpart?

*Ugh!* My highjacking had turned out way different than I planned.

One minute, I held the space pirate captive at the tip of an electrocution weapon, and the next, I was flat on my back with spread legs and my core clenching around not only the space pirate's, but his beast's cock.

My face heats with shame. Now that the blissful moment has faded, I'm mortified how much I enjoyed the act. How much I look forward to a repeat. When had I become this way? I was never promiscuous before my abduction and I never liked what the warden had done to me.

Was this Stockholm syndrome? Technically, I was Navik's captive until we reached Earth. Was this my way of coping with my new captivity by being attracted to my captor?

I shudder, hoping to reach Earth soon.

My stomach rumbles in discontent, yet here I stand before a machine that can create any meal I can dream up, and all I can think about is how it felt to be plundered by Navik and then his sivot. My nipples already hardening for his touch, my core weeping for another claiming.

I shake off the illicit thoughts and focus on my empty stomach. Since I haven't eaten anything except pressed mealy bars since waking up on Onis, I'm craving everything at once. There's so much I want, I can't decide, so I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind.

I watch, mesmerized as a perfect stack of blueberry pancakes materializes in front of me, dripping with syrup and a pat of melting butter perched in the center. If it wasn't for the

heavenly aroma overwhelming my senses, I would have thought it was an image taken from the pages of a magazine.

Navik had called it Moktian technology. Who are these Moktians that have Earth recipes?

And I wonder...

“Mocha cappuccino?” I question the machine.

To my utter delight, a large mug with a frothy top appears out of thin air. Hot tears press behind my eyes at the sight and sweet scent of a confection long missed. I blink them back and carefully remove the plate and steaming mug from the machine. I take a seat at the counter and palm the odd looking eating utensil Navik left for me. It’s a cross between a flattened spoon and a fork.

I cut a pie shape from my stack and stuff the buttery, sweet cakes into my mouth. Nearly forgotten flavors dance across my tongue, my eyes fluttering closed as I savor this moment. For the first time in years, I’m eating something real and it’s almost too much.

I take a sip of my cappuccino to wash down my first bite of home, and moan. My taste buds explode with flavor. The sweet, creamy, bitter, and robust tastes of the coffee fills me with warmth.

Tears roll down my face while I eat my first Earth meal in years. Suppressed memories sweep over me in a weighty flood. I had resigned myself to my fate as the warden’s pet after months of imprisonment went by and no hope for escape had presented itself. Homesickness had faded to a hollow ache until numbness had dulled my senses.

But now, here I am, eating food from home and drinking cappuccino that tastes like a hug from my mom. After my dad died, she took on a second job as a barista at a mom and pop shop in our tiny town of Guthrie, Oklahoma, to make ends meet. On the weekends, her boss would let me sit at the counter and drink hot chocolate while my mom worked her shift.

After I got older and could stay at home alone, I still frequented the coffee shop, trading hot chocolate for my beloved mocha cappuccinos. Now, I'm finally able to taste a bit of those forgotten moments.

My mom had sacrificed a lot to raise me on her own. To her, I was a missing person. After all this time, she probably thought I was dead.

The first of many sobs erupts from the hollow ache I buried deep down long ago. It was easier to cope knowing freedom was out of my reach when I forgot what I was missing. As my stolen life threatens to drown me in flashes of memories, I wipe away relentless tears and finish my pancakes.

Damn, I miss home like crazy. I hope Navik hurries up and finds a new ship, or the Yulineon patroller catches up to us. If Navik is arrested, my bargain will end and my strange craving for the pirate with it. Then the space cop can take me home.

## CHAPTER FIVE

NAVIK

“Are you interested in a Moktian Galaxy Cruiser that’s been painted with a Yulineon tracking device?” I ask Qhix a few hours after leaving Cora in the galley.

A fellow Star Maverick, Qhix is the closest male I have to a friend, which isn’t saying much. We met years ago when we had first been inducted into the brotherhood of Star Mavericks. Both rookies, we had been hunting the same bounty, a deadly Syprx accused of killing the mate of a chieftain on Zifk.

We ended up joining forces to capture the leech and split the reward between us. A bond had been formed the day we had brought down the Syprx together. With six eyes, four arms, and an affinity for blood, those leeches were hard to kill. But the amount of rillium the chieftain had offered for the head of the male who had taken the life of his beloved was worth the risk of being sucked dry by the space leech.

Like all Star Mavericks, we were loners and spoke only rarely. As the comm remains silent, I look to make sure I’m still transmitting. The reluctant pause didn’t come as a surprise.

Earlier, I had been treated to the same stretch of silent treatment by the trollis when I tried to space dock above the trading port on Tirius. Once the little green freak had processed my request to dock, he was having nothing to do

with my marked vessel and had even sent a Lizordian Battleship to force me to leave at the threat of annihilation.

I open my mouth to interrupt the reluctant pause, but Qhix gets there before me. “You are aware that a Yulineon tracker is nearly impossible to remove.”

“I dampened the signal after coming out of a hyper-jump from Onis.”

“What were you doing on that frozen prison rock?” Qhix asks.

“Delivering a Wetokian I captured for Warden Hyt’s arena.”

Qhix’s low whistle fills the bridge. “Making lots of new friends since we last spoke. You know the Wetokian’s will want retribution for their stolen comrade.”

“Only if they can catch me,” I smirk. “Do you want the Mektian vessel or not?”

“You know what the penalty is if you get caught with stolen Mektian technology,” Qhix says finally, his voice low and grave. “The Yulineon will be the least of your worries if they catch and turn your ass over to the Mektian High Council.”

“I’m aware, but I need off this vessel. My passenger isn’t safe.”

“Passenger?”

“I need a vessel that cloaks if I’m to get to Earth undetected.”

“Earth! Why would you want to be going to that primitive shithole?” Qhix scoffs. “How much tellic is he paying you to fly into territory protected under Universeval Rule?”

“She.”

“I’m sorry, what? Sh... *She*?” he sputters between gasps of laughter.

The humor he finds at my expense grates on my nerves. “Do you want the blinking ship or not?”

Qhix clears his throat and asks in a neutral tone, though I can hear the smile in his voice, “Where are you now?”

“Just exiting the Unur Galaxy.”

“Meet me on Yeet in the Denarian Sector,” Qhix suggests. “We can strip it of useful technology and leave the rest there.”

Smart choice. There are no habitable planets in that sector, only dying solar systems that once thrived millennia ago.

“I’ll split the profits from the technology with you, and I’ll also need a ride to Neptus to retrieve my ship I left there.”

“Since I’ll be giving you and your female companion a ride, a 40/60 split is more to my liking.”

I grind my molars knowing the male has the upper hand. In true marauder fashion, Qhix sees an opportunity and takes it. I can’t find fault with his demands. I would have done the same.

There’s no negotiating if I want his help.

“Fine. I’ll see you on Yeet.” I end the call with a stab of my finger on the comm.

The anguished groan from the back of the ship sets me on edge.

“Cora!” I yell over my shoulder.

Panic grips me when there’s no reply, my sivot roaring to life with worry. I quickly set a course for Yeet and engage the auto pilot, bolting to the galley where I left her. I skid to a halt, frozen in place at what I see before me. Half eaten plates and cups of unfamiliar food and drink are scattered across the length of the counter. Cora lays on the floor, curled into a ball with a hand pressed to her belly.

Fear for another’s wellbeing has been lost to memory but comes back in a rush at the sight of my starfire in pain.

Dropping to my knees, I place a gentle hand on her shoulder. She whimpers in response, her body trembling beneath my touch. The ache in the center of my chest is ignored as I act on instinct, carefully brushing the length of her inky hair from her face and ask, “What ails you, starfire?”

“Ate too much,” she groans and hiccups. “Gonna be sick.”

Without hesitation, I scoop her up in my arms and carry her to the nearest cleanroom. Sweeping her hair from her face, I hold the length in my hand while she heaves into the wall basin. It feels oddly natural to rub circles on her back and mutter soothing words as she empties the contents of her stomach.



## CORA

Navik holding my hair while I vomit is more surreal than seeing him morph into his beast. His touch is strangely comforting as he keeps me upright and helps me through this bizarre moment. As I empty my stomach into the basin, his large rubs soothing circles on my back while the other ponytails my hair in a loose grip, all while muttering calming words in my ear.

Once my stomach is empty, Navik helps me rinse my mouth and face before leading me to a bed. I collapse onto the soft sheets, feeling weak and embarrassed. The mattress dips under Navik’s immense weight as he sits beside me, placing a cool, wet cloth on the back of my neck.

“You should rest.” His deep voice sends warmth through me, calming my unsettled stomach and offering a reprieve from the queasy spinning sensation threatening to overtake me.

I think nothing of it when Navik abruptly leaves. I wouldn’t expect anything less from the surly space pirate. He’s currently not his sivot, so it doesn’t surprise me when he departs without a word.

I let out a deep sigh, feeling the tension slowly leaving my body. My eyes have just started to shut when he suddenly reappears, carrying a small boxy device. He sets the machine

on the bedside table and taps the top, bringing it to life. A fine mist billows from a tiny hole on the front of the machine, cooling the air and filling the space with a sweet aroma that reminds me of chamomile.

I pull deeply of the air, letting the calming scent wash over me. With each inhale, my body relaxes further into the mattress until I grow sleepy.

“Better?” Navik’s voice is oddly gentle, lacking its usual gruff edge.

“Yes,” I say weakly, too embarrassed to meet his gaze.

“I’ve set a course for Yeet,” Navik says, “to meet my brother, Qhix. He’s going to fly us to my ship I left on Neptus. Then we can travel to the space port on Etto to purchase a ship capable of flying you to your home planet.”

“You have a brother?” I couldn’t imagine there being two of Navik. He was larger than life, the Universe didn’t seem big enough to hold two of him.

“Not of blood relation, but bound by the oath we take when inducted into the brotherhood of Star Mavericks.” Navik’s face glows with a hint of pride. “Once you’re chosen to join, your loyalty to the group is unbreakable.”

“No offense, but the Star Mavericks are pirates, right?” I squint up at him. “Aren’t you guys thieves and mercenaries?”

Navik shrugs a hefty shoulder. “At the very least, but the brotherhood upholds a space pirate’s code that unites us for life. Leave no Maverick behind.”

“That would be nice to have a group of people you know you can always depend on, even if you are a bunch of criminals.”

Navik tosses his head back and laughs. “It’s far simpler to support one another when there are no rules to follow, only laws to break.”

His wide open smile transforms his face into nothing short of handsome. His glossy blue skin seems to glow like polished topaz. The harshness of his features fades away with the

crinkles at the corners of his eyes. Eyes that sparkle with ice blue flecks like sun glinting off a winter mist.

I can't help but stare, captivated by the way his laughter fills the room. Something stirs inside me, my heart flutters in my tightening chest. It's a rare moment of vulnerability that I haven't seen in him before.

Our gazes lock and the moment turns awkward. I divert my gaze and pretend to take interest in the machine gently blowing out the calming mist.

I clear my throat, the weight of silence too much. "I thought we were going to Tirius?"

"Already did while you were sleeping," Navik says. "The trollis didn't want any Yulineon entanglements, and the tracker will eventually be found."

"What's a trollis?"

"Short, stalky, green bumpy flesh. More than likely the creature who sold you to Warden Hyt." At the shake of my head, Navik furrows stark white eyebrows. "Do you not recall anything of your abduction?"

I think back to the last night I remember on Earth. The memory is a blur of movement and sound. I was walking home from my late-night job at our local diner when a bright light shot through the sky and an eerie hum filled the air. I remember feeling paralyzed with fear before everything went dark.

"No," I whisper.

Navik's face darkens as he reaches out and rests his hand on my shoulder. "Sometimes memories are better left forgotten," he murmurs. A deep sadness engulfs Navik's countenance, and I can't help but wonder what he is attempting to put behind him.

"I couldn't agree more." I pull my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around my legs, holding myself together. Old memories leave me feeling raw and vulnerable.

Navik stands and crosses the room to pull a blanket from sleek, built-in cabinets that cover one wall from floor to ceiling. On his return, he shakes it out then covers me with it.

“It will be a few hours before we reach Yeet,” Navik tells me as he heads to the door. “Rest, then maybe you can try to hold down a meal.”

He doesn’t wait for a reply but swipes his hand over a panel embedded in the wall adjacent to the door. The soft illumination in the room dims and the door sweeps soundlessly closed behind him. I’m left alone with my rampant thoughts about who Navik really is.

This softer side is as unexpected as it is confounding. Navik has lived up to his reputation as a cold, unscrupulous space pirate. The tender emotions I heard in his voice and saw in his eyes were at complete odds to how he was before we left Onis. What changed in such a short time?

The beast that lived within him wanted to protect me, to keep me safe, but Navik never shared in that concept, had even rebelled against it. The strained grimace on his face made the inner struggle he was having with his sivot obvious.

Snuggling into the blanket Navik laid over me with care, I entertain the notion that Navik and I share something in common. Just like me, Navik harbors something dark in his past he wants to forget.

I clip tender feelings that try to take root. I don’t want to feel anything for him. He’s nothing more than my ride home, no more than an exchange of one thing for another until I reach Earth.

We are not friends. He isn’t my ally or my savior. I mean, I don’t even like him. The lie knotted in my throat as a strange warmth blossomed behind my sternum.

## CHAPTER SIX

NAVIK

I sat at the console, my hands moving along the control panel, guiding us through the Denarian Sector and toward the dying solar system where Yeet orbits. I let my mind wander as I traverse the stars twinkling in an endless expanse of black.

The ship hums quietly beneath me as my thoughts drift to Cora and how she looked when I left her in the room.

Knees pulled up to her chest, she wrapped her arms around herself protectively, as if to shield herself from memories of her abduction. Her vulnerability resonated within me, reminding me of my own past—a dark betrayal by somebody I trusted and its hefty price of imprisonment.

So small and defenseless, she curled herself into a ball as if to protect herself. My sivot had shifted restlessly, but it was both of us who wanted to stay with her, to offer her comfort, but I couldn't let myself do it. I vowed long ago never to let anyone else get too close. Even the other Star Mavericks, who I call allies, were kept at arm's length.

But Cora was different. She had an inner strength that came from deep inside. It called to me. It tugged at something I thought was lost forever.

The console beeps, dragging me back to the present and alerting me we were closing in on Yeet. The planet came into

view, the surface swirling with acid dust clouds of browns and greens. Through the restlessly shifting clouds, I can barely make out the outline of the planet's surface and its jagged rocks that stretch for miles.

A barren world void of life, scorched by a sun that had long ago turned into a red giant and turned the air toxic.

I guide the ship through the atmosphere, navigating around the worst of the raging storms. The landscape is desolate. The air thick and soupy with fine debris. I land the ship on a flat patch of dirt, the engines kicking up the powdery ground as they slow to a stop.

I scan the area, looking for any sign of my fellow Maverick. Nothing stirs, so I hail Qhix on the comm.

"You on Yeet?" Qhix answers immediately.

"Waiting on you, brother," I reply curtly. "I'm cloaked. Sending you my coordinates now."

"Received," Qhix says. "I'm locked in on to your location. Sit tight, I'll be there shortly."

Qhix ends the call and I settle back in my seat while fighting the urge to check on Cora. If she needs me, she will let me know. I must keep my distance. She's the reason my sivot writhes under my skin.

*That is all she is to me, I remind myself. A tool to be used when needed.*

It isn't long before I spot Qhix's ship descending through the soupy atmosphere. The Thrushian Star Chaser glides gracefully toward me despite its bulky hull. Nearly as valuable as my Mektian Galaxy Cruiser, the Thrushian cargo ship is a rare vessel to have acquired. Thrushians are as possessive of their technology as the Mektians.

Fine dust particles cloud the air even more as Qhix's ship lands on the ground near mine.

The comm pings and Qhix's voice fills the bridge, "I'm driving over in a hauler. Prepare the dock."

Qhix isn't blinking around, already the hatch to his cargo hold is opening. The boxy hauler rolling out on spiked, metal tracks that leave a triangular pattern on the bleak landscape in its wake.

I rush from the bridge, down the narrow corridor and to the hatch in the floor. I throw it open and slide down the ladder's rails to the cargo hold in the belly of my ship.

Reaching the control panel to the cargo hold, I engage the nano barrier—the transparent nanite particles solidify to form a wall that will protect me from Yeet's toxic atmosphere—and drop the ramp just as Qhix reaches my ship. Alert beacons flash in warning as the ramp drops, allowing Qhix's hauler to drive inside.

The hauler rolls up slowly and stops. Clamps reach up from the floor, locking the hauler in place with a hard thunch. I work the controls, raising the ramp and pressurizing the cargo hold before disengaging the nano barrier.

The transparent wall dissolves and I step inside the cargo hold as the door to the center of the hauler lifts horizontally. Qhix steps out. His cocky smirk hasn't changed since the last time I saw him.

"Well met, Navik," Qhix says, slapping a fist to the center of his chest in the traditional Star Maverick salutation.

I do the same as I close the distance between us. "Well met, Qhix."

His eyes narrow as he looks me over. "Something has changed with you."

"No. Nothing has changed. It's just been a long time since last we saw each other."

"Perhaps." Qhix continues to study me as if I'm an insectid under a magnifier.

I bristle under his intense scrutiny, my sivot surging with unease from the weight of his curious gaze.

"Are we going to stand here eyeballing each other or strip the ship before that Yulineon bliker finds me?" I bark.

Qhix throws his head back and roars with laughter, his mirth echoing off the metal walls of the cargo hold.

“Same old Navik,” he sobers and claps me on the shoulder. “Come on old friend, let’s salvage what we can off this hunk of junk.”

“A Moktian Galaxy Cruiser is hardly junk.”

“It is after it’s been painted with a Yulineon tracker.” Qhix glances around the cargo hold and lifts his arms, questioningly. “So where’s this female that’s got you eating out of the palm of her hand?”

Protective instincts I never knew I had flare to life. My sivot bristles from the other male’s interest. Why should I care if Qhix asks about her?

I’ve never fallen jealous over any female, even passed them off to other males without a single care once I was done rutting them. Why do I feel like tearing Qhix’s arms off and beating him to death with his own appendages?

Qhix unholsters his laser blaster and takes aim. “Bliking dund, Navik! What is with the sudden hostility... and your eyes?”

My hands ball into fists at my sides. Pinpricks poke my palms as my claws begin to extend. The tightness of my pants around my legs warns me that my sivot is winning the inner battle that constantly wars just beneath the surface of my flesh.

“It’s nothing,” I murmur, deeper and rougher than normal. The voice of my beast. “Let’s just get to work.”

Qhix stares at me for a few more seconds before lowering his blaster. “Your flesh swirls like liquid. I would hardly say that is nothing. And your eyes flash white.”

I take a deep breath and try to relax, but my heart still thunders wildly in my chest as an unfamiliar feeling coils inside me.

“Your corium is coalescing into a solid sheet around your arm.” Qhix retreats in slow, careful steps. “She has awakened your sivot. You’ve knotted her.”

Not a question and Qhix is no fool.

“She is mine to protect,” my sivot hisses.

“Indeed she is.” Qhix holds his palms up in surrender. “I have no intentions of coming between you and your chosen mate, Navik.”

“She is not my mate,” I grit out.

Qhix’s eyes widen and his jaw drops. He recoils back, and in that moment, I read fear in his eyes for the first time ever. Fear of me. Fear of what I can do now that my sivot has been awoken.

“Says you.” Qhix continues his careful retreat. “Yet your sivot seems to be having a bit of a disagreement.”

My muscles strain as I fight against the beast trying to consume me. My claws reach deep into my skin, drawing blood, before finally receding back into my body with a shudder of relief. I take deep, gasping breaths until my heart slows to a normal rhythm.

“You know raising a weapon on a fellow Star Maverick is forbidden.” I lick the sharp point of one fang.

Qhix nods slowly and holsters his blaster. “My apologies, Navik.”

I let out a long, shuddering breath as my sivot finally relents. I can feel the sharpness of my fangs slipping back into place, the burn of my skin healing over them. The taste of my own blood still lingers on my tongue, tinny and sweet, a reminder that I’m not wholly in control when it comes to her.

“Sivots haven’t presented in millennia.” Qhix squints at me. “How is it yours has been triggered?”

“I don’t know, but I plan to use the beast to my advantage,” I say, my voice still thick with the sivot’s influence. “I will take whatever I want, whenever I want it. I will be the most envied Star Maverick in the known Universe.”



## CORA

I jolt awake at the metallic clanging. My heart hammers inside my chest as I scan the dimly lit room and wonder where I am. No longer caged inside my gilded prison in the warden's bedroom, recent memories slowly return.

I'm on a spaceship with Navik, the notorious Kaul space pirate, and the sivot that lies in wait beneath his skin. The beast who has declared himself to be my protector.

I had eaten too much and Navik had rush to my aid, holding me up so I could empty my stomach. Sweet chamomile lingers in the air from the mist machine he thoughtfully set up to ease my nausea.

I push myself into a sitting position, the blanket Navik covered me with puddling around my waist. Yet another kindness I had not thought Navik capable of. He was full of surprises, my beastly space pirate.

The sheet I wrapped around myself has loosened from sleep. I tighten the wrap above my breasts at the distant mumbles of two male voices followed by more clanging. They converse in a companionable exchange. I recognize one of the deep grumbling tones as belonging to Navik.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed. Had I slept through the entire journey to Yeet? The second voice must belong to Navik's Star Maverick brother, Qhix.

My feet touch the cold metal floor and I shiver, wishing for some warm socks. I stand, the chilly metal biting into the soles of my feet. Tightening the sheet more, I curse myself for leaving my robe, even though it's soiled, in the other room where I had fulfilled my side of the bargain I struck with Navik.

I cross the room and raise my hand to the panel embedded in the wall, not expecting the door to open. My handprints had never worked on the control panels in the warden's quarters, so I figure I'll have to knock or holler through the metal slab for Navik to let me out. To my surprise, the door glides soundlessly open, and I step into the narrow corridor.

The distant rummaging grows louder. Curious, I follow the voices of the males to the bridge. I round the corner and come face to face with a male similar to Navik, glossy blue skin stretched over a huge muscular frame, a mass of stark white hair cut to the center of his back, and cool, light blue eyes. Only his hold a warmth where Navik's are twin shards of ice.

Like Navik, he's bare chested and wearing only pants and knee-high leather boots. Unlike Navik's solid black, his pants are a deep navy blue with a thick silver stripe running down the length of each leg. The pockets are large enough to fit all sorts of gadgets and tools.

He carries a jagged piece of equipment, wires hanging off the edges. The device is a dull gray with deep blue buttons and two metal handles. It looks like something out of a science fiction movie.

He tilts his head, studying me with an inquisitive gaze. "Well met, female. You must be Navik's mate. I'm Qhix."

"Well met?" I return his warm smile with one of my own. "If that means hello to the Kaul's, then well met, Qhix. But just so we're clear, I'm not Navik's mate."

I stick my hand out for him to shake then startle when Navik is suddenly wedged between us, his predatory growl having an odd effect on me. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end in warning as a curl of heat licks my sex in wanting.

Navik's eyes widen and flash white. He drinks in my disheveled state, and I swallow thickly and tug the sheet around me higher. My bed-rumpled hair falls wildly around my shoulders. I realize how I must look and how naked I am beneath my thin wrapping.

“Apologies, Navik. It was an accident we ran into each other,” Qhix is quick to apologize.

Navik looks to be struggling to contain the sivot. His eyes flash the white of the beast, and the tips of his fangs extend past his sculpted lips.

“Your brother was just introducing himself to me.” I pat Navik on the chest, hoping to put his beast at ease. “No harm has been done. Calm down.”

Navik visibly deflates before my eyes. I release a long, slow breath. That was close. I don’t want Qhix to get hurt because of me, and I worry that all this male posturing and growling is going to be the norm whenever another male is around.

“I shall return, Qhix,” Navik says to his comrade, yet his intense gaze never leaves mine. “Finish disassembling the octhane driver while I remind my female with whom she belongs.”

“With whom I belong?” I echo, unable to hide my shocked surprise.

Navik isn’t in a chatty mood, scooping me up and carrying me to the room where we first had sex. A hint of our hard coupling still lingers in the air. I’m enveloped in his warmth and strength as he lays me down on the bed, unwrapping me like a present for his hungry gaze.

I half expect him to morph into his beast and ravage me. Instead, it’s Navik who does the ravaging.

He covers my body with his, devouring my mouth in a hungry kiss as greedy hands seem to touch me everywhere at once. I wrap my arms around his neck, melting into him as I surrender to the sensations of his all-consuming touch.

His mouth leaves mine to trail kisses down my throat, licking and nipping at the sensitive skin there. I arch against him as his fingers find their way inside me, making me cry out in pleasure. Rocking into him, I urge him to work me harder, faster.

Navik gives me what I ache for, pushing me higher and higher as I race toward release. His name is a litany on my lips as my body shudders in pleasure, waves of warmth washing over me like a tidal wave. He strums my body to life, every nerve ending tingling in an exquisite mix of pleasure and pain.

My body hums and twitches with the aftershocks of my orgasm, but Navik is far from finished with me. He claims my mouth in a searing kiss, demanding and relentless. I hardly have time to catch my breath before he unfastens his pants and thrusts into me without warning, casting shockwaves throughout my body. The raw power of his thrusts sends me spiraling, my screams muffled by his ravishing kisses.

