



OUT OF THIS WORLD ALIEN ROMANCES BOOK ONE

HER BARBARIAN ALIEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LACEY CARTER ANDERSEN

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BOOK ONE

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DEDICATION

*To every reader who knows what it is to struggle, but also
knows they deserves their
happily-ever-after.*

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ONE

Panic welled inside Kaci's mind as sweat beaded her forehead.
It's everywhere! I don't want to care, but I have no choice.

It never gives me a choice.

Dust! the virus commanded, bringing with it another wave of terror that rocked her body and twisted her stomach.

Dust. Now. Now!

She could fight it, but she already knew it would win. It always won.

Eventually.

Gritting her teeth, she grabbed a clean, perfectly folded rag from under the sink. She wiped the offending particles from the top of her white vidscreen, then dusted the base for good measure. When she was finished, she took several steps back and let her gaze run over the vidscreen. It sat in the center of the room, like the first item in a brand-new place, not a single piece of dust visible to her eye.

Her relief was marred by sadness. *My house is perfectly clean now. And empty.*

So different from when my sister was here.

But the virus wants cleanliness. Always cleanliness. So I simplified. Removed everything I used to cherish.

And everyone.

A loud commercial interrupted the soft music that had been playing on her vidscreen. The familiar voice caused everything inside her to tense.

The president stood, her back straight, her plain gray clothes a subtle reminder of the seriousness of what she was about to say. “My fellow Americans, we had hoped to avoid a draft, but the time has come. The names of all women between the ages of nineteen and twenty-nine were placed in a lottery last night, and soldiers are already on their way to the homes of the women selected.”

The news crews in the audience started shouting questions, but the president held up her hands for silence.

“We have no other choice. The process is so selective that less than one in five hundred passes the test. And there aren’t enough volunteers for testing. This simply must be done for the survival of the human race. But please remember, each woman who passes the test will be given one million dollars to leave to whomever she chooses.”

The president nodded to two men in military gear on either side of her. “We are sending two soldiers to each house to collect the women who are drafted. We want to avoid instances of women fighting—or fleeing—when selected. Please do not make this anymore difficult than it already is. The aliens have made their agenda very clear, and we have nothing to do but sacrifice a few to save the many. This is a great honor. The women who join the Star Squad will fight to save billions of innocent lives.” She paused, her expression

gentling. “But remember, you still need to pass the test. Even if you are drafted, chances are small that you will be chosen.”

The camera zoomed in on a close-up of her face. “Give your life for those you love. It is the ultimate sacrifice.”

The commercial ended with a flashing of the daily countdown: *7 days until The Return*, followed by one advertising the latest police-sanctioned hovercraft. Then, her soft music began again.

Kaci’s gaze strayed to the pamphlet lying on one of her white couch cushions. *I know this is the right thing to do, so why am I so afraid?*

The answer was simple: *You just don’t want to hurt her. To abandon her when she’s lost so much already.*

But despite her guilt, Kaci heard a different countdown in her mind. *7 days. 7 days until I die.*

TWO

Medic Seer jerked awake. He'd had that feeling again, even in sleep, that feeling of being tugged at by someone far away. And it was always the same, a painful moment of sadness followed by a vision of the future. Usually bad.

Make that catastrophic.

He knew it was coming...and even though he'd tried a hundred times, he couldn't stop it.

Tingles ran through his muscles and goosebumps erupted on his arms just seconds before the vision swept him under.

The female stood on the edge of a cliff, her pale blue dress swirling around her in the wind. As he moved closer, she slowly turned to face him.

He inhaled sharply. The female was like no being he'd seen before. She was tiny, both in stature and sheer size. Her skin looked strangely pale, without markings, and big blue eyes peered at him with adoration.

Eyes the color of the clearest oceans of Omiria Five.

Against his will, he reached for her. To his shock, she came to him, rushing into his arms. The soft feeling of her body against his was like nothing he'd felt before. His manhood hardened at her touch, his senses drinking in every inch of her

—from her strangely sweet scent, to the way she felt so fragile in his arms.

His heart sang, pushing aside all logic, claiming her as his own. As his mate. As his heart.

She reached for him, tangling one hand in the back of his long blond hair and tugging him down to face her. She rubbed her thumb along his bottom lip in a movement that was shockingly sensual.

Out of instinct, he licked the digit. She tasted sweet. So incredibly sweet.

And then a shadow passed over her face. Her eyes widened, and he saw the same fear that he'd seen in the gazes of too many women before her. The Bortracks had come for her.

His female's life was forfeit.

And he could do nothing to save her.

The vision faded and Seer found himself alone in his room, shaking and aroused. Never before had he experienced a vision like that. But what could it mean?

Why do I have a vision of this female when I'm not allowed to take a bride?

He stared out at the stars through his window. *You're just nervous because the new brides will arrive soon*, he told himself.

Sweeping a hand through his hair, he willed the strange feeling in his chest to fade, to gain control over the arousal that made his body hum with tension. *I'm a medic and the head researcher on a ship headed for a new world. I have other*

things to focus on than my vision, like the blood samples of the new brides.

But even though logic told him to climb out of bed and get to work, he paused for a moment to rub at the spot that ached in his chest. *It's good that my visions often have other meanings beyond the obvious. Because if I were allowed a bride, and she were in danger, nothing could stop me from protecting her.*

He clenched his fist even as he felt the unmistakable stirring of the beast within him stretching to life. *It was just a vision and nothing more.*

Yet when he licked his lips, the delicate female's flavor still lingered.

THREE

Kaci's vidscreen chimed and an image of her older sister appeared on the screen. For a minute, she just stared. Darlene had the face of a cherub. She had bright green eyes and shoulder-length brown hair that matched their father's. She had innocence, intelligence, and strength. *Which made her dangerous in battle.*

But more than that, she had a kind heart.

Choking back her tears, Kaci spoke, "Connect."

Darlene was leaning back on her bright orange-and-red sofa, her legs—real and artificial—drawn up next to her. It was a stark reminder that her sister had already fought for their country, when their greatest enemy was a dangerous group of terrorists. *How could anyone of us have known that while we were wasting our time fighting each other, the real enemy circled above our heads?*

Kaci had been ineligible for the military because of the virus, so her big sister had gone, protecting all of them. But she hadn't returned the same. While the leg was obvious, it was more than that. Without the money to buy a biologically identical leg, her sister was in constant pain. *Getting the bio-leg is the only way to stop the pains that make her life a living*

hell. The ancient metal leg strapped to her knee was just not enough.

She deserves better.

And my sacrifice will give it to her.

Worry created small lines in the corners of Darlene's mouth. "I haven't heard from you in awhile. I was starting to think something bad—"

"I can't live like this anymore," she blurted out before she lost her nerve.

Surprise flickered in the depths of Darlene's eyes, and she slowly dropped her legs to her carpeted floor. "You're going back on the meds?"

Kaci shook her head. Paused. Shook it again.

Then again.

Stop, she commanded herself.

She stopped shaking her head. Obeying. *All I do is obey my obsessive thoughts now.*

No, not my thoughts. The thoughts from the virus.

She clenched the fabric of her white pants then released her fingers. Looking down, she noted the wrinkle. More anxiety bubbled inside of her.

"No." Kaci swallowed. "I'm volunteering to be tested for the Star Squad."

The color drained from Darlene's face. "No. You don't have to do that. We just need to find the right doctor."

*Change your pants **now.***

Kaci's laugh was bitter. "So another one can tell me it's all in my head? That roughly 5 percent of women randomly developed debilitating OCD and anxiety the day after the alien craft crashed, but it had nothing to do with the aliens?"

"We're making progress with the government. Just give them more time to find a cure!"

"They aren't even looking for a cure, dammit! All of us are suffering, and we're either dying quickly, or more slowly. And I'm sick of waiting for a cure that isn't going to come! " She closed her mouth, surprised to realize she'd been yelling.

Darlene ran an angry hand through her dark hair, her lips forming curses she didn't speak out loud. "It doesn't matter if you don't get better. At least you're still here! This is suicide!"

Change!

"I know. But it's for a cause. And you know what? Intentional or not, that damn ship brought this virus here. It's their fault I have this condition. I *want* to fight them."

Her sister slammed her fist down on the table in front of her, eyes blazing with anger. "They're already doing a draft. The aliens will be fought—it doesn't have to be you! This family has already given enough!" She paused, visibly getting herself under control. After a second, she spoke more calmly. "We can go to more doctors."

To waste the little money we have instead of focusing on you, to helping the one of us who has a chance? No.

With the money I'll get from joining the Star Squad, you'll finally be able to achieve your dreams. One of us can really have it all. And it should be you.

"I'm sorry, but I—"

Darlene held up her hand. “You have other options besides this. I won’t support you in it. I need you.”

“That’s not fair! No one stopped you when you wanted to fight! I couldn’t go then. Let me do what I can now.” Anxiety made her wring her hands. She didn’t want to leave her sister like this. “Please. I need to go.”

“No,” her sister said. “You don’t. And if you do this...if you abandon me after losing Mom and Dad, I will *never* forgive you.” Darlene hesitated, her voice coming out stronger. “I need you.”

Kaci was taken aback. *Does she really need me? She’s always been the strong one, the one to take care of both of us. How am I supposed to leave now, when she’s never asked me for anything before?*

“Please?” Her sister’s word came out choked.

The answer was suddenly clear, though it almost killed her. *I can’t leave her alone in this world.*

Kaci hung her head. “Fine.”

Her sister’s tortured expression relaxed. “Thank you. Because even if you can’t see it...even if I don’t show it enough...I need you as much as you need me.”

Someone knocked at Kaci’s front door.

“Who’s that?” Darlene asked, frowning.

Kaci was shaking, afraid of what she might say or not say. “I’m not sure, but I’d better check.”

Her sister’s gaze held hers. “I love you.”

Even though Kaci’s heart hurt, she forced a smile. “I love you too.”

“Forever and always.”

“Forever and always.”

The moment they hung up, there was another knock.

Change. She pushed the thought aside, gritting her teeth.

Rising on shaking legs, she walked to the front door and peered out the small peephole. Outside, two dark-haired men in military uniforms stood waiting.

It's fate.

Her heart pounded as she opened the door. “Hello?”

“Darlene Summers?”

Horror made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. *No. This can't be!*

“What do you want?”

The taller soldier squared his shoulders and put down the hand-comp he was carrying. “I’m Officer Thompson, and you know why I’m here. Don’t make this harder than it already is. We’re looking for Darlene. Are you her?”

My sister must not have updated her address yet, so they think she still lives here. I have a chance to protect her. If I handle this right.

Kaci drew herself as tall as she could, asking the question even though she already knew the answer. “Are you here for the draft?”

Officer Thompson rolled his eyes. “I’m sure you can put two and two together here, right? Because we’ve had a long morning.”

“My sister has already done her duty to this country.”

A look passed between the two men. “Ma’am, please—“

“She’s a goddamned vet!” Kaci shouted. “She lost a leg! She’s sacrificed enough.”

Her words seemed to settle between them, and the atmosphere changed.

The shorter soldier removed his hat. “I’m so sorry.”

“That’s unfortunate, but it doesn’t change our job.” Officer Thompson said, clearing his throat as he held up his comp. He began to recite from the screen. “Darlene Summers is hereby enlisted in the Star Squad, the sole force in the battle against the alien invaders. Please understand that this is a necessity and not a decision that was made lightly. Even though we had hoped to avoid a draft, our battle plans were set in place when they crashed their ship here twenty years ago. In that vessel, we extracted their plans. They are returning in seven days’ time to invade Earth and enslave mankind.”

He paused for a breath. “The ships we’ve captured and reverse engineered can only be flown by women. Your service will prevent them from destroying our technology and systems and, most of all, humanity. She is our last hope to avoid the destruction and enslavement of mankind. In return, her family, or an heir of her choice, will be compensated with one million dollars cash. It is her duty to—“

Fate is cruel. But I don’t have to let it win. This is what I wanted anyway. And I would do anything to protect my sister. Anything.

“I’ll do it.”

He started, looking up from the comp and halting his monotone speech. “What?”

“I volunteer to be tested in her place.”

“You...volunteer?” the other guard repeated, his expression softening. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Kaci answered without hesitation. Then she added more quietly, “She’s my sister. And she already got a Purple Heart in the Winter War.”

Surprise, then sympathy, reflected in his dark eyes. “As you wish.”

The paperwork took a surprisingly short time, and then she was given her testing appointment the very next morning. As they left, Kaci stared at her ticket, then set the germ-covered number carefully just inside her door.

It’s done. Tomorrow I’ll be tested. And whatever those damn aliens want us for, it’ll be me going up there. Not my sister.

She went to her hand-comp and typed a simple message to Darlene.

I’m so sorry, but I’m submitting myself to be tested for the Star Squad. I hope one day you can find it in your heart to forgive me. I love you. Forever and always.

She scheduled the message to be delivered long after her testing appointment, then turned off her comp, and shuffled down the empty hall with its blank walls to her bedroom. She walked past the bed, nightstand, and lone lamp to the closet, where she pulled out an identical pair of white pants hung with the utmost care.

Taking them out, she dressed with caution. Aware that if any of her tears fell on the fabric, her brain would make her change again. *And again.*

I hate you, she directed the thought at her brain.

As always, there was no answer.

Tomorrow can't come soon enough.

FOUR

The Evaluator's office was just outside their small town. It was a huge building, dark and foreboding, and it took everything in Kaci to straighten her shoulders and walk toward the big glass doors. Soldiers, dressed in military fatigues and carrying rifles, eyed her as she passed them. She pasted on a smile and tried to carry herself as if she wasn't counting each step.

The women accepted seem to be young and in good health, so that's exactly how I need to present myself.

When she got to the door, she pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and pushed it open. She tried not to imagine the germs crawling from the cloth, making their way to her skin, but the image haunted her.

There was another security desk at the front. She had to leave her coat. And place all her important items on the belt. Inside, she saw the line of women. *I just need to go stand with them.* Fear and anxiety filled the air as they chatted with one another.

Too bright.

Too loud.

Too dirty.

Too crowded.

She panted, sucking in breaths as her vision spun. *Hold it together!*

Just then, chaos erupted behind her. She spun around as four soldiers dragged a tall brunette into the facility.

What the—?

The brunette swore in Spanish, struggling in their arms as she kicked and punched. Several of her blows landed, causing the soldiers to curse.

The soldiers' gazes held barely controlled rage. *If she keeps it up, they're going to hurt her.* Worry made Kaci freeze in shock.

But then they were coming right at her.

She jumped out of the way. The woman caught her eye, and the fear and desperation in her expression took Kaci's breath away.

They took the struggling brunette to the end of the line.

She struck one man in the face, and he drew his arm back, mouth twisted in anger.

"Stop!" All eyes were on Kaci before she'd known she'd spoken. "Just stop," she begged.

The brunette's long hair was a messy curtain in front of her face, just one big eye peeking out. But the way she held herself, and the rapid rise and fall of her chest, told Kaci the woman was nowhere done fighting.

But she needs to stop. They'll hurt her.

Why aren't any of the other women trying to help?

Every one of them stood with their backs turned, looking straight ahead. *As if pretending not to see it means that it isn't happening.*

One of the soldiers leaned in and spoke, nearly into the woman's ear.

Instantly, she stilled. The men released her, hovering close. But all the fight was gone from her eyes.

Kaci's heart pounded as she moved to stand behind the woman. *I want to offer her comfort, but what could I possibly say?* The soldiers around them slowly moved away until they were positioned at the exits.

The brunette turned with a smile that wavered. Her hands shook as they moved to fix her tangled hair. "Thanks for stopping that asshole. My name is Catalina." The words rolled off her tongue with a beautiful Spanish accent.

It's been so long since I talked to a person besides my sister. She'll see right through me to the virus. Meet her eyes. Choose your words with care.

"What just happened?"

The woman raised both brows, looking surprised by her bluntness. "I didn't want to be drafted."

"I don't think you're alone in that."

But there must be more to it.

Catalina gave a laugh that held only a slight edge of anger. "True enough. I didn't catch your name."

"Kaci." She forced the word out past her dry lips.

"Well, straight-to-the-point Kaci." Catalina leaned in and opened the collar on her red shirt ever so slightly. Kaci caught

a flash of silver. “I have a plan to get us out of here. You in?”

Is that a knife?

She shook her head slowly.

Catalina leaned away, the sharp lines of her face growing sharper. “What? You one of those crazies, hoping to be beamed up and find something better?”

“No, I—“

“You trying to get out of jail time?”

“No.”

“Then, why the hell wouldn’t you jump at a chance to escape?”

Kaci swallowed. *Should I be honest?* “Because I’m taking someone’s place.”

“Who?”

“My sister.”

The woman’s whole demeanor changed, her anger fading into something closer to sympathy. Then she nodded, slight wrinkles gathering at the corners of her full lips. “It shouldn’t be like this. You shouldn’t have to throw away your life to save someone you love.”

I don’t want to think about that. “Can I ask you something?”

Her eyes became guarded. “Shoot.”

“What did they say to get you to calm down?”

Catalina was quiet for so long Kaci thought she’d never answer, but then at last she did, her words coming out soft but certain. “My grandfather molested me as a kid, but then he

moved away. When I left home, I made my mom promise to keep him away from my little sister. But she didn't." Anger flashed across her face once more. "I tried everything I could to help her, but finally, I just shot the bastard."

Saying she didn't answer my question doesn't seem appropriate...

"I'm sorry," was all she could manage.

The woman shrugged. "I'm glad I killed him. But I didn't expect to be dragged here for testing. I did what I did knowing I'd spend a long time in prison, but I didn't sign on for a death sentence." She took a deep breath, something unreadable flashing in her eyes. "But they reminded me that they could always take my older cousin in my place. And nothing means more to me than family."

They threatened her? What despicable pieces of garbage!

"I'm sorry." The words felt inadequate, but they were all she had.

Catalina stared expectantly. "Most people have a different reaction to learning I killed someone."

"Most people think every life has value." She spoke without thinking, but once the words had left her mouth, she wished she could take them back.

"Oh." The woman's eyes widened. "I get it now. You volunteered for a reason then. No judgment."

She thinks I want to die.

How can she possibly understand how much I want to live?

"If I had any chance at living a normal life, of having a husband, having children...I wouldn't be in this line."

The woman's face suddenly looked younger under her heavy makeup. "Okay. I believe you."

For some reason, Kaci felt as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. *I'm giving my life, not taking it.*

The line moved slowly over the next hour, but she finally found herself standing in front of two massive metal doors with guards on either side. When it was Catalina's turn to enter, the woman looked back over her shoulder and patted the spot where her knife was concealed, then entered without looking back.

Time seemed to crawl as Kaci counted her breaths.

This time when the doors opened, her legs shook. *It's my turn. And it doesn't sound like Catalina has caused any trouble—yet.*

A small man in a military uniform led her through three more sets of metal doors—each guarded—before she stepped into the dome that housed what appeared to be an alien-looking craft.

This is it.

They went straight to the ship and stopped just in front of it. It was about twice as wide as an SUV, but far shorter, slightly taller than her waist. All black. Round in the middle and a sharp nose in the front. There was a sleekness to it that gave it an air of mystery.

"Anytime now, blondie." The little man pointed at the ship.

She narrowed her eyes. "And what exactly would you like me to do?"

His mouth pulled into a thin line. “What do you think? Climb in! See if it responds to you!”

This must be the test.

Taking a deep breath, she drew her shoulders back. Then took two more breaths. Then walked toward the ship. When she reached the side, she saw that the glass top had been pulled back to reveal a small area filled with a dashboard covered in buttons. It was a small space, obviously meant for one person.

She’d never been claustrophobic, but her anxiety screamed to life. A guard reached for her hand to help her board. She shifted away from his touch, fighting her brain’s desperate screams to run from the small dark germ-filled space.

When she finally lowered herself into the ship, she was slick with sweat. She clenched and unclenched her hands as nervous energy coursed through her. Staring at the dials, she wondered how she was supposed to fly it. And then, a dark thought slid through her mind.

This is the moment.

If you aren’t chosen, you will lose the opportunity to die with dignity.

To help your people.

To help your sister.

You must be chosen!

The guard leaned over her. “Place your hand on the disc.”

She looked up to meet his eyes, but instead his gaze was running over her. Something uncomfortable flipped in her stomach. *Why is he looking at me like that?*

The little man in the military outfit suddenly appeared next to the guard. “On with it now! We’ve still got a line out the damned door, and we’ve only found one match all morning.”

With one hand tapping her leg, *tap, tap, tap*, pause, *tap, tap, tap*, she reached her other hand out and placed it on the silver disc. Straps wrapped around her hand like the tentacles of an octopus. She gasped in shock and fear as she tried to pull free. A second later, however, pain radiated through her palm. Red blood leaked from beneath her hand onto the disc.

This isn't right! This shouldn't be happening! Something's wrong—

The world faded to nothing. Instead, she saw a strange and beautiful man sitting at a desk. He was covered in tattoos, curving black shapes that seemed out-of-place on a face that was so stunning it took her breath away. Looking up, his pale green eyes widened in surprise. His lips moved, but she couldn't hear any sound.

She moved closer to him, wanting to run her hands along the hard lines of his body. To tangle her fingers through his long blond hair.

Never before had she seen someone who should frighten her, but instead, aroused and intrigued her. His gaze promised her, I will protect you always.

Closing her eyes, she willed herself into the safety of his arms.

“Command it!” someone shouted.

Her eyes flashed open, and reality came back like a bucket of cold water. Her vision, the feeling of being safe, disappeared in the harsh lights of the military building.

“Command—?” she murmured.

“Tell it to fly!” the military man shouted in annoyance.

Feeling uncertain, she did as he told her. To her shock, the dashboard lit up and the craft slowly rose from the ground. The two men near the ship stumbled back as the ship rose higher and higher.

She looked down into the room below. The scientists, guards, and military men working around the edges of the room paused in their tasks and stared up at her.

Now what?

“Okay,” the little military man said, excitement in his voice, “just imagine gently landing back down.”

It can't really be that easy, can it? But she did as he said anyway. Very slowly, the craft landed.

The man and the guard were immediately at her side.

“Congratulations,” the little man said, smiling for the first time. “You’ve got what it takes to fly one of the alien ships, pilot. Which means you’ve just officially been accepted into the Star Squad.”

He pulled something from his pocket and pressed it onto the back of her hand.

She looked down.

9,847.

I guess this means I'm in. So what now?

Fear crept through her veins, but even as it did, she remembered the face of the man from her vision. And although she knew he wasn't real, the thought of him calmed her in a way nothing else had for a very long time. She tried to

imagine him just as he was in her mind, but somehow, she could already feel him slipping away.

If only...

But she already knew, even if the man with the kind eyes existed, he couldn't help her now. No one could.

FIVE

Seer's primal side was enraged. It demanded the blood and death of his enemies. Who were close. Closer than he ever imagined they could be.

I just need to focus on my work. Lose myself in it.

Or kill those creatures with my bare hands.

He drew in a shaky breath, forcing his hands to uncurl. *You are a medic and a researcher now. Not a soldier. Those beasts are not your concern.*

But something had brought his primal side roaring to life. A memory. A memory of the beautiful female who his heart claimed as his mate.

It was nothing.

And yet, his hands shook. With anger. With frustration. With desire.

This is why your work is so important. It is something you do have control over.

Turning his head, he stared at his screen, willing himself to forget all else but his work. Time ticked by. He slowly relaxed as he viewed the data streaming in from the new Earth brides. *This is exactly why I agreed to join this crew, being Head*

Researcher on the first bride exchange with a new world is an opportunity I never thought I'd have.

And it keeps me focused on the present.

From light-years away, females were simultaneously injected with their new mate's language, while their blood sample was taken. Only females capable of breeding with their males would be accepted in the exchange.

Everything was going perfectly. *Not even a slight hiccup detected so far.*

Almost the second the thought entered his mind, the computer flashed, the numbers freezing in place. His eyes widened at the sight of the latest data being streamed from their soon-to-be brides. "One of the women has Spiritus blood in her. That's impossible."

He rubbed his face and stared back at his holoscreen until the numbers stopped blending together. The data was the same.

Not quite one of us, but not quite human either.

"That can't be," he murmured to himself. "In order for one of the humans to have our blood in them, she'd have to be..."

He wasn't certain.

But what he did know was that female number 9,847 was an abnormality. A mystery. *And I love mysteries.* He now not only had a new species of brides to study, he had a specific female to study.

He grinned, but then his smile faltered. Number 9,847 would be the easiest Earth female to breed with. *Parsimon will want her as his bride.* Which made him feel... uneasy.

Soon he would run The Bride Initiative. It would assign each woman to their mate based on the best possible match for breeding, but also based on factors that they'd finally been able to identify on a scientific level. Their system was nearly flawless. The females would find themselves irresistibly drawn to their mates, as would the males. It was the closest science could come to identifying a formula for love.

But when Parsimon learns of her Spiritus blood, he'll want female number 9,847, regardless of whether or not they would make a good match.

Unfortunately for her.

His door beeped. *Only a few people have access to the private medbay that leads into my living quarters. I wonder what the person wants.*

“Enter,” he responded, leaning back with a groan.

How long have I been staring at that damned screen?

His best friend and captain entered Seer's quarters with his usual air of confidence. Moving soundlessly past his bed, he went to the corner and poured them both a drink.

Immediately, Seer tensed as the real world collided with his simpler world of numbers and formulas. Wearily, he watched as the other male came to settle in the chair across from him.

Usually I'd be glad for his company but not after what I learned earlier today. Not after seeing my greatest enemy, the creatures who haunt my nightmares, walking the halls of this ship as guests.

It was a terrible betrayal. And the only person responsible for it could be the male staring at him, one Seer had called friend for many years.

“No greeting?” Leader’s voice held an edge of amusement as he handed the other male a drink. “I’m told you saw the Bortracks and that you were not pleased. That you have been asking many, many questions. Do you still have any left unanswered?”

Many. Too many.

Like how could we work with the creatures responsible for the greatest war in our history? Like how could any male see the things we did during the war and not gut any Bortrack on first sight?

But spewing my angry, betrayed words will do no good.

Seer eyed Leader, trying to remain calm. “Why are the Bortracks here?”

“We need them.”

His friend’s answer was not good enough. “We have never before needed the Bortracks to retrieve brides. What’s different this time?”

Leader’s smile faltered. “Parsimon does things differently.”

This has been sanctioned by the council? He wasn’t sure what he’d hoped was the reason for seeing the Bortracks on board, but imagining his government coming to some kind of agreement with their enemies was certainly not it. As excited as I am to be Head Researcher, I would never have joined a crew with those beasts on board.

“The Bortracks thrive on suffering and violence. They’ve been reduced to little more than a scattering of groups that survived the war. What could Parsimon possibly have offered them to gain their help?”

Leader shrugged.

The muscles in Seer's body tensed further. "I can only conclude that he lied to the Bortracks to gain their help. Offered them something that we would never willingly give."

"I don't know what Parsimon gave them in exchange." Leader sat back in his chair, swirling the golden contents in his glass. "I was not part of the negotiations."

Be calm. Think. Don't act.

Seer took a sip of his own Golden Spite, letting the beverage pop softly on his tongue before he answered. "I don't like it."

This can only end badly.

Leader's facial markings shifted with his darkening mood. "None of us like it. But Parsimon says we need them."

He felt a wave of relief. *At least my friend is not working with them by choice.*

Seer almost suggested they give up their mission and have the Council send another crew that didn't include the Bortracks. *Almost.*

I lose nothing but a chance to keep my mind busy with my work. Most of the males on this ship would be delaying claiming their mates. Including Leader. Including my other friends. It should be their choice, not mine. If the males who had paid for their brides through this voyage wanted to take this risk, it wasn't his place to speak against it.

But I sense that this will end badly.

"Not to worry, my friend. You might not have a vote on politics, but you are still our First Tier Medical Specialist and Head Researcher. You'll be tucked safely away with any

females who need your level of expertise. Who need your healing mind. And, of course, with your beloved data. You won't even be aware of the Bortracks."

His gut tightened. *I envy you, my friend. If you can so easily forget the horrors from the war. The images of what the Bortracks did to those females. Because I can never forget. And knowing they are so close?* His pulse raced, pounding in his ears. *It will take everything in me not to seek out their chambers and give into the soldier within me. To crush the life from them.*

It is what they deserve. Every one of them.

Seer was shaking, struggling to control his raging emotions. "I'm already aware of them. Stomping our halls like they own the place."

"While guarded." The words held a slight growl.

My friend's inner beast rides too close to the surface. If he isn't careful, he'll shift on this voyage. And the last thing he wants to do is prove the rumors about his infamous temper.

"They will be kept in their quarters as much as possible," the other male added, as if such a fact was significant.

Seer wondered if Leader really thought that their physical presence was his issue with their agreement. *He should know me better than that. He should know my hatred for the Bortracks runs deep. The creatures are evil at its purest form.*

The Bortracks stole or purchased their females as breeding slaves. Then mated with them continuously until they were impregnated. If they survived the mating process, the females were locked in a birthing chamber. A box where the females would hang, with metal bars encasing them, bowing them forward, leaving room only for their bellies to grow. Tubes

were inserted where needed to force them to stay alive, to use all their energy in growing the monstrously large child. When it came time to birth the Bortrack baby, the females had usually become thin, almost lifeless skeletons, their bellies extending nearly to the ground. Then, the Bortracks would cut the child free and leave the mothers to bleed to death.

During the war, most of the birthing chambers they stumbled across held nothing but bodies. But worse were the times they found the females who still lived. *Their deaths were slow. All I could do was take their pain away.*

I did not become a medic to helplessly watch females die.

In all his time as a soldier, he had saved only one female. *She had survived...but barely.*

Her name was Purity. *Seeing someone that brutalized, someone whose body I could heal but do nothing for her mind, still haunts me. For that reason, I sometimes wish I had never been with the medic assigned to that Alpha Squad. Even if saving the king's niece brought me fame and fortune.*

“What are you seeing?” Leader asked.

Seer jerked back into reality. Setting his drink down and rising in agitation from his seat, he paced before the wide windows of his chambers.

“I wasn’t. I was remembering.”

Leader’s voice held a note of fear. “So it was not a premonition?”

Seer had been given his name when Power Seeker had determined his gifts on the first day of his birth. People often grew nervous when he got lost in thought. *They always think I am seeing some terrible vision of the future, but how could*

they possibly understand that seeing is about the past just as much as the future?

“No. I was thinking of Purity.”

“Ah.” Leader sounded far too relieved. “I saw her at a ball not long before our departure. She looked well. You did an excellent job healing her.”

She has gained weight once more. But although her body looks healthy, her eyes are still haunted. I wonder if she is glad she lived.

“The same monsters who brutalized that woman are guests on our ship. I wonder at the wisdom of your choice.”

Leader raised a brow. “It was not my choice.”

“That does not excuse it.”

His friend placed his drink down and crossed the room to step in front of Seer. “I can handle this. I can handle anything, if it brings me to my mate.”

Before the Contagion, none of these males would risk working with the Bortracks for a mate. They are desperate. Recklessly desperate.

“And you believe we can control these creatures? Even for a short time?” Seer tried to keep the disbelief from his words, but failed miserably.

“Trust me. The females will be safe. If the Bortracks step out of line, deal or no deal, I will dispose of them. Even if it costs me my career.”

Seer knew his friend was called Leader for a reason, and it wasn't just that he was the captain. Leader's reassurance tugged at his thoughts, urging him to listen.

But instead, Seer met the other male's gaze. "If I have to kill those beasts to protect the newest brides, I will."

Leader fidgeted nervously. "I thought that your killing days were behind you, that you sought only peace now."

Seer clenched his teeth. "If you do not want me to return to the male you knew in the war, you will make certain no female is hurt at the hands of our enemies."

His friend squeezed his shoulder, holding his gaze. *He's afraid. Afraid of what I'm capable of.* "You have my word. All will be well."

Seer looked away, that familiar feeling rising in him again. He might not be able to shift, but the primal side of him was always there, just below the surface. Driven by a violent need to protect. And since his vision of the blue-eyed female, he felt it pacing just below his surface.

I must hope all goes well. If I unleash it, I fear that I will not be able to regain control again.

And in many ways, that was more worrisome to him than even the Bortracks.

SIX

Training was every horror Kaci imagined all rolled into one. She slept in a massive room filled with bunk beds. Forty women shared the space. Some smelled. Some were messy. Some hummed or sang. All were infested with germs.

She couldn't even hide out in the filthy, overused bathroom. Instead, she gritted her teeth and closed her eyes, trying to imagine she was in a pristine white space alone.

Her OCD fought her tooth and nail, but she reined it in as well as she could. Obsessive thoughts beat at her brain over and over again. She was sure the other women thought she was odd. It was impossible for her to hold a real conversation. Someone would speak to her, horrifying images would play in her mind, and when she looked up again, the person was gone.

If I can just hold on a little longer, this will all be over.

She rocked in her bunk, hands over her ears, repeating the comforting words over and over even as the intrusive thoughts roared louder.

These clothes are filthy.

The stains on the sheets are probably covered in germs.

Get out. Run! Go—

Someone touched her shoulder.

She uncovered her ears, realizing for the first time she was shaking.

“Kaci?”

