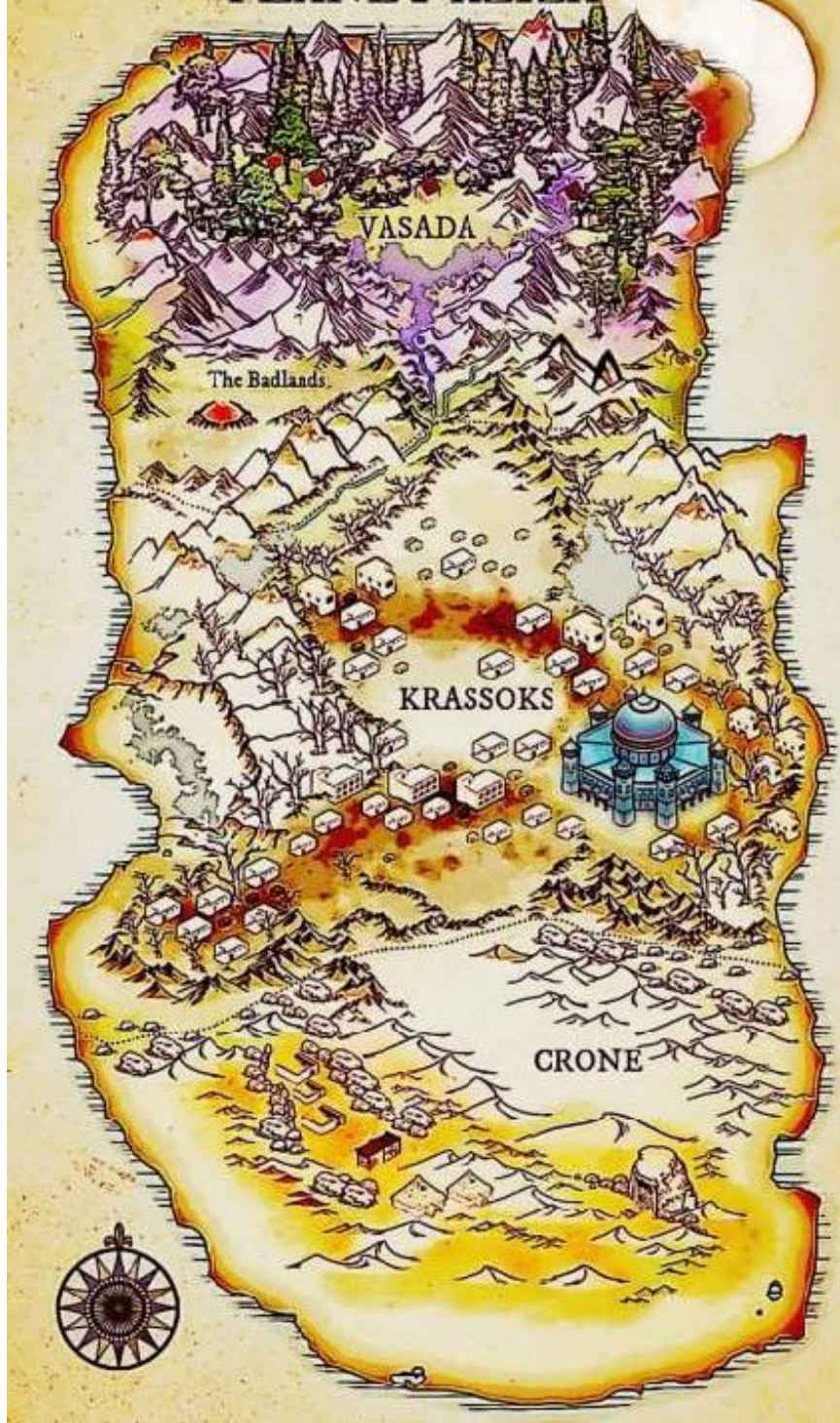




MY ALIEN  
HERO

HORNED WARRIORS BOOK 3  
LYRA STARK

# PLANET AZIZA



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## **My Alien Hero (Horned Warriors Book 3)**

*Cut off the horns, unleash the dragon.*

*Ajani*

I'm stuck in a horrible situation, and my only way out is my grumpy blue guard who offers to sneak me out of this research facility under his cloak. To do that, I'll have to wrap my arms and legs around him. As much as I want my freedom, I'm terrified to touch him, and I've been burned by his kind before. But Skoll makes me want to take crazy risks. Maybe even try something reckless like fall in love.

*Skoll*

I cut off my horns and left the seclusion of my ranch to go undercover in the Dome. The anti-mating hormone I've taken should ensure I don't bond with any of the females I'm attempting to rescue. But I'm caught unprepared when I encounter Ajani, a beautiful captive human who fears all physical contact. She's asked me to help her desensitize so she can escape. If her training doesn't kill me, fighting the bond just might.

My Alien Hero is a steamy full-length, standalone sci-fi romance featuring a reclusive alien scientist who sacrifices everything for his fated mate.

Sign up to Lyra Stark's mailing list and you'll receive the Horned Warriors Series Guidebook, deleted scenes, and hot new release updates. No spam. Only fun stuff.

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# Chapter 1 The Dehorning

*Skoll*

“What are you then, a coward?”

My laboratory companion skittered away to his crevice in the barn door.

“You can’t hide your entire life, Rasling.”

Another smack of my sledge, another explosion, and when the sparkling blue dust cleared, only a divot had appeared in my horns.

“Useless pet.” I grumbled as I packed a larger amount of compound onto the tip of my horns. Bending down to brace them on the workbench, I swung the sledge and a loud crack bounced off the wooden stalls as fire radiated in my scalp.

My legs nearly buckled as a deep male voice bellowed from behind. “What are you doing, fool?”

I braced to fight, holding the sledge ready. Two figures approached, invading my private refuge. A little blurry, but the arrogant commander of the Nivveok warriors was unmistakable with his black horns and purple scales. Next to him walked Raxteemi, a smug medic of the Horned Warrior Alliance.

“I never should’ve given you clearance through my energy shield.” I briefly recalled the first night he’d shown up at my ranch. I’d almost killed him thinking he was an intruder, and after several hours of debate, he’d convinced me to take the vow and join the Nivveoks in the fight against the Zul.

The Nivveoks were the failed experiments in the Zul’s efforts to create a “superior” race with less monstrous features, particularly horns. Vonne had promised that Nivveok like us would be the secret weapons to take down the Zul, and I signed on. It was time for me to leave my sanctuary and join the battle for justice that others were so bravely undertaking. Somewhere along the line, I’d volunteered to go undercover



inside the Dome, but that required the removal of my horns. No horns allowed inside the Zul's utopian city.

"It's an impressive invention," Vonne said, referring to the shield I'd created that protected my ranch. It magnetically repelled anything that tried to get in without permission.

"Mmm. I'm working on adding perebreum missiles so I can shoot down uninvited guests."

He smirked. "Then it's good you haven't added that feature yet, or we might have been blue dust."

"Would you like a drink?" I held up a nearly empty bottle of gravy juice.

"I'm here to help with the dehorning," Raxteemi declared.

My chuckle died in my throat. "I dehorn these beasts." I vaguely motioned to the animals in the stalls around me. "I can dehorn *myself*."

"The pain will be excruciating," Vonne offered.

"Ahh, pain. Is it any less than what the females suffer in the Dome? The pain your mate was spared?" His human mate was lucky enough to be rescued before she ended up in the hands of the Zul to be treated like a specimen in a breeding experiment. Many other females, both human and Azizdro, were not so fortunate.

Vonne growled and stepped toward me. "You're drunk and making bad decisions right now, Skoll."

"Am I? Now?" I asked, throwing my arms out wide. "As if deciding to go undercover in the Dome wasn't a fantastically stupid idea?"

"Give me the sledge." He held out a hand, palm up and glanced at the weapon that I hadn't realized I was still wielding at the commander of the Nivveok warriors.

A'write. Maybe I was making some bad choices.

I tossed the sledge, and it slid under my workbench, hitting the wall with a thunk. "Leave me alone." I turned my back on

them and tried to reconcile my thoughts through the throbbing in my head.

“You don’t have to do this. We can cancel the mission and free the females another way.” Vonne’s condescending tone raked down my spine.

I spun on him and snarled. “That will take entirely too long. He’s killing them. It’s not only a birth chamber but a death chamber.” My voice faltered.

Vonne lowered his head, his massive black horns tipping forward to acknowledge what we all knew was the sad truth. “Then allow Rax to remove your horns the proper way. Medically, surgically. Not with blexing explosives.”

“Is that an order, Commander?” I narrowed my gaze on him. I was rarely insubordinate with Vonne, but I’d had too much juice to care.

He growled and glared back at me. “Nai.”

The ground swayed beneath me, and I fell to my ass on the dirty barn floor. The bottle of gravya rolled away from me. “Unfortunately, I am too drunk to argue. Go ahead then. Do it.”

They stepped closer and four hands gripped my arms to haul me to my feet.

“Are you sure?” Raxteemi asked, ever the noble medic acting all proper and ethical.

“Aye.” Remove the horns that defined me, haunted me, ruined me. “Just take them and be done with it.”

Raxteemi nodded. “We’ll do it in your sleeping quarters.”

I stumbled out of the barn to the halls of the ranch house and then led them to my room. When my head hit the bed, the void enveloped me.

\*\*\*

My eyes slowly opened as a groan pushed up from my throat. Raxteemi moved about the room in a hazy fog. He glanced my

way, saw I was awake, and went back to whatever he was doing.

The ache in my skull dropped like a sinking weight in my gut. I reached up to feel the cruel stumps on my head. They were gone.

“I’ve removed your horns,” Raxteemi said redundantly. “The base tissue has been scraped to ensure they don’t grow back.”

Good. We couldn’t take any chances they would regrow while I was undercover. The remnants of my horns lay on a tray next to my bed. I’d carried them my entire life, and now they were debris on a table.

“When do you leave for the Dome?” Raxteemi asked.

“At sunrise.” My throat scratched as I tried to speak.

He brought me a small cup of water. “That doesn’t leave much time for healing. I’ll do what I can to accelerate the tissue regeneration, and you’ll rest as much as possible before then.”

“I can’t rest. There’s too much to be done.” I needed to finish up work on my tracking device and inject myself with the anti-mating hormone. The last thing I needed was to bond and turn into a Rage Monster while undercover.

Rax pressed a probe into my bicep. “This will allow us to track your location. We’ll have limited access to your vision and hearing.”

“A’write, but don’t reveal my cover under any circumstances. Whatever you see happening, let me handle it on my own.”

“We’ll wait for your word.” I hadn’t realized Vonne had entered the room and was now standing at the end of my bed.

“I’m going in as a guard in the laboratory.” I’d just received the news yesterday and hadn’t had a chance to tell Vonne.

His eyebrows rose. “That’ll put you right at the heart of the matter.”

“Aye. As soon as I arrive, I’ll begin to gather data about the layout and operation. I’ll need to earn the trust of the other guards.”

“I’ve heard they have orcs as guards.” Vonne took a seat in a chair against the wall.

“If so, that may work in my favor. My ranch hands are mostly orcs. Maybe I can find a clan relation and play on that. The biggest unknown is how we’ll get the pods out safely, but I’ll look for a weakness in their defenses.”

We sat in silence for a moment. It was hard to believe the day had arrived and I would be heading into the Dome tomorrow as a guard, no horns, no runes. I’d be trading my bretten and swords for their ridiculous leather suits and silver helmets that I loathed so much.

“My medical team is preparing for the pods,” Raxteemi said. “We’re learning as much as we can about the cryogenic freezing and the nanotech keeping them alive.”

I’d given him my theories about the mechanics of the gel they were encased in and the nanotech inserted in their bodies, but the truth was that we didn’t know for certain. “We’ll want to get them off the nanotech right away. It’s not good for them.”

“Aye. We’ll deal with that when we get there.” Raxteemi had packed his medical supplies and appeared ready to leave the room.

I was able to walk and led them back out to the pasture in front of the ranch. Their hoverbikes waited there for them.

“Thank you. Both of you. I shouldn’t have tried to do this alone.”

“We’re here for you when you need us,” Vonne said with a grin as he thumped his tail on the soil.

“Good luck on your mission.” Raxteemi patted my shoulder and mounted his hoverbike.

They took off, and I watched them pass through the shield before turning back to my laboratory in my barn. I still needed

to cover my runes and administer the anti-mating hormone to myself.

The dose I needed to prevent bonding was all theoretical and untested on Nivveok. I'd only used it on animals before, and even then it wasn't failproof. In the end, I had no choice. I was going into the Dome to free those females no matter what.



## Chapter 2 The Blue Guard

*Ajani*

Today, like every day, the lights came on with the morning bell, and I awoke to the holographic image of a creepy alien floating on the wall. His yellow eyes peered down at me from beneath his shiny robe like he could see all my secrets.

I avoided his gaze and rushed to the bathroom to do my business and have a good cry. It all seemed so hopeless in the mornings.

Several years ago, I went to sleep in my bed in South Africa and woke up in a cage on an alien planet. Evil trolls and orcs forced me to work in dark mines harvesting a weird blue explosive material.

That ended with some kind of battle a few months ago and since then I've been stuck in this sterile white room alone with no food and nothing to keep me sane.

I wiped my tears and changed out of my sleeping gown into the obnoxious white bodysuit they forced me to wear. At least I had clothes here and a clean room. When I was back in the mines, I had just scraps of fabric to wear and a dirt floor to sleep on. I shivered at the memory.

Back to today. To the routine that grounded me through all of this. One step at a time. I always started with morning stretches, using memories of home to keep them fresh in my mind so I didn't forget where I came from.

Standing in the center of my room with my back to the creepy alien dude, I closed my eyes, raised my arms, and took a deep breath in.

Frigid air filled my lungs.

If I forced my brain, I could almost push away the antiseptic smell and replace it with the aromas of my home on the Eastern Cape of South Africa. Warm and spicy, earthy and rich.



I was twenty-one years old then, before my abduction. My parents were dead, and I was dirt poor, but the elephant reserve had offered me a scholarship to go to their veterinary college. I had hope for my future.

As I stretched to the left, my memory conjured my little meerkat popping up on his hind legs to wish me good morning.

*Hello, Kwammanga.*

Then I imagined Ophelia, my steadfast elephant that I'd raised from a calf, poking her trunk through the window of my bungalow.

*Get out, Ophie.*

I spread my feet wide and bent at the waist to grip my ankles, pulling down until my back resisted. My long deep groan echoed off the walls.

A grunting noise caused me to open my eyes. Upside down boots filled my vision followed by thick, long legs clad in black leather, and a sharp needle and syringe held in gloved hands. I popped up and stepped back with a gasp.

A new guard stood there. His helmet, a pointed silver disk with an opaque gray shield that came down over his eyes, covered most of his head. His square jaw and muscular neck were cobalt blue. That was unusual. Most of the guards were green skinned.

He peered at me with that impassive mouth all the guards had. I was the specimen. The experiment. Not a human, not of value.

My chest heaved as I panted out harsh breaths. How long had he been standing behind me?

Without a word, the new guard came at me with the needle, and I backed up against the wall. He reached for me, and I fell into a huddled heap in the corner of my room. "No!"

My throat closed and cut off my air. So hard to breathe.

His glove scraped my arm, and I screamed, "Help!" It came out as a strangled cry.

Strong fingers wrapped around my wrist and tugged. My heart thudded like a raging bull in my chest.

He pulled me to my feet and tried to force me to stand, but my knees were jelly.

“Release her at once!” A deep voice boomed over the chaos.

The guard immediately let go, and I fell back against the wall.

“You incompetent bacrass.” Dagmar’s voice gave me something to reach for through the haze. “She feeds herself the gel. She can’t be touched.” I looked up to find him punching the guard in the neck as he scolded him. The translator chip they’d installed in my brain gave the aliens here a unique Scottish American accent. Some of the words didn’t translate, like bacrass, but I could guess its meaning based on the violent way Dagmar was attacking as he said it.

The guard didn’t fight back, just stood there unmoving as the much smaller alien punched him in a way that must’ve hurt.

Dagmar stopped and rubbed his hand as he let out a frustrated sigh. The guard bowed deeply, lowering his head subserviently despite his much larger size.

“You’re off rotations for ten moonrises. You’ll spend that time cleaning the waste disposal while you review all the cases for special circumstances. You can go now.”

The guard pivoted with his head still down. A thick blue tail swished behind him and scraped the floor as he left the room without a word. I held back my gasp seeing an alien with a reptilian tail.

Dagmar turned his attention toward me, his wrinkled brow furrowed deeply. He looked like a demon with his leathery gray skin, chartreuse eyes, and hooked chin. “Calm down. It’s over.”

I regained my footing and straightened out the white jumpsuit, my skin sweaty beneath the synthetic fabric.

“Truly, Ajani. One small touch and you fall apart? Next time just call for me.”

Was he kidding? As head of the laboratory, he hadn't seen me panic before. He'd just taken my word for it and ordered the guards not to touch me. Now he was chastising me for it instead of offering some empathy? “I called for help.”

He waved his hand across the room toward a small rectangular table that was built into the wall. “Let's move on. Sit down.” I did as he said, and he took his place opposite me. “Apart from that incident, how are you doing, elksan?”

The translator said this meant darling, and I didn't like him calling me that, but I wasn't about to speak up and correct him. Dagmar had promised to return me to Earth for my cooperation with his experiment, and I didn't have any other options, so I obeyed just like the blue guard had done.

The truth was that Dagmar was in a position of power, and we were all forced to bend. “I'm doing the best I can, but I would love to have some solid food. Something simple like a piece of fruit so that I can taste again and know that my mouth is still working. I feel like a robot when I don't eat. And I'm lonely. Do you have any kind of pets here on this planet? Even a little mouse or a bug? Something to keep me company besides my own thoughts.”

He peered down at me over his long pointed nose. “I can't give you food because it would interfere with the results of the experiment, and I can't give you a bug or a rodent because you might eat it.”

I flinched back. “I wouldn't eat a pet if you gave me one no matter how hungry I was. It would help me mentally. I've always had pets. I do better with them than people.”

He looked away, avoiding eye contact. Finally, he forced a smile and gazed at me. “I can keep you company.”

Ugh. These awkward conversations with Dagmar were so confusing. “I, uh, appreciate that.” I had to be nice to him because I didn't want him to give up on me and leave me

alone in this endless solitude. “Any news on when I can return to Earth?”

He looked away again. “It depends on many factors. You may decide you don’t want to go back.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Time on Earth passes more quickly than here on Aziza. If you go back, hundreds of years will have passed.” He leaned forward and exaggerated the words. “Your family will all be dead.”

“I didn’t have any family. I had animals, and while I’d be very sad if they were dead, I cared about my country and all the wildlife there. The elephant reserve offered me a scholarship, and I was going to train to be a vet...”

He tapped his hand quickly on the table until I stopped talking. “Och, aye. I do not care about the details on a planet as inconsequential as Earth. Aziza has forests and wildlife. Perhaps you will find a new home here.”

“Africa is a part of my soul. Aziza is my nightmare.” I had only seen Crone and this laboratory, but my time in the mines of the desert were the worst memories of my life. That evil troll kept me in a cage like a slave and forced me to dig for that blue gem that would explode without warning. “How can I not dream of the home that I loved?”

He didn’t answer. This was his chance to offer to take me out of here and show me the planet, but he said nothing.

“Please. I’ve cooperated with all your experiments. I’ve lived in isolation without solid food for I don’t know how long. I just want to go home.”

“I see.” He stood up from the table and turned his back on me. “I’ll check on those items for you.”

From his tone, I got the feeling he didn’t like my answer, and he had no intention of checking on anything for me.

As he left the room, I peeked out into the hallway and watched him walk away. Before the door closed me in again, I

caught a glimpse of a cobalt blue tail at the opposite end of the corridor.

My hands shook and my mind spun out of control. What just happened? It felt like something important had changed, yet I looked around my white room and everything was still the same.

I took a few breaths to steady myself and moved back into my yoga position. My routine was my safe place, so I picked up where I'd left off, stretching my right side with a breath in.

Kwammanga.

Ophelia.

Dagmar.

The blue guard.

The way he bowed to Dagmar and didn't utter a sound. His indifference to being struck. He revealed nothing, yet he couldn't hide the slight tension in his shoulders, a reluctance to all his movements.

When I dove forward again, I giggled at the thought of the stoic blue guard opening the door to find my backside in his face. It wasn't nice to laugh at his misfortune, but finding any humor on this godforsaken planet was a rare gift.



## Chapter 3 The Forbidden Fruit

*Skoll*

Asphyxiation. Death by strangulation. That was how I would kill Dagmar.

He dared to punch me in the throat, the only weak spot in this uniform, in front of a female specimen.

Ajani. Her name was Ajani.

He was still in her room talking to her as I hid nearby. I refrained from killing him today for the sake of my mission, but he would die at my hands for what he did.

They discussed her freedom as if it were an option, but very few females escaped the Dome anymore like they had done in the beginning. I'd never even heard of a human coming out alive. The experiment was a lifetime sentence.

I listened as she begged for solid food and a pet. She sounded so desperate, and he answered her with cold lies and twisted words. He shouldn't have been alone with her in her room. He was breaking the rules, but he ran the lab so who would stop him?

Shaking my head, I rushed to the disposal chamber. I'd been a blexing idiot. Instead of earning Dagmar's trust to gain access to the pods, I stood frozen staring at Ajani's backside and earned his ire.