Navik breaks away from the kiss and raises up on outstretched arms, pumping into me until I'm writhing beneath him, rolling my hips in tune with his, reaching for the next release yet never wanting this high to end.

"You are mine." The deep baritone of his beast rumbles through me.

My eyes fly open to see Navik's icy blue irises glowing bright white around the edges, though he hasn't morphed into his beast.

"Say it!" he snarls the demand.

My mind spins from the intensity of it all and I can't form the words to answer. His cock feels so good inside me, stretching and filling me until my toes curl and my breath catches in my throat. I cling to him as he takes me higher, climbing toward the knife-edge of release.

To my displeasure, he slows his rhythm, gliding slowly in and out of my slippery tunnel. Teasing and taunting me with his thick erection.

"Say it!" he growls again.

He keeps me teetering on the edge of a wild torrent, my orgasm just out of reach. The need to shatter has me begging him for release, but Navik won't relent until I say what he wants.

“Yes,” I moan and arch, finally telling him what he wants to hear. “I am yours.”

This isn’t about pleasure for him. With another male aboard, this is about staking his claim.

Navik roars with satisfaction and seats himself fully inside me; the bulge at the base of his thick phallus swells, knotting inside my weeping core. The finger-like projections at the base of his cock vibrate and tease, massaging my clit as he locks us together.

“Climax on my knot, starfire,” Navik growls out his pleasure as hot jets splash deep inside me. I come undone at his command, shattering into a million pinpoints of light. “That’s it, my mate. Milk my knot for every drop of seed.”

There’s no post-orgasm cuddling from Navik, only his beast. His knot trapping me on his cock shrinks, and he wordlessly slips free of my body, leaving me feeling empty and wanting despite being thoroughly satiated.

I curl up on my side, longing for Navik’s sivot to stroke my cheek and gaze lovingly into my eyes. The cooling air makes me shiver, and I pull the covers over me, missing the warmth of the beast’s reverent touches.

While fastening his pants, Navik crosses the room to rummage through the wall of cabinets. I’m drawn to the way his muscles roll and contract beneath his glossy blue skin. Navik is a vision of power and strength, an irresistible male specimen that should not hold me so captivated. I should resist the pleasure I find under him, not look forward to the next sexual encounter.

The words I uttered in the heat of passion echo inside my mind. Maybe it was simply Navik’s version of dirty talk, or had I sealed my fate by agreeing that I was his?

That couldn’t be, because we had an agreement that he would return me home in exchange for the use of my body. Despite how much I was enjoying the bargain I’d struck with the space pirate, I was living up to my end of the accord.

Navik returns with a pair of thick socks and black pants and top, laying them on the bed beside me.

“These will have to do until I can find you proper female clothes that fit. Use the purifier in the cleanroom and get yourself cleaned up,” he murmurs and leaves the room.

The door slides home behind his muscular frame, and I’m left alone. The cool, quiet room now in stark contrast with the frenzied heat and passionate sounds from a few moments ago.

I bristle over his commanding tone. It’s tempting to rebel and do exactly the opposite but as badly as I want to thumb my nose at him, a shower sounds really good.

Naked, I stand and stretch, enjoying the sweet sensation of soreness in my thighs. Sex with Navik is a wild ride. His ardor and intensity surpass anything I’ve ever experienced before, and I enjoy every second of it.

If that makes me a total wanton, then so be it. There is no one here to judge me, and besides, Earth rules don’t apply in outer space. Nothing from Earth applies out here.

Memories flood back of my time with the warden and all the unwanted orgasms forced on me with the icy hot spray he slathered on my sex before impaling me with his collection of alien dildos. I refuse to feel shame for my body’s natural response to the warden’s diabolical treatment.

A girl must endure what is necessary to survive.

Shaking off the memories of my time with Warden Hyt, I pad to the bathroom, or what Navik calls the cleanroom, and step inside the purifier. The upright pod blows warm mist to clean the skin and hair instead of soap and running water.

I step inside, close the pod’s door, and crank the handle. Warm mist blasts out from many tiny holes, caressing my skin as it removes all dirt, sweat, and grime from my skin and hair. I bask in its comforting embrace for a few moments before stepping out. Refreshed, I should no longer carry any trace of my recent tryst with Navik.

I sniff my arm, picking up trace hints of Navik’s musky pheromones. My heart thuds wildly in my chest as I remember

the words I uttered. Was I truly his? Had he marked me with his scent somehow, or was I making something out of nothing?

I towel off, deciding to question him as soon as I can get him alone. I need to make sure our deal to fly me home still stands. I slip into the thick socks and don the clothes Navik found for me. They're a little big but better than the sheet I'd been wearing or my soiled robe.

I glance in the reflective panel over the basin and finger-comb my raven tresses before smoothing down the fabric of the black shirt. I look different, not like the me I used to be, but the me I'm becoming. The me that is a survivor and won't let anything stand in my way of returning home.

I leave the room and find Navik and Qhix scavenging parts from the bridge. The consoles and displays that were once lit up with colorful, blinking lights are now dark and lifeless. In the center, where one of three seats used to be, is now an empty space with wires strewn across the floor.

Navik and Qhix stand atop ladders, removing panels from the wall to access more components. A few sparks fly as they fiddle with something inside one of the panels while I watch from below, fascinated by their handiwork.

"Anything I can do to help?" I ask.

All eyes turn my way. Qhix sweeps his warm gaze over me, a knowing smile playing at the corners of his generous mouth. I flush, realizing he must have heard us through the walls.

Navik's gaze burns with an unmistakable heat, sending a shiver down my spine.

"Yes." Navik jumps off the ladder and commands, "Come here, starfire."

I approach him, my heart fluttering wildly when he takes my hand and leads me to sit in a seat at the console.

"Keep an eye on this screen for approaching ships," he says, gesturing to the only lit screen.

He quickly explains what I'm to look for on the large readout. I listen intently, feeling essential that he trusts me with such an important task.

Now that my bout with nausea is over and my stomach again empty, it rumbles angrily. "Are we taking the replicator with us?" I ask.

"If we have time," Navik states.

"All I have are dried rations aboard my craft," Qhix interjects while pulling free another component from inside a wall panel. "The replicator aboard my ship failed long ago, and you must feed your female something other than your cock, Navik."

My entire body flushes with heat, my face erupting in flames.

Navik's cold gaze sparks with a mischievous glint. "I'll make sure you're well fed, starfire," he murmurs before returning to stripping the ship of its components.

I tear my eyes away from Navik's retreating form. The heat that blooms over my flesh has nothing to do with embarrassment. I squirm in my seat and try to focus on the screen before me.



IT FEELS as though I've sat here for hours, staring down at the empty screen. My neck is sore from looking down, and my back aches from sitting in the same position. I look around while rubbing the soreness from my neck. The bridge has been reduced to a husk, the salvaged parts taken to Qhix's hauler, when the blip of an approaching craft gains my attention. "Navik! Something's coming."

Both Navik and Qhix rush over to look at the blip blinking on my screen.

"It's the blinking Yulineon," Navik curses.

My heart skips a beat. This was the moment I've been waiting for. If the Yulineon arrests Navik, then the patroller will take me home. I won't have to wait and wonder if I can trust the word of a space pirate. But my loose plan hadn't included Qhix.

It would be two against one. Would the Yulineon be able to take on two Kauls if I make a run for the door? If the Yulineon loses the fight, what will become of me? Navik will be pissed and may decide our bargain be null and void if I try to run.

Plus, the windshield is dark so I can't see outside. Navik had called it a view screen, and with so many pillaged components, it probably no longer works. I know nothing about Yeet. Once I get out of the ship, I have no shoes, and I'll be running blind on an unknown planet.

"He's landing directly in front of us," Navik hisses. "He knows we're here."

My body hums with energy, ready to bolt. I picture the route to the exit, and how to work the controls to drop the ramp. I watched Navik's beast extend the ramp when he carried me aboard and we left Onis. I think I can repeat what he did.

Concern for my space pirate and his sivot makes me hesitate. Would Navik face a harsher punishment if the Yulineon thinks Navik abducted me from Earth?

I won't let that happen. Navik may be guilty of many things, but abduction isn't one of them. I'll have to make sure the Yulineon understands that. Had I not run into Navik on the way to the exit on Onis, I wouldn't be on this ship with him. I involved him in my escape. I can't let him take the blame for something he didn't do.

Before I can make my move, a deafening roar sounds out behind me, shaking the hull of the spacecraft. I cover my ears against the audible assault but I don't need to turn around to know Navik has morphed into his sivot.

Qhix stumbles backward, toppling over the console where I'm seated. He rolls once and springs to his feet, his expression

a mix of shock and surprise.

“Stay here with Cora, Qhix!” the sivot’s deep baritone rumbles through the bridge. “I’ll take care of the Yulineon.”

I leave my seat and whirl around in time to see Navik’s beast exiting the bridge and into the narrow corridor. Qhix leaps over the console and our eyes lock. My heart lurches in my chest. I don’t like the fear I see reflected there.

“Where is he going?” I ask.

“To the cargo hold,” Qhix says, grabbing my hand. “Maybe you can talk some sense into his sivot before he leaves the ship.”

I don’t have time to make sense out of Qhix’s words as he drags me from the bridge and down the narrow corridor. When we reach the end, we find a hatch in the floor that’s been thrown open. Qhix uses the rails on either side of the ladder to slide down and into the belly of the spacecraft.

Once Qhix’s feet touch the floor, he reaches up for me to follow. “Hurry! We can’t let him go out there unprotected.”

I use the rungs to climb down as fast as I can. The blast that hits us shakes me loose and I fall, but luckily Qhix is there with lightning reflexes to grab hold of me before I hit the floor. He sets me on my feet and we race toward a wall of glass.

Qhix frantically taps on a control panel and curses, “Bliking sivot has locked me out.”

On the other side of the glass wall, the alien version of a U-Haul is parked inside a cavernous space. The sivot stands before a large rectangular door in the wall that can only be the ramp.

“Navik, you’ll die if you go out there!” Qhix bangs his fists against the glass wall, the clear barrier between us and Navik’s beast.

“She is mine to protect, Qhix,” the sivot turns and shouts back before slamming a meaty fist on a large, red button adjacent to the ramp. “You know what the Yulineon will do to her if he finds her.”

Flashing red light fills the space. A warning blares sounds out and the ramp begins a slow, horizontal descent.

My stomach drops, not understanding what is happening. “Why will he die, Qhix?”

“The air on Yeet is toxic. Even if he held his breath, the victus acid will burn his flesh from his bones.”

“No!” I beat on the glass wall for all I’m worth. “Come back. Don’t leave, Navik. Please!”

The sivot’s head swivels around as the ramp completes its descent, touching the ground in a silent landing. A sickly green fog fills the air in a wavy distortion as his long, white hair starts to sizzle and smoke, his liquid blue skin melting away like wax under an open flame.

Claws extended, fangs displayed in a feral snarl, he looks like a monster from an ancient myth, ready to destroy his enemy.

“I will never leave you, starfire.” Navik’s beast levels a resolute gaze on me. “You are mine to protect for always.”

Arm up and out, the sivot deploys a shield from what used to be a metallic tribal tattoo adorning Navik’s arm. Now transformed into a solid sheet encasing the sivot from shoulder to wrist, he expands it into a circular shield before pushing through the green fog.

“Reckless fool!” Qhix slams his fist against the glass wall, his face contorted with anger and worry.

We watch helpless from behind the wall of glass as the sivot charges the Yulineon’s ship. I recognize the sleek craft as the same one that fired on us as we left Onis.

Sparks fly and metal groans as the sivot slams his shoulder into the hull of the Yulineon’s ship. He pummels the enemy vessel with his shield, using it as a battering ram. The metal hull screeches and bends with each of his blows.

The sivot then tears into the hull with its claws, ripping and shredding the metal until it explodes in a shower of sparks and debris. The beast is blown backward, landing with a

skidding thud into the hull of our ship. The beast shakes his mighty head and rises, limping up the ramp and slapping a hand over the red button to raise it.

The sivot collapses in a steaming heap as the ramp closes and seals with a whoosh. His flesh, once a liquid azure, now absent in large smoldering patches, revealing the raw meat of his muscles beneath.

The red lights no longer strobe in warning, so Qhix taps on the control panel again. The glass wall blocking us from the cargo hold dematerializes at his command. I can hardly believe it and reach out my hand to confirm that the wall is no longer there, just air.

Qhix rushes inside to where Navik's sivot lays unmoving. I follow, dropping to my knees beside the beast. Overcome with grief, I let my tears fall as I take in the sight of him.

His once beautiful blue skin is now melted away. What's left is charred and blistered. The acid air of Yeet searing his body and burning the hair from his head. His breathing is shallow as he lays motionless.

"He still lives," Qhix says softly.

"Help him, Qhix!" Tears stream down my face unchecked. It breaks my heart to see him like this.

"The med bay is packed inside the hauler." Qhix slings his hand at the boxy vehicle parked inside. "We'll have to take him to my ship so I can treat him there, but we need to hurry. All Yulineon patrollers are equipped with galaxy positioning devices. As soon as the ship exploded, it vanished off their grid."

I help Qhix roll Navik's beast onto his back and drag his huge, smoldering body onto the hauler. "They'll have already dispatched patrollers to investigate," Qhix says. "We don't want to be here when they arrive."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

NAVIK

The scent of her tears is reminiscent of the sweet, tropical rains on Zeva, a distant planet where my Kaul half calls home. “Are those for me?” I crack open eyes that burn and wheeze with an exhausted breath.

“Why did you do that, sivot?” Cora cries out in anguish, her voice cracking with grief. “You knew the air was acid. You could have gotten yourself killed.”

“I am hardly dead, starfire,” I groan when the hauler bumps down the ramp of my cargo hold.

Cora swipes angrily at her tears. “Why? Why would you risk your life?”

“You are mine to protect,” I reply simply.

*“You could have rigged the thermic beam into a current strong enough to return fire on the Yulineon patroller,”* my Kaul half grouches inside my mind. *“There was no need to leave the bliking ship!”*

Trapped in sivot form, I cannot morph back into my Kaul body until I heal more. My injuries are too extensive. Not even the hole blasted in my chest had brought me this close to death.

Inside my shared mind, my Kaul half writhes in pain and anger that I had been so reckless, but the only way to be sure

Cora remained safe from the Yulineon was to destroy him before he destroyed her.

Once we clear my cargo bay, Qhix shifts the hauler into high speed and races across the surface of Yeet. My body screams in protest from the slightest of movements. I am careful to keep my grunts and groans to myself. Every jolt sends a searing pain coursing through my veins, and I grit my teeth to muffle my cries, not wanting to further distress my mate.

There is a slight pause before the hauler tilts and drives up the ramp into Qhix's spacecraft. The hauler stops. The hard clunk of the floor grips locking us in place spears me with a jolt of fresh pain over every inch of my flesh. The ramp lifts, cutting off the toxic green fog of acid, sealing us safely inside Qhix's craft, followed by a sucking whoosh. Once the ship pressurizes and fills the hold with clean air, Qhix moves from the driver's seat.

My burning eyes close in relief. We have made it aboard Qhix's vessel, but we are hardly safe. Not until we are off the ground and far away from Yeet will I succumb to my injuries, only when I know my Cora is safe.

"Stay with him," Qhix tells Cora. "I'll be back with a gurney to move him."

"I will," my mate snuffles and gingerly pats my clawed hand.

I open my eyes and peer up at Cora's pretty face etched in worry as she looks down at me. My chest expands, blooming and swelling with emotions long dead. The wall my Kaul half has built around his heart cracks, crumbling away despite his resistance. The stubborn fool does not trust the compassion Cora offers.

"You're safe now," I whisper through a throat raw from the burning acid.

She nods, tears streaming down her face. "Promise you won't ever do something like that again."

“I am sorry,” I reply, feeling guilty for causing her grief. “That, I cannot promise.”

Cora’s weeping increases, and I try to sit up to comfort her, but the pain is too much and I fall back with a groan. Cora leans in closer, her hand brushing my forehead. Her touch is soothing despite my wounds, and I close my eyes to savor the sensation.

Qhix returns with a floating gurney. He lowers it to rest on the floor of the hauler. The pain is excruciating, but I endure as Qhix moves me to the gurney. My eyes shut tightly in torment, then flip open when my forearm is enclosed in a cuff.

“Where did you acquire a Ziarian medical cuff?” I croak.

“Stole it from a bunch of unfortunate Ziarian prisoners on Zune,” Qhix says, floating the gurney above the floor and rushing me out of the hauler and through the ship until we reach the med bay. “I heard their guards abandoned them, so I went to check it out. They were all in lock down when I arrived, so it was an easy theft.”

“Zune?” I rasp. “There’s nothing on Zune.”

“There’s plenty on Zune,” Qhix counters with a sardonic laugh. “For once, the rumors were true.”

Cora remains at my side the entire way. My eyes burn with blurred vision. Blinking away the tears pooling in my eyes, I keep my gaze firmly on her. To look away would be to ignore a sweet solace in this time of suffering.

Once inside the med bay, Qhix slides a bed out from the wall and pushes me onto it, strapping me down so I don’t fall onto the floor when we launch. The screens above my head flicker on, displaying my vitals in numbers and jagged lines.

“Cora, take that seat and strap yourself in. It’s gonna be a fast launch off this rock,” Qhix tells her and sprints from the room.

I hear Cora shifting about and then the click of the seat straps. It isn’t long before the revving of the engines hums throughout the ship. Cargo vessels like this one aren’t usually

equipped with reverberation dampeners like the luxury long-range passenger crafts, so the noise is deafening.

I feel every minuscule movement the ship makes on takeoff. The pain radiating from my body is like nothing I have ever experienced before. Every breath feels like fire, and every movement sends shockwaves of agony through me, but the medical cuff is working. I can already feel the warmth of its healing effects.

The anesthetic it pumps into me is already making me drowsy. I must not give in to the lethargy dragging me down. Not until I know Cora is far away from Yeet and any possibility of a Yulineon confrontation.

I fight against the blackness, trying to stay conscious and focus on the pain. Focus on the dull ache in my bones and the burning sensation in my chest as a way to keep myself from succumbing to unconsciousness.

I close my eyes and take deep, calming breaths, forcing the blackness to remain at bay. I cling to Cora's voice as she speaks softly to me, telling me that everything will be all right. With her words of encouragement, I fight against the darkness that threatens to consume me.

My mind drifts in and out as Qhix pilots us away from Yeet and the Yulineon patrollers I know are on the way to investigate the loss of their ship. I float in a dreamlike state; my body is nearly numb, yet I can still feel the pain radiating from my wounds.

Once the ship finally levels off, the harsh hum of acceleration fades away so all I hear is Cora softly weeping.

"Don't cry, Starfire." I hate how weak my sivot's voice sounds.

She unbuckles and comes to stand at my side. "Look at you," she sniffles. "You could have gotten yourself killed. It was reckless of you to go out there."

"You are mine to protect."

"As the sivot, you keep saying that, but what about Navik?" she says. "Did he even have a choice? He would have

never subjected himself to acid air to protect me.”

My eyes close, weary and uncertain how to make her understand.

“Navik is as much a part of the sivot as the sivot is a part of Navik. We are one and the same, only in a different form. We share the same mind. I know his thoughts because they are my own.”

“Yet Navik has never declared himself my protector.”

“The Kaul half of me is a stubborn fool, yet he knotted you. Spilled his mating seed inside your womb. Still, he resists because of a betrayal from long ago.” I chuckle when my Kaul half stirs with irritation. I revealed his secret. “But you are not her, starfire.”

“Her?”

The darkness pulls at me, tugging me under. My already blurry eyes begin to dim as pitch black creeps around the edges of my vision.

“The one that broke our heart...”



CORA

I must have stood here for an hour absorbing the sivot’s words and watching Navik’s chest in his beastly form, rising and falling with each labored breath. My heart aches for them both, and I can’t help but feel responsible for their injuries.

The sivot had explained they were one and the same, sharing a mind and heart. And both felt something for me. Though I wasn’t entirely sure how the morphing worked, his explanation made since. They were the same person only in different forms. One a beast and the other a humanoid.

Both had knotted me, releasing into me in hot splashes of what I thought was simply semen. Navik’s sivot had called it

mating seed. Could Navik get me pregnant? I hadn't thought it likely given our different species.

I swallow hard, not knowing what to do with that.

I lean in closer, studying his monstrous face. My fingers itch to touch him, to offer him comfort, but he's burned everywhere, and I don't want to do anything to hurt him further.

My thoughts are interrupted by the sound of the door sliding open. Qhix enters, his eyes scanning over the sivot's body. "I'm glad to see he slumbers. The cuff will work faster to heal him if he's asleep."

"Thanks, Qhix, for all you did to help him."

"Leave no Maverick behind." Qhix wearily falls into an empty seat. "And as Navik's mate, you qualify as a Maverick. I've set a course for Neptus, where Navik left his ship. We should arrive there within a few days."

I want to shake my head and deny the status as Navik's mate, but how can I when I told Navik I was his? When both had knotted me. I opt to say nothing, dropping my gaze to focus on Navik in his badly injured sivot form.

"Is it my imagination or are his burns already healing?" I lean in closer to examine his forearm. Where his glossy blue skin was seared away leaving raw meat exposed, healing flesh now shows.

"The cuff is doing its job." Qhix bobs his chin at me. "With that Ziarian piece of technology around his arm, he will recover quickly, likely before we reach Neptus."

I release a long sigh and settle back into my seat. "That's a relief."

Despite how quickly Qhix claims his injuries will heal, he's still in pain. The sivot had braved the inhospitable environment on Yeet to protect me from the Yulineon, and now I couldn't shake the guilt of that.

His injuries are all my fault, and I want to know why the sivot was so adamant about attacking the Yulineon. "What

would the Yulineon have done to me had Navik's sivot not killed him?" I ask in a thin voice.

"He would have killed you."

"Why?" I recoil. "I thought a patroller was like law enforcement. I've broken no laws. I'm the victim."

"Not in the eyes of Universeval Rule."

"Uni-what?"

"Universeval Rule is an assembly of cosmic entities comprised of three of the oldest galaxies in existence. This covenant seeks to safeguard nascent galaxies like your Milky Way from exposure to more powerful entities who might threaten them. Conversely, if any human ventures outside their world, they are to be terminated immediately."

"That's the craziest thing I've ever heard." A hard mix of outrage and fear streaks through me. Not only had I nearly run out into the toxic environment on Yeet that would have melted the flesh from my bones, but the patroller I thought was my salvation would have been my murderer.

"Not to them." Qhix leans back and loosely crosses his arms across a broad chest. "They think that humans are not prepared to accept the truth of what exists outside their known Universe. As a primitive species, your lifestyles and views on the world would be shattered if you learned the truth. Global panic could have horrific consequences that would extend beyond planet Earth."

Even if I don't like it, I can't disagree with the reasoning. Humans are reactionary, and I could only imagine the mass hysteria if the general populace was to see half of what I had.

"It surprises me that Navik is willing to let you go." The warmth in Qhix's glacial blue gaze burns with curiosity. "Even more surprised that Navik would risk flying into Yulineon territory to return you to Earth. The Lunarick Sector is swarming with patrollers ever since the Gretolics went rogue from their makers and increased their rate of human abductions. Your chances of making it past their patrollers and

to Earth's ground and Navik making it out of that sector alive are slim to none."

My gaze flicks to Navik's sivot. Blistered and scorched from protecting me from an enemy I had contemplated running to for help. He was willing to die to keep me safe. I can't let that happen. Not again. I can't let Navik die because of me.

"There has to be another way to get me back on Earth without Navik risking his life to do it," I ponder aloud.

"The sivot has but a singular purpose," Qhix replies. "To protect his chosen mate, even if it means his death."

"But why?"

"It is, or used to be, the way of our people. Sivot's haven't presented in millennia. Not since our females evolved into warriors and no longer need the protection of their males," Qhix describes what I can only imagine. "When the war between the Kaul home world of Klaxis and the neighboring planet of Cret showed no signs of ending, the Kaul females had picked up arms. Began to fight alongside the males in epic battles that raged on for years. Our females, who were looked upon as treasures in need of protection, became even more fierce than the males. The sivot, a Kaul male's ability to morph into a beast for the sole purpose of protecting a mate, went dormant. Until now." Qhix tilts his head at me, inquisitively. "Until you."

Unable to hold Qhix's perplexed gaze, I drop my eyes to Navik's sivot. I have no answers for why Navik's sivot chose me after his species' ability to morph into a beast went dormant.

As I watch Navik sleep, I can't help but feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude and something else I'm not ready to name. I know that Navik feels something for me, but now I know why he's holding back. The betrayal that the sivot spoke of weighs heavily on his heart, and I can only imagine what kind of pain he must have gone through to be so guarded with his emotions.

I can't deny the way my heart races every time his icy blue gaze locks with mine. Can't suppress the desire that erupts within me when his fingertips graze my skin. Navik stirs a longing inside me that I've never felt before, and I am helpless to resist the heat of his caress.

But attraction and lust aren't substitutes for love, and I miss home. Miss my mom, and my waitressing job at the greasy diner. Miss sipping mocha cappuccinos at the counter of the local coffee shop during my mom's shift.

My eyes fill with tears as I gaze upon his wounded body. I reach out a hand and gently brush what's left of his hair away from his singed forehead. He stirs slightly, but doesn't wake up.

"How can anyone live through these burns?" I bite down on my lower lip to keep it from trembling.