Looking up slowly, Catalina’s face came into view. Free of makeup, she looked different, younger. With an air of innocence that was completely unexpected for a killer. *Or for the woman who has proved herself such a bad ass leader and fighter that she’s become the head of our squadron.* Catalina’s dark brows arched over eyes that were such pale brown they were almost hazel. She smiled, softening her heart-shaped face even further.

“You okay?”

“I’m—“ She shuddered.

“Not okay.” Catalina finished for her. “Come with me, *amiga.*”

She wasn’t okay. Because she was spiraling. Because she was so close to losing all control, she followed Catalina. Untangling her legs from the bunk, she ignored the way conversations silenced as she walked past. How card games froze.

Catalina led her out the door and into the chilly air. Immediately, her anxiety seemed to decrease. *Strange.* She sucked in a breath. *At home the outdoors makes me worse.*

The base was quiet that early in the morning, the massive field of alien crafts strangely silent. The only movement came from the enormous fence surrounding the base, where armed military men paced. *To keep us from escaping.*

Some of the women whispered that bases just like this one had been created all over the world to house the women. To keep them prisoner until the aliens arrived.

Catalina took her to the small lake in the back of the base, where she sat down on a bench. Kaci cautiously sat next to her.

“You have the virus.” Her words were a statement rather than a response.

But Kaci answered anyway, “Yes.”

Catalina was quiet for a long moment. “My older sister had it too.”

She didn’t need to ask why the statement was in past tense.

“It must have taken everything within you to last this long. To come here and face your fears.”

Each time they have me fly the spaceship, the small space closes in on me. My hands shake, my vision goes black. I can barely hear the commands over the intercom.

And training classes are just as bad. I can barely fight. I’m so distracted by the smell of sweat. When I spar with the other women, I pray not to make contact with their bodies.

This place is torture.

Kaci wrapped her arms around herself. “Maybe it was a mistake. I’m not hiding it well enough.” Catalina turned slightly to face her, and Kaci noted that she was cautious about not touching her leg. “We only have one more day.”

All the air rushed out of her lungs. “I’m about ready to break. I don’t know how I’ll hide it that long.”

Catalina only laughed. “You can hide it.”

“Easy for you to say. One day you’re trying to kill our commanding officer, and the next you’re the head of our squadron.”

She shrugged. “Maybe I decided this is a cause worth fighting for. Or, maybe, I thought the nine of you needed me.”

We did. Their squad was the absolute worst. They would be the first to attack during the invasion. ‘Bullet Catchers,’ as some of the other women mumbled. But Catalina had never hesitated in demanding that if she led, it be their group only.

“I want to be able to do this... but I’m going crazy.”

Catalina met her gaze. “You fly well. The ship responds to your commands faster than any other woman. It’s only your fears, your unwillingness to try during hand-to-hand training —“

“I am trying! I’m trying so damn hard!”

She put up a hand. “I know. But that isn’t how they see it. My point is, you’ll make it. Because I believe you can, and because I’ll help you.”

And because Darlene needs me to.

“But what about Zoey,” who seemed constantly distracted, “and Athena,” who was frighteningly angry, “and Clarissa,” who seemed terrified of her own shadow. “They all need you too.”

Catalina smiled. “Let me worry about our squad girls, you focus on yourself.”

If only it was that easy.

“Besides,” she continued, “I think at this point they’d let you fly no matter how crazy they thought you were.”

Not when they can simply take my healthy sister in my place.

Kaci forced a smile. “That’s something.” She touched one corner of the bench, then touched it again. With each second that ticked by, she could feel training time drawing nearer, but she wasn’t ready to end the best moment in days. Not yet. “Can I ask you a question?”

Catalina nodded.

“Do you regret killing your grandfather?”

Geez, Kaci, where did that come from?

“No.” There wasn’t an ounce of hesitation in her voice. “My sister wasn’t safe, and no one would help her. She was too afraid to tell anyone else the truth. And my mom and the officers? They just saw a kind old man, not the sadistic bastard hiding underneath. It was all a game for him. All he had to do was not screw up while they were watching.” Her head sank a little. “So I did the only thing I could.”

The hurt in the other woman’s voice called to her. “I’m so sorry.”

Catalina nodded. “I’ll never trust another man again.”

“Well.” Kaci smiled sadly. “That probably won’t be a problem at this point. For either of us.”

“Do you...do you have someone?” the woman asked.

Kaci shook her head. “I’ve heard it’s better to have never loved than loved and lost though.”

“I guess we’ll never know.”

For some reason, they both laughed, even though the sound was sad to her ears.

A comfortable silence stretched between them.

“Why do you think only women can fly their ships?” Catalina asked.

Kaci had spent too long the past few days thinking of this. “Maybe they’re all female?”

Catalina shrugged. “I guess we’re just lucky their scout ship crashed years ago, or we wouldn’t know about the invasion. They’d wipe us out and we wouldn’t have any real resistance.”

“I guess that’s something.” Her stomach turned in an unsettling way that made her want to curl up in a ball and sleep until this nightmare was over. If only. “So tomorrow then?”

Catalina stood and looked back at base. “Yup, tomorrow, and it looks like training is about to begin.”

Kaci stood too. *I can handle one more day.*

But a cruel voice whispered in the back of her mind, *No you can’t.*

SEVEN

Seer's comp rang out as he was finishing straightening up his private medbay. He frowned. They'd be entering the wormhole shortly, and then all communication would be cut off from this galaxy. *But who would be contacting me now?*

Walking past the three healing chambers, he seated himself before his desk and placed his palm on the silver oval. Parsimon's 3-D image wavered and came into view. His dark hair lay combed close to his face. His markings were sharp, distinctly unpleasant, and set into an equally unpleasant face.

"Medic Seer."

"Lord Parsimon, to what do I owe the honor?"

"Have you found my mate?"

Seer felt a sense of unease as he spoke. "I was about to run the Bride Initiative. But...there is an Earth female with Spiritus blood. I will have to examine her to determine exactly —"

"She is mine!" Greed darkened the other male's eyes further.

Seer released a slow breath. "Are you certain this is what you wish? Without the program, there is a chance you will not

be compatible. She may not enjoy your company or find you attractive, you in turn—“

The male waved a hand, dismissing his concerns. “All I care for is that she is capable of producing healthy heirs. Females themselves interest me very little.”

Seer tried to hide his surprise. *After going across galaxies to find a mate, I would care more for the female herself than her uterus.*

“If you are certain.”

“I am.” Parsimon folded his hands over his belly, looking far too satisfied. “And I will make it your personal responsibility to determine why she has such unusual genetics. Understand? She is your priority.”

He does not need to tell me how to do my job.

Seer gritted his teeth. “As you wish.”

I will never work for this man-child again. Everything within me wishes I was close enough to a hospitable planet to simply leave on a shuttle.

“But now for the reason for this contact,” the other male’s eyes glinted with something that made Seer even more uneasy. “There is information you need to know, and there isn’t much time to tell you.”

Seer sat up straighter. “Yes, m’lord.”

“I have just now informed Leader, and he felt it necessary, given your role in this voyage and your connections, that I explain it to you as well.” He paused. “We have not made a trade arrangement with the humans for mates.”

His brows rose. *Then why are we wasting our time with this voyage?*

“After carefully monitoring this species, we learned that although they are compatible at a basic level and will produce offspring, we had no doubts that they would not allow us to simply trade for the females best suited to us.”

“So—“

“So we setup a trap we knew they would be foolish enough to fall for. We crashed a craft on their planet, with specific details about an invasion date. They in turn did exactly as we expected—they reproduced replicas of the craft.”

What does this have to do with...oh. “To fight off the ‘invasion’,” Seer said slowly.

“I knew you would get it immediately!” The other male sighed dramatically. “If only the humans were that smart. No matter. We placed an Evaluator within the ship as a requirement for flying it, which means only genetically compatible females can fly the ships.”

Seer rubbed his forehead. “I think I see where this is going.”

“Yes! A large group of genetically compatible women will be flying straight from Earth to our ship. When they get in range, their weapons will disengage, and we will take over the controls to manually fly them into our docking bays.”

Seer felt his jaw drop. “Do you really think it’s going to be that easy?”

Parsimon waved his hand. “Of course!” He raised an eyebrow and leaned into the screen. “Need I remind you that we are the far superior species? We are genetically and technologically more advanced. The females should be grateful we are taking them.”

We're kidnapping those women. This makes us no better than the Bortracks. "My lord..."

Parsimon rubbed his hands together. "And soon, many deserving males will finally have brides and, as the one responsible for all of this, I will be generously compensated. My plan is flawless."

But this is not how it is done. There is a protocol for this very reason.

Every year the Council sent out new Searchers. The specialized, automatic crafts traveled at speeds that would be deadly to life-forms. Their job was to seek out compatible species on other planets. The devices went in different directions, sometimes disappearing for many years. Sometimes not returning at all. But if they did find compatible life-forms, the Searchers opened wormholes back to their own world, Unngar, so their people could quickly travel back and forth. Negotiations were made between the Council and the new world for the females they so desperately needed. *We have bargained hard with other worlds, but never before have we simply taken the females we need.*

"I thought this mission was sanctioned by the Council."

What we are doing is illegal. Wrong.

Parsimon's eyes flashed with rage. "They would never have approved our mission. Because it was not one of our Searchers that discovered the human planet, but one of the Bortracks'. They contacted me with a deal I simply could not refuse."

The other males can't be aware of this arrangement. They would never take unwilling mates...

"Lord Parsimon—"

“You will help Leader with all that he needs,” he responded, his voice twisting and garbling.

We must be about to jump through the wormhole.

“I won’t be a part of this!” Seer rose. “It’s unethical.”

The male’s image twisted. “It is too late to save the females, but if you stir up any trouble after, I will find a way to wash my hands clean of this...but your friends? Leader? And the others? They will not be so lucky. Will your conscience be any cleaner when they are exiled for bringing back the humans? Will the females be any safer?” And then, he was gone.

Seer stared at the blank screen in shock. *This can’t be happening.*

His cabin shook for a long moment, then outside his window new and different stars appeared. *The human galaxy.*

Suddenly a Bortrack Searcher, a standard Nutronian transporter, came into view outside his window. Tan in color and massive, almost three times larger than their ship, it had sharp angles covering every inch of it. At one end was a long point, and energy flowed from it, creating the wormhole. *So this is why we have Bortracks on board our ship. It wasn’t one of our Searchers that found the human world, but theirs.*

Without the Bortracks we could not have accessed this galaxy. We shouldn’t be here. If they turn on us, they could seal off the wormhole stranding us from our homeworld. Why would Lord Parsimon take this risk?

Because he didn’t, a stern voice whispered in the back of his mind. *He sent all of you instead.* He closed his eyes, feeling ill.

And what could we have traded with the Bortracks for? They can take Earth without us.

His comp buzzed. He touched the silver oval more out of instinct than desire. His blood-brother Gallant's 3-D image hovered above the display screen.

"Did you see it?"

Seer nodded. *Of course. He doesn't know of Parsimon's deal.*

"If we used a Bortrack transporter, then it means we don't have one in this sector. What we're doing is not sanctioned by the Council."

"I know, brother." Seer took a deep breath. "We also haven't negotiated for brides."

Gallant's expression grew distant as he processed the information. "Then what are we doing here?"

"Kidnapping them."

Anger blazed to life in his dark eyes. "We may not share the same mother, but our blood flowed together in battle. Would you have me believe that you—?"

"I did not learn this until a moment ago. From Parsimon himself."

Gallant slammed his meaty fist against his comp. "That bastard. We cannot do this. I paid a dear price for my bride, but I will not kidnap her. Such a thing is against every..." His words were cut off by a string of curses.

"Brother," Seer interrupted, trying his best to sound calm. "I share your anger. But I think the more important thing to consider is what we offered the Bortracks to allow us to use their wormhole."

Gallant quieted, running a hand along his neatly shaved head. “You are right.” Then, their gazes locked. “And how we will protect the females from those monsters. I don’t want them to end up in the birthing chambers.”

A siren wailed and Gallant looked at another screen, his brows wrinkled. “Ships appear to be entering space...from the human planet. What could this mean?”

But Seer already knew. “It means it’s too late to save the females.”

EIGHT

This is it.

I'm going to save Earth.

Kaci glanced down at the flashing lights of the control board in front of her and then out the window at her last view of the airfield. Her squadron of ten, known as Tridek Squad, surrounded her.

Probably every one of them feels like I do.

Anticipation. Fear. And an indescribable feeling of pride.

Beyond their small group, identical ships amassed in battalions stretching out in all directions on the black tar airfield.

We're as ready as we're going to be. The scout ships were launched. Initial intelligence says one massive alien craft just entered Earth's airspace. It's now or never.

“Soldiers,” Catalina’s softly accented voice came across their squadron’s coms, lighting her viewscreen in a soft blue light. “My friends. I know you’re nervous, but we got this. Stay in star formation. Attack as one. That’s our job. That’s all we have left to do.”

“And fight...” Athena added, her voice laced with sarcasm and anger.

“And die.” Clarissa’s cracking words hinted at tears.

Come on, Tridek Squad! We need to prove to everyone else that we aren’t as useless as they think. Kaci’s anger rose as she remembered some of the disdainful looks from the military personnel who had trained them. She clenched her free hand. “And save Earth. Remember, that’s why we’re here. To protect the people we love.”

“That’s right!” Catalina intoned, passion filling each word. “You ladies remember when those damned terrorists attacked during the Winter War? Our brothers and sisters fought to keep us safe. Now it’s our turn. For Earth!”

“For Earth!” they all echoed.

That’s right, Darlene, my brave sister. You sacrificed enough back then, it’s my turn now.

“Amen,” Zoey whispered, followed by a chorus of “amens” by the rest of the squad.

The light around her viewscreen changed to gold as the head commander of the Earth fleet, spoke, overriding their squadron communication. “This is Head Commander Quartz. Greetings to you all. In moments, ten thousand women from around the world will lift off and join me in taking down our enemy. We are all that stands between Earth and annihilation of the entire human species.

Until hours ago, we didn’t know what we would face today, but we knew it would be the aliens that wanted our planet for their own. Now, we know. There is one ship, a monster of a ship, out there waiting for us. Speeding ever closer through our galaxy toward Earth. It’s time. Time for us to be heroes. Ready yourselves for countdown.”

The straps that pinned Kaci's hand to the silver oval squeezed her tighter. To her surprise, the feeling was no longer disturbing...but reassuring, in a strange way. She took a deep breath and the oval seemed to warm beneath her touch as if it was ready and waiting to obey her commands.

The countdown to liftoff started, blinking on her screen.

10...9...8...

A surreal feeling overtook her for a moment. *I'm really doing this!*

...2...1.

Hastily, she sent the command to the ship. It lifted off, silent as always, hovering for just a moment.

Around her other ships rose. Then a few went berserk.

Not again.

Two zigzagged toward the horizon, then abruptly smashed into each other not far from the base. Their smoking, fiery masses tumbled to the ground, then disappeared from her view. Perhaps a dozen ships took off in various directions, quickly fading from view.

Chickens.

I should have expected it, but somehow, I guess I thought all the suicidal pilots had already crashed their ships. And the ones who planned to abandon the fleet had already taken off.

Her viewscreen lighted blue. Catalina's reassuring voice came softly, "No one from our squad left. Ignore them. Focus on the next step."

She's right.

Kaci took a deep breath and willed the shiver that traced down her spine to fade, then pictured their flight path. Instantly, the speed pushed her back against her seat and she shot into the atmosphere. The ship shook around her and the temperature shifted subtly, growing colder. Goose bumps raced along her arms, but she was too anxious to focus on anything but staying in star formation with her squad.

We've done this time and time again. But now, we're actually going to enter space! There's no second chance if we screw up.

Her pulse filled her ears as she rose higher than she ever had before. She left behind a sea of clouds and kept going. And then, suddenly, she exited the blue haze of the ionosphere.

Instantly, the drag on the ship seemed to disappear and the flight became smooth. She commanded the ship to pause for a moment, as they had been ordered to do while waiting for the other squadrons to take position around their own.

The stars stood out like a panorama against the sky. She rotated the ship back to look at the Earth. The vision tore the breath from her chest. She'd seen pictures. Watched movies. But to actually be there, looking down at her planet? It was incredible.

This. This is what we're fighting for.

A few moments later, Catalina's voice came on over the com. "All fighters in Tridek Squad, check in please."

Their code names came in rapid succession.

"Silent Fire," she said when it was her turn.

"All right, ladies, stay in formation. Fire on my command. Let's show these aliens whose planet this is."

“Yes, ma’am,” came her squad’s voices in unison.

She held her breath, her stomach turning. *Be brave. For Darlene.*

“Tridek Squad,” the lead commander’s voice seemed to come from around her. “Attack!”

Their ten ships moved as one, traveling at the speed of thought. She sensed, more than saw, the other squadrons following close behind.

Kaci had expected her last minutes to be calm and slow, but instead they seemed to be speeding by, nearly as fast as her ship was flying. Her hand felt sweaty, secured tightly to the silver oval in the center of her blinking console. *There’s no going back now.*

The stars around her were nothing more than streaks of light. The feeling of surreality came over her again. As if she was outside her body, looking down at a woman in a blue flight suit. At a woman who wasn’t a fighter, but who was fighting. A woman who didn’t want to die, but had willingly sacrificed her life to be free from a cruel virus. *Me. That’s me. And all of this is real.*

Focus! she ordered herself.

Her ship shuddered around her. *I’m going too fast.*

She tried to command the craft to slow, but if anything, it seemed to speed up. Around her, the other women’s ships kept pace with her own.

Her display blinked. She frowned down at a large red blinking circle that covered half of the monitor for a moment before realizing what it was. *The alien ship! It’s massive! Do we actually stand a chance at destroying something that big?*

It doesn't matter. We have to destroy it. Billions of lives are at stake.

Narrowing her eyes, she promised herself that she would win. Her finger hovered over the space just above the oval, the trigger.

On-screen, she mentally commanded, and the alien mother ship came into view before her.

Dear god...it's big, nightmarish, and we're about to attack it, like a child striking a giant.

Her heart started to race, her breathing became harsh.

No, she ordered herself through force of will, *calm down. You're going to die anyway, just go down fighting.*

She took a deep breath as her gut churned. The mother ship was made from a dark metal that hinted at an unspoken threat. But it wasn't shaped in a way that suggested speed, at least from what little she had learned in training.

Instead, the middle was massive, and the top and bottom slowly tapered off out of her view. Red lights blinked in thousands of places around it, like tiny stars. Around the swollen center, perfectly spaced red ovals wrapped the width of the ship.

What will it do when we start to attack?

"Steady, ladies," Catalina's strong voice came over the com. "This is the moment we've been waiting for. We're going to save our friends. Our family. All of Earth. We're going to be heroes."

"No!" Clarissa's voice came in over the com. "That ship is enormous! I can't do this!" Then, a pause. "Why isn't the ship listening to me? I don't...I don't want to die!"

“Don’t you dare abandon us now!” Athena shouted back.

The dashboard lit up. *We’re in range. I don’t know what my squad will do, but I came here to fight.*

“Fire when ready!” Catalina yelled.

It’s time.

Kaci took a deep breath and pressed the trigger. “Target locked. Firing now.”

Several others echoed her.

But nothing happened.

Why isn’t it working?

Her fingers continued to push the trigger again and again. She felt her hope fading a little more each time the ship failed to respond.

This can’t be happening!

Panicked voices came over the com in a rush.

“What’s happening?”

“Why won’t it obey?”

She pressed the trigger again. *Nothing.*

I’m doing the same thing I did in practice. Why won’t it shoot?

And suddenly, the answer came to her.

“Of course. The aliens,” Kaci whispered. “They’re controlling our ships now.”

Slowly, the voices grew silent over her com.

I’m right. I can feel it.

Icy fear clawed down Kaci's spine as she got pulled, along with the rest of the ships, inexorably toward the alien vessel.

It loomed over them, dark and forbidding.

Catalina's voice was deathly calm over their com-link. "It was a trap. Our mission failed."

Panicked questions flooded the airway.

"What does this mean?"

"What do they want with us?"

"Why only women?"

"Oh my god!"

"They're going to enslave us!"

But Kaci wasn't listening.

The human race is doomed. Because of us.

Images flashed through her mind. Of the death and carnage these vicious aliens would unleash on their world. Of her sister. Of Darlene's face the moment she realized the end was near.

That I failed her.

Her ship seemed to grow smaller, closing in around her. *I did everything I was supposed to do. Failure is not an option!*

She hit the console. "Obey me! Obey me, dammit!"

With her last ounce of willpower, she sent a mental command to the ship. It shook around her and then slammed to a stop with such power that her head smashed into the console.

Colors swirled before her vision as she struggled to lift her head, to fight against the agonizing pain on her forehead. She managed to turn her head slightly, to lie on her cheek and stare

out the viewscreen. She blinked, looking out at the mother ship as she continued toward it, but at a painfully slow pace, aimed straight for one of the red ovals lining the middle of the alien craft.

I'm going to crash!

Warm blood leaked beneath her cheek as her vision swam in and out.

She waited for death.

But it didn't come.

The red shield she smashed into was like a thick gelatin. Her ship slid into it, leaving space behind. And suddenly, she was trapped in the liquid. Caught in the ship. Hysteria overwhelmed her.

I can't get out! I'm going to suffocate!

And if I don't die—I'm a prisoner.

What do they want with us?

Her sister's voice came into her mind, soft and confident.
Don't worry, Kaci. I'm here. I'm always here. I'll save you.

Then, blackness swallowed her whole.

NINE

Seer raced toward the entrance to the main docking bay doors, his pulse beating wildly in his ears. *Should have been here sooner!*

But if he hadn't finished running the Bride Initiative program and matching the women with the correct ship numbers, the men wouldn't know which woman was theirs. *And I wouldn't know which docking bay the woman with Spiritus blood was in.*

When he reached the end of the hallway, he frantically typed in the password. A second later, the doors parted. He surveyed the pandemonium in front of him, struggling to contain his shock. *It is like the moments after a battle.* He wrinkled his sensitive nose. The scents of fear, desperation, and uncertainty perfumed the air. Females were being dragged or carried by males who looked confused.

Narrowing his eyes, he stared at the women more closely. They were all small and free of markings like the female from his vision. *What does this mean? I dreamed of these new brides before I saw them?*

Could the female from my vision actually be real?

The idea sent fire running through his veins. Against his will, he hardened. *Calm yourself now! You are a Second Tier*

male. You are not allowed feelings like this... don't hurt yourself by wanting what you can never have.

Gallant exited a docking bay cradling a tiny, brown-haired woman while she punched him over and over in the face. He held his match-sensor lightly in his hand. It blinked rapidly at the female's nearness.

Against his will, Seer felt glad for his friend. *He was lucky to find his match so quickly. Even if she appears not so glad to see him.*

Their usual custom was to lead the women into Greeting Rooms where they waited for their optimal genetically matched male to arrive. *But usually the women came of their own choice.*

“Put me down! Let go of me!” she screamed, an interesting accent lacing the words.

At least our language transfer appears to have worked...

Gallant stared down at her. “I will not hurt you. Please, calm yourself!”

“Like hell!” she yelled, punching him squarely in the nose.

His blood-brother caught his gaze, looking miserable, and hurried off down the hall, his shoulders tense.

Gallant waited so long for a female. This is not right.

“Why are these women so angry?” One of the soldiers shouted at him as he walked by with a wailing female in his arms. She struggled and beat her fists against his chest.

Perfectly timed, Leader's voice came over the ship's comps, almost vibrating in the air around them. “There has been...some confusion. The Earth Brides believe they are

being kidnapped by us. Focus on calming and reassuring them for now.”

Oh my friend, you should have told these males sooner. You should be here.

But I'm sure you're distracted by your own bride.

“Kidnapping?” the same man shouted. “Does anyone know what the hell is going on? I paid a child’s weight in credits for my bride, not for a frightened female who doesn’t want me!”

Angry questions filled the air, while the females seemed to grow quieter.

This situation just keeps getting worse.

Seer spun, raising his voice above the chaos. “You are Spiritus males! Tend to your females. There will be time later for your anger and confusion.”

This whole mission is wrong. The other males know it too. But once they calm and claim their mates, I doubt they will speak against it.

And the females? They will not be able to resist the pull of their mates. Hopefully, for their sakes, they will come to enjoy living with us.

He turned and began to jog again. A blue light flashed to one side of him. His steps faltered as an image of the female from his vision flashed in his mind. The blue of her eyes... they were like nothing he could have imagined.

Why does she haunt me in all things I do? A reminder of what I can never have? A mate of my own. His heart squeezed painfully.

Coming around a corner, he nearly crashed into two guards. One was carrying the other, and the injured man looked bad. Familiar.

I've seen injuries like that too many times to count.

Please, let me be wrong in this!

“What happened?” he asked, kneeling down and adding up one injury after another.

A broken arm. And by the way he's breathing, at least a couple of broken ribs.

The uninjured guard met his gaze. It was a young male named Follower. “The Bortrack we were guarding tricked us and escaped. We tracked him down here, but then Unlucky was injured.”

Seer cursed. “Were you able to stop it?”

Follower shook his head.

Dammit! A Bortrack is loose!

“Where is it?”

“In bay number 257. It says the female there is special, so it's claiming her as its own.”

Of all the luck...

“How many soldiers have it cornered?”

“Uh.” He cleared his throat. “None, Medic. They're all busy. With their new brides.”

Something cold uncoiled in his belly. *Selfish bastards!*

Seer stood. *This injured guard is strong, he will survive. But if I'm not fast enough, the female won't.*

“Get Unlucky to the medical bay, stat. I’ll deal with the Bortrack.”

“But Medic Seer, it’s danger—“

“Get him to the medical bay!” he commanded.

Then he ran toward the bay at full speed. Anger and fear made the sound of his heart pumping fill his ears. The enormous whitewashed outer ring of the docking level seemed to speed by as he moved. Images came to him of dead bodies—women brutalized by the Bortracks. Of their breeding chambers.

He clenched and unclenched his hands. *Not this time. I will not allow a female to be raped and brutalized with me close enough to prevent it!*

Stopping before the door, the blue scanner moved over him for half a second, then the doors slid open. A Bortrack lumbered back and forth just outside the red gel that filled the lower half of the room, trapping the ship.

And protecting the female. Until the creature decides destroying its shell is worth entering the abrasive gel.

The Bortrack was massive, even for one of its kind. Its tan shell was covered in deep grooves and badly healed cracks. Even a few of the sharp points jutting out from its shoulders, arms, back, and legs had been broken off. *This one has seen a lot of battle. But against his own kind or mine?*

It doesn’t matter. I’m not an inexperienced youth. I am a warrior.

He took a step closer, a snarl escaping his lips.

The Bortrack turned, its black eyes fixed upon him. “You!” it roared. “Release her from this red *slagent*! I choose her as

my mate.”

Seer gritted his teeth. “She is spoken for.”

The Bortrack’s agitation increased, and a low, guttural sound rumbled from its chest. “Without us, you wouldn’t have any women. I have seen your precious files! This one is the best. I claim her as my own.”

How the hell did he see my data?

The tan plates on its face shifted, moving back to reveal a flash of sharp teeth. “She is mine.”

Somewhere in the back of Seer’s mind, he was aware of a tiny female breathing unevenly in the ship just below him. *A female who needs my help. I’ll never let them have her.*

“You will go back to your chambers,” Seer ordered. “Or you will die.”

Choose the latter. The world will be better with one less of you.

As if in answer, the Bortrack lurched toward him.

So be it.

Seer planted his legs more firmly, his breath rushing in and out. *I can’t let it grab a hold of me. If it does, my death will be quick.*

And the female will be left to its mercy.

It swung out, grinning. But its grin slipped as Seer easily avoided the blow. It punched again and again, but each time Seer ducked, shifting slowly backward as it crowded his space. After a moment, it stopped, panting and eyeing him with both disbelief and anger.

Unfortunately for this Bortrack, it must not have fought in the wars.

Luckily for me.

Seer took advantage of the opportunity, punching out. His fist connected with the side of its hard head. *That hurt me more than it, but angering it is key.*

It screeched and swung its arms dumbly about.

He agilely ducked, avoiding its reach, then kicked out, sweeping its legs out from under it.

The beast went tumbling down, sprawling onto its back. Looking up at him, it panted. "I will break your limbs and have you watch while my cock tears the female in two."

He saw red, his mind going blank as he lost all control.

Roaring, Seer leaped onto its chest and swiped at its throat. *Kill. Kill. Protect!*

Protect her.

He had no idea how much time passed when he became aware of himself and his body again. Looking down, he stiffened, shaking his head in disbelief. Blood was everywhere. The creature's throat nothing more than mangled flesh. Seer looked between the beast and his hands. His nails had grown to claws.

How...?

He was a Second Tier male. His markings changed with his moods, just like all Spiritus, but no part of him had Shifted before.

My hands Shifted?

It was whispered that some males could transform later in life, but he never considered he might be one of them. It usually happened in the worst situations, when a male had to tap into the ancient part of himself that was more animal than intelligent being.

But I faced many of those situations in the war. Many times I might have died.

So what has brought this change in me now?

His gaze swept to the ship, and to the female he sensed inside. And then he knew.

Her. It's her.

Pushing down his hope, he watched as his nails slowly returned to normal.

He went to the control valve and entered the code on the screen overlooking the docking bay. Slowly, the red gel retracted, leaving behind a small ship. Clenching his hands, he strode down the steps and crossed to the spacecraft.

If I could Shift, I could take a mate. Logically, I haven't Shifted in thirty turnings of the world, so it is unlikely I will fully Shift now. Still, his vision haunted him. Of the female he'd held in his arms. His mate.

It could come true, if I could become a First Tier male.

Gritting his teeth, he willed his hope to die away. There was no point in torturing himself.

Instead, he approached her ship.

It won't be the female from my vision. It can't be. This one is simply Parsimon's bride.

At the side of the ship, he pressed his hand to the outside and leaned down to peer into the small craft. The glass opened to reveal a golden-haired woman slumped over in her harness. She didn't move.

"Are you injured?" he asked, hesitant to touch her without her permission.

The female didn't respond.

His nerves crackled.

He gently used her shoulders to push her back against the seat. Blood spilled from her forehead, covering her pale skin like a sickening paint, clinging and weaving through her short strands. Righteous anger expanded in his chest. *What happened? Was it the ship? This woman is hurt because of us. No female should be hurt under our protection.*

Then, his gaze went to her face.

Air rushed out of his lungs. *It's her!*

It can't be!

But it is!

Calm yourself. Be logical. Think this through.

All his visions were a bit hazy, so he couldn't be one hundred percent certain this female and the one from his vision were the same, not without seeing her eyes. *But my heart believes it's her. The female who called to me.*

His brain protested. *Perhaps many of these Earth females look this way. You cannot let your heart convince you of something that may be completely false. All that will happen is that you will be destroyed when she and the female from your vision are not the same. So, do your job.*

Taking a deep breath, he unbuckled her straps, then carefully lifted her into his arms.

She's so light.

Staring down into her face, he stood transfixed. *How can she be so lovely when it's obvious she's been so poorly cared for?* She was thin to the point of near starvation. The flesh on her face held a tightness, even while unconscious, that spoke of unhappiness.

A protectiveness he'd never felt before clenched his heart. *I will care for you, little one. I will never allow you to be mistreated again.*

He carried her through the weaving hallways to his private medbay in a quiet corner of the ship, cradling her close to his chest in silent wonder. He was unable to explain the emotions that seemed to overwhelm him. He was a doctor. He'd seen females in much worse condition, so why did his knees shake?

Laying her down on one of the healing chambers, golden particles immediately drifted above the bed, reaching to nearly two feet above the sleeping female. He took a step back and stared. She looked tiny on the long white table. Her hair drifted slightly in the golden light that undulated above her like some combination of dust and ocean waves.

Never before have I thought a female looked beautiful in a healing chamber.

But it isn't time to admire her. I have a job to do, he scolded himself.

Moving to his familiar spot just above her head, he reached into the golden particles. The nanobots immediately reacted to his mental command. Golden particles pulled together, like a scattering of stars, and then the controls shimmered and

formed. With just the slightest twist of his wrist, he was able to command the intricate controls, identifying illnesses and injuries, as well as healing them.

But the work required a focused mind. No detail could be missed.

First, he took several different images of her head and the inside of her skull, checking for how extensive the damage was. Initial scans showed that the wound was mostly superficial. Her skull showed no signs of injury. Yet when he dove into the scans of her brain, he frowned.

The further he dove into the structure of her mind, the more he found wrong. The connections in her brain lacked all logic. It was obvious that a virus had crossed her blood-brain barrier, inflaming her basal ganglion, influencing how her brain could function. Connections had been made throughout every area of her brain. But they were all wrong, terribly wrong.

This can't have happened from the crash. To show this kind of progression, she's had the virus for years. Someone with these sorts of incorrect connections should not be able to function, let alone experience any kind of happiness.

But I think I can fix it. Most of it.

“You can't be awake for this though,” he spoke out loud, even knowing she couldn't hear him.

He chose the most genetically compatible mist to keep her asleep and unaware of the delicate work he would be doing on her mind. *This will take days, if not weeks, to fix. But it is not straightforward work. Each day, I shall have to awaken her and watch her function to see the impact of what I am doing,*

to make certain her human brain accepts the healing as our own would.

First, he had to identify the source of her illness. But when the results came, the air seemed to rush out of his lungs.