I continued to curse myself as I passed through the doors leading to the disposal chamber. It appeared empty, so I headed deeper into the unlit room.

A whoosh of air zipped past my nose and a thunk to my right pulled my attention. "That's far enough." A raspy male voice spoke to me from the shadows.

I stopped and spotted an axe dug into the wall of the disposal chamber.

"Who are you?" the voice asked.



When I didn't respond, a guard stepped out of the shadows and stared me down from across the space.

He was bulky, mottled green skin, and tusks. Ah, an orc. Vonne was correct then about them working in the lab. He held another axe in his right hand. "The orcs guard this territory, and you are not an orc."

"I am not."

"So leave now." He threw another axe at my head. He was fast and skillful, but not enough to beat me.

I deflected it with my forearm, and it clattered to the floor. I stood with my feet wide, stance relaxed, arms loose by my side.

The orc withdrew two more axes from a strap around his waist.

I would not let him intimidate me with his weapons. I hadn't even seen the pods yet, and I didn't cut off my horns to be sent home by the first obstacle I encountered. "Approach me and you will find out exactly who I am."

He took three slow steps forward then lunged while swinging both arms at my shoulders. I leaned to the side and chopped my palm into his neck when he missed.

The large orc stumbled and turned on me but didn't charge.

"Perhaps you're starting to rethink this whole attacking the new guy idea."

Ragged breaths and deep growls came from his throat, his tusks jutting forward. He went low and I jumped. He swung high and I ducked.

"I am not leaving." We circled each other with slow steps. It was a measured fight, not chaotic like when I battled a beast. He was overthinking.

The next axe he threw at my head I caught by the blunt end of the blade. I tossed it to the side. I didn't need a weapon to beat him.

He bent forward and came at me lower this time. If I had my horns, I would've used them to stop him, but as it was, I had no defense. His shoulder pummeled my groin as he wrapped strong arms around my hips and forced my back to the wall.

Before I could recover, he pulled back and sunk his axe into my shoulder. I gritted through the pain as he removed the blade, turned it sideways, and pressed the handle to my throat. "You are not welcome here." His gaze turned to the blue blood seeping through the gaping hole in my uniform. "You are Nivveok?" he asked.

"I can not hide that." I tried to swipe his arms up, but his hold on my neck grew tighter.

"Have you come home to please your father?" he sneered.

His reference to the Zul as the biological father of the Nivveoks was meant to insult me, but if he were truly loyal, he wouldn't slander the Zul.

I struggled to get my response out. "I come in the name of Bazur of Eastern Krassoks." I gave him the name of my top ranch hand.

His axe lifted from my neck. "My brother?"

A grin spread across my face. "Will you listen to me now?"

"Aye." He stepped back, allowing me to walk away from the wall.

I pressed the wound in my shoulder tightly to stem the bleeding. I was not badly hurt, and it would heal quickly.

As we walked toward the waste in the disposal area, he huffed out a laugh. "You could've mentioned Bazur earlier and avoided the skirmish just now."

"Ah, but I enjoyed it. Haven't had a challenging match in eons."

"I am Gerzog." He had no tail but dipped his chin. "Chieftain of the Blackwind horde of Eastern Krassoks."

“Krath, champion arena fighter and rancher, also of Eastern Krassoks.” I stomped my tail and clicked my greeting as a sign of respect but gave him my pseudonym to be prudent.

He moved some large crates around, shuffling one closer to a fire that burned in a pit at the bottom of a disposal chute. “You went easy on me then.”

“Aye. My friend would not be happy if I killed an orc.”

He raised a large crate of waste and poured the contents into the incinerator. “Did Bazur send you?”

I copied his movements and disposed of some waste. My arm had already stopped bleeding and the pain was minimal. “Nai. I came of my own will. He’s my head ranch hand. His daughter, my house manager.” The thick sludge sizzled as it hit the flames at the bottom of the chute.

“Little Glasha?”

I chuckled. “She is not so little anymore.”

“Tell me what you know.”

“I’ve only just met you, and you attacked me thoroughly with your axe collection. I’m not sure I can trust you.”

He stopped and turned toward me. He thumped his fist over his heart. “On my brother’s honor, I give you my word you can trust me and my clan.”

I could not see his eyes through the mask, but I sensed he was honorable and trusted Bazur’s brother would not betray me. “I’m here to free the females from the lab,” I admitted.

His mouth dropped open and a wry grin showed me all of his crooked teeth. “Can you also conjure magic? You’ll need it with that fantasy.”

I laughed and picked up another crate. “Why does the lab generate so much waste?”

“Dagmar hides his failures from the Zul.” His voice became solemn.

“These are the females’ bodies?”

He nodded, but his head lowered. “And their unborn young. If testing indicates the offspring will have horns, he disposes of the entire pod.”

I paused and stared into the dark sludge in the crate. I said a small prayer to Zenas to watch over the lost souls and grant me strength to complete this mission in their honor.

As if he could sense my hardening resolve, he asked, “What do you need from me?”

“For now, foster trust between me and the orcs. Tell them I am Bazur’s friend, and I have good intentions.”

“I will do what I can.” His voice was steady and confident.

We carried on with the night’s disposal duties in silence, both of us lost in the pain of the past and the hope for the future. I asked him a few more questions about the operation of the laboratory and gathered as much intel as I could from him. I was surprised to discover the female specimens were only lightly guarded during the day.

When we were done, I asked, “Is the holding facility monitored after the night bell?”

“Nai. Dagmar doesn’t care enough to watch them that closely.”

I nodded and patted him on the shoulder. “Thank you.”

\*\*\*

I returned to my room and sat on my bed. Someone had delivered a box of food for me which was good because I had missed dinner in the commissary. Looking through the box, I found flatbread, cooked meat, fresh fruit, and cheese. Nothing fancy but it would suffice.

Eating slowly, I pondered all that had happened today. The night bell rang and the room went dark.

*Something simple like a piece of fruit.*

Why was I lucky enough to have food to eat while she was forced to subsist off of nanotech that would eventually kill her? The mesancloi in my palm was ripe and ready to eat now.

Without a second thought, I left my room and took the shortest path to Ajani's chamber. A strange magnetic pull in my chest urged me on, telling me I was doing the right thing.

Within parsecs, I was at her door.

I stood there silently, afraid to open it. Would I startle her again? This was reckless, but she'd said she wanted a piece of fruit and I had one for her.

With a deep breath, I swiped my hand over the sensor and the door opened. She was lying in her bed, and I watched her sleep for a moment. Her breaths were shallow and uneasy as the door closed behind me. I had to bend forward to avoid my helmet scraping on the ceiling. Shaking a small canister of pimariss, the room lit in pale blue, and her eyes opened.

She gasped and sat up in her bed. "What are you doing here?"

The crisp scent of water and fresh flowers hit my nose, delicate and feminine like her. I hadn't noticed it before when Dagmar was here, but now, alone with her, it was undeniably potent and uniquely hers.

"Stay back or I'll call the guards." Her voice shook as she pulled her blanket up to her neck.

I slowly raised my hand and uncurled my fingers, offering her the fruit in my flat palm.

She peered down at it. "Is that real food? It looks like a plum."

"Aye." We called it a mesancloi, but I used her word to earn her trust. "A plum."

"For me?"

"Please eat it. Quickly before we're discovered."

Her face scrunched into many shapes, and her breathing sped up. She blinked and looked around, but her eyes kept coming back to the fruit.

"Why are you doing this?" she whispered as she lowered the blanket and leaned toward me.

“You asked Dagmar for a piece of fruit.”

“I did.”

“Did he bring it?”

“No.”

“So here I am.” I placed the fruit on the small table by the wall.

Her teeth pulled on her lip for what felt like forever but was probably only a minute. Finally, she lunged and grabbed it from the table. Her nightgown flowed behind her as she crouched in the corner to eat it like a frightened animal. She gobbled down the whole thing, even the pit, and then licked her fingers. I should've brought more for her.

Her shoulders hunched as she crept back to her bed and stared at me with wide eyes. “Thank you.”

She was so fragile and trusting. I wanted to promise her more food and warn her to be careful, that she shouldn't trust Dagmar, that I was really here to save her, that he was lying to her and she was at great risk to her life, but that would jeopardize my mission and only add to her stress because she couldn't do anything to protect herself.

All I had to offer her was a plum. “Don't tell anyone you have eaten solid food.”

She shook her head. “I won't. I promise.”

I turned and swiped my hand over the sensor for the door.

“What is your name?” she asked my back as it opened.

“Krath,” I said quietly as I looked back over my shoulder, hating the lie on my tongue.

Her mouth bent down in the corners, her eyes shiny with unshed tears. “Thank you, Krath.”

I nodded and left quickly. That had gone well, but it was much too hazardous. I would not be visiting Ajani after night bell again. As much as I wanted to help her, I couldn't risk losing everything for her.





## Chapter 4 Did He Bring It?

*Ajani*

When the door opened, my heart sank. Dagmar stood outside my room again. For three nights, I'd waited for Krath to return with another plum. Only Dagmar appeared.

Ever since the blue guard incident, he had come every night before the final bell.

He didn't bring me solid food or a pet, but he stayed longer and attempted conversation with me that always ended with an awkward question about touching me.

"Are you sure that you're not ready to let me touch you?" he asked again as he sat in his usual seat at the small table in my room.

The conversation exhausted me, but the thought of letting him touch me made my heart race and not in a good way. "No. I'm not ready yet."

I didn't dare tell him that I would never be ready because then he'd leave, and I'd have no chance of getting out of here. I sat across from him and folded my hands on the table. "Have you located a small pet for me?"

"Stop asking me for such a silly thing."

I didn't feel it was silly. Locking someone up in a solid white room alone for months was pure torture. "How about a book or a video? Is there something that can occupy my mind?"

"Your time is almost up. Just be patient."

Patient? I had been more than patient with this horrific process and bizarre situation. I had no freedom, no friends. I had nothing except my yoga and my memories. And one sweet plum.

"Perhaps I could arrange some food for you if..."

"If what?"

“If you permit me to get close to you. You don’t need to fear me. The best treatment for this kind of psychosis is exposure therapy. You must experience touch and learn that it is safe.”

He reached out with a clawed hand, and I snatched mine away. He was doubling down on his requests and now adding food as a bribe. As much as I would love more solid food, I couldn’t give in to his demands.

He leaned forward, and his eyes flared as his hand curled into a fist. “I’m growing impatient with the distance between us.”

Gah! I hated this. So many times I’d been tempted to fake it and let him touch me, let him develop a relationship with me so that I could get what I want, but the fear of being touched was as real to me as any skin condition. I couldn’t just pretend it away.

But if I allowed it, if I could be strong and give him what he wanted, maybe this whole thing would be resolved. He’d eventually allow me to leave for Earth. There was also a chance that once he’d touched me, he’d claim me as his and he’d never let me leave.

Whatever the consequence, I wanted *something* to happen. It was time to call his bluff and force the issue. I had to let him touch me so that I could see if he would keep his word.

“Fine. Do it.”

“What?”

“Touch me. I’ll allow it.” I gritted my teeth and waited. It was time to pony up. The waiting game had gone on too long.

The air whooshed as he left his seat and appeared in front of me. “Better to do it fast before you have time to create more irrational fear in your mind.” His hand wrapped around my upper arm, and I squeezed my eyes shut as the burn flared from the spot. I could hear his voice in the background trying to calm me down but blackness swallowed me whole.

Then I was thirteen again. An abandoned orphan with no one to protect her except her beloved elephant.

Ophelia. My baby, my love, my life.

She lay dead in my room, her chest bleeding from a hunter's bullet wound after she valiantly tried to save me. My face grew wet, and my shoulders heaved, sobs wrenching my body.

All the grief came from that one spot on my arm where he touched me. I hated it. I loathed it. I needed it to end.

“Stop!” My cry came out breathy and weak. “Stop now,” I pleaded.

Mercifully, he let go and stepped away. “I see you're not strong enough yet, but I can wait for you.”

I opened my eyes to my stupid white walls and Dagmar staring down at me like I was some pathetic child having a tantrum. He would drag this out forever if I didn't confront him. “No more waiting, Dagmar. You said if I let you touch me you'd send me home.”

“Not if my touch makes you weep. I want you to enjoy it. It's clear you don't trust me fully.”

How could I possibly trust someone who was denying me food and keeping me in isolation? I thought back on Krath's words again. *Did he bring it?*

I wiped my face and narrowed my gaze on him. “Do you really have the ability to return me home?”

“Aye. I could arrange for safe passage back to Earth for you.”

I held my tongue. He hadn't done it yet, and his excuse that he was waiting for me to let him touch me was wearing thin. I'd tested the limits and found myself stuck again, this time with a lot less hope of ever finding a way out.

He looked down as he walked to the door. “It's time for the night bell. Sleep now, and maybe it'll be easier by the light of a new day.” He opened the door and left. I peeked out hoping to see a flash of blue, but there was nothing. After a few moments, it slid closed.

The light of a new day, huh? The only light I ever saw was the synthetic blue beams around the perimeter of my room.

I lay down on my bed and closed my eyes, taking deep breaths to calm myself after the turmoil of Dagmar's visit.

Think of home. The rays of the South African sun beating down on my skin. A brutal heat but a reliable friend that warmed the earth in the morning and left us in shadow at night.

The lights went out, and I fought back the surge of tears. Would I ever feel the sun again? Eat solid food? Perhaps Krath would bring me another plum. I wished I'd taken more time to look at it before I ate it. It wasn't exactly a plum although it was deep purple. The skin wasn't tart, and the inside tasted more like papaya. If he ever brought me another piece of fruit, I'd eat it slowly and cherish every morsel.

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I hadn't yet fallen asleep yet when the door opened to a dark figure standing there. My chest tightened, and I held my breath as he shook something that lit his massive frame in a halo of cyan.

I sat up in my bed and put my feet on the floor. His hand was fisted at his side, and my gaze locked on it, waiting to see if he'd brought me anything. He slowly raised his arm and uncurled his fingers. Two plums waited in his gloved hand.

He nodded and placed them on the table. "Go ahead, Ajani."

This time I didn't hesitate. I took the plums and bit into one right away. His mouth relaxed, but he didn't smile as he watched me. The sweet flavors burst on my tongue. Yes, definitely more like papaya than plum. So delicious.

I didn't eat the pit as the last one made my stomach hurt, but he watched as I bit into the flesh of the second plum.

"Where do you get the fruit?" I asked as I tossed the pit into my waste chute.

His lips pressed tight for a long while before he answered. “It’s supplied to me because I am a guard.”

“Why am I not allowed to eat solid food and drink?”

He looked toward the door and then his head turned back in my direction. “The injections contain fuel for a nanotech that is inside your body.” He spoke quickly like he was hesitant to share anything with me.

“There’s something inside me?”

He nodded. “They likely inserted it into your system when they brought you here.”

I disliked thinking of the fight at the mines, but I remembered other silver headed aliens poking me with something that knocked me unconscious. “I think I know when they did that. I felt weird when I woke up.”

“Aye. The nanotech is supporting your life form now. The injections keep it running, but I don’t trust it. I believe solid food is best.” He waved his hand toward the second plum that I was holding.

“Is that nanotech thing part of Dagmar’s experiment?”

He shook his head and sighed. “It’s not his experiment. He runs the laboratory, but the experiment belongs to the Zul.”

“Who is the Zul?”

He hesitated as I waited breathlessly to hear more of this story. “He is an evil despot who came to our planet and took over. He created this Dome and built this laboratory to breed what he considers to be a superior race. He’s done nothing but cause death and destruction, and now you are stuck in his trap.”

As he spoke, his voice became more stringent, his muscles tensed, and the anger coming off of him forced me to take a step back.

“Breed? This is a breeding experiment?”

“Aye. You are in the holding facility. Dagmar shields you.”

“I knew something wasn’t right here.” Krath had just validated a lot of theories I’d been thinking but wasn’t sure were true.

“I’ve said too much. I should go.” He held out a triangular piece of flatbread.

I took it and stared into his mask, trying to see behind the shield, but I could not see his eyes. “Thank you so much.” It was the first time I’d taken something directly from his hands. We didn’t touch, but we came close.

He thumped his tail on the floor quickly as he turned and left.

His energy drained from the room too as I sat in my lonely bed and finished the second plum. I squeezed the flatbread between my fingers and kneaded the dough. What he’d said explained how I’d been surviving without any food. They’d inserted something in my body that was feeding me. The injections were the fuel. But Krath knew this too, and he’d brought me solid food because he thought it was better.

His anger also signaled to me that he might be on my side. He’d called this Zul person evil, yet he was working for him here in the lab. How was Dagmar shielding me? I had so many questions. I tried not to get my hopes up that he would return the next night, but it was inevitable. My day would now revolve around waiting for his arrival.





## Chapter 5 Little Mouse

*Skoll*

My gut grew sour as I made my way to Ajani's room after the sleep bell had sounded. I'd managed to mostly stay away for the time that I'd worked in the disposal chamber, but tonight desperation finally drew me to her room.

It was dangerous, and yet she needed solid food to survive. The nanotech would slowly kill her, and she would end up in a crate full of sludge dumped into an incinerator if I didn't step in.

When I arrived at her door, I found her sitting upright in her bed. The pimaris stick illuminated the plums I brought for her as I placed them on her table.

She grabbed them quickly and began to eat. No longer nervous around me, she chewed unhurriedly. After she finished the fruit and disposed of the pits, I held out a small chunk of grilled nolug. "I brought you some meat tonight."

She eyed it cautiously but didn't pounce excitedly like she normally did. I placed it on her table, but she still didn't move to take it. "You don't like meat?"

Her lips twisted like she was thinking of how to respond. "Not under normal conditions, but nothing about this is normal. Is it?"

She reached for it but drew her hand away.

"You don't have to. I'll bring something else. I'll come back later tonight. Will you be awake for me?"

"Of course." She twisted her hands together. "I can eat the meat. Really. It's alright."

"The commissary may have synthetic proteins."

"I want to try it," she blurted as she took it from the table. Ah, she was brave tonight compared to the skittish girl I'd seen the first two times. Her blunt teeth tore off a tiny piece

and chewed it steadily. “Hmm. Not as bad as I thought it would be.”

“Our imaginations are often much worse than reality.”

“True. Sometimes.” She turned away, her long wavy hair held in a loose braid down her back. It was a rich brown, almost black. The color reminded me of the dark sands on the shores of the Gorge of Krassoks.

“I brought you one more thing.”

She spun around as she plopped the last chunk of nolug meat into her mouth. “What is it?” she said awkwardly around the food.

I reached into my pocket and withdrew the small rodent I had caught and tamed for her. I held him in my palms as he sniffed the air, likely smelling the meat she was eating.

Her eyes locked on him, and she made a noise as she swallowed the last bit of food. “Oh my,” she whispered. “It looks just like a mouse.”

*Mouse* didn’t translate directly, but if that’s what she wanted to call it, I would use her word. “Do you like him?”

“He’s adorable.”

“His fur matches the color of your hair. I thought you might be able to hide him in there.”

Her gaze moved robotically from the mouse to my eyes. “My hair... Can I?”

“Aye, take him. He’s yours.” I placed him on the floor in front of her.

“Mine?” Her voice was only a squeak. She gently took him into her hands, her shoulders held high. “Hello, little guy. What’s his name?”

“He doesn’t have one.” I shrugged. I hadn’t thought to give him a name.

“Hmm. Let me think about it. Can I tell him secrets?”

This seemed like an odd initial question, but she asked it in all sincerity. “Aye. He’s a good listener.”

She smiled with her blunt teeth showing, and I realized I hadn’t seen her look so radiant before. Her face became even more heart-shaped when she smiled, and her deep set eyes twinkled in the light. She held the mouse close to her chest then froze, her widened gaze seeking mine. “It’s not safe for him. If he gets caught, they’ll kill him.”

“Don’t worry. These kinds of rodents are stealthy. He can hide in the wall here.” I showed her how the bottom panel lifted. “Go ahead, put him in.”

Her palms closed around him in a protective sphere. “I don’t want to lose him.”

“I’ll show you how to coax him out.”

She leaned down and unfurled her hands. The mouse hopped off and scampered into the space under the panel, and I lowered it. She looked adorably concerned when I replaced the panel and he was gone.

Her lower lip puffed out. “I hope he’s okay.”

I leaned down and clicked my tongue off the roof of my mouth rapidly but quietly as I lifted the panel. The mouse emerged nose first. He saw me and jumped into my palm. I handed him a small piece of cheese, and he chattered gleefully as he held it in his tiny hands and munched on it.

Ajani began to squeak but caught herself and bit her lip. The joy on her face nearly drew a smile to mine. She’d been worried and neglected. Dagmar was toying with her head, and my simple gifts of food and a mouse brought her a moment of glee in the darkness.

I leaned back and watched her. What else might evoke such delight in her eyes? An image of my fingers tickling her stomach came unbidden to my mind or my teeth tugging on the hairs at the base of her neck. What face would she make then? How loudly could I make her cry out?

Enough, Skoll. Ajani was a victim of the Zul and a prime target of Dagmar. She was in a perilous situation, and I was

here to rescue her, not tickle her until she squealed. Although it would be fun.

No. Not here for fun. I was here for very serious reasons. Many women in both the holding facility and the birthing chamber depended on my diligence.

“I’d better go.”

“So soon? Can’t you stay just for a little bit?”

Leaving was the best thing to do. This was too careless, and my thoughts were drifting, but her dark eyes pleaded with me. She’d never asked me to stay before, and the fact that she’d drawn the courage to request what she wanted made it impossible to say no.