"As youths, we were taught about sivot biology in the Academy and told they were virtually indestructible." Qhix rises, studying his fellow Maverick with worried eyes. "I admit, when Navik was exposed to the acid atmosphere on Yeet, I never expected him to survive. I guess the scholars have it right. A Kaul's sivot is one durable bliker."

I swallow past the lump in my throat, and blink back the hot press of tears wanting to fall.

"Even still, I'm worried about him." Qhix pulls a flat, circular device from his pocket, which looks like a miniature hockey puck, and hands it over to me. "Keep this on you at all times."

"What is it?" I take it, flipping it over in my hands.

"An alert beacon. If either of you gets into trouble, twist the two halves opposite of each other. It will illuminate to let you know it's been engaged. I will come find you wherever you are."

"Thanks, Qhix." I tuck the beacon in my pant's pocket.

Qhix clears his throat and starts for the door. "Navik removed the replicator from his ship, but once the Yulineon

arrived, I forgot to load it. I do have dried rations if you're hungry."

"I'm not hungry." I take my eyes off Navik only long enough to glance up at Qhix. "Thanks though."

"It's a long way to Neptus. I can show you to a room if you want to rest."

"I don't want to leave Navik in case he wakes up. I don't want him to be alone."

Qhix studies me a moment then crosses the room and pulls another bed from the wall, a twin to the one Navik occupies. "I'll return with water and rations enough to last you the journey."

"Thanks, Qhix." My smile wobbles, grateful yet heartsick over Navik's injuries.

"You would sacrifice your own comfort for him." Qhix quirks a brow at me. "Whether you know it or not, Cora of Earth, you are truly a Kaul's mate."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

NAVIK

I blink open eyes that are hazy to the world around me, swimming in and out of focus. My Kaul body throbs with pain, and I don't immediately recall why. The recent past tickles the edges of my memory before coming into focus.

The Yulineon landing on Yeet and my sivot enduring the dangerous atmosphere to destroy the patroller's ship with the Yulineon inside. I try to sit up, but the agony is overwhelming; my limbs tremble under the weight.

"Easy there," a soft voice says, easing me back onto the padded cot with a gentle hand. I turn my head to see Cora sitting beside me, dark circles marring the delicate flesh under her eyes, evidence of her exhaustion. "You're still healing."

"Wh-where are we?" I manage to croak out, wincing at the soreness of my throat.

"On Qhix's ship in the medical bay," she replies, her voice a soothing balm to my aches. "He just came by to tell me we're almost to Neptus."

"You've been here with me the whole time." It is not a question. Even unconscious, I was aware of her presence. "Thank you," I say, struggling with the words. It's not often I express gratitude, especially to a female, but I can't deny her loyalty as she remained at my side.

Cora brushes tousled ebony locks from her face. “I didn’t want you to wake up alone.”

Warmth blooms within me, filling my heart near to bursting. Aside from awakening my sivot, I don’t know why this little human causes such a reaction in me. Her very presence is intoxicating, shifting something deep within me that has been buried for far too long. Her gaze upon me is a drug I cannot quit.

“Rest,” she says, her voice tinged with concern. “Qhix said the medical cuff works faster to heal you if you’re sleeping.”

“Stay with me?” I ask.

Vulnerability is something I swore to never fall victim to again, yet with her it feels like a haven. A few days ago, I would have called myself weak. Today, I know I am stronger because of her. This tiny human female—my starfire. My mate.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Cora takes a seat on a stool next to my cot.

As I close my eyes, her presence beside me offers a sense of comfort I’ve never known.



THE HUM of the ship’s engines reverberates through my body, pulling me back from the depths of unconsciousness. As my senses return, I become aware of the warm weight of Cora’s hand resting over mine. A simple gesture that constricts my chest.

“Navik,” Cora murmurs, her voice hoarse with exhaustion. “You’re awake.”

I open my eyes to find her still seated on the stool, slumped forward on my cot. Despite her fatigue, she manages a weak smile. It’s clear that she has taken on the role of protector while I’ve been incapacitated.

“How do you feel?” she asks, pushing herself up despite the heaviness of her limbs. “You look fully healed.”

“Groggy, but more like myself, but you look like blinking dund.”

“Such a sweet talker,” she smirks.

I scoot over on the small cot to make room for her. “Come here, starfire. You need proper rest.”

Cora hesitates for a moment, then climbs onto the small cot with me, tucking herself against my side. She sighs in contentment as I stroke her hair, feeling the warmth of her skin against mine as she drifts off to sleep.

The hum of the ship lulls us both into a deep slumber, and I can feel Cora’s body relax against mine as we drift away together.



I WAKE to the winding down of the ship’s engines and know what it means. I sit up slowly, testing my strength before swinging my legs over the edge of the cot and standing. The medical cuff has done its job to heal me fully.

Cora stirs beside me, her eyes fluttering open as she wakes. She stretches her arms above her head with a yawn, then looks up at me with a sleepy smile.

“We have arrived on Neptus.” I frown knowing our time together grows short. Soon, I will have to return her home.

Cora sits up and rubs her eyes before slipping off the cot. Her body brushes against mine as she steps away. I can’t help but notice the curve of her hips and the way the inky blackness of her silky hair tumbles down her back.

I reach out a hand to pull her back with intentions of rolling her beneath me and feeding my cock inside her tight sheath when the med bay door slides open to reveal Qhix. I growl over his insufferable timing.

“What do a Moktian, a Wetokian, and a Yulineon all have in common?” Qhix saunters inside, tossing me new pants and two pair of boots. One pair for me and a smaller pair for Cora.

“You know I hate riddles, Qhix,” I scoff, catching what he tosses.

“They all want your head on a spike.”

“You’re not funny,” I huff. “Shall we list all the enemies you’ve made over the years as a Maverick?”

“Let’s not.” Qhix hikes a thumb at the cleanroom door Cora closes behind her. “Best not to scare the female. You look as good as new. Surprising, considering what your sivot looked like after your trek through Yeet’s acid air.”

“I can imagine.”

“No. You really can’t.” Qhix quirks a frosty-white brow and leans a hip against the counter lining the wall on the opposite side of the room. “Your sivot nearly got you killed.”

“Protecting Cora,” I simply state. “Which is the sole purpose of the sivot transformation.”

“Something that hasn’t occurred with any other Kaul males for as long as any of us can remember.” Qhix narrows eyes on me. “Why do you think it’s happening now and with a female not of our species?”

I scrub my hands down my face wondering the same. “I have no answer.”

“Can I ask what you think triggered your beast to emerge?”

“I had just been shot by an escaping Nomadican and was lying in a puddle of my own blood when Cora came upon me in the exit corridor outside the arena on Onis,” I smirk, recalling how adorably fierce my little starfire looked wielding an electro-rod.

“The same Nomadican who stole your ship?” Qhix sits forward. His cool, blue gaze sparkling with curiosity, and I wish I had kept the misfortunate incident to myself.

“One and the same.” I brush aside Qhix’s interest with a casual swipe of my hand. “Anyway, the little human demanded I fly her away from the prison. The guards were about to enter at one end when the Nomadican used a tritus surge to kill the power, trapping us inside the corridor.

“I can’t explain it, but something came over me knowing the guards would see the warden’s collar around her throat and take her from me. I just remember being swept up in an overwhelming need to protect her and there was no way out except through a solid metalloid door with a dead locking mechanism. Before I knew what was happening, I morphed into my sivot. With a single-minded determination to save her, I shredded the metalloid door with my claws, snatched her up, and flew her off Onis in the Moktian craft I sold to Warden Hyt.”

“When he figures out it was you who stole his property, he will put a bounty on your head.”

“No doubt. Can you imagine the bounty if he knows I have Cora? She was his coveted pet.”

Qhix whistles low. “I imagine you don’t plan on giving her back to Warden Hyt.”

“Blike no!” I growl. “The warden will never so much as lay a finger on her again. She belongs to me!”

Qhix goes still. “How’s that going to work out for you when you return her to Earth?”

I scowl at Qhix who seems to know far too much.

“You knotted her,” he states.

“You know nothing, Qhix!” I hiss, hating that he can see right through me.

“I don’t need to witness the act to see the deed written all over your face, brother,” Qhix retorts dryly. “You’ve mated her in the tradition of the Kaul, and you plan to just let her go?”

“It is not as simple as that, Qhix, and well you know it.” I plow my fingers through matted hair and give it a hard tug. “I will honor the bargain I made and return her to Earth.”

“And when she finds out you’ve claimed her as your mate?” Qhix presses.

“It was not supposed to have happened,” I counter.

“Yet it did,” Qhix says softly. “What if she already carries your offspring?”

“She is human. Our species are not compatible.”

“How sure are you about that, Navik? To my knowledge, no Kaul has ever spilled his mating seed inside a human’s womb.”

The door to the cleanroom glides open and Cora steps out, pausing as she notices the two of us intently watching her.

“Am I interrupting something?” she shares a look between Qhix and I.

“No,” Qhix is quick to answer, pushing off the counter. “Nothing that Navik won’t fill you in on, I’m sure. The hauler is loaded with your share of the Mektian tech and your sack of tellic. I’ll drive you over to your ship. Meet me in the cargo hold when you’re ready to leave.”

“What was that all about?” Cora turns a wary eye on me. “What will you be filling me in on?”

“We can talk on the way to Etto,” I dodge her questions and hand her a pair of boots, hating that ill-fitting garments are all I have to offer her. I’m richer than I’ve ever been in my life. My starfire shouldn’t be wearing rags but garbed in the finest silks tellic can buy. “Qhix brought you these. I need a turn in the purifier before we leave.”

Without waiting for her response, I step into the cleanroom and shed what’s left of my clothing after the exposure to the acid air. I catch sight of myself in the reflection panel over the wall basin and curse my sivot. My hair, once cut to the center of my back, is singed in matted tufts that brush my shoulders, the medical cuff only having regrown some of the length while it healed my body.

Vanity had never been important to me until Cora. I was no longer the same male who had stepped onto Onis, but a

changed version of myself. One that longed for her approval.

*Which is a ridiculous waste of time!*

My sivot stirs in disagreement. What used to hold the greatest importance is insignificant compared to the female I've chosen to mate. The Universe remains the same, it is me that is different. Where I was once certain of the path my life was taking now I see an uncertain future when it comes to Cora.

Yet I have to remind myself there is no future with Cora. She will not change her mind about returning to her world. Knotted or not, she cannot be a Kaul's mate. My mate. She is a human and belongs with her people, not flying around the Universe with a Star Maverick.

I step into the purifier and crank the handle a little too hard. The machine screeches and whines from my abuse before warm mist shoots out in a cleansing cloud, but I don't linger. My time inside the pod is quick and efficient before toweling off and donning the pant's and boots Qhix left for me.

Once I'm done, Cora and I leave the med bay and make our way to the cargo hold where Qhix is waiting for us at the hauler.

"Ready?" Qhix tosses me the sack of tellic. "It's all there."

"I know." And I do without looking inside. Qhix might be a marauder, but he is a fellow Star Maverick who swore an oath to the brotherhood, to each other. Mavericks never betrayed the other. Even with my trust issue, I knew Qhix would never steal from me.

I open the sack and pull out a handful of tellic. "For your trouble."

Qhix's eyebrows shoot to his hairline. "I can't take that, Navik. It's too much. You have already given me payment in the form of Mektian tech."

I take a step forward and stuff the tellic inside one of Qhix's many pockets. "Without the medical cuff, I would still be healing or dead. I owe you my life."

“You owe me nothing,” Qhix says, “but I thank you for the tellic.”

I nod my head as Qhix opens the hauler door and climbs into the driver’s seat.

I help Cora into the passenger seat next to Qhix and take a seat in the back with my share of the Moktian tech from my stripped down ship.

Qhix drops the ramp and drives us out of the cargo hold and onto the surface of Neptus. It’s a barren world with powdery dirt coating the ground like dust. The sky is an ashy gray, heavy with dark clouds that never seem to break. Illuminated by two suns, one red and one blue, it bathes the desolate landscape in an eerie hue.

Qhix navigates around an obstacle of boulders, and I spot my spacecraft in the distance. I’m relieved to find that it is still right where I left it. Neptus isn’t known for many visitors, but the ones that do stop here are as unscrupulous as I am.

We come to a halt just in front of my ship and I disembark. “Give me a minute to drop the ramp to the cargo hold.”

The atmosphere on Neptus is hospitable, letting me breathe without the use of a respirator or encapsulation suit. I walk around to the side of my spacecraft and enter a code into the keypad. The retinal scanner above it blinks green as I press my eye against it, and with a loud thunk, the ramp locks disengage.

I wave to Qhix who drives the hauler closer. The conveyance won’t fit inside my smaller craft, so Qhix and I will have to off load my loot from here.

Cora takes tentative steps out of the hauler and onto the arid terrain, her face pinched in worry as she peers around. I move to stand with her.

“Would you rather wait inside the ship while Qhix and I empty the hauler?”

She surprises me when she slips her hand in mine. “No. It’s just strange to be standing out in the open on another world.”

My starfire seeks my comfort and protection. The simple gesture sends a shiver of excitement through me that must be ignored. Part of me wants to surrender to this newfound connection, yet I fear the consequences of allowing her to get too close.

Qhix's question lingers in my mind. What will I do when I return her home? If I allow her into my heart, will I have the strength to let her go?



## CORA

Navik's ship is a sleek, shiny black conveyance, gleaming like a dark gem in the weird light cast by two suns. I keep out of the way, but don't wander far as Navik and Qhix unload the hauler.

At the front is a large dome made from some kind of shiny material I know isn't glass. It's tinted so dark, I can't see inside.

Along the sides are several portholes that glow with a soft blue light, and four circular pipes are attached to the back. The whole thing looks powerful and mysterious, a machine capable of flying me anywhere in the Universe.

Flying me home.

I tilt my head back and peer up into the cloudy sky. Earth is out there somewhere, and soon I will be on my way there.

Navik's deep baritone draws my attention. I look back over my shoulder to watch him carry a boxy piece of equipment inside the hold of his ship.

He risked his life to save mine. How can I ask him to do it again?

His head turns as he walks up the ramp. His icy gaze locks with mine. My insides flutter and I'm afraid it's more than just

gratitude that turns my knees to jelly. For a brief, fanciful moment, I wonder what it would be like to be his mate.

Qhix had said I was truly a Kaul's mate by refusing to leave Navik's side. Despite our rocky beginnings, it just felt wrong to be away from him, especially while he was hurt. What if he had woken up and needed me?

Navik's eyes hold a certain intensity that sends my heart racing, but I know it's foolish to entertain such thoughts. We come from different worlds. Though I haven't had the chance to reaffirm our bargain, we will soon part ways. Call me a fool, but I don't believe Navik will renege on his end.

Navik disappears into the hold, and I'm left standing alone, wondering why I'm so drawn to him. Is it the danger he exudes or the way he saved me from certain death? I shake my head, attempting to clear the thoughts from my mind.

Soon enough, they've transferred the contents of the hauler into Navik's ship and it's time to say goodbye to Qhix.

"Until again, brother," Qhix slaps a fist over his heart.

"Until again, Qhix." Navik mimics Qhix's farewell.

"Thanks for everything, Qhix." I pat my pocket where I've stashed the beacon he gave me and jut out my hand. When Qhix simply eyes it, perplexed, I explain, "It's called a handshake."

Qhix glances at Navik first before clasping my hand in his much larger, blue one.

"Until again, Cora of Earth." Qhix releases me and steps back. "Safe travels to you both."

With a final wave, Qhix boards the hauler and returns to his ship. Navik turns and places his palm on the hull where a light sweeps across it.

Navik leads me up the ramp, through the ship, and to the cockpit, guiding me with a warm palm pressed to the small of my back, his familiar touch sending tingles over my skin.

I can't help the feel of excitement thrumming through me when I see the cockpit for the first time. This is a side of Navik

I've never seen before, his ship a representation of the life he leads as a Star Maverick. The notorious space pirate, Navik T'Jarik, I heard the warden talk so much about, and here I am aboard his vessel that's, no doubt, stolen.

He guides me to a seat at the console that spans the entire front of the ship. It's filled with buttons, switches, and screens, all displaying information I can't begin to comprehend. The walls are lined with a variety of controls and monitors, like something from a science fiction movie.

Just like the Moktian vessel, there are seats bolted to the floor. Only this craft has two instead of three.

The front window I saw tinted from the outside offers a panoramic view of Neptus. There's not much to see except for Qhix's boxy ship parked off in the distance. The ground is covered in a thick layer of powdery dirt, the sky is more gray than blue that's almost oppressive. There's no sign of life or vegetation, just an eerie stillness that hangs in the air like a thick fog.

We take our seats and watch Qhix drive the hauler into his vessel before he leaves the ground. His engines roar as the boxy craft rises from Neptus's surface. The ship is quickly swallowed up by a cloud of dust and debris, obscuring it from view. A few moments later, the engines fire again and Qhix's vessel shoots off into space.

Navik's fingers move over the controls with deft expertise. "Ready to visit your first space port?"

"Yes." I settle back into the seat beside him, feeling a rush of excitement at the prospect of exploring a new world with him there to protect me.

The ship hums as we rise slowly into the air. We hover for a moment, then the ship accelerates. The force of the takeoff pushes me back into my seat as we leave Neptus. The planets in the solar system glimmer in the light from the two suns, some with rings of dust and debris surrounding them. Once we travel farther out into the galaxy, the stars seem so bright and close, it's like I could reach out and touch them.

Navik brings up a holographic map filled with hundreds of galaxies. The shifting colors cast an otherworldly glow across his glossy, blue face.

“This is us.” Navik traces a line from our current location to a spiraling blue and white galaxy. “We should reach the space port on Etto in a few hours.”

It’s hard for me to comprehend how it’s possible to travel from one galaxy to another in a matter of hours. What’s ordinary for Navik is nothing short of miraculous to me.

I lean forward, studying all the swirling galaxies. “Where’s Earth in all this?”

Navik touches his fingers to the map, sweeping through the expanse of the Universe until he reaches the Milky Way.

“Here.” He points to a galaxy with a spiral of stars resembling a pinwheel. It looks just like the depictions I’ve seen before.

“That’s a long way from where we are,” I gulp.

“Not if you have tellic to hyper-jump,” Navik says. “From our current location, I can have you there in seconds.”

“And Onis. Where is that?”

Navik moves the map again with quick flicks of his finger. “Here.” He points to a galaxy on the edge of the map.

“Why does the map end?”

“That’s the edge of the known Universe. Nothing has been charted past this point.”

“Why not?”

Navik shrugs heavy shoulders. “Don’t know. Maybe because the next galaxy we can detect is so far from the last ones charted, no one is brave enough to venture out that far into the unknown.”

We travel in silence, my mind roaming around Navik’s words. We are insignificant compared to how immense the Universe is. I had seen all manner of bizarre creatures on Onis

before I was locked up like a prized pet, and yet there is still so much out there waiting to be explored.

“How did you manage to escape Warden Hyt?” Navik asks as if he knew where my thoughts had wandered.

“Opportunity,” I answer, keeping my gaze on the map. “When the prison break happened, Warden Hyt and the guards were too distracted to pay attention to me. The warden accidentally left my cage unlocked, and I used the chaos to my advantage.”

“Sounds like you owe Ruze and the Berserker some gratitude,” Navik says with a smirk.

“I know of the Berserker, but who is Ruze?”

“The Nomadican bliker that shot me in the chest and stole one of my Moktian ships,” Navik grumbles. “Ruze and the Valosian warrior Warden Hyt deemed the Berserker, somehow broke out and decided to free all the females used as prizes for the winners of the arena.”

“I’m glad those poor girls were saved. It isn’t right to enslave people.”

Navik’s eyes flicker with a hint of something I can’t quite read. “No, it isn’t right,” he agrees with a heavy grumble. “But unfortunately, that’s how things are in the Universe. The strong prey on the weak, and those in power abuse it for their own gain.”

“Not much different from Earth,” I mumble, thinking of the corrupt politicians back home.

“How long were you held on Onis?”

“A few years, I think.” I rub a weary hand across my forehead. “It could have been worse. I could have been given to the prisoners and used like the other girls.”

Navik’s low growl startles me. “Warden Hyt will never touch you again.”

“Thanks to you.”

Navik nods curtly, shifting in his seat as if uncomfortable with my gratitude.

“Qhix said you were going to catch me up on something.” I look at Navik. “What was it?”

I can see his mind mulling something over. His wheels are spinning, but his mouth is tightly sealed. I’m not given time to wonder what it is he doesn’t want to tell me before the ship’s sensors beep out an alert. Navik taps on a screen to show the ship that follows.

“A Yulineon patroller has its weapons systems locked on us.” Navik’s hands fly over the controls. “Strap in, we’re going to hyper-jump and try to lose him.”

The ship’s engines power up as Navik activates the hyper-jump. No sooner do I get my seat strap buckled than my stomach drops as we’re flung through space. Everything around me is a blur of color, like being shot through a kaleidoscope. The stars become streaks of color against the blackness of space, and the ship vibrates and hums with power. My heart pounds in my chest as I feel the force of acceleration pushing me back in my seat.

The journey is over before it starts, and the ship slows just outside a different galaxy. I gasp for air, feeling like I’ve run a marathon. Navik’s face is tense as he checks the sensors. The Yulineon patroller is nowhere to be seen.

“That was close,” I breathe out in relief.

But our victory is short-lived as the ship’s sensors beep again. Navik curses as he brings up the view screen to reveal the Yulineon patroller who followed us and is closing in on us fast.

“Bliking dund!” Navik’s hands fly over the console as I sit by helpless to do anything. “Let’s see how good a pilot he thinks he is.”

My heart pounds in my throat as Navik makes evasive maneuvers through the galaxy, expertly weaving and bobbing to avoid the Yulineon’s fire. The Yulineon is not easily dissuaded, staying hot on our tail, relentless in his pursuit.

We dip and dive, zipping around moons and planets. Navik's hands move with lightning speed over the console, his face etched with concentration. Tension thickens the air with fear of what will happen if the Yulineon catches us.

The Yulineon's laser fire sears past us, melting the surface of an asteroid that we narrowly missed.

"Bliker!" Navik curses under his breath, swerving to dodge another volley of lasers. "He won't follow us in here."

"Navik?" I shrink in my seat as an asteroid field rushes up to greet us.

"Get ready," he warns, flicking several switches on the console. "This might get rough."

"Are you sure about this?" My voice is high-pitched with fear.

"Never been more certain," Navik replies through gritted teeth and takes us in. "I'm an expert at navigating through these fields."

Navik skillfully steers us through the spinning rocks, evading the massive space boulders that hurtle toward us. The Yulineon stays right with us, shooting his lasers every chance he gets.

But then Navik makes a daring move, banking left before slowing and whipping the ship up to circle back around just in time for the Yulineon's vessel to fly into an asteroid and explode upon impact. We are safe for now. The immediate threat eliminated.

Navik takes us out of harm's way and into empty space just as his comm pings.

Qhix's voice fills the cockpit. "You've just become more popular. Warden Hyt has set a bounty for your head, and is offering a bonus for the return of his treasured pet."

"We just dodged a Yulineon."

"Word gets around fast when that much tellic is promised. You need to lay low. Let me contact the other Mavericks and see what we can do to figure you a way out of this."

“The only way out is to kill Warden Hyt,” Navik sneers.  
“No warden, no bounty.”

“If it were only that simple,” Qhix says.

“Maybe it is.” Navik’s brow creases into a serious line.  
“What’s the amount he’s placed on my head?”

“Forty pieces of tellic.”

“That’s all?” Navik scoffs. “I’ll pay fifty to the male that brings me Warden Hyt’s head on a pike.”

The comm goes silent, then Qhix breathes out in disbelief,  
“Fifty?”

“Fifty,” Navik repeats sharply.

“I’ll put the word out,” Qhix says. “Warden Hyt will be dead before he even knows there’s a bounty on his head. You need to lay low until it’s done. Take Cora someplace safe.”

“Already have a destination in mind.”

## CHAPTER NINE

NAVIK

I ‘ve never brought anyone to my home on Zeva, much less a female. They are for fleeting pleasure and nothing more.

I’d done hard time, and with a female comes nagging and complaining, which is a prison I am not willing to enter. Yet here I am, about to fly one to my home.

I’ve always kept my hideaway secret even from my fellow Star Mavericks. Though we have all vowed allegiance to each other, I prefer absolute solitude.

Until Cora.

Maybe I’m a fool, or maybe the fool is my sivot, but there is something about my starfire that makes me want to share everything with her, including my home. Whatever my affliction, I want to show her this special place I discovered long ago, and it’s the only place in the Universe where I know she will be safe.

“Are you ready for another jaunt through an asteroid field?” I lift a quizzical brow at Cora.

“Um, no, not really. Why?”

I set coordinates for the Ridox Galaxy where Zeva is nestled, check the tellic levels inside the fuel reservoir and hover my finger over the hyper-drive. “All strapped in?”

Cora's gaze lingers on me while she tugs at the straps holding her in the seat. "I'm good, but I'm not sure if I'm ready for another harrowing flight through—"

Her words are cut off the moment my finger engages the hyper-drive. The stars blur and streak across the viewport as we shoot through space with a force that knocks us back in our seats. The stars outside the window blur together, making it seem like we're inside a tunnel streaked with light.