“The Rewire Contagion?” *The contagion responsible for wiping out most of our females also exists on Earth?* He had studied it in school, although it had been eradicated among his people by the time he came of age. “How is this possible?”

He had the sickening feeling he knew the answer. *The craft that Parsimon crashed on Earth must have carried the virus with it.*

The implications of such a thing were too immense for him to consider at the moment, at least while the female needed healing.

Twisting his hands, data streamed into his mind at impossible speeds. He would try a low dose of the treatment as he fixed the damage he now knew was caused by the Rewire Contagion. *There’s no point in healing the improper connections if the virus is still present.*

As the low dosage filled the golden healing space, causing tiny sparks of silver, he moved to the incorrect connections in her mind. He identified the ones that were newest, not woven as deeply, and cut them, one at a time.

You’re lucky you got me as a doctor, little human, he mused as he worked. *For I was particularly interested in the brain during medical training.*

Hours had gone by when he at last got the alert that the first dosage of the Rewire Cure had been given. The silver sparks in the golden light stopped and, as he stared down at

her flesh, he saw specks of silver light flare briefly in her pores, then fade.

Good. Everything appears correct.

Straightening from his position above her head, he removed his hands and blinked his eyes several times. He loved being a medic, but even with modern medicine, healing often required a great deal of mental and physical stamina from him.

Now for the easy part.

Placing his hands back in the healing nanobots, he took a deep breath, then shifted his focus to the easy task of healing the shallow cut in her forehead. It had long since stopped bleeding. When it was finished there was nothing but a pale pink scar, which would soon fade to nothing.

Time to wake her and see the results of my initial work.

But how would she respond?

He knew she would be groggy, and he wouldn't wake her completely so she would slide back into sleep quickly. But he needed to know how she would respond to all the medications he had used on her. *She will not be perfect, but she should be better than when I first came upon her.*

Taking a deep breath, he shifted his hands and decreased the meds he'd used to keep her unconscious. Cautiously, he watched as she tossed her head back and forth, and then her eyes opened.

He found himself staring into familiar eyes. Blue eyes. So blue they took his breath away. So blue that he was pulled back into his vision for a moment.

It is her.

She struggled to sit up. He slid around to the side of the healing chamber. "Lie still," he whispered. "You're safe. I'm here to help you."

Collapsing back against the table, her hand trembled as she reached for him, mouthing something he couldn't hear.

He leaned closer. "What is it?"

Did her transfer of our language not work when we got her blood sample?

She grabbed his arm and pulled him down to her. All the way. The last thing he saw was her soft pink mouth coming toward him, and he realized she wasn't going to stop.

When her lips pressed against his, electricity jumped between them.

He inhaled sharply, as her hand dug into the hair at his nape, pulling him closer. Their kiss deepened. Her lips were soft, warm, and willing. Then, her tongue slid inside his mouth and he groaned, pulling her closer to him.

The kiss grew harder, more desperate. He felt his blood rush south. *What's happening?*

Just as he was spiraling out of control, she fell back onto the table. Her eyelids fluttered closed.

"You taste...amazing," she whispered.

As she fell asleep, he touched his lips in wonder. *So that's what it feels like to kiss a woman.*

He finally understood why males fought so hard for this. He would give anything to keep this female forever. To kiss her day after day, moment after moment.

Then he started. *But Parsimon has claimed her. When we return to Unngar, I will have to give her to him.*

His mind roared a denial.

Stumbling back to his chair he sank into it, staring at the human female.

Don't jump to conclusions about her; she didn't know what she was doing. The logical part of his brain reminded him.

But another voice whispered even more softly. *But you did.*

TEN

Seer stared at Medic Solemn, trying to hide his surprise. Solemn's 3-D image hovered over Seer's comp station as he waited for the man to speak. One of the young man's eyes had been swollen shut, and a deep bruise marred that side of his face.

"How soon will Elder Medic Steady be finished?" Seer asked, feeling uneasy.

"Just a moment." He cleared his throat. "But while we wait, he wanted me to, uh, warn you."

Seer inclined his head. "I've already seen that most of the Earth females are fighting their kidnapping."

As they should. As I would.

"No, sir," he said, the black markings on his face expanding to show his embarrassment. "It's, uh, rather an, uh, issue with the reaction of the...the healing chambers and their...well, their..."

Seer rubbed his forehead. *Spit it out, kid. I've had too long of a night for this.*

The human's kiss had impacted Seer in a way he hadn't anticipated. He'd found himself exiting his room over and over throughout the night to stare at her in the healing

chamber, reminding himself that she had been drugged out of her mind when she kissed him. But still, he couldn't let it go. Or sleep. Even the thought of her made his body ache.

“What are you trying to say, Solemn?” Seer asked, trying to distract himself from the thought of the tiny human just a few feet behind him.

The young man gave an audible sigh. “It seems to...well, arouse the females.”

Seer slowly dropped his hand and looked up, meeting the other male's gaze. “What do you mean?”

Solemn's tattoos expanded further. “Both of the females that required my healing woke from their chambers and, uh... well, their chosen mates did not appreciate their immediate interest in me.”

“Really,” he replied flatly. *So that's it.* His chest felt oddly hollow. *She kissed me because of a chemical reaction. It was science, and nothing more.*

Seer cleared his throat. “Thank you for the warning.”

Solemn looked relieved. “How is Parsimon's bride-to-be?”

He chose his words with care, not wanting to panic the young man with the implications of finding a human female with the Rewire Contagion. “She has extensive damage in her brain. Her treatment will require days, if not weeks.”

“May the Pregnant Mother watch over her,” the young man murmured the prayer, shaking his head.

“From your lips to her ears,” Seer responded customarily.

A second later, the young man's face twisted, and the face of Elder Medic Steady replaced the younger man's. “I'm told you wanted to speak with me.”

Everything will change from this moment on...

“Yes.” Seer held his gaze. “The young woman in my care has been infected by the Rewire Contagion.”

His bushy gray brows rose so high they disappeared into his short gray hair. “If this is some kind of sick joke—“

“I wish it was.”

He didn’t speak for a painfully long moment. “May the Pregnant Mother help us.” Steady’s markings had paled to a gray nearly as light as his hair. “How is this even possible?”

“I don’t know, but I intend to keep her isolated until her system is free of it, as well as discover the source of her initial infection.”

The older male nodded. “And none of the other females show signs of infection?”

“None that have been reported.”

He shook his head. “I’ll have my men run bloodwork on the females every twenty-four hours until we return to Unngar. If anyone else has contracted it, I will send them to your medbay for treatment.”

There will be more. There always is.

“We may have to keep them quarantined for the full seven days on the ship. It won’t be safe to bring them home, even if there is the slightest risk of reintroducing the contagion to the population.”

Steady’s lip curled. “Well, that shouldn’t be a problem, given that we are headed away from the wormhole.”

“Away?” *What possible reason could Leader have for that? We should be returning these females to the males*

eagerly awaiting them back home.

This can't be good.

But he kept his thoughts to himself, better to ask his friend Leader rather than add to the crew's sense of unease.

A soft noise came from behind him. The human was waking.

"I must go."

He waved his hand through the image and the other male faded, then rose from his seat in front of the com station and passed the two empty healing chambers. The young woman tossed her head, a frown curving her pale lips.

Freezing a few feet from her, he regarded her for another moment, both fascination and hesitation warring within him. Who knew how long the Rewire Contagion had been attacking her brain, seeping her of life day after day. She had been so thin that he had programmed the healing bunk to administer an emergency starvation protocol. It had been only a day and a morning, but already he thought he might see slightly more color to her pale cheeks.

He cleared his throat, and her eyes fluttered open.

He closed the space between them, keeping his strides measured. "How do you feel?"

Will she hit me? Scream? Or kiss me again?

His body tightened. *Do not hope for that. It will hurt all the more when Parsimon comes to claim her.*

"I—I..." Her blue eyes looked wide and clear as the Intaga oceans, reminding him yet again of how closely she resembled the female in his vision.

She licked her lips. “Smell.”

“Smell?” he repeated. *Did I hear her right?*

“Need to...shower.” Her gaze met his, pupils still far too dilated from the pain medications.

“Huh?” He stepped back. “After everything you’ve been through, you’re worried about how you smell?”

She wrinkled her nose, then gave a ghost of a grin. “Yes.”

Well... cleanliness is always a benefit when recovering from illness. He mentally kicked himself. *Stop pretending.* An image came to him of her bathing. His breath caught.

She raised her arms and they trembled a little.

He found he couldn’t refuse her. Leaning down, he swept her into his arms and moved through the medbay toward his private chamber. The doors parted, and he carried her to the separate privacy room.

Bathing pool or shower?

“Computer, fill the bathing pool.”

Instantly, the massive, round tub in the center of the room filled with the sound of rushing water.

While he waited his gazed strayed back to her. Blood still matted her blond hair and stained part of her face. The uniform material she wore felt stiff.

She has already been through so much. “I shall leave you here, and bring a change of clothes.”

“No,” she whispered. “Please. Don’t.”

He frowned. *Are the many meds running through her impacting her logical thought?* She might already be moments from sliding back into sleep.

“Stay with me.” She reached up, touching the marking on his left cheek in an intimate gesture.

His heart raced. “That would not be...wise.”

No male should see her like this except her mate.

Only he chose to remain safely at home, sending me to fetch her like cargo, an angry voice whispered in the back of his mind. If he were here, he could care for her as she needs to be. She should not suffer for his lack of interest.

“Please,” she begged him, her nose wrinkling. “You are a doctor. And I feel disgusting.”

Reminded of his duty, he closed his eyes, willing himself not to think of this woman as anything but a patient. “All right.”

But I will not breach the lines of chivalry again. My kiss was enough of a mistake. We will wear our clothes while she bathes.

Holding her more tightly, he struggled out of his boots. She nestled against his chest, causing the air to rush in and out of his lungs at a faster pace. He gritted his teeth, then knelt down, sitting, then sliding into the blue gel-like waters, with her still in his arms.

She gasped as the warm gel came up to her chest. Eyes wide, she stared at him. “What is this?”

The gel began to work, rubbing against them, scrubbing the dirt from their skin. The look of panic faded from her expression, replaced by one of pleasure. “My imagination has never been quite this...creative.”

He shifted, shocked by the way his manhood responded to the sight of her, mouth slightly open, head slowly lulling back.

I have been attracted to females before, but never have I lost control so easily. Settling more deeply in the waters, her hair dipped into it, and he watched as the dirty, bloodstained strands changed color. When she sat up slightly, her locks were as golden blond as his own.

Stunning.

He loosened his grip on her, letting the cleaning gels sink over everything but her face. Then, gently, he let her sink beneath the waters. Her eyes opened, and she bolted into a sitting position. Even though she had been beneath the gel for only a moment, the blood had already been cleaned from most of her ivory skin.

Unable to help himself, he reached up to wipe specks from her cheeks, only to discover it didn't wipe away. It was a part of her. *Another surprise.*

She smiled, a slight movement that transformed her from beautiful to breathtaking. "I never imagined death to be like this. To finally bring me everything I didn't have in life."

Death? Does she think...?

Before he could finish his thought, she kissed him. Again. And again, all logic faded in the presence of her touch.

ELEVEN

Kaci kissed the strangely handsome doctor, glorying in how real everything felt in Heaven. The arms that held her were strong and powerful. His lips on hers were soft and uncertain, making her feel brave and reckless. She deepened the kiss, weaving her fingers through his long blond hair, tugging him so that his mouth angled over hers for easier penetration.

When he parted his lips, she slid her tongue into his mouth. Sparks of need and desire erupted inside her. *In life I couldn't have a man. I couldn't have romance. Now, I can have it all.*

And she wanted it all. From him. She drew back, fascinated by his pale green eyes. Amazed by the tattoos that covered his face, shifting and moving in a way that was hard to follow, but felt as if it was significant. *Is he an angel? So I guess they aren't winged, innocent creatures, but big, strong, dangerous-looking men.*

“How do you feel?” His voice was low, laced with an accent that was odd. Harsh but sexy all at once.

It was hard to focus on his words, but she tried. “Heaven is better than I ever imagined.”

She could see the wheels turning in his mind before he spoke. “What is Heaven?”

An angel doesn't know what Heaven is?

“This,” she whispered, running a finger along his lower lip. “The perfect man, here with me. Peace from the virus, from the anxiety, the fears, the OCD—“

His brow drew together as he relaxed his grip on her. “You believe you’re dead.”

A bubble of laughter came from her lips. “Aren’t I? There’s no way life could be this glorious.”

Everything around her vision was fuzzy. The lights above, too bright. This had to be Heaven.

He looked up, focusing on a point above her shoulder. “What is the last thing you remember?”

Screaming. Pain. Death.

Fear swept through her. “Nothing.”

“You’re shaking.”

“I’m not.”

He glanced back at her. “You are. I didn’t mean to frighten you. I just wanted to remind you—“

“I’m tired.” And she was. Suddenly, her thoughts felt foggy, and her limbs weak.

And you don't want to remember.

After a long moment of silence, he said softly, “All right.”

He rose, carrying her with him. At the door, he drew a warm blanket around her small frame. A foreign feeling came over her, of feeling safer and more protected than she’d ever felt in her life.

Maybe even loved.

She snuggled deeper into his arms for the short trip down the hall and into a bedroom. The room was painted in muted earth tones. It was sparsely decorated, but still felt warm, somehow. *This isn't the medbay. Is this his...bedroom?* A thrill went through her.

He laid her down on a bed and went to drawers built into a wall, pulled out dry clothes, and ducked back into the bathroom. All of it felt strange. Foreign. But in her tired mind, she couldn't quite decide why.

She closed her eyes.

“I have a shirt you can wear, if you would like.”

“Please,” she whispered.

There was a sense of movement, but she lay still, too content to move.

“Call me when you're finished.”

After a time, her wet clothes disturbed her from her half sleep. With heavy movements, she sat, even though it caused the room to spin. In a dreamlike state, she stripped her wet clothes and pulled on the massive shirt.

The task took all of her strength. Every part of her seemed to be filled with an overwhelming sense of exhaustion. Easing beneath the blankets on the bed, she relaxed into pillows that smelled like him.

When I'm not so tired, I'm going to have sex with that beautiful angel doctor. I've never been touched like that...held, worshipped.

I must have done something very good in life to have earned that man. Something very, very good.

That was the last thought she had before she surrendered to sleep.

TWELVE

Seer went back to the medbay, pacing before the door to his private chambers, wondering if he'd done the wrong thing. Would she be able to change by herself without further injury? At last he could wait no longer. He closed the distance quickly, the doors opening at his approach. Her blanket and clothes had been tossed to the floor. She wore his shirt, eyes closed, sleeping beneath his covers.

She needs to return to the healing chambers. I cannot further delay her treatment.

But she looks so comfortable. Perhaps I can give her a little more time.

The sounds of shouting came to him from the hall outside his chamber. He frowned, exiting his room with cautious movements. The warrior in him, the one who had fought in one of the most brutal wars in the history of his people, stretched to life. But to his surprise, he also felt the primal side of him growl low within his chest.

Is it possible that I will partially Shift again?

The answer came from deep within him. *I will. To protect my female.*

His back snapped straight. The human was not his. She was tied to another, and he was a Second Tier male, unworthy of a female of his own. So why did the primal side of him not seem to care? It should not exist in him at all. From his earliest memories, it had never asserted itself. Not even when faced with his own death, so why now?

It's her. He pushed the thought aside. But it simply cannot be.

His legs shook as he moved through the medbay. When he reached the doors, they parted to reveal the hall.

A massive Bortrack dominated the space, shrieking and swaying back and forth.

Four guards surrounded it and Leader blocked its way into the medbay. The alien creature drew itself up and screeched its threat, jaw opening to the point it looked as if it would unhinge, drool dripping from sharpened teeth. It drew up its beefy fist and pounded the hard shell of its tan body, a threat in his every movement.

“Where are *our* females?”

Our?

“Zeeefaruk failed to claim the special one, so I claim her instead.”

There was anger in Leader's eyes. “Parsimon will handle all of that when we are back in Blazar galaxy.”

“No!” Its voice thundered. “We will not take the weak and unwanted ones. We will select our half of the females now!”

He couldn't have...no male would ever offer innocent females to these creatures. Could they?

Leader voice grew soft and deadly. “The deal was arranged by Parsimon and will be carried out by Parsimon. My job is to get us all back home safely.”

Seer felt himself relax against his will. *Leader’s gift. Charisma. An ability to sway those around him.*

“We grow impatient,” the Bortrack said, instantly calmer. “We will not be patient much longer.”

“I understand,” Leader said. “And we won’t ask you to.” He gestured to his men.

The Bortrack lumbered down the hall, the guards scrambling to keep up.

So the Bortrack that had tried to take the human female from me thought she was his by right? What has my friend gotten us into?

“Leader, we need to talk.”

His friend gave a curt nod and followed him into his med chamber. The doors slid shut before Seer allowed himself to turn to face the other male.

“Did we make a deal to give the Bortracks half our women?”

Leader took so long to respond that Seer already knew the truth before he answered. “Yes. We had to.”

Pregnant Mother forgive us!

“We didn’t *have* to do anything.”

Rage flowed through Seer in a way it hadn’t since the War of Innocence. He may have been a medic, but those days turned every male on the battlefield into a killer.

“My friend—“ Leader began.

“Has logic failed you? You fought too. You know what those brutish monsters are capable of. I will not allow the females to be given to them.”

Leader squared his shoulders and invaded Seer’s space. His eyes darkened and an animalistic growl escaped the back of his throat.

If he Shifts now, I’m dead.

And yet, Seer couldn’t bring himself to back down. “They are innocent. We are males. It is our highest priority to protect them.”

The black markings on Leader’s flesh spread until his skin was midnight black. “I am a male! I do not forget my duty to our females! We have no intention of following through with the deal!”

Seer spun, then stomped to his chair and sat, waiting for his friend to calm. Waiting for his own anger to calm before he did something stupid. *Knocking sense into fools is no longer who I am.*

It took a full minute for Leader to gain control over his primal side. When he did, he was panting, eyes no longer black, but a pale brown.

“Can we speak now?” Seer asked, striving to keep his voice level.

“Yes,” Leader said, still a hint of anger in his voice. “I know you have the king’s ear. I know you have a powerful voice amongst our kind, greater than any Second Tier male before you. But you will *not* insult my honor.”

What honor is there in this?

“So you will not sacrifice our females to creatures who will brutalize them?” Seer said, drawing out each word. “But you will go back on your word and create a deal you never intended to keep?”

Leader’s brows lowered. “They are Bortracks. They are not our equals.”

Oh, my friend, what has happened to you?

“That means we can’t expect them to keep their word, but that doesn’t excuse us not keeping ours.”

Silence stretched between them.

Finally, Leader sighed and crossed the room to sit at the chair in front of his med station.

“I don’t like this any better than you, truth be told.” He swept a hand through his long dark hair in a gesture of frustration. “I didn’t know all of this until it was too late, and now I must go along with it. My own female is on board. A female I have waited a lifetime for.” His gaze grew desperate. “What else can I do?”

He wanted to relent, but he couldn’t. It didn’t matter if half the females were safe, the other half weren’t. “Is there any way to undo this now?”

Leader shook his head. “If we do not return with the females, there is a very powerful group of males who will be disappointed. And my friend, these are not males we should disappoint.”

“So why are we moving away from the wormhole?”

Silence met his question.

“Leader?”

The other male cursed. “Because the Bortracks must have known we would betray them. We detected a mothership just on the other side of the portal. If we return now, they will kill us and take all the females for themselves.”

The male who seeks to poison his neighbor will instead sicken himself. The Pregnant Mother’s wisdom rang far too true.

“Then what is our plan?”

Leader’s words rushed out. “I am going to reroute power to send a request for help from Parsimon and his partners. We will wait until they deal with the Bortrack mothership.”

“If they deal with it.” Seer rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “Perhaps it is time to contact the Council.”

“No.” The word rushed from Leader’s lips. “You know that might mean exile for all of us. Or worse, that they would take our females from us.”

You mean your female from you, as well as the others.

“Far better to give them over to the Council than to those beasts.”

Leader rose, his anger returning. “I would die before I let them take our females. Give me time, my friend. Parsimon will take care of the mothership. Until then, we need only to make our females comfortable.”

“I disagree,” Seer said, “but I know my opinion means little.”

His friend clasped his shoulder tightly. “Focus on healing Parsimon’s bride. Let me worry about all of this.”

She doesn’t belong to him, a voice growled in his mind. He frantically pushed it aside. “Leader—“

“You are a medic. Focus on what you do best.”

This time, his words held less reassurance and more of a command.

“As you wish.”

Leader turned, but paused before the door. “My female... she is exceptional. A warrior who has been through much. I loved her the instant that I saw her.”

“And does she return your affection?”

He took a long moment to answer. “I think she would, if she allowed herself to. Part of it, I believe, has to do with her wound—“

“She is wounded?” Seer asked, instantly concerned.

“Not wounded, but her leg...it’s no matter. I will fix it when she lets me fix it.”

Seer didn’t like the idea of an injured female, but he also knew a male would do anything to help his mate. If Leader didn’t seem concerned with it, he would try not to be either.

“May your union be one of love and friendship.”

Leader’s lips quirked into a smile. “You are a good male. Do not worry about anything but your patient—I have this under control.”

I wish I could believe that, even if I know you do.

Seer watched the captain leave, the wheels turning in his mind. *He said for me to do what I do best, so I will.* There was a chemical injector used during the war. It was a powerful weapon against the Bortracks. He would have one of his comps start creating the compound. Just in case everything didn’t go as planned.

And I will prepare my other backup plan, for when power is rerouted to send out messages...

Immediately, he rose and went to the comp in the corner to work on both his contingency plans. Hours flew by as he constructed the compound used in the chemical injectors. And when at last he started the replication process, his eyes ached, and a familiar pounding in his head had returned.

Which is exactly when the door to his suite opened.

THIRTEEN

Kaci stared at the man from her dreams, the one who had tasted of something smooth and rich and entirely foreign. *Only he wasn't a dream.*

“Who are you?”

The massive man rose gracefully, the agility of his movement speaking of a warrior. *Like my sister.* “I am Seer. Your medic.” As he spoke, the tattoos on his face shifted. Like a living creature.

Her heart raced. *He's not human.*

She took a step back, but collided with the door behind her. *I'm trapped.*

What now?

“It's all right,” he reassured her. “You are safe.”

“Safe?” She racked her brain for her last memories, but all she saw were flashes of disjointed images. Of her ship. Of kissing him. Of him holding her while she bathed. “Why am I here? What do you want from me?”

He took a step toward her.

“Don't!” She held out her hand, wishing she had more than her words to defend herself.

His gaze held uncertainty, but he didn't move closer.

He's so large. Larger than any human could possibly be. Her gaze traveled from his dark pants to the white shirt with several buttons undone at his throat. How can he seem so strange and familiar all at once?

"You were injured during your flight," his voice was soft, as if he feared startling her. "I have been healing you. But... once inside your brain, I discovered significant damage. So I have been repairing it."

"Damage?" *In my mind?*

And that's when it hit her. "My OCD, my anxiety—they're gone!"

There's a cure!

He frowned. "OCD? I understand anxiety. Is that what the Rewire Contagion did to your mind? Caused fear?"

This man knows about what made me sick? Of course he does. His people were responsible.

Emotions washed over her in waves. "You helped me. Why?"

He stiffened. "I am a medic. It is my job to help those who need me."

The sincerity in his voice made her muscles relax, if only by a fraction. "And I'm cured."

"Not yet." His gaze held hers. "But you will be. The Rewire Contagion will take time to fix, but I should be able to repair most, if not all, of it."

She knew she should have been filled with nothing but terror, but instead, it felt as if a great weight had been lifted

from her chest. *Before my life was hell. Living was torture. Now I have a chance at being healthy.*

Then another thought struck her. *But I'm no longer on Earth. I'm a captive. What kind of life is ahead of me now?*

“The last thing I remember is going to fight off the invasion.” Cold dread suddenly filled her chest. “We lost.” Her sister’s face flashed in her mind. “Is everyone else...dead?”

His eyes, a pale shade of green, widened. “Dead? Oh. No, no, they are all fine. Earth is fine. That was never our true intention.”

She squared her shoulders. “We found your plans. Don’t lie to me now.”

He looked away from her. Shaking his head, frustration was clearly evident in the way he clenched the strong lines of his jaw. “This story is long. And I’ve only found out the details recently myself. Can we sit? Can I feed you?”

Should I trust him? The food could be poisoned. He could attack me.

She took a deep breath. *Why would he heal me only to poison me? And if he wanted to hurt me, I couldn’t stop him now any better than I could while sitting.* “All right.”

He came toward her, and she involuntarily shrank back farther. He slowed his pace, but didn’t stop. When he was a hand’s length from her, he froze. This close, his size was even more shocking. And his appearance? Even more bizarre. With his shoulder-length golden-bronze hair, and the flawless lines of his face, he looked like some kind of Viking god. Or perhaps the sexiest angel to walk through Heaven’s gate.

But the corded muscles traveling his arms and even his throat? They spoke of power. And his strange tattoos? They

made him look dangerous...

And sexy.

“My quarters are right behind you,” he said.

His voice sent shivers down her spine.

“That was your bed I was in?” she asked, unable to keep the question from slipping from her lips.

He nodded.

She wrapped her arms around herself, all too aware of the fact that she wore nothing but a shirt. *Why am I wearing only a shirt?* “Did we...did we do anything?”

“Do anything?” he repeated.

He can't be serious. “You know...”

His brows drew together. “I don't understand.”

Her cheeks burned. “Sleep together. Have sex.”

The tattoos on his face swirled and embarrassment filled his gaze. He shook his head, holding up his hands. “No. I could not...would not...and besides, you were in no shape to...”

For some reason, his reaction reassured her. If he was lying to her, he was the best liar she had ever met. She nodded.

He moved closer, invading her space. Suddenly, the door behind her flew open. She almost fell back, but his strong hand closed around her arm, keeping her on her feet. Sparks of heat radiated from his touch. And for a minute, she couldn't seem to catch her breath.

“Are you all right?” he asked, frowning.

“I'm—fine.”

But she didn't feel fine. She felt...aroused. Which made no sense. She should be afraid. She should be angry. Instead, she felt content. More than content. Almost happy.

Perhaps that was because the virus wasn't screaming in her head. But the arousal? Her gaze slowly traveled over Seer's broad chest. That had everything to do with the man whose touch made her legs tremble.

"Are you sure?" He ducked his head so their gazes locked. "You have been through a lot."

Using one large hand, he tilted her chin up. What he saw there made his brows draw together.

"Back to the healing chamber," he said, and suddenly she was swept up into his arms, as if she weighed nothing at all.

"No!" she protested, although she didn't entirely understand. "You said you'd explain what happened."

He strode across the room, his grip gentle. "I will."

"Now." She pushed. *How am I to relax when I don't understand what happened yet?*

He nodded, then carefully laid her on a hard white bed of some kind, in the center of the room. "Are you sure you want to hear all this now?"

"Yes." She needed to know.

And so, he told her a story. Of a plan set out long ago by another alien, who apparently was in charge of the ship and all the people on it. When he was finished, she closed her mouth. The story was absolutely unbelievable. And yet, she completely believed him.

Which makes no sense. This guy, or more of his people, kidnapped me and all the other women. To be...their brides?

“So then,” she tried to pick only one question at a time. “I’m your bride?”

His tattoos swirled again, and he took a step back. “No. I cannot have a bride of my own.”

She was surprised by the disappointment that swelled in her chest. “Why not?”

“Because,” he paused, “I am unworthy.” He took a deep breath. “I am here to heal you. To protect you against any and everything. You are mine...my responsibility. I would sooner die than harm you or allow anyone else to harm you.”

Again, she believed him.

He doesn't want me. I should be relieved.

So why do I feel upset?

“You mean you have no desire to...have sex with me? To make me your bride?”

He froze, his stunning eyes swimming with unspoken emotions. “I am a Second Tier male, unworthy of any female. I have never touched one, nor will I ever. You are safe with me. Please do not be afraid.”

She stared. The emotions in his eyes said exactly the opposite. *He wants me. But he won't take me? And he has never had a woman before?*

She couldn't believe her ears. A big strong man was proclaiming his desire to keep her safe. A sexy doctor, who said he was unworthy? And was apparently a virgin.

Why do I find that so damn irresistible?

I should be upset I've been kidnapped. I should be plotting my escape.

But instead, she was thinking about the possibilities of her future. Perhaps there was a chance she could return home to her sister. But did her best chance at that lie in some strange alien who had bought her? Or in this doctor?

Maybe I can convince him to take me home.

And if that isn't possible? I would rather take my chances with him than any other man.

Not just because he is hot. But because he seems kind. Gentle. Intelligent.

Because somehow my gut is telling me he could make me happy.

“Please lay back now.” His face was serious. “I need to continue to fix the Rewire Contagion in your mind.”

“Will it hurt?” she asked, flashes of the many doctor’s offices she’s been to since getting sick rolling through her mind.

His brows drew together. “Never. Never would I hurt you. Lay back. You will sleep and when you awaken, you will have healed even more.”

How is it possible I trust a strange alien who kidnapped me more than any man I knew back on Earth? Cautiously, she lay down on the table, her eyes never leaving his.

Reaching out, he brushed a strand of hair from her face. “Sleep, little female.”

Moving to just above her head, golden sparkles rose around her. She almost sat up, but then an overwhelming sense of peace filled her. The hard table no longer felt hard, but like a soft pillow. She was warm, perfectly warm, and her eyelids felt heavy. Staring up at the big alien who moved his hands

above her head, a look of complete concentration on his face, she made a decision.

Tomorrow I'll decide what I'm going to do with this whole "bride" thing. But for now, I'm going to take control over my situation. And what I want more than anything is to have sex with Seer.

Her eyelids closed. Opened. Her thoughts grew fuzzy.

I want his hands on me.

I want my mouth on him.

His muscles.

His arms.

Stomach.

Cock...

WHEN KACI AWOKE, she was alone. Blinking slowly, she reached for her thoughts...but they felt fuzzy. She remembered that she was on an alien ship. That she was kidnapped. And that she was intended as the bride to some asshole who bought her. But somehow, she didn't care.

Her blood seemed to be moving too fast through her body. Her heart beat, filling her ears. And her womanhood? It felt wet and swollen with need.

Why am I so hot?

Just as quickly as the thought came, it left.

I want Seer.

Inside me.

Her hands drifted to her breasts. She groaned as they slid across her hard nipples beneath the thin shirt. *Will he know how to please me?*

The thought of his sensual lips running over her heated flesh made her inner muscles squeeze.

I need to find him.

She sat up, then stood, too quickly. Her legs crumpled beneath her. When her head stopped spinning, she rose again. Her legs no longer shook. Her mind no longer felt as fuzzy. But her desire? It seemed to only be getting stronger.

Spotting the door to his room, she padded silently across the doctor's area. She stepped in front of the doors, but they didn't move. *Oh yes, I'm not heavy enough for them.* She jumped. They slid open. *How did I know that? I'm not doing too badly at this alien thing.*

Grinning, she stepped inside the darkened room. Soft golden lights flickered around the walls of the room, giving just enough light to clearly show the massive man lying in his bed. The dark blankets were pulled low, revealing his entire chest and stomach.

An eight-pack of hard smooth muscles.

God, I want him.

Like I've never wanted any man before.

This isn't like me. But the me before? She was miserable. All she ever wanted was a man like this. And now, here he is. Even if he is a strange alien.

No matter what happens to me in this new world, at least I'll have my time with him.

Creeping to his side, her need surged. His lips, the taste of them still lingered on hers. She longed to kiss him again, to run her fingers through his long, tangled hair.

I wonder if he's sleeping in the nude.

Even though she'd had only one boyfriend before her illness completely overtook her life, and a dozen sexual encounters with him that were little more than decent, she felt ridiculously brave. Experienced.

Perhaps because I'm finally free of the virus.

Or because he was the one who freed me.

Or because he's the hottest man I've ever seen.

Or because I can finally have sex again.

Or because his inexperience turns me on.

There were so many reasons to make this alien her own. But were there any reasons not to?

Her brain was blissfully silent. *Finally, my brain and I are a team. And we both want this man.*

Reaching for the hem of the large shirt she was wearing, she stripped it off. She knelt next to him on the soft bed and drew his covers down.

And her heart stopped.

He was naked.

His cock was impossibly long and thick. *Is he always hard?*

The thought had possibilities.

The markings that covered the rest of his body also covered his manhood too. He was definitely an alien, and

different. But also all male.

I wonder if he's as big as he seems to be.

Unable to help herself, she reached down and wrapped her hand around him. Her fingers scarcely touched. *God, I wonder what he'd feel like inside me. Filling me completely.*

Dragging her hand down, she stroked him.

Instantly, his cock hardened even more, and he gave a soft groan in his sleep that sounded strangely like her name.

She felt herself grow wetter, more needy. Using her free hand, she twisted one of her nipples as she continued to stroke him. A fire built within her when she saw the first drop of precum beaded at the top of his cock, the sight of it driving her wild.

He moaned and then she felt his gaze on her.

Bravely, she turned to face him.

He was panting, his chest rising and falling. His eyes burned as they swept over her naked flesh. "You—can't—be here," he whispered, his voice husky with need. "No matter how much I might wish it otherwise."