I sat down on the floor with my back against the wall. “For a few parsecs, but it’s not safe.”

She sat opposite me and smiled as the mouse explored up her arm and nuzzled into her hair. Indeed, I would not mind watching her smile a little longer.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Aye, lass.” It was getting to the point I’d tell her anything if she just asked.

“There were other women like me. We worked in the mines together, but there was an attack and we were brought here. I don’t know what happened to them. I’ve been so worried.”

“One of them has been rescued. The others are here. A few of them are in quarters just like this. The rest were... ” Impregnated and held in cryogenic suspended animation while being forced to gestate heirs for the Zul. Many of them were sludge now.

“Okay. Thank you for telling me.” The light in her eyes dimmed, and her smile faltered. “Can I see them? They must be so scared and lonely like me.”

The others were scared, but none of them were like her. None of them had her unique beauty and bright smile. “You can’t. Not now.”

“But maybe someday soon?”

I paused and looked her in the eye even though she could not see mine through the mask. “I’ll not make you false promises. You’ve had enough of that.”

“You mean Dagmar and his promises?”

I flinched hearing his name on her lips but nodded slightly.

“I wish I could say I didn’t get my hopes up, but I did. He’s so convincing, and he knows exactly what to say to get to me.”

“It’s wrong of him to manipulate you like he’s doing.” I was telling her too much, but we’d already crossed so many boundaries, what was a few more?

“I see that now.” She looked away as she reached up to her neck to draw the mouse down into her hands again.

“You do?”

“I tested him.” She didn’t look at me as she spoke. “I wanted to see if he would really send me home if I let him touch me.” Her shoulders came up, and she shrank back a little.

My fists clenched as I suppressed a brewing storm. “Did he hurt you?”

“No. I panicked and he let go of my arms.” She sighed. “He was frustrated. I just don’t believe he’d let me go even if I was able to be touched.”

She was confused and asking me to help her understand, so while it was risky, I decided to tell her the truth. “It’s more likely he’s just saying that because he wants to take you as his mate.”

She gasped and wrapped her arms around her middle. “I’ll never want him.”

A wave of relief rushed through me. If she chose to be with Dagmar, I couldn’t stop her. I nodded and waited to see if she would share more.

“I think he knows that so he’s coming to accept that he’ll have to force me. He probably would’ve preferred it if I chose him willingly so it would be less adversarial, but now he’s close to just taking what he wants with the knowledge that I will always hate him for it. He said my time was almost up.”

I growled at hearing my worst fears about Dagmar confirmed. He was pressuring her because he planned to take her as a mate, willingly or not. It shouldn’t have changed the way I looked at my mission, but the truth was that it affected everything. If I waited to execute my plan with the orcs, Dagmar could hurt her or sneak her away somewhere before it was time.

Nai. Just like everything from day one with Ajani, this was different. I had to protect her now before it was too late.

I hadn’t fully formed the thought before I started to speak to her. “If I could, let’s say, somehow find a way to get you out of here, would you trust me and come with me?”

Her eyes widened and she sat up with her back straight. “You’d do that for me?”

I rubbed my chin and shook my head. “Aye, lass. It appears I’d do a lot of things for you.”

“Why?” she whispered.

“I don’t know. Perhaps to assuage my guilt for frightening you that first day.” I wouldn’t tell her she resembled my mother. That would scare her, but she did. My mother was gentle and loved animals too. “You would trust me?”

“Yes. I mean it’s crazy, but my instincts are telling me that you have a kind soul even though you’re working for the Zul or whoever is doing this. I trust you a lot more than Dagmar. That’s for sure.”

“Good.” I had earned her trust. Now I needed to honor it. “Tell no one of this or the mouse.” I stood to leave and she mirrored me.

“Of course.” Her voice was high and excited, her breaths coming fast.

“We’ll talk again soon.” I placed some bits of cheese on the table for the mouse.

“Goodbye, Krath.”

I stomped my tail and left her room, my mind reeling at the promises I’d made with no plan in place at all. I would find a way to come through for her. If I didn’t, I was just as bad as Dagmar, dangling happiness in front of her without bringing it.





## Chapter 6 Except One Part

*Ajani*

My little mouse turned out to be an impressive acrobat. I was working on a headstand when he jumped and flipped, landing on the bottom of my feet.

I finished my yoga practice for the day and gave him some cheese crumbles. He made the sweetest melodic flute-like piping sounds.

Krath didn't correct me when I'd called him a mouse, but he was different in that his ears were bigger, and he had a tuft of fur on the top of his head that stood up like a mohawk. Krath had said his fur was like my hair, but only some of it was brown like mine. He had strands of purple and black. He could've also been a hamster. I didn't care what species he was exactly. I had a friend and a tiny bit of joy for the first time since I'd been abducted years ago.

As I settled into my bed to wait for Krath, he leaped to my shoulder and snuggled in behind my ear with my hair covering him. "You sure are snuggly. I'll call you Snuffeltje, my little snuggler. "

There was a kerfuffle at the door, and Snuffeltje ran to hide at the back of my neck. He became ultra silent and didn't move at all. I sat up straight, and my heart pounded.

Suddenly I was back home in the bush and poachers were attacking. I had to defend my pet at all costs. I had no weapon, but I knew some karate, and I had a will of fire when it came to defending animals. I stood and braced for a fight, hands up and stiff, prepared to chop my attacker to bits if he tried to get to my Snuffeltje.

The door opened, and I thought I might die from fear. If I had to attack, that meant I had to touch someone, and I'd immediately be weak. Luckily it was Krath standing there. His mouth was open, stance wide, and he swayed from side to side.

I lowered my hands and reached for Snuffeltje from my hair. “It’s okay. It’s just Krath.” Snuffeltje jumped into my hand and sniffed the air.

Krath paced the tiny room. He forgot to bend down, and his helmet scraped across the ceiling.

“Are you alright?”

He stopped and stared at me. “Aye, lass.” His voice was a deep snarl. “I’m a’write. Just had a wee dram of the gravya juice with the lads. They’re orcs, did ya know? The other guards? Orcs of all beings.”

“They’re evil whatever they are.” I crossed my arms and moved to sit down at the small table in my room.

“Not all of them. I have some orcs that work for me. They’re misunderstood and like a good drink.” He stumbled and fell against the wall with an “oof.”

Thinking back on my interactions with the orcs, maybe he was right. The ones at the mines were sometimes brutal, but the trolls forced them to be. Here at the lab, they’d been fair to me despite the circumstances.

“Why don’t you sit down? You seem a little unsteady.”

“That’s the truth, lassie.” He slid down the wall and landed with a thump, his tail sprawled in an awkward twist that looked like it hurt.

“So you’ve been drinking? I didn’t even know they had alcohol here.” I couldn’t see his eyes, but the blue of his jaw was a bit brighter than usual.

“We have the spirits, aye. I don’t usually overindulge, but I have an agenda you see.”

“What’s that?”

“To rescue you. I told ya.” He bent one leg and draped his arm over his knee. I hadn’t realized before, but he was kind of handsome when he relaxed.

“You mentioned it, but I didn’t think it was all that serious.”

“It’s coming together. I’ll sneak you out to my ranch. The orcs are with us, ya know. They all hate Dagmar. They can’t stand to see the females in the pods any more than I can.”

I wanted to ask about his ranch, but the pods thing struck me as odd. “What do you mean by pods?”

He ran his hands over his helmet and gave it a yank. “The pods are hideous, and yet I came from a pod. I am therefore hideous as well.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We’re all empty shells of ourselves doing things we don’t believe in, hurting females, burning the forests, killing the animals.” His voice was far away and reflective. I’d never seen him like this before. He seemed so... human.

“You’ve lost me.”

“Do not listen to me. I’m a drunken fool. I shouldn’t have come. I get these ideas sometimes. It’s the scientist in me, always seeing creative ways to solve simple problems.”

“What did you mean by *sneak me out*?”

“Soon I’ll earn a few days off-duty. I’ll hide you under my cloak, and I’ll get you out. You’ll be safe on my ranch. It’s hidden in the mountain and protected by an energy shield I designed myself. They won’t be getting past it this time.” His shoulders slumped like he was remembering something sad.

He was throwing a lot at me and the word *ranch* stood out, but there was one part that worried me. “Under your cloak?”

“Aye. You’ll cling to me. On my back. They won’t check my body on the way out, only the parcels. It could work, and then you’ll never be in a pod. I can take you to the ship if you don’t like the ranch. The human females will offer you help.” He was talking fast, slurring his words, and the Scottish accent of the translator seemed enhanced.

“I’m sorry I’m not understanding you right now. Maybe we can—”

“I have to get you out of here.” His voice dropped to a deep growl. “When I sober up, I’ll get the orcs in place, then

earn my leave, hide you under my cloak, and take you with me to the ranch.” His tone became more resolute as he detailed out his plan.

I was very curious to find out what kind of ranch he was talking about. “That all sounds wonderful except one part.”

His head snapped up. “What part do you mean?”

Even though I couldn’t see his eyes, I felt his scrutiny and looked away. “The clinging to your back part. I can’t be touched.”

His mouth dropped open, and he struggled to his feet. He stared at me for a long time. “I’d forgotten. How stupid of me.” He swirled and punched his fist into the wall.

I flinched back. “Shh. Don’t rouse the guards.”

“Blex the guards and blex this blexing place.” He threw his hands up and turned his back on me like he was heading for the door. “I’ll think of another way.”

I’d never seen this anger from him before, but it didn’t scare me. It showed me he had a real personality and he wasn’t immune to the stresses of the laboratory. I found it attractive when it wasn’t directed at me but at the situation we were both stuck in.

He stomped his tail and turned back toward me. “How is your wee mouse?”

“He’s doing well. I named him Snuffeltje.” I lifted my hair and revealed his hiding spot.

The corner of his lip lifted like a snarl. “It is a male.”

“I know that. It means little snuggler.”

The lip lift grew into an even deeper snarl with a snort behind it. “Will you remove his balls as well?”

I held back my laugh and sputtered. “What?”

“You must give him a name of strength and honor. He’s not a snuggler. He’s a hero.” His body still swayed, but his voice had softened.

“We could call him Heldmuis. Hero mouse.”

“Och, aye.” He leaned his shoulder against the wall, his arms swinging slightly, hands curled but not fully fisted. “Heldmuis is much better. You can’t call him Snuffeltje.” He shook his head and chuckled.

“Okay, Krath. He can be Heldmuis. He’s a hero. He’s much stronger than either of us thought.”

“Without doubt.” He pushed off from the wall, and I found myself smiling as he left. Even while drunk, he never invaded my personal space and didn’t even consider pressuring me to touch him. The silent acceptance of my limitation sat warmly in my tummy. I didn’t know what forces brought Krath into my life, but I would be eternally grateful for that big lug.



## Chapter 7 First Touch

*Skoll*

My head pulsed like it was in astral core meltdown mode. The ghost pain from the horn removal combined with the after effects of the gravy juice throbbed in my brain as I met with Gerzog and the orcs in the disposal chamber.

“We want perebreum,” Korben, Gerzog’s second in command, said to me.

They were drunk again, but I merely held my drink in my hand. They didn’t seem to notice I wasn’t actually imbibing it.

“How much?” I asked.

His lower lip came up around his tusks as he grunted. “Ten cylinders.”

“That’s enough to arm a small village.”

“And if we are free, we will have a village to protect again.”

Korben and Gerzog shared a look then turned to me and nodded their agreement.

Ten cylinders was a hefty load, but I could prepare it for them if it meant they’d support a rebellion. I had more than enough in the cache my uncle had left behind, and I could spare it while still protecting my shield. “I will supply the perebreum you request. High quality. Easily worked into weapons.”

Korben eyed me cautiously then nodded curtly.

“How do you plan to subvert the Duigari?” Gerzog asked. “There are too many for us to win a physical battle.”

“I haven’t worked out the details yet, but we’ll need a mighty distraction and a creative method to get the females out.”

“You are either incredibly brave or totally insane.” Korben shook his head.

“Aye, a little of both, my friend.”

The laughter we shared broke the tension of the negotiations.

I had one other issue to bring up with them based on what Ajani had told me. “Another obstacle we may encounter is the females themselves. They don’t trust the orcs, particularly the ones who were at the mines. Between now and then, do what you can so that when the time comes, they will be more likely to cooperate.”

They both nodded. I hadn’t seen them mistreating the females in the holding facility, but I didn’t know what went on in all the corners of this place, and the females likely had long memories.

“Let’s meet again in two weeks.” I stood and stomped my tail. The orcs thumped their chests with their fists and lowered their heads.

Gerzog offered up another toast, and I pretended to drink the gravya with them. As I left the room, the throbbing in my head had been replaced with a clear hope. This could work if everyone did their part and fate was on our side.

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I had some ideas I needed to run by Ajani as alternatives to hiding on my back, so shortly after the night bell rang, I made my way to her room.

As usual, she was waiting for me while sitting up in her bed as I lit the pimaric stick. She smiled, but I didn’t return her grin. “If I made a spectacle of myself last night...”

“You didn’t.” Heldmuis peeked out from her hair and chattered like he was happy to see me.

“I don’t even know what I said to you.” I’d remembered some of it, but a lot of it was a blur of her dark hair and brown skin against the white nightgown she wore, all of it bathed in hazy blue light.

“Nothing too bad. I agree that Snuffeltje wasn’t the best name for a mighty mouse.”



I groaned and covered my eyes with my palm on my helmet. “What else did I say?”

She dropped her legs over the edge of the bed, and her bare feet touched the floor. Her toes were blunt like her teeth with no claws at all that I could see. She was basically defenseless. “You said you were hideous.”

I placed two plums and some bread on the table next to her bed. “The juice draws out the truth from our souls.” I ran my hands over the helmet where my horns used to be.

“We have a saying where I come from. *The rain washes away all lies*. I feel like last night revealed a lot of truths, and the most true is that you are not hideous.”

I looked into her innocent eyes, so trusting despite all she’d been through. “There is a lot you can’t see.” This helmet and uniform, the missing horns. She didn’t even know my real name yet.

She rose from her bed and moved to the table. “I liked seeing you relaxed like that. You’re always so tense when you’re here.”

“Mmm.” Many things about Ajani made me nervous. Not only her safety but the unfamiliar feelings she stirred in my gut. Desire, jealousy, protectiveness, possessiveness.

“You said you’re making a deal with the orcs.”

I sat down at the table across from her. “Aye. I was waiting to tell you until it was more certain, but it appears the orcs are willing to work with me.”

“And you asked one other thing.” She looked at the floor and her eyelids fluttered. “You asked me to cling to your back.”

“Hmm. That wasn’t wise. I can work out another way.” That was why I was here, to offer some alternative ideas.

“Maybe I could do it.” She shrugged casually like it wasn’t a huge obstacle for her, but her hands twisted and her gaze didn’t land on me again.

“We can find another way.” I didn’t want to make her suffer by forcing her to withstand my touch.

“How would it work? If it means getting out of this place, I think I could at least try.” Her voice was weak and nothing in it convinced me, but she was asking.

“We wouldn’t have any skin-on-skin contact, but you’d have to stick close and not move.” I removed my gloves from my belt and worked them onto my hands.

She nodded quickly as she watched my claws slip into the fingers of my gloves. She swallowed loudly. “Mmm-hmm.”

“They have issued me a hoverbike with limited storage area, and they screen all the parcels, so riding on my back seemed like the best way.” I stood and showed her with my hands where she would be on my back as if I were carrying her by her thighs. “I’d cover you in my cloak, and we’d cruise past the checkpoint when I went out for my scheduled leave.” I spun around so she could imagine herself on my back with a cloak concealing her. “I’ll arrange to have an orc ally at the checkpoint at that time.”

“Let’s try it.”

I admired her bravery and optimism, but it didn’t seem practical considering how she’d reacted the first time I’d touched her. “Now?”

“Yes. We can work on it a little bit every night, and hopefully we’ll be ready before it’s time.”

“A’write.” I cleared my throat and tried to think of the best method. Now that the task was before me, my mind ran blank.

Her breathing sped up, and her round pupils dilated. I didn’t have any experience with human females, so I turned to what I knew. Animals and beasts. I’d tamed many skittish foals over the years and battled countless wild beasts that thought they could conquer me. First you had to establish dominance.

I lifted my hand toward her and made the clicking noise I’d use to train the mouse. She stared at my hand like a

terrified child. Heldmuis, however, leapt into my palm and twirled in a circle.

His antics broke some of the tension we were both suffering through. “Good job, lad.” I gave him a stroke down his back, and her gaze tracked my movement closely.

She bit her lip as I placed Heldmuis on the ground, and he ran back up to her shoulder. “Your turn.” I used a commanding voice that made it clear I expected her to obey, no objections.

She nodded quickly but stayed frozen in place like a frightened feline.

“A’write. Let’s try something else. Heldmuis, here.” I motioned to her palm, and he quickly scampered down to her fingertips. She reflexively raised her hand which closed some of the distance between us. Slowly, I lifted my hand as well. “Stay,” I told him.

He waited poised on her fingertips, enjoying our little game. “Transfer him to me.”

Her hand shook, and the little mouse had a bumpy ride, but gradually, she edged her hand closer to mine.

“Make a bridge for him.”

She shimmied infinitesimally but didn’t make that final move that would cause us to touch. “I won’t give him the command to come unless the bridge is solid.” Again, I used my stern voice, letting her know I expected her to comply with no chance of refusal.

Her teeth dug so deeply into her lip, I thought she might draw blood. She sidled a fragment closer, inhaled raggedly, and finally closed the distance. Her fingertip barely brushed the outside of my glove, but it was enough. “Come, Held.”

The mouse jumped eagerly into my palm and scampered up to my shoulder. I gave him a treat.

I smiled to praise Ajani, but she’d collapsed in her bed. Her shoulders heaved. Blex. I’d thought that was the right way, but maybe I’d been wrong. It was my first instinct to

command her to do it, but I was no better than Dagmar who'd pressured her. "Forgive me. I—"

"It's okay." She wept into her pillow. "I did it." Her voice was muffled and weak.

"Aye, lass. You did it. Good job. Just rest now. Try to eat the food I brought you." I didn't know what else to offer her. I couldn't comfort her with my touch. I was useless.

"Just leave. Leave me alone, please."

A bolt of pain seared my heart. I'd unintentionally wounded her. I would never hurt her, but she didn't know that. She'd assumed the worst. What made her think that? "Who did this to you?" I asked, low and deep.

She didn't answer. That was a question for another time when she wasn't so distraught, but I would find out the truth, and whoever it was would forever regret the day they laid hands on her.

I exited quietly, my soul heavy with guilt. I passed the hallway that would lead me to Dagmar's quarters. I wanted to kill him now for making her so fragile. I couldn't follow through on that urge, but I would always remember the sound of her weeping, the way her optimism turned to cowering sorrow. Someday soon, he would face retribution for his actions. Today was not the day, unfortunately, but I'd never forget or forgive him.



## Chapter 8 Laid Bare

*Ajani*

The following night, my muscles twitched too much to wait in my bed for Krath. Instead, I stood in the middle of my room and repeated my nighttime moon salutation.

The series of yoga poses was supposed to harness the energy of the moon and cleanse the soul. It helped you to start fresh and manifest the things you truly wanted. I wanted things to go well with Skoll so I could escape this nightmare, so I attempted to focus on that.

I hadn't seen the three moons of Aziza in a long time, but I remembered their purple and yellow splotches and felt how they grounded the planet in daytime and night. Earth's single white and gray moon was a distant memory for me now, but I still tried to envision it and draw strength from it. It existed somewhere in the universe. I just needed to find it.

By the time he'd arrived, I'd calmed my guilt and fear and was sitting on the floor with my legs crossed as I meditated on the moon.

He entered the room slowly, his gray form blending into the shadows, but I sensed him there as sure as I could feel my heart rate beginning to increase.

He shook the small canister that generated blue light and placed two plums on the table for me without saying a word.

I rose from the floor and he stepped back. I hated this awkwardness between us. "Krath..."

"Skoll."

"What?"

"My name is Skoll O'Kelleher, champion arena fighter and rancher of Eastern Vasada." He clicked his tongue in the middle and stomped his tail lightly. The whole thing was so beautiful, I had no words. I just stared at him with my mouth open.

I sputtered something that I intended to be an apology for my overreaction the night before, but he silenced me when he dropped to one knee.

His head dipped and he withdrew a small object from the belt of his uniform. He held it near his face but didn't look up. "This is my skeedu, a blade given to me by my deceased uncle. It bears my name, and it is my most valuable possession."

As I looked more closely at the object in his gloved hands, I could see it was a small knife, like a dagger. He held the handle toward me and the pointed blade toward himself.

"I give it to you so that if I ever hurt you, you may pierce my heart with it."

I gasped and took a step toward him. "What is this about?"

He lifted his head then, and I tried and failed to see his eyes through the shield. "I wish to build trust between us so that you won't fear my touch."

My heart clenched. He was so sweet. "I do trust you and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I reacted the way I did, but it's really not your fault."

"Please take it as a symbol of honesty between us." He held it out toward me. He was so tall that even on his knees, his face was at my eye level.

I took the knife from him and examined the beautiful markings carved into the handle. The blade looked worn like it had been sharpened many times. I could almost see him carving wood with it, or well, I didn't want to think of the things he had killed with it. I felt like it would be very rude of me to reject it, so I held it in my palms and brought it to my chest. "Thank you, Skoll." His real name felt foreign to say, but it also fit him in many ways.