We zip past planets, star clusters and asteroids as they race by in a blur, my Bioti Nebula Slayer navigating through them with ease. Cora's grip tightens on her seat as she looks at the passing objects outside the viewport with a mix of awe and fear.

After a few seconds, we reach our destination and come out of the hyper-jump directly in front of the asteroid field that keeps the planet I call home out of reach. Most aren't brazen enough to risk flying through unpredictable space debris to reach a star system with nothing of value worth losing your life over.

I'm particularly talented at maneuvering through unpredictable obstacles, a critical skill when it comes to my chosen vocation and avoiding capture. I glance over at Cora, who seems to have regained her composure after our wild ride.

I expertly navigate my ship through the field, dodging and weaving around the floating rocks that could damage my ship beyond repair or destroy us completely. I easily make it through and set a course for Zeva.

As my ship draws nearer to the solar system, I gaze upon the enchanting sight. Before me, Zeva is a resplendent gem amid an ebony tapestry of stars. We fly toward the planet, and my muscles tense, every nerve ending tingling with impatience to breathe the sweet air. Even the soles of my feet ache to be planted on familiar soil. It seems as if an eternity has passed since last I was home.

As we descend toward the planet's surface, details of the landscape become more clear, lush green forests, crystal blue lakes, and majestic waterfalls spill that from every mountain

peak. An unspoiled beauty unmarred by the progress of species. A paradise untouched by people, preserved in time, forgotten by the Universe.

I take a deep breath and let the beauty of Zeva wash over me. Peace is to be found here, knowing that no one will ever find us. Not even Qhix knows about this place.

I start my descent, flying lower and lower until I reach a ravine hidden within the lush vegetation of the landscape. I lower the ship inside, and the sight that greets us is breathtaking. A waterfall cascades down the side of a cliff, creating a small lake at its base. Trees surround us on all sides, providing shelter from prying eyes.

Once we've landed, I spend a moment to taking in the beauty of the ravine through the viewport before I shut down the ship. Cora is already unstrapping from her seat as I power down the engines.

Her eyes sparkle as she declares, "Now this is a planet worth looking at."

We stand together as I open the hatch. Sweet, sultry air wafts inside. The musical thunder of the waterfall, provides a soothing serenade.

Cora steps out of the ship first, as if beckoned by the stunning scenery. Her eyes widen as she peers around, taking in the beauty of my hidden oasis.

"This place is too beautiful to be real," she whispers.

"My home is this way." I reach out a hand and she lay her much smaller one in mine. I stare at where we're chastely joined and swallow through the knot forming in my throat. The barricade I erected around myself all those years ago is cracking, and I'm not sure if I'm ready for it to crumble to dust.

There's no stopping the fissures already formed from growing larger. Cora's hand is warm in mine, and I can feel her pulse thrumming against my flesh.

I've never been one to fear anything. I've faced many an enemy with no hesitation or trepidation, fought and won

against the most formidable foes, yet this tiny human has the power to bring me to my knees with a single look.

Together, we make our way through the dense foliage, following a path only I know. The trees are thick and tall, diffusing the sunlight to a soft glow. The ground is wet from a recent rainfall, and birdsong can be heard all around us.

I push aside thick vines laden with huge leaves, exposing what appears to be solid rock. I reach into a crevice and trigger the rock to shift aside, revealing a hidden door, then pull out a small device and attach it to the wall. A few moments later, the door slides open, revealing a staircase leading down into darkness.

Palming a solaris rock left at the entrance to light our way, clutching Cora's hand, we descend into the depths of my home using winding stairs hewn from solid rock. The door glides soundlessly closed behind us.

"It took me a week to cut these steps with a laser," I tell her.

She holds tightly to my hand. "How far down does this go?"

"About thirty feet."

"So, you live in a hole in the ground?" I hear her gulp from where she follows close behind me.

"No," I smirk. "Just wait and I'll show you."

As we walk, the soft glow of the solaris rocks embedded in the walls illuminates our path. The air grows cooler, and the sound of our footsteps echoes off the stone walls.

We reach the bottom of the staircase and come to a solid metalloid slab. It would take days and a high velocity laser cannon to cut through the thick material if my passage were ever found. I slip my hand into a crevice where I hid the locking mechanism and press my hand against the scanner. The door slides open with a soft hiss.

We step inside and are greeted by a generously sized room filled with artifacts from all corners of the Universe. A space

pirate's booty of ancient weapons, gadgets, and other mysterious objects line the walls, each with its own story to tell of how I acquired them.

Scattered throughout are oversized couches and chairs that look far too comfortable to want to leave. Situated in the center is a ring of hot stones; always cool to the touch, they corral a pile of thermal rocks I collected from Hadis 5. Each one glowing a different hue, the stones give off a never-ending radiance, chasing away the dampness of my rocky abode.

I touch a panel, bringing up the lights, bathing the room in a soft blue glow. Cora's eyes widen in amazement as she takes in the sights before her.

"This is incredible," she utters. My pride swells with the wonder in her voice.

I smile and lead her farther into the room. She brushes curious fingertips along the backs of the plush furnishings as we pass through, sighing softly over the thick, luxurious fabrics of deep blues, greens, and purples.

The walls are decorated with colorful tapestries depicting scenes from various cultures across the Universe. I point out a few of my favorites, regaling her with stories of the people and the events they depict. Some are so intricately detailed, the weave so fine, it's almost as if they come to life right before our eyes.

We move on to the bedroom, my cock twitching with anticipation to ravish her in the center of the sumptuous blankets of velvety furs.

"So pretty," Cora enters the room to run the flat of her palm over the rich, blue furs piled high on the bed.

"The sheets are Arian silk, and the bed frame has been carved from a single piece of exotic wood from the sacred forest on Reki," I add, entertaining the need to impress her.

I sweep past the cleanroom with a push of the door and a mention of what's inside on the way to the galley.

"Is that fresh meat in there?" Cora stops to peer inside the praksis, a clear case set into the row of cabinets.

“Yes. A jokot I hunted the last time I was here...” my words trail off as I ponder on when exactly that was. “Maybe a year ago.”

“A year! How is the meat still fresh after all that time?”

“The praksis works the same as a stasis pod. It keeps whatever you place inside in suspended animation until you’re ready to use it.”

“Forever?” Her face glows with an expression of pure amazement that stirs something deep within me I never knew existed. My heart flutters and my sivot swirls contently just below the surface.

Mundane things I take for granted are fascinating to her, everything so new to her human eyes. And there is so much I can’t wait to show her.

“Nothing is forever, starfire, but meat can remain in stasis for several hundred years.”

“That’s a long damn time to keep a roast in the fridge.”

“The fridge?” I tilt my head.

“Refrigerator,” she clarifies. “An appliance on Earth for keeping food fresh, though for only a few days.”

“If you think the praksis is impressive, just wait until you see this.” I tug her hand to get her moving. “I saved the best for last.”

Back out in the main living area, I slide my finger across a control panel embedded in the rock wall. A section of what appears to be solid stone dematerializes. Cora’s gasp is enough to bring a wide smile to my face—exactly the reaction I was hoping for.

Filled with crystal-clear water, a natural pool is revealed. Fed by rivulets running down the rock face, the water glints off the cave’s ceiling high above, shimmering and dancing in a hypnotically reflective pattern.

Beyond the pool is a sky-high view of the terrain. Nothing but pristine, lush vegetation for as far as the eye can see stretches out before us.

Unspoiled, thriving flora hugs the verdant terrain tightly, swaying and rustling softly in the balmy breeze. An endless expanse of unbridled beauty, it is hard not to feel humbled by its magnitude. A melody of chirping birds and buzzing insects floats around us as we stand there, enraptured by the serenity of the moment, basking in awe at the grandeur laid out before us.

I lead Cora out onto the smooth rock terrace jutting from the natural entrance I blocked using a molecular reconstructurizer to appear as solid rock in the side of my mountain. Situated to one side is a seating area complete with a smokeless fire pit.

“We’re so high up.” Cora inches closer to the edge. “You don’t live in a hole in the ground at all, but a mountainside cave.” She then quickly steps back to my side. “Is it safe to walk around up here?”

“Perfectly.” I wink at her and stroll to the edge of the terrace where I glide my fingers over the transparent shielding, glitching the clear barricade in a ripple of distortion. “Transthermal netting. Let’s in smaller particles like air, that’s why we can feel the breeze, but keeps heavier things, like us, inside.”

Cora cautiously steps forward, her eyes wide with curiosity as she inspects the netting. I guide her hand to the transparent surface until I feel the resistance of the net. She smooths her palm over it, causing the barricade to shimmer, giving away it’s tightly woven texture in sparkles of light.

“That’s so cool.” She pulls her hand away, watching as the netting resumes its invisible state.

“You could never fall, even if you took a running leap into it. The net would catch you.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” she raises a perfectly arched, ebony brow at me before wandering toward the pool. “Is it safe to swim?”

“Of course.” Without another word, I walk to the pool edge and strip. Diving in, I swim to the center then turn and

curl my fingers to beckon her into the water. “Come on in, starfire. It’s perfectly safe. Plus, there’s something else I want to show you.”

Her face heats with color. “I already saw your something.”

I chuckle, the sound strange to my ears, and I can’t recall the last time I heard it. “Not my cock, silly female. I’ll be showing you that later. What I want to show you is over there.” I point toward the arched opening leading out of the cave and beyond.

Cora hesitates for a moment, but then slowly begins to shed her clothes. My eyes feast on her curves as she steps into the pool. I meet her in the middle, and together, we swim to the lip as the sun is slowly sinking in the sky, painting Zeva in an array of warm golds and purples.

We reach the lip of the pool and Cora’s eyes widen in wonder as she follows the point of my finger. Over the edge, a crystal cascade gently spills, creating an elegant torrent of liquid stars that pours into a network of shallow pools dotted all the way down the mountainside.

All around us, the setting sun casts its gentle golden rays, bathing the lush valley in a warm and inviting glow. Jagged peaks of the mountain ranges surrounding the valley cut across the horizon like the teeth on a serrated blade until the last rays disappear over the tallest peak.

“How did you ever find this magical oasis?” Her breathless utter floats away on the breeze as soon as the words leave her lips. Had I not been studying her profile in the waning light, I might not have known she’d spoken.

“Purely by accident.” I tell her the story of how I was being chased by Bioti after stealing my current ship. I had flown through the asteroid field, knowing I could lose them in the whirling debris. “There aren’t many who are brazen enough to fly into danger.”

“I can believe that,” she grins.

“Once I lost the Bioti, I needed a place to lay low for a few days and stumbled upon this solar system and found Zeva to

be habitable. It's charted as a world with no higher lifeforms and no viable resources worth mentioning."

"You're kidding? The whole planet is a valuable resource. It would make for the perfect lover's retreat." Cora sweeps her hands through the air. "You could make more of these cave houses with pools and rent them out."

I give my head a firm shake. "Solitude is what drew me here and kept me returning. I found this cave on one of my hikes and closed it off in the unlikelihood of intruders and made it my home."

"Don't you get lonely on a planet all by yourself?" she asks, her gaze shadowed with a hint of sadness.

"All Mavericks are solitary." My lips curl in a repentant grin, knowing that after I return her to Earth, I will know loneliness for the first time.

"Really? Why?"

"Given our vocation, it's safer for us to remain apart rather than to be gathered in one place in case one of us is found. No need to get everyone killed at once. We are all wanted males, constantly hunted for our various crimes. Some worse than others," I say, my sivot half stirring anxiously over the mere thought of being parted from her. "Are you hungry?"

"A little."

"Stay and swim while I prepare the last meal of the day." I recoil from the emotional turmoil she causes within me by retreating to the opposite side of the pool.

Qhix's comment bangs around inside my skull. What will I do once I fly her to Earth? Can I simply let her go? It isn't in a Kaul's nature to be separated from his mate. Kauls mate with only one female over the course of a lifetime, and once knotted and mating seed is spilled inside the womb of a chosen female, it means forever.

I heft myself out of the water, grab a towel from the basket, wrap it loosely around my hips on my way to the purifier, and contemplate just how bliked I am.



## CORA

The water envelops me, cool and inviting, as I glide through the pool's depths. It's so clear, I can see the smooth rock bottom. The pool is a natural formation fed by trickling water that glides down the sheer rock wall from an unseen source somewhere inside the mountain. The sensation of weightlessness tugs at my heartstrings, reminding me of days long gone when I was home on Earth. I can't help but smile as I come up for air.

The pool is sublime, as if it was meticulously hewn out of the mountainside. I swim to the edge and look out over the forested land below. A thin cascade of crystal-clear water pours over the side, flowing into a series of pools along its descent until it reaches the bottom.

I pull deeply of the sweet air, admiring the setting sun leaving a vibrant palette of oranges, pinks, and purples in its wake. A flock of colorful birds soars across the horizon, their tiny wings flapping in unison. In the far distance, several planets can be seen twinkling in the darkening sky.

Zeva is the most beautiful place I've ever seen in my life. I swallow back the guilt that threatens to drown me. Guilt over asking Navik to risk his life again to take me home, and guilt over the temptation to ask him if I can stay.

What a conundrum I've found myself in. If I stay on Zeva with Navik, that would mean I would never see my mom again, but it would also mean Navik would remain safe.

"Is the pool to your liking, starfire?" Navik's voice floats over from where he's cooking us a meal over a smokeless fire pit in the center of a rock ledge the size of a large patio. He peers over one mighty shoulder, his muscular back turned toward me.

“It’s amazing,” I reply, pushing wet strands of hair from my face. My body is alive with newfound freedom, an emotion that has been scarce since my abduction from Earth. “Thanks for bringing me here, Navik.”

In true Navik fashion, he simply grunts and goes back to cooking.

The moment feels surreal. I should pinch myself to see if I’m dreaming, but if I am, I don’t want to wake up. Me taking a dip in the pool and Navik barbecuing over an open flame, it’s all so—*normal*.

The irony of my present situation isn’t lost on me; finding solace in this cave-like dwelling after being imprisoned in the underground caves on Onis. But Navik’s home opens up to the outside while nestled within Zeva’s craggy mountains, offering a sanctuary I hadn’t expected.

As I swim, my thoughts drift to the harsh Universe just beyond the darkening sky overhead, where it feels like everyone out there wants to use me, kill me, or both.

I dive under again, seeking refuge in the water’s healing embrace. It’s as if each stroke washes away another layer of my horrifying captivity. I’m immensely thankful to Navik for giving me this moment of reprieve.

“Food’s almost ready,” Navik calls out. “If you want to use the purifier, the time is now.”

I make my way to the pool’s edge, reluctant to leave its soothing depths.

“Got a towel?” I ask, hoisting myself out of the water.

Navik leaves the fire pit and approaches as I stand before him shivering, aware of his gaze lingering on my dripping form. It’s impossible to ignore the slow burn of desire that seems to always be simmering between us.

“Here,” Navik grunts, handing me a towel he plucked from a basket set against the wall. Our fingers brush briefly as I take it from him, an electric current passing between us. I quickly wrap the towel around myself, shielding my body from his intense scrutiny.

“Thanks.” The word comes out as a raspy whisper, heavy with unspoken emotions. “I’ll only be a minute.”

“I left some fabrics inside the cleanroom,” Navik calls after me. “Maybe you can fashion a garment until I can get you proper clothes.”

“Okay, thanks,” I call back, passing through the main area Navik has set up like a living room with large, comfy chairs and tables. I’m looking forward to lounging about while taking in the view of the forest beyond the faux wall separating Navik’s cave from the outdoors.

I step inside the cleanroom and pause. Sitting on the floor is a huge basket filled with luxurious fabrics in shades of midnight blue, amethyst, and obsidian. My fingers itch to touch the silky material, to wrap myself in its softness.

I pluck a piece of midnight blue material from the top of the stack, admiring the way it shimmers in the soft light of the solaris rocks embedded in the walls. The fabric is finely woven, with a soft, elegant design that catches the light like a prism. I trace my fingers along the intricate pattern, feeling its silken texture. It’s unlike any material I’ve ever touched before.

It’s a large piece and my mind races with how I can best drape it around my body to make a dress as I drop my towel and step into the purifier. I close the door to the upright pod and crank the handle. Immediately, I’m enveloped by a cloud of warm steam.

I sigh as tense muscles relax, the purifier working its magic as it cleanses and rejuvenates my weary body. The pod hums softly around me, a soothing symphony of alien technology that lulls me into a state of tranquility.

Sadly, this moment can’t last forever, so I shut off the purifier and towel off. Dinner will be ready soon and I don’t want to keep Navik waiting.

And I have a big decision to make. Should I stay here to keep Navik from risking his life again and never be reunited

with my mom, or return home and hope he isn't killed in the process?

I shake out the elegant fabric, feeling a deep sense of contentment as I drape it around my body. It molds itself to my curves as I arrange it in a toga style. The fabric feels expensive and cool against my skin, a soothing balm to the rawness of my emotions. For a moment, I allow myself to revel in the luxury of peace, entertaining the idea of this being my home.

Navik is waiting for me on the patio where he cooked our meal. A table is set up for two and Navik is just setting out plates of food when I'm struck with a bout of nerves.

He notices me and stops to stare. His icy gaze touches me from the top of my head to my toes peeking out under the silky fabric of my makeshift garment. I fidget under the intensity of his stare and wonder what he is thinking.

He doesn't say anything for a long moment, just keeps his eyes locked with mine. Finally, he speaks. "That fabric suits you well, starfire."

I feel my cheeks flush at his compliment. "Thank you," I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

Why does this feel so much like a first date?

"Sit," Navik gently commands, gesturing toward the table.

I walk over and take a seat, my eyes glued to Navik's face. He looks different in the waning sun and warm light from the fire pit. His normally harsh features softened by the flickering flames.

His hair is still damp from his turn in the purifier, the ends sweeping across his massive shoulders. Always bare chested, his muscles flex and roll with his every movement. Sculpted from granite, his body is a work of art, and I can't stop myself from admiring every inch of him.

Navik is a Kaul of few words, but his actions speak volumes. I can tell by the way he looks at me, the way he touches me, that he wants me just as badly as I want him.

He's changed clothes, wearing loose fitting pants in a soft white that hang low around his tight waist and billow around his thick thighs. Buttery leather shoes adorn his feet, reminding me of expensive slippers. He looks comfortable and at home in his mountainside oasis.

The tantalizing aroma of cooked meat and exotic vegetables fills the air, making my stomach growl in anticipation.

As we eat, I try to focus on the flavors bursting on my tongue, but my thoughts are consumed by the man, er... male sitting across from me. The marauder who had once viewed me as nothing more than an object for pleasure. And yet, against all odds, our turbulent relationship has evolved into something infinitely more complex and intimate.

We eat in companionable silence for a while; the warmth of the fire pit flickers against my skin, making the silky material wrapped around me dance with every lick of flame. As we share the meal he has prepared, I can't help but notice how the charred ends of his hair catch the firelight, a stark reminder of the dangers waiting for us beyond the safety of Zeva.

"Navik," I say, reaching across the table to touch the singed ends of his hair. "You should let me trim away these burned ends."

His gaze holds mine. "You can do anything you wish with me, starfire."

My cheeks flush at the force of his icy stare. I withdraw my hand, a flurry of butterflies flutter inside my belly. Navik's presence is intoxicating, keeping me in a state of perpetual anticipation. I feel like I'm standing on the edge of a precipice, ready to take the plunge into some unknown abyss.

Every moment we spend together is filled with such passion and emotion that it's hard to catch my breath. The air between us crackles with electricity, and I can feel my pulse quickening in response to his proximity. I wonder if he feels it too.

We finish our meal and clear the table. I follow him to the galley kitchen in the back of the main living area.

The kitchen is a marvel of alien technology, with appliances that I can barely comprehend. The walls are lined with sleek, metallic cabinetry that seems to shimmer in the soft light of the solaris rocks. There are no knobs or handles on any of the appliances. Instead, they all respond to voice commands and gestures. Navik demonstrates how to use the Earth equivalent of a dishwasher. Together, we load our dirty dishes inside and Navik commands it to wash.

I follow him back outside to the patio where he hands me a wicked looking knife I wasn't aware he had tucked inside his waistband.

"Are you always armed?" I take the knife with raised eyebrows.

"Yes," Navik states flatly and takes a seat with his back to me.

"After I shocked you with an electrifying stick, you trust me with a knife at your back?"

"You earned my trust and my gratitude after you remained at my side while I healed from my injuries." Navik's words shock me. "You could have ended me while I lay incapacitated."

"I would never do anything to hurt you, Navik." The resolution to my conundrum made all too clear in a single sentence.

"I know, starfire. You are not *her*."

I stand behind him, curiosity clawing at me about the female in his past that hurt him, and begin to trim the ends of his hair, careful not to cut too much. His hair is soft and thick, like silk in my hands. I take my time cutting away the burned ends, loving the feel of his hair between my fingers. As I cut, Navik leans back into my touch, and I can feel the tension in his body begin to melt away.

Then he surprises me by opening up about the one thing I never thought he'd share with me.

“I fancied myself in love with her. *Veeda*,” he seethes through gritted teeth. “One among the strongest and most fearsome of Kaul’s female warriors. She would never have sat vigilant at my bedside like you did. I was a fool to have ever freely given her my trust. I had many a moon to ponder my folly and swore to never allow it to happen again.”

I’m quickly captivated by the story Navik recounts. It was a daring plot, conceived by *Veeda*, that involved the theft of a sacred artifact of immense value from the Kaul temple, the figurine an offering to their gods. She had used Navik’s trusting and guileless nature in order to pin him for her crime. As I listen to Navik weave his tale, it feels as though the air between us is growing thicker and darker.

“I spent fifty years imprisoned for a crime I didn’t commit, and all because of misplaced trust,” he concludes with a long, weary sigh.

“Fifty years! How old are you, Navik?”

“Seventy-six,” he says. “Still in my prime.”

“For a Kaul maybe,” I puff. “For a human at that age, I would be an old lady. So how long do Kaul’s live?”

“On average, two hundred years.”

“I’m in my late twenties.” I try not to dwell on the time stolen from me. It only leaves me morose. “Not really sure how many birthdays I’ve missed.”

Finished with his haircut, I hand Navik back his knife, my gaze roaming over Navik’s freshly trimmed hair. It’s a lot shorter than when I first met him on Onis, having burned off in the acid air on Yeet. As the medical cuff healed his body, so did it increase the speed at which his hair grew.

Now that I’ve clipped off the singed edges, it barely brushes the tops of his muscular shoulders. I come around to stand before him, admiring how his silky strands frame his chiseled features. Striking is the contrast between its snow-white hue and the deep, glossy blue of his skin.

So very alien, yet so very captivating.

There's something undeniably magnetic about Navik. Firelight dances across his strong jawline and the sharp angles of his cheekbones, casting shadows that only serve to enhance his fierce features. The undeniable truth is that, despite our turbulent meeting, I find myself drawn to him in ways I can't fully comprehend.

"There," I say softly, my voice barely more than a whisper as I reach out and gently cup his square jaw. "Handsome as ever."

"Is that so?" The icy shards of Navik's piercing gaze narrow on me. "I thought you said with a face like mine, I couldn't get laid without a fight."

"I was angry and scared. I lashed out, and I shouldn't have said it. It was a mean thing to say and I'm sorry." My mouth suddenly gone dry, I trail the tip of my tongue along my bottom lip. "Truth is, I think you're incredibly handsome. Even your sivot half is attractive in a beastly way—fierce and wild."

The silence between us hangs heavy, charged with uncertainty as Navik continues to fix me with his intense gaze. Finally, he leans into my touch, nuzzling my hand with a tenderness that takes me by surprise.

His breath is warm against my skin as he murmurs, "Apology accepted, starfire."

Before I can even think to move away, Navik snakes an arm around my waist and pulls me closer. I stand between his spread knees, the top of his head reaching my chin. Even seated, Navik commands a massive presence.

My hands settle on the heft of his shoulders as I peer down into soulful eyes, the edges of his icy gaze flashing white, his sivot reminding me he's there just beneath the surface.

Navik cups the back of my head, pulling me down to close the distance between us. I expect his mouth to crash over mine, but this kiss is different—not insistent, but a tender exploration of newfound emotions.

His lips are soft and yielding, his tongue exploring my mouth as if discovering me for the first time. Heavy hands tangle in my hair, holding me close as he deepens the kiss.

Navik's body presses into mine, the heat of him branding me with a million sensations all at once. His need rises up between us like a living thing, his body swelling and changing under my hands as he fights for control of his sivot. Both of them want me and I can feel it in every hard inch of him.

Navik breaks the kiss and sweeps me up in his arms, carries me to the bedroom where he lays me down gently on the fur-laden bed. His eyes never leave mine as he lowers himself down beside me, his body curling around my own.

I'm safe here in his embrace, and in this moment, I never want to leave. The room is a haven piled high with soft furs and plush pillows.

My skin feels alive in his arms, my breath coming in short gasps as his lips explore me. His embrace is an endless cocoon of pleasure, the warmth of his body entangling with mine.

Navik's hands glide down my body, tugging away the silky fabric wrapped around me. His touch gentle, unhurried. Questing fingertips stroke every inch of my flesh with an unquenchable hunger. Every touch a masterful tease until I think I'll go insane with wanting.

Nothing else matters as time seems to slip away.

Firm lips brush against my neck, making me burn before descending to my breasts to set me on fire. There, he sucks my areola into the hot haven of his mouth, swirling a tongue around the pebbled peak to gently suckle. He treats the opposite breast to the same lavish affection before continuing his exploration lower.