His gaze slid to where her hand was wrapped around his cock. Shock widened his eyes.

She stroked him again, and he half sat up.

"I've never been touched like this before. We have to—"

"You've never had a woman stroke your cock before?"

He watched as she slowly drew her hand down again. "No."

"Have you ever touched a woman before?"

He clenched his jaw. “Pregnant Mother forgive me,” he groaned. “No.”

“Would you like to?”

Very slowly, he nodded.

She reached for his hand. He didn’t protest as she shifted as she knelt, spreading her legs farther apart. Turning his hand, she drew his fingers along the blond curls of her mound. Then she pressed his fingers slowly inside her, to touch her outer folds.

“You’re...so wet.” He groaned. “Is that...good?”

She shuddered. “Yes. Stroke me, Seer. Use the big hands of yours to make me come.”

Gently, his fingers brushed her slick folds until they touched her clit.

She cried out as a bolt of pleasure tore through her.

He froze. “I’m sorry, I—“

“Keep going,” she instructed. “Harder.”

She watched him as he stroked her, aroused both by his innocence as much as his handsome face. His touch was gentle. Too gentle. He was driving her wild.

Grinding against him, she stroked his cock as she moved.

“Faster! Oh god!” She rolled her head back, squeezing one of her nipples. “Dammit, Seer! Faster!”

He complied. The glorious friction of his touch took her closer and closer to the edge. To her climax.

But I need more.

“Your fingers,” she begged. Reaching down, she maneuvered his hand so that two of his fingers penetrated her womanhood.

She clenched her inner muscles. “Just like that!”

And she lost her mind. Thrusting against him, she took his fingers deeper, faster. The scent of their desires filled the room. His thumb continued to rub her clit, creating both agony and pleasure.

Then, she jumped over the edge, screaming his name, cursing, screaming and screaming until she was hoarse. Her womanhood pulsed, clenching, holding his fingers as if it might never let him go.

When she at last collapsed on top him, she stared at his cock. Hot cum had squirted from his tip, coating her hand and his belly.

“You liked that,” she moaned, feeling strangely satisfied.

“I’m sorry.”

She turned. His eyes were closed. His arm thrown over his face.

“Sorry?” she asked, clenching his cock a little harder.

A strangled sound left his lips. “For embarrassing myself. For this. I know—I know a male should last. Should please his female.”

She laughed, the sound husky to her own ears. He tensed beneath her touch.

“Seer, look at me.”

He did, slowly, reluctantly. His face was filled with anguish.

“Knowing you came just from my touch, from watching me come, is one of the hottest things I’ve ever seen.”

His gaze was guarded. “Are you saying this to—to protect my wounded pride?”

She pulled his hand from her womanhood and released his cock. Straddling him, she leaned down and kissed his lips. After a moment, his mouth softened. She kissed him long and hard, drawing out his tongue, teaching him to tangle with her own. When she finally pulled back, she was aroused, panting with her need.

“Now, for your cock. Seer? Put your hard cock in me. I can feel it, there against my ass. Put it inside me. Fill me up.”

He groaned, his hands clenching her hips tightly. “We—can’t.”

She wiggled against him, tearing a strangled sound from his lips. “We can, and we will.”

“You don’t—understand. The healing bed, it can make you...aroused. I should not have touched you. Should not have let you touch me. I have taken advantage of you. I hope you can someday forgive me for my lack of honor.”

He feels guilty. Again.

She rubbed her nipples against his chest. “Maybe that damn bed got this whole thing started, but I want you. I want you more than I’ve ever wanted a man before.”

He was panting. “Please, I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Kaci.” She rubbed her ass along his hardened cock. “And I know how you can make this all up to me.”

He instantly looked down, the tortured look on his face fading slightly. “How? I will do anything in my power.”

God, he's so hot.

“Have you ever gone down on a woman before?”

He frowned. “Gone—down?”

His innocence made her pussy tighten. “Yes.”

She rolled to the side of him and lay on the bed, spreading her thighs. His eyes widened. “It’s how you apologize to a woman you’ve wronged.”

His gaze was one of disbelief. “What should I do?”

Using her hands, she spread herself for him. “You know how you just kissed my mouth?”

He nodded, his eyes darkening.

“Come kiss me here.”

“I should not,” he said, already moving to climb on top of her. “You belong to another male. I am not allowed to touch you. I am unworthy.”

“You don’t feel unworthy to me.” She tangled her fingers in the back of his hair and pulled him down. “It’s my body, handsome. And the only male that’s going to touch me is you, as long as I say so.”

“Goddess,” he moaned, his breath hot on her pussy. “You are so beautiful. You smell...intoxicating. It would be an honor to kiss your sweet womanhood, if that is what you wish.”

She couldn’t catch her breath. “Yes. I want it. Kiss me. Lick me. Give it to me, Seer.”

His mouth pressed against her wet folds, and she thrashed.

“Like that?” he questioned.

“Yes! Yes! Oh god, yes!”

He growled, an animalistic sound of satisfaction. And then, he was licking her, kissing her. At first he seemed to be experimenting, but soon his tongue was lapping at her clit. She was shoving him against her pussy, legs wrapped around his shoulders. Tears ran down her face as she got closer and closer...

And then, she was gone. Climaxing. Screaming. Thrashing. Her vision went black, then white. She rose above her body, then crashed back into it.

Her muscles twitched around her. Her body was soooo relaxed. She felt amazing. Her legs had come open, fallen to the bed around her.

He lifted from between her thighs, wiped his mouth, and grinned. “Did I do well?”

“Oh—yes,” she reassured him, still panting.

To her utter satisfaction, she noticed he’d come again.

“It looks as if you enjoyed it too.”

The tattoos on his face shifted again, something she’d begun to realize meant he was embarrassed. “I am sorry.”

She laughed. “Don’t be. Like I said, knowing making me come makes you come, that is...ridiculously sexy.”

“So I am forgiven?” he asked, sincerely.

She laughed again. *I like this guy.* “You are.”

Lying down next to her, he didn’t move. “What should I do now?”

“Now?” She put his arm behind her head and snuggled into the side of his body. “Now, you sleep, because soon I’m

going to want your cock buried inside me.”

“You are not my mate—“ he began to protest.

“Shhh.” She pressed a finger to his lips. “Not now.”

Closing her eyes, she felt a smile twist her lips. Had she ever been this happy before? She didn’t think so.

FOURTEEN

Seer had made a grave error. Hours later, when he reluctantly untangled himself from the human female's arms, the full impact of what he'd done hit him.

I should not have touched her.

She would be angry when the effects of the healing chamber wore off. She would hate him.

He should care more that he had been disloyal and dishonorable by touching another male's mate. Or that the punishment would probably be swift and severe. But he didn't. It was strange. His brain knew she wasn't his, but his heart asserted that she was. His primal side claimed her. Growling at the thought that she could be anyone but his.

Restlessly, he dressed.

I should not have done that.

But do I regret it?

Only if she does.

Images came to him of her naked body. *Had there ever been any female as beautiful as her? And the scent of her desire? The taste of her womanhood?*

He froze as his cock stiffened once more. *There has never been anything like that before.*

An angry voice rose in the back of his mind, *and there never will be. She is not yours. When she has gone, you will return to being alone forever.*

You will have lost her. Another male will have her.

Exiting into his medbay, he pulled up the list of brides. Next to Kaci's number, he typed her name. Already most of the numbers had names.

That's when his comp went black. A second later, the list of female brides came again. But this time, half the names were crossed out in red. A message flashed a moment later.

We have chosen our half of the females.

It was a message from the Bortrack mother ship.

If you do not bring us our spawn incubators in one day's time, we will take all of them.

Seer fought the churning in his gut. *We cannot hope to stop them. This ship is equipped for transportation, not fighting.*

His finger scrolled through the list of females the Bortracks had chosen. Then stopped.

Kaci's name and number had been crossed out. The Bortracks had claimed her.

A countdown flashed on the screen.

We have twenty-four hours time to find a solution, and then they will come for her.

His primal side stretched to life and a possessive anger filled him. *I will not let that happen.*

Even though he'd promised himself that the soldier within him, the expert killer, was gone forever, a cold realization settled in his belly. He would become that man again. For her.

The thought should have frightened him. It should have.

But it didn't.

FIFTEEN

If I send this message, I'm betraying my best friend. The thought made Seer feel as if an Ungarrian worm was crawling inside his belly.

But sometimes making the right decision has consequences. And sending this message is the right decision, isn't it?

His head pounded. This was not an easy action to take, and time was not on his side. *The Bortracks will soon request half the females on board. Including Kaci.*

And I would do anything to protect her, even this.

He ran agitated fingers through his hair. *I'm not just considering this for my own selfish reasons, because there's more at stake than just her life. If we don't give up the females, the Bortrack mothership will attack. And this ship is a transporter vessel, not a warship.*

We will lose. And then, we will lose all of them.

Leader believes Parsimon and the other males who funded this voyage will come to our rescue and defeat the mothership before our time runs out. It's a gamble. With the females' lives.

With Kaci's life.

The lights overhead flickered, signaling that for one moment power was being rerouted to communications. *So Leader can send his message through the wormhole. Now is my only chance.*

It's the only way to be sure they'll all be safe.

Seer hit the button.

His message was sent, and within moments, the lights overhead grew bright once more. *It's done. There's no turning back now.* He waved his hand and the 3-D screen vanished. For a second, he just stared around the empty medical bay. *It still looks the same. As if nothing has happened.*

It was not an easy choice, but it had to be done.

Suddenly, the hairs on his arms stood on end and his stomach turned. He gripped the side of his table, trying to steady himself, but the vision tore through him before he was fully prepared. Pain burned behind his eyes, and everything went black.

HE STOOD *in a dark hallway in the ship. Red emergency lights flashed and a siren blared.*

Like most of his visions, he could already tell it was going to be a bad one. He steeled himself for the terrible things he'd soon experience.

"Seer!"

Spinning at the sound of his name, the already fuzzy vision blurred further. It was a second before the moving shape in the darkness formed into a person. Leader.

“They’re gone!” His friend’s face was etched in pain, his fingers bit into Seer’s shoulders. “We failed them. We lost them.” He looked down to see his friend was covered in blood. His markings were so pale they were nearly white. The blood was his own. And he’s lost too much of it.

“Calm yourself. Let me—“

“Calm? They took your female too!”

“My female?” A shiver raced down his spine. “I don’t have a female.”

“Your Kaci.”

His hands curled into fists. “Where is she? I will get her back and someone will pay.”

Leader placed a hand against the wall, blinking slowly. “Too late.”

Cold fury swept through Seer. He stepped forward and reached out, but a horrible pain sliced through his ribs. Glancing down at himself, he saw that his clothes were torn and wounds covered his body. One in his chest was bleeding profusely.

There had been a battle... and he had lost. Lost Kaci?

Then he was on Leader, grabbing him by the shirt.

“Who took her? What happened? Tell me everything!”

His friend blinked slowly. “The Bortracks. They took my mate. They took the females.”

“How?” he demanded, his voice almost a roar.

Leader’s lips moved as he tried to answer, but suddenly, he tipped forward.

Seer tried to hold him up, but the pain in his chest paralyzed him and his friend slid out of his injured arms.

Leader hit the ground, the impact silent beneath the deafening warning sirens.

Crumbling to his knees, he felt for a pulse.

Nothing.

My best friend is dead. The female I swore to protect is gone. What happened?

Rising on legs that shook, he clenched his fists and started to run toward the bridge. I need to know what happened, so I can stop it. I need to—

AROUND HIM, the vision began to fade. *No, no! I don't know anything yet. I need more time! More information!*

He gasped for breath as his vision faded and the medbay came back into view. He was shaking. His entire body felt weak, drained.

“Damn it!” He slammed the table with his fist.

Why do my visions taunt me? How many times do I have to see something awful, but never be given enough information to stop it?

His primal side roared to life inside of him, its rage making his nails lengthen and his flesh ripple. *Protect our female.*

A need to kill and destroy swept through him with such fierceness that he saw red. *Like when I was a soldier.*

The thought made him freeze. He never wanted to be that male again. But he'd had some control over that. This? He

couldn't control the powerful rage from his primal side. Seer the medic killed only when he had to. And he was frighteningly good at it. But if his primal side took control and he Shifted...

No one would be safe.

Taking several deep breaths, he could no longer ignore the way he was changing. The Shadow Walker within him was growing stronger. Something about Kaci had awoken his primal side, making it more than an echo inside him.

He should be elated, but he couldn't imagine a worse time. *If I can completely shift into a Shadow Walker, I can be a First Tier male, maybe even fight to keep Kaci. But I also cannot risk ever letting it loose, losing control. Not now. Not with a fragile female to protect.*

He forced himself to search for stillness, for peace. He felt his nails slowly retracting, and his markings returning to normal. *This was a warning. The Bortracks are coming, and there will be a battle. You can't be distracted from the significance of it by what's changing inside of you.*

His vision, as always, didn't tell him which path to take, which action would save Kaci from the Bortracks.

But now I know I'm right, the females are in danger. I just need to figure out what to do about it.

He cursed again. Sometimes he hated being right.

"Seer?"

Pushing away from the table, he turned. Kaci stood in the doorway to his quarters, wearing his shirt.

His breath caught. *Was the vision correct? Is she meant to be mine?*

He could feel his primal side's possessive assertion. He shook his head. *I must be crazy. Parsimon would have me killed if I took her. Besides, I haven't even fully Shifted yet. And I still might not Shift fully.*

But the sight of her slowly pushed away his other emotions, his worries and his fears. In that moment, there was nothing but her.

She's perfect.

"Seer?" her soft, sensual voice came again. "What's wrong?"

His gaze jerked from her legs to meet her startling blue eyes and guilt overtook his desire as the memories of that night came over him. *I took advantage of her.*

Unsure of her feelings, he crossed the space between them and knelt down on one knee. "My lack of restraint will forever be a mark on my honor. I do not expect you to forgive me, but I offer you my apology."

He held still, holding his breath, waiting.

She laughed, a sweet sound. "What are you apologizing for? I'm just glad that you weren't a dream. For a minute, I thought I might still be on Earth, my brain completely destroyed by the virus, and this whole thing just some ridiculous fantasy I'd created."

He frowned. *Does she not remember what we did together?*

"Don't get me wrong, it isn't that I'm suddenly happy to be an abducted bride. It's just that no matter what happens, I've decided to enjoy myself with you. Enjoy myself being almost...normal." She tilted her head, her beautiful curtain of long golden hair moving as she stared down at him.

She must still be groggy from the healing bed. Perhaps humans need longer to recover than we do. “I am not your male, and last night I violated you.”

“Violated? Oh... you realize,” she began, her voice growing quieter, “I was the one that took advantage of you... I mean, I did sneak into your bed and fondle you while you slept. Honestly, I don’t know what came over me. I’ve never done something like that before.”

His momentary relief melted away. *Oh. That’s why she forgives me so easily. She doesn’t know that this is my fault.* He shook his head. “This is still my fault. The healing bed makes human females... aroused. As your medic, I knew you were not in your right state of mind. Therefore, I took advantage of you.”

“Of course! The shy, virgin alien doctor took advantage of me.” She laughed again. “Will you stand up? You’re making me—“

When he rose, she made a tiny sound of surprise and took a step back. “I don’t know why I keep forgetting how big you are.”

Cautiously, he lowered his gaze until he met hers. There was nothing but merriment in her eyes.

He frowned, feeling even more uncertain. *Is she still impacted by the healing bed?* “Do you understand what I have done?”

How could she know? He chided himself. *She doesn’t know our ways. I may have told her that I couldn’t take a mate and that she belongs to Parsimon, but she doesn’t know what those things mean. She cannot possibly understand how wrong my actions were.*

Her gaze went down to his mouth, and her little pink tongue darted out to lick her bottom lip in a way that had his cock hardening. “I remember. I understand.” She moved closer and tentatively placed her small hands on his chest. “The thing is... maybe the healing bed made me a bit more... adventurous, but I don’t regret it. It’s what I wanted.”

She took a deep breath. “My illness forced me to miss so many things over the years. I missed... being touched. Being with a man.”

He stared. And stared. *Is it possible?* “Do you forgive me then? Really?”

Her lips quirked into a smile. “Really. I’m saying that I would’ve been upset with you if you’d turned me down. I mean, I even made you—“ She cut off, her cheeks growing bright pink.

Curious. “Made me what?”

The little dots on her pale flesh stood out even more as her cheeks turned an even brighter shade of pink. “You know... I told you to apologize by—“

Realization dawned on him. “You had me kiss your womanhood. Go—“ He searched his brain for the right words, “down on you. That is the correct term, right?”

“Seer!” her voice was gently scolding.

He frowned. “Is that term incorrect? What do you call it when you spread your thighs and I pressed my mouth in your wet folds, licking and—“

“Stop, just stop!” she begged, putting one hand over her mouth and the other over his.

I have made another mistake. “I am sorry. I have never done such a thing to a woman before. And what is more, you are not my female. My error was one that is unforgiveable. A breach in honor—“

“Enough.” She placed her hand back onto his chest, the warmth of her touch reaching all the way to his heart. “What you did is okay. I just meant you don’t need to be so... dirty about it.”

“Dirty?” He didn’t understand the human female.

“Yes, you don’t have to talk about what we did together, okay? On Earth, a woman chooses what she wants to do with a man. People don’t decide for her. And then, it doesn’t need to be talked about later.”

Relief rushed through him. He might know the shame of his indiscretion, but it didn’t sound like Kaci wanted anyone else to know. *And more than that, it doesn’t sound like she regrets what we did together.* The thought made his cock jerk again.

To his surprise, she glanced down at his arousal, then met his gaze. Desire swam in the deep blue depths. His primal side clawed within him, urging him to take her.

Instead, he stepped back, panting. He was so close to Shifting that if she touched him for another second, he might lose all control.

She dropped her hands, her expression strangely disappointed.

I am a medic and she is my patient, a bride meant for another male. I cannot forget that again. Even with the excuse of the healing bed.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, trying to take his mind off his body.

She nodded, so he led her back into his chamber to the small table. Uncertain, he asked the computer to create a few human dishes at random, as well as a few of his favorites. It synthesized the foods and he placed them on the table, indicating that she should try what she liked.

To his surprised, she reached for his foods first. “What is this?”

This female is adventurous. I like that. Too much, I think.

“That is... lumbar. A tender meat swimming in a sauce made from its fat and herbs. The animals are native to Unngar.”

“Unngar?”

“That is my homeworld. Where we are heading. Where you will live.”

Picking up her fork, she took one of the dark red pieces of meat and popped it into her mouth. Her eyes widened. She chewed slowly, then licked the sauce from her lips, which, of course, made him remember the way her sweet hand had felt wrapped around his cock.

“That’s delicious. Weird, but delicious.” Her smile reached her eyes. “When I was sick, I had to count every bite. My brain wouldn’t let me try new things... it had so many rules. It feels strange not to have to obey my obsessions anymore. To have freedom. Strange, but nice.”

Her words warmed his heart. *Taking her was wrong, but at least I have been able to help her.* “I’m glad.”

She finished off the entire plate of meat, then went on to the dessert. This time, when she placed one of the berries covered in sour sauce in her mouth, she winced. “That one is not so good.”

“I’m sorry.”

Smirking, she cocked a brow. “Did you invent that recipe?”

He could tell she was teasing him. He shook his head.

“Then don’t be. Because of you, I was able to try that awful food.” She smirked.

He laughed. *When was the last time I laughed?* He’d certainly laughed since the war, but it hadn’t been so spontaneous, so right. “I guess... you are welcome then.”

She sampled one thing after another for awhile. Some things, she ate most of, while others she tried and then ignored.

To return her adventurous spirit, he tried some of her strange human food. Something she called *spagatte* tasted like old, rotted food. Another, called a *beef roast* was quite delicious and reminded him of meats from his own world, although the flavors were more muted.

At last they both slowed.

She picked at some of her human food and glanced at him. “Am I supposed to meet the man who bought me on *Ungare*?”

He stiffened. *Do we have to talk about Parsimon? He will have you too soon already.*

“Our planet is called Unngar,” he corrected, “and yes.”

Her fork continued to push at her *spagatte*. “And what if I don’t wish to go with him?”

His heart soared and his primal side surged with joy, even while his logical mind chided him.

“You will want to. When you meet him.”

“Why?” she asked, her intelligent eyes locked on his.

Now I must tell her why this male is more worthy than me? His chest ached. “Parsimon is wealthy and powerful. You will want for nothing.”

“Is he kind, like you?”

Like you? Her words repeated in his mind, warming him. “He is in charge of the Bride Initiative. The program that links brides to their mates. His family has many connections, homes all over our world and others.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

He sighed. *I will not lie to her.* “I do not find him a particularly kind male, but he will care for you as if you are the most precious thing in this world, like all females that come to our world.”

But never as I would care for her.

She was quiet for a time, then placed her fork on the table. “If he’s in charge of getting brides for his people, does that mean he’s responsible for taking us from our world?”

“Yes... I told you before how it happened. The Earth mission was... unusual. This is not how brides are usually acquired.”

“But I didn’t know my future... husband was the one responsible for it. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You were frightened, and there was so much to tell you... and maybe I didn’t feel you were ready to hear it.” *I was surprised how well you took everything I’d already had to tell you.*

“I guess that makes sense.”

There’s more. He could sense it in the stiffness of her shoulders, so he waited, practically watching the wheels turning in her mind.

“Am I a prisoner on this ship?” she asked at last.

Even though he was prepared for a question, he hadn’t expected it. “You can’t return home, but no, you are not a prisoner.”

“Then I would like to explore the ship.”

Explore the ship? With the Bortracks on board?

“No.”

“Why not?” she pressed.

“There is a race of aliens on board called Bortracks who are dangerous. It is not safe.”

“Even with you with me? You seem big enough to—”

“I would never let you come to harm,” he assured her, his heart pounding. “I would give my life first.”

She gave a small grin, one side of her lips twisting up. “Then, there’s no reason I can’t explore the ship. With you by my side, of course.”

He wanted to tell her no. But he could not. His mouth would not form the words. His heart begged him to give her anything and everything she wished for.

“But it must be a short trip. You need to return to the healing bed.”

“Agreed,” she said, her smile widening.

For some reason, he felt that he'd been tricked. And yet, he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so happy.

SIXTEEN

Kaci adjusted the loose dress Seer had given her, pulling it back on her shoulders so that her breasts didn't completely spill out from the top of the wide V-neck.

“This dress is huge.”

When she glanced up, he was watching her, his mouth open. *He looks as if he wants to devour me whole.* Her inner muscles tightened at just the thought.

He cleared his throat, his voice husky. “Our women are quite a bit larger than you.”

She perked up, glad to have an excuse to ask him more questions. “Do they have tattoos like you?”

“Tattoos?” he frowned.

“The black shapes on your body.”

“Oh, my markings,” he said, touching one that curled along his massive bicep. “Yes, our females have markings as well.”

“Do you... do your men find our women attractive without the marks?”

He stared. “I thought after last night that would be painfully clear.”

Her pace sped up as the night before came rushing back to her. Touching him had been better than any fantasy. And feeling his hands on her? His mouth on her? It made her want more of him. *All of him.*

Focus. Ask questions. I'll never gain his trust if I don't get to know him. Which means— I won't be able to convince him not to give me away to some strange guy named Parsimon. Whether I ultimately decide to stay with Seer or go back home, I'm better off with him than someone else.

The thought caught her oddly by surprise. Was she really already so smitten with this alien that she'd consider staying with him rather than going home? For some reason, the idea that she could wake up tomorrow and not see him again made her stomach turn. *I'll be damned if I allow them to sell me to some alien jerk. I'm staying with Seer, then I'll choose my own fate.*

“Is that why your people came for us? Because they find us attractive?”

“No.” He hesitated. “The Rewire Contagion that made you ill wiped out most of our female population before we found a cure. And we haven't found too many planets where we are compatible with the female population.”

“Oh.” What more could she say? “So exposing us to that same virus was accidental?”

Somehow she knew the answer, but she needed to hear it.

“Entirely.” She had only a moment to feel relieved before he continued. “Part of the reason I've kept you in my private medical bay is because we can't risk exposing the other women to you.”

The other women.

She realized that she hadn't thought about them since she'd been with Seer. Guilt blossomed within her chest and her thoughts turned to them as he finished clearing their meal from the table. *While I've been here enjoying life, what have Catalina and my squad had to endure? Have the other aliens been as kind to the other women as Seer has been to me?*

Since the crash, her thoughts had been fuzzy. Everything had seemed so perfect. She wasn't dead in some terrible mission to defend Earth. Her sister was safe, and her virus actually had a cure. And then there was the sexy, sweet doctor responsible for healing her.

I've been so grateful to not be consumed by my sickness, to finally be able to enjoy my life a little, that I didn't think of the others. I'm an ass.

She raised her chin. *When I leave this room, I'm heading straight for them. If they aren't being treated well, everything will change. Seer will become my enemy, and my goal will be to get us all the hell out of here.*

I really hope my friends are safe and that Seer has been honest with me.

"One moment and we can leave," he said, drawing her attention from her thoughts as he moved away from the clean table. "I know you are eager to go."

He turned his back to her. In one quick movement, he pulled his white shirt over his head and tossed it on the floor. The muscles on his back rippled with the action, and his markings shifted.

Unable to help herself, she watched as he pressed a button on the wall and a drawer slid open. Reaching into it, he pulled out something. A second later, he donned a tan leather vest,

which he buttoned with agile fingers, then slid one dagger after another into the built-in sheaths across his chest.

“That doesn’t look like something a doctor would wear,” she remarked, feeling a flutter of nervousness. If she’d thought Seer looked handsome before... now, between his long blond hair and the markings curling along his muscular flesh, he looked sexy, dangerous.

“I was a medic in a war.” He turned back to her, wearing the vest, dark pants, and boots. “Even though it feels like a lifetime ago, my combat experience is as much a part of me as being a healer.”

That’s... unexpected. Somehow, she couldn’t imagine him fighting in a war.

She moved closer to him, as if pulled by an invisible force, stopping just feet in front of him. “And you think you might need weapons when we explore the ship?”

“No.” He reached out as if to touch her, then dropped his hands. “But I wouldn’t gamble with your life.”

His reassurance brought a smile to her lips. “You’re sweet.”

The markings on his face swirled, something she’d come to realize meant he was embarrassed. “Let’s go.”

Padding on bare feet— he hadn’t been able to find any shoes small enough for her— they left his room and exited the medical bay. When they reached the hallway, two alien men who stood conversing paused in their conversation to stare at her. Their gazes lingered on her before they walked past and entered a room just a couple doors down from their own.

She stared at them. They were nearly as large as Seer, and the kind of men who would make her do a double-take had

they walked by her back on Earth. But for some reason, she didn't feel the same kind of overwhelming attraction she felt with Seer.

It shouldn't have surprised her, but it did.

“What would you like to see first?”

This is it. “I want to see the other women. My squad.”

A frown pulled the corners of Seer's lips down. “You can't.”

Her hands curled into fists. “I need to.”

“Why?” he asked, defiance in his gaze.

She raised her chin. “Some of them are my friends. I need to know they're safe.”

He stared at her for a long moment before his eyes gentled. “We can't risk exposing them to the virus, not when we aren't entirely sure you're cured yet.”

“I will not—”

He held up a hand to silence her. “I may be able to find a way for you to see them and speak to them, without risking their health.”

The fight left her. “Thank you.”

They headed down the hall, his hand lingering lightly on her lower back. Heat radiated from his touch, but his gaze was sharp, alert. Tension seemed to sing through his muscles, so she remained quiet. *He must be nervous about the Borrats.*

For some reason, all she could picture was a giant sewer rat when she thought of the Borrats. Glancing at the man next to her, she grinned. *I'm sure he can take them.*

When they reached the end of the hall, he hit a button on the wall, and a door slid open into a small, silver room. A room that looked like an elevator. She followed Seer in, and the door closed behind them.

“Computer, bridal floor.”

The elevator plummeted and her feet briefly left the floor.

She screamed and grabbed Seer around the waist. Her stomach flipped and her head felt as if her brain was shifting around in her skull.

“What is it?” he asked, gathering her close.

Too fast.

Too bright.

Too small.

I’m going to die.

A second later, the elevator stopped and the doors opened.

She didn’t move, too afraid her trembling legs might collapse from beneath her. The plummeting elevator was terrifying, but what worried her more was the anxiety that had so quickly swept her under. *I’m not cured yet.*

“Kaci?”

If I tell him now, he’ll make me go back.

“I’m—fine.”

Putting a hand under her chin, he forced her to look up at him. “Are you certain?”

“Yes,” she said, trying to sound confident. “Elevators simply don’t move as fast on Earth. It surprised me is all.”

“If you are sure.” He didn’t sound the least bit convinced.

“I am.”

She tried to step back, but in one quick motion, he bent slightly and hoisted her into his arms.

She let out a squeak of alarm and pushed at his arms, almost forcing him to drop her. “I can walk.”

“You are my patient.” He started forward. “If you weren’t so captivating, so convincing, you would be in your healing bed right now. But you are, so I will carry you and allow you to learn what you need to in order to rest and relax into your new life.”

She ran a finger along his jaw line, unable to help herself. “You sound like you’re trying to convince yourself more than me.”

His gaze strayed to her lips, and his gaze grew more serious.

He’s going to kiss me. She held her breath.

“Medic Seer,” someone greeted.

He jerked, quickly looking away from her. “Gallant, how fares your new bride?”

She turned to see a handsome man with short, dark hair striding towards them. One side of his lips quirked up. “My bride is fiery, passionate, impossible, and—she is perfect.”

Seer laughed. “I am glad. So you’ve won her heart?”

His smile faded. “Not yet. But I will.” Then, his gaze moved to her. “Who is this?”

Seer’s grip tightened around her. “This is Kaci. My patient.”

“Ah, Parsimon’s bride?”

“Yes.” Was it her imagination, or did the word *yes* hold an edge of anger?

“She is pretty. Too thin. Too small. And her skin and hair are unusually light, but—“

“She is beautiful. And she is a person, who can hear you.” Now, there was no mistaking it. Her doctor was angry.

For some reason, his quick defense of her warmed her heart.

“Apologies,” Gallant said, giving her a short bow. “My bride’s beauty has confounded me. I forgot my manners.”

“No problem,” she replied, unsure what else to say.

“Where are you headed?”

“Kaci wishes to see how the other females are faring. Actually, could you bring a handful of the females to viewing room five?”

Gallant frowned. “Why does she need a viewing room?”

He hesitated. “She is currently being treated for the Rewire Contagion.”

The other man practically jumped back from her. “She should be in quarantine. What in the Pregnant Mother’s name are you doing bringing her out here?”

Seer’s tone was clipped. “Kaci has been around the other females her entire life, and yet no one else is sick. I therefore have to conclude that the virus isn’t nearly as contagious or as dangerous to human females. Additionally, she has been given a full dose of the cure. In ninety-five percent of cases, the patient doesn’t require more than one.”

Gallant nodded, but the skeptical expression didn't leave his face. "Still..."

"That's why I requested the viewing room, my friend. I am taking no chances. Can you do as I ask?"

After a moment, the man nodded, reluctance in the way he frowned. "As you wish."

"And," Kaci added, "if I could see Catalina, Athena, Clarissa, or Zoey, that would be great. They were women who, uh, flew in my squad with me."

"Did you say Catalina?" His expression was guarded.

"Yes. Do you—?"

His frown deepened and he turned away, speaking over his shoulder. "I will see what I can do."

Farther down the hall, they turned into a small room. Seer placed her on a row of chairs facing another room separated by glass. A short time later, the door to the room they looked into slid open. Athena strode confidently in. She wore a massive, ill-fitting dress similar to the one Kaci wore. It was a yellow that seemed comical on the serious woman, with dark eyes, and dark hair styled into a bob that made the harsh lines of her face seem even harsher. Her brows rose as she spotted Kaci.

Clarissa came in next, her rounded face puffy, her hazel eyes streaked with red. The curves of her body looked strange, crammed into a green dress that was both too tight and too long.

The younger woman's gaze swung to her. "Kaci!" She raced to the glass and pressed her palms into it, her eyes filling with tears. "You made it!"

Kaci rose and touched her own palms to the glass, feeling uncertain. Even though she and Clarissa had been in a squad together, her illness had driven a firm line between them. And what was more, it was difficult to get to know a woman who always seemed on the edge of a breakdown.

“Are you okay?” Kaci asked. “Has anyone hurt you?”

She started to sob, babbling at the same time in a high-pitched voice. Kaci stared, unable to make out any of her explanation. Looking at Athena, she pleaded for help with her eyes.

“No one has hurt us,” Athena said with a sigh. “We’ve been sitting in a cell, waiting to be fed like good little prisoners each day. Oh, but they’re nice enough to let a group of us leave for meals once a day in a common area. So there’s that. And, of course, waiting to be sold off to whatever perverted aliens bought us.”

Seer made a sound in the back of his throat behind her. “We are not perverts.”

Athena’s dark eyes fixed on Seer, shooting daggers. “And what do you call buying us as whores?”

“Brides,” he corrected, looking confused. “Not... whores.”

“Oh, that’s right!” she exclaimed sarcastically. “Creepy aliens kidnapped us to give to other creepy aliens who paid for us. And what, they aren’t going to want to have sex with us?”