His lips curved up at the corners, and I thought briefly that that may have been the first time I'd seen him truly smile. He walked over to the table and kept his attention on me as he sat down.

I moved to my bed and took a seat, still overwhelmed by the huge gesture he had made. “So why are you using a fake name?”

He leaned forward and placed his elbows on his knees. “I’m here undercover to free the females from the experiment.” He spoke so quietly, I barely heard him.

“Oh.” It wasn’t a total shock to me. I had gathered that he wasn’t sympathetic with Dagmar or the laboratory if he wished to get me out, but I didn’t realize he had intentions to free us all. “Are you here by yourself?” I hadn’t noticed any other new guards since he had started.

“Aye. Inside the Dome, I am the only one, but outside, I have allies. I can’t tell you more now.” He sat back in his chair like the hardest part of the discussion was over.

“Okay, well, I believe you and thank you for trusting me with that secret. I’m happy that someone is here for us. I believed I was fully alone all this time and no one cared.”

He nodded. “Hopefully soon you will see another side of Aziza. It’s not all bad.” His lips quirked in a crooked line.

Every time I saw Krath... I mean Skoll, I learned something about him that was more impressive than the last. “You’re very brave.”

“Not really. I’m far too late and hid from the truth for too long.” His voice was soft again like he was remembering something.

“And humble,” I added.

He chuckled and turned his head toward the door.

“If you’re still willing, I’d like to try again, with the touching.” I toyed with the handle of the blade he’d given me. His skeedu as he’d called it. It was solid and heavy for such a small knife. I’d keep it for now and give it back to him later.

He turned back to me. “I am still willing, but I have realized that I was wrong to think that I could tame you like a skittish animal.”

“It wasn’t your fault...”



“You’re not an animal. You’re a complex being with thoughts and emotions, and there’s no shortcut around that.”

I swallowed around the huge lump that had formed in my throat. “Okay,” I squeaked.

“So I think that before we can move forward, I must know who did this to you.”

“Um.”

“Who did this to you? Dagmar? The orcs?”

“No. I had this problem on Earth before I was abducted.”

“Tell me how it started.”

My stomach sank. “The story is too painful to relive.”

“And yet you relive it every day and suffer the pain anytime someone gets close to you.”

I nodded. “My body just reacts. It’s not even under my control.”

“What does it feel like?”

“First, it’s massive panic like something really bad is going to happen, and then when it doesn’t, it’s overwhelming grief that knocks me out and I weep uncontrollably.”

“Grief for who?”

I hadn’t thought of it that way before. I closed my eyes and imagined the pain I felt when I cried. “Grief for the girl I once was. The girl who missed out on a childhood because bad things happened.”

He leaned back and closed his eyes. “What bad things?”

“My parents were park rangers. When I was thirteen, they were killed by poachers. That left me an orphan. I stayed in the ranger station by myself. I lived with my pets. I had many, but my main companions were my elephant, Ophelia, my baboon, and my meerkat. One night the poachers, they came for me. They entered the station. They said they’d heard I was living there alone and that I was a beautiful virgin.” I shook my head as the pain welled up in my chest. It was extremely

difficult to tell this story to an alien. I didn't know anything about his culture or how he would receive it. His jaw seemed tight and his nostrils flared, but Skoll often did that.

“They attacked me. They tore my clothes off. I screamed, but there was no one nearby. No one except my elephant. She charged them. The baboon and the meerkat also fought the best they could. It was a loud commotion like a stampede.” I cupped my ears with my hands like I could still hear the stomping of angry hooves and battle cries breaking up the calm beat of cicadas in the bush. “They didn't hurt me. My elephant saved me. I was able to get to my gun and I shot the poachers, but it was too late. Ophelia was already dead.” Tears streamed down my face as I remembered the awful scene. “After that, I never felt joy again. I lived in fear, in grief, in anger for it all.”

He lowered his head, and I wondered again what he looked like under his helmet. “That must've been very painful for you.”

“It was.”

His head came back up, and I felt the heat of his stare on my cheek. “You must've been terrified, and helpless with your parents unavailable to protect you or guide you after it happened.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

He leaned forward with his elbows on the table. “You probably felt like you wanted to hide away forever and never come out so you'd never have to feel that kind of pain again.” His voice reverberated with the most compassionate tone. He wasn't judging me for my fear. He was empathizing.

“You seem like you understand it too well.”

“Maybe I do.”

“Will you tell me?” I held my breath as I waited for him to speak again.

He tapped the table a few times like he was debating whether to share with me. “I lost everything once. It was my

fault. My own hubris. So much death at my hands. After that lesson, I secluded myself at the ranch. Rarely left it.”

I wanted him to tell me more, but he stood and turned away from me. He kept his head down as he waited silently.

I left his knife in the bed as I climbed out and approached him slowly. Still he didn't move. It was like he was frozen. Then without even thinking, I reached up and put a hand on the broad expanse of his shoulders. I sucked in a sharp breath, and his shoulder dropped slightly as the pointed tip of his tail flicked once.

We stayed like that for endless minutes. The heat and strength of him emanated through his uniform. The faint smell of sandalwood wafted into my nose and reminded me of the incense I used to burn at home before I was abducted. The grief began to well up, but I was able to hold it down. Yes, I'd lost a lot of things, but so had he and he didn't break down crying. He was fighting back in an extremely brave way. Somehow laying myself bare for him had helped take the edge off of the panic and grief that had been my constant companions for most of my adult life.

He remained still, and I sensed that he was allowing me to take my time and make the next move. Eventually, the grief ebbed, but I didn't feel ready to touch him anywhere else. I lowered my hand and snatched up the fruit he'd brought me. I took it to my bed. I used the small blade to cut out a sliver of the plum.

As he slowly came back to life after being a statue for so long, he moved toward the door without looking back. “Sleep well, Ajani.” He softly patted the curve of his tail on the floor.

“Goodnight, Skoll,” I said quietly. I knew why he didn't look back. What we'd shared was very intimate, and we were basically strangers stuck in a difficult situation. He only wanted to physically rescue me, but instead I'd dragged him into my issues with my stupid fear of being touched. Haphephobia is what they called it.

He'd shared a lot of important parts of himself with me too. For the first time in a long time, I didn't feel so alone

anymore. Tonight I'd taken a small step toward curing my phobia, and that big blue alien was the unlikely reason.



## Chapter 9 Good Girl

### *Skoll*

I entered Ajani's room after the night bell. She was waiting for me as she sat up in her bed as usual. I lit the pimariss stick and placed the food on her table. I'd miss our intimate ritual when it was over but looked forward to having her out of danger.

"I've received approval of my leave for tomorrow at moonrise," I said quietly into the silence of the room.

Her eyes widened as she climbed out of her bed. "Oh wow. So soon?"

Four sessions after the first time she'd touched me, Ajani was close to ascending onto my back. She readily placed both palms on my shoulders, and was comfortable with one knee against my side.

"You can do it. Only this last bit left."

I understood why it was a challenge for her. The position would require her backside to press against my tail. She'd also have to rest her cheek on my back, and I knew the extensive touching would be a stumbling block for her.

"So, this is my last chance?" Her voice faltered.

"I fully believe in you. What can you tell yourself when you feel scared?" We'd worked out a few phrases that helped her get into the mindset.

"I'm safe with you," she said weakly.

I nodded and turned around.

"Looking forward, not back." Her voice grew stronger.

"Aye."

She settled her palms on my shoulders. "I have to be brave if I want my freedom." She hitched a knee below my hip.

"Good girl." She'd told me she liked it when I praised her, and this phrase seemed to boost her confidence. I moved my

palms into position, prepared to catch her and lift her. When she shuffled closer, her rapid heartbeat buffered my back, but she did not jump. Instead, she backed off with a whimper.

I turned to see the familiar fear in her eyes and once again, I wished to kill whoever had done this to her, but they were dead according to her. Their ghosts still remained in her mind. “What is holding you back?”

“It’s embarrassing.” Her body curled inward.

“What is it?”

She eyed her bed like she wished to hide.

“Is there honesty between us?” I asked her.

“Yes.”

“Then tell me.” I tried to avoid commanding her, but we had little time to solve this problem if we were to execute the plan tomorrow.

“I know this is for the escape, but I’m worried that maybe... we’ll cross a line when I jump.” Her voice grew quiet again.

“What kind of line?” She was speaking in riddles and I needed her to just say it.

“A line where we’re not just allies but male and female and there might be... feelings between us that could be misconstrued as other things.” Her features twisted in a slightly different way than when she was scared. This was more timid.

I leaned forward, trying to read her, but she’d stumped me. “I only wish for you to cling to my back so that you may be free. I see no feelings.”

She shook her head and avoided my gaze. “Maybe it’s just hormones.”

*Male and female hormones. Zenas.* How could I have been so clueless? “I see.”

I took a step away from her to ease her worries. She laughed awkwardly, and I took a moment to figure out how to

address this sensitive topic. “Ajani, you are obviously an attractive female.”

She huffed a laugh and turned her gaze to the floor.

“I have seen the way Dagmar reacts to you. He objectifies you. Disregarding your fears for his own selfish reasons. The poachers who attacked you admitted to being there to claim a piece of your beauty that was not theirs to take. You’ve been mistreated by trolls and orcs on this planet, but I can only give you my word and show with my actions that I am different.”

She nodded quickly. I believed in her heart she knew it was true, but her body was trained to be frightened of males and their carnality.

“As far as hormones go, mine are suppressed. I have taken a formula that would stop my need to rut.”

Her eyes grew wide and her lips dropped open in a small pout. She was indeed a stunning female, but I refused to focus on that when we had much more important things to worry about.

“It’s a treatment we use on the ranch to prevent the livestock bulls from attacking the heifers, but it seems to have worked for me as I am simply a bull at heart.”

Her shoulders relaxed with her grin, and I offered her a wry smile back.

“So are you ready to jump on this bull’s back to save your life?”

“I am.” She pulled her shoulders back and peered up at me.

“Let’s do it then.” I turned and lowered my arms, palms prepared to catch her. “Get ready... and...”

She took a deep breath and blew it out quickly.

“Go.”

After two quick steps, she leapt onto my back. Her knees clamped on, hands gripped my shoulders, and I didn’t even need to support her.

“Good girl. So proud of you.”



“I did it!”

“I knew you could.”

“Oh my God.” Her laughter in my ear was a joyous sound.

“How are you feeling?” I turned my head to catch a glimpse of her smile over my shoulder.

“I’m so excited, I forgot to be nervous.”

I could not see her lips from this angle, but her eyes sparkled. “Excellent. Try tucking your head, and I’ll fit the cloak.”

She rearranged her position, her knees sliding up and down my sides.

“Settle in on my tail.”

She let out a small gasp as her rump landed on the base of my tail. I grinned at the contact. It felt good. It felt right.

I’d carried Glasha on my back before when she was younger and had many beasts attack from behind, but I’d never had an adult female cling to me like this. Light and fragile, trusting yet fearful. Her nightgown hung loosely around her, but in this position, new scents found their way into my nose. Sweet and feminine, warm and spicy. And the heat. Good Zenas, the heat from her core on the base of my tail. The way her breasts flattened against the fabric of my uniform.

For the first time in our training exercises, my cock grew hard. It had pulsed and twitched every time she’d touched me, but this drew a fully potent involuntary reaction.

I cleared my throat and focused on the danger. I’d promised not to sexualize this, and we had to get it right or we’d both end up dead. The thought of my arousal getting her killed drained the vigor from my cock.

She’d overcome a huge hurdle and needed reassurance from me now. “Very good.” I swung the thick cloak around and adjusted it in the mirror. “Tuck your head in further and slide down as low as you can.”

She wiggled around on my back a little bit more, and we found a position that worked well for her to sit. The cloak draped smoothly from my neck past my hips. She was invisible.

I arched my tail into a curve and pressed it against her back. She remained calm, and her heart tapped out a steady beat. “This could work, Ajani. I can’t even see you there.”

“Really?” Her muffled voice came from under the cloak. “They won’t check under here?”

“The orcs will help us.” I had solidified my alliance with the orcs over the past weeks and would make sure they had someone stationed at the exit we planned to use tomorrow.

I moved around the room, testing the cloak at various angles and body positions. It was very thick and covered her sufficiently. She held on like she was meant to be there. “You’re shockingly strong and agile.”

“I’ve been doing nothing but yoga in this room for months.”

“You mean the bending over position?” The vivid image of her backside the first night filled my mind, and my cock twitched again.

She laughed. “That’s one way to describe it.”

“Just keep your knees bent. If you’re feeling insecure, tap your fingers on my sides. I can grab on with my hands if necessary, but mostly I’ll be using my tail to hold you in place.”

“Okay.”

“Can you stay like this for a good while?”

“I think so.”

“My ranch isn’t too far north of the Dome.”

“I’m excited to see it. Especially the animals.”

“They’ll be happy to have a visitor.” I continued walking around the room getting used to the feel of her pressed to me

like a baby clinging to her mother's back. "You'll meet Bazur and Glasha, a few other ranch hands."

"Sounds nice. I can't wait to talk freely with someone again besides you, of course, but you know what I mean."

"I do." I made some sudden movements, testing to see if she tightened her grip, and she did. The position provided more stability than I'd expected.

"I think you're ready."

A tiny squeak came from under the cloak, but it wasn't from her. It was Heldmuis. "You stay quiet too, Held, or you're not coming with us."

"He'll behave. I promise."

"I'm going to set you down now." She straightened her legs, and I lowered her to the floor. Her hair was messed, and Heldmuis scampered onto her shoulder to shake it all off. "You both did really well."

"Thank you so much for being patient with me." Her chest heaved and she smiled up at me. This was absolutely the right thing to do. She was too precious to be lost to Dagmar or the experiment.

"You did it yourself, Ajani. You're quite brave."

"Not as brave as you but thank you." She looked down and smoothed out her nightgown.

"I've arranged to be your guard tomorrow. We'll do it after evening check in."

She nodded.

"Sleep well. This is your last night as a specimen. Soon you'll be free."

She took a plum from the table and withdrew my skeedu from beneath her bed. She climbed in and smiled as she cut out a slice. I left her room with a palpable lightness of heart I had never known before.



## Chapter 10 Chase the Sun

*Ajani*

My thoughts buzzed like a swarm of honey bees as I ran through my daily yoga routine. Everything came down to this. My body and mind needed to be strong, and I would be tested on all the work I'd done. I imagined the power of the sun and moon fueling my muscles and giving me courage.

When the time for check-in finally arrived, my stomach lurched as I attached Skoll's small blade to my chest and concealed it between my breasts. This was terrifying, but I had to be brave for him. He had risked so much to rescue me, and this was my chance to prove myself worthy of his efforts.

The door opened, and I held my breath, expecting to see Skoll with his cloak in hand. I was fully prepared to jump on his back and get the heck out of this place. Instead, I stood face-to-fang with Dagmar.

His yellow-green gaze with slitted pupils peered down at me like a predator who had spotted his dinner. I stepped back, my throat clogged.

The needle and syringe dangled from his fingers. "Ajani, how is my lovely lass tonight? I brought your injection, and thought we could spend some time together."

I swallowed and tried to compose myself. It was supposed to be Skoll. We were supposed to escape! This was all wrong. Now I was stuck indefinitely with Dagmar and whatever plans he had. He'd left me mostly alone the last few weeks, but he still came to my room and hinted that I should loosen up and allow him to touch me. He seemed different tonight, more focused like he was on a mission.

"Uh, I'm actually not feeling well, and I'd really just like to be alone in my room."

"Take your injection and you'll be fine." He placed the needle on the table, and I picked it up like nothing was amiss, but this was so suspicious. He'd never brought me the

injection himself. It was always a guard. I pretended to fumble with the needle to buy myself some time. Then I had a fake coughing fit and turned away from him.

“Just take it already,” he said.

I was patting my chest, pretending to gasp for air when the door opened again. Skoll stood there, tall and foreboding. I caught a glimpse of the tightness that passed through his mouth and neck before he recovered.

“Dagmar.” He bowed. “I am assigned to this room tonight.”

“Aye, well, as you can see, I’ve already checked in with the specimen. You’re dismissed.” He paused and inspected Skoll from head to toe. “Why do you have a cloak and a bag?”

”This is my last check in then I’m off-duty.”

He scrutinized him a breath longer. “You can leave now.” He waved his hand to shoo him away.

When Skoll didn’t move, he said, “Off you go, now. I’ll handle her.”

I felt Skoll’s cool gaze scan my body, and a muscle in his jaw flexed, but other than that, I couldn’t see any reaction. He was good at hiding things.

As he left, I stared longingly at his cloak. How I wished I was under there leaving with him instead of dancing around the issues with Dagmar.

The door remained open as Dagmar turned to me. “I’ve decided it’s time for you to leave your room. I’ll take you to my chambers. A change of scenery might help shape your perspective.”

“I’m really not comfortable...”

“It’s time for you to try something new.” He stood by the door with an arrogant grin on his wrinkled face. “We’ll do the injection there.” This was all very strange. I hadn’t been out of this room in months, and now he wanted me to leave and give me an injection in his room? I had no choice. Dagmar ran this place, so when he stalked down the corridor, I followed.

My heart shrank as we walked deep into the bowels of the facility and farther away from Skoll. Would he really leave without me like Dagmar had instructed him to do?

We passed an expansive open area with big black double doors. My room was all white, so the sudden change to black surprised me. “What’s in there?”

“Another part of the laboratory.”

“What exactly are you studying?”

He waved his hand over his shoulder. “Nothing really. Just the best ways to keep you healthy and living a long life.”

“And this is all yours?”

“Aye.”

Now I knew for sure he was lying. Skoll had told me there were breeding experiments being run by someone called the Zul. I had a feeling the pods he’d mentioned were in there, and I hated that Dagmar was being deceptive while pretending to be my ally at the same time.

The biggest shock of all hit me when we entered his room. Furniture filled every corner including a massive bed sitting atop an ornate golden frame. Mirrors covered all the walls. The garish and ostentatious display seemed completely inappropriate for a laboratory director. “This is... nice.”

“Thank you. I like having a relaxing place to retire to after a long day of work in the lab.”

A long day of treating women like lab rats and then he comes in here and relaxes? Ugh. How disgusting. I couldn’t believe I’d ever doubted my instincts. It took Skoll’s confirmation for me to realize how much danger I was truly in here.

“Come sit. I’ve decided to let you have something to drink.” He poured a clear liquid into a tiny glass, and I took a seat at his god awful table with its fancy golden swirled tabletop.

I sniffed the drink and pretended to sip it, but I didn’t trust him not to slip me something that would haze my judgment. I

needed to play it smart until I figured out a way to get back to Skoll. “What’s going on, Dagmar? This all seems out of the ordinary.” He’d never bent any rules before and tonight he’d already broken the two biggest ones.

“You’re special, Ajani.”

I had to fight to keep from rolling my eyes. I knew he wouldn’t tell me the truth.

“There’s something about you, and the fact you don’t want me to touch you confounds me. Is the thought of me really that abhorrent to you?”

I groaned inwardly. He always came back to this same question. It was like a personal challenge to him. “It’s not you. I’ve been this way for a long time.”

“What if I told you if you let me touch you, you can leave your room for good? You could stay here with me in my room. I’ll get you out of the experiment program, and you’ll live here as my mate. You’ll be highly regarded and you’ll have anything you need. All the finest meals and fabrics. I’ll even allow you to have a pet as long as it’s small and quiet and it doesn’t leave any mess.”

I’d left Heldmuis back in the room. Would I ever see him again? If Dagmar forced me to move into this room, he certainly wouldn’t allow me to keep a mouse.

“Drink more.”

“No, really. I’m fine.”

“Drink more now. You begged for food, and I’ve given you this gift.”

I took a dainty sip and touched the liquid to my lips. It tasted like liquid fire, and I knew I’d be drunk if I swallowed any more of it. I smiled at him. “Yum.”

“Now come to the bed and lie down.” He unfastened his shirt and exposed his wrinkled gray chest to me. I immediately thought of Skoll and the huge muscles beneath his uniform. They were complete opposites.

“I’ll stay right here.”



He stood quickly and growled through gritted teeth. “You’ll lay in the bed, Ajani. I’m offering you a chance to get out of the bree—the experiment, and I think you’d be wise to take it.” He picked up the syringe like a weapon and stalked toward me.

My stomach twisted. This was it. He’d reached his limit and he was done waiting for me.

His leathery hand wrapped around my wrist and threw me to the bed. I fell on my back as he climbed up over me. The syringe waved in and out of my vision as we struggled.

“No! Get away from me.” I kicked and tried to make contact with his balls, but he was too strong.

The blade. I had a weapon strapped to my chest thanks to Skoll. I stopped fighting and lay flat.

He grinned like he’d won and brought the needle down to my arm. My other hand was slowly creeping up my side to reach the blade. I was interrupted by a high-pitched siren. We both froze as the blaring sound filled the room and pierced our ears.

“Blex!” He dropped the needle, crawled off the bed, and started to fix his clothes.

I scampered away and pressed against the wall.

He moved to the exit. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

I nodded quickly, but I had no intention of staying there.

As soon as he left, I ran to the door, but I bumped into a big wall of leather wrapped around the massive chest of a blue alien.

Skoll checked me over quickly and then turned around, holding his cape aside “Hop on.”

I didn’t hesitate. Like we’d practiced, I jumped up and locked my knees by his hips. My hands gripped his shoulders, and the thick cape fell around me like a blanket.