I arch, my breath catching in my throat as his fingers dip between my legs. His tongue follows the trail, lips finding their destination. His feral growl echoes off the walls as he hungrily licks me, sucking and eating at my flesh, sending shockwaves of bliss through my veins. Every flick sends me

soaring higher and higher, my hips arching to meet each sultry swirl of his talented tongue.

Lost in a sea of desire, my body teeters on the precipice of completion. So close. My hands curl around his nape, keeping him exactly where I need him. Pressure builds within me as Navik locks onto my hips, steadying me on the edge of a white-hot rapture.

Flames spark in my core, my hips swivel in surrender to the sweet, erupting inferno taking me in wave after wave of blinding pleasure. His name a litany as I shatter into a million tiny pieces on his probing tongue.

Navik settles between my spread thighs, his eyes flashing with his combined hunger, evidence how much both sides of him want me.

Navik rears over me, and I brace for the hard joining of a single thrust. Instead of burying himself to the hilt, he moves slowly, sensually, feeding his girth inside me inch by inch until he's fully seated.

I gasp at the sensation of him filling me so completely, every nerve in my body alive with pleasure. The finger-like appendages, what Navik calls his weft, at the root of his cock, are erect and begin to softly vibrate. Each inward thrust, an electric jolt to taunt and tease my clit. The sensation is maddening.

Then he begins to savor me in slow, deliberate undulations of his hips. Curling and rolling into me with full, thorough strokes until I'm mindless with sensation.

A sensual claiming that curls my toes.

All too soon, I'm grasping at the next precipice. Reaching for the next shattering peak. My nails bite into his firm backside, urging him on. Urging him into a faster rhythm to feed my insatiable craving of gratification only Navik can bring.

Soon, his thrusts become more urgent, more frantic, as we reach a shared peak in a chorus of pleasure. His lips find mine.

A deep, hungry kiss of untethered passion, as we spiral higher and higher until we shatter as one.

I can't tell where my body ends and where Navik's begins as the knot at the base of his alien cock swells, locking us together in a shared ecstasy. Shudders of pleasure rip through me as hot jets of blissful rapture drench my womb. Bombarded by waves of searing ecstasy, his weft pulses in mind-blowing vibrations that keep me in a perpetual state of orgasm.

Navik's knot shrinks and he eases out of me. I'm delighted to see him transform into the sivot. I stretch and undulate, a fresh rush of wetness prepping me for the sivot's massive phallus that kicks the second my eyes land on his engorged flesh.

Navik's body begins to expand, his muscles growing and inflating before my eyes. His freshly trimmed hair is now a wild lion's mane around his striking features, his face becoming more angular. Icy blue irises glow a bright white. Long, sharp, black claws protrude from hands I know will never hurt me, and his glossy blue flesh swirls into a liquid azure.

The sivot's veiny cock is more beastly than humanoid. Swirls of ridges stretch out along the length of his shaft as it pulses and throbs in anticipation. I eagerly reach out to take him into my hands, savoring the feel of its girthy weight in my palm.

"Mine to pleasure," Navik's sivot hisses.

"Then pleasure me, sivot." Feet planted firmly on the bed I raise my hips in wanton offering. "Fuck me. Mate me. Knot me until I see stars."

I don't know where my naughty words came from, I wasn't known to talk dirty. Maybe it's driven by the unrelenting lust coursing hot through my veins, melting the marrow of my bones. My sole focus is getting every glorious inch of the sivot's beastly cock inside my pussy. Hard. Slow. I don't care how as long as he's buried deep.

Taking himself in hand, the sivot snarls, lining the flat, knobby tip of his monstrous phallus up with my slick entrance. I moan against the immense pressure pushing at my slit, willing my muscles to relax so my flesh will give way under the sivot's considerable girth.

The sivot's breathing quickens. Chest heaving with every ragged breath, he's as eager as I am. Fangs bared, he captures my raised hips in his clawed hands and pulls me toward him. My eager flesh stretching, yielding, as the width of his knobbed tip burns its way into me.

Thighs tremble as I take his thick length, my juices soaking his cock, flowing in a continuous stream down my quaking thighs.

The sivot's eyes glow hot with lust, his grip on my hips tightens as he eases his monstrous phallus into my tight sheath. He holds himself against my body, rocking reverently into me as he savors the feel of my body embracing his in the most intimate of hugs.

He glides out and I roll my hips, loving the feel of his beastly side. Again, he eases his way back in, filling me to the brink of tearing. He slides out, my sex clenching to keep him seated and leaving me aching for more.

My breaths quicken with his increased rhythm, my sex responds in kind, loosening the tight grip of my inner walls as his phallus penetrates me faster, in and out. In and out. Until the sivot is driving into me with greater speed, dragging my hips into his thrusts with wet slaps of our bodies until I'm writhing in his grip, wanting to climax. Needing relief from the heady ache coiled up tight in my belly.

"Please," I beg, not even sure what I'm pleading for.

Submerged in the darkness of the night, the sounds of our bodies colliding and the smell of our sweat filling the air around us. I want to feel the waves of climax, my body craves it, but I don't want this to end. I never want him to stop.

The sivot's thrusts falter and he buries himself so deep, I feel the slap of his pendulum sack against my ass. Hips held

high, his knot swells, locking me down tight on his pulsating cock. His weft, fully erect, vibrates my already sensitive nub, dragging out incoherent babble between my heady moans.

My orgasm washes over me with a force that takes my breath away, an eruption of pleasure that radiates from deep within my core and ricochets through every nerve. I scream out in blissful agony as the sivot releases inside of me. Hot jets bathe my womb in his release.

“Milk my knot, starfire. Drain me dry of every drop of my seed.” The sivot cups his hand, turning the dangerous tips of his claws inward, and gently running reverent knuckles down my cheek. “Mine to pleasure.”

“For always,” I utter in satiated bliss.

## CHAPTER TEN

NAVIK

As the first rays of dawn start to peek through the window, I stir from my sleep and sit up. The room remains mostly dark, the solaris rocks embedded in the walls covered with black fabric from the night before, yet I can see Cora sleeping soundly next to me. Her breathing is slow and steady, her dark hair spilling over the pillow like an inky waterfall.

My chest constricts with a tenderness I've never felt for another. Ever since Yeet, something inside me has changed, and it has nothing to do with my sivot. It's me. Cora has been chipping away at my defenses since the first moment I clapped eyes on her, flat on my back and with a hole seared in my chest.

Now the fortified wall I built around myself crumbles with every look, every smile, every touch from my starfire. A warmth blooms within me, chasing away the chill of loneliness I had not realized had taken a firm hold on my heart until now. I struggle to contain these unfamiliar emotions, afraid of what would be left of me if I allowed myself to fully surrender.

Silently, I rise and start toward the galley, my bare feet cold on the stone floor. I answer the call of the emergence of new instincts buzzing within me. It's as if I've been plugged into an electro-rod and charged with a new energy. The

overwhelming urge to protect and provide for my mate is an undeniable force.

My sivot stirs just below the surface, not in conflict, but in harmony with my Kaul side. Now that I've let go of my inner struggle for control and accepted Cora as my mate, the beast within me is at ease. No longer fighting for control over my actions, the sivot seems content to abide by my choices.

"Navik?" Cora's voice, thick with sleep, cuts through the quiet.

"Rest, starfire," I tell her softly, "while I make us the first meal of the day."

She rubs her eyes sleepily and snuggles under the furs. "I'm not gonna argue with breakfast in bed."

I chuckle softly and turn away, my lips curving into a grin as I cross through the main living area to the galley.

I rummage through the cabinets for the container of dried Nubi leaves, thankful that the last time I was home, I dried a fresh batch. I take out two mugs and fill an earthen pot with water and place it on the radiant burner, adding Nubi leaves to each mug.

While the water heats, I take out some dried tubers and fruit packs and start preparing a simple breakfast for us. My thoughts stray to the events of the past few days, and a sense of unease washes over me.

We were safe enough here on Zeva, but the bounty Warden Hyt had placed on my head was enough to tempt any male to risk their life flying through an asteroid field if anyone were to discover our whereabouts.

I would have to trust that Qhix or one of the other Star Mavericks will dispatch the warden first, before anyone came looking to collect the bounty on my head. None knew of my home on Zeva, but the stars had eyes and forty tellic was a hefty sum.

The water in the pot starts to boil, and I quickly rehydrate the dried tubers before searing them in a pan over an open

flame. I rehydrate the sliced fruits and put them in bowls before pouring hot water into the mugs for the leaves to steep.

Cora stirs as I enter, and I place the tray of food between us on the bed. She sits up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, and I hand her a mug of steaming tea.

“It smells amazing, Navik,” she says, tucking her hair behind her ears.

The sight of her beaming smile tightens my chest. It’s daunting the level of emotion she stirs within me. I study her face, committing the sight of her alien beauty to memory. When I return her home, it will be all I have left of my starfire.

I know by the hollow ache swelling within me that the betrayal of my past will be but a pinprick compared to the gutting I will have to endure once she’s gone from my life.

“You okay, Navik?” Cora’s hand settles over mine. “You look like you’ve lost your best friend.”

Worse. Not my best friend, but my mate. “I’m fine. Eat before your food gets cold.”

As she digs into her meal, I can’t help but feel a sense of pride at her enjoyment. It’s a simple gesture, but providing for her brings me a unique sense of fulfillment. Even my sivot hums with contentment.

“What is this drink called?” Cora sips at the steeped brew. “It’s like green tea on Earth.”

“Dried Nubi leaves,” I say, around a bite of seared tubers.

“It’s really good.” Cora sets the steaming cup down and scoops up a bite of tubers. “And this?”

“Tubers.”

“Mmm...” Cora moans around her first bite. Her eyes close as she savors the flavor. “It’s like hash browns.” At the slight shake of my head, she elaborates, “Shredded potatoes. They’re a root vegetable.”

I watch her eat, a somber weight settling around me knowing our time together is limited. I try to push the thought

out of my mind and live in the moment.

Cora is beautiful in the early morning light, her hair cascading down her back in loose waves. What time we do have together must be savored, not wasted on what tomorrow might bring.

“We should go for a walk after this. Collect more Nubi leaves. I can show you how to prepare them to dry in the sun.” A knife twists behind my sternum knowing by the time the leaves are dried enough to brew, she will already be home on Earth.

“Is it safe outside of your cave?”

“Perfectly,” I say. “There’s no one else on Zeva except the two of us. Nothing will harm you here.”

“I would love to go exploring on your world.” Her gray eyes glint with excitement.

“We’ll pack a meal,” I add, knowing the perfect trail where I want to take her. “Make a day of it.”

“I can’t wait.”

We finish our meal in companionable silence, and I take the tray back to the galley while Cora riffles through the basket of fabrics to create a new garment. I pack a lunch of dried meat and water, knowing Cora will enjoy collecting fresh fruits and vegetables that grow along the trail.

Zeva is plentiful with native fruits and vegetables, from the sweetest citris to the juiciest berries. I even know of a few wildflower patches that I have no doubt Cora will love.

“Ready?” I ask, slinging the pack over my shoulder and offering Cora my hand.

She places her hand in mine. Her skin is warm and soft against my rough palm. The contact sends a jolt of electricity up my arm.

The path ahead unfurls before us like a golden ribbon, meandering through the lush, verdant wilderness of Zeva. Rays of sunshine dance through the trees, casting patches of light among the vibrant foliage. The air is alive with the sweet

aroma of wildflowers and the gentle hum of chirping birds as we wind our way down the mountain.

“Navik, this place is... *incredible*,” Cora breathes, her steely gaze wide as she takes in the otherworldly beauty of my favorite walking trail.

“Zeva is a refuge,” I admit, leading her deeper into the forest. “A place to escape the chaos and violence of my life.” I gesture toward a cluster of glowing purple flowers, their petals trembling in the breeze. “Those are luminous, emitting a soft light at night. They look like tiny stars scattered across the ground.”

Cora reaches out to touch one, marveling at how the delicate petals shimmer beneath her fingertips. “Amazing,” she murmurs, the awe in her voice pulling at something deep within me.

As we continue our walk, I make a point to stop and show her the various plants and creatures that inhabit this secluded planet. The flora on Zeva is stunning, even more so than any other world I’ve ever visited. Vibrant flowers in every shade from rosy pink to blazing orange are scattered throughout the dense undergrowth.

Cora is enthralled with the natural beauty of Zeva, and I can’t help but swell with pride at her enjoyment. She stops to admire each new blossom, her delight palpable in the way she smiles when we come across a particularly beautiful flower.

As we continue down the trail, we pause to watch a flock of birds take flight. Their multicolored feathers dancing in the sunlight as they swoop across a cloudless sky. It’s a moment of true serenity I haven’t experienced since my last time here.

We reach a clearing of trees heavy with ripe fruit. Cora’s eyes light up at the sight of the sweet treats before us. We spend the next hour picking and tasting the various fruits, filling the sack I carry until it can hold no more.

“I think this yellow one is my favorite.” Cora chomps into the succulent globe, juices dripping down her chin as she savors the tart flesh.

“Mine too.” I reach out and brush my thumb across her chin, wiping away the sticky juice.

Cora grins up at me. My sivot languidly shifts within every cell of my being, captivated by the female destined to be our mate. I lean in and press my lips to hers, tasting the sweetness of the fruit on her tongue. Her hands slide up my chest as she deepens our kiss, a low moan escaping her throat.

I ease away, taking a moment to savor the sight of Cora with her flushed cheeks and swollen lips. “Come on.” I take Cora’s hand and lead her deeper into the forest. “We’re almost there.”

“Where are we going, Navik?” Cora happily chirps, staying close on my heels. “Why do I have the feeling you’ve got a secret agenda?”

“You’ll see when we get there.” I grin to myself, not wanting to give away the destination.

Following down the trail to the base of the mountain, we round the bend to the sound of rushing water. “We’re here.” I stop in my tracks and push aside the foliage to reveal the crown jewel of my favorite trail.

Cora sucks in a sharp breath, her eyes wide as she takes in the breathtaking waterfall that cascades down a sheer cliff face into a shimmering lake, its crystal-clear waters sparkling in the sunlight like fine-cut, crystalline gemstones.

“Navik, it’s beautiful,” Cora whispers, her eyes filling with tears as she gazes upon the sight. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Come, let’s have our mid-day meal here,” I suggest, guiding her over to a flat rock on the shoreline.

Cora leans her head way back, shielding her eyes from the sun to peer up at the top of the falls. “This is a different mountain than where you live.”

“Yes. We skirted the base of mine. This one is adjacent to me.”

“Is the water safe to swim?” Cora removes the clunky boots Qhix gave her and dips her toes in the water.

“As long as you watch out for the squidlin,” I casually toss out. “They have really sharp teeth.”

Cora gasps and pulls her feet back to tuck her legs close to her body. “No shit?”

The rumble of laughter percolates up my throat despite my best attempts to suppress it. I take a seat next to Cora and remove my own boots, plunging my feet into the cool water. Her shocked expression sparks a burst of laughter I can’t contain. I toss my head back and let it go, my amusement echoing through the valley.

“There’s no such thing as squidlin, is there, Navik?” Cora crosses her arms over her chest, pinning me with an indignant glare.

“There is, but not on Zeva.” I give her shoulder a little nudge, still chuckling as I add, “I was just playing with you.”

“Who would have thought the notorious space marauder is a jokester?”

“There is more to me than my scandalous reputation, starfire.” I hand her a folded cloth of dried hetta strips.

She studies my face a moment before taking what I offer. “Much more than I ever expected.”

We sit in comfortable silence, eating our meal of dried meat and fruits we gathered along the trail. Bathed in a gentle breeze, I glance over at Cora, taking in the way the sunlight dances on her skin, illuminating her features. She catches my gaze and smiles, stripping me of my defenses, leaving me vulnerable and captivated by her presence.

“What do you say we go for a swim,” Cora winks, “since there aren’t any creatures with sharp teeth swimming around.”

“I hoped you would want to.”

Cora grins, stripping off the makeshift dress she draped around her body. “It’s too beautiful not to.”

“The only thing too beautiful is you.” The words slip out on a slow exhale.

Cora clears her throat as her face flushes with heat. “Keep talking like that, space pirate, and I’m gonna think you like me.”

I step into her, cradling her face in my hands, my thumb caressing her silken cheek. If I were to utter the words lingering on my tongue, it would make the task of returning her home that much more unbearable.

With a soft, reverent kiss swept across her parted mouth, I take a step back. A bittersweet fire burns within me as I join her in shedding my clothes. Fate is cruel, destinying me with a mate only to be forced to let her go.

Cora takes my hand, pulling me toward the water’s edge, and we step in together. The sun’s rays reflect off the surface in a glistening lightshow. We walk out farther until we are waist deep, and Cora turns around to face me. The water is cool and refreshing as it laps around us.

“Thank you for this day, Navik,” she says softly, her eyes locked on mine. “For showing me this place, and for letting me see the male behind the marauder.”

“Thank you, starfire,” I reply, my voice thick with emotion, “for reminding me what it feels like to be alive.”

Our lips meet in a leisurely embrace. I commit every nuance of the kiss to memory, from the tenderness of her lips to the way our tongues move in a slippery harmony. Time seems to stand still, yet with each passing second, I’m painfully aware of how precious and fleeting this moment truly is.

*My starfire, I will never forget you.*

I’m first to break the kiss, pulling her close to me as I wade us deeper into the water and closer to the falls. Cora wraps her arms and legs around me, her core hot against my belly. I want to sink my hardened shaft into her, pump her silken tunnel until she cries out my name. To knot her and fill her with my mating seed, but that pleasure can wait until the

coming darkness. Right now, I will savor the precious time we have left together.

We drift in the refreshing water, our bodies entwined, the current pulling us closer to the frothy falls.

“Close your eyes and hold your breath,” I tell her just before we pass under the falling water.

The force of the rushing water is strong, but I’m able to keep my footing and hold Cora close. We pass through the curtain of water and come out on the backside of the waterfall. Inside is a cave, its walls glistening with moisture.

Cora gasps in surprise, her face lighting up with wonder as she takes in the sight before us. The walls and floor of the pool are lined with bioluminescent rocks and flora, illuminating the cave and brightening the water in soft blue and green light.

“This place is amazing!” I let her go and she spins in a quick circle to admire everything at once.

I swim to the back of the cave and take a seat on the rocky ledge, the water lapping around my waist. “Zeva doesn’t have many bioluminescent plants and animals. Not like Valose. I’ve read the Huren Jungle is all lit up after dark, as well as the Valosian people.”

“Like the Berserker?”

“Yes. The Berserker was a Valosian warrior. His spirit mate was one of the human females held as a prize for the winners of the arena.”

Cora visibly shivers. “The Berserker will take good care of her?”

“He will guard her with his life, the same as my sivot.”

“I’m glad she’ll be okay.” Cora eyes drift off as in deep thought, then shakes her head. “I don’t want to talk about the prison. Not while we should be enjoying this incredible place. You’re so lucky to have this planet all to yourself.”

With arms outstretched, I watch Cora spin around in the water, creating a wake with her cupped hands. Her lithe form slices through the water, her raven hair fanning out around her

like a dark halo. The sight of her, so free and unguarded, fills me with warmth.

It's no longer just my sivot that wants to protect her and keep her safe from the dangers of the Universe. I'm shaken to my core by how much this tiny human has affected me. I could stay with her like this forever.

The moment hangs in the air, unspoken words of longing and desire linger in the stillness. And for the first time in my life, my gaze is not cast to the stars in search of my next adventure but on the female frolicking in the softly glowing waters of a planet I call home.

What will Zeva be like without her here? The solitude I once cherished no longer holds the same appeal.

Her delightful laughter echoes off the cave walls. I know the sound will haunt me once I return her to Earth. A cold emptiness tugs at me. My sivot stirs restlessly, but even my beastly half cannot argue with Cora's deepest desire of returning to her world.

"Come play with me, Navik." Cora playfully splashes water at me.

If only it were as simple as her changing her mind, calling Zeva her home, and accepting me as her mate. But I know it isn't to be.

I push off the ledge and join her in the pool. She wraps her arms around my neck, and I pull her close, playfully spinning her around in the water. Cora's laughter fills the cave, and I can't help but laugh along with her. Her soft gray eyes are bright with joy.

I forget the Universe outside our oasis and savor the warmth of her in my arms. I know soon enough I'll have to let her go, but for now, I'm content just to be with her in this moment.

A few days ago, I would have laughed at the male I have become. I would have called myself weak for allowing a female to rule my head and my heart. The laser blast through

my chest hadn't killed me, but the male I once was died in that exit corridor on Onis.



## CORA

Somewhere between the explosive orgasms and Navik's unexpected, sweet side, I've lost my heart to both the space pirate and his sivot. Though I miss my mom and Earth like crazy, I can't help but feel like in Navik's arms is where I belong.

I also know I could never live with myself if something happened to Navik while returning me home. If he is killed because of me, I would never forgive myself. Risking his life for me isn't a chance I am willing to take.

"I'm starving," I say, following Navik back up the trail.

The sun is setting behind us and already the few bioluminous plants and creatures on Zeva began to glow in the dimming light. It is a sight to behold, a graceful display of nature's light show.

Navik turns to look at me. His brow furrowed, the corner of his lips kicked up in a smirk. "It has not been that long ago since we had our mid-day meal."

"All that swimming really took it out of me." I trip over my own feet. The boots Qhix gave me have saved the soles of my feet, for which I'm grateful, but they're too big. Tender spots on my heels and toes already tingle to the tune of blisters.

Navik is right there to sweep me off my feet. Scooping me up in a powerful hold as if I weigh nothing.

"You need proper shoes," Navik scowls. "Proper clothes."

"We're laying low, remember?" I say, loosely draping my arms around Navik's neck, loving the feel of being carried so

effortlessly. “We aren’t supposed to leave Zeva until Qhix gives us the all-clear.”

Navik grunts. I know he hates that I’m wearing a random swath of fabric and ill-fitting boots. The thought of the unscrupulous space pirate wanting to take care of me makes me feel all warm and tingly.

“You know, with only the two of us on this entire planet, clothing should be optional,” I purr, smoothing my fingers over the thick pad of one glossy, blue pectoral.

I was sure we would have sex inside the waterfall cave, but for some reason, he’d held back. Navik had been fully erect from the start of our skinny dipping and going by the thick ridge tenting the front of his pants, he still is.

I am more than ready to receive what he’s packing. My body is a livewire, burning for what he’s denying me. I’m so horny, I’m ready to toss all inhibitions out the window and have sex right here on the trail. We’re alone of this planet so it isn’t like anyone is going to happen by.

Perhaps a little persuasion...

I tuck my face in the curve of his throat and nibble the lobe of his ear. His breath hitches and I can feel his muscles tense beneath my touch. “There’s a nice carpet of moss over there.” I pepper kisses up his neck to his impossibly hard jawline. “A perfect place to get freaky out in the wild.”

That’s all it took to break him.

Navik growls and marches toward the mossy area, gently laying me down but not so gentle when he nicks the top of the fabric wrapped around me and rips it in two.

“I wanted to wait until later.” Navik pushes my legs wide apart. “To take my time savoring your delectable slit.” I arch off the ground when he plunges two fingers deep inside my weeping core. “Mate you slow and easy so the night will last forever.”

He slips his fingers free, sucking them clean with a feral snarl. His icy irises flash with a ring of white, the sivot thrumming just below the surface.

“You’re dripping cunt is as impatient as my cock.” Navik tears the fasteners off the front of his pants in his haste to release his pulsing member. Copious amounts of fluid leak from the bulbous tip.

“Navik, please,” I plea. Knees wide apart, I plant my feet flat on the ground and thrust my hips up in offering.

So desperate for each other, there’s no foreplay of any kind. Just the mutual craving of a carnal pleasure.

He lines the fat tip of his cock up with my entrance and drives into me. My pussy squelches with his powerful thrust. Each deep plunge of his pistoning hips sends me soaring higher and higher. Already so close to a white-hot release, my thighs quake in anticipation as I roll my pelvis in time with his thrusts.

My orgasm crashes down like a wave, rolling through my body in a series of shudders and convulsions. Navik is hardly finished, pumping into me with long, thorough strokes, stoking my fire for another eruption.

His even thrusts falter, burying himself to the hilt, and I brace for an unrelenting climax. Fully impaling me on his thick erection, the bulge at the base of his cock swells, knotting him inside me. I pant through the onslaught of the finger-like projections at the base of his cock vibrating against my clit.

Pleasure floods me in endless waves, his weft driving me to the limits of pleasure. His fullness within me is almost too much, but I relish it. His knot keeps us entwined, deepening the connection I feel with him.

Navik’s orgasm detonates inside me, my body contracting around his as he fills me with hot splashes of his essence. He shudders with the shrinking of his knot, then tosses his head back with a roar I’m sure can be heard on the neighboring planet. When he looks down at me, his eyes have gone completely white, shining bright with a wild gaze.

The sivot will have his turn.

Navik's cock slips free of my body as he morphs into his beast, growing larger before my eyes. His pristine white hair, shorn to his shoulders, swirls wildly around his head. Granite features become more sharp and prominent. Claws extend from his nail beds while his glossy blue flesh swirls like liquid metal.

He looks like something out of a nightmare, but all I see is beauty.

Lips drawn back in a feral snarl, the sivot growls down at me, displaying enormous fangs. "My slippery cunt," the sivot declares. "My mate to pleasure."