He frowned. “Well, of course they will, but—”

Clarissa’s sobbing grew harder.

Athena waved her hands in the air, lips curling. “Sorry alien-man, but no one is going to fucking buy me. Or pay to

fuck me. Because if he tries it, I promise he'll regret it. All of you will."

Seer looked affronted. "No one is going to pay to have sex with you... you are a bride." Kaci's heart raced and she put her hand on Seer's arm to silence him. "We should try to talk to Seer's people, to explain why kidnapping us for brides is wrong. Maybe they'll take us back home."

The dark-haired woman shook her head. "Don't be naive. We were tricked into becoming sex slaves. Better face it - once we reach our buyers, life's going to get a hell of a lot worse."

Gallant stuck his head into the room. "Females, I must return to my bride. Your visit needs to end."

Athena flipped him off, causing both Gallant and Seer to stare at her in confusion, then moved closer to the glass. "We need to get out of here. Fast."

Their gazes held, and Kaci understood her unspoken words. *You need to get us out of here. Fast.*

"Where's Catalina?" Kaci asked, her voice barely a whisper.

Athena turned angry eyes on Seer's friend. "One of the aliens took her. She didn't want to go, and we hear her screaming every day. God only knows what he's doing to her."

Catalina, my brave friend, who killed to protect her little sister, who became our squad leader because of her intelligence and spirit, is screaming? What could make a woman like that scream?

The most logical answer made her sick.

"Who took her?" Kaci asked in a whisper.

Athena pointed at Gallant.

Kaci's stomach dropped as she turned to the large man who regarded her with cold eyes. "I want to see Catalina."

"No," he practically snarled.

"Yes! Now!" Kaci spun to face Seer. "Take me to her!"

Gallant growled. "I will not expose my female to—"

"Enough!" Seer said, his expression guarded. "Kaci, I'm sorry, but you can't see your friend."

Kaci turned back to Athena. "Where is she?"

Athena pointed to the right. "Third door down." She paused. "We saw her when we were passing his room one day, and he was leaving. She was in handcuffs."

Handcuffs?

Ice ran through her blood. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the two men exchange a look. *Are we actually safe here? Who has her? Has he hurt her? I need to find out.*

Seer circled around the chairs and placed his hands on her shoulders. "We can discuss this later. We should return to the medbay."

What if I never get this chance again? What if now that I suspect what is going on he doesn't let me out?

Internally, she apologized to Seer, then shoved him with all her might.

He let out a sound of surprise before tumbling backward over the chairs. Turning, she sprinted for the door, which opened at her approach. Her feet pounded down the hall as she ran to the third room. Behind her, she heard Gallant shout.

At the door, she slammed the button, heart pounding in her ears. But nothing happened.

“Catalina! Catalina!” she screamed.

A second later, she heard someone pounding on the door and a frantic voice from the other side. She couldn't make out the words, but she knew it was her friend.

Suddenly, Gallant grabbed her around the waist and pulled her away.

She struggled, kicking behind her. “Let me go, asshole!” A few blows landed, but he didn't seem to notice. “Catalina!”

Damn it! No! She struggled even harder, thrashing like a wild animal, but his grip on her was like steel.

Suddenly she was ripped from Gallant. She barely had time to realize what had happened, when Seer pulled her behind his back. A snarl sounded in the oddly silent hall.

Her heart thudded wildly. The sound seemed to come from Seer.

Gripping onto his tan vest, she bit back a scream as his markings spread, the darkness washing out most of his skin. He crouched slightly in front of her, his stance wide, like an animal challenging another.

What...?

His friend took two steps back. “I wasn't trying to hurt her, just to protect my mate.”

Seer growled, a low sound that made every hair on her body stand on end.

Gallant's dark eyes widened, then he growled in return, his own markings darkening. “Are you—? You're Shifting. Control yourself before someone gets hurt.”

Kaci took a step backward, looking from one to the other. *What's happening here? What is Shifting?*

Seer's snarl, and now she was sure it was him, echoed off the metallic walls of the ship and sent a chill down her spine.

"Get him out of here. Or no one will be safe!" The edge of rage in Gallant's voice made Kaci's fear jump several notches.

Seer's eyes flew to her, and her heart stopped. They were entirely silver.

"But..." She stepped back from both of them, shaking her head.

"He's not going to hurt you," Gallant snapped. "But you're about to see what it looks like when two Shadow Walkers fight, and trust me, I'd rather not gut my friend."

Seer growled, his silver gaze sliding from both of them.

I don't know what's happening. But it needs to end. "Seer," she whispered his name. "I'm scared. Can we go back to your room?"

His head jerked up and he tentatively rose from his crouch. When he reached for her, she swallowed her terror and took his hand. Seer snarled once more at Gallant, then backed them toward the elevator. The short trip back to the medbay left her in a cold sweat.

When the door closed behind her, she tugged her hand free of his grip and wrapped her good arm around his neck. "Seer? Are you all right?"

His soft growl came from right behind her, "As long as you are."

"I'm fine," she reassured him, even though she didn't feel the least bit fine.

Cautiously, she slid slowly away from him, leaning awkwardly on the healing bed. Then, she watched him, not sure what he would do next.

To her relief, his markings slowly retracted and his eerie eyes without pupils returned to normal. But then, he was standing in front of her, looking every bit as normal as always.

“Kaci,” he sounded out of breath. “I’m sorry—I—”

“What was that?” she asked on the verge of tears. “What are you?”

“It was my primal side. The Shadow Walker within me. I was trying to protect you.” He reached for her, but when she flinched, he dropped his hand. “I would never hurt you.”

Maybe he wouldn't. But what about the thing he was changing into? It seemed more like a monster. “I still want to see Catalina,” she whispered. “To make sure he hasn’t hurt her.”

Has Gallant changed into that thing with her?

“Gallant has been Shifting since he was thirteen. He has a lot more control, and he would never hurt his bride.”

“Humans just don’t scream and cry for no reason.”

“I don’t know why she’s screaming and yelling, but Gallant is a good man. He wouldn’t hurt her.”

“What about the handcuffs?”

Seer sighed. “If he handcuffed her, it must have been for her own safety.”

If only I could believe that. She felt it then; her anxiety rising. Sweat trickled down her back as her head pounded.

She’s going to die.

He's hurting her.

All because I forgot about her.

Stop! She screamed into her mind. Her thoughts calmed.

I'm getting sick again.

A moment later, the door to the medbay opened. Gallant entered, his gaze locked on Seer.

Without thinking, she stood, watching as Seer crossed the room and stopped just feet in front of his friend. *Are they going to fight again?*

“What are you doing here?” Seer asked, his tone curt.

Gallant spoke as if he didn't hear him, “if you're starting to change, you need to talk to someone. It can be dangerous in the beginning, at least until you learn to control it.” He reached out and grasped his friend's arm. “Maybe she shouldn't be with—”

“She's fine with me,” Seer said, his tone clipped. “And I'm fine, because you're the last person who will lay a hand on her while she's in my care.” He jerked his arm out of his friend's grip, then reached back for Kaci.

She stayed out of his reach, even when she saw the hurt in his eyes. *This shows how little I know about them.*

Gallant turned to her. “Catalina is fine,” he promised. “No male would ever hurt a female. Especially his chosen mate.”

She swallowed around the lump in her throat. “Maybe you see us as your mates, but to us, you're still just aliens that kidnapped us. I wonder how long your men will be patient when they realize we won't just go along with it.”

She held her shoulders high as she spun and hurried to the bedroom. As much as she wanted to talk to Seer, she needed to clear her head first. She'd learned so much in such a short period of time it felt as if her already confusing situation had just become frighteningly real.

I need to come up with a plan.

I'm such a fool. I kidded myself that because of my attraction to Seer, and the cure for the virus, that being kidnapped by aliens was a good thing. That it'd brought me the life I'd always wanted, and maybe even happiness.

Turns out, I've been kidnapped by monsters.

SEVENTEEN

As Seer stared down at Kaci lying on the healing bed, his heart constricted painfully in his chest. He'd lost her trust because of Gallant, that was evident, but even worse, she was afraid of him because he'd started to Shift. What should have been amazing, the highlight of his existence, was now tainted.

Only the lowliest of males scare females.

It is no excuse that my vision has been distracting me. That I keep feeling as if it will come true at any moment and all will be lost, yet I don't know what action to take.

There is no excuse. None.

He wanted to hang his head in shame, but instead, he spoke calmly. "I'm going to go back into your mind now, to make certain I've eradicated the virus, and to continue removing the incorrect connections."

She didn't look at him, her expression morose. "Okay."

He moved to stand just above her head, plunging his hands into the golden particles to bring up the control panel. With a slight movement, he started the medicine to sedate her.

He stared one last time into her clear blue irises before her eyes fluttered shut.

At least she still trusts me this much.

Taking a deep breath, he began to search her mind for the virus. And froze in shock.

It's still present!

He couldn't believe it. It rarely happened with Unngar females. But even worse, it was growing again at an incredible speed.

This is impossible.

He'd found no traces of it the day before. He searched his brain, trying to recall a single instance of a similar case. But in all his medical experience, he couldn't remember one. *I'll have to contract Elder Medic Steady.*

In fact, he requested all her data to be automatically streamed to the elder medic immediately. *Hopefully he will be able to explain what I'm seeing.*

Again, he administered the cure. Tiny sparks of silver sprang to life within the golden light. *Perhaps human females simply need two doses.* He prayed that was all.

Next he started to search for incorrect connections in her mind. To his surprise, there were new ones. And some older ones had been reinforced. *What in the Pregnant Mother?*

He severed some of the weaker connections, but as he dove farther, he saw something that gave him a tightness in his chest. The virus was fighting back. There were so many new connections. More than he ever imagined. And some of them were so deeply ingrained in the workings of her mind that to sever them would cause irreparable harm.

I can't cure her.

At first, his mind was unable to accept it, but as he examined her brain from different angles, he realized it to be

the absolute truth.

I can help her, but she'll never be the way she was before we infected her.

Ripping his hands out of the controls, he stumbled back from the table. In medical training, he'd always been at the top of his class. He was entirely focused on healing the sick, saving the unsavable. But when he lost a patient, a dark cloud seemed to fall over him, wiping out the colors of the world. It was why he'd chosen to serve as a medic in the war. He thought it would help to eliminate his weakness. His inability to handle defeat. Death.

But he'd been wrong, although he never admitted it to anyone but himself. For him, the war had been one day after another of witnessing things that bled the life from him as surely as it did so many of his patients. When he got out, he dove into research. It was a safe place he could help. Where he wouldn't lose anyone.

Curing Kaci had reminded him of how much he missed working with patients. Now, he remembered why he'd stopped. Again, he had failed. Not only himself, but the female who needed him so badly.

I will do what I can for her. That is all I can do.

With a heavy weight on his shoulders, he stepped back to the table and placed his hands back into the nanobots. He meticulously explored her brain, cutting each incorrect connection he could. He didn't stop for hours, until his eyes were bleary and he realized he had to rest. Then, he paused, staring at the many, many connections that would remain.

When he finally pulled away from her, his legs trembled with exhaustion. Many hours had passed. A buzz sounded

behind him. *The biological weapons in case we need to use them against the Bortracks... I just can't deal with them right now.* Going to his room, exhaustion narrowed his focus until he saw nothing around him. Instead, he poured himself a drink. Then another. And another.

When his vision started to blur, he set his drink down and took two steps toward his bed. That's when his comp buzzed.

Even though the ground felt uneven beneath his feet, he stumbled to the desk in his suite and activated it. His friend, Leader, appeared in the 3-D image.

For a moment, his chest tightened. *Here I am getting drunk and feeling sorry for myself, when my vision—*

“Seer, I... you do not look good. Are you alright?”

His friend's calmness made his muscles unclench. *If there was a reason to worry, Leader wouldn't be concerned about the way I look.*

“I am fine,” he interrupted. “What do you need?”

He grinned. “I wanted to let you know that a Spiritus ship has been spotted on the other side of the wormhole, so we are headed back.”

Seer blinked slowly. “A Spiritus ship?”

“Yes,” Leader answered slowly, frowning. “Parsimon has come to deal with the Bortrack mothership. Soon they will be gone and all the females will be safe. See, I told you all would be fine, that you could trust in me.”

So I have betrayed my friend... and I was wrong. It is a relief to know that my vision was wrong. That the females are safe, that Kaci is safe, but the repercussions of my decision will be immense.

Leader continued. “The females should be with their new males before seven days has passed.” He paused again, brows wrinkling. “Are you drunk?”

I cannot deal with this either right now.

“The Bortracks will be defeated, and the females will return to their males. Kaci will be given to Parsimon. Everything is fine. Who wouldn’t be happy with such good news? But I need to say goodnight now.”

“Seer—“

He ended the communication with a wave of his hand. Tomorrow he would tell his friend what he had done. Tomorrow he would admit that he contacted the council and told them about the unsanctioned abduction of the human females. And that, in all likelihood, the council would intercept before they ever reached Unngar. Take the females. And all men on board would be punished, severely. That all of them would probably lose their mates. *Because of me.*

But at least they won’t be taken by the Bortracks. And their planet will be safe. He collapsed into bed, his thoughts slowing down. Tomorrow he would face the truth. That he had done all he could to help Kaci. That he would soon lose her. And that he had betrayed every male on the ship.

But not tonight.

Tonight, he would sleep.

EIGHTEEN

Kaci blinked slowly as she awoke. It took her a moment to remember where she was. On the healing bed. On an alien ship. With Seer.

The thought of him made everything inside her twist up in knots.

I care for him. I want him. But I don't know if I can trust him. Or if I'm safe with him.

And even worse, he's supposed to sell me to another alien. One who's more powerful. Parsimon. I wonder if he shifts into one of those things...

Rising slowly from the bed, her eyes searched the softly lit medbay room for Seer, but he was nowhere to be found. Her gaze went to the door of his bedroom and memories of the night before came back to her. *Tonight's visit will be a lot different.*

Standing, she gathered the long skirt of the oversize dress in one hand and tiptoed across the floor. *I want to catch him groggy. I might be able to get the truth before he can lie.*

When she reached his bedroom, she had to jump in order to trigger the sensor. The door slid silently open. But immediately, she heard the sounds of a struggle. She slid to the

side and hid behind the doorframe, peering inside. He was thrashing on the bed, making small sounds of alarm.

Her heart thudded wildly in her chest as she crept into the room.

“No!” he groaned. He was obviously caught in some kind of nightmare. His big body was covered in sweat, his long hair matted to his skin as he tossed his head.

Tentatively, she approached the bed, then reached out and stroked his hair back from his forehead. “Seer, wake up. It’s Kaci. You’re safe.”

With each of her words, his struggling slowed, then his eyes opened. “Kaci?” His pupils seemed to have trouble focusing on her.

“Yes,” she whispered, her heart aching at the sight of the pain in his eyes. “You were having a nightmare.”

“I fail. I always fail. I cannot save you. I cannot save anyone.”

She lowered herself onto the edge of the bed, cupping his chin. “It was just a dream.”

“No, it wasn’t,” he whispered, the words cracking. “It’s real. All of it is real.”

She decided to humor him. “All right. Come on, let’s get you in the shower.”

He didn’t protest as she helped him to stand, even though he leaned a bit on her as they walked. When they reached the bathroom, he muttered a word, and the stall in one corner turned on. The sound of falling water filled the room.

She helped him unbutton his vest and shed it to the floor. When her hands reached the button on his pants, she hesitated

only a second before undoing it. In moments, he was standing before her naked, his large, muscular body exposed to her gaze.

Focus.

She steered him into the shower, then stripped off her dress and joined him.

The water was hot. She groaned as it touched her flesh, finding his eyes as he turned to her. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he lowered his head onto her shoulder. And for that moment there was no fear, no thinking about tomorrow. He was her man, she was his woman, and he needed her. “It was just a dream. You’re safe now.”

She felt him shake his head. He spoke into her shoulder, his voice ragged. “I cannot repair the damage from the Rewire Contagion. I thought I could, but I cannot. I am sorry.”

She froze. *What is he saying?* “Why do you think that?”

A shudder ran through his body. “I was healing you earlier... and I... I discovered it.”

Her head felt suddenly light. *I can't be cured?* “What did you discover?”

“The virus is fighting back, making more connections than before.” His voice was ragged.

She shuddered. “So, I’ll be the way I was before? Where I couldn’t function?”

Just the thought made her feel as if she was choking. As if tight hands were squeezing her throat harder and harder.

“No. I don’t know. I was able to heal a lot, but... not everything. You’re always going to have your fears and your

obsessions. It just depends on how much the virus continues to fight.”

The news was like a blow, and she staggered, but he caught her before she fell. Her thoughts started to turn angry. *Did I ever really believe I would be “normal”?*

I had hoped... But that isn't how real life works.

“The man who bought me will be pretty pissed when he finds he got a dud,” she laughed, a sound that was painful to her own ears.

He raised his head, water dripping down his neck, meeting her gaze with his own pale green one. His expression was one of shock and wonder as he reached out and pushed some of her wet, tangled blond hair back behind one ear. “You are the most extraordinary female I have ever met. You have such life, such fire despite all you have suffered. Any male would be proud to call you his own.”

She shook her head. “You think that because you don’t know the truth. Did you know I nearly had a panic attack on the elevator? I was terrified. Because it was too fast. Did you know I almost didn’t get into one of those spaceships because it was too small? Did you know I had to kick my sister out of her own home because this damn virus needed everything to be too clean? Did you know I rarely left my house? That I haven’t even gone on one god-damned date in years? This thing I have—no one could love me with it. No one would want me with it.”

Saying the words aloud hurt, but somehow also felt good to finally share her pain.

He didn’t speak for a long minute, letting the water simply stream over them. “I do not like loud noises. When I hear

them, I think of the sound of weapons firing. Of war. My blood races. Fear consumes me. In that moment, I can no more escape my fear than you can escape yours.” Then he sighed. “And when I cannot help someone, I am consumed by guilt. Guilt so deep that I feel as if a world’s weight rests on my shoulders. I like my research because numbers make sense to me. This world does not. A world where Parsimon can have a beautiful, smart, wonderful female, and I, I can only dream of her. My world of numbers never leaves me aching with loneliness and despair.” He took a deep breath. “If you were mine, our house could be as clean as you wished. We would not have an elevator or anything else that you did not like. And if we never left our home, well, I would have no need to leave if you were there with me.”

His words sent frissons of shock and wonder through her. *How could I have found this man? How could I have doubted him? I don't know about the other aliens or the future, but I know Seer. I know with him, I can feel normal. I can feel cherished. Even if only for a little while.*

“Make love to me.”

She felt the shudder that raced through his body despite the heat of the water. “I cannot. You are not mine.”

Tracing her fingers lightly down the muscles of his chest, then down to his stomach, she felt her desire building. “Tonight I could be.”

“You will regret it.” He shifted closer, closing his hands on her upper arms.

“I won't. Neither will you.” Then, she leaned forward and kissed him. His mouth softened beneath her touch. He tilted his head, and clasped her arms slightly harder, drawing her

against him. His cock was hard. Eager. Pressing proudly into her stomach.

Her inner muscles twitched, and she could feel herself growing wet.

His tongue swept into her mouth, at first gentle, almost hesitant. But when she slid her own tongue along his, a groan tore from his lips, and his kiss grew harder, more urgent. His hands moved from her arms to her back, stroking her up and down, before hesitantly moving to cup her ass.

She gasped.

“Sorry,” he murmured, taking a step back. “I shouldn’t have.”

The loss of his touch was too much. She crossed the space between them, reaching out to grasp his manhood in her hand. “You should have.”

His eyes widened.

Holding his gaze, she stroked him slowly, up and down his hard length, feeling him swell in her grip. His hips began to rock to her touch. She could hear the sound of his panting and felt her own body respond to his desire.

Kneeling, she moved so that her mouth was just inches from his cock.

“Kaci.” Her name was a groan and a warning all in one.

Her inner-muscles tightened, and she licked his mushroom shaped head, his precum sweet on her tongue. The taste of him, the feel of him in her hand, was too much. She wrapped her lips around him and sucked.

He cried out, spreading his legs farther apart as she rocked him in and out of her mouth. Reaching between his legs, she

grasped his ass, drawing him closer against her until she felt the tip of his manhood hit the back of her throat. She gagged around him as she held him deep inside her. Then, using a trick she'd read about, she began to hum.

He came with a groan, his hands digging into the back of her hair as he rocked into her. She swallowed his sweetness, then dragged her nails along his ass, before using her fingers to squeeze his balls.

“I am—sorry,” he panted, releasing her hair. “The feel of you was just too much.”

She grinned, her womanhood slick with desire. *I like making him lose control. Of knowing I make him respond like that.*

He knelt down in front of her, locking gazes. “But I remember exactly how to apologize.”

One second they were kneeling in front of each other, the next he had pushed her back onto the warm floor of the shower, pulling her legs over his shoulders. She barely had a second to process the change in dynamics, when he blew a hot breath over her mound.

She gasped, fingers flying to the back of his head. And then, his tongue slid along the seam of her womanhood.

“Yes,” she moaned. “Oh yes.”

He spread her lower lips, and his skilled tongue dragged along her inner folds. She arched against him, pushing him closer to her. Over and over he licked her, never once touching her throbbing clit.

“Please!” *Does he know what I want?*

And then, his tongue dragged along her clit, proving that he did know.

She cried out, shocked as lightning sizzled through her body. While her head was still spinning, and her vision was wavering, he sucked on her clit.

Her body tensed, then exploded. Her climax was like a wave, dragging her under. She screamed his name over and over, thrusting into his mouth as he sucked and licked, drawing her higher and higher. She thrashed her head, unsure whether she wanted him to stop or continue. When he finally slowed, she felt her muscles begin to relax.

It took a minute for her vision to return, for her to focus on the tiny sparks radiating from his slow-licking tongue. It was both pleasure and pain after her climax. But she lay back, enjoying the feeling of him licking her as if he wanted nothing more in the world.

Even though his touch was gentle, she was shocked when she felt her muscles slowly tensing once more. The tiny shocks grew harder. *Am I going to come again?*

“I want you inside of me this time,” she whispered.

He looked up at her, drawing his tongue along her clit as she gasped. “Now?”

She nodded. “Take me to bed.”

He was off her in an instant, sitting up, then pulling her into his lap. He mumbled something and the shower stopped. Hot air suddenly puffed out around them, drying their wet skin.

She could feel his hard erection pressing into her ass as his fingers ran along the sides of her breasts. She let out a soft moan. “Seer...”

His fingers skimmed her nipples, which hardened into sharp points beneath his touch. Then, he squeezed them gently. She rubbed her ass softly against his cock, wanting him to stop the torment, to enter her, but also afraid to break the spell.

At last he spoke another word and the air stopped. He rose, carrying her in his arms as he walked to the bed. Their skin dry. Their bodies warm. A haze of desire surrounding them.

He laid her gently on the bed, then took a step back. Her greedy gaze swept over him. He was muscular... everywhere. From his thick thighs to his smooth stomach with its ridiculous eight-pack, to his arms that felt like steel. And, of course, his huge dick. Just the sight of it made her mouth water. It had tasted incredible on her tongue, sweeter than any human's cock. It was huge, thick and long, veins straining beneath his skin. *It must be my reward for so many years without sex. I just hope it'll fit inside me.*

His markings were moving fast along his body, sliding along the same lines she'd traced with her eyes. At last, she looked up, their eyes connecting. Her breath froze in her chest. The raw desire in his expression made everything inside her tense.

“Seer?”

He closed his eyes and clenched his fists, and she could tell he was trying to hold back. *Oh yes, my sexy alien virgin.*

“Come here.”

He did, moving to lie beside her on the bed, every muscle tense, his body on high alert. He was cautious, as if she was something fragile he feared to disturb.

His uncertainty made her hot. *Such a big man. But a man who needs me to show him what I want.*

Climbing on top of him, she brushed her breasts against his chest, lowering herself so that the seam of her womanhood rested on his massive cock. Rubbing against him, she drew a gasp from his lips. She caught his mouth and kissed him. Her tongue dove into his warm mouth, tangling with his own.

She groaned as his big hands reached up to cup her breasts, to tease her nipples. “Oh, yes. I like that.”

He rolled her nipples between his thumb and finger, and she bucked against him. His cock shifted into her slick wetness, without quite entering her. She ground against him, panting, heart racing. She wanted him. And she didn’t want to wait another minute.

Lifting her hips, she lowered herself onto him, taking his big, mushroom-shaped head inside of her.

He made a tortured groan and she paused, breathing hard. *He’s so big. Will he fit?*

After a moment, her body seemed to stretch enough for her to lower herself farther and farther. His hands rested on her hips tightly, but he held himself still, as if afraid to move.

At last she knew she had reached the hilt and she broke her lips from his, shifting to ensure he was all the way in. As deep as he could go. As deep as she could take him. Her body held him tightly, almost painfully.

When he took her nipple into his warm mouth, she cried out in shock, bucking against him, taking him even deeper. He teased one nipple with his fingers while he sucked and lapped at the other. Her inner-muscles clenched around his manhood, growing wetter around him.

With a moan, she rocked her hips, then lifted her ass until he was nearly out of her, before crashing back down. He gave

a strangled curse against her breast, then sucked harder.

She went crazy, lost in a wave of desire. Thrusting and bouncing against him, she took him out and drove him back in. She moved faster with each stroke, his own hips matching hers until she knew she was coming to the edge. Her hands dug into his shoulders, using him as leverage to drive him harder.

Then she came, shouting his name in the same instant she felt his warmth squirting inside her. He came in small waves, the sensation like a vibrator placed deep inside her. She screamed and bucked like a wild animal, her vision swimming, sparks of pleasure lighting her in a blaze. At last she slowed, dropping on top of him to lie panting on his chest.

“That was... amazing,” she panted.

His hands ran along her back. “Mine. My mate.”

Is he claiming me? Because I thought I was someone else's bride.

She suddenly felt very weary. *I'll deal with that tomorrow.*

Her eyes fluttered closed and she felt her breathing slow. Had she ever felt this relaxed before? This satisfied?

The answer was easy.

No.

And it was all because of Seer.

I can't believe this, but I think I'm in love with him.

NINETEEN

“Seer!”

Seer jerked awake, blinking. His hands automatically curled around the tiny human female still on top of him. She stirred, her movements causing his cock to harden even further within her.

“Kaci?”

But the speaker wasn't Kaci. He turned his head to see Leader storming toward him.

Instinctively, he wrapped himself around his mate, pulling the blankets over her to hide her body from his view. “We can discuss this later,” he growled.

“Pregnant Mother! I don't have time to care about what is going on here. We've been betrayed.” He turned, slamming his fist into the wall with a roar. “Those bastards will burn in the fire lakes of Inferna forever, damn them!”

Ice trickled through his veins. “What do you mean?”

“Parsimon just contacted me.” His friend's hands balled into fists, his skin pale beneath his markings. “He said that we are to give the Bortracks their half of the women. He doesn't think it's worth the cost to battle over them. He said we can go back and get more from Earth at another time.”

“What do the Bortracks want with us?” Kaci asked, her eyes looked massive beneath her curtain of tangled hair.

She doesn't need to know...

Leader answered her, his tone cruel. “The massive creatures want to mate all of you until they snap you in two, or until they impregnate you. Then they will strap you into chambers while you grow their monstrous babies. When it's time, they'll cut them from your bellies and watch as you bleed to death. Which is why this is horrible. Which is why I wish there was another way. Any other way.”

Damn him for saying such things to my fragile female.

Seer stroked his mate's back as her skin paled. “You can't actually be—“

“We have a Bortrack mothership and a Spiritus warship waiting on the other side of the wormhole. If we try to run now, they will catch us. If we fight them, this ship can't take much. It wasn't built for war. They'll disable the ship, kill us, and take all the women for themselves anyway.”

His prediction matches my vision. Much too perfectly.

Seer shook his head. “So what's the plan?”

Leader locked gazes with him. “I hate to say it... but I don't have one. We need to give them up.”

Give innocent women to those monsters? Give my Kaci to them?

“I'll die first.”

Leader roared, his markings shifting and his nails extending. “You *will* die first if we fight! *Do* you think I want this? There is no other choice.”

“Yes.” Kaci pulled back from Seer, his cock coming free as she gathered the blanket around her body. “There is.”

He turned to look at her.

“What are you talking about?” Leader demanded.

“This ship might not be able to fight them, but we’ve got ten thousand ships that can.” She brushed the hair back from her face to see them better.

Leader shook his head. “I already thought of that. Those ships are set up so only females can fly them. It would take us more time than we have simply to convert a handful of them —“

“But you’ve got ten thousand trained pilots already on board.”

Leader stepped back, clearly in shock.

Seer’s stomach flipped. “You can’t actually think we are going to send females to fight for us. To die in battle while we simply watch.”

Kaci’s eyebrows lowered, her blue eyes flashing with an unspoken emotion. “Most of us were recruited without a choice. Then you kidnapped us, and again, we didn’t have a choice. After that, we were paired off with men to be their mates, and we still weren’t given a choice. But now, here we are. And for this battle, a battle for our very lives, we deserve a choice. To be given to monsters, or to fight. Let us choose.”

Her words struck at something deep within him, and Seer pulled her closer. “I can’t.”

But in his heart, he already knew his mate would soon be fighting. He knew what the Bortracks would do if they caught her, and death was preferable.

But maybe the council will come in time.

Leader finally recovered his voice. “You’re right,” Leader said to Kaci, more quietly. “We may have no choice at this moment, but you do. If nothing else, maybe they won’t catch all of you. In the ships, at least you have a fighting chance.”

“But—“ Seer’s word was cut off as the ship rocked around them. Suddenly, the lights flickered and dimmed.

“What’s that?” Kaci asked, her voice filled with fear.

“If I were to guess,” Leader said slowly. “I’d say a warning shot”

Pregnant Mother help us, they’ve already come through the wormhole.

It’s too late.

TWENTY

Seer could not let Kaci fight. He simply could *not*. Every instinct within him screamed that it was wrong. That she was his female to protect. His primal side raged inside him, thrashing with such force that he feared it would tear him apart.

His best friend, Leader, paced one end of the room, but his own feet wouldn't move. His hands refused to open.

“Another status update from the command deck. Shields are at 90 percent. The Bortracks aren't trying to destroy us yet, just reminding us that we're screwed.” Leader paused his pacing just long enough to stare at Seer's comp screen and confirm the new ship stats, then began to walk again. His grumbling faded to silence as Seer's mind worked.

In seconds, Kaci would step from the medbay, where she had just finished receiving one more dose of antidote to the Rewire Contagion. He hadn't wanted her to do it, but she wanted her head completely clear for battle.

When she returned, she would be ready to risk her life.

How can I keep her safe? There must be a way! If she remained on board their transportation vessel, the Bortracks would come for her. If she returned to her little fighter ship and stood against a Bortrack warship, as well as Parsimon's

heavy-duty fighter vessel...the odds of her survival weren't good. Even if the other human women joined her in the fight.

So, he had to look at the situation in a different light. And then do something that no one would expect.

His breathing stopped. *There might be a way...*

A plan began to form in his mind. A desperate plan. *It will probably cost me my life, but it will save hers.*

Hope unfolded within him as each step of his plan took shape with more certainty.

This could work.

No, it has to work!

“Another damn update.” Leader cursed. “Shields are 88 percent. The command deck wants to know what the plan is. How can I go up there without anything to offer?”

“Give me a second,” Seer muttered.

If this is going to work, I need to be ready.

He launched into action, hurrying across his chamber to where his old combat gear had been tucked away. Pulling open the drawer, he paused for a moment, entranced. The rich, reddish-tan material of his leather armor brought back memories of every battle he'd ever fought. He reached out and touched a slightly imperfect spot, where years before a deadly sharp dagger had left a hole in the leather. He'd mended it, but it could never truly be the same.

Nor was I, after nearly dying on yet another healing bed.

Shedding his clothes, he pulled his pants on, followed by his boots. The rich smell of the supple leather reached his nostrils, making his memories stronger. In the beginning, he

tried to be nothing more than a medic in the war. But then times grew so desperate that Leader made Seer enter his battle frenzy.

He would kill, coldly and mercilessly, until he'd slowly come back to himself. His fellow soldiers were both awed by his powers, and terrified.

They thought males who could enter their battle frenzy were too dangerous to be allowed to survive. But during that war, they were thankful for my skills, even though after it ended, they made me vow to maintain a life of peace.

A vow I must now break.

Seer slipped on his vest and slid one knife after another into it diagonally. This was different than when he'd worn his weapons to escort Kaci through the ship. This time, he was dressing for battle.

For war.

Seer glanced up at his friend who still paced, his dark eyes faraway, as if lost in thought. Leader ran a frustrated hand through his long brown hair, his movements unnaturally clumsy for a man who was a warrior through and through.

His friend cursed again. "All I can think of is my mate, lying in her healing bed. My brain seems to think nothing else matters."

Seer stiffened. "She's injured?"

Leader's mouth drew into a thin line. "No. I made her fix an old injury, even though she fought me on it. She's so damn stubborn, my female! But I would not allow her to continue on in pain." He paused, a tortured expression twisting his face. "Now I've left her vulnerable. All I want to do is go stand

guard by her bed, but I must run this ship, even if I never wanted to do it in the first place!”