He grunted what sounded like approval as he took off running. I squeezed my knees tight and held on for my life. I

sensed that he was keeping his motions fluid while also trying to be fast because he didn't jostle me too much. He stopped running, and I heard him rustling some items before he swung a leg over and bent forward. The hoverbike, I assumed.

It hummed beneath us, and weightlessness made me dizzy as we rose straight up into the air. We hadn't practiced how gravity would make my stomach sink when we accelerated or turned tightly, but I held my reaction in and didn't make any sounds.

I really needed some reassurance from him that I had done well, but I knew he wouldn't risk getting caught. He completely ignored me on his back which was wise and professional but also made me worry that I had messed it up somehow.

The humming of the bike slowed as we passed what I assumed was the checkpoint. I hunkered down and became completely motionless. Skoll exchanged some words with someone and then we were off again.

Sunlight poked through the bottom of the cloak as his tail pressed to my back to hold me solidly.

Skoll remained painfully quiet for a long time then finally, his shoulders relaxed, his head turned back, and he said, "Good job, lass. We did it."

I smiled and squealed with joy. "Oh my God."

"You did so well. Good girl."

"No problem at the exit?" My breath was coming fast, my voice high from the thrill.

"The orcs came through and let us pass." I could hear the smile in his voice as he kept his gaze in front of us.

"How much longer?" I was holding my emotions in pretty well, but anxiety was quickly morphing to sadness, and I worried I'd lose control and start weeping on his leather-clad back.

"Not too long. We'll be there before moonrise."

I didn't know exactly what that meant, but I knew we'd left the Dome in the evening before the night bell so perhaps we'd be there before darkness fell.

"Can you manage?" he asked.

I clung to him more tightly. "I can manage."

As I peeked through a small opening in the cloak, I noticed that we were heading toward the sun.

"You're like Sköll," I said to him.

"I am Skoll," he replied.

"A different Sköll. From Norse mythology. He was a giant white wolf who chased the sun."

He chuckled. "I don't know of this myth you speak of, but I agree, I am Sköll chasing the sun right now." His back straightened, and his chest expanded like he was letting out a long sigh he'd been holding in.

I smiled and settled my cheek between his strong shoulders. I was free from the Dome, free from Dagmar, and safe for the first time in a long time. My heart soared like Skoll and I on his hoverbike.



# Chapter 11 I Am Not Your Friend

*Skoll*

Early celebrations often proved to be a fool's mistake, but as we flew over the burnt out tree stumps of the Krassokdro forests, I became more and more confident that we had not been found out.

Ajani began to fidget against my back, perhaps sensing we were getting closer to our destination.

"You can look now," I told her. She had followed my instructions well so far, but she most likely wanted to see more of the planet she'd been on for years.

The cloak shifted, and a small gasp drifted over my shoulder. "Why is it all black?"

"The Zul had the forests destroyed. First cut down then burned." Guilt for my part in their destruction simmered in my gut, but that was a story for another time. "It forced many species to rely on him and move into the Dome."

"But you didn't go?"

"Nai." I didn't go. Instead I hid on my uncle's ranch while my planet suffered.

As we climbed in elevation, the purple and silver canopy of Vasada came into view on the horizon. "What's that?"

"The Vasada forests still stand. The Zul fears the graymaw."

"Oh well, that's good."

Aye. It was ironic the beast we'd almost hunted to extinction ended up being the one to save the northern part of the planet.

We descended through the trees and landed at the base of the mountain near a cave I used to stockpile weapons and supplies. I dismounted the bike, and she climbed off behind me on her own. I wanted to help her but decided against it.

She'd only allowed my touch to facilitate her escape, and I was already mourning the loss of her heat at my back.

“What’s this place?” Her eyes focused on the moss near the opening to the den, but they grew wide when I brushed away some branches and revealed the entrance.

“This is where the Duigari think I live. I’ll leave their bike here so they can’t track us.” I entered first and wanted to lift her up into the cave, but held back. Now that she was free, I had no excuse to touch her anymore.

“Smart.” She climbed up easily on her own and stood next to me. She stretched her limbs as she looked around.

My gaze locked on her tight white pants and the way her curved backside tensed and pulled. That plump part of her had been sitting and bouncing on my tail for most of the day. I shook off the memory of how good it felt and focused on the back of the cave where I had my hoverbike stored.

A stack of items blocked my access to the bike. That was odd because I usually kept this cave tidy, and I didn’t remember leaving a mess the last time I was here. Gerzog knew the location of the cave, but he wouldn’t fill it with junk.

I started to move things aside. Weapons I’d never seen before, food waste. The stench of urine hit my nose. I sensed movement outside the cave.

“Ajani, hide under this.” I removed my cloak and wrapped it over her shoulders. “Sit here.” I motioned to a spot behind some crates that would conceal her.

“Why? What’s wrong?” She pulled the cloak up over her head and scooted into the corner.

“We’re not alone. Keep quiet,” I whispered.

She nodded and curled into herself, making her profile tiny and well hidden. Her bending exercises came in useful again.

I drew my laser blaster and leapt out of the entrance to the cave. Three cloaked figures approached and peered at me with glowing red eyes. They lowered the tops of their cloaks to reveal the exposed exoskeleton of their spherical heads with

elongated noses and sharp, protruding fangs. Phukas. The pirates of Crone. Vonne had run into them in Krassoks too. They had possession of his mate at first, and he believed they had abducted her from Earth.

“You block the entrance to our den?” The nasally voice of the tallest among them spoke.

“This is my den,” I replied and stomped my tail. “Krath, Duigari Guard of Eastern Krassoks.” I gave them a respectful click, but it was strained.

They didn’t reply with a formal introduction. Instead one of them asked, “What is that smell?”

“Leave now.” I gripped my blaster tight, prepared to shoot it at the phukas who was clearly enjoying Ajani’s scent by the way his mouth opened and he wandered closer to the entrance.

“It smells like a human,” the third one added and took a stunted step forward, as if he were transfixed by her too.

A harsh growl rumbled through my chest. “You disobey a Duigari guard? I order you to leave now.” I gave them one last chance before I killed them.

“It smells female. The Zul keeps all the human females inside the Dome. Why do you have one here?” The phukas were a very inquisitive and unprincipled species. It was these traits that made them successful pirates. The humans peaked their interest, and they had no qualms about abducting them to trade for favors with the Zul.

“Does she have large breasts?” The tallest one took a step to my left, and I shot him in the foot. Bad move, phukas. You’ll go nowhere near her.

He yelped as his cloak dropped to the ground. “A’write, friend. Was just curious.” I’d lost sight of him, but his disembodied voice came from my right side. I’d forgotten they had exceptional camouflage skills. I could darken my skin at night, but they could become fully invisible even in the daylight.

The other two phukas dropped their cloaks and turned invisible with sniveling laughter.

“I am not your friend.” I spoke in the direction of the rustling brush, but they’d split up.

I braced and closed my eyes, listening for movement around me, but they were too fast to track.

A sharp thud hit my wrist, and my blaster fell to the ground. “Blex!” I reached for it, and it went flying. Knowing he must’ve kicked it, I swiped out and grabbed one of his spindly legs. He fell to his back, and his body reappeared.

“Ha. Got you. Don’t mess with a guard, phukas.” I’d never fought phukas before, but I’d heard tales in the arena of how to beat them. Their heads were strong because of the exoskeleton, but their necks were weak and barely supported the bulbous cranium. If I could get my hand in there... I climbed up over him as he attempted to kick me off. I worked my hand into the space between the skull and the body and wrapped my fingers around his neck. It snapped with a gratifying pop. His heavy head rolled away, eyes opened wide, and poisonous red venom flowed from his fangs. I jumped off of him, careful not to get the poison on my scales.

Behind me, a rustling came from inside the cave. Where were the other two? Ajani screamed, and I leapt back in through the entrance. She was on her knees, struggling to pull her arms free from the invisible phukas that held her.

The panic in her eyes sent a bolt of pure fury through my soul that flared into a firestorm. With a feral growl, I whirled my legs in furious kicks where I estimated the one on her left would be. The third kick made contact with something, and he went flying backwards into the piles of junk stored in the cave.

He materialized, and his massive head wobbled back. With my hands, I followed Ajani’s arm until I found the one on her right side. He squealed and something sharp penetrated my forearm.

“Och! You blexing driffsek.” My arm burned, but I found his neck and squeezed tight until his bones dissolved in my hands. His head fell off and plopped to the ground as I dropped his dying body.



The one on the pile of junk recovered and turned invisible again as he tried to run past me, but I swung my arm out and knocked him down hard, forcing him to materialize again.

I stomped toward him and landed my boot firmly on his neck, snapping it in half as his head rolled toward Ajani, red venom spewing from his mouth. I grabbed it before it could hurt her and tossed it to the back of the cave.

Two dead phukas and their round skulls lay strewn on the ground. The third one was still outside.

Ajani sat on her knees as she heaved for breath.

“Are you a’write, lass?” I offered her my hand, but she didn’t take it.

Instead she climbed to her feet and brushed off her white suit. “I’m fine. I’m okay. Are you okay?”

“Aye, just a bite on my arm I’ll need to treat.” The wound stung, but we weren’t far from the ranch, and the healing wand would eliminate the venom from my body. “I’m impressed how well you handled that.”

She swayed as she smoothed her hair. “Was nothing. I got this. I got this.”

I had to laugh at her obvious lie. She was terrified and trying to hide it. “I have to dispose of the bodies,” I told her.

“You go,” she said breathlessly, waving her hand as she stared down at the lifeless head at her feet. “I got this.”

I chuckled as I stacked the two phukas bodies together. “Don’t touch the venom.”

“I’m not touching nothing.”

I laughed and carried my load out to the side of the cave. When I returned for the heads, her breathing had calmed, but she was staring in shock at the venom dripping from the mouth of the severed phukas head. “Don’t look at it.” I grabbed an old tarp from the pile of junk and wrapped it around the head she’d been staring at. “I should’ve taken the heads out first.”

“Then I’d be alone with the bodies.”

“True. You can wait outside the cave.”

“There’s a dead one out there too.” She pointed sharply toward the entrance, and I had to laugh at the tone of her voice.

“Close yer eyes, lass. I’m almost done.”

She did as I said, and I collected the three heads, careful not to touch the venom.

I dug a hole in the ground and dumped all the body parts into it. With my blaster, I charred it to rancid ash. Once they were fully disintegrated, I covered them in heavy layers of peat.

I returned to the cave and found her with her eyes still closed. “Good girl. You can open them now.”

Her lids slowly raised, and she stared at me with awe in her soulful brown gaze. She couldn’t see mine through the helmet shield, but that was good. The heat there would embarrass us both. She looked absolutely breathtaking standing in my cave after bravely facing down three phukas. I wanted to touch her, comfort her, caress her hair. But I couldn’t do any of that, so I just said, “Let’s get going. The ranch awaits.”



## Chapter 12 The Ranch

*Skoll*

“You ready, lass?” I asked her as I hauled my own bike out of the cave and mounted it. The familiar humming eased the tension from the battle with the phukas, and I was eager to leave the golden Duigari bike behind.

“Uh, sure.” She shook her head and climbed out of the cave.

“Hop on.” I sat still and watched her move in a way that was comfortable for her. She resumed her position behind me, climbing up over my tail.

“You don’t have to sit on my tail anymore.” I wiggled it beneath her, and she raised a hip so I could slide it out. Her backside was now firmly planted on the bike, and she only had to touch me enough to hold on. “No more cloak either.”

She pressed her chest to the cloak that lay flat against my back. “This is nice.” She sighed.

Her heart pittered, and I enjoyed the warmth from her body that seeped through the cloak. “It is. Good job.” I was truly proud of how well she was handling all of the physical contact especially after the scare with the phukas.

We left the den, and I guided the hoverbike straight toward the center of the mountain. To her, it would look like we were about to crash. “Skoll!” Her panicked cry made me smile as we flew through the holographic shield easily.

“Oh my God. This is amazing!”

The ranch was carved into a sloping plateau on the side of the mountain. I looked at it for the first time through someone else’s eyes. I didn’t know what Earth looked like, but I imagined they didn’t have anything as beautiful as my ranch.

My uncle had constructed it by cutting a huge triangular wedge out of the side of the mountain and shaping the inside to create a sprawling ranch with pastures, stables, crops, and

living quarters. Everything revolved around a waterfall that cascaded down the back face.

The mountain itself provided protection from above, and it felt like a secluded oasis amidst the loss and destruction of Krassoks. Because it was so close to the boundary with Vasada, the north-facing side received lots of sun and fresh air.

As we landed, the landscape came to life. Creatures that had been peacefully milling about began running toward us. For a moment, I worried she'd be frightened, but I turned to check on her, and she wore a giant smile on her face.

A pack of herding caneens bounded toward us, and all the livestock gathered at the limits of their corrals.

She quickly climbed from my back and opened her arms for the approaching horde. "Come here, babies."

I suppressed an automatic urge to protect her as she reached out and touched each one of them without fear. Ajani could not wait to put her hands on their heads, feel the fur, pat their flanks. "Hello, hello. You look just like dogs. Oh my gosh." She greeted them like old friends. They were more than happy to lick her fingers and face and sniff her everywhere.

The female who'd taken ages to work her way up to climbing on my back was now on her knees being licked up by at least five herding "dogs" as she called them.

An unfamiliar twang in my gut had me frozen on the bike. She was so easy with them, so open and loving, but with me, the fear always surrounded her like a barrier.

Maybe I didn't wish to share my ranch with her after all. The more people who knew about it, the more vulnerable it became. I removed my gloves roughly and smacked them onto the seat of the bike. The material was already cooling, mourning the loss of her lush curves.

Enough. I would not be jealous of the herding animals on my ranch. If she enjoyed them, then I was happy that she had found some pleasure after the sadness of her confinement in the Dome. The caneens seemed to recognize me once I'd taken

off my gloves, and they rushed to greet me as well. I petted them dutifully. Unfaithful mutts.

Ajani took a deep breath as she looked around. The sun had descended below the cliff of the mountain, and O’Kelleher Ranch was cast in a soft lavender glow. The evening plants were letting off their signature scent, and the animals grew quiet as they settled in for the night.

“This is the main house. We call it the Queen’s House.” I motioned to the giant wooden structure that glistened in the sunset. The renovations I’d made had returned its previous glory. It was even more impressive now, I might say. “Over there’s the Family House where the workers stay. There’s the front pasture, the barn. Back pasture’s over by the waterfall.”

But Ajani only had eyes for the pen of goolchex off to the side. “Those look a lot like goats.” She started running toward them. I sprinted behind her, afraid to let her get too far away on her own. She stuck her hand in the pen, and I had to force myself to hold back from stopping her. The ever hungry goolchex, or goats, as she called them, chomped on her fingers. “Ouch!” She laughed and pulled her hand out. “Nippy little things.”

Of course the goolchex could touch her but not me.

“We call them goolchex, but goats is acceptable too if it’s easier for you.”

“Okay. Goolchex. And the dogs?”

“Caneens.”

“Caneens. I think I’ll just call them goats and dogs. It feels more familiar. What other animals do you have?” She craned her neck to look around.

“Bucnag is the main livestock we raise and sell for meat.”

“Like cows?” I thought her neck might break with how hard she was straining to see into the adjacent corral.

“I suppose. We have nolug, shakturs, and polans in the barn. That’s all the domestic species. I have an exotic collection too. I’ll show you later.” We’d just been on a long

ride after a dangerous escape. I had a wound to tend to, and I could not wait any longer to get this wretched helmet off my head.

“Can I see them now? I want to meet the whole family.”

I smiled because the animals were like family to me too, but there would be time for introductions later. First she had to meet the more sentient members on the ranch.

Bazur and Glasha had witnessed our landing and made their way toward us. “This is Bazur, orc of Eastern Vasada, and my ranch manager, and his daughter, Glasha. She is the house manager and head chef.” I stomped my tail, but the orcs did not have tails, so they grunted and nodded curtly. I added many clicks to show my respect.

Their eyes came to mine, and they squinted to see through the mask of my helmet. They were obviously hiding their shock that I had brought someone home to the ranch. I had never done anything like this before apart from allowing the Nivveok to visit. Seeing me in the helmet and uniform, without my signature horns, likely disturbed them as well. I had not had a chance to say goodbye to them when I’d left for the Dome, so they hadn’t seen me in the garb yet. Glasha’s gaze flitted from the injury on my arm to my mask.

“This is Ajani, a human from South Africa on Earth.” I continued with the introductions as if it were completely normal for me to bring a human female or anyone to the ranch. “She was the daughter of brave park rangers and has grown up around animals. I’ve rescued her from the Dome.” I stomped my tail and added clicks to her introduction too.

They grunted and examined her with curious glares. Ajani blinked and looked down, shy again after her boisterous greeting of the animals. Humans were so complex and mercurial in their emotions. Or perhaps it was just her.

I pulled Glasha to the side and spoke quietly so as to not upset Ajani. “She appears strong, but she’s been through an ordeal.”

Glasha listened intently, nodding as though she understood.

“She needs solid food as she weans off of nanotech.” She turned with her hand reaching for Ajani, but I blocked her by the wrist. “She prefers not to be touched, and she doesn’t eat non-synthetic protein. She has a translator implant. Please consult with her about how we might feed her a diet close to what she was used to on Earth. She should bathe, eat, and rest. Provide her with a fresh female bretten and get her settled in a room next to mine in the Queen’s House. Tell her to ask for you if she needs anything else. Can you do that all without touching her physically?”

Glasha’s eyes widened as I revealed Ajani’s secrets. She stood very still while she processed the orders I had given her. She blinked and then nodded quickly. “Och, aye, Skoll. I’ll help her. What happened to your arm?”

“We had a run in with some phukas. She’s also likely upset about that. Please see to her for me while I heal my wound and remove this blexing helmet.”

“Of course.”

I watched carefully as they walked toward the main house together, checking Ajani’s body language to see if she was tensing. Her head bowed down slightly, but overall, I didn’t sense unease from her.

“Skoll?” Ajani stopped and peered back at me over her shoulder.

“Hmm?”

“Heldmuis...” She looked stunningly beautiful in the setting sun with her hair all messed from the cloak, concern for her pet on her face.

“Right. I forgot.” I reached into the pack on the bike and hoisted the mouse out. He gave a virulent shake and started preening his fur.

“Heldmuis!” Ajani rushed back to me and held up her hands. She inadvertently brushed the tip of my claw, but didn’t



acknowledge the contact as Heldmuis jumped onto her palm. She cradled him to her chest. “Thank you so much.”

After watching her walk away with Glasha, I turned my attention to Bazur. “We need to set up patrols for Duigari around the perimeter. There’s a strong possibility I’ve been tracked.”

“Aye.”

“I killed three phukas at the cave at the base of the mountain. I expect retaliation for that as well.”

I had trusted Bazur and Glasha with the general details of my undercover assignment because they were like family to me. We had all suffered the loss when the Duigari raided the ranch, and my mission was as much vengeance for them as atonement for myself.

“I have ten moons to prepare then I return to the Dome to complete the mission.” I removed the satchels from the bike and slung them over my shoulders. “I will contact Vonne Bhuttu to make arrangements for Ajani to return to Earth.” Bazur knew that Vonne and I had formed an alliance. He didn’t know the extent of the Nivveok warriors’ involvement in the rebellion or the size of Dolvena’s forces.

He grunted and looked out to the sunset in the distance.

A sudden darkness fell heavily in my chest. This uniform, the helmet, returning to the Dome, Ajani leaving... The hope I’d felt on the bike vanished as I turned toward the ranch house. This grand idea I’d had to be the hero and free the women seemed impossible and foolish again.

Bazur’s hand on my back pulled me from my downward spiral. “You’ve done well, Skoll.”

It was much too soon to celebrate. Many factors remained unresolved. “When I go back...” I stopped and turned to him. “Och, I have news. Gerzog is in the Dome working in the lab.”

He paused and smiled as he leaned back. “You’ve seen him?”

“Had I not mentioned your name, he would’ve severed my arm with his axe.”

Bazur stared at me for a long time. His face morphed into a grimace, and he turned away as he held his head in his hands. “I believed. I always believed my brother was alive.” His shoulders heaved.

I had never seen Bazur show much emotion at all, but at the news of his brother, he wept before me. I placed a hand on his arm. “He’s my ally now. The next time I come back to the ranch, I will bring Gerzog to you. It will be a great reunion.”

He nodded slowly, keeping his face away from me so I couldn’t verify if he’d really cried. “Do not tell him how happy I was to hear this. He will hold it over my head like a cloud for the rest of my days.”

I laughed. “Och, aye. I’m telling him. This is too good to keep quiet.”

He shook his head and continued to walk by my side toward the main house.

“Call up all the ranch hands while I change out of this hideous disguise and see to my wound. I’ll meet you at the firepit to organize the patrols.”

“Aye, Skoll. I’m glad you are back safely.” He slapped my arm before turning and walking out to the pasture again.

I entered the main house and checked on Ajani. She was showering while Glasha prepared a bretten for her, so I headed toward my room. I breathed out a sigh of relief when I loosened the bolts that held the helmet in place. I peeled off the ridiculous uniform and tossed it aside.

Ajani was safe for now. My cover was intact. My plan had worked so far, and I needed to remain hopeful that the rest would also fall into place. I smiled as I surveyed my room and saw a blue Krassokdro bretten folded and waiting for me. Glasha had likely done it, anticipating my return.