"Yours," I whisper, and arch in surrender, trembling under the tips of his claws gently raking over my pebbled nipples.

He slides his hand lower, exploring my folds with gentle swipes of his fingertips. I gasp and writhe beneath his touch, my pussy still sensitive from Navik's hard use. He drops his face to my throat, bathing me in the heat of his breath as he inhales my scent.

Fangs scrape down the delicate flesh below my ear, scattering gooseflesh over my skin. His lips clamp down on my throat to suck and lick while he gently traces a claw around my hardened nub. I quiver under his gentle assault as his rough tongue caresses my skin, sending shivers rippling down my spine.

He explores lower, covering first one nipple with his beastly mouth and then the other. I go wild with need, my hips buck as he sucks and suckles my nipples, sending a fresh pool of wetness to my pussy.

Eyes blazing with desire, the sivot looms above me. His beastly form is monstrously huge, something I should shrink away from, not crave with a dark yearning. It should be taboo to want Navik's animalistic side to thrust inside of me with his bizarre, savage phallus. Yet here I am, rolling over and positioning my body so he can penetrate me from behind.

On all fours, I look back at him over my shoulder, watching with hungry anticipation as he guides his beastly

cock to my entrance. The head is more flat than bulbous, making it harder for him to penetrate me. He glides the knobbed head through my wetness, and his thick shaft follows, parting my cheeks with languid strokes as he wets his shaft with my juices.

The sivot rumbles out reverent noises, rubbing his thick cock against my nether lips. I grind against him, circling my hips to encourage him to stop teasing and get to fucking.

I bite down on my lower lip as he presses into me. The sensation of him stretching me is overwhelming. For a brief second, when his clawed hands land on my hips and squeeze possessively, I'm fearful that it might be too much of a tease to have presented him with my backside. He is a beast, after all.

As soon as he yanks me back, impaling me on his monstrous cock, I forget all about any pain that might have happened. Every inch of me is alive with pleasure, and I gasp as my senses are overwhelmed by the intensity of it all.

His cock ignites a fire in me that has been waiting for this moment for what seems like eternity. We move together with an urgency and passion, reaching higher and higher as he pushes deeper until I am soaring toward ecstasy. My toes curl and my breath catches in my throat as our lovemaking intensifies, until finally we reach a climax so powerful that it leaves me trembling in his embrace.

My body shakes as he grasps my hips, slamming me down onto his veined length. My mind reels from the overwhelming sensation of him inside me. I groan in pleasure as his knot begins to swell, the vibrations of his weft tickling my ass as he stretches me to my limits and fills me until my toes curl in ecstasy.

"That's it, starfire." My body convulses around his, milking the seed from his pendulum sack hanging heavy between massive blue thighs. "Milk my knot of all its seed."

My eyes clamp down tight, my mouth hangs open in soundless cries of ecstasy. His knot keeps me tight on his cock. I'm afraid to move or be torn in half, but the pressure inside

me is exhilarating, my body shaking with the intensity of a seamless orgasm.

After what seems like an eternity, he releases me from his knot and I collapse onto the mossy ground, spent and satisfied. The sivot scoops me up and cradles me against the breadth of his chest, rocking me as if I were the most precious thing in the world. I snuggle against him, breathing in his dark spicy scent.

“Even after we part, you will always be mine,” he says softly. “Forever.”

I don’t have the strength to answer him, but inside my heart swells with warmth and contentment. I smile and close my eyes, happy to stay in his beastly arms.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I know, Navik is gently laying me on one of the overstuffed couches and pulling a blanket over my naked body. I stretch and smile up at him.

“Still hungry?”

“You know I am after what we just did.” I stretch my legs and wince. My abdomen tightening with a slight pinch.

“What’s wrong?” Navik’s pristine white brows crease in worry.

“Nothing.” I stretch again but discount the odd sensation. “Just a little sore from all the action.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Stay here and rest while I make the last meal of the day.”

“If you insist.” I stretch again, rolling to my side to watch as Navik disappears into the galley.

Time is slipping through my fingers. My conundrum resolved. My decision made. Now for the hard part: telling Navik how I feel and hoping he accepts me. Hoping he doesn’t reject me.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

NAVIK

The chirp of the comm wakes me from my slumber. I reach out a hand to slap the insistent pinging into silence before pulling a sleepy Cora back against my chest and burying my face in her silky tresses.

All is quiet, calm, as I drift off—

*Ping! Ping! Ping!*

My eyes fly open, my jaw clenching in irritation. All I want is to stay here and sleep the morning away wrapped around my mate's warm body.

"You should answer that." Cora rolls over, snuggling her face between my pectorals. "It's probably Qhix."

Her lithe arm encircles my waist in a loose embrace and there's nothing Qhix or whoever is on the other end of the comm has to say that's more important than savoring this moment of solitude with my mate.

*Ping! Ping! Ping!*

"Bliking dund!" I curse, reluctantly untangling myself from Cora to snatch the comm from the bedside table. Only her lilting giggle keeps me from crushing the device in my bruising grip.

"Don't break it, silly," she gently chastises me. "Maybe it's good news."

I roll to my back, dragging Cora's delectable body onto my chest. Her slight form fits snugly against me, her soft curves conforming to my muscles like a second skin.

"It had better be," I grouch, and she giggles.

"What is it?" I answer, my gruffness somewhat tempered.

"Behtu, the bliker, beat me to it," Qhix grumbles. "The bounty on your head has been eliminated."

Cora's body stiffens in my arms. I would have thought the news of Warden Hyt's demise would come as a relief. Instead, there's tension radiating off her.

"Where and when does he want to meet for the exchange?" I instinctively smooth my hand over Cora's back, offering comfort.

"Vrut's third moon, Xea, in two hours."

Now it's my turn to tense. So little time is left with my starfire. With the bounty lifted from my head, so is the reason for keeping Cora safe on Zeva. And I must return her to her home.

"Two hours," I grit out. "Tell Behtu I will see him then."

"Very well, brother," Qhix ends the call and it's all I can do not to hurl the comm across the room.

I set the comm aside and pull Cora tighter to me, not ready to let her go. Closing my eyes, I drop my face into her silken strands and inhale deeply of her scent. She squeezes me in return, and I entertain the idea that she wants to stay with me as badly as I want her to.

My chest constricts and aches with an unbearable acuteness as I taste a glimpse of the loneliness that is to come with her departure. Cora does not belong here. She was unjustly stolen from her world, and deserves to be returned there safely. A task I will see through to the end no matter how much it pains me.

I will live up to my end of our bargain as she has hers.

“We should get moving if we are to meet Behtu on time.” I begrudgingly break the silence. “We can travel to Etto from there, trade my ship for a vessel with a cloaking device.”

“Then to Earth?” she asks, her arms tightening around me.

“Yes,” I somberly whisper into the morning air. “I will honor my half of our bargain and return you home.”

Cora scoots to the edge of the bed, her head hangs, and her delicate frame trembles in a way that worries me. I knew I was too rough with her during our last mating.

“You’re hurting,” I hiss through clenched teeth, my sivot shrinking in shame.

Her response is a single, anguished whisper. “Yes.”

“It’s my fault.” I scramble off the bed and drop to my knees before her. “I should not have been so rough with you, starfire.”

Her eyes bright with unshed tears, she searches my face in confusion. “I’ve only ever found pleasure at your hands, Navik.”

“Then what is it?” I clasp her hands in mine. “What ails you?”

Her lips part and she presses a palm to the center of her chest, yet she is hesitant to speak.

“Just tell me so I can fix it.”

“I don’t want to go,” she blurts.

“To meet my brother or to Etto?”

“Home.”

I couldn’t have been more stunned had Ruze appeared out of thin air and blasted a hole in my chest with my own weapon again. “I thought that’s what you wanted?”

“It was,” she sniffles. “I have no right to ask you for anything, and I know how much you value your privacy.”

I raise up on my knees, cupping her face in my hands. Hope ribbons around my heart as I search her eyes for an

understanding. “What are you trying to say?”

“You’ve already risked your life to keep me safe and I can’t let you do it again. But...” Cora’s words fade on a lingering sigh.

“But, what, starfire?”

“I made peace a long time ago with the fact I would never see home again, my mom, or my friends. I figured I would eventually die on Onis.” Cora’s gaze grows bright with pooling tears. “Though I would love to see my mom one last time. Let her know that I’m okay.”

“You don’t wish to return to Earth?” My heart hammers in my throat at the prospect of Cora remaining with me on Zeva.

“Qhix said it was too dangerous to travel to Earth. He said the chances of you getting away from the Yulineons is slim to none. I can’t let you die because of me.”

“Qhix has a big mouth and little faith in my abilities to outrun a group of blinking patrollers.” Deflated that it’s merely my safety that concerns her, I sit back on my knees. Hope is a dangerous thing to wield when matters of the heart have not been resolved. I got ahead of myself thinking Cora shares the same tender feelings for me as I have for her. “Worry not, starfire. I will not die in the process of returning you home.”

I start to rise, but she grabs a hold of my wrist. “That isn’t the only reason.”

My eyes roam her face, searching for a glimmer of the tenderness I feel for her, but as I do, an underlying fear creeps in. The longer she remains silent, I worry maybe mine isn’t a genuine emotion reciprocated, and perhaps I have been twice a fool to lay myself vulnerable to the pain of rejection.

Had I allowed myself to be taken alive by her beauty, only to be slain by an icy indifference?

“I love you, Navik.” Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. “My heart couldn’t bear it if I had to leave you behind.”

I sag under the weight of the relief that washes over me as her words echo in my mind. The breath I hadn’t realized I was

holding punches from my lungs. Only now, as I inhale deeply, do I finally allow myself to feel the full force of my love for her.

“You what?” I utter like a gibbering idiot. “You... did I hear you right?”

“You did,” she fidgets while my mouth hangs loose, my mind still processing the very thing I yearned to hear. “Going by your expression, I’ve stunned you into silence. It’s okay if you don’t feel the same—”

I snatch her up so fast, she squeaks. Her body is so small against mine, but her presence fills me up like nothing else ever could. I hold her tightly, not wanting to ever let her go, and whisper, “I love you too, Cora. More than anything else in the Universe.”

Her big gray eyes widen, and then soften with a smile that could light up the darkest of skies. “I was afraid to tell you,” she says, shyly.

“Never be afraid to tell me anything, starfire. A Kaul without his mate is lost. Had I taken you home, I don’t know if I could have let you go,” I admit. “Once both sides of me knotted you, filling your womb with my mating seed, I sealed your fate. I shouldn’t have forced a Kaul mating on you.”

“Is this what you and Qhix were deep in discussion about aboard his ship? The thing you said you were going to catch me up on later?”

“Yes. I shouldn’t have forced a Kaul mating on you when I should have asked first.”

“Well, then,” Cora leans back on bended elbows and widens her knees invitingly, “get to asking.”



CORA

“You’re not angry that I mated you without your approval?” Navik remains on his knees before me.

“Can’t say that I am.” I curl my hips to draw his attention away from how he thinks he’s wronged me. “Now’s your chance to remedy the situation, and I don’t think that was the question you really want to ask me, is it? Whether I’m angry or not?”

Navik shifts forward, his icy gaze growing brighter, more intense, as he moves closer. His hands slide up my inner thighs, the heat of his palms searing their way up to pause at the juncture of my legs. He shoves my legs wide apart and I gasp. He’s so close I can feel the heat of his breath wash over my nether lips.

“Will you be my mate, Cora Gale Vogel? Let me knot you, spill my mating seed inside your womb?” Navik crawls up my body, his cock heavy and hard between us. “Say yes and I will claim you as a Kaul claims his chosen female.”

“Yes,” I swallow the word when the head of his cock presses against my entrance. “Yes, Navik T’Jarik, I’ll be your mate.”

Navik’s mouth crashes down over mine. His kiss hungry and demanding, hot and fierce, like the space pirate himself. His tongue delves between my lips, and I open wider to accommodate the invasion. He tastes like all the things I love about him. Dark and dangerous, wild but sweet.

Navik rocks forward, the head of his cock breaching my slick opening. I cling to him, panting into his mouth as he glides his way home, sheathing himself in my willing warmth.

His hips thrust forward. I half-moan, half-sob, an intense pleasure I’ve come to expect shoots straight to my core. My sex clenches around him, spasming violently as his knot swells, locking me down tight.

“That’s it, starfire. Milk me for every drop.”

His approving growl sets off another convulsing orgasm, and I’m unable to hold back my mewling cries of pleasure when his weft erects to vibrate my clit into an endless release.

Navik isn't fucking around. There's no slow build up to climax. No slow burn to combustion. Hot jets of his release bathe my inner walls, splashing my womb with his mating seed. He exhales a heavy groan as his body shudders, the waves of his climax rippling through us both.

His knot slowly shrinks, but his cock remains nestled inside my heat. I wait for the sivot to make an appearance. Instead, Navik rolls with me to his side, pulling me close.

"Now, you are officially a Kaul's mate, Cora of Earth."

I beam, trailing a finger over the swirling design he calls a corium, marking his forearm like a metallic tribal tattoo. "The sivot isn't getting in on the action?"

The deep rumble of Navik's laughter fills the room. "You prefer mating me while in my sivot form, insatiable female?"

"I didn't say that, it's just, most of the time I get double the fun."

"Now that I've accepted you as my mate, I can better control when I morph into my beast." Navik smooths his hands over my skin as if he can't get enough of touching me. "Sometimes Kaul males are too stubborn to accept when they have found their chosen mate and biology must take the lead."

"Stubborn. You?" I scoff. "Surely not."

"What we did wasn't about a simple act for pleasure, but one of ceremony."

"But that wasn't the first time you've knotted me."

"No, but it is the first time you understood what the spilling of my mating seed meant. To seal the bond between us." Navik kisses my forehead. "It's the same knotting ceremony Kaul males have done for centuries with their chosen female."

"The bond? Is that why I can always detect trace amounts of your scent on my skin even after I shower?"

"Yes. Other Kaul males can scent to whom you belong." Navik playfully swats my bottom. "As much as I want to lay

around in our mated bed for the remainder of the day, I must meet Behtu and pay him the bounty I owe.”

“Maybe we can. How far away is this Xea moon where we have to meet him?”

“An hour if we don’t engage the hyper-drive.” Navik pushes off the bed to stand. “What do you have in mind, starfire?”

“Since you don’t need to trade your ship anymore, we can skip the trip to the trading port on Etto and be back here before lunch, or the mid-meal, as you call it.” I stretch out my leg to run my foot along his thigh. “We can be naked and back in bed before the furs get cold. Unless you still need to sell the stuff you and Qhix scavenged from the Moktian ship.”

“I love how your mind works, starfire.” Navik captures my foot and drags me to the end of the bed where he scoops me up in his arms. “The Moktian tech can wait to be sold later. Everything I could ever want is right here on Zeva.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

NAVIK

“**T**here it is.” I point to the small, shimmering moon orbiting the gas giant, Vrut.

Xea is a deep sapphire-blue moon with streaks of silver and pink glimmering across its surface. The atmosphere is thick with clouds on an endless churn. Third of ten celestial bodies orbiting Vrut, it is the only moon hospitable enough on which to make a landing.

Cora sits forward, taking in the sight of Xea, her eyes wide with wonder. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yes, very.” I can hardly drag my gaze from my mate as she studies Xea through the viewport.

As we fly closer, the gray-brown planet takes up the majority of the viewport. Vrut is enormous, and covered in toxic clouds and swirling debris. A soupy mix of a world more liquid than solid.

The other moons orbiting Vrut are far less spectacular than Xea. Mostly small and rocky with no atmosphere. Void of life, even Xea, as lovely as it is from a distance, is nothing more than a barren globe.

I scan the surface of Xea until I find the coordinates Behtu sent me and lock in on his location. Parked near a small crater,

his large, silver craft reflects its surroundings, mirroring everything around it, including us.

Angled downward, we descend through the misty atmosphere. A canvas of multicolored rocks and sand greets us in hues of deep blues, greens, oranges, and reds, mixing together with silver and pink, swirling into an almost surreal landscape as we land on the rocky surface.

“With all the pretty colors, I expected there to be more here than rocks and dirt.” Cora unstraps from her seat and sits forward. “Why does it seem like every planet I’ve visited is void of life except Zeva?”

“Xea is a moon, not a planet, but the majority of planets in the known Universe are habitable, just not the ones where Star Mavericks choose to meet,” I tell her. “It wouldn’t do us any good to land on a world filled with people as wanted males.”

“True.” Cora turns to me with a smirk. “I hadn’t thought of that. You are still a notorious space pirate even though you’ve proven to have a softer side.”

I suck in a sharp hiss of mock horror. “Soft? You think me soft, female?”

I move quickly, grabbing her and lifting her onto my lap. My fingers instantly go to work tickling her.

“No tickling, Navik!” Cora’s delightful squeals ring out through the cockpit as she wriggles in my grasp. “It’s not fair, you’re stronger than me.”

“Stronger, eh?” I curl my fingers into her side, setting off a fresh bout of breathless giggles. “I thought you said I was weak.”

“Soft,” Cora gasps out trying to catch her breath. “I said soft, not weak. And for a pirate with a beastly alter ego, you have a really soft center.”

I place my hand over where hers covers my heart. “Only where you are concerned, starfire.”

Cora’s pale gray gaze meets mine and a gentle smile curves her lips. She leans in to brush her lips against mine,

hitting me with a jolt of electricity that shoots straight to my cock.

“You still slumming around in that Bioti Nebula Shitter?” Behtu’s sharp tone disrupts our intimate moment, reminding us why we are here and not still in our mated bed on Zeva.

“She might be a bit worn, but it’s better than flying around in that unscathed hunk of metalloid looking like you’ve never seen any action,” I fire back. “You been taking a break since commandeering that Lizordian freighter, Behtu?”

“You wish I’d leave the best loot for you, bliker,” Behtu growls. “Is it my fault I’m a better pilot?”

“Delusional much, Behtu?” I snort.

“You bring the bounty?”

“Only if you’ve got what I’m buying,” I reply.

“Open your hold, I’ll bring it over.”

I end the comm and stand with Cora still in my arms. “Wait here while I make the exchange.”

“You guys sound like you hate each other.”

“Just brotherly bantering,” I say, smirking. “The only thing larger than Behtu’s sarcastic mouth is his ego.”

I leave Cora in the cockpit and pop open the hatch in the corridor floor. I don’t waste time with the ladder but jump down into the belly of my craft with a resounding thud.

Inside the cargo hold, I clip a respirator onto my septum and engage the nano barrier before lowering the ramp. The air on Xea is barely breathable, kicking up clouds of colorful dirt as the ramp extends for Behtu’s grand entrance.

Larger than life, my fellow Maverick strides through the dust and climbs up the ramp to stand before me. His towering, muscular frame casts a shadow over mine. It’s been so long since last I saw him, I forgot how far I had to tilt my head back to look him in the eye.

All Kaul males born to nobility are larger in stature and build. Two long white braids sweep the shape of his head to

hang down a broad chest. He wears a respirator like mine fastened to his septum. Despite his regal lineage, he wears simple black pants and a pair of knee-high leather boots. No frills, only the basics.

“Well met, Behtu.” I slap my fist to my chest in greeting.

“Well met, Navik.” My fellow Maverick returns the greeting before lifting the clear box he carries up for my inspection. “Warden Hyt’s head only not on a spike. It wouldn’t fit inside the stasis cube, but I can arrange something if you wish.”

“I’ll take it as is.” I sneer at the remains of the male who had once held my Cora captive and pull free the sack with fifty tellic I stuffed inside my pocket before we left Zeva.

Behtu takes the sack I offer and nods his approval then hands me the stasis cube. “Nice doing business with you, Navik.”

“Same,” I reply with a firm nod.

I accept it with a grimace of disgust. Lifeless eyes stare out from a face frozen in death. The mouth is twisted in a silent scream, contorted into an expression of anguish. The head is severed at the neck, a clean cut, most likely by the very blade slung across Behtu’s back.

“Decapitation by a sharp blade. No doubt Klaxis forged steel,” I say, hating that my sword remains on Onis where I dropped it.

“A Star Maverick should never be without his primary weapon.” Behtu nails me a cocky smirk and tilt of his head. “Wouldn’t you agree, Navik?”

I return Behtu’s stare, wondering where he meant this line of questioning to lead. No one knew about my holster snapping and my blade falling to the floor as I morphed into my sivot for the first time. “You got a point you want to make, Behtu?”

Just as my ire rises over Behtu’s silent smirk, he reaches back and unsheathes what I thought I had lost. “Found this on a guard at the prison. Figured you’d want it back.”

Behtu hands me the blade, hilt first. I accept what he offers, disbelieving my luck. "Thank you, my brother."

"Rumor has it a human female awakened your sivot." Behtu narrows shrewd eyes on me. "Any truth to the story that a human was able to do what no other Kaul female has done since they became warriors?"

"Qhix's big mouth, no less." I stand taller as my sivot surges with aggression. "It's no secret, and you heard correctly."

"Interesting." Is all Behtu has to say for once. No sharp-tongued come back, only mild curiosity before his rapid departure. "Until again, Navik."

"Until again, Behtu."

I watch as Behtu strides back to his ship, the dust clouding around him like a halo of colorful smoke. He climbs aboard his craft, engaging thrusters and lifting off Xea's surface. I close the ramp and secure my hold before delivering the warden's head to where Cora waits for me in the cockpit.

"Oh, that's so gross!" she gags when I present her with her prize.

"A fitting end for the male that kept you as a pet," I growl. "Wish I could have been the one to have run my blade across his throat."

Cora holds her nose and I lift the cube for a quick sniff. "Can you scent his blood through the stasis cube?"

"No." She shakes her head but keeps her nose plugged. "Just looks like it would stink. Please tell me we aren't taking it back with us to Zeva."

"You don't wish to keep it as a trophy?"

"Yuck! No," Cora gags again. "Just knowing he's dead and can never hurt me again is enough. Unless you're wanting to keep it knowing the bounty on your head is gone."

"No. It angers me to look upon it, knowing he tormented you for years." I think a minute. "Perhaps we should launch it into space."

“Let’s do it.”

I set the head aside and we take our seats. Powering up the engines, my hands fly over the controls as I set a course for Zeva. The ship soundlessly ascends, rising from the ground in a swirling fog. We break free from Xea’s atmosphere and travel into outer space.

Once clear of the Neur Galaxy where Xea lies, I slow to a stop. Here, in the pitch-blackness between galaxies, is the perfect spot for a male so vile. Forever in a state of limbo, the head will take hundreds of years to rot.

With Cora at my side, I open the exhaust port and place the stasis cube containing the warden’s head inside the opening.

“You want to do the honors?” I gesture to the button that will shoot Warden Hyt’s remains into space.

“I do.” A wide, relieved grin spreads across Cora’s face.

She presses the button and a loud hiss echoes throughout the ship as the head is launched into space. We watch through one of many portholes dotting the corridor as the stasis cube drifts away, growing smaller until it’s just a speck in the distance before disappearing completely.

“A fitting end for a most despicable male.”

“Agreed.” Cora takes a deep breath and we return to our seats. “Let’s go home.”

A moment of peace passes between us before the proximity alarm blares through the calm of the cockpit. With a flick of my fingers across the scanner, I zoom in on the approaching craft.

“Bliking dund!” I curse. One enemy taken out only for another to take its place. “That’s a Wetokian Battle Cruiser.”

The ship is massive, one of the largest in the Universe. The hold designed to transport many Wetokian Destroyers at once. A dull black, it blots out the twinkling galaxies in the distance as it consumes the viewport.

“Strap in, Cora. He’s right on top of us. I’m going to try and lose him.” I quickly maneuver my ship away from the

battle cruiser, taking evasive action and performing a series of barrel rolls in an attempt to put enough distance between us and them to engage the hyper-drive.

The ship rocks and lurches as I twist and turn, but before I can hit the hyper-drive, a concussion beam shoots out, blasting through the ship with a booming echo that kills all the power and knocks us both unconscious.

Not even my sivot is given time to react.



CORA

I wake to a foul odor. My eyes flutter open to a blurry scene before me, and I groan as the stench of rotten garbage and machine oil fills my nose. I look around, fighting to recall how I got here.

Where is here?

And where is Navik?

My head throbs as the pain intensifies, pounding in time to the guttural voices arguing among themselves in the distance. I reach up to rub a shaky hand at my temple, squinting to help focus my eyes. With each lethargic blink, the room comes more into view.

I'm alone in a large chamber with metal walls and several large boxes haphazardly strewn about. The perforated floor is hard and unforgiving where I lay. I shield my eyes with my hands against the dingy overhead lighting which sheds no warmth on the space.

The arguing grows louder and suddenly two quill-covered, monstrous creatures with tusks step into the room. Flesh a vile grayish green, I know without a doubt what they are.

Wetokians.

I saw images of them on Warden Hyt's monitors when he was searching for a worthy opponent to pit against the Berserker in the arena. One that would be sure to come out the victor.

Word was quickly spreading that Warden Hyt was running unfair fights because of the Berserker's winning streak. He needed to prove that the warrior of Valose could be beaten before his unsavory reputation as a fraudster became firmly established and ticket sales plummeted.

"I am commander on this vessel, Grot!" I scramble away from the approaching Wetokian who reaches down and grabs me roughly by the ankle. "I make use of the human's cunt first."