And there was his friend’s truth at last. The little thing that had bothered Seer about this mission in the first place. Leader might have been an amazing fighter in the war and a brilliant strategist, but he did it all to gain prestige enough to one day get a female of his own. Inside, he’d always been more of a rogue.

Now he realized Leader was here on this mission not because he wanted to run a ship, but because it was his best and quickest chance to get the bride he’d desired so much.

Which is why he’s here with me instead of on the command deck. He needs my help because his heart isn’t in this mission.

“I think I may have a plan.”

“Hopefully something that might not end in all of us dead,” Leader mumbled, his pacing increasing.

“How many warriors do we have on board?”

Leader stopped his frantic pacing, a scowl twisting his lips. “Not enough.”

“How many?” Seer realized his voice had dipped dangerously low, an animalistic rumble from his chest lacing each word.

I just need a small group. One that can slip into the Bortrack ship and slaughter the animals before they know we’re there. And another group to keep them distracted while we attack.

“Fifteen, maybe. If you can convince them.”

Seer cursed. *That can’t be.* “Fifteen? But all the males on board—“

“Are mostly wealthy aristocrats, ambassadors, and the spoiled children of the most important leaders from our world.” Leader scowled. “Of course, you wouldn’t know because you’ve given up that life. But these males are not fighters. Nor will they fight. As much as they want these females, they’ll give them up and demand a female from the next batch rather than risk their own lives to protect them.” He paused. “And you realize they can’t even fly the ships we have.”

Leader crossed his arms in front of his chest, the pattern of his markings shifting, no longer smooth elegant lines, but the flames of a fire roaring to life, indicating his growing rage. He was waiting for an answer, but Seer didn’t have one. Yet.

Leader continued, “That’s why Kaci’s idea to have the females fight is a good one, at least the human women can fly the ships.” A glimpse of suppressed rage crossed his face. “But you should know right now that my Darlene won’t be stepping one foot into danger.”

His mind calculated the men required to fly the handful of ships in their personal docking bay, and the men he would need on the Bortrack ship. *It isn’t enough to pull off the mission. But I have to do something!*

What can one male do on his own against a Bortrack mothership and Parsimon’s ship?

One male? He stilled, his hand curled around the hilt of one of his daggers. *One desperate male can do a hell of a lot.*

Seer moved closer to his friend, lowering his voice and glancing back at the open door to the medbay. “But what if I took your ship and programmed the females’ ships to mimic mine?”

Leader's expression froze. "It's...possible. But completely foolish. The fail-safe built into every ship to prevent bots from flying them, to make it so war is costly and something to avoid, means that the ships will have zero responsiveness. They will, quite literally, do whatever your ship does. Your life will be at risk, and the ships will lack the fighting abilities of true pilots. They'll pick off the ships faster than our eyes could follow."

I know all this. "But will the distraction give you enough time to get through the portal? To jump into hyperdrive?"

Leader's gaze held his. "My friend..."

"Could it give you time to get her—and the other females—to safety?" Sweat ran down his back as he waited for an answer. His friend's expression was distant. "It's possible. We would have to force the engines into a speed that will eventually burn them out, but we should be able to get to Spiritus's space, to the safety of our patrols."

That's all I needed to hear.

Another shot rocked the ship, and Seer's pulse raced as the floor pitched beneath him. "Let's do it."

Leader dragged his hand through his long hair once more, his mouth pulled into a thin line. "Whoever thought you'd be taking on a suicide mission now, right?"

"Yes, this isn't exactly what you promised me. You know, a chance to study a new world of brides and hide away with my research." Seer tried to smile. "But I can't say I regret coming, even with the way things are playing out." He looked toward the medbay. "Some things are just worth dying for."

Leader expression softened. "I, uh, I never got to tell you how much I admire you."

Seer couldn't conceal his shock. "You...admire me?"

"Of course!" His gaze bored into Seer, his brows lowering over his dark eyes. "I might be able to strategize, to get my men to the battlefield, but do you have any idea how brave you are? That day...when the Bortracks had us surrounded, when we all thought we were going to die...you went into your battle frenzy and saved us all. You knew showing us what you could do would end in your execution. And, I saw your face after, for a man with such a kind heart, killing anyone, even your enemy, changed you." He shook his head. "Facing your greatest fear like that. Risking your life to save us. That was the bravest damn thing I've ever seen."

Seer didn't know how to respond. "Not many soldiers understand what it means for a man who saves lives to take them." He paused. "I guess in that moment you admired me about as much as I admired you every day thereafter. You led us to hell and back. And you only asked me to use my skill when you had to. It takes a special man to respect the people he leads that much."

There was a brief moment of silence.

"Take care of my mate when I'm gone."

"Done." Leader lifted his chin.

Seer nodded. *That will have to be enough.*

Behind them, the door snicked open. Kaci's voice was soft, but sure. "I'm ready."

He whirled around, his heart in his throat. And stared. Riveted.

His mate's pale, beautifully speckled skin still held the rosy hint of a female who had just been made love to. Her wide blue eyes shone with emotions, the strongest of which

was grim determination. And even though she wore the overly large dress he'd given to her the day before, she also had her long blond hair pulled back into a warrior's tail. She was ready to fight. To protect the women on their ship. She almost glowed with a warrior's strength.

So brave. My tiny, fragile mate is ready to give her life.

It made him proud. He was lucky to have such a mate. It took everything in him to keep his voice steady, to not betray the wave of emotions that threatened to sweep him under. "How do you feel?"

She grinned, even though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Like a million bucks."

At least that's something I could do for her before leaving.

"Leader is going to show you how to communicate with the bridal suites." He turned to his friend.

But Leader was still, looking between them, frowning.

Seer raised a brow.

"You two deserve each other," Leader said, his words matter-of-fact, but his expression pained.

Seer almost asked what he meant, when it hit him. *Both my mate and I plan to sacrifice our lives for the other one.*

His heart twisted. *If only I could have had a lifetime with her.*

Another shot rocked the ship.

"Shit," Leader muttered, hurrying to the comp in the corner of his room. Moving his hands rapidly, it took him a minute before he turned back to Kaci. "You can explain

everything to the human females over this system. Click this button and speak into the mic.”

But instead of going to Leader, Kaci rushed into his arms, squeezing him tightly. Without thinking, his arms wrapped around her too.

My beautiful, wonderful mate, I will love you forever. They clung to each other for one long moment that seemed to engrave itself into his mind for eternity.

Then she drew back, unshed tears glistening in her deep blue eyes. “Seer...”

“Kaci,” he murmured, as he brushed his thumb gently along her cheek. “You are everything to me.”

Her lips drew into a wobbly smile. “You are...completely unexpected. Wonderful. I’m so glad—“

Another shot rocked the ship. *They’re already getting impatient.*

Seer released his mate, stepping back. The loss of her warmth was almost painful. “Talk to the women. Get them ready.”

And stay here. Safe.

Kaci held his gaze. “You can count on me.” She paused. “I can do this.”

Does she sense my reluctance? Or only that I’ll never see her again.

He looked away. “I know you can. Leader?”

“I’m in.” He pointed to the screen. “It’s all very simple. Remember. Click this button to speak.”

Kaci's hand brushed his arm as she passed him. Lightning crackled where their flesh had touched. He wanted to kiss her, to hold her just once more. But if he wanted to save her, he'd have to go. Now. "There are seven injectors on my desk in the medbay. They cause instant death to a Bortrack. Leader, take four, but leave three for Kaci. Just in case."

She nodded and turned away, but not before he caught the glimmer of tears in her eyes. "Be safe."

"You too."

If he said more, if he looked at her, he didn't think he could leave her side. He tore from the room and through the medbay, then out into the hall.

His mind counted down the minutes he had until their enemies launched a full attack. But his heart—his heart clung to his last image of his mate.

Forgive me for my deception. For loving you and leaving you. For not letting you be the warrior I know you are. I'm not strong enough to watch you die.

As he entered the elevator and hit the button to the docking bay, a wave of rage and frustration swept through him. He pulled a blade free from his vest and clenched it in his fist. His skin rippled, his markings moving. His primal side roared *your mate needs you*, but he gritted his teeth, refusing to give into it. The Shadow Walker within him understood instinct, and there was nothing instinctual about leaving one's mate, even if it saved her life.

Suddenly, the elevator stopped and the lights cut off. Absolute darkness swallowed him whole.

Before he'd realized it, he'd crouched, his nails lengthening and the fangs in his mouth growing. His primal

side sought a target.

After a second, a voice, harsh and cruel, slipped through the darkness. “We have your control room. Our warriors will be boarding soon.” The intercom crackled. “You have lost.”

TWENTY-ONE

Kaci clutched Leader's arm so hard her nails must have been cutting into his flesh. But seconds after the terrifying announcement from the Bortracks, red lights flashed, pushing away the darkness. Sirens wailed and she turned to Leader, her heart in her throat.

“What does this mean?” she shouted.

His expression made her stumble away from him, her back hitting the desk.

He's Shifted.

“Must protect mate.” The words tore from his lips, deep, almost animalistic.

Before her eyes, he transformed, his skin changing to a glistening, silky black, blending into the darkness. His eyes glowed pure silver. Throwing back his head, he roared.

A scream tore from her lips and the hairs on her arms rose.

The creature crouched, then bounded out of the room with the speed and agility of a wolf.

For one long second she stood frozen.

Then her legs folded beneath her, and she crawled beneath the desk, her pulse hammering in her ears.

Now there are two kinds of monsters on this ship.

Then, unbidden, the thoughts from the back of her mind began again.

You're going to die.

In the dark.

Alone.

Torn apart by one of those creatures—or the Bortracks.

Either way, it'll be painful.

She put her head in her hands, squeezing her eyes shut and trying to force the virus's thoughts from her mind. But it continued to taunt her until her own breathing grew so loud in her ears that she could hear little else.

“Stop!” she shouted.

And was met with silence.

The voices were gone. She raised her head, wiping back the tears that ran down her cheeks. With her ears no longer covered, the horrible blaring of the sirens seemed to pulse around her. Even though her legs shook, she crawled out from beneath the desk.

I've never been so scared in my life. But Seer needs me.

I have to get out of here and lead the women to fight.

The truth was she didn't know how things changed now that the Bortracks had taken the command deck, but she didn't care. She'd heard Seer's plan when she'd been in the medbay. Which was reckless. *Suicidal*, Leader had said.

The alien men might think she and the other human women were too weak to fight, but she knew better. If she could get them out of their rooms and into the ships before

Seer had time to program them to mimic him, she could save his life.

She and the other women might have had only a short time to train, but they could handle this. She knew they could handle this. And she wasn't about to let the man she loved die when she could do something about it.

Love? Her mind froze, turning the word over. But no matter how she looked at the word, it rang true deep in her chest. She loved Seer.

Of course she did.

Putting her hands on the holoscreen, she brought up the communication screen, which he'd already linked to the bridal suites. Taking a deep breath, she touched the button that would connect her with them.

The golden particles swirled and expanded, nearly covering the entire wall. In the center of them was her own face staring back at her. And around that, hundreds of tiny squares that peered into small rooms.

"Hello?" she whispered.

Her voice echoed for a moment.

In the tiny squares, women stood from bunks and desks and moved to stand in front of her. And in a few of the rooms, well-dressed alien men stood beside their women, their expressions troubled. Hundreds, if not thousands of frightened voices spoke at once.

"Stop!" she shouted above them.

An itch began at the back of her neck. They were all staring at her. At her. She had become their leader. She squared her shoulders. "I never thought I would be addressing

you today. On an alien spaceship—far from home—asking you to fight. The past few days have been the best and worst of my life. I didn't die fighting the aliens. Instead, I found myself mated to one of them." Some of the women raised their fists in anger. A few flipped her off. Others seemed—almost happy.

She nodded her head in acknowledgement to all of them. "I'm not sure what your experiences have been. I'm sure each of ours has been different, but I know, more than anything, that the aliens who captured us are not evil. They were simply lonely, their women are gone and they were tricked into this plan by other aliens who are evil.

"That second, monstrous race of aliens is here now—and they want us. Not to mate us, not to treat us as equals or to provide us with a home as our current mates wish to do. But to breed us—like cattle—and having just one of their children kills the host when they cut it out." A stunned silence followed her words, and she saw horror cross the women's faces. Even those who had been smirking or cursing stopped and paid attention.

"This ship wasn't built for fighting, and the men on board aren't warriors. The aliens—Bortracks—have already captured this ship. Our only chance to escape is to get to our ships. And our ships are the only ones that have a chance at taking down these creatures, or else they will follow us to Earth and take whoever they want. But we can't do it unless we all attack together. Alone, they will pick us off one by one. But together, we can use the formations we learned to buy us a chance at a future.

"The way I see it, *this* is the real battle. This is what we trained for on Earth. This is the time where we can stand

together and change our fates.”

She took a deep breath. “I’m not a leader, no one special. I’m just like you. But I’m asking you to fight with me. To save ourselves. To protect Earth. And to save these aliens who want to be our mates. Even if they are misguided, they don’t deserve to die.

“In a moment, I’m going to unlock all your doors. Those of you who wish to fight, get to your ships as quickly as you can. We are going to fly straight at those motherfuckers and show them what we can do. For Earth!” She shouted the last words and raised her fist in the salute they’d learned in training.

It was echoed by many, many of the women. Then there was a cacophony of voices. Some shouts of agreements. Some questions. It didn’t matter. It was time to go.

Her fingers hovered over the door release. “There’s no time. It’s now or never.” She hit the button.

A thousand tiny bells chimed, some as one, some a second or two later. The women turned to look at their freedom. *It’s up to you now.*

She moved away from the screen and to the door exiting into Seer’s medbay. Jumping before it to trigger the release, it slid open. Hurrying to the door to the hallway, her bare feet whisper soft against the metal, she jumped again.

The door slid open.

She jumped again, backward this time. Her eyes widened. A creature was there. Seven feet tall, with a tan shell like a scorpion covering its massive body. It wore no clothes, but every inch of its shell seemed to quiver and shift as it moved, like the creepy exoskeleton of an alien from her nightmares.

Before her shock had worn off, its black gaze flicked to her. It spoke, a guttural sound that was painful to hear. The sound echoed through her mind as she winced, and a moment later, transformed into one clear word, *mine*. The shells around its mouth made a strange clicking sound as they rearranged to reveal rows of sharp teeth. “You, female, are mine.”

She snapped from her stupor, turning and running back the way she came. It caught her hair, yanking her back in one motion, as she hit the floor with a crack. She coughed, spitting blood and rolling onto her back. Crawling backward, she eyed it and then glanced back over her shoulder at the medbay.

If I can't get to those weapons Seer left for me in time, I'm going to be an alien incubator.

TWENTY-TWO

I can't give up. There has to be a way out of this. Think!

Seer's elongated nails burned and throbbed, urging him to tear through the metal of the elevator. He dropped his blade, knowing it was no longer useful to him, and let it clatter to the floor. In the glow from the red emergency light that blinked overhead, he watched his markings spread, nearly covering every inch of his flesh.

I'm Shifting!

His skin tingled. His back curled, but still, he was Seer. His primal side was frantic inside him, desperate to be released. He clung to his control, even as he reached for the beast within him. The polarizing needs, the need to give in to a creature that could act on instinct alone, and the need to remain focused, logical, and controlled, battled within him.

But as his transformation stopped, he accepted his failure to entirely Shift. His thoughts barreled instead into what was most important. Shifting or not, he had to save Kaci.

Code Red had switched on. The power would work throughout the ship, but the doors would remain closed, unless overridden by a high-ranking officer in the ship. And the elevator wouldn't work until the Code Red was turned off.

A growl rumbled in his throat. None of his men would be able to take back a command deck filled with Bortracks. Not without his battle frenzy.

Using his knuckles, he beat at the control panel once more, then slashed at it with his claws. It sparked, but the elevator failed to move. Going to the doors, he wedged his claws into them and gritted his teeth. Channeling his strength, he slowly, very slowly, pried them apart.

Solid metal greeted him beyond the doors. Roaring, he felt true panic set in. He had to get to the command deck. *Because if there's no one to fly this ship, to bring the women to safety, my distraction is pointless. I need to get back control and then program the ships to mimic me.*

And if I fail, they'll take Kaci. Like my vision.

Already, the red lights were eerily familiar to his vision. The one where he lost everything. *I can't let that happen.*

Looking down at the floor, another desperate plan flashed through his mind. Kneeling down, he pulled back his arm and slammed it down. His nails sliced into the floor of the elevator with almost no resistance.

Sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes as he used his claws as saws, creating a circle in the floor. After a minute, he pulled his hand back and stood. Raising one booted foot, he kicked into the center of the circle. The section of floor popped out with a metallic screech and tumbled into the darkness below.

He leaned forward, watching until the flicker of metal disappear entirely. Then, he waited. Too many seconds passed before he finally heard it hit somewhere far below.

If I fall, death will be quick to follow.

Sitting, he swung his legs to dangle into the darkness. Giving a silent prayer to the Pregnant Mother, he gripped the other side of the opening, took a deep breath, and dropped through the hole.

His fingers gripped the sharp edges of the opening as he dangled over the deep elevator shaft. A musky scent assaulted his nose as he peered through the near pitch-darkness, looking for a ladder or something to grab onto. Anything.

He saw nothing.

Cursing, he refused to give up.

I'll make my nails carve through the solid steel of this shaft if I have to.

He used the strength of his body, to rock his legs back and forth, gaining momentum. The faster and farther he swung, the more his slick grip loosened on the elevator floor above him.

At last, he screamed and launched himself at the wall, claws outstretched. They dug through the steel, holding him even while his booted feet slid, trying to find purchase on the smooth wall. When they did, he paused, listening to the racing of his heart.

He had a lot of descending to do before he reached an exit point. And time was of the essence.

Rolling his neck, he pulled one hand back until the claws slipped from the steel. Holding on with the other hand, he reached as far below him as he could before stabbing his claws in once more.

Over and over he inched down the elevator shaft, hoping that he would be able to identify the door to the next floor when he reached it. As he continued working his way

downward, he saw a sliver of red light. Narrowing his gaze, he peered into the darkness, trying to identify it.

Using his claws, he descended toward it, then sideways until he reached it. It took him long minutes before he identified it. *Elevator doors!* It was the slightest hint of light peeking between the closed doors. And it meant he had found his exit.

Adrenaline pumped through him as he crossed the last of the space, then pull the doors apart.

The flashing red lights blinded him and the sounds of a hundred screaming voices filled his ears. He pulled himself from the shaft and blinked for one second before his eyes adjusted to the chaos.

His heart hammered as he surveyed the women, who raced about like mad creatures. Then, he heard the terrible rumbling noise that haunted his nightmares and *knew*.

The Bortracks were there. And they were attacking.

TWENTY-THREE

Kaci had nearly reached her salvation just as the creature closed in on her. Panic washed over her in suffocating waves. *This is it. The way you die.*

The virus seemed gleeful in her mind, pecking at her like a flock of hungry ravens. But even though her brain commanded her to lie there and let her horrible death happen, she refused. Instead, she continued to move stealthily toward the injectors on the desk.

And then, suddenly, they were in reach!

She stood, grasping two of them by the handles, and pointed the sharp tips at the beast. “Back!” she ordered, her voice wavering.

Its dark gaze slid to the weapon and an angry hiss escaped its sharp teeth. “You dare to threaten your male?”

Her grip was slick on the hilt of her last defense, but she had to believe the weapon was as effective against these monsters as Seer had promised. “You’re not my male. I already have a male! Besides, I’m a human woman, and goddamn it you better be scared.” The words rang through her with a truth that made every muscle in her body tense.

“Scared?” It froze, studying her. “Of thin flesh stretched over fragile bones? I think not.”

Fragile? Me?

Something grew cold inside her. “Clearly, you aren’t familiar with my species, because if you think you’re going to take a single one of us, you haven’t met a human before. We’ll destroy you. We’ll make you beg for mercy, and then we won’t give it to you. So you want to know if you should be scared? You should be terrified.”

Anger like nothing she had known before uncoiled inside her and seized her. She took a step toward the monster, and he quickly took one back. Pointing one of the oversize syringes at him, she threw the other over her shoulder like a baseball bat.

“I. Don’t. Believe. You,” it said arrogantly but there was a hint of doubt in its voice.

“You want to know how we creatures with thin flesh and fragile bones have dominated every species on their planet, you alien bastard? Do you really want to know? Because we are smart. And merciless. And we’re usually at our best when we get backed in a corner.”

Its gaze flickered from her to the corner. “We will take every female for our own—“

“You can damn well try!” She screamed, a sound like a banshee, then charged it at full speed.

The Bortrack stumbled back, into a medstation, and flipped over onto its back. She knew she should run, but she also knew it would chase her. And like the virus that seemed to haunt her days and nights, she wanted to end this here and now.

She was tired of being afraid.

As fast as she could move, she jumped onto the table and then down on top of the beast, slamming the injector into its neck.

The creature's eyes widened as she straddled its chest, pressing all her weight onto the weapon.

And then, after a tense moment, the monster chuckled. "This is your human fury? A tiny prick?"

Fear struck her. *It didn't work.*

She raised the other injector, but the Bortrack knocked it easily from her grip.

Then it rolled on top of her. Crushing her. "You go to my ship. Now."

She gasped, trying to breathe. But she couldn't pull in air. Punching out at the Bortrack, she hit the injector still sticking from its neck. The weapon hissed softly, and the Bortrack grabbed her arm and yanked it to the side.

Her bones snapped and her vision went black. Pain exploded within her.

A second later, the monster slid off her and fell to the floor.

Gasping in deep breaths, she sobbed, her vision white and then coming slowly back into focus. She wanted to move her arm, to alleviate the pain, but somehow knew moving it would only make things worse.

At last, she looked at the Bortrack through her tears. Its face was frozen, the life gone from its eyes.

Sobbing again, but this time in relief, she dragged her broken arm onto her chest, cradling it as the tears slipped down her cheeks. The floor was hard and cold beneath her. And her body was slick with sweat. But she was alive.

It took forever to force herself to rise. Black-and-white streaks flashed in her vision every time she jostled her arm. But she needed to keep going. She needed to lead the women. Perhaps they would fight on their own, but she couldn't take that risk. If she did, it might cost all of them their lives.

And Seer might execute his suicidal plan before I can help.

She struggled to her feet, gritting her teeth, then stared down at the unused injector tossed on the floor close to them. Nausea rolled up her throat as she bent down to pick it up. Leaning against the nearby table, she steadied herself until the world stopped rocking.

When she pushed away from the table, she turned the injector over in her hand. There, on the side, a simple silver button stared back at her. *Inject it and push the damn button. Need to talk to Seer about his instructions.*

Later. But right now, the docking bay.

“But first,” she said to herself. “I’m not going to get anywhere if I don’t bind this arm.”

If only I knew how to work these healing beds.

Using a pair of medical scissors, she sliced off the bottom of her long dress. The task was awkward and painful with her bad arm, but at last she managed it. Then, just as carefully, she tied the long piece of blue fabric into a sling, put it over her head, and slid her arm into it.

Not great, but better.

Almost drunkenly, she stumbled toward the door, the ground shifting with each tiny jostle of her arm. She bit back a sob of protest as she reached the door, then jumped, triggering it to open. The jolt of impact had her curling over her arm in shocked pain.

But she let herself pause for only a moment. Moving on, she headed down the hall. When she hit the door to the elevator, the button stayed dark. She pressed her ear to the doors. *Dammit, broken.*

Scanning the hall, she saw a metal door with a handle. A small picture showed an image of stairs. *That will work!*

Thankfully, the handle turned without issue, and she opened it into a stairwell. The red lights flashed even brighter, which made it easy to see as she started down the steps. *Three floors down from us*, she reminded herself.

The combination of stabbing pain and a roaring throb made her movements feel more that of a woman in a dream. *No, a nightmare.* She moved, barely feeling her feet. Her good hand awkwardly slid along the banister, with the injector loosely gripped, as she wound farther and farther down.

It was in that way that she didn't see the Bortrack until it was upon her. She turned, not knowing how she'd find the strength to climb the stairs, but it caught her by the waist. Slamming her broken arm into the wall, it hissed into her ear. "Mine."

Why does every alien think I'm his?

But then her thoughts stopped as her vision blackened once more. The air in her lungs slid in and out like broken glass. Tears freely fell down her cheeks as she tried to fight thought the haze of pain.

At her side, the second injector lay trapped by its big body. If she could only reach it!

Her thumb searched out the silver button.

As the creature tore her skirts, she used the slight lessening of its body pressure as her chance. Spinning, she slammed the

injector into its chest. *I'm too short! I missed its neck!*

The tip scarcely penetrated its shell.

Her eyes widened and she released the injector, her gaze traveling up to meet the creature's eyes.

They narrowed in rage. "Mistake," it growled.

And that mistake that will cost me my life.

TWENTY-FOUR

Seer roared as he sprang onto the back of the first Bortrack who was dragging a woman by her hair into its ship. Using his claws, he sliced its throat. His hyper senses picked up the sound of its gurgling blood before it pitched forward. He leaped off it and pulled the beast off the woman. She wept beneath it, one side of her face bruised and swollen.

No time for sympathy. Kill the Bortracks. Get to the command deck.

“Run,” he growled.

The woman stumbled to her feet and brushed by him, sobbing into her hands as she ran past.

Glancing up, he caught sight of Bortracks simply knocking females over, likely searching for a female of their preference. On the far side of the bay, at least a dozen Bortracks were dragging screaming women toward the same docking bay door.

They must have already docked a transportation ship with our own.

The implications were horrifying.

He moved down the hall like an animal on the hunt. His blades sliced through Bortracks faster than he'd ever killed

with his blade in the war. Everything seemed to slow down around him, and he felt his battle instincts sharpen. He felt himself slipping away even more.

Blood and carnage trailed his every step. Shocked females stared at him with horror in their eyes. He leaped, ran, moved with agility through them all.

Some of the Bortracks tried to fight back. But he was faster.

And none of them expected that they faced something like him.

When the last Bortrack's lifeless body tumbled from his claws, its blood sliding down his hands and arms, he realized he was at the docking bay of the Bortrack ship. He heard a roaring behind him and turned.

More Bortracks than he could count were in the transport vessel, as well as their captive females. They formed a line in front of the women, grabbing weapons and charging.

Too many. He stepped back, stumbling over a dead Bortrack.

Then he heard a roar to his right. Another door was being pried open. A second later, Spiritus males poured in. Most were not warriors, but he instantly recognized the few that were.

TAKING A DEEP BREATH, he curled his nails and roared. The answering roar was deafening. Some of the Spiritus men had partially Shifted. *The warriors.* But the other males were no match for the Bortracks. They battled with blades, the panic in their eyes mirroring the fear in the women's eyes. He briefly

glimpsed two of them using the injectors. *Leader*. He glanced around but didn't see his friend.

One woman screamed in front of him as a Bortrack gripped her hair, his arm pulled back, ready to strike. Her face looked so much like his Kaci's. Delicate. Fragile. Desperate for his help.

His vision went red.

A coppery scent filled his nostrils. Hot blood splattered his body. A roar tore from his lips like that of a mindless beast. He carved through more Bortracks than he could count, blood flying, roars filling the air.

“Seer! Seer!”

He spun, claws outstretched.

“It's me, Gallant! Seer, it's me!”

Slowly his vision returned. Gallant stood before him, his arm hanging awkwardly along his side, no doubt broken. One side of his face was bruised and sliced.

“You need medical attention.” His voice sounded groggy, wrong, even to his own ears.

His friend nodded. “We all do.”

“The Bortracks.” He stiffened instantly, looking around. The blaring from the sirens filled his ears. The hall was a massacre of bodies. The red light only darkened the blood painting the walls. But luckily, most of the bodies were those of their enemy.

“You got them,” his friend said. “Pretty much all of them. We assisted as much as we could.”

He turned back to Gallant and to the men who still stood, battered and injured, behind him. Some holding females in their arms. All stared at him. The mixture of both awe and terror so familiar.

His stomach tensed. *The battle frenzy. The being I become, just as my father before me.*

It's necessary, he reminded himself. His mind knew it. He rubbed his forehead, willing the memories away. But they wouldn't dissipate. He remembered every detail of the day his father had turned on a room full of his own kind, killing dozens before he was taken down. Seer had prayed never to become that.

But I must take the risk. For Kaci.

"I'm taking back the command deck. Those who wish to join me may." Seer turned and raced back down the hall, stepping over bodies as he moved. He turned the handle to the stairwell and started up the stairs.

Below him, he heard the sounds of a fight. A woman's scream. He hesitated only a moment.

Should I save her?

No. I have to get to the command deck if I have any chance at protecting Kaci.

When they reached the top floor, he paused. Six men reached the landing a moment later, including Gallant. *Three warriors. Three untrained males. It isn't enough, but it will have to do.* His gaze held theirs.

"Be prepared for anything."

They nodded.

A woman screamed far below. His gut tightened, but he couldn't help her. None of them could, not if they hoped to save them all.

He turned the handle and opened the door, knowing that this might be one mission he might not make it out of. *Perhaps Leader will take over my plan then.*

He hoped. If not, Kaci would still be in danger. All of this would be for nothing.

TWENTY-FIVE

Kaci screamed and struggled with what little strength she had left, but this new Bortrack had her trapped against the wall. She shoved at the injector sticking from its chest, trying to push the button, but the creature hardly seemed to notice.

Instead, it held her against the wall. Its hard, massive hand curled around her throat.

It leaned in, hot breath on her cheek. “You will spawn my child. A son. A warrior.”

“I won’t!” she said, tears stinging her eyes.

Its head suddenly jerked, and it stared off as if listening. The plates around its mouth moved and an angry hiss escaped its lips. “Not safe. You come with me.”

One second she was pinned against the wall, the next she was hoisted over his shoulder. The jolt to her arm nearly had her spewing the contents of her stomach. But with great effort, she swallowed it down, kicking weakly in a poor attempt to free herself.

It neither slowed nor acknowledged her.

They exited the stairwell and entered a hallway. As they traveled down the corridor, she glanced around, and terror

caught in her throat. Blood painted the walls. Bodies littered the floor. Spiritus, human, and Bortrack.

The creature made a sound she decided must be a curse.

It turned and began to pry open a door.

“Hey!”

With great effort, she craned her neck to look toward the sound. A male with long golden hair much like Seer’s rushed toward them. “Put her down!”

Hope blossomed within her.

The man pulled out a golden dagger from his belt and charged.

Her breath caught.

The Bortrack’s massive hand reached out and caught the man by the throat. His brown eyes widened as the Bortrack’s massive fingers slowly crushed him. The crack that followed seemed to radiate through the room, and her soul. The life fled his eyes, and the Bortrack tossed him to the floor.

Tears ran down her cheeks. All she could see was the dead man, his blade useless on the floor next to him. *He died. Died trying to save me.*

There was the sound of a door hissing, and then she was plunged into a strange, darkened ship with tan plating covering the interior and glowing brown cables winding through the panels.

The Bortrack tossed her onto the floor.

Even though she landed on her good arm, the jolt that reverberated through her body had her hissing and curling over her injured arm, her pulse filling her ears. Gasping she looked

at the opening to the ship—it was her only chance. Struggling, she dragged herself toward the door.

Just as it began to close.

No! She struggled, every muscle screaming in protest.

But she wasn't fast enough.

The door closed inches from her nose. She pressed her hand against the cool metal in disbelief. The deep sounds of the engines firing up came from beneath her, along with a rumble.

She fought back a wave of hysteria.

Injured! Trapped on a Bortrack ship! What are my chances of escape now?

TWENTY-SIX

Seer looked at his small crew of warriors and the closed door to the command deck. *There is only one way this has a chance at working.*

“How many of you can fight better when fully Shifted?”

The warriors exchanged a look. “We have enough control over our primal side to follow orders.”

He felt a wave of relief. Shifting was not always done in battle, because more often than not it was difficult enough to control a Shadow Walker when Shifted in anger. To actually go into battle as one...there was usually a lot of blood, but complete chaos. Which they'd discovered often caused danger to their own men as well as the enemy.

A tall aristocrat with a slight bump on his otherwise uncommonly handsome face spoke. “If I Shift...I can't control myself.”

“Nor can I,” the other confessed.

“Nor I,” the final admitted, clenching a bloodied arm.

“But,” the tall aristocrat added, “my female is on board this vessel, and I'll be damned if I give her to those creatures. So, what I lack in experience, Commander, I assure you I make up in willpower.”

Seer nodded. “Good. That’s what we need.”

“So, what’s the plan?” The warrior who spoke had a crisscross of battle scars and eyes that already glowed silver.

“I— you’ve all already seen what I can do?”

The scared warrior nodded. “I thought that seeing a Shifted male fighting was terrifying. But watching an animal attack is different than watching an invincible warrior. You’re like a thing of magic. Too fast to follow. Too strong to stop. And nothing they did to you slowed you down. I see why your kind has been so feared.” He shuddered visibly. “I’d thought all warriors capable of battle frenzy were executed. I’m glad I was wrong.”

Because the king agreed that he should spare me. A life for a life, for saving his niece. As long as I promised never to lose control again.

A promise I have willingly broken.

Seer swallowed the lump his throat. “I will go first. I will draw their attention away from the door...then all of you surprise them from behind.” He took a deep breath. “Stay out of their reach as much as possible. Even if it takes longer to deliver a deathblow, do not let one catch you.”

“But—“ one of the men hesitated. “Will we be safe in there with you?”