## Chapter 13 Unmasked

*Ajani*

I'd never seen a female orc before, but I really liked Glasha. She had muscles that would rival any bodybuilder back on Earth. She wore a flowing fabric with beautiful royal blue stripes that looked striking against her pastel green hue. It wrapped over one shoulder with a thick leather belt at her waist. With her hair shaved on the sides and braided at the top, she looked like the goddess Athena.

She showed me how to work the waterfall shower, and when I emerged, she had placed a similar fabric on the bed while holding one in her hand.

"This is a bretten. If you are from Krassoks, you wear blue. Purple for Vasadro. Orange for Crone. You wrap it like this." She held one corner at her hip and wrapped the fabric around her waist.

I attempted to copy her while still keeping my towel in place. The regions of the planet were starting to feel familiar to me, and now that I'd flown over, it made more sense. Vasada had a purple glow to it, and the sands of Crone were orange. Not much was left of Krassoks, but I would've liked to see what part of that area inspired the blue kilts. "I was in Crone when I worked in the mines, and I'd never seen one before."

"Now wrap the top like this." She did some kind of fancy move and covered her breasts. "The Zul doesn't allow the bretten, and the orcs at the mines were working for the Zul. Here on the ranch and anywhere that is free of the Zul, we wear them." She didn't give me undergarments, but the wrap around my breasts felt tight enough, and I was happy to be out of my white jumpsuit. She tightened a belt around my waist.

"They remind me of Scottish kilts. The accent in the translator seems Scottish too. I wonder if this planet has any ties to Earth."

She shook her head. “I don’t know about those things. Step in.” She held out a large black boot that seemed much too big, but as my feet flattened into it, it shrunk to fit.

“Ooh, nice.”

“Now, let’s get you some food. What did you eat on your home planet?”

“It’s been a long time, but fruits and vegetables. Biscuits and curries. That kind of thing.” I took a few steps to get used to my new clothes.

“Aye, we’ve lots of that. Come into the kitchen with me.”

I followed her out of the room and down the hallway to a large kitchen with a huge central window. It had a basin for cleaning and a wood burning stove. It was not unlike a kitchen on Earth apart from the scale of things and several small black boxes on the counters that looked like they could be gadgets for cooking.

She walked over to a huge wooden box in the corner and opened a door that slid sideways. “We’ve all this here from the ranch. Fruits, veg, meat. Well, you don’t eat the meat. Here’s some synthetic protein, but the lads don’t like it much.”

We started to go through each item and talk about it. I assigned an English equivalent to them and used those words. We discovered potatoes, carrots, plums, which I already knew about, and several herbs that I tasted and assigned the closest thing I could think of to it. Giving them familiar names helped ease some of my discomfort being alone on an alien planet, and she didn’t seem to mind.

Glasha put something together for me that was like a salad and told me to sit at the table and eat it. While I enjoyed my first salad in years, I nearly cried. Something so simple as eating food brought me so much joy. I kept peeking out the window, trying to get a glimpse of the animals out there. I also wondered when I’d see Skoll again. It was so fascinating that he had this ranch with its colorful foods and animals and yet he left it all to go undercover in the Dome and then risked all that to save me.

I finished my salad and thanked Glasha for helping me. I brought my dishes to the basin, but she came up behind me. “I can take care of those for you.”

“I don’t mind doing my own dishes. I haven’t done anything normal in a long time. This is a luxury for me.”

She nodded and stepped back. “I didn’t realize.”

I dipped the plate into the water slowly. “You think your life is boring and mundane, and then one day it’s just gone, and you wish you could have that boring thing back again.” I let my hands just soak in the water, feeling the warmth seep into my skin as I stared out the window at the area in front of the ranch house.

It had grown dark outside. Only one pale blue light shined down over a ring of boulders. Several orcs walked up to the circle and began talking. When a blue alien approached them, they all turned to greet him. “Who is that?”

Glasha moved up next to me to peer out the window. “Tobian is the manager of the animals, and you met Bazur. The other orcs you will meet later.”

“Not the orcs, the blue one. Who is that?” A cobalt blue alien with broad shoulders stood taller than all of the orcs. He was wearing a teal kilt and had long swords strapped to his back with a thick chest strap. His head was covered in a rounded black beanie that folded up over his brow, and his arms and legs were covered with swirling black tattoos.

“Why, that’s Skoll, of course.”

“He looks different.” Like really different. Like hot as fuck mountain man gorgeous compared to his reserved black leather uniform and the silver helmet. He even had long blue hair that hung down to his shoulders. Had that been in his helmet the entire time?

He turned his back toward me and swished a familiar blue tail, but now it was adorned with brass rings. Black splotches covered the giant expanse of his shoulders and arms. I couldn’t make out the tattoos, but they moved with his muscles as he patted the orcs on their shoulders and stomped his ringed tail.

We watched silently as he wrapped both arms around a huge chunk of wood and balanced it atop a flat boulder. He gracefully pulled an axe from his belt, lined up, and then swung at it with a loud grunt. He hit it right in the center with a booming crack I could hear through the closed window. It split easily into two equal halves that tumbled to the ground. Skoll breathed heavily as the orcs restacked them for him to chop in half again. The orcs picked up the wooden wedges and threw them in a pit in the center of the boulders.

Glasha sighed and leaned her hip on the counter as she gazed out the window at him chopping wood as easily as if it were made of butter. “Aye. He’s a bonnie lad. He looks good back in his home wearing his traditional clothing.”

“Really good.” My breathing became rough and my skin tingled.

“Mmm.” Glasha ran a long green tongue over her lips, lifting it to get over her tusks.

As we gawked, he turned toward us and peered in the window. We pivoted away like we’d been caught peeking at dirty magazines. She gasped and ducked down below the counter. I coughed uncontrollably and met her on the floor of the kitchen. We looked at each other for a second and then we both broke into spontaneous laughter.

“I wasn’t looking. You were looking,” I said.

She sat on her butt and leaned her head back against the cupboard. “I don’t know what yer talking about, lass. I didn’t see a thing. I wasn’t anywhere near that window. Nope. My face was over there in the pantry.”

“You are such a liar.” My chest ached with the strain of laughing, and I loved it. Laughter was another one of those things you took for granted until it was gone. I looked at Glasha and placed my hand over hers.

She sucked in air quickly and met my gaze.

“Thank you, Glasha. For everything.”

“I didn’t do anything, I swear.” She pressed her lips together and sputtered a laugh.

We broke into giggles again, but a dark force entered the kitchen and we both stopped cold. Standing in the entryway was a towering blue Zeus in a kilt, swords casting shadows on the floor, stern face scowling down, and brilliant blue eyes glaring at my hand on hers. I pulled it away instantly. I hadn't done anything wrong, but the way he stared at it made me insecure.

“You found something funny, lassies?” Skoll's deep voice came out of the alien, but he looked very different from my guard inside the laboratory. This alien was relaxed, confident, strong, and definitely wouldn't bow to Dagmar or sneak around in the dark with a mouse in his pocket. This alien looked like he was ready to hunt, kill, and eat whatever prey was unlucky to be in his path.

We both stood quickly and tried to collect our faces. Glasha turned toward the basin and took over my chore of washing the dish. That left me staring at the new improved super warrior Skoll.

My eyes took him in from his boots to his thick blue thighs that widened before disappearing under his kilt. He had smudges of dirt on his chest, an axe tucked into his powerful belt, and one corner of his kilt casually slung over his shoulder. Apart from his beanie, everything else was uncovered and godlike. I knew he had big muscles, but until I saw them unfettered by that uniform, I didn't really have a good grasp of the sheer magnitude of them. So many tattoos, and one on his chest that looked like a scar. I had a lot of questions. His hair shined a beautiful turquoise blue.

Those eyes he'd been hiding all this time scanned me from head to toe and then flared when they got to my breasts. My skin heated, and a full-body shiver ran through me, making the hairs on my arms stand up like I'd seen a ghost. How did this huge kitchen suddenly become so tiny and hot?

“You, uh, hi. I mean... you have eyes? I mean eyes like that? I mean not that they're bad but I couldn't see them and now I see they're azure blue like the Sardinia Bay.” I bit my lip to stop myself from rambling. God. He had thick cobalt blue lashes too. Impossibly lush and gorgeous. “And you have



tattoos?” Okay, maybe a little bit more rambling, but this guy had withheld some serious secrets from me. “And jewelry and swords.” I coughed to clear the huge lump in my throat.

A wry smile grew on his dark blue lips. Those hadn’t changed, but I didn’t think I’d ever seen him smirk like that before. Just mesmerizing.

“It’s good to see you in Krassokdro blue, lass.” His eyes swept over the kilt again then returned to my face to lock gazes with me. “And to look into your eyes and have you see mine too.”

Glasha dropped something, and it clattered to the counter. “I have to go out to the garden,” she muttered as she basically ran out of the kitchen.

“Have you eaten?” he asked without stepping deeper into the room.

“Uh, yeah, she made me a salad with some synthetic protein. It was good.” I shrugged. It was more than good, but I was having trouble forming thoughts with his big blue body blocking out the light.

“Now you must rest,” he declared.

“I want to see the animals. Why don’t you give me a tour?” I stepped closer to him.

His grin quickly dropped, and his jaw clenched as his nostrils flared. Did I smell bad after my shower? I took another step, and he swayed back like a magnet had repelled him.

“I have work to do,” he said sharply as he broke eye contact and looked over my head.

“Oh.”

“Tobian will show you the animals in the morning after you’ve slept.” He stepped back, still keeping his beautiful blue eyes focused in the distance.

“Okay.” I didn’t know how to react to his sudden change in mood. Did I do something to anger him? I’d only changed my

clothes and eaten a salad. Did he not like the way I'd asked him to give me a tour?

“I only have ten moonrises here and then I go back into the Dome. I need to prepare the perebreum for the orcs. It's a time consuming process. We have to organize patrols.” His response came out as a low growl like a bear that had been awakened after a long hibernation.

His meaning wasn't fully clear, but it sounded very serious. “Alright. I won't keep you then.” I withheld my questions because he didn't seem like he wanted to expand on it.

Something had changed. My Skoll was like a stranger to me again. His brow was deeply furrowed, and his shoulders seemed burdened by all the work he had to do. Spending time with me was probably an annoyance when he had so much weighing on him.

“I'm very lucky to be here. Thank you for everything.” I lowered my head and bowed deeply before him, my legs crossed in a chair pose that was part of my yoga practice. It seemed like the right thing to do. He was like a king and everyone should bow before him, especially me.

A haunting growl reverberated from his chest and sounded in my ears. It was primal and strong, like a wolf preparing to hunt on a full moon. It rose in volume and pitch, but when I lifted my head, he was gone and the sound died in the air. His absence left an empty feeling in my tummy despite the full meal I'd just eaten. The kitchen suddenly seemed very big again.

I sucked in several deep breaths and braced myself on the counter. Today was absolutely overwhelming. Maybe he was right. I did need to rest before I saw any more of this incredible ranch or its intimidating owner.



## Chapter 14 Girl Talk

*Ajani*

“How’re you doing, lass?” Glasha asked me as we were chopping vegetables in the kitchen.

If I could be honest with her, I would’ve told her everything.

*Well, Glasha, the truth was that I spent the last two days with Tobian marveling at the ranch and all the fascinating animals, but also stayed up at night alone in my room wondering where Skoll was and what he was doing.*

We’d seen him briefly in his laboratory in the barn, and he’d caught me staring at his back and the rings in his tail. I nearly died of embarrassment, but he barely glanced at me. He was too busy working frantically at his lab bench like a mad scientist.

Then last night, I thought I’d heard him enter the room next to mine very late, which gave me the shivers as I waited for a surprise visit or at least a few plums, but he never showed. All I heard was some low grunting that stirred heat deep in my belly, and I could swear he was touching himself.

But I couldn’t tell her any of that so I just said, “I’m good.”

Glasha and I had decided to make an alien version of Cape Malay Curry. We’d selected ingredients that looked like they could be potatoes, carrots, and onions, and I was rolling with it. I’d embraced the fact that playing make believe helped me get through the unfamiliarity of everything here.

“You seem to be taking this all very well.” She dropped a cube of something into a pot, and it sizzled in the onions and carrots we’d already added to it.

“I’m actually just in awe of everything.” I settled for a more neutral version of the truth. “Tobian showed me the menagerie today, and it just blew my mind.” Skoll had collected male and female versions of many species from tiny

lizards all the way up to large predators, and they all seemed very happy, or as happy as a wild animal could be in captivity. Tobian had gone over all the details of the enclosures and care for each species.

“Aye. Skoll is a voracious collector. Most of those species are extinct in Krassoks now.” She began to slowly peel a potato.

“That’s so sad how the forests were cut down and burned.” I grabbed a knife and began peeling too. The skins were purple and much thicker than a potato, but it was close enough for me.

She nodded. “Skoll told you about it?”

“A little. We mostly focused on escaping when we were inside the Dome, and now he’s busy with protecting the ranch and preparing to return.”

She frowned and gripped her potato tightly with her whole hand. “Aye. Only a short visit. I wish he didn’t have to go back.”

“You missed him?” I asked.

“I’m just worried he’ll be hurt.” Her voice grew soft and she lowered her chin. “Or killed.”

I’d noticed her ogling him before, but now I was sure she cared for him deeply. A swirl of something green flitted through my stomach. Part of me had harbored a secret hope that I was special to Skoll and he was just giving me space while I recovered, but I was misguided. If he had a female as beautiful and strong as Glasha on his ranch who loved him, why would he waste his time on me?

We worked together quietly as she added broth to the sautéed veggies and stirred it. The smell was very close to what I remembered from home. I knew I shouldn’t ask, but I couldn’t help myself. The swirl of green in my tummy had flared into a little envious gremlin who desperately needed to know.

“Are you and Skoll mated?” I tried to keep my tone casual, but my voice twisted it into an awkward question.

She dropped her knife and turned her entire body away from me to hide her face. “Skoll will never take a mate. His will is unbreakable on that.”

“Oh.” I sensed a lot of bitterness in her voice, and I didn’t ask more questions, even though curiosity was eating me up inside. I’d already made her uncomfortable, and it was really none of my business what her relationship with Skoll was.

She slowly turned back to her work and picked up another potato, this time chopping the pieces a little too roughly. “Nivveok don’t form bonds.”

I didn’t know what Nivveok meant, and I was about to ask her but she kept talking.

“And he’s too noble to mate for physical pleasure even though I’m sure he has intense carnal needs.” She looked up at the ceiling, her voice dripping with exasperation. “Don’t ask me how I know, but you grow up on a ranch with someone and you find out... things.”

“Mmm.” I’d clearly hit a nerve with Glasha because her eyes lit up, and she was on a roll now.

“It’s fine.” She chopped a potato brutally in half, and the knife wedged into the cutting surface. She had to wiggle the handle to get it out. “I’m probably better off with an orc. The Nivveok are too closed. They believe they aren’t worthy because of their horns, but Skoll’s horns were a thing of beauty.”

“He had horns?” I hadn’t seen anyone on this planet with horns, and I’d never imagined Skoll had them. But now that she mentioned it, I’d only seen him wearing the helmet or the beanie. I’d never seen his head.

“Gorgeous horns,” she said with a deep sigh. “He blew them off in an explosion. All that to go undercover in the Dome.” She shook her head. “A fantastic set of double greens, curved back pair, sharp, thick front pair. I might’ve had some crazy fantasies about them, but I’m not confessing that.”

I coughed and stifled a laugh.

“I’m sorry. I’ve shared too much. Please don’t mention any of this to him.” She wiped her hands on a towel and pressed a palm to her forehead like she was burning up.

“I won’t. I promise.” I scooped up the well-chopped potatoes, tossed them into the pot, and watched as they tumbled in the now simmering broth.

“I’m going out to the garden to get some herbs. Will you be a’write here by yourself for a moment?” Glasha asked.

“Of course. I’ll stir the curry.”

She grinned awkwardly as she headed out the back door, and to be honest, I was grateful to have some time alone.

So much new information about Skoll to process. He once had horns? She’d called them double greens and described them like a ram’s horns. I laughed to myself. I couldn’t even imagine such a thing, and yet I was on an alien planet. Anything was possible.

And the way she felt about Skoll made me question my own feelings. He would never mate with anyone? He’d told me he’d taken an anti-mating hormone, but my stubborn mind had still spent many nights imagining myself glued to his back on his bike, my hands drifting lower to his pants, smelling his sandalwood scent with my nose near his neck, his tail swishing between my legs. Was I an infatuated school girl just like Glasha? Did I really have no chance with him either?

It didn’t matter because I was eventually going back to Earth and leaving Skoll and all his fantastic animals behind. I’d miss this place, but I’d always remember my short time on the alien ranch. Returning home would be scary without Skoll’s broad shoulders in front of me warding off the demons, but I’d have to be brave and forge ahead.

A commotion in the main room caused me to fumble the ingredients and drop them awkwardly into the pot. Boiling broth bounced back and burned my hand. “Where is she?” a female voice came excitedly closer as I reached for a towel to soothe the ache. “We heard there was a human here.”

My heart dropped like a lead weight. They were here to get me. The beautiful virgin. Another set of feet followed behind her in the hallway. An attack. Poachers here to capture me and Heldmuis. I pulled him from my shoulder and dropped him to the floor. “Run!” He scampered along the floorboards, but there was no hole for him to hide in.

I fell to my knees and tried to lift up the flat board on the bottom, but it was secured tight. That’s when I felt it. Hands on my back, on my arms, everywhere. A squealing sound pierced my ears.

I thought it was Heldmuis, but the noise came from me.

My throat tightened, and my heart nearly burst from my chest. I couldn’t breathe.

The panic gave way to deafening grief. Sadness for the girl I was who was taken from me. The innocence lost at the hand of poachers who stole my youth and my beloved elephant. They’d come back for me. They always did. There was no escaping the terror of it. My life would forever be haunted by them.

And so I began to weep. Uncontrollable sobs into my knees, my hands covering my ears. I was lost and scared and alone again with no defenses to save my sweet Ophelia. I should’ve brought the knife that Skoll had given me. I didn’t even have a gun on this planet. All I had was...

“What the blex is this? Get away from her.”

Skoll. I had him. My protector. My hero.

“She can’t be touched. You see what you’ve done? Give her some space. Driff!”

He was here. He’d protect me from whoever had touched me. I could hear his heavy boots stomping into the room and standing in front of me.

“Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry.” A woman’s voice hit my ears, but I was frozen in place. She had an American accent, and the translator did nothing with her words. She was speaking English.



Feet shuffled away, and silence filled the room like they were all waiting for me to show my face, but now embarrassment was keeping me down. How could I face Skoll again after I'd lost my composure and panicked when there was clearly no threat? He obviously knew these women who spoke English without a translator.

“We won't touch you. I promise. We won't hurt you. We're sorry we scared you. We're just so excited to see another human. We got carried away.”

Another human. They were human like me. I sucked in a huge breath, not realizing before how very much I'd missed my own kind.

“Stay back.” Skoll's voice protected me like a shield. “Leave now.”

“No way, big boy.” A sassy voice spoke back to him in a tone I'd never dream of using with a commanding alien like him.

“She needs us,” the other female voice said. “We'll wait. She'll be okay soon. I've had panic attacks before. She'll settle and then we'll talk about it. We understand how frightening this all is, but we're really the best people to be here. When you're ready, we'll talk. We won't touch you.”

I finally found the courage to look up past Skoll's massive thighs and kilt. I caught sight of a black woman with neatly braided hair and small dark horns. She wore a blue plaid kilt and smiled down at me with compassionate eyes. The other woman also had brown skin, but she looked like she could be Latina or Indian. Straight hair, curvy body, purple kilt, no horns. Both of them were stunning and intimidating despite the friendly smiles.

“My name is Nefer,” the one with braids said. “This is Stella. I'm from Los Angeles, and she's from Las Vegas.”

“Well, I'm really from Oregon originally. No one wants to claim Vegas as their hometown,” Stella added.

“We're bonded to Nivveok warriors.” They both smiled, and I noticed they had glowing marks on their necks.

Didn't Glasha just tell me that Nivveok like Skoll didn't bond? I swallowed my pride and pushed my hair away from my face. "Hello." I offered them a weak smile, and they returned it with gleaming white teeth. "I'm Ajani from Addo, South Africa."

Skoll continued to glare at them and didn't move out of the way, but they were right. The panic passed, and I was excited to see them too.

I stood and fixed my kilt. "I'm so sorry. That was embarrassing."

Skoll was standing with a dagger in his fist, but he wasn't wielding it at them.

"No. It's our fault. We're far too welcoming, and we forget that any human on this planet is probably traumatized from what they've been through. You were in the Dome, huh?" Stella asked.

Skoll growled, and his fist tightened around the handle of his dagger. "Don't ask her these things."

I reached up and almost placed my fingertips on his shoulder, but thought better of it and pulled back. "It's fine. Yes, I was in the Dome. Skoll helped me escape under his cloak."

"That's awesome. Wait a minute. Wait a goddamn minute." Nefer's head moved side to side almost independently from her neck. Oh, I recognized that move from when my mother used to do it. It meant she was getting ready to lay it out. "You escaped under his cloak? So you touched him?"

"Through our clothes, yes, after lots of practice," I said with a shrug.

Both women turned their gazes slowly toward Skoll. "You know how to help her?" Stella asked.

"Aye."

"But she still can't be touched?" Nefer asked.

"She's safe here."