I struggle to get free as he drags me across the floor. My skin sticks and pulls on the metal surface, but I freeze when his words register.

My whole body goes numb. I can't stop the conversation between the warden and his guards from replaying inside my head about which females should be sacrificed as potential prizes for the Wetokian. One would be chosen as a prize once he won against the Berserker in the arena.

Spikes on the ends of the Wetokian's cock would shred whichever female he chose to pieces. Only the most broken and used among the group of females would be considered, none of the new arrivals would be sacrificed.

"I was the one who located the Star Maverick's ship, Krut," Grot argues, making a grab for my wrist. "I should be the one to bloody my cock first. You can have what's left of her when I'm finished."

My heart slams against my rib cage. Like a human tug-of-war, I'm pulled and yanked between the two Wetokians. Neither willing to let go as they fight over who gets to rape me first. I struggle to breathe, feeling as if I'll be ripped in two.

A deafening roar rings out and the males stop their tugging. All eyes turn to the open door where it sounds as if a war has erupted.

I grin.

I would know that roar anywhere. Navik is here and his sivot is pissed.

“Cora!” bellows the sivot. “Cora! Where are you?”

“Here!” I yell out, tears of relief flooding my eyes knowing the sivot will soon come to my rescue.

Sounds of a battle fill the air. Crackling laser fire and small explosions reverberate off the walls. Heavy thuds pound the ground like the landing of heavy bodies. A chorus of growls rumble as punches connect with solid meat.

How many Wetokians is the sivot up against?

I don't have long to wonder before my protector storms into the room with a Wetokian's head hanging from his fist. The creatures handling me so roughly, drop me on the floor and I scramble away, scurrying to the far side of the room until my back hits the wall.

The sivot stands tall with claws and fangs bared. Magnificently grotesque, he's bathed in the green blood of our enemies, it even drips from his fangs in viscous strings. His white mane juts out in all directions in an unruly disarray. He looks wild and ferocious, like a mythical beast come to life.

Snarling at the two Wetokians, he lunges at Grot while slinging the severed head at Krut, hitting him in the stomach. The Wetokians waste no time and attack with ferocity.

The sivot deflects their blows by extending his corium into a shield and striking back with deadly accuracy. Navik's sivot moves with the grace of a warrior despite his lumbering size, his fists connecting in rapid succession while his claws rake gouges across the bellies and faces of the Wetokians.

Navik's sivot ducks a swinging fist and strikes out with a brutal kick that knocks Krut back on his ass. Then he swings around to sink his fangs deep into Grot's throat. Grot howls in pain but Navik only grins, a pool of blood spilling from his mouth as he rips Grot's head from his body.

Krut is quick to regain his feet, but he's no match for Navik's sivot. The sivot moves with a speed and agility that belies his size, leaping onto Krut's back and sinking his claws into Krut's neck.

Krut thrashes and struggles to get free, but the sivot's claws are buried deep in his flesh and there's no shaking him off. The sivot drags Krut across the floor, claws still embedded in his neck, before sinking his fangs deep into his stomach.

Krut howls in agony as the sivot disembowels him with claws and fangs, ripping out intestines and organs that spill onto the ground in a grotesque scene. Wet sounds of a dying breath gurgle out, then Krut grows still.

The sivot drags his arm across his face to swipe away the Wetokian's blood as he strides toward me.

"Are you hurt?" He crouches where I'm huddled on the floor, and I throw myself into his powerful arms.

"No."

"I need you to hide, starfire." The sivot quickly scans the room. "There are too many left to kill. Only come out when I tell you it's safe."

"No," I plead as the sivot carries me across the room and rips the grate off an air vent close to the floor. "We need to get out of here."

"There's no leaving until I get my ship free of their hold." He places me inside the duct. "After they hit us with a concussion beam, they hauled the ship with us in it on board their battle cruiser."

"No, Navik!" I argue, worried he will get himself killed trying to save me. The very thing that terrifies me the most. "Hide with me until we can call for help."

"Worry not for me, starfire." The sivot replaces the grate, flattening his palm over the louvered metal. I reach out to press my hand over his much larger, clawed one. "Stay inside here until I come for you."

"Please be careful," I sniffle at the sivot's retreating back.

It isn't long before more sounds of fighting commence. The noises of battle are brutal and relentless. More sounds of laser fire and wet thumps as punches connect with their targets filter into the space where all I can do is wait and worry. Howls of pain reach my ears, but so far, none belong to the sivot.

Then all goes quiet.

My heart races as I struggle to draw a single breath. Frozen with fear, my mind races wondering what is happening beyond my hiding place. Every slight sound seems amplified as I wait and worry about Navik. What has happened?

The sivot bursts into the room. The breath I held punches from my lungs as he rushes toward me.

"You're okay!" I place my hand on the grate, his massive body blocking the view of the room as he crouches before me.

"Time to go," the sivot says, his claws poking through the louvered grate as he's about to pull it free.

The tip of the blade breaks through his sternum. Blue blood of my protector sprays out in fine droplets, a gory mist clouding the air being sucked into the air duct where I remain hidden.

I blink hard, unable to comprehend what I just witnessed. The tip of the blade pulls free as Navik's sivot falls forward in an unmoving heap, and I get my first look at the quilled monster who just impaled my mate with the very sword Behtu had returned.

"Die, freak!" the Wetokian snarls.

I scramble away from the grate before the Wetokian sees me, hugging the side of the duct to my back, and trying to muffle my sobs. The Wetokian tosses the sword to the floor and strolls from the room.

My eyes flash to Navik's sivot lying deathly still. He can't be dead. He just can't. I reach out to touch my fingers to his claws still sticking through the grate.

Have I imagined the slight twitch?

The sivot is blocking the grate with his enormous body so I can't push my way out to check his pulse.

"Navik," I whisper, my plea filled with the hope he still lives. "Navik, please be alive."

Ever so slowly, the sivot turns his head to cross a finger over his lips. A relieved breath rushes past my trembling lips, but he's not out of the woods. The bright white of his gaze dims with every second that passes. Dark blue blood is a growing pool beneath his crumbled body, and I can do nothing to help him.

Trapped inside this ducting, I have to find another way out, to stanch the flow of blood before he bleeds out and hope he heals fast.

"I'll be right back, Navik. Hold on."

I'm at the end of a run with only one direction to go, so I scramble on all fours as fast as I can. It's no use. The duct ends at a ninety degree angle with no way to climb up.

Releasing a soft curse, I turn myself around in the tight space, and rush back to Navik. Something bumps against my thigh as I travel. I could smack myself in the forehead. How could I have forgotten?

With hands that shake, I pull the beacon Qhix gave me from my pocket. To think, I hesitated about taking it with me. I almost left it on the bedside table in our room on Zeva.

Twisting the two halves in the opposite direction as Qhix showed me, the beacon activates with a pulsing, green light.

"Please, Qhix. Hurry."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NAVIK

The thunderous boom rattles my bones, shaking me from the depths of unconsciousness. My eyelids fight against the weight of gravity to open, and what I see makes my heart skip a beat. Cora's worried face peers through the grate of the air vent where I forced her to hide.

Panic swirls in her gentle, gray gaze as she reaches out to me, her small fingers brushing lightly over my claws still jammed between the louvers. I remain in my sivot form, probably because of the severity of my injuries. Despite my fatigue, I muster all the strength I can find and drag myself off the floor. We have no time to waste. I must get my starfire off the Wetokian's ship.

My vision dims and I slump forward, fighting to remain conscious. I must keep my mate safe, but the darkness is encroaching. My life's blood spilling from the hole in the center of my chest.

"Navik, don't try to get up," Cora pleads with me. "I'm hopeful that explosion is Qhix coming to help us."

"Not know we're here," I rasp through a dry, sticky throat.

"Yes, he does." Cora holds a blinking disk up to the grate for me to see. "He gave me this beacon in case we ever needed his help again."

“Sly bliker,” I wheeze.

The first sounds of fighting come from a great distance. The floor tilts under me, and I can barely keep my eyes open, but I must stay alert. I must protect my mate.

The shouts and roars of many familiar male voices must be my imagination. Star Maverick’s don’t congregate. Ever. It’s too dangerous for us to convene in one place.

“Cora!” Qhix careens into the room from the hall and draws up short when wide eyes land on me. “And not a moment too soon. Huh, Navik?”

“In here, Qhix!” Cora bangs on the grate.

“You shouldn’t have come, Qhix.” I lift a hand only to have it flop to the ground. “Too dangerous.”

“Maybe.” Qhix rushes over unhooking a med kit from his belt. “Maybe not, but it looks like the two of you need all the help you can get. You all right in there, Cora?”

“I’m okay,” she says. “Take care of Navik first. I can wait.”

“Spoken like a true Maverick’s mate,” Qhix mumbles as he stanches the flow of blood with a cloterizer to the entry and exit points.

I grit my teeth through the sharp burn, my sivot flesh melting under the heat from the medical device to stop the blood flow before Qhix slaps a medical cuff on my arm.

“What were you thinking taking on an entire Wetokian Battle Cruiser?” Qhix asks, and points to the blade that skewered me. “Were you wounded with your own weapon?”

“Seems to be a reoccurring theme lately. For the record, we were hit with a concussion beam as I was trying to outrun them.” Qhix helps me move away from the grate and remove the vent cover. “Come on out, starfire.”

“Lie still,” she fusses at me, easing me to the floor and laying my head in her lap. “Let Qhix help you. You’ve lost a lot of blood.”

“I’m fine. It’s just a scratch.” My vision dims, belying my words as I try to remain conscious.

“Listen to your mate, Navik.” Qhix makes adjustments to the medical cuff, but I try and shake off the lethargy that comes from the anesthetic effect the cuff provides.

“Turn down... the healing effects, Qhix. You’ll... need my help... getting out of here.” I fight to remain alert, but the cuff is dragging me toward a healing repose.

“Rest, Navik,” Qhix commands as my eyes drift shut. “Behtu and Vytko are finishing off the ones you didn’t rip to pieces.”

I force my eyes open only to have them close again. Cora’s soft words lull me into a trance, comforting and soothing my wounded sivot like only she can.

“It’s going to be all right, Navik,” she murmurs. “Rest so you can heal. I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

I try to respond, to tell her I’ll be here to protect her until we are someplace safe. The darkness is unforgiving, and I can feel myself fading away.

“That creature is Navik’s sivot?” Behtu’s voice seems to come from someplace far away.

“The sivot is not a creature,” my starfire defends. “He’s still Navik, just in a different form.”

“Guess she told you, Behtu.” Vytko’s bellowing laughter washes over me as if in a dream. “Fierce little thing, aren’t you? No wonder Navik succumbed to your charms.”

I fight the darkness, wanting to wake up and tell Cora how proud I am of her for standing up to Behtu. Sleep keeps me within its firm grasp.

I’m vaguely aware of being lifted from the floor and carried by many hands. Cora’s fingers are entwined with mine. The warmth of her touch lets me know she is safe, thanks to my brothers.



CORA

“Are you sure that’s right, Qhix?” I squint up at the monitor blinking over my head. “That can’t be right.”

Back inside the medic bay on Qhix’s ship, it’s a déjà vu I can do without, Navik wounded and being healed with a medical cuff from a near death injury.

Qhix has set a course for his hideout on a planet called Loken 1, located in the Juril Sector, where Navik can finish recovering. Wherever the hell that is. I’m just glad to be off the Wetokian Battle Cruiser and on the way to someplace safe.

“Positive.” Qhix taps out a few adjustments on the monitor then points to what I’m having a difficult time believing. “That’s your heartbeat. The other one belongs to the offspring you carry. Good thing you agreed to let me scan you for injuries. It might have been a few more days before you became aware of your condition.”

Inside my mind, I count back the days since the first time Navik and I had sex. Despite my years spent with the warden, he was unable to do anything except with toys, so there’s no question it’s Navik’s. “How can there already be a heartbeat when I’m only a few days pregnant?”

“I don’t know. I’m not a medic, and I’ve never had a mate that was pregnant.” Qhix leaves me lying on the gurney to cross the room and roll over a machine that looks like a flatscreen tv on a stand. “Combat injuries are one thing. Pregnancy is another. I do know that gestation for Kaul females is approximately five months.”

“Five months! That’s all?” I look over at Navik’s sleeping form and wish he were awake to share this moment with me.

Returned to his Kaul form, his color is back to the normal brilliant azure of health. No longer the pale pallor of death, his

stab wound has already knitted together. Qhix expects him to be healed by the time we reach his home on Loken 1.

“How long is gestation for humans?”

“Nine months or so.”

Qhix switches on the new machine and hovers a rectangular card over my belly. “According to the internal imager, you’re two days along.”

I shake my head at the strange writing typing out across the screen, wondering how it’s even possible to detect pregnancy after only two days.

Qhix taps on the card and changes the view from a read out to a three-dimensional image of what’s going on inside my abdomen. The machine works like a super high-tech ultrasound.

“There’s baby Navik or baby you, gender pending.” Qhix’s blue finger points to a tiny bubble with what looks like a gummy bear nestled inside. The flicker of an itty, bitty heart ticking out the rhythm of new life.

“That’s incredible,” I whisper, knowing the pinch I felt after our romp in the forest on Zeva had to be the moment of conception.

A mixture of awe and fear war within me as I contemplate the idea of having a baby, let alone one with an extraterrestrial parent.

“Have there ever been any hybrid babies born to Kauls?”

“Not that I know of.” Qhix’s words are not what I want to hear. “I didn’t know Kaul’s were biologically compatible with other species. I guess that makes you a pioneer. First, the awakening of a sivot after millennia, and now you’re going to birth the first Kaul-human baby.”

“Why does that make me happy and nauseous all at the same time?” A mix of excitement and dread courses through my veins. It’s overwhelming, the thought of bringing a new life into the world, yet terrifying at what awaits me. “Where

am I going to have this baby? Is there a hospital or somewhere I can give birth with a doctor present?"

Qhix's eyebrows furrow together in a worried expression, which ramps up my anxiety. "Humans are looked at as an inferior race by most awakened species, so offhand, I don't know of any medical facilities."

"Awakened?"

"Meaning aware of other life outside their home worlds," Qhix explains. "Kaul females have been birthing young without assistance for as long as I can remember."

"I'm not a Kaul female, Qhix, and this isn't going to be a normal birth. I don't know what to expect. Is there any way to determine a due date given the difference in gestation times?"

"I'll contact the other Mavericks. Maybe someone knows a medic that can be trusted to help." I appreciate Qhix's attempt to reassure me. "In the meantime, try not to panic. Once Navik is fully healed, you can keep the medical cuff in case you need it during or after the birth."

"Qhix, I can't take that. What if you need it?"

"Think of it as a baby gift. Besides, I know where to get another one. It gives me an excuse to return to Zune. See what the Ziarian prisoners are up to."

"Is it safe to go to a prison planet by yourself?"

Qhix chuckles. "What fun would it be if it weren't dangerous, Cora? But Zune is a moon that orbits the Ziarian home world of Ziaria. The prisoners are supposed to be there mining a rare ore called xedon, but the one time I was there, I found no evidence of any such ore. The Ziarian government is always up to no blinking good, and I'm dying to know what it is."

"Try and be careful."

"Always." Qhix winks. "My curiosity needs to be satisfied as to what it is they're really doing there. For now, I need to get back to the bridge."

Qhix shows me how to operate the alien ultrasound and hands me the card so I can scan myself.

“Thanks, Qhix.” I take the card and smile up at him. “You’ve been a true friend.”

He gives me a slight bow. “Star Mavericks always look out for each other, it’s part of our creed.”

“Leave no Maverick behind,” I say with a watery grin.

“That includes baby Mavericks.” He points to my belly. “I’ll find someone to help, Cora, I swear it on my honor as a Maverick.”

Qhix leaves me to blink away tears of joy. After being held captive for so long, I never thought to ever feel happiness again. Here I am with new friends, a fierce space pirate as a mate, and a baby on the horizon.

Sadly, none of my new life can be shared with my mom, the only bleak spot in my new life.

“What is that you’re looking at on the internal imager?”

My head whips around at the raspy voice of my mate, and I rush to his side. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. Tired.” Navik pushes himself up into a sitting position on the gurney and nods to the alien ultrasound machine. “Are you hurt?”

“No. Not hurt.” I take a deep breath and steel myself for what I’m about to say. “I have something to tell you.”

“What is it, starfire?”

Butterflies flutter wildly in my belly as I look into Navik’s icy gaze, searching for the right words to tell him he’s going to be a father.

“Cora?” he prompts when I just stand here staring.

“We’re having a baby,” I blurt.

Navik goes still, his face an unreadable mask. The weight of my confession lands on him like a ton of bricks, and I regret

not easing into the conversation more gently. I should have chosen my words more carefully.

“Say something,” I whisper. “Are you mad?”

Navik moves with such speed, I don’t register his movements until I’m up on the gurney with him and cradled in his arms. “How could I ever be mad at you, starfire?”

“Are you okay with being a father?”

“I am elated.” He squeezes me tight before easing away to stare into my eyes. “Worried about your condition but thrilled all the same.”

“I feel the same.” I expel a relieved breath. “Qhix is giving us the medical cuff you’re still wearing and is going to call the other Mavericks to see if anyone knows a medic that can help me through the pregnancy.”

Navik quickly glances around. “Back in the medic bay on his Thrushian Star Chaser?”

“Yes,” I say. “Once we got you settled, Qhix talked me into a full body scan to make sure the Wetokians hadn’t hurt me since I was roughly handled. The monitor showed a second heartbeat. Then he used this alien ultrasound machine so I could see the baby. Our baby.”

“Can I see?” Navik swings his legs over the side of the gurney, keeping me on his lap, so we’re both facing the flat screen.

I hover the card over my flat stomach, and the image of our tiny baby appears on the screen. Navik’s eyes widen in wonder as he gazes at the tiny being growing inside me. His hand trembles slightly as he reaches out to touch the image on the screen.

“Our child,” he whispers reverently. “I can’t believe it.”

I smile, happy to see Navik so excited about our upcoming arrival. “Neither can I.”

Navik leans in to kiss me, his lips tender yet full of passion. I melt into him, feeling his love and adoration for me and our unborn child. As we break the kiss, Navik rests his

forehead against mine and whispers, “I promise to protect you both with everything I have.”

“I know you will,” I breathe, feeling overwhelmed by his love and reassured by his protective nature. “I’m just concerned over the pregnancy. The scanner shows the baby at about two days old and Qhix said Kaul females are full term at five months. Humans are nine. At only two days, our baby is way more developed than if it were only human.”

“One of the Mavericks will know a medic that can help,” Navik reassures me. “If not, I will search for one myself.”

A wave of emotions washes through me, a blend of anticipation and panic. I’m relieved that Navik is here to help me through this, but also scared of what could happen. There’s so much unknown and uncharted territory ahead, but I know that as long as Navik is with me, we’ll make it through.

“Do you know where we’re headed?” Navik asks.

“To Qhix’s home on a planet called Loken 1. I didn’t tell him the location of your mountain home. I know how much you cherish your solitude.”

“*Our* mountain home,” Navik gently corrects and places a tender hand over my abdomen. “Given your condition, I think it’s in our best interest to tell the Mavericks where we’re located in case you need help.”

“You’re all right with telling them? I thought you said the solitude is what drew you to Zeva.”

“It was. However, I’m not the same Kaul I was before I met you.” Navik cradles my face in his huge blue hands. “Now I have you and the baby, a family of my own to share my life with. I love you, starfire, and our tiny baby.”

“And I love you, Navik, and our baby Maverick.”

My heart swells with love for my space pirate. Never did I expect to find someone like him in all the stars of the Universe. Lost to my own world, he has given me a home and a family. I know as we navigate through the unknowns of this pregnancy, Navik will be there to love me, and his sivot will be there to protect me.

# EPILOGUE

CORA

I close my eyes and press my hands softly to my growing belly, a bubble of contentment rising within me. Cocooned in a luxurious nest of velvety cushions with Navik's muscular thigh as my pillow. A crisp, refreshing breeze drifts through the main living area, carrying with it the floral notes of new blossoms, marking the change of seasons.

Navik said this time of year on Zeva is reminiscent of what I would call winter on Earth. But it won't get any chillier than this, to which I'm glad. I've never liked the cold.

Six months have passed since Navik's sivot was gravely injured. Run through on a wicked blade I was sure had killed him. I shudder recalling the moment I watched Navik fall, crumbling before me in a bloody heap while I hid inside the air duct.

"Cold, starfire?" Navik reaches over to pull a fur from the back of the couch to cover me with it. "Is that better?"

"Yes, thanks." I roll to my side and snuggle into the soft fur while Navik surfs the universal network, the outer space version of the internet, on a thin tablet.

We spend most days like this, relaxing, watching the stars from our living room or taking leisurely strolls along the many scenic trails on Zeva. Navik seems happy, I know he's thrilled about the baby, but I worry.

Worry about what the future holds for us.

Navik may be content for now, but what happens if he grows bored staying home? Navik retired his place as a Star Maverick, though he's still a wanted male. I know how much he craved the thrill of traveling through the Universe, living without attachments, thieving and marauding.

How long before he resents being tied down on Zeva with me and the baby?

"Why so restless, Cora. Is it the young? Should I fetch the medical cuff? Or do we need to travel to meet the medic on Dolif?"

"No, I'm fine." I sit up, unable to keep my body as well as my mind still. "The baby is fine."

"Then what troubles you?"

"Just thinking."

"Thinking about what we've already discussed a thousand times over?" Navik asks softly, setting the tablet aside and giving me his full attention. "We've already talked about this, starfire."

"I know, but you went from a space pirate to a family male virtually overnight. I just worry I won't be able to keep you happy. That being here on Zeva all the time won't be exciting enough for you."

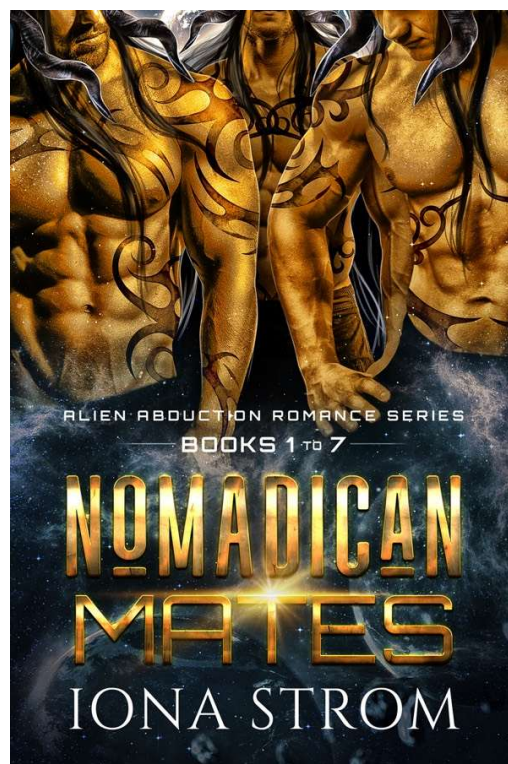
"Oh, my beautiful mate." Navik pulls me onto his lap, covering my belly with one huge, warm palm. "What can I do to ease your mind?"

"I don't know. I'm just being hormonal." I fuss with the edge of the fur blanket. "One minute I'm as happy as a clam, and the next, I can't shut my mind off from worrying that you'll get bored. That I won't be enough, and you'll leave me to go in search of another adventure."

Navik cradles my face in gentle hands, his bright smile filling my heart with light.

"You are my adventure, starfire."

# SNEAK PEEK!



[AMAZON!](#)

***Alien abductions are total crap!***

At least, that's what I used to think.

Now that I've woken to discover I've become victim to an interstellar trafficking ring, I don't have any other choice but to believe.

Saved by a spacecraft full of gorgeous alien males, I must find a way home. Yet, these males have other plans for me, and I discover too late my true purpose.

Daunting as it all feels, the more time I spend with these enticing males, the less Earth feels like where I belong.

# CHAPTER I

The musty stench of earth tickles my nose. Moving my hand to rub away the itch feels like I'm dragging a lead weight.

My body is too heavy, my eyelids locked down tight. Nothing but fog is left of my brain as I try to understand why my pillowtop mattress has turned into a concrete slab, or why the air packed in my lungs bears substance and tastes like garden soil.

Letting go, all thought dissipates with the hot breeze that ruffles my hair.



SOMETIME LATER, I float back to consciousness. Lethargy clings to me, trying to drag me under, but this time, I fight, not letting the darkness consume me once again.

Something isn't right.

A prickling awareness keeps poking at me, but I can't get my brain to make sense of why I need to be alarmed—

*I'm not alone.*

Adrenaline allows me to pry open my eyelids, just a crack, but enough to let in a blinding light that blurs my vision. Sluggishly, I blink away the distortion. The world around me slowly comes into view.

My cheek pressed hard to the ground, what I see makes no sense.

Hordes of bizarre feet! The pairs not wearing strange footwear have claws for toes, some are hoofed, while others are beyond comprehension. A menagerie of oddities the likes of which should not exist in real life traipse past on peculiar, packed red dirt. Some pause in front of me before moving on. Others rush by, undoubtedly in a hurry to get to wherever they're going.

An inexplicable spectacle is only second to the dense roar filling my ears. As the thunder taking up every inch of space inside my pounding head begins to diminish to a low buzz, a pulsing cadence of peculiar sounds emerges. A rhythm of woven chaos with a beat I can't quite place.

So tired. So... *tired*.