Seer stiffened, even though he knew the male hadn’t meant to offend. “I have never harmed an innocent while in my frenzy. Does that answer all your concerns?”

All the men nodded.

“Then, stand back.”

Three men pressed their backs to each side of the door.

He stood before it, waiting for the battle frenzy to overtake him. But nothing happened. *Damn it!* He clenched his hands harder.

“I knew you’d be headed here,” Gallant said, his voice a cautious whisper. “I stopped by the medbay to bring Kaci to the safety of the bridal floor.”

Seer barely breathed.

“The door was open. There was a dead Bortrack inside.”

“No!” The roar tore through Seer and his flesh rippled.

Must...search for her...

“She wasn’t there. She must have hidden elsewhere. She’s smart. But the best way to help her now is to take back the ship.”

Logic slid past his anger. Gallant was trying to bring forth his battle frenzy. *He may even be lying.* He’d done it many, many times in the war, opening wounds that forced out the uncontrollable animal within Seer, maximizing his usefulness in battle. Now was no different.

But what if he’s telling the truth?

He needed to take back the command deck. Then find Kaci. As fast as possible.

My female may be in danger.

His vision went red. He turned back to the door to the command deck, pushed his claws into the crack, and tore the doors open.

At least two dozen Bortracks and a handful of bloodied prisoners turned to look at him. *You took my ship. You endangered my female.*

And now you'll pay!

He roared, a sound that vibrated through the ship, then leaped into the air. His claws extended in both directions, slicing the throats of the two closest Bortracks.

They rushed him as one, pulling free their jagged blades. But as his feet landed on one control station, he leaped again toward the massive display screen looking out at space. His flip spun him over the heads of a half dozen surprised enemies before he landed and looked at them.

They turned and came again.

The world slowed. He moved, ducked, crouched, clawed, and kicked. Avoiding some blows from their swords, while others buried in his flesh. Some dropped their swords, trying to use their greater weapon, the strength of their arms. They tried over and over to catch him, but he was too quick. Too unpredictable.

He heard the sound of his warriors entering the room, their surprise attack, but focused on nothing but the enemies in front of him. Of slicing through their plated armor. Of tearing out their throats.

At last, nothing moved around him. He was soaked in their blood. He could feel it decorating his face, his arms, his clothes.

“Seer?” Gallant asked, his face wavering before his vision.

“No time. Kaci. Must stop her leading the attack.”

The scarred warrior stared behind him. “Commander, I think it may be too late for that.”

Seer turned toward the display screen, horror crawling over his flesh. Sure enough thousands of the females' tiny

vessels were flooding from their ship and out into space, heading directly for the Bortrack mothership.

“Kaci?” It was a groan of disbelief.

“Seer, focus. What should we do now?” Gallant asked.

He stiffened his spine as he saw a Bortrack ship dart free from their vessel. “Someone shoot that coward. And link our communications with the women. It’s too late to stop them, so we must help them.”

Gallant turned. “Who can link communication with the vessel?”

One of the injured prisoners limped forward. “Give me one minute and it’ll be done.”

A second later, he felt Gallant touch his arm, leaning close enough to whisper. “You’re injured. Badly.”

“I’m fine,” Seer gritted out, but he didn’t feel fine. His head felt light as a feather, his body a flowing mass of tension as his blood pounded through his veins.

“My friend, you get like this in your battle frenzy. If you don’t have those wounds tended to—“

“Is communication linked?”

“Done,” the deck officer asserted.

“Open the channel.”

“It’s open.”

“Kaci!” Seer shouted. “Kaci, I just need to know you are safe.”

The link stayed silent.

“Kaci?”

No answer. Where is she?

She must be on one of the vessels, unable to answer. He needed to help her. Help all the women. Their transportation vessel might be limited in its attack, but it could do *something*. “Then get within range of the Bortrack warship. Fire, but use caution, I won’t have our females injured by our own weapons.”

Males scrambled around him, trying to obey his orders.

Another officer spoke over his shoulder. “Preparing to fire—fire at the escaping enemy vessel. Should we shoot to kill?”

Not when there could be female prisoners on board.

He opened his mouth to answer, when he suddenly felt a rush of heat spread over his body. His head spun. He gripped the command desk in front of him, blinking. Looking down at himself, he was surprised to see a gash across his chest, and more gashes across his arms. Blood so dark it was nearly black flowed from him.

He blinked, his medic’s mind realizing immediately that the bloodflow was too much. He opened his mouth to speak, but the ground shifted and then rose up to meet him.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The Bortrack stood from the pilot's chair and turned to face Kaci. The tan plates around its mouth shifted to reveal sharp teeth.

She shivered. It looked as if it might be...smiling.

It peered at her, its black eyes scanning over her far too slowly. Then, after a moment, it started toward her. Its massive, tan feet echoed on the metal floor. When it came to stand over her, it seemed all the more massive.

Involuntarily, she shrank back.

Without warning, it kicked Kaci onto her back. "Autopilot. Time for mating."

Kaci's voice wavered. "If you try it, I will kill you."

It laughed. "A weak creature like you? No. You will spawn my young."

She tried to rise, to roll to her knees.

It kicked her onto her back once more. Hard. She struggled for air, sure it had cracked a rib this time.

The last thing I need is a punctured lung.

After a moment, she dragged in painful breaths. Lights blinked in her vision as she watched the Bortrack step over

her, pinning her down by the skirt at her hips.

She tensed, preparing to fight it even if she died trying.

But then it made a strange wheezing sound, its big hands moving to the injector that still protruded from its chest. “Wh—
—at?”

Is the poison finally affecting it? Hope uncurled within her.

The Bortrack stumbled, nearly tripping over her as she curled into a fetal position.

Suddenly, the entire ship rocked with an explosion, sending the Bortrack flying against the opposite wall and her sliding toward it.

It slumped over and she scrambled away to avoid touching it.

Struggling, she rolled onto her stomach and used her good arm to help her rise to her knees. When she looked at the Bortrack again, its strange eyes were half-closed.

Another explosion rocked the ship and an alarm began a low, grating sound.

What now? Can I turn this thing around?

Gritting her teeth, she used the wall to inch up until she made it to her feet. Even though her vision blackened and the pain radiating through her begged her to give in to the darkness, she forced one bare foot in front of the other until she reached the control board.

It looked like nothing she’d seen before. Glowing buttons, all an ugly orange.

“You—will—never—escape,” the Bortrack threatened, its harsh voice wet.

“Maybe not, but I think you’ll die before I do.”

Screw it.

She started hitting buttons at random, but nothing happened.

Looking up at the display screen, a massive tan ship came into view. *The Bortrack mothership*. Spikes covered nearly every inch of it, at least where weapons weren’t protruding. Which was nearly everywhere. *If I end up on that ship, I’m done.*

“Come on!” she shouted. Finally, she hit the largest button in front of her.

A guttural computer voice spoke. “Self-destruct triggered. Confirm?”

Self-destruct?

Her fingers hovered over the button she’d just pressed.

And finally, she knew what she had to do. She was going to steer this ship straight into the center docking bay of that massive ship of monsters, and self-destruct it.

Everything had led up to this moment. *This is my chance to save all of them.*

I LOVE YOU, *Seer*. *I only wish I got the chance to tell you.*

With steady fingers, she pressed the button.

A countdown began at sixty seconds.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Seer rose in a panic.

“Whoa, whoa!” Elder Medic Steady pressed him back onto the healing table with firm hands.

“Kaci, where’s Kaci?”

The old man frowned. “Kaci?”

“My mate! The human female.” He scowled, shaking his head. Medic Steady wouldn’t have a clue where she was.

“Ah,” the old man said, “Kaci, your female with the Rewire Contagion. I looked at her files. Fascinating stuff. You’ll be glad to know that she isn’t contagious, however, I concluded the same as you, she’ll never be free of it. We’ll be able to keep it at bay, but only with regular treatment from a specialist in—“

“Medic.” He sat fully up, forcing the old man back. “Where is she?”

His gray brows drew together in his familiar expression of disbelief. “Be logical, son, I’ve barely finished the first level of your healing. If you don’t remain in the healing bed, you’ll be bleeding out again with the slightest trauma.”

Seer stood, then half-fell back onto the bed. The old man caught his arm, but after a moment, Seer shrugged him off.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not! Now, lie down.”

Unable to help himself, he grasped the old man’s arm. “You speak of your bride as if the moon rises only for the love of her. What would you do if she was in trouble?”

The old man held his gaze for a minute, then sighed, running his fingers through his short gray hair. “Fine, you convincing bastard. Get up and be a hero. Just get back here in time for me to patch you up.”

Seer felt a rush of gratitude. “Now, I need only to find her.”

The old man nodded, then glanced out the small window of the private medarea. Outside the windows, every bed was lined with an injured female or male. “I can help, if only for a moment.”

“Help?”

“I can pinpoint her location.”

Seer stared, gratitude and confusion rushing over him in a wave. “How? I mean, yes, please, right away.”

Medic Steady went to his com-station, his hands waving through the golden nanobots. “This has to be our little secret, but when we take their blood sample, we also inject them with a tracker. It doesn’t work for long distances, but it should help us now.”

“What? You track them?”

He frowned. “Well, they are only humans. It’s really for their protection.”

Seer snorted. He’d have to deal with that later.

After a minute, the old man frowned. “This can’t be right.”

“What?” Seer pushed himself farther from the table, trying to see what the medic saw.

The old man turned around, his markings moving in an uncharacteristic display of uncontrolled emotions. “She isn’t on this vessel anymore. According to this, she’s inside one of the small Bortrack warships, almost inside the mothership.”

Seer’s heart stopped. *No!*

Racing from the room, he sprinted up the stairs, winding and winding. When he reached the right floor, he turned to the private docking bay. The massive room held only three vessels. He hurried past Leader’s large ship and chose a tiny one. With his hands on the silver oval, the ship responded to him, propelling him out of the docking bay and into open space.

Around him, more female ships were rushing toward the Bortrack mothership. Orange flashes of light came around him, followed by explosions of the tiny ships. He focused his attention on the Bortrack mothership, surrounded by the females’ tinier crafts.

A second later, fire poured from the mothership’s docking bay and fiery cracks spread throughout the surface of the vessel. The females’ ships fled from it in a haste, but he willed himself to move closer. To reach Kaci before the ship—

It exploded—fiery massive pieces shooting out in every direction. His own small ship was hit by a wave, rolled over, and spun. When at last he stopped the ship from spinning and turned back to the mothership, his heart in his throat, all that remained of the vessel was a field of debris.

Kaci.

It couldn't be. *It's impossible.* After everything he had done to protect her, she couldn't have died.

Parsimon's ship came into view from where it was hiding far behind the Bortrack ship. He saw the blue flash of its weapons charging. But he didn't care. It was only fitting that after failing to protect his bride, he would lose his life too.

He closed his eyes, pain like nothing he'd ever imagined consuming his heart.

And waited for death.

TWENTY-NINE

Kaci opened her eyes, confused and cold. She was lying on her back, her entire body aching. Her arm throbbed, as if to remind her what mind-numbing pain really was. She craned her head in every direction, but all she saw was space, a blanket of darkness, and speckles of stars. *Where am I? How did I get here?*

She reached her good hand out in front of her, stretching out until her fingertips touched the glass substance that seemed to surround her. But instead of the firmness of glass, the vessel she was lying within stretched outward like a bubble, as if fleeing her hand.

With a gasp, she drew her hands back. *Will this flimsy thing pop if I press it too firmly?*

A piece of flaming debris came into view. Heading straight for her! She had only a second to register it before it slammed into the side of the clear bubble-like structure. Every muscle in her body tensed for impact.

But the debris made a slight sucking noise, then bounced off, flying in the opposite direction.

What is this thing?

No longer afraid she would pop the fragile creation, she sat up. The translucent vessel seemed to shift along with her movements. From her position, seated in midair on absolutely nothing, she stared out at space in shock. Chaos surrounded her. From the female fighter ships flying at a rapid pace in every direction, to the smoldering debris, to the massive unknown ship heading straight in her direction.

Memories suddenly rushed back, and the last few minutes before the explosion came back to her.

As she had been heading toward the Bortrack vessel, prepared to sacrifice her life by driving the ship set on self-destruct straight at the Bortrack mothership, the vessel had chimed in, “Emergency evacuation protocol?”

She had stiffened. *What does that mean?*

The countdown continued, *10, 9, 8...*

For a moment, her hopes rose. *Can I actually save Seer, the women, and myself?*

Feet in front of her, the Bortrack ship swallowed her in its shadow.

I guess it's worth a shot.

She pushed the button.

An orange circle appeared around her, growing in size. *What in the world?*

A translucent bubble shimmered and grew around her in the orange light. Her pulse picked up as she forced herself not to run. A loud beep sounded. And then, the ceiling of the vessel opened above her, and she shot out.

The explosion, the wave rocking her bubble and sending her flying through the air, an almost invisible speck next to the

flaming debris and enormous ships that surrounded her.

Her arm being crushed as she rolled over and over...

That's why I blacked out!

She surveyed the space before her. Most of the flames were gone—floating debris, her ship, and Parsimon's ship still remained.

As she studied the aftermath of the battle once more, another thought dawned on her. The Bortrack ship was...gone. Completely. And in its place was a field of debris, like the flaming piece that had come at her before.

A laugh slipped past her lips, sounding too loud in the darkness. *I did it!*

Now, no matter what happened to her, at least she'd killed them. The other women had a chance.

Seer has a chance.

She curled her good arm around her injured one and felt the oddest sense of hopelessness.

So what now? No one knows where I am. I can't get aboard any of the ships.

She surveyed the space before her. *And there are no controls in this damn bubble.*

Seer will come, her mind reassured her.

Come on, the voice broke in. *You're just a speck in the middle of space. How can he hope to find you?*

As Parsimon's vessel drew closer, she saw something that made her breath catch. A bright blue light grew from one part of the ship, starting at the tip of a massive weapon. The light grew brighter and brighter. *It's charging.* And it was pointed

straight at the big transportation ship. At Seer and the innocent people on board.

Perhaps all her sacrifice had done was buy everyone a little more time before they died.

THIRTY

The small craft Seer had stolen from the docking bay closed in around him. *This can't be happening. I can't have lost her.*

His comp beeped. Out of instinct, he accepted the message.

And instantly regretted it.

Kaci is dead. Death is coming. Nothing else matters.

“Seer?” Medic Steady’s voice was soft, calming.

He spoke, the words tumbling past his numb lips. “The Bortrack ship exploded. Parsimon is charging his weapons now.” *And Kaci is dead.*

But he knew the medic wouldn’t care about that, past viewing her as a subject with the Rewire Contagion. *Only I loved her.*

And she was dead. His Kaci. He still couldn’t wrap his mind around it. It didn’t seem possible that she had died and he remained behind. Without her. *Impossible.*

The medic cleared his throat. “I checked Kaci’s tracker. For some reason, it’s still showing her, but now in open space. I thought you would want to know.”

Seer sat up straighter, unable to take a breath. “What? What did you say?”

The medic held up his hands. “I’m not saying she’s still alive. I’m just saying—”

“Send me the tracker coordinates.”

Logically he knew that all he might find was her body. But his heart wouldn’t let him accept that. Instead, a desperate hope filled him, rushing through his veins.

The medic sighed. “Well, I guess you’ll probably be safer out there than in here.”

“Tell Leader—“ Seer paused when a high-pitched sound cut through the ship, and Parsimon’s smooth voice slid over the com-link instead of the medic. “I realize that, given the circumstances, there may be some bad blood between all of us now.” His voice oozed with satisfaction. “However, I am grateful for this turn of events. Now that the Bortrack ship has been dealt with, we can simply go forward with our initial plan and pretend that all this ugliness never happened.”

That bastard. But Seer didn’t care about Parsimon or his agenda now. His hands closed into fists as he waited for Kaci’s coordinates to be sent to him. He knew that right now, Parsimon was probably deciding if he needed to kill all of them to hide his actions from their people, or if they were going to play along with him. The truth was, Parsimon had a Class 4 warship. If he hit their ship with a powerful enough blast, he could tear it apart.

The only reason he hasn’t is probably because he’s still hoping to get his female. I hope Leader remembers that bargaining chip.

It made him sick that Parsimon would have allowed the Bortracks to kill all of them and steal all the women, as long as he got his female.

The bastard.

Coordinates appeared across his console and instantly his focus sharpened. He sent his ship the command silently. It obeyed, switching its direction toward the vast field of debris that was the remains of the Bortrack ship so the scanners could check the area for life. Around him, space flew by. Every muscle twitched as he stared at the vidscreen and silently commanded his vessel to move faster.

Female fighter ships flew all around him. Some were returning to their transportation ship, some headed back toward Earth, and a handful of them moved toward open space. A number of the women flew like experienced pilots, but some narrowly missed smashing into his craft. A few hit debris, sending fire blazing along parts of their ships.

In other words, it was utter chaos.

It was only his sharp focus and fast commands that allowed him to avoid their unpredictable paths and the flaming bits of ship that tumbled all around him.

The ship beeped and slowed as he neared her coordinates. He focused on the screen in front of him, even though he didn't want to consider what the scanners might find when they got to her coordinates.

I can't lose her.

He slowed the ship. "Computer, magnify the following coordinates."

On his screen, a section of the debris field magnified. Smoldering masses flew in all directions, but there was no

Kaci.

“Double magnification.”

A flash of something came and went. A light source perhaps. *Something.*

His voice shook as he spoke. “Double again.”

There!

AT FIRST HIS mind didn't make sense of what he was seeing, but then the pieces came together. She was in a Bortrack escape pod. The clear bubbles made it difficult for enemies to find them. *How did she get into a Bortrack escape pod?*

Slowly, a smile touched his lips. “My clever, clever mate.”

He steered the craft close to her trajectory path, and then strapped into a spacesuit with hands that shook with disbelief, shock, and relief. *This can go wrong in so many ways.*

All space pilots had special training for occasions like this. The bubbles were strong, but slippery, and hard to grasp. They had to use special, taloned gloves to bring the bubbles inside another craft.

He could miss her as she flew by, or be unable to hold onto her. Or he could accidentally pop the balloon with the talons and she would be in open space. *But I can't afford to focus on the many ways this could go wrong.* Going to the back of the ship, he closed the doors and waited impatiently as the compartment decompressed. All the while, tension built inside of him.

She's alive. That's the most important thing.

And if she was hurt...he could fix her. *That's why I became a medic.*

The lights around the decompression room turned green, and he clipped his safety harness into place then hit the button for the external door. It opened with a soft hiss.

Not twenty feet in front of his ship, Kaci drifted in his direction. *I need to time this right, or she'll go right past me and I'll have to try again.*

Just don't pop the bubble.

The muscles in his legs bunched, and then, he leaped.

Almost in slow motion he shot out. Her eyes widened and her bubble slammed right into him. He dug the sharp talons on his gloves into the bubble, praying that they would hold her vessel without breaking it.

After a tense moment, he breathed a sigh of relief. His grip held.

"I've got you," he whispered.

Tears filled her eyes and her mouth moved, but he didn't understand her words. She pressed her fingers to her lips, then to the bubble right in front of his mouth.

"I love you too. You're safe now." He mouthed, hoping she could understand him even though she couldn't hear him.

Pulling one hand free, he hit the button on his belt. They slowly reeled in, closer and closer to the safety of his ship.

Once inside, he closed the outer door and waited anxiously as it the air pressure and oxygen levels returned to normal.

Kaci was so close. In his arms, so close, yet still untouchable.

He couldn't stop staring at her. She looked...tired, and in pain. But so beautiful. More beautiful than any woman before her.

When the green light turned on around the room, he shed his suit and went to the far wall, grabbing the special tool kept in every Spiritus's ship for occasions just like this.

With the Splitter, he broke the bubble that surrounded her.

She fell a few inches to the floor, barely keeping her balance, the shimmering bubble falling to the ground around her like a silky fabric.

He dropped his weapon and wrapped his arms around her small form, steadying her. "It's okay. I'm here."

And we'll never be apart again.

She threw her arms around him, sobbing. The blue of her eyes was breathtaking as she looked up at him. "You came for me."

It was hard to speak around the lump in his throat. "I always will." *Always.*

Love, relief, and fear crashed over him in a wave, and he had to work to remember to breathe. Only a short time ago, he thought he'd lost her. *My Kaci.*

He pulled her onto his lap on the ground and wrapped himself around her. Then, gently leaned forward and kissed her forehead, then her cheeks, and finally her soft lips. He wanted to touch every inch of her, to be absolutely sure she was alive and well. But he held himself back, trying to keep a grip on his fragile control.

If he let himself feel all of it, he was afraid he wouldn't be able to keep himself together. And she needed a strong mate,

not a broken one.

“You’re safe now.”

She relaxed in his arms, her head falling onto his shoulder.

He inhaled deeply as he pressed his face into her tangled, blond hair, taking in the underlying scents of his mate. Her scent was uniquely her. Sweet and feminine, it stirred a protectiveness inside him that made his primal side sit up and take notice. That accepted her as his one and only mate on a deep, instinctual level.

“And the others?” she whispered softly. “Did I save them?”

“Things are a bit of a mess, but you destroyed the Bortrack ship and saved countless lives.” *Every one of us owes you our lives. Let’s see if we can keep them.* “Parsimon will need to be dealt with, and the women will need to be rounded up, but—”

“Good, now take me home.”

Home? No! Not after I finally have you safe in my arms! “You want to return to Earth? I—“

“No,” she whispered. “Take me back to your room. That’s my home now.”

Unable to speak, he simply nodded and made a silent promise to himself. *My love, I will give you anything you ask for. I will keep you safe from all harm, no matter what it costs me. No matter what I have to give up, you are my mate.*

I will never lose you again.

THIRTY-ONE

Kaci sat in Seer's lap as he piloted the ship. It obeyed whatever silent command he had given and turned, heading back toward the transportation ship.

I still can't believe he found me. And that he loves me. There has to be a way to get around the rules of his society, the law that forbids him to take a bride. I won't let his inability to Shift determine whether we can be together or not.

He dropped his hand from the silver oval and held her even more closely in his lap.

After a moment, he spoke softly. "I can't believe I almost lost you. I tried so hard to keep you safe, and still you ended up in a bubble in the middle of space." He covered his face with one enormous hand.

The pain in his voice made it hard for her to take a breath, but there was so much that hadn't been said before. So much she still needed to say. "I know. I heard your plan."

He stiffened beneath her touch. "You did? Then, why did you—?"

She looked up at him and lifted her good hand to sweep his bloodstained blond hair back from his face. His deep green eyes met hers, and something powerful and unfamiliar

stretched between them. The words tumbled from her lips, even while she felt lost in the depths of his gaze. “Because I couldn’t lose you. Just like you couldn’t lose me.”

He shook his head, his eyes wide. “But it’s my job to protect you.”

“No...” She smiled. “It’s our job to protect each other.”

He reached out and lightly touched the sling that held her injured arm. His brows drew together in an expression she’d come to realize meant he was thinking too much. “If I were your mate, it would be my responsibility. *You* would be my responsibility. In all ways.”

She searched her brain for what he’d told her before. Seer had told her before they made love that he couldn’t be with her, because of some strange rule in their culture that required him to be able to Shift. At that time, all she had been hoping for was that Seer might care for her enough to return her to Earth.

But now?

Now, everything had changed. Even though it meant giving up Earth and never seeing her sister again, she wanted to stay with Seer. Yet, was such a thing even possible?

“What if I want to be your mate?”

His arms tensed around her. “Nothing would make me happier.”

“But you said before—”

“I know what I said,” he interrupted. “And that hasn’t changed. In my society, you and I can never be together.”

I won’t accept that. I can’t. “I won’t be with anyone else.”

After everything we've been through, I won't lose him now.

“There may be a way...our world is not the only civilized one. If we snuck away, perhaps we could be together.” He paused. “It would be difficult. Not the life you deserved, but —”

Unable to contain herself, she grabbed the back of his hair and pulled him into a kiss. Time stood still for one perfect moment before he stiffened beneath her touch.

She pulled back, their lips parting.

His eyes were closed. His expression twisted in pain.

“What is it?”

He clenched his jaw. “We can't.”

He can't mean that...but he does.

Tears pricked the back of her eyes. “Why? You said we could sneak away before...”

“Your illness. The Contagion. We need my people's technology to keep you well.”

He's staying for me. Even though he doesn't think he can be with me. She couldn't breathe. Her eyes welled with tears, even though she tried to blink them away. On Earth, the virus had kept her from love, from happiness. She couldn't believe it was doing it again. “We can still find a way.”

His eyes opened and the flash of pain within them sent an echoing emptiness radiating through her. “Perhaps.”

He doesn't think there's a chance for us. She cupped his face in her hands. “Seer, I've faced worse odds than this. I should have been dead twice already. We will find a way to be together.”

I didn't survive all of this to lose him.

He relaxed ever so slightly beneath her touch, although his expression remained downcast. "I am a lucky male."

"Yes," she smiled, curling against him. "You are. And I'm a lucky woman."

And no matter what you believe, I won't let anyone pull us apart.

She nuzzled her nose against his neck, inhaling the spicy, exotic scent that was now more familiar to her than her own scent. Although her future was still uncertain, she held onto this moment between them—a warm stillness that was precious and fleeting.

My Seer, fierce in battle and tender with me. You're a dream come true.

As they drew closer to the larger ship, reality began to creep back in with agonizing clarity. As much as she didn't want to go back, they had to. They both needed medical attention. Her arm still throbbed, still made her stomach turn whenever she moved it, but she also knew Seer could make it better. It was the voices that worried her. And him.

Blood splattered his clothes. And even though he reassured her it was from a wound that had already been healed, his black markings were a duller color. They moved slowly along his skin, appearing almost sluggish.

She might not fully understand his people or their physiology, but she recognized that he looked...pained.

"Stop looking at me like that," he said, glancing down at her with a slight smile.

“Like what?” she asked, smiling. *I’m teasing him? No, I’m flirting with him!* She shook her head in disbelief.

“Like you think I’m about to fall over.”

“I would never!” Unable to help herself, she reached up and dug her hand into the back of his dark hair, and tugged him down for another kiss. His lips met hers, and everything faded away except him and the feel of his hard mouth crushing her own.

He groaned and deepened their kiss, his tongue sweeping into her mouth.

She shivered and pulled away, gasping, trying to keep a hold on her willpower as it slipped through her fingertips. *We’re almost back to the ship.*

But I’ve never wanted a man like this before.

His deep green eyes held hers, and the desire swimming within them only made her want him more.

She tangled her hand in his tan vest, her fingertips skimming over the hard hilts of his many daggers. “Do we need to go back to the ship right away?”

He closed his eyes, and she felt the shudder that racked his body. “Don’t tempt me, my sweet female.”

Shifting slightly in his lap, she rubbed herself as casually as she could against the hardness of his manhood.

His eyes flew open. “The Bortracks are gone. But we still have Parsimon to deal with. We still need to get back to Spiritus space if we have any hope of being safe.” He ran a hand along her side, pausing at the curve of her breasts. “We have to focus on...” He groaned and ran a hand through his hair. “Hell, we can worry about all of that later. You are

coming back to my room, and the second your arm is healed...”

She grinned, still amazed that she could make a man like Seer aroused. That after years of not being able to have a single real relationship because of her virus, she had found him. On Earth, she probably would've settled for anyone who was kind to her. But Seer? He was an intelligent, gentle doctor. And a fierce, muscular warrior.

He was everything she had ever wanted, and more.

And the way he looked at her? She almost believed that she was everything he wanted too.

Suddenly, a golden light came from above their viewscreen. “This is the Spiritus High Council. We will be docking with transportation ship *Galaxy* shortly and request an immediate meeting with the senior officers aboard the *Galaxy*, as well as Lord Parsimon and his senior crew members. This is not a request.” The light faded and Kaci looked up at Seer. “What does that mean?”

Seer scanned the viewscreen, then placed his hand on the silver oval. He turned the ship, and a stunning golden spaceship came into view.

His expression was unreadable. “It means that the high council has arrived to sort through this chaos, and that we're all hopefully safe from Parsimon. And that, my dear, is their ship.”

“And?”

“I am not certain.”

Kaci shivered. If this was a good thing, why did she suddenly feel even more nervous? But she didn't have time to think about it because the ship beeped.

Instantly, Seer accepted the incoming transmission.

An older man with gray hair, large gray brows, and a gentle face came onto the viewscreen. His eyes widened when he caught sight of her. “You did it. You found the human.”

“Yes.” His arm tightened around Kaci. “Thank you for notifying me of her location. What is the status on board?”

“Well, we believe most of the Bortracks have left the ship. The ones who didn’t leave on their own were dealt with by Leader and his warriors. Our males were incredible! We lost many good warriors, but they won against impossible odds. Leader and Gallant are doing a final sweep of the ship as we speak. But still, you should be cautious coming through the ship, just in case.”

“Thank you.”

Another man spoke from somewhere off-screen. “We’ve found another group of injured!”

The old man didn’t look at them. “Time to go.” The screen returned to a view of the side of their massive transportation ship, as they drew closer and closer.

The speed of their small craft slowed, and another person communicated with them, giving them permission to dock.

A red door on the outside of the transportation ship slid open. Their tiny craft flew in and through a short tunnel into an enormous bay with a handful of crafts. These ships were much, much larger than the tiny crafts they had piloted from Earth.

She was too in awe to respond. *This must be where the real ships are. The Spiritus ships.* Their ship was one of the smallest. It hovered over a small spot, then slowly lowered.

Their ship slowed further before she felt it come to a stop.

Seer lifted her in his arms and carried her to the door. “Are you ready?” His voice was gruff.

She took a deep breath. “I’m ready if you are.”

He hit the button and the door opened. In front of them, the docking bay was poorly lit by the emergency lights. Proceeding cautiously, he carried her through the eerily empty docking bay to a metal door that exited into a familiar hall. The hallway was also empty, although the creepy red lights still flashed and the siren still wailed. She tensed in his arms.

He carried her down the hall, past docking bay door after door. And past bodies that still littered the floor.

Suddenly, one of the bodies groaned. Seer froze and set Kaci down, kneeling beside the body.

“Leader?” his voice was filled with disbelief.

Another body, so bloodied she couldn’t recognize the face, moved.

Seer stiffened. “Gallant?” His hands curled into fists. “What happened?”

Leader’s mouth worked, but for a moment, no words came out.

Seer leaned in closer. Kaci stood over them, clutching her hands. These men were Seer’s friends. And even with their alien technology, she had no idea how they could survive the damage done to them.

Tears choked her throat and instinctually she leaned forward too.

“Behind you,” Leader gurgled, blood flying from his lips.

A cold hand grasped her injured arm, and suddenly she was pulled away from Seer. She turned, staring into an unfamiliar face.

The man, with cruel eyes and a crueler face, smiled. “At last, my bride has been returned to me.”

THIRTY-TWO

Seer roared as Spiritus males stepped out of the docking bay doors on all sides of them. There were a dozen, not including Parsimon, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was Kaci.

He leaped for her, but Parsimon jumped back, taking Kaci with him.

A fist crashed into the side of Seer's head, the raw power making his head spin. A slight tickle of warm blood trickled down the side of his head, but he ignored it. His vision blurred, then returned. *A concussion.*

He turned slightly to view the warrior who had delivered the coward's blow. The man's facial expression was one of nervousness.

Seer glanced at the men who surrounded him, scrutinizing their strengths and weaknesses. All wore the reddish-tan vests of males trained in the war. But something was off. His eyes narrowed as he took in the strange billowing quality of their uniforms.

Instantly, he knew what it meant.

These males could fight in Shifted form. And they had uniforms for it.

His pulse picked up. Only a handful of the population could do such a thing without losing complete control and becoming more of a liability than an asset.

These males were dangerous. But then, so was he.

His gaze returned to Parsimon and Kaci. His eyes narrowed as he waited. Whatever he had to give the coward to get her back, he would.

“Seer,” Parsimon’s voice was overly friendly. “Thank you for returning my bride to me.”

Several of the warriors around him jerked at the mention of his name. Two stepped back. Seer clenched his fists. *Good.* Let them know that they faced one of the only living males who could enter battle frenzy. Let them know that even in Shifted form, he was stronger, faster, and able to take more damage than they could ever imagine.

Let them realize that even against ten Shifted males, he would win a battle. *And if my past is any indication, I can kill them all without hurting my Kaci.*

Seer’s chest rose and fell as he fought to remain calm. His head felt strangely light, but he ignored the odd sensation, focusing instead on his mate. Kaci looked small and pale in the other male’s grip. He needed to do whatever he had to in order to keep her safe. He would enter battle frenzy only if he had to.

His primal side rippled beneath his flesh, demanding blood. Seer pushed it down. He didn’t know what his Shadow Walker would do if released. His battle frenzy he understood.

And what could the combination of the two do? a voice whispered at the back of his mind.

This isn’t the time to find out, he argued sternly.

Be calm. “I was taking the female to the medical bay. She is injured. And after the Bortrack attack, it was unwise to surround a warrior protecting a female.” Then, he glanced pointedly at Leader and Gallant. “And *somehow*, even after the Bortracks were dealt with, two of my friends were badly wounded. If they don’t get medical attention soon—“

“They already appear dead to me.” Parsimon watched him too closely. “But if you feel they can still be saved, by all means, go.”

Seer’s eyes narrowed. “Thank you. Kaci, come on then, we’re off to the medical bay.”