“Maybe for now, but if she escaped, they’re looking for her, and you stopped helping her before she was cured?” Stella added.

Skoll looked over his shoulder, but his gaze didn’t meet mine. Neither one of us had thought to continue touching practice after I’d escaped. The purpose of it was accomplished, and we’d moved on. Or had we?

“That shit is whack.” Nefer propped a hand on her hip. “Why’d you give up like that? Huh?” Her tone was exactly like my mother’s when she was angry with me. “You know what? Nevermind. I don’t care what your fucked up logic was.” She pointed a long painted fingernail at Skoll. “*You* were wrong, and you need to keep working with her and help her continue to improve.”

“She’s returning to Earth.” Skoll crossed his massive arms over his chest like this solved the problem. We hadn’t even talked about that yet, but I had a feeling these women weren’t buying his bossy routine.

“And you think she doesn’t need to fix this before that?” Stella shook her head and made a funny grunting noise. “It’s just as dangerous on Earth. If a man gets a hold of her and sees her crumble like that, she’s easy game.”

Skoll growled, but he didn’t move or reply.

“Whether she stays or goes, she needs your help and you need to stand up and do it.” Nefer’s sharp fingernail pointed at me. “And you need to let him do it.”



## Chapter 15 Uninvited

*Skoll*

I saw red. These females. These women... I took a deep breath and squeezed my fists as if I could turn back time and make it never have happened. Tor's mate and Vonne's mate had overstepped boundaries and violated my private space. They'd terrified her and made her cry when I'd done so much work to make her feel safe here in my refuge. They'd just burst in with their loud voices screeching demands.

They did not command Skoll O'Kelleher. Never. When Vonne gave me orders in battle, I was forced to follow, but my choices on my own ranch were mine alone, forbidden from their scrutiny.

Vonne and Tor rushed into the kitchen with weapons drawn. They took in the blade in my fist and immediately moved to defend their females. Vonne tugged Nefer by the waist and pressed her protectively into his front.

Tor wrapped his arms over Stella's shoulders and turned her to the side as if Ajani was the one who had been attacking. "Are you a'write, lass?"

When I had seen Ajani cowering on the floor, I'd ached to raise her up and hold her to me, protect her from all her fears, but I couldn't touch her, especially not in the state I was in, so I directed my frustration at the four beings who stood in my kitchen.

"Your mates..." I pointed my dagger at Vonne and then Tor, "rushed in here without a thought of caution and frightened my guest. I don't know how it's done on Earth, but on Aziza, you would wait to be introduced before you touch someone."

"Are you reprimanding me?" Vonne asked, his tone incredulous.

"This is not your mothership. This is my ranch, my rules," *my mate*. I'd almost said it out loud. No. Definitely not my

mate. That was the sickness talking. The illness that began when I'd first seen Ajani in her bretteen after her bath. I'd contracted a virus of some sort that convoluted my thoughts and made me want to rut her. It was driving me mad, but I had to suppress it right now and deal with this situation unfolding in my kitchen.

"I'm sorry, Skoll. I didn't think," Nefer offered her weak apology again, but the damage had already been done.

I sheathed my sword, struggling to control myself through the fever. Vonne would kill me if I hurt his mate. "While Ajani was still shaken, they shouted orders about what she should be doing to combat her deepest fears which I assure you is definitely not acceptable on Aziza. You must earn her trust first and then if you are lucky, she may allow you to help her, but this is not the way."

Vonne and Tor relaxed and moved their death glares off me, both of them withdrawing their weapons as well. "I see," Vonne said. Apparently this was not the first time their mates had caused trouble like this.

I glanced down at Ajani and paused at the expression on her face. Pupils wide, mouth open in a soft pout, breath somewhat ragged, and her gaze flitting between Vonne's grip on Nefer's hip, Tor's arm across Stella's chest, and both male's horns. Vonne's were a sleek black and Tor's a brilliant white. Her eyes fell half-lidded and lazy as she scanned them.

None of her normal signs of anxiety were present.

She'd had a similar look the first time she'd seen me without my uniform after we'd arrived here, but she'd masked it quickly. Now, she was so shaken, she didn't even think to hide it.

Did the massive horns on the males shock her? Inside the Dome, there were no horned beings, and at the mines where she'd been held captive for years, I had only heard of orcs and thuvix, both hornless species.

Maybe she craved a male with horns. Something I could never give her. Her gaze traveled over the many scars carved

into Vonne's scales and the Horned Warriors mark on Tor's chest.

Vonne and Tornoc were monstrous but also impressive in size and stature. Their presence stole the attention of the room. Their humans clearly found them extremely appealing with no misgivings even when they shifted into their less humanoid Raseri form.

The mating bond between them was palpable in the room. That same bond had motivated me to volunteer to go into the Dome. The rash decision was driven by an overwhelming need to save females like Stella from the Zul's grip. Females like my mother. Like Ajani.

I suddenly regretted holding back the many questions I had avoided asking my Nivveok brothers until now. I didn't think it was worth the violation of their privacy to ask about their intimate relationships when I never planned to mate in any form.

"I'm really fine," Ajani said as she smoothed her hair. "Can we just move on?"

"Of course," Vonne said. "I am Vonne Bhuttu, hunter of Western Vasada." He stomped his tail and offered some polite clicks, leaving out his role as the commander of the Nivveoks.

After we went through the rest of the introductions, an uncomfortable silence blanketed the kitchen, and Ajani turned to me with many questions burning in her gaze. "I'm going to speak to Ajani alone now. Wait in the main room. We'll meet with you later."

They muttered their goodbyes and cleared out of my kitchen.

Standing alone in the kitchen with Ajani, her floral scent reached my nose, and I closed my nostril flaps parsecs too late. My sickness flared, and my hands ached to touch her. I'd avoided her for days because of that scent, and now it was assaulting me.

Glasha came into the kitchen and found us staring numbly at each other. "What happened?"

Her question snapped me out of the daze Ajani's scent had induced. "Vonne and Tornoc are here with their mates." I motioned toward the main room without taking my eyes off Ajani. "Can you check in with them and offer them whatever they need?" If I couldn't manage to be polite to them, at least Glasha could do some damage control for me.

She paused and glanced back and forth from me to Ajani. Finally she said, "Certainly," and dropped her basket on the counter. She turned off the heat on the stove before she rushed out to greet them.

"Let's go." I motioned for Ajani to walk ahead of me and held my nostrils closed as I followed her out the back door of the kitchen. I overheard Glasha speaking with our uninvited guests in the main room as we left.

"Where to?" Ajani glanced over her shoulder at me, and I was momentarily lost in her eyes. I hadn't been this close to her since we'd separated from the bike.

"The barn." I managed to get the words out with a scratch in my throat.

As we entered through the barn doors, the animals greeted us with grunts and whinnies.

"Why here?" she asked me as she walked over to one of the shakturs in his stall and petted his snout. Lucky beast.

"Because it relaxes you," I admitted as I took several steps backward, attempting to create physical space between my sick mind and her sweet scent.

A smile curved the corners of her lips. "How did you know that?"

"I'm always watching you, Ajani." She may not have noticed, but I'd seen the way her eyes brightened and small dimples formed in her cheeks whenever she entered the barn.

"Did you have horns?" she blurted out.

I stared at her in stunned silence. I was not wrong that I'd seen wonder in her gaze when she'd met the other Nivveok. "Och, aye. I once had horns, but mine were green."



“And you cut them off to go in the Dome and rescue the women in there?”

I expected her follow up question to be about the color. I was thrown when she brought up my mission. “Aye.”

Her mouth turned down and a softness blanketed her eyes. “You’re a hero.”

I laughed. “Hardly. They are still there and I am not.”

“You risked all that to save me first,” she whispered. “Why?”

“Because...” There were many reasons, not all of which I was fully aware of or ready to confess to her. “You seemed particularly frail, and Dagmar’s interest in you put you in extra peril.”

“Oh. Sometimes I wondered if...” She didn’t finish that thought, and I turned away from her to walk toward my lab bench. I needed to take in a breath, and I wanted as much distance from her as possible.

I cleared my throat and took in some much needed air. Her scent hit me, and the fever rose again, more potent this time mixed with the warmth of the barn. I held onto the sides of the bench and closed my eyes. “And although I helped you get out of the lab, according to the other human females, I didn’t do enough.”

“Yes, you did.” Her gentle voice washed over me like sunshine. Instead of looking at her, I inspected the mess of perebreum I’d been working on when I’d heard her scream. I was way behind on my production schedule if I was going to bring it to the orcs upon my return, and yet, suddenly, it didn’t seem important at all.

“Is it true that human men will take advantage if they find out your weakness?” I turned to look at her to read her reaction.

She chewed on her lower lip as she pondered my question. “Not all of them. If you’re lucky, you can find a good man. Someone like you.”

I growled at the thought of her finding anyone but me. “You think that I am good?”

“I know that you are. You rescue all these animals and provide refuge for the orcs.” She walked slowly to the next shaktur stall and gave him equally enthusiastic snout rubs. Another lucky beast. “You saved me, and you’re sacrificing yourself for the other women.”

“There is much you don’t know about me.” If she knew I was holding back the urge to slam her up against that stall and force my cock into her, she would definitely not call me *good*.

“Tell me. I’d love to know.” She looked at me again with that glassy stare, like I was a hero. She was so wrong about me. Heroes didn’t cause death and destruction like I had done, and heroes definitely didn’t spend their days thinking of ways to defile an innocent virgin who was already afraid of men.

“What if I told you I was the one who burned the forests?” I spit the words out at her, knowing she would find it shocking that her hero had done something so cruel. Like the poachers who had hurt her before. My sledge was sitting on my lab bench, and I picked it up and swung it as I confessed. “I killed the beasts. I did that.”

She gasped and stepped protectively in front of the shaktur she’d been petting. “Why would you do that?” As soon as that adoring look left her eyes, I missed it and wanted it back.

I dropped the sledge and it hit the ground with a thunk. “The Zul enlisted the arena fighters to do it. The Duigari threatened our families if we didn’t comply. So we burned the forests for him. And while I was out burning my own blexing forests down, the Zul attacked the ranch anyway. I lost my uncle, the animals there, so many orc friends that were like family.” I hadn’t told this to anyone before, and the guilt still churned like it had just happened.

“You were an arena fighter?” Again, the parts of what I said that she caught onto surprised me. She ignored all the negatives and focused on the one positive thing.

“Aye. I abandoned my uncle for adventure in the arena, and look what it earned me? Shame, loss, nothingness.”

“Leaving your ranch to seek adventure doesn’t make you a bad person. It’s normal. The fact that the Zul did those things was not your fault. It sounds like he caused lots of pain on this planet, and you were just another one of his victims.” She moved onto the next stall and petted the last shaktur in the row.

“You see the good in all things, and you’re very positive despite the unfortunate luck you’ve had.” Her uniqueness continually amazed me. Beautiful yet so trusting and resilient, my little sunshine was.

“I feel very lucky to be here.” Since she was out of animals to pet, she stopped and faced me. She folded her hands together in front of her and bent her knee in a way that caused her hips to tilt. Very curvy hips and thighs that had been wrapped around me on my hoverbike not too long ago. Strong, flexible hips and a nice round ass.

I forced my eyes back to my workbench and turned away to hide my stiffening cock. “So, regarding what the human women said, if you need to be cured before you return to Earth, and I am the only one who can do it, perhaps they are correct, and we should continue your training.” It would be pure torture to have her touching me without being able to claim her, but I would suffer through it for her. I’d do anything for her if she just asked.

“You don’t sound eager to help. You sound reticent.”

I turned back to her then and she looked away, her eyes blinking rapidly. My anger was showing through, and she thought it was her fault. “I admit I’m feeling some reluctance, but it has nothing to do with you. I’ve been feeling... unwell.” That was the best way I could describe it.

“It’s really fine. You’re very busy and if you’re not feeling well... Can I do something to help?”

*Strip naked and spread your legs, Sunshine.*

“Nai. Nothing you can do.”

“Oh, okay. Well, I guess I’ll get back to my curry then.” She started to walk out, and I felt my one and only chance to touch her slipping away.

“Sunshine, wait.”

She stopped and looked back at me. “Did you call me Sunshine?”

“Aye, lass. You are a ray of sunshine that blinds me.”

“Oh.”

I lowered my head and bowed before my queen. “It would be the greatest honor of my life to help you overcome this fear so that you will be safe and happy when you return to Earth.”

She coughed and when I rose from my bow, I saw her hand lightly gripping her throat. I wanted to press mine up against it and squeeze, hard, forcing her mouth open so I could jam my tongue inside until she moaned from the onslaught. On the corner of the bench, I found the vials of anti-mating hormone I’d used before I left.

I quickly jabbed two of them into my arm. “Shall we start now?”



## Chapter 16 Tie Me Up

*Ajani*

*Now?* I gulped down the huge lump in my throat and looked around at the animals for support, but they'd all retreated to the backs of their stalls to rest.

I did desperately want to touch Skoll again, but after he rose from his sudden and unexpected bow, the predatory look in his eyes raised goosebumps on my skin. The respectful and unemotional mask he'd always worn had cracked and hints of raw desire peeked through at me. He'd said he felt unwell, so maybe I was reading him wrong, but my body heard his unspoken request, and the thought of granting it had me shaking in my boots.

"I think... Yes. I'd like to keep working with you. I want to be comfortable being touched. I hate my weakness."

"A'write. Let's do it." He stalked toward me and stepped into my personal space for the first time since we'd arrived at the ranch. He peered down at me and darkness sparked in his eyes. "What are you afraid of, little girl?"

His voice held a hint of challenge like he wanted me to fear him. Well, it was working. "I'm afraid you'll hurt me."

He flinched and walked away muttering something to himself. I didn't catch it all, but it sounded like he'd said, "Get ahold of it, Skoll. She needs you." He returned carrying a wooden barrel that creaked as he sat down on it. "What do you think I'll do that will hurt you?" He gripped the edges with his hands and seemed to be bracing for my words.

His position gave me total freedom to decide how close to him I wanted to stand. "You'll try to steal my elephant." I took an instinctive step backward.

Cobalt blue eyes flashed to mine, staring at me with obvious skepticism. It felt silly to say it, and yet my gut screamed that if I let Skoll touch me, I'd lose my beloved pet that I was meant to keep safe.

“You know that I would give you a thousand elephants if I could,” he said softly as he leaned back and folded his hands between his spread thighs. He’d masked the hunger I’d seen before. Now the gentle giant I knew from the lab sat humbly before me, only a hint of tension remained in his flexed jaw that was now covered in a sexy dark blue stubble.

My shoulders heaved as my eyes watered. “I know.” He had an entire menagerie of animals that he protected, and here I was accusing him of wanting to take my imaginary one. He’d trained a mouse and risked getting caught to bring it to me. My brain was so messed up. “And then I feel grief for the little girl who lost so much that she can’t even trust someone she knows would never hurt her.”

“I feel sad for her too because she’s a good girl, and she deserves all the pleasures of life, including the joy that comes with physical touch and affection.” He crooked his arm so that his palm was face up and angled toward me.

I took a hesitant step closer to him. He looked so handsome sitting on a barrel in his barn offering his hand to me in a nonthreatening gesture. I knew that if I didn’t take it, he would wait patiently forever if we had it. “You won’t hurt me. I’m safe with you.”

He nodded calmly like he didn’t have any doubts at all.

His eyes watched closely as I placed my fingertips in the center of his palm, and his fingers closed slightly around them so only his claws brushed my skin. His other palm turned up, waiting for me to touch it.

I laughed nervously and circled in front of him, keeping my fingertips in his palm. “I don’t even have an elephant right now. I have a mouse, and he’s safe here on your ranch.”

He remained perfectly still and relaxed, waiting for me to make a simple move such as touching him. I placed the fingertips of my other hand in his palm, and he grasped them with his claws in the same way. Now I was standing in front of him between his spread legs as we pseudo held hands in his barn.

“Good girl.” The praise rumbled from his chest, and my heart thumped loudly. He approved. He knew how hard this was for me, and he was saying all the right things to encourage me.

I stepped deeper between his legs and felt his heat on my skin. His massive arms felt like a cage around me. My chest tightened, panic bubbling beneath the surface. I gritted my teeth to push it down and fight it off, but my hands shook and betrayed me.

“Ajani, if you’re not ready...”

“I’m ready. I’m ready.” The words rushed out. “I’m also afraid you’re going to grab me and pull my clothes off and steal my elephant.”

“I know,” he said patiently. “Step back.”

I removed my hands from his palms and stepped away, sucking in a deep breath to calm the butterflies causing a riot in my chest.

He stood from the barrel and walked over to some tack hanging on the wall of the barn. He selected a thick rope and slapped it into his palm in that well-practiced way of a horseman who knew how to use it. “Tie me up.”

“Um, what?” I croaked out through the butterflies now clogging my airway.

“If I’m restrained, you’ll trust that I won’t hurt you, and we can get past this last boundary.” He slapped it in his palm again and grinned as he watched my reaction.

“Mmm.” My thighs clenched and warmth pooled in my belly. I knew he was being scientific, but why did the thought of him being tied up stir fire between my legs?

The end of his tail flicked quickly in the dirt of the barn floor.

This rope idea added a new level to the whole exercise. We weren’t just clinical anymore. If I tied him up and touched him, it would be impossible to keep it from turning sexual.



We'd been dancing around it, and I hadn't seen any signs from him until tonight when his eyes heated. That brief look intrigued me, and I was eager to draw it out again. Maybe this was exactly what I needed to finally defeat my fear.

“Okay.”

He handed me the rope and walked over to a sort of wooden pommel horse type thing where they stored the saddles. He moved the gear off of it and planted his big body right in the center. The shaktur in the stall behind him let out a soft, throaty nicker. The whole thing was so stunning I simply stared at it for a long time in disbelief that he was making this happen for me. After years of ugliness and darkness, he was offering me beauty and light.

He sat on that wood in an extremely masculine way, thick thighs spread wide, feet resting on the sides of his boots, biceps flexed as he supported the weight of his broad shoulders. It was mesmerizing like watching a bull rider saunter into the pen and climb confidently on top of a wild beast.

I cleared my throat and approached him slowly. I worked carefully to wrap the rope around his wrist and tie a strong knot that would hold him to the wood. He'd have to either break the rope or walk around with a huge piece of barn furniture strapped to his arms.

He grinned mischievously as he watched me tie the second one. “Better?” he asked as I stood back.

To my surprise, it worked. My chest relaxed, and I could breathe easily. It was more the suggestion that he was tied because I was sure if Skoll wanted to, he could break free, but what I had done was enough for now.

“Now touch me, lass.” His voice seemed much deeper than usual, and it vibrated in my chest. It gave me a heady sense of power over him which was comical. He'd told me he was an arena fighter, he was a guard in the Dome, and a Nivveok like Vonne and Tornoc, and yet I had him tied up at my mercy.

My breath was ragged and rough as I moved closer and placed my fingers on his shoulder. Even through the fabric of his kilt, his muscles felt insanely firm and unyielding. With my other hand, I reached for his other shoulder and touched one of the black markings there. It looked like a demon with spines and sharp teeth.

The muscles in his arm flexed slightly at my touch then relaxed again.

“What’s this mean?”

“These runes are the beasts I’ve killed.” He looked down, and I could almost see the shame he felt seeping from the tattoo.

“Oh.” I traced my fingers around the edges trying to tell him that I accepted him even though he’d done that in his past. He didn’t do it anymore. Now he protected the animals, one of them was behind us now looking on.

I stepped closer and trailed my fingers down his bicep. This was the first time we’d really touched skin on skin. His beautiful blue scales were soft and smooth like leather stretched over hard steel. The heat from his body hit my chest, but it didn’t frighten me this time. Skoll had created a safe place for me to explore.

His sandalwood scent enveloped me as I stepped between his legs and outlined more of his tattoos on the way down to his hand. I placed my fingers on his palms, and his hands curled up slowly until his claws and fingertips were touching my wrists.

Our eyes met, and I felt like a whole conversation passed between us even though the only sounds in the barn were the soft rustling of hooves and the roughness of his breath.

An electric current sparked where we were touching and traveled up my spine. He must’ve felt it too because he grunted softly as if to say, *Go ahead. Do it.*

I reached up and slipped the sash of his kilt off his left shoulder and pushed it down his arm. He had the same

marking on his chest I'd seen on the other warriors. "And this?"

"My vow of fidelity to the Horned Warriors."

"Mmm." I had many questions that I would save for later when my voice wasn't shaking and my mouth wasn't watering quite so much.

He tilted his head back and stared down his nose at me with a fierce heat in his eyes that dared me to continue. He didn't say anything, but his jaw clenched so tight that his cheek bulged out.

Feeling brave, I climbed up onto his lap slowly, first one knee and then the other. He was so big, we were almost face-to-face even with me on my knees on his legs, but I didn't look him in the eye. I kept my gaze downward as if I were concentrating on my balance.

The wood beneath us creaked under the pressure, and his arms flexed beneath my hands.

I dared to look up and make eye contact with him. His slitted pupils were gone, and his normally dark blue eyes had turned ice blue with a darker ring around the edges. Absolutely beautiful. He stared at me intently as his nostrils flared and his chest rose and fell with his deep inhale.

Between us, the fabric of his kilt rose and tented. What would he do if I touched him there? We'd clearly be crossing the line from friendly training to intimate touching, but would he let me do it?

Acting on impulse, I reached down and wrapped my hand around the girth of fabric jutting up from his lap. He sucked in a hissed breath as I tried to touch my fingers together, but it was much too big for that.