My eyes drift closed.

It's just a dream—a really weird one, probably from that extra glass of wine I had with dinner. Moving from bustling Los Angeles back to the small town where I was born and raised was a serious culture shock that required liquid fortification. Don't get me started on having to deal with my parents. That's where the bottle of Chardonnay, which had my name written all over it, was needed the most.

Dream or not, my bed is not what it used to be. Maybe I fell out of it, and I'm lying on the floor. Probably hit my head on the corner of the nightstand, and that's why I've conjured all this crazy. Must have a head injury.

Dragging in a breath is more difficult than usual. Air shouldn't have weight. What I'm pulling into my lungs is what I would imagine breathing underwater would be like. A concentrated substance easier cut with a knife rather than inhaled.

The longer I lie here, the clearer my head becomes. The woven chaos sorting itself into a jumbled mess of voices from that of a crowd, but still a chattering mass of untranslatable noise, reminding me of the time I visited France. Seated in a

crowded bistro, I tasted escargot for the first time and listened to all the intermingled chattering around me while not understanding a single word.

What I hear now isn't French. And the last time I checked, I was in the United States.

If I could just push myself up...

As I drag in more thick air, the earlier hot breeze that brushed my skin now feels blistering hot, especially on my lower half. Raising my eyebrows high, I force one eye to open. The spectacle of the truly curious that should not exist continues to mill about. A veritable circus of freakish feet trodding along in traversing paths, overlapping and interconnecting.

My body weighs a thousand pounds as I flop to my back. Prying both eyes open, I use my hand as a shade and wonder how I ended up outside... and why the sun looks so orange and bigger than I've ever seen it.

I mean, I remember brushing my teeth before climbing into bed... or did I? Rubbing my forehead does nothing to resurrect memories of last night.

A booted foot kicks my side. Smacking the offender away, I snap, "Watch it, asshole!" *Annnnd...* that's when I realize I'm completely naked.

Apparently, I've woken to a Halloween party in the middle of July because the dickhead who kicked me is decked out in some sort of scaly suit. Wrapping my arms around myself to hide my nakedness, I have to give him props for the mask. Those bug eyes and huge slashing mouth look authentic.

Slapping the freak next to him, the dickhead utters something in a foreign language, making a lewd gesture and cupping his crotch. They both look down at me and laugh.

*"Screw you, freaks!" I don't have to take this bullshit.*

Shooting to my feet, I list to one side, then the other before I gain my bearings. The rattle of chains and the restriction I now feel around my throat are shocking.

Dickhead rushes at me, slamming me against a wall so hard my teeth rattle. All up in my face, his gash of a mouth peels wide, revealing razors for teeth; two rows of them stacked one behind the other. My fingers pull and tear at the wide band of restriction around my throat. A show of dominance when he snaps his jaws a mere inch away from my face.

*This shit just got real!*

A scream is ripped from my tight throat. I couldn't be in a worse position to fight back, naked and chained to a wall. I try a knee to dickhead's groin, but he just laughs it off and sandwiches me tighter between the wall at my back and the coolness of his creepy body. Panic rides me hard when my effort to get away proves unsuccessful.

Taunting me with a slurping tongue up the side of my neck, I shiver in disgust from the layer of slime it leaves in its wake. Cold to the touch, I shove at him, but he's not budging. A lagging cognizance that his funky skin is no costume is freaking me out more than the threat of being bitten by those shark teeth.

Beating my fists against his arms and sides proves useless, only tiring my oxygen-deprived muscles.

Shifting his hold, he squeezes my throat with one clammy hand while the other roughly fondles my breasts. I gag back the bile percolating up my esophagus. When that hand drops between my thighs, I come alive and begin thrashing about.

"Get the fuck off me, freak!"

Unseating his hand, I gain some leverage and shove the heel of my hand into what I assume is his nose.

*That does the trick!*

Roaring with a high-pitched screech that sets my teeth on edge, I kick out, shoving him away. My back no longer pinned against the wall, I'm still in no better shape. Shackled by the throat, I can only retreat as far as the chain will allow.

Just as the freak launches himself at me again, something much bigger snatches it from the ground and hurls it across the

crowd streaming past.

Looking *waaaaay* up, I shrink back from the creature that came to my defense. Wiping at its gigantic runny nose, the ogre squats down to get a better look at me. Now eye-to-eye with my terrifying green savior, my lips tremble, my voice thin.

“Th-thank y-you.” I try for a smile, but it comes off as a stretch of my lips over clenched teeth.

His hand lifts and my back hits the wall. Green fingertips brush from the top of my head down the length of my hair. He grins. The ogre likes blondes—lucky me.

Big yellow eyes travel the length of my body. I fold my arms over my chest and bend a knee to hide my crotch.

“Hey! No touching.” I smack away the finger that probes at the juncture of my thighs. All that gains me is a sneer.

“*Na tu la beatus,*” the ogre says, gesturing with his fingers to spread my legs.

I give my head a shake. “Not gonna happen—”

One giant hand to my chest pins me to the wall, the other, he uses to scissor my legs apart. Spreading me to his view, he dips his head to have a look. My face goes up in flames. Running his knuckles up my thigh, the ogre swipes a thick finger over my feminine flesh before sniffing his appendage.

Backing away, he grumbles with a tight smile stretching his mossy green lips. The lack of the ogre’s hand has me falling forward. Catching myself on the packed red dirt, I watch the ogre walk away, disappearing into the crowd.

For the first time, I take in the strangeness of my surroundings.

The sun hanging in the violet sky is a shock of blood red orange. A gigantic churning orb resting so close to the planet its presence registers as tremendous. Oddly, I can look into its roiling depths without it burning my retinas, but it’s no less hot than the sun I used to know.

There's not much else of note about the flat, barren landscape—no trees or vegetation anywhere, only the dustless red dirt beneath my knees. The ground a hard-packed surface akin to concrete that the many strange feet, attached to even stranger bodies, leave barely a faint print.

Fear is a weighty cloak that shrinks me inside my skin as I come to terms with the fact that I'm no longer on Earth. It's almost too much to grasp the abundance of life-forms, seemingly hundreds of alien beings milling around a wide-open market.

Booths line the trodden swath of a path in front of me, displaying all sorts of wares. Some trading one item for another while others exchange merchandise for gleaming white tiles I imagine is some type of currency.

To my right, another girl is lying on her side. From what I can see, she looks human, fitted with a collar around her neck and attached to the same stretch of the wall by a chain. Swinging my horrified gaze to the left, I find another girl, another after her, and even more beyond them, all chained and collared—not human but definitely all female.

A rush of cold recognition freezes the marrow in my bones as I realize what I am in this scheme of things—merchandise, something to be bartered.

Grabbing at my collar, I feel around for some way to detach it—nothing, just a circle of thick hide with a circular ring that connects me to the chain which I give a futile yank. Feeling around the circular hook that attaches me to the wall, I give it a twist, but it's no use. The unmovable metal loop embedded in the wall is attached to the solid chain that holds me captive.

The continual stream of creatures seems to be without end. Most leer at me as they pass, but to my horror, some pause, taking an interest. Dropping to the ground, I pull my legs to my chest, wrapping my arms to hold myself in a tight ball. If I don't give them much to look at, maybe I'll go unnoticed.

*Think, Ivey.* I've gotten myself out of tight jams before. I'm a smart girl, I can figure a way out of this.

I take stock of my surroundings. Most of the creatures look male, but some I can't tell. A few appear relatively human, while others are beyond imagination. Tall and lanky with long green hair and skin to match, covered in scales or shaggy fur, there is no end to the impossible show of species present. George Lucas would have a field day with this place.

Shrinking smaller as a particularly nasty-looking half-man, half-insect *thing* scurries by on spindly legs leaving a parallel trail of pockmarks in the compacted dirt. It doesn't notice me but is curious about the girl lying on the ground. Poking at her with its spidery leg, she moans.

A troll with a lower jaw full of protruding tusks rushes forward on stunted legs. Rolling the girl onto her back, exposing her attributes to the creatures beginning to crowd around.

I crane my neck, so I don't lose sight of her. Some sort of negotiation happens between the insect-man and the troll as more creepy-crawlies begin to crowd around.

The troll holds up his hands and speaks to the crowd of beasties. Unconscious, the girl isn't given the same opportunity to protect herself as I have. That could just as easily be me being bartered. The girl moans, her head thrashing side-to-side as she begins to regain consciousness. The troll doing the negotiating hobbles over, pulling a dart-like instrument from its belt to poke into the girl's thin arm. With a yelp, she stills, her face rolling away from me. At first, I think she's dead, then I see the rise and fall of her chest, but the relief that washes over me is short-lived.

With multi-jointed fingers fit for a skeleton's hand, the insect-man tosses white tiles at the troll before rolling the girl's prone body around on the ground. Thrusting its lower abdomen forward, it begins to spin a white thread. As the creature turns the girl over and over, her body becomes encased, cocooned in a sticky web. Standing on its two hind legs, the insect-man tosses the girl over its shoulder, and she's carried away to a fate I don't want to imagine. Following close behind its retreating form are over a dozen of those alien insect-men.

I can't stop the shaking in my limbs or the whimper that escapes my trembling lips. I'm not going to get out of this one—not this time.

An uproar to my left pulls my eyes away from the girl being carried away. A much worse fate awaits a female with bluish skin. Big breasted like me, she's being stalked by a ruddy beast on all fours. Massive horns the color of alabaster grow out the sides of its head. Heavily muscled, the male is huge. When it stands upright, I cower back against the wall.

Eight feet of monster reaches out to encircle the female's waist with one enormous hand, lifting her from the ground. She doesn't fight as I expected but arches back, thrusting her breasts toward the great beast. With a long whip of its tongue, it lashes out to lavish the female's nipples. She moans, wiggling in the beast's grip. Its free hand rubs between her thighs, making her wild.

With a roar, the beast jerks the chain free, taking a chunk of the wall with it. Another troll, a species I've decided to dub "the sex-slavers," rushes forward as the beast digs into a pouch hanging from his side and pours a mountain of white tiles into the slaver's cupped hands.

Sinking into a kind of frozen shock, I try to come to terms with my situation. Not a person known for submitting, my struggle is real. Fighting these vile creatures will surely get me killed but letting them freely rut between my legs is a fate worse than death.

Bile rushes to the back of my throat. Turning, I empty what little content is in my stomach. Wiping my chin with the back of my hand, I look back to the bluish female just as she's tossed over a muscled shoulder. The beast pushes its way through the crowd to carry away its purchase. That's when I glimpse the ogre who fondled me earlier.

With a large, green hand cupping a bulge grown from viewing the beast's public fingering, its yellow eyes meet mine. I can read its thoughts through the drooling expression on its ghoulish face.

*It wants me!*

Striding toward me with a lust-driven purpose, I pull on the chain and claw at my collar.

“No, no, no, no, no,” I murmur. “Not him. I won’t be taken by an ogre.”

Wildly swinging my eyes around, I stand and scan the crowd for anything remotely human. My eyes bounce around the crowd, landing on face after bizarre face. Just as I’m about to give up hope, I settle on a pair of human men at a booth across the path who are in the middle of making a trade. I hesitate only a moment before calling out to them.

“Hey,” I yell. “Over here!”

I gain the attention of the shorter of the two men. Unfortunately, he’s not all that looks my way. Thrilled when I feel his gaze rake over me, my relief is short-lived as he loses interest, and the freak show herds my way.

## CHAPTER 2

I holler out again to gain the attention of the man across the path. He isn't the only thing that takes an expressed interest in my frantically waving arms.

As the light of hope fades with the multitude of shadows cast by terrifying creatures, the ogre shoves its way through the crowd.

Just as doom bleeds through my soul, I see the man jogging toward me through a break in the crowd. Behind him is the taller one, a scowl slashing his handsome face.

The ogre makes a grab for me, but the troll that bartered the other girl out to the insect-man takes control of the situation. Zapping the ogre with something akin to a taser, the troll plants himself in front of me, using the weapon to force back the unruly crowd into a semi-circle that surrounds me like a wall made out of freakish beasts.

*Oh shit!* I may have made matters worse.

All the attention is on me as a bidding war begins, and the two men I hoped to entice are nowhere to be seen, lost in the thick of the crowd. The creatures holding up the biggest purses are some of the most frightening.

It's all happening so fast. My head begins to spin, trying to keep track of all the aliens bidding. Their chatter is a roar in my ears, but it wouldn't matter if I could decipher individual voices, with the language barrier, I'm at a loss to know what creature I'll be sold to.

Immersed in fear, my vision goes wavy until a single voice resonates deep and rich above all the others.

*“Mot tu le tou!”* Whatever was shouted shuts the crowd up, leaving only a few mumblings in its wake.

Pushing through the throng of freaks is a beardless Jason Momoa, the tail of his dark hair held together with metal bands made of bronze, hangs the length of his powerful back, swinging free to brush about his waist as he strides forward. Towering at least seven feet, his deeply tanned skin is heavily marked with thick black tattoos banding his exposed arms and chest, I recognize him as the taller of the two. As a path clears, I see the second man, made more handsome with proximity, close on his heels.

*I’m saved!* By Jason Momoa and his handsome sidekick. Tearing my eyes away from their rock-hard bodies, I swing my gaze up to admire Jason’s cruel face when he speaks again.

Taken aback by what I find, blinking hard doesn’t change the freakish nature of his eyes. An unholy green that glows like a flashlight through tinted glass, the cat-like slits of his pupils holds me spellbound. At the rumble of his deep voice, my attention drops to the sculpted fullness of his lips. A flash of fangs has me stepping back, but I don’t get far as the wall halts my progress.

“Not... *not* like Jason,” I stammer. “Not. Like. Jason. At. All.”

Looking at the handsome one, he’s blasting me with a warm, expressive smile, his fangs gleaming a bright white in the rays of the blood orange sun. Unsettling as his dental work may be, the twin black horns curving with the shape of his head are beyond bizarre. Growing out from his temples, the thickness of his dark-as-sin hair neatly blends the odd protrusions.

I was a fool to have mistaken them for humans. They aren’t human at-*fucking*-all. Cat eyes, fangs, and horns have me thinking twice about my choice.

The bartering commences, and I share a look between the only two opponents willing to compete with whatever price shut up the crowd. A colossal monstrosity with rounded eyes that blink in the opposite direction from what I'm used to counters alien-Jason. Holding up a sack of those white tiles, I realize the hair covering from its forearm isn't the sleeve of a fur coat but actually growing out of its rough skin in wiry bristles.

Alien-Jason pauses in thought. If I'm ever going to sell myself to anyone, it's going to be to this... *male*. There is no way I'm going anywhere with that hairy beast bidding against him. I'll cut my own throat before I let that happen.

Forcing my feet to move, I come to stand in front of the two horned males; my collar pulls at my throat when my chain plays out, growing taut between the wall and me. My charming smile feels tight and forced.

"You guys should take me with you. *Please*," I plead and reach out to them. "You can't leave me here. You have to take me with you."

My words capture the attention of the shorter of the two males, who steps forward, invading my personal space.

"*Na lues*," he says excitedly and turns to alien-Jason.

I root my feet to the spot, forcing myself not to flinch when rough fingertips caress my cheek. The tilt of his head and impish grin on his impossibly perfect face throws me off-kilter as does his intoxicating male scent that does something warm and tingly to my insides.

He's surprisingly gentle as he cups my cheek. I should be terrified, but I'm not. There's an underlying gentleness that belies all of his scary attributes.

Gorgeous, I decide. Alien or not, the male is absolutely... *gorgeous*.

He steps into me and drops his head to my throat, inhaling deeply of me as I do of him. His intoxicating scent invades my senses. I refuse to credit the shiver and goosebumps peppering

my flesh to anything other than the knowledge that he has a mouthful of sharp teeth.

I'm supposed to be pushing him away, yet my hands find their way to the small of his back. His silky hair tickles my fingers. I don't stop myself when I wrap my fingers around his thick ponytail, sampling the silky texture. I drag my hand downward and wonder at the cold metal bands holding his mass of hair in place.

Large palms smooth down my back. The gorgeous one pulls me forward, my naked body plastering to his front. The bulge of his sex is an undeniable presence pressing into my belly. That musky aroma I will forever associate with him thickens, weaving an exotic spell that commands all of my attention.

The audience of onlookers falls away. All I scent is him. All I feel is the heat of his skin against mine; his fingers smoothing and caressing.

I suck in a startled breath when my hips voluntarily roll to the tune of his low growl that vibrates his massive chest. My nightmarish situation forgotten; I'm solely focused on his full lips brushing along the tender skin of my throat. For some strange reason, I feel safe in his hands.

I'm hit with the impression that he's —*mine*? I shake the notion loose. That can't be right. The heat of this desolate planet must be frying my brains.

He groans and pulls away. I stumble back at the loss of his touch. The spell broken; my foggy brain slowly comes back online as the chaos of the crowd grounds me in a reality momentarily forgotten.

The gorgeous one turns to the other male, fast-talking in a convincing tone, reminiscent of a child begging his parent for a toy before leaving the store.

I silently root for my gorgeous defender as I cross my arms over my boobs. Without the heat of his body comes a curious sense of loss, and I'm left feeling more naked than I did

before. Raw to so many peculiar eyes burning into me as I stand exposed to their intense view.

I drag my gaze over the crowd that's becoming more unruly the longer it takes alien-Jason to counter the last bid spoken by the fur-covered monstrosity that's now sniffing at the air. With bulging eyes and a heavy purse, the thing appears on the verge of attack. At the extension of a forked tongue, the monstrosity tastes the air with a flicker much like a snake in search of its next meal. I wonder if the creature can taste my scent.

Rolling his cat-like eyes, alien-Jason makes a cuffing sound. I know he can't understand me, but I have to try.

"Come on. *Pleeeeeeease*. Take me with you." The desperation in my voice making it crack. I let the tears fall down my cheeks in hopes it will gain me some sympathy. All it gets me is a passing glance.

No longer surrounded by the musky spice of the gorgeous male, the influence charming me into thinking I'm safe begins to dissipate. Anger surfaces and I want nothing more to scream and rail at the nasty crowd. I hate being afraid and this is the scariest situation I've ever found myself.

The crowd begins to stir, impatient as they wait for alien-Jason's bid. The crowd of beasts surges forward and judging by the tone of all the hollering, catcalls are not exclusive to Earth.

Taking a drag of the thick air, I'm running low on ideas. Meanwhile, the monstrosity has been watching my show with a fresh gleam in his grotesque eyes. With a lick of his lips, he sweetens his bid with another bag of alien currency. The troll running the auction ambles toward all of what's being offered. Alarm shoots high-octane adrenaline through my veins.

Wheeling around, I lunge at alien-Jason.

"Please." I grab at him, begging for all I'm worth. "Please don't let that thing take me away. If you have any kind of heart, you'll save me from that beast."

The gorgeous one jumps on board with my pleading. With both of us working on him, alien-Jason's harsh expression softens just the tiniest bit, but it's enough.

*"Mot tu le flur."* Alien-Jason's offer stops the troll in its tracks.

*"Le flur?"* The troll tilts its head in disbelief.

*"Duna."* Alien-Jason nods.

*"Mot tu le elle!"* shouts the monstrosity.

A gasp rolls through the crowd. Whatever *le elle* is must be a large sum.

I hold my breath, watching the tick of alien-Jason's square jawline. The gorgeous one is doing more of that fast-talking. I will be forever grateful to him for coming to my rescue.

After a lifetime, alien-Jason counters, *"Mot tu le donet."*

The troll nearly vapor-locks, sucking back air at whatever sum has just been offered for me. With a nasty curse, the monstrosity stows his bags of currency and waves me off as a loss. It would seem money talks, and bullshit walks on this planet too.

I collapse to my knees on the packed dirt, grateful to my saviors. I breathe for the first time in what feels like forever, the weight of the air I pull into my lungs makes me dizzy.

The troll takes the payment that's reluctantly given by alien-Jason and pulls out the wide, flat key he used to unlock the bluish female's collar. As my collar pops free, I realize I'm no longer restrained.

Before I think better of it, I spring up on unsteady feet and take off in a lumbering run.

*Free! I'm fucking free!*

Stumbling once, I regain my footing. Lightheaded from the dense air, I forge headlong toward who-knows-where. As long as I'm creating distance between me and the marketplace, I don't care where I end up. I'm resourceful. I'll find a cave. Someplace to hide...

Unceremoniously, I'm plucked from the ground. Captive once again, I shriek from the injustice. Lashing out, I kick and beat my fists against anything I come into contact with. Arms like steel bands wrap around my squirming body, and alien-Jason holds me fast, that doesn't slow the kicking of my legs or the straining of my upper body.

Alien-Jason sets me on my feet and barks strange words at the gorgeous one, gesturing with a slash of his hand. I get the impression that he's irritated with me. Well, too fucking bad! I'm rather pissed off myself.

A decision made, I slowly back away from the alien duo. The gorgeous one cautiously stalks me, babbling soothing words with hands out, palms up as if to coax me back. Despite tremors of attraction for this beautiful male, my brain is telling me to run like hell and never look back.

As I turn to act on instinct, I draw up short and freeze. The horde of nasty creatures we left behind at the market are beginning to head in our direction. With me naked and on the loose, I'll become fair game for any one of those things.

My gaze bounces wildly around. To the left and right of me, all I see is red packed dirt, scorched from the blazing orange sun, flat and inhospitable. I have no food, no water, and no clothing. By the looks of the flat, barren landscape —no place to hide.

The freak fest is kicking up a dust cloud as they barrel down on us.

"On second thought," I say, whirling around to face the two males. "Get me the fuck out of here."

The gorgeous one gives me a curt nod as if he understands my words and grabs ahold of my hand. The three of us start to run. I get no more than two steps and I fall flat on my face. These guys are at least seven feet tall with long legs and even longer strides. There's no way I can keep pace with them.

The gorgeous one helps me to my feet, brushing away the red dirt clinging to my skin. He gives me a sympathetic smile. As we stare into each other's eyes, and the world melts away, I

want to know his name. I want to know where he's from, what species he is.

Before I can open my mouth, I'm whipped off my feet and swung into alien-Jason's arms and cradled against a massive chest. I don't have the opportunity to appreciate the pads of hard muscle holding me before he takes off at a fast sprint. My arms instinctively wrap around his thick neck as he covers ground like an Olympic runner. The gorgeous one easily keeps up as if the breakneck speed is nothing.

Up ahead, I catch a glimpse of a row of spacecraft in all shapes and sizes. I would love to stare at all the unfamiliar, but I'm more interested in how much distance my rescuers are putting between me and the freak horde.

I look back over a tremendous shoulder and squeak. The creatures are close enough that I can make out angry facial features.

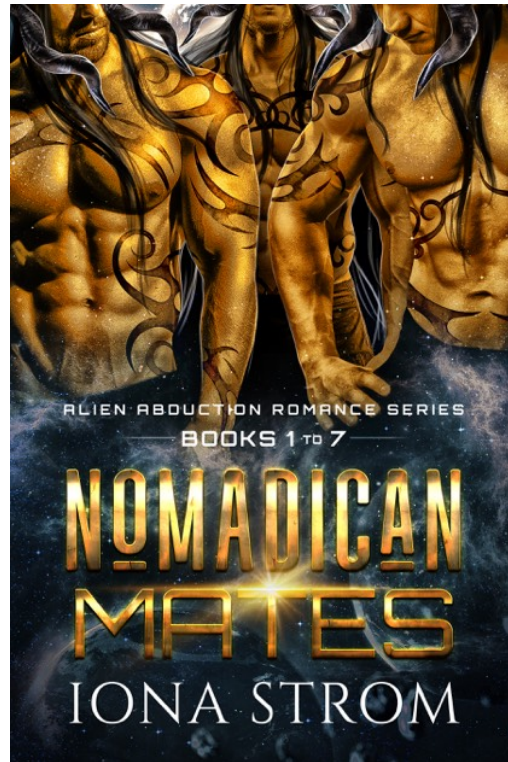
"Run faster!" I yell. "You must run faster."

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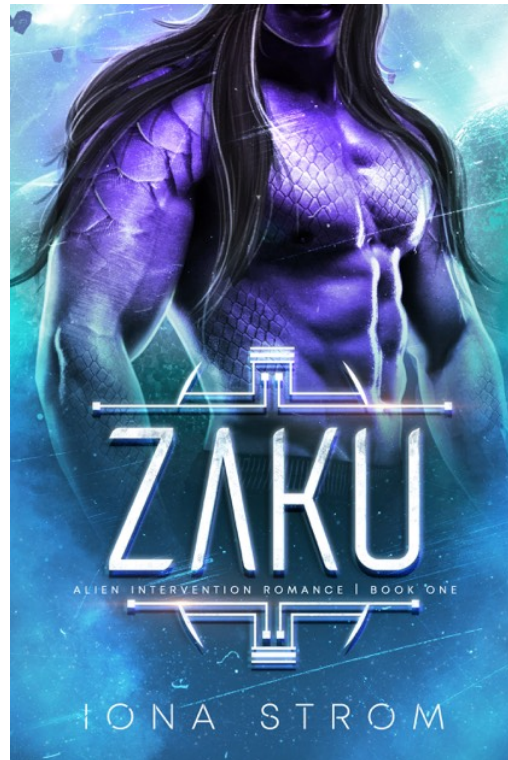
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***Iona Strom*** writes for readers who love hot and endearing romances featuring exotic alien males who fall hard for their human mates.

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