His hand visible clenched her arm harder. “You seem to have taken a strong interest in my bride.”

Give nothing away.

“You instructed me to make her my first priority. She has the Rewire Contagion. And was injured in the first docking.” The words came out of him too quickly. He blinked, his vision wavering for a few unsettling seconds.

Why do I feel so—strange?

“I understand.” Parsimon’s gaze ran over Kaci in a way that made Seer’s stomach turn. “It seems you took your responsibility very seriously. Even entering the debris field to bring my mate back to me. For that, I’m grateful.”

Get her out of here, fast. Something isn’t right. “Now, I must attend to her wounds. She still has a broken arm. And will need continued treatment for the contagion.” Seer reached forward, but two males blocked his path.

Peering between their shoulders, his gaze locked with Parsimon. “What is this?”

An unexpected weakness came over Seer, and he had to fight to keep his knees from folding. Clenching his fists, he willed himself to remain strong.

The male's dark eyes flashed with something. "As you know, this mission has had some...complications. I intend to see to my bride's well-being from now on. We will be returning to my ship, where she will receive the finest of care. Congratulations, Seer, your duty is done."

He plans to run before he has to face the council.

"That's unnecessary. We have the facilities here—"

"I have deemed it necessary, Medic. And as I am your superior—in all ways—you have no right to tell me otherwise."

Seer watched as Kaci struggled in Parsimon's grip, wincing as the male tightened his hold on her injured arm. "I won't go with you."

Every instinct within Seer roared to kill the male who had his hands on his mate. But even while his nails elongated and his skin tingled, he held himself still. "The Council is here. They have requested to meet with all of us."

All pretense disappeared, and Parsimon's expression hardened. "Those useless bureaucrats are afraid to dock with us, even now. A rogue Bortrack might be alive. By the time they have gathered the courage to leave their ship I will be long gone with my bride." He paused, glancing at his warriors. Then stepped closer and lowered his voice. "Be logical, Seer. You might have grown to...care for this human, but is she worth your life? My warriors are the best, and you look as if you can barely stand. I have great respect for you—both your medical expertise and your former heroism on the battlefield.

But this is a battle you can't win. Step aside and I will let you live."

A ripple that raced beneath Seer's skin that was like nothing he'd felt before. Staring at Kaci, heartbreak and helplessness dancing in her deep blue eyes, something took over.

"I can see what you're thinking," Parsimon said. "But I have to warn you, the blow my warrior delivered to your head contained a controversial medication. You won't be able to enter your battle frenzy until it's left your bloodstream. In fact, as it works its way through your bloodstream, you'll experience a significant amount of pain and weakness."

Seer's gaze jerked to the male who had punched him. The warrior held up his hand. The ring he wore had a short, sharp injector on the end of it. *It wasn't a concussion. It was the medication going into my brain.*

His pace picked up, and he groped for his battle frenzy. He thought of Kaci. Of them taking her. Anger and desperation boiled inside him, but when he reached for his gift, it was simply gone.

No! This can't be happening. Not now!

"Accept this, Seer. Don't fight it. There's nothing more you can do."

His primal side growled low within him, and he felt the hairs on his back stand on end. If what Parsimon said was true, soon his strength would be gone along with his battle frenzy. Already he could feel it fading in the shaking of his exhausted limbs.

I will save her, no matter the cost.

But what do I have left?

A stillness came over him.

And then the growl in the back of his mind became a roar. And he did something he'd never done before. He gave control to his primal side. He let go.

Within him, his primal side roared again in satisfaction, growing and changing as it expanded. He felt his markings spreading. His back bent forward, and he shuddered.

His clothes ripped in pieces around his changing body, the tattered remains clinging strangely to his new form. Fire raced through his blood and his vision shifted to grays. His Shadow Walker stretched to life, like a thunderstorm within him.

Giving into it was strange, yet natural. Almost intoxicating. Just the power that filled his blood, strengthening his muscles and his bones, made him feel like a creature of legend.

It was different than his battle frenzy.

When he was young, a warrior had described the difference between battle frenzy and Shifting. He was right. When he used his skill, he felt invincible. But in his Shifted form, he felt the raw power of an animal. Soon he would know what this new form was capable of.

A growl rumbled his chest, permeating from deep within him.

Parsimon's eyes were wide, his markings pale. "What is this? He should be lying on the ground, not Shifting."

But something was different than everything he'd been told, even by the Shifter. *I'm still able to think.*

Unlike most Shadow Walkers, he wasn't attacking like a beast driven only by instinct. He was waiting. None of them

seemed to know what to do.

“Can he still tap into his battle frenzy?” one warrior asked, pulling a blade from his vest.

Parsimon took too long to answer. “Uh, no.”

His men did not look convinced.

Seer could smell the fear on all of them. He growled low in his throat. His lips pulled back from sharp teeth. *Let them wonder what I'm capable of.*

“He’s just a Shifter, and so are all of you,” Parsimon barked, shoving one of his men forward. “There are a dozen of you. Take him out! Drain the life from his worthless body.”

“Seer!” Kaci shouted. She tried to run toward him, but Parsimon yanked her back. She cried out in pain.

My mate! His primal side snarled.

His vision flashed to red.

Leaping onto the first warrior, he tore through his throat and let the body drop to the floor. Blades hissed as they were unsheathed from vests. His ears perked as he heard the other warriors start to Shift.

He caught the wrist of the closest guard and twisted. The male yelled out in pain and dropped his dagger, but then he finished Shifting and swiped at Seer with his other hand. His claws slashed Seer’s chest like shallow knives.

Using his nails, Seer slashed back at his throat, and the male’s yell faded away in a gurgle.

Seer tore through the other warriors one by one, moving ever closer to Kaci, who was kicking and struggling in Parsimon’s arms. It didn’t matter if they had fully Shifted,

Seer's rage and desire for his mate made his Shadow Walker faster, stronger. And his ability to think gave him increased control.

The remaining men leaped on him together, trying to use their numbers against him. Blades, claws, and teeth tore through his barely healed flesh. But he hardly felt the pain. He slashed, bit, fought like the primal animal that he had become. Nothing could stop him from reaching his mate.

"I'll kill her." Parsimon's threat was a cowardly whisper.

Seer looked up and saw that more warriors were emerging from the ship behind Parsimon.

He roared, but didn't move as the guards closed around him.

"If you fight them, I will kill her here and now," Parsimon promised, his lips drawing into a thin line.

His Shadow Walker howled in desperation, but Seer held himself perfectly still. He didn't want to lose her. Didn't want to give her to a man who would hurt her. But he couldn't go on if his actions cost her her life.

Will he really do it?

He narrowed his eyes and examined Parsimon. The other man was trembling, his only concern was for his own life at this point.

He would slit her throat and leave her here just to make his escape while she bled.

He hung his head, even though his beast howled in denial. "I will not fight." His promise was gravelly, the words of a half-beast.

“Unfortunately, your word is just not enough for me. Given the situation, we both know you’ll come after us.”

The warriors struck while he was down, not giving him a chance to recover. The first blade struck him in the shoulder. And then there were more and more. In his back. In his side.

His eyes caught Kaci’s, the pain on her face agonizing. “I love you,” he mouthed.

“You can’t do this!” she screamed, beating and kicking at Parsimon, tears running down her face. But the other man easily held her. “He isn’t fighting!”

The four remaining men stabbed and stabbed. Hot blood leaked from his wounds and his legs crumbled from under him. They pushed him down, in a pool of his own blood, and he watched as Parsimon tried to drag his crying mate into the ship.

A hiss sounded behind him, and suddenly Parsimon dropped the knife with a shout. A blade impaled his hand. As if in slow motion, the knife at Kaci’s throat tumbled to the ground.

“What in the Pregnant Mother’s name is going on?”

The warriors around Seer stepped away, and suddenly five older males in white robes knelt down around him.

One of them spoke, his voice somehow familiar. “Medic Seer?”

Councilman Trustworthy.

“We need a medic now!” the councilman shouted.

Seer closed his eyes as a tear slipped down his cheeks. They had arrived just in time. No one could save his life now, but they could save hers.

“Stay with us,” the old man said, his voice filled with panic.

“It was him! He attacked me!” Parsimon’s voice was filled with pain and panic. “He went into his battle frenzy. Kill him now or he’ll attack again, better yet, let me take care of him!”

“No, he didn’t!” Kaci screamed. “Parsimon is a murderer!”

Seer’s eyes cracked open—one last chance to see his mate—even as chilly numbness washed over his body. He watched the scene unfold as if he had already left his body far behind.

Parsimon shoved past Kaci and headed toward him. *To finish what he began.*

Suddenly, with a surprising strength and speed, Kaci bent down and grabbed the blade that had only moments before been at her throat. Jumping onto his back, she jammed it into Parsimon’s throat. “Don’t you *ever* touch him again!”

He gurgled as she leaped away from him, his hands flailing about the hilt of the dagger. But she ignored him, rushing forward and throwing herself on top of Seer, grabbing one of the knives from his vest.

She pointed it at his attackers. “Let him go. Get away from him!”

But they had already backed away, looking between Parsimon, who was on his knees, and the council.

She is safe now.

He wanted to rise, to kiss her, to tell her that he loved her. *I can Shift. We could mate, make a family, grow old together.*

But he felt his heartbeat slow, as the life drained from his body. His vision faded to black, even as Kaci shook him, begging him to stay with her.

But death would not be stayed. She closed her icy fist around him, tugging him into the darkness of the afterlife.

THIRTY-THREE

“Seer, get up! Get up!” Kaci shook his bloodstained shirt, sobbing.

An older man removed his hand from Seer’s chest “Female, his heart...it’s too late for him.”

“No!” she screamed. “No! No! He can’t—no!”

She turned him over and put an ear to his chest. There was no heartbeat. No rise and fall. His nails had returned to normal. His markings completely vanished. Lying on the ground, he looked...he looked like a dead human.

The door to the bay whispered open, and a man with gray hair rushed in. She glanced up as he rushed toward her and recognized him from the viewscreen earlier. *The medic*. “Let me see him,” he ordered, pushing her aside. He held a strange device in his hand.

Pushing it into the torn flesh of a wound over Seer’s heart, the metal contraption dug slightly into his chest.

She pressed her hands to her mouth to keep from screaming.

The device flashed red. Three red bars glowed on the front.

The old man took a loud breath and pushed a button on the front of the device. “Come on, Seer.”

The device flashed golden. Seer's entire body jerked, his limbs flying out, but the bars remained red.

"Come on, Medic, attend to one of the living." The councilman's voice was firm but gentle.

But the old man shook his head, pushing the device again. Another golden flash. Another jerking of his limbs, and more red bars.

Kaci sobbed into her hands, staring at Seer's still face. She couldn't lose him. Not the man she loved.

The old man hit the device over and over again, ignoring those around him that told him to stop. One man even gripped the doc's shoulder, saying, "This is pointless and horrifying. The male is dead."

The doc smacked his hand away and hit the device again.

This time, the bars turned yellow. They moved up and down in a slow wave.

Kaci tensed, looking at the doc's face. Was he—?

"Get him to the medbay! Now!" the old man ordered, forcing them into action.

Two of the other men scrambled, taking him under the arms and legs.

She followed them closely out into the hall, and as they ran toward the medbay she saw that others were already hauling Leader and Gallant in that direction. They all crowded into the elevator.

Kaci held his hand, refusing to let go. Seer needed to feel her there. To know she hadn't left him.

Someone tried to push her aside, stumbling under the weight of his patient. She refused.

They hurried into the medbay, past healing bed after healing bed—all full. The older Spiritus was right behind her, pointing to a bunk in the corner. “Put him there,” he ordered.

The two men laid Seer on the bunk, and the doctor pressed a button. Golden particles immediately floated over his head.

“Kaci?” the old man said, gripping her arms. “Your mate is gravely injured. Your job is to make sure no one interrupts me. Do you understand? Lesser medics can help the others, but I owe this man my life. Most of us on this ship do. I will not leave his side unless there is no hope.”

She nodded, gripping the blood-coated dagger harder.

Over the next few hours, people tried to interrupt the medic, but she intercepted them. *Can't they see he's busy?* The old man's hands moved at a rapid pace through the golden sparks. Images of every part of Seer's body were pulled up in magnified holographic pictures before the doctor's eyes. And every image looked...wrong. Injured.

The old man would narrow his eyes, and then he would begin to work on each section. Closing wounds, healing broken bones, and constantly moving back to a holographic image of his levels. Some she recognized—his heartbeat, his temperature—but others were foreign to her.

People didn't seem to care how busy the doctor appeared, they approached her over and over again. They argued that Seer was too far gone to be helped. That others needed the doctor's attention more.

Finally, after ten hours they began to argue that the old man was pushing himself too hard. But she faced off with

them, like a feral animal. She refused to respond, only gripped her dagger and dared them to step forward with her eyes. None did. They shot her looks of annoyance and disgust, but she would not let Seer die when he could be saved.

At last, there was a loud sound behind her. The doc had crumbled to the floor. She rushed forward and bent down to him, feeling his neck for a pulse. His eyes were glazed, but he was breathing and his pulse was strong. He was just exhausted.

She rose to the table, looking at her mate. “Seer?” She gripped his hands in hers, waiting. Everything depended on this one moment.

He opened his eyes, blinked once, then closed them again.

She bent down and wept over his chest. Her shoulders shook. Her relief was so overwhelming that she couldn’t move, couldn’t draw in a breath.

Her medic. Her friend. Her mate. Her love.

He would live.

THIRTY-FOUR

The afterlife was far different than Seer imagined. It was pain. Terrible pain. And an inability to speak. To relieve it in any way. *This is worse than life. An unjust reward for fighting so hard, for having to leave my mate behind.*

He tumbled through swirling colors, praying for a second death to take away his misery. For anything that would ease his suffering.

When he finally opened his eyes, he was in a healing bed. He pressed his knuckles into his mouth and bit down on his scream. A second later, a shadow hovered above his bed, and the golden particles sparked with blue light.

Finally. *Finally.* The edge of the pain dulled.

The tightness in his chest eased and he could breathe. His hand fell back, and he pressed his body into the bed. *How am I still alive?*

But he couldn't voice the question, so no answer came.

He drifted in and out of consciousness, knowing somewhere in the back of his mind that his injuries must have been extremely severe to keep him completely unaware of the outside world. It told him that they were still afraid that any

reprieve from the healing and pain medicine would be more than he could bear.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed when he blinked and became aware of his body. And that other than a dull ache, he felt better. When he tried to sit up, soft hands helped him.

His head spun as he fully sat up, and his neck strained in protest. Then, he opened his eyes, and *she* was there.

Kaci's arms came around him, and he held her close. His chest felt tight as emotions overwhelmed him. She was here. She was safe. And they were together.

"How do you feel?" Her voice was overjoyed.

He breathed in the sweet scent of her hair, and brushed his shaggy beard against her head. "I..." He cleared his throat as the word came out a croak. "Okay."

She pulled back and held his face in her hands. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "I thought I'd lost you."

Someone cleared his throat behind them. It was Elder Medic Solemn. "Glad to have you back, Medic Seer."

He nodded at the old man, knowing he could have been the only one responsible for saving his life. "Thank you."

"Well, I couldn't have done it without your fierce little mate. She protected you until I got there and stood as my guard throughout your healing."

"Somehow I'm not surprised to hear that." He looked at his beautiful mate. *Of course you fought for me.*

The old man cleared his throat. "I hate to tell you this, but the Council wants to see you right away. They've been waiting for you to gain consciousness, so they can sort out this mess."

Seer nodded and struggled to stand.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Kaci’s mouth pulled into a tense line. “What he needs is rest!”

The old man held up his hands. “I agree, but I’m not the one who makes the rules.”

“Whoever makes the rules is an idiot! Is it that bunch of old guys who stood around while Seer was dying? Isn’t this whole thing their fault? They’re the government!”

“It’s okay,” Seer reassured his passionate mate, although inwardly he felt amazed. *No one has come to my defense before.* “I’ll be fine.”

When he stood, it was only her soft arms around his waist that kept him from falling for the first few seconds. He leaned on her, then got his balance and started toward the door, but paused as he reached Medic Solemn. “Leader and Gallant... did they make it?”

The old man nodded. “Leader’s been in his mate’s private med room since he awoke, and Gallant is already back with his mate. They both wanted to be notified when you woke. I’ve already informed them.”

Seer cleared his throat around the lump that had formed. *The Pregnant Mother really must have been watching over us.* “I’ll have to visit them when this is settled.”

“Hell, I think we all need a drink,” Solemn agreed.

Whether we are all celebrating or consoling one another.

“Is the Council still on this vessel, or back on their ship?”

“They’re still here, in the fourth floor boardroom, questioning everyone and generally making life difficult.” Solemn shook his head. “Bureaucrats.”

When they arrived at the boardroom, the guards at the door scrambled to let them in. Inside, five council members crowded around one end of the table. Dozens of holoscreens were scattered on the tabletop, the expressions on the faces ranged from anger to dismay.

When Councilman Trustworthy looked up and saw them, he swept a hand through the screens and they disappeared.

“Seer, how are you?”

Kaci lowered him into a chair while he held back a groan. “Alive.”

She seated herself next to him, taking his hand in her smaller one. Every eye in the room locked onto their clasped hands. She stared straight back at them, a challenge in her eyes.

She wants them to know we're together. Does that mean she'll choose to remain with me?

Councilman Trustworthy sighed. “It seems at least some of the rumors we heard are true.”

Seer's face was impassive as he nodded. *And I don't regret a moment of it.*

The older man sat in a chair and the others followed suit. He leaned back, steepling his hands together. “There are few males I respect as much as you.”

“I feel the same.”

And he did. Every interaction he'd had with Councilman Trustworthy had shown that. The man might not always rule in the way Seer thought was right, but his ruling always seemed unbiased and just.

“But I must still make a decision based on our laws, do you understand?”

“I do.”

Tensions sung through the air. “We understand that circumstances have since changed, but is it true that you, as a Second Tier male, selected a mate?”

“Yes.”

The other males stiffened, but the councilman pressed on. “And you knew that such a thing was forbidden to you?”

“Yes.”

“And did you share a bed with this female?”

Seer didn't hesitate. He didn't regret the truth. And would not lie no matter the cost. “Yes.”

One of the men shook his head, muttering with disgust, but every expression grew angry.

“And you also knew this was against our most sacred laws?”

“Yes.”

Trustworthy frowned, pausing for far too long. “And you joined a crew of males who stole brides from a primitive world?”

“Yes.”

Kaci suddenly stood. “You can't possibly get the full story with these questions! He didn't know we were being kidnapped. If you would just—”

“It's okay.” He touched her arm gently. “This is how it is done.”

“This is not Seer’s fault,” she broke in, her voice overwhelmed with emotion. “The two of us falling in love and becoming mates wasn’t about him being able to Shift, or deserving me, or anything else. It is that we’re meant to be together.”

Councilman Precise wrinkled his large nose. “If the female cannot obey the rules of this meeting, she is not welcome.”

“But—”

Seer squeezed her hand. “Please, sit down.” He motioned to the chair and said gently, “We must respect the process of law.”

Very slowly, she sat.

The tension in the room eased ever so slightly.

Councilman Trustworthy smoothed the fabric of his white robe and then leaned forward, his gaze locking with Seer’s. “Is it true that you were the one to alert the Council of Parsimon’s misdeeds and ask for assistance for the females, regardless of the consequences to yourself?”

“Yes.”

“And that you fully Shifted to protect this female when she was being attacked by the Bortracks?”

“Yes.”

A murmur went through the observers.

The councilman shook his head, obviously in disbelief. “Shifting for the first time as an adult...it’s...well, it’s unexpected to say the least.”

“However,” a second councilman broke in, “we are grateful that you were able to Shift. Otherwise, Parsimon

would have gotten away with this travesty.”

The first councilman’s gaze turned to Kaci. “Is it true that Medic Seer never once forced his affections on you?”

He saw her eyes lighten with hope. “That’s true.”

“And you willingly chose him as your mate, even though he was of a lesser status?”

“Yes.”

“And is it true that you will accept him as your mate, remaining with him forever of your own freewill?”

Seer couldn’t breathe. This might be her chance to escape. To return to her old life and put this whole ordeal behind her. Would she actually choose him over returning to her world?

“Yes,” she said, turning to face him. “Nothing would make me happier.” She smiled.

His heart surged with joy at her words. *Now all they have to do is say yes.*

He threw an arm around her and began to pray silently. *Please, Pregnant Mother, if I ask you for nothing else, let me have this. Let me have her.*

The councilman nodded formally. “Please step outside. We shall make our decision.”

They were in the hall for nearly an hour before they were called back in. Seer’s legs shook and his eyelids felt heavy from the effort, but he held himself tall for their verdict, meeting each of their gazes. Daring them to take his mate from him.

Councilman Trustworthy stood, his expression unreadable. “Your crime is twofold. For one, you and your crew are

responsible for damage to a primitive world and to precious female lives. Although you were unaware of the consequences of your actions, many were hurt because of your ignorance and complicity. Others were killed. Your second offense was to claim a female as a Second Tier male and take her as your own. These crimes cannot be ignored.”

Seer scanned the faces of the other councilmen, but their faces were impassive.

The councilman took a deep breath. “You are henceforth stripped of any and all association with the Bride Initiative. You may never again take any role in this organization. Nor are you allowed to leave the Spiritus without express consent of this council. What’s more, since you have now been elevated to a First Tier male, effective immediately, you are solely responsible to see to the care and well-being of your mate, henceforth referred to as Kaci of the Humans. Because of her unique health concerns, again a consequence of you and the other males associated with this disastrous kidnapping, it will be your responsibility alone to ensure she remains healthy. These responsibilities will be for the remainder of your life.”

“You mean, we—“ Kaci began.

He held up a hand. “Additionally, here, today, before the council, we declare Kaci your bride. A union that can never be broken.” His lips curved into a slight smile. “Do you accept the decision set forth by the council, or wish to claim the rule unjust and seek the king’s word on the matter?”

Seer shook himself. Tears formed at the back of his eyes, but he blinked them away. His chest swelled and, even though it hurt to breathe, even to move, he struggled to his feet and met each of their gazes. His answer came out choked but clear. “I do.”

“Then, place her hand in yours and repeat after me.”

He turned to his mate. Her own eyes glittered with tears, even as a smile curved her perfect lips. He repeated the mating words in a daze, his heart pounding with exhilaration. “I, Seer, will love, cherish, and put my bride above me in all things for the remainder of our lives.”

Councilman Trustworthy turned to Kaci. “Do you accept this male as your mate until the end of your days?”

“I do!”

He nodded. “Then, henceforth Kaci and Seer will be one in the eyes of the law and the council.”

Kaci threw herself into his arms, and he pressed his face into her hair, inhaling her sweet familiar scent. None of it had truly sunken in yet. Kaci was his? His mate? Forever?

If he awoke now, this moment would still be the best one of his life.

He gazed over her head at the men who watched him. “Thank you.”

Councilman Trustworthy smiled. “Oh, and the king wanted me to tell you that he is glad you survived and wishes to meet your mate. After your claiming period, of course.”

As Kaci led him from the room, he couldn't keep the smile from his face. *Now, the rest of our lives will begin.*

THIRTY-FIVE

Two days later...

KACI STEPPED from the bath in Seer's room, still amazed by how clean she felt after the tub of warming stuff—some substance that was not quite water but not quite gel either. She donned a massive robe made of a shimmering fabric that felt thick and soft against her body.

And absolutely heavenly.

As she ran a brush through her hair, she felt happier than she had in years. The Council had finished handing out the last of their rulings just hours before. She didn't know all the specifics, but she knew that the Spiritus males had been given a deadline to woo their mates. If they failed to do so, another male would be given a chance to win their hearts. And if by a predetermined date no male managed to win their hearts, they would be allowed to return to Earth.

Which many of the women will be thankful for.

The information wasn't common knowledge yet. But from what she understood, in a year's time, the Council would return to Earth with the missing humans and attempt a treaty of some kind. They wanted to be in control of when the

women returned and what was said when they were brought back, which was annoying but understandable.

And as for the women who selected a mate, they were never allowed to return. Kaci would miss Earth and her sister, but her heart was with Seer now and forever.

Besides, Darlene would no longer have to worry about her sick sister. She could use the money Kaci had left for her to fix her leg, to stop being in pain, and maybe, finally, meet someone who could make her happy too. Her sister had been her best friend their entire lives. The loss of her sent a longing aching in her chest, but she knew that Darlene would be okay without her.

No one is tougher than her.

Setting down her brush, she looked at herself in the mirror. She'd lost too much weight again. There were circles under her eyes and a hollowness to her skin after spending too many days waiting for Seer to be healed enough to be allowed to wake up. But the strange thing was, she'd never felt more beautiful. *Seer makes me feel beautiful.*

She turned to stare at his sleeping form in the bed. Although his time in the healing bed was finished, he still needed as many hours of sleep as he could get until he fully recovered.

I'm his mate now. I want to show him what that means.

Tiptoeing to the edge of the bed, she gazed at his face. His markings were still duller than they should have been, but they wrapped his flesh in a familiar scattering of shapes, like intricate, curving tattoos. He looked younger as he slept, even beneath the slight beard he hadn't yet shaved off.

She caught the edge of his blanket and slowly tugged it down. His body was covered in scars. Some pale and pink. Others still red and angry-looking. He'd healed so much, and yet, he still had so much more healing to do.

I'll have to be gentle.

Like the first time she had crept into his bed, she shed the robe and sat down beside him. Wrapping her hand around his cock, which was massive even when limp, she started to stroke him gently. After just a few pumps, he swelled in her hand. He tossed his head in his sleep, a groan slipping past his lips.

She leaned over him and licked the tip of his manhood. Once, twice, and then wrapped her mouth around him and sucked.

He gasped and stirred slightly. She knew he was awake, his gaze locked on her, which only encouraged her further.

Taking him inch by inch deeper, she tried to take his entire length. When his tip hit the back of her throat, she had to fight not to pull back. Instead, she sucked, enjoying the sweet taste of his precum. Using her hands, she cupped his balls, stroking them with her thumb.

Not breaking her suction, she moved her head up and down, taking him deeply and then sliding back to his tip. His hips bucked and his hand moved to the back of her head.

She settled in more comfortably. Sucking, touching, stroking, her own arousal growing with the knowledge that she was building his.

At last, he tugged at the back of her head. "Kaci," he said her name, breathless but full of wonder. "I can't take any more."

She released his cock and looked up to meet his gaze. His expression was one of a man being tortured with pleasure. *Just what I want.*

“I know you aren’t feeling well...”

“I could lift a mountain.”

She chuckled. “How about for tonight I just ride you until you come?”

He visibly shuddered, his eyes flickering closed for the smallest moment. “I’d like that.”

Climbing on top of him, she straddled his thighs, wrapping one hand around his cock. “I can’t wait to feel you inside me.”

He reached forward and slid a hand between her thighs, parting her lower lips.

She gasped in surprise, and then felt his finger stroke her folds.

The feeling was...overwhelming. Her breathing hitched and her eyes closed.

He touched her gently, unhurriedly, as if there was nothing else to do. As if there was nowhere else to be.

She rocked her hips as her body grew wet and ready, as his fingers explored her more thoroughly. Sparks of pleasure ignited through her nerve endings as she rubbed herself against his fingers.

He leaned forward and suddenly one of her nipples was in his mouth. She groaned, clutching his shoulders. Shocked by the way her body responded to this man. To this alien.

One of his fingers slid inside her wet channel, even while his thumb began to rub soft circles over her clit.

She bucked harder, tossing her head back as he sucked and licked one breast before moving to the other. At last, she felt her body shudder. Felt herself dancing on the edge of a cliff.

Pushing him back onto the pillows, his mouth left her breast and his hands fell to his side. She slid up, positioning her womanhood over the head of his glorious manhood.

His hands moved to her hips, and she clutched his shoulders. The head of his cock parted her lower lips, sliding back and forth along the folds of her womanhood. Tension coiled between them.

At last, his cock found her opening and inch by inch pushed into her. She held her breath, closing her eyes, determined to fit him into her, even as her body held him too tightly. When at last she reached his hilt, settling so that he was fully buried inside her, she leaned forward and took his lips.

Their kiss was mind-blowing. His eager mouth crushed hers, his tongue sweeping inside her mouth, tangling with his own.

Not breaking their kiss, she began to ride him. Slow at first, then faster and faster. Their lips drew back, barely touching. Their breath mingled.

He thrust inside her, holding her hips in place. They found the perfect pace, thrusting, diving in and out, their climaxes building as one. Lightning sizzled through her veins, alighting her nerves on fire.

Her inner muscles began to squeeze him harder. She couldn't catch her breath. As her nails dug into his back, she felt herself drawing closer and closer to the edge.

At last, she cried out. Falling farther over him, she grabbed his shoulder more tightly to use as leverage as she rode him.

Her pleasure was like nothing before. Pure. Perfect. She spun over the edge, screaming his name. Her inner muscles milked his massive cock, shuddering and clenching him as if she might never let him go.

He roared, and his hot seed shot into her. His thrusting grew desperate.

She couldn't speak, couldn't breathe. All she could do was hold on as he pounded into her, drawing out her own climax, her mouth twisting into an unspoken *O*.

And then, he slowed, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and pulling her close.

Sparks continued to fire inside her, but she pressed into him, inhaling his exotic familiar smell. Still in disbelief that she didn't just have tonight with him, but forever.

As her eyelids grew heavy, he stroked the hair from her back. "I love you, my mate."

She turned and pressed a soft kiss to the side of his neck. "I love you, my mate."

His arm tightened around her. Sleep tugged at her thoughts.

And then his damned comp began to beep.

She sighed, climbing off him, tying the robe at her waist. He pulled the blanket around himself and strode to the computer, sitting in the chair. She perched herself on his knee.

"What do you think this is?"

He rubbed his face. "Only one way to find out."

Clicking a button, an image appeared on the holoscreen. It was Leader in a ship. His markings were gray and slow, his eyes wild.

“Leader?”

“Listen,” he rushed out. “I only have a minute before I jump through the portal. The Council delivered my punishment today. They stripped me of my title, my possessions, and exiled me.”

“I’m so—”

“And my mate.” He growled. “I could accept the others. I could not accept that. So, I stole her.”

Seer shook his head. “They’ll come after you. They’ll find you.”

“You don’t understand. None of it matters. Nothing matters, without her. She might not love me yet, but I know she can. She’s just so damned stubborn.”

A familiar voice spoke from behind him. “Who you calling stubborn?”

Kaci stiffened as a chill went down her spine, and then a familiar face came into view. “Darlene!”

“Kaci!” Her older sister’s dark eyes widened as she leaned over the chair behind Leader to peer back at Kaci.

Tears choked her throat as she shook her head. “No. No, this wasn’t supposed to happen. You’re supposed to be safe on Earth. I did everything to protect you, to give you a good life.”

Darlene reached out as if to touch her. “Don’t you get it? I’m the older sister! I could never let you do this alone. I’ve been working so damned hard to find you, to make sure you’re

safe.” Her eyebrows lifted and she looked Seer up and down. “But it appears that you are.”

Kaci swallowed. “I am. I swear to you I am. The virus is better. I—I got married. I’m in love. I’m happy. But you—”

“Have been kidnapped by a psycho,” she said, narrowing her eyes at Leader. “Not to worry, he’s about to learn who’s really in charge here.”

But the way her sister stared at the man beside her, there was more than anger in her gaze. There was interest. Passion.

Kaci had never seen that look in her sister’s eyes before. “I’ll come get you...if you want to be rescued.”

Darlene hesitated.

So it’s like that, is it?

“We’re going through the portal!” Leader broke in. “Sit down in that chair before I...”

Darlene winked at her, then called out, “I love you, always and forever.”

“Always and forever!” she shouted back.

And then, the screen faded to black.

She turned to Seer with panic in her eyes. “What if she really doesn’t want him? We should find her. Help her.”

Seer tilted his head. “Are you sure she wants to be rescued?”

Kaci opened her mouth but no words came out.

Seer sat back in his chair. “What do you think? Will she enjoy a man like Leader? A stubborn, daring, adventurous know-it-all? Will she like being on the run, seeing new worlds, and constantly experiencing new things?”

The answer was easy. “Yes.”

Seer wrapped his arms around her waist. “Then let them have their fun. I, for one, would like to see what else my little mate can teach me.”

Despite the lingering confusion concerning her sister, Kaci smiled. *I can worry about that later. I have all the time in the world now, with my mate.* “Come on then, back to bed.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lacey Carter Andersen is a USA Today bestselling author who loves reading, writing, and drinking excessive amounts of coffee. She spends her days taking care of her husband, three kids, and three cats. But at night, everything changes! Her imagination runs wild with strong-willed characters, unique worlds, and exciting plots that she enthusiastically puts into stories.

Lacey has dozens of tales: science fiction romances, paranormal romances, short romances, reverse harem romances, and more. So, please feel free to dive into any of her worlds; she loves to have the company!

And you're welcome to reach out to her; she really enjoys hearing from her readers.

You can find her at:

Email: [laceycarterandersen@gmail.com](mailto:lanceycarterandersen@gmail.com)

Mailing List:

<https://www.subscribepage.com/lanceycarterandersen>

Website: <https://laceycarterandersen.net/>

Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/authorlaceycarterandersen>