"Do you touch yourself, Skoll?" My voice held a rich tenor I'd never heard before.

"Aye," he answered gruffly but honestly, still holding his breath.

"Do you think of me when you do it?"

“Aye, lass.”

Ah, that’s what I’d thought was happening in his room. He was thinking of me just as I was thinking of him.

“Has anyone else ever touched you like this?” I stared into his changed eyes searching for answers. Was this as new to him as it was to me?

“Nai.” His fangs seemed to elongate and glimmered at the corners of his mouth.

“Is it alright if I keep going?”

“If you stop now, I’ll implode.”

I stifled my shocked laugh. It was the first verbal acknowledgment he’d given me that I was affecting him. Man, he was good at masking things, but I felt like I’d found a key to a secret door. I’d discovered his weakness, and I was going to explore it. I squeezed my palm as hard as I could.

He moaned and threw his head fully back, exposing a large lump in his throat. I couldn’t help myself, I leaned forward and licked the bump. It felt hot and strong against my tongue. His deep groan sent a lightning bolt straight to my clit.

More. I wanted more. I stroked my hand up and down his length, and the fabric became dislodged. If I didn’t stop, it would eventually ruck up over his cock, and I’d likely see him naked beneath it. Unless he was wearing undergarments, but he seemed like a purist who would go commando any chance he got.



# Chapter 17 Earthquake

*Ajani*

Holding this power over Skoll stirred tremors in my bones. My whole body began to shake as I stared down at my hand on his length. I had never had anyone desperate for me like this. Knowing I was testing the restraint of someone as strong as Skoll was everything. The absence of fear and panic left a vacuum that was loaded with fluttering exhilaration.

The fact that he would accept anything I did now gave me confidence. He wouldn't hurt me or retaliate. Based on his words and his reaction, he'd probably welcome and savor my assertiveness. He'd call me a good girl for bravely overcoming my fear and taking it to the next level.

Why shouldn't I kiss him then? Take a chance for once in my life. I'd found myself on top of a mountain of willing blue alien that was any girl's fantasy, and I wasn't going to run from it. When would I ever have another opportunity like this that felt so right? And I wanted it. I wanted it badly. A yearning chasm of lust swirled in my belly, and he was the remedy I needed.

I pressed my lips to his neck and sucked. His muscles tensed and he froze in place, not even breathing as I trailed my lips up over his strong jaw to his mouth. Our lips barely brushed before he opened eagerly, his hot, wet tongue darting out to lick at the seam of my mouth. I poked at it, but he dove in and aggressively stroked my tongue with his. The ridged surface shocked me with its intrusion. It tasted salty and sweet, but I was too overwhelmed to name it. The tip of his tongue locked onto mine like a striking snake. It sucked me in and held on tight as the rest of it started to... spin?

I'd kissed a few boys back home when I was a teenager before the attack. It had been slobbery, messy kisses in a hurry behind the schoolhouse, but this, this was completely different. Skoll was in charge and in control of everything. All I could do was submit and let his specialized tongue do its magic.

Deep in my core, an insatiable hunger begged for more of him, dizzy with desire, lost to the euphoria of kissing Skoll. Uneven moans spewed from my throat, and he swallowed them up with his low growl. Desperate for some clarity and a full breath, I pulled my tongue away with a pop as the suction broke. We stared into each other's eyes, both of us panting with heated lust.

“Wow.” My voice rasped and my chest heaved.

He hummed as his blue tongue came out and spun on his lips like he was licking my taste off of them. Sweat beaded on my skin the way it would during a hot, humid day back in the bush. His hands, still tied to his sides, gripped the wood as if it were an enemy holding him back from a fight.

Something began to vibrate in my hand. I looked down and realized I was still gripping his hard length. God, if his tongue was so unique, what was his cock like? I stroked it once, and the edge of the fabric pulled up higher. Another pull and it would reveal everything.

My hand fell away, and I stared at it as the vibrations did the work for me. Slowly, the last bit of his kilt skittered off, and my eyes took in his dick for the first time.

I hadn't seen many naked human men apart from my father and the occasional accidental peek when someone was showering in the ranger's station. I'd seen lots of animal anatomy on the reserve, but I'd never seen anything like this.

The tip was shaped like a big suction cup, and it had smaller suckers down the sides that twisted in the shape of a unicorn horn. It was deep blue at the base where it curved in on itself and lighter at the tip where it narrowed, but all of it was shiny and smooth, no triangular scales like the rest of his body.

“Are you afraid of it, lass?” he ground out tightly, eyes wide, veins pulsing in his throat.

Um... No. I wasn't afraid. I was shocked, but I absolutely wanted to explore it. Skoll had this fascinating part of his body that I knew nothing about, and he was offering himself up to

me. My mouth dropped open as I shook my head from side to side, still gasping for breath after that smoking hot kiss.

“Touch it, Sunshine. I won’t hurt you.” His deep voice rumbled across my cheek like a caress.

I wrapped my hand around it, pulling a long moan from deep in his chest. It felt strong and hard like a tree trunk as it oscillated in my grip. My hand seemed too small to give him any pleasure, so I added another hand and stroked downward to the wider part then back up to the tip. The suction cups kissed my skin as it passed over them.

“Ajani.” My name came out as a low, desperate plea as his thighs trembled, and the wood protested his weight. “Give me your mouth again.”

I leaned forward to press my lips to his. His tongue reached for mine and latched on. He moaned into my mouth, and his hips jutted up, lifting me higher so that he had to tilt his head back in order to maintain the kiss. We stayed in this elevated position for a long time, my hands squashed between us, getting used to this new feeling of our mouths playing together.

He ended the kiss and moved his lips to my cheek. “I wish to make you bend to my will, but you need the opposite from me.”

“You’re tied up. Not much you can do,” I teased.

He chuckled. “Right.” He bucked his hips roughly, leaning back so I was almost flat on top of him, supporting my weight with my arms on his chest. My legs dropped and straddled his hips. He looked down at my breasts that were smashed to his strong pecs. “What do you want?” The tip of his cock pressed at the fabric of my kilt, requesting entrance between my legs.

I wanted those suckers caressing my skin. I was terrified but also very curious and turned on. To answer his question, I sat up, raised the fabric of my kilt around my waist, and gradually bent my knees, lowering my hips until his cock landed at the apex of my thighs. The vibrations pulled a sharp



gasp from my throat, and all my attention became laser focused on that one spot.

He was too big to kiss from this angle, but I felt his head lower and his sweet breath brush the top of my hair as he hissed. “Careful, lass.”

I rose up and down, brushing his hard length along my clit. It felt incredibly good, so I hummed and did it again. Over and over, I found my groove on his cock, smearing the wetness between my legs all over his arousal.

He groaned, long, deep, and loud. “Go ahead, take what you want from me.” His voice was a lethal whisper now. The wood creaked loudly. He was supporting us both with just his arms and his lower back resting on it. “Good girl. You’re so greedy and brave. Taking what you need. Does it feel good?”

“Mmm. It feels amazing.”

I canted my hips and rolled over him again and again like waves hitting the shore. The suckers were like little massage pads that reached out and grabbed on briefly then released my skin. I reached down and felt where we were touching, coating my fingers with slick heat.

“Let me taste you,” he asked, his voice tight.

I peered up at him and chewed on my lower lip.

“Please, Zenas help me, I want to taste it so badly. Bring your fingers to my mouth.”

When he commanded it like that, it was impossible to say no. The desperation in his voice, the tension in his body, it all demanded that I do as told. And so I brought my hand up and watched in a trance as his ridged tongue came out to lap hungrily at my fingers. He sucked them into his mouth, and it began spinning around them.

I started grinding shamelessly again. His hips rose in responding thrusts. An explosion threatened and I struggled for air. “I’m gonna... I can’t...”

“Och, aye you can, Sunshine.” My fingers slipped out of his mouth and slid down his chin. I felt off-balance as I

teetered above him, holding myself up by weak arms and shaking legs.

“I’m...” *Going to fall. Catch me if I fall...*

“Look at me. I want to see it through your eyes if I can’t be inside you.”

I tilted my head back as a seismic wave erupted along the fault line of my soul. Strangled, wordless sounds escaped from my mouth. It crested, holding my breath captive for an endless moment. A tendril of fear passed through me. What if I didn’t survive this? What if it never ended or it ruptured my heart irrevocably?

Skoll remained strong and still beneath me, watching in wonder as I struggled through the ecstasy. Finally, it dropped me and a strong pulse shook my whole body from head to toe. And another. One after the other, booming pulses plunged through me.

He started thrusting again. His vibrating cock prolonged it forever, longer than anything I’d ever given myself when I was alone.

All his muscles tensed, the wood cracked loudly, and suddenly we were falling. His back hit the dirt of the barn floor, and his hands came up to wrap around me, holding me close to his body, loose ropes dangling on my skin. He caught me like I knew he would.

His hands slid down my hips and cupped the rounds of my ass, and then I was sliding forward. Up, up, until my knees were past his shoulders and my sex was over his face.

I fell forward and caught myself with my palms flat on the ground, arms straight. For a brief second, I recognized I was in the same table pose I did in my yoga practice, but all logical thoughts vanished when his wet, hot mouth landed on my sex. His tongue explored until it found my opening, stabbed inside, and started spinning.

I gasped and moaned above him, my back arching upward. Another orgasm brewed deep in my spine even though the last one had barely faded. The scruff on his jaw scraped against my

inner thighs. I cried out when his upper lip brushed my sensitive clit.

He paused briefly then adjusted everything so the base of his tongue was on my clit, but the long tip of it curled inside, filling me up. His tongue vibrated and spun, the suckers plucked at my clit, his hands gripped my hips tightly, and I was lost to the cosmos.

A scream scratched my throat as a rainbow of colors passed behind my lids. The euphoria that erupted through me sent me arching back as I pulsed on his tongue and lips. I vaguely felt his hands holding me up as my body twisted in ways I couldn't control. He angled his neck to keep maximum contact as he sucked and nipped through my neverending orgasm.

I lay back against him and felt his cock jerk and stab at my neck. A deep growl reverberated against my pussy, and fluorescent white jizz spurting into the air over my shoulder. In huge streams, it coated my face, chest, and legs in hot liquid. The base of his cock swelled and he groaned beneath me like he was in pain. I sat up and shifted forward, my wet core sliding along his torso, pulling another long, deep moan from him.

"Are you okay?" I wiped the alien jizz from my face and peered down at him.

He laughed. "Aye, lass. I am." He reached up and placed his thumbs under my chin, fingers over my ears, and tugged my head down to his. His wild tongue finally slowed and gently licked my lips and face. He lapped most of the alien cum from my face and chest.

We shared a long, sensual kiss on the ground in the barn as I absorbed the mix of both of us on his lips. His hands clenched in my hair, pulling it tightly as he softly hummed.

I thought back on that loud crack of wood before we fell. It was like a release of tension, a break in a fault line giving me permission to stop worrying and trust him to catch me, and he did. My fears disappeared with that break. I'd overcome a huge obstacle, and not only had I been okay with being

touched, I'd allowed myself to experience extremely intimate pleasure. I couldn't hide my smile of pride, and Skoll answered with a grin of his own.

Slowly, the muscles of his neck relaxed, and his grip on my hair loosened. I rested my cheek on his shoulder and looked down at the wet, sticky mess we'd made. "I'm fairly certain now that you aren't going to steal my elephant."

His chest rippled up with the buoyancy of laughter then settled down with a contented sigh. "Nai, lass. Your elephant is safe with me."

My fears seemed so irrational now. How did I not trust this shockingly caring alien who had freed me and wanted to help me?

"Oh my curry. I left it on the stove." My head popped up, but his hands brought it down again.

"Glasha is tending to it." Something clinked as it patted me on the back, and I realized it was the jewelry on his tail.

I cleared my throat and struggled to accept I'd just made out with an alien with a tail. "I, uh, attempted to make something like the food from home, but you don't really have anything like turmeric. It should be good enough though to get the idea. There's plenty for everyone."

He spoke with his eyes closed, his voice languid. "I'll have Bazur call the staff to the bonfire then, and we shall all sample your Earthdro food, but I can tell you now that nothing in the universe will ever surpass the divine bliss I have just tasted."

Wow. Post-orgasm Skoll had a way with words. My cheeks heated and the butterflies in my tummy began to party again. I separated myself from him before we ended up doing more training in the barn and missed dinner altogether. "I'd better clean up first."

"Mmm. Unfortunately, you must." We stood and he stepped back, giving me space again, but his eyes were all over me, taking in the sight of the fluorescent cum smeared all over my front. If the others saw me now, they'd totally know what we'd been up to. "I'll guide you in through the back so

you can have some privacy.” He motioned for me to leave the barn, and I walked ahead of him.

“Thank you.”

As we left, the animals who had been silent, stirred to life, offering gentle clomps and soft brays to say goodbye to us.



## Chapter 18 They Like Each Other

*Skoll*

I didn't want her to wash my mark from her skin. Nothing would please me more than to walk right into the Queen's House and show it off to the other Nivveok and all the orcs. It would proclaim her as mine to everyone.

But that would be wrong for many reasons, the greatest of which was that she was not mine and never would be. She belonged on Earth with her people, her animals, and her freedom. It would be selfish of me to keep her here where the future was uncertain. Dolvena could erase her memory of all the trauma she'd experienced on Aziza and return her to the path that was meant for her on her home planet. This abduction was a temporary detour in the life she deserved.

I walked her into the main house through the back so that she could go to her sleeping quarters next to mine without being seen. My cock swelled again as I washed, thinking of her on the other side of the wall as I had done for the last few nights. I relieved the pressure with my fist, but the illness still flared. It had tasted her and wanted more regardless of her needs or what was honorable.

When I emerged in fresh bretten, she was already in the kitchen with Glasha, so I walked silently out to the bonfire and joined the orcs who had already gathered at my request. Bazur lit the fire, and they stared at me awkwardly, waiting for me to speak.

"Is there a problem?" I asked Bazur.

He glanced at Tobian before turning back to me. "We haven't had a meal together at the bonfire in a long time."

This was true. The last time we'd done this was before my uncle had been killed. That was my fault. I'd been too focused on the animals, the perebreum, the experiments, that I'd ignored the ones who were faithful to me through the darkest of days. Many of the orcs died defending my uncle, and I owed their kin my loyalty.

“My mistake. Forgive me. We are a family. Are we not?”

Their faces slowly unfroze, and smiles broke out among the group. “We are.” Bazur patted my shoulder.

I held up a bottle of gravya and swung it in the air. “Drink! Don’t worry. My friends have come to visit. Ajani and Glasha have prepared a special meal. Enjoy yourselves.”

Vonne, Nefer, Tornoc, and Stella approached us, and we exchanged introductions of those who hadn’t already met. Polite tail stomps or head nods with clicks were exchanged, and we sat down to watch the building fire as glasses of gravya were shared all around.

“How goes the patrols?” Vonne asked me directly instead of speaking to Bazur or the others. Despite the greeting he’d shared with them, I could see a lack of trust in his eyes. The humans especially glanced warily at the orcs. A few minutes in the company of Bazur and his workers and they’d quickly be dispelled of any previous notions they held about orcs and their savage brutality.

“Mine was all clear, ” I stated. “Bazur?”

My ranch manager frowned as he poked at the fire. “Some silverheads came by the decoy spot. Led by a gray-scaled Krassokdro, ugly eyes, chin shaped like a tusk.”

The mere mention of Dagmar made my blood boil and brought a deep growl to my chest. He showed up at the place I’d declared as my location while on leave. “Did you speak to him?”

“He asked after you. I told him I’d seen you there that morning and you were likely out hunting.” He shrugged like he thought that was a sufficient answer, which it was.

“Mmm. A’write. I’ll spend more time there tomorrow in case he comes again.”

We were all quietly contemplating the news that the Duigari were looking for me when Glasha and Ajani appeared carrying large crocks of food. They placed them on the tray above the fire to keep warm, and the orcs broke out into song.



It was good to hear the old meal time tune again. I'd nearly forgotten it.

When they quieted down, Ajani made a happy noise from her throat as she placed a serving spoon in one of the crocks. "This is what I call Almost Cape Curry. It's spicy and a little sweet. Glasha made the meat separately if you'd like to add it to the curry." She spoke quickly and moved in stilted jerks, but she didn't need to be nervous. On Aziza, we ate whatever was offered and always liked it.

Without taking a portion for herself, she curled her hair over her shoulder and chose a seat on a boulder near me.

Glasha eyed the space between us, likely measuring if it was wide enough for her to fit, as she scooped up her own plate. I scowled at her to let her know she wasn't welcome there. In the end, she took a seat next to Tobian, and I relaxed.

The Nivveoks and their mates served up plates and began to eat. The orcs went last, all of them adding the meat to the curry as none of them were vegetarian. I prepared a plate without meat and handed it to her.

"Thank you." She waited while I spooned mine, and she didn't eat until I sat down next to her again.

I decided to try the curry without meat so I could see what Ajani was tasting. It was as she described. Sweet and spicy with a smooth sauce of many layered flavors. The vegetables were tender but not mushy and offered a nice crunch. I did notice the lack of meat but decided to wait until later to add it. "It's delicious, Ajani."

As everyone muttered in agreement, I caught her eye and mouthed, "Good girl." She looked away and tried to hide her smile, but she could hide nothing from me anymore.

I knew her intimately now, and I could read even the most subtle of her body's reactions. The slight change in color in her neck, the heightened concentration of her scent, and the clenching of her thighs told me she was remembering our time in the barn and struggling to control her lust.

I had strapped my cock to my leg in anticipation of my arousal, so my plate did not rise in the air as I held it on my lap.

“Is the meat pleasing as well?” Glasha asked loudly, forcing me to pull my gaze from Ajani and look at her.

“Aye, Glasha. Nice job.” She grinned smugly, and her eyes passed over Ajani before she settled down.

“I remember you now,” Stella said to Ajani. “From the mines. You came right before I, uh, left.”

Ajani looked up at her with her eyes wide. “You were there? In Crone?”

Stella nodded eagerly as if she were happy to have been a slave, but more likely she was just happy to see Ajani again and share her experience. “My troll was named Dohlan. Yours?”

“Burmog.” She frowned as she said it, and I began to plan a trip to Crone to kill a troll named Burmog. “I’m sorry. I don’t remember you,” Ajani said.

Stella’s face grew more appropriately solemn. “We both looked a lot different back then. I escaped when Tor’s bike hit Dohlan’s hut.”

Ajani pinched her brow as if she were remembering. “Ah, yes. I heard about that. They were looking for you, and Dohlan was injured in the crash.”

Tornoc grunted. “He was injured but not by the crash. I beat him that day but let him live because Stella needed medical care. He’s dead now. I made sure of it.” His gaze met mine. “Killed Burmog too.”

I nodded as I mentally canceled my trip to Crone.

“No humans remained, and the mines were abandoned,” Tor continued.

“We must’ve already been gone. Shortly after Stella escaped, there was some commotion in the settlement. The orcs were fighting the trolls and it looked like they might win, but then the Duigari arrived on golden hoverbikes and

captured all the human females and the orcs. We all ended up in the Zul's laboratory, which I have since learned is inside the Dome."

I hadn't heard the full story from Ajani before, but it sounded like the orcs had attempted a rebellion and failed. We had much to discuss.

"So the other girls were in the lab? Are they alive?" Stella asked.

"Aye, they're alive," I answered, not mentioning the many bodies that I had tossed into the disposal. "I have seen them in the holding chamber and in the cryogenic pods for gestation. I have a scheme worked out with the orcs to rescue them. I'll need your help now, Vonne."

"That's why we're here. Anything you need. Good job, brother." Vonne took a large bite of the meat that had been served.

"You can praise me when they are safe and thawed. They're on nanotech right now that keeps them alive but is also killing them. The sooner they are off it the better. Ajani is weaning from it now. Eating solid food instead of the injection. Raxteemi will need to prepare facilities for the thaw. There is much work to do."

Vonne grinned at me. "Aye, he's already preparing."

"Good." I was glad to be back on cordial terms with Vonne after the spat we'd had about my dehorning and the conflict between the human females when they met. Horned warriors didn't hold grudges against each other. We were brothers after all and forgave our frequent bouts with stupidity.

I finished my plate and stood to add some meat. Stella screamed and jumped into Tor's lap. I dropped my plate and stood guard in front of Ajani. We all drew swords and faced outward in a circle. I didn't see or hear anything.

"What is it, lass?" Tor asked her.

"There's a mouse!" She pointed under the rock she had been sitting on.

Tor bent down and pulled Rasling up by the tail. He was about to toss him into the fire.

“You’ll not kill the mouse. It’s my pet,” I said.

Tor paused and glared at me. “This?”

“Aye. Useless thing.” I stepped closer and held out my hand. “Rasling, come.”

The mouse jumped into my palm, and I smiled at him as I petted him gently with my finger. The laughter around the campfire distracted me. I looked at Vonne for clarification, but he didn’t respond.

“You named the mouse Rasling?” Tornoc had no problem explaining their humor to me.

Good Zenas. They were teasing me because I named him after the legendary fire-breathing serpent, the Raseri. It had turned out Vonne and Tornoc had the ability to shift into a Raseri-like creature now that they’d bonded. “I named him before either of you bonded and shifted.”

“He’s your wee Raseri,” Tor teased with a chuff.

A’write, I admitted it was a little funny. “Rasling is not as bad as Snuffletje.”

Vonne laughed. “Who was named Snuffletje?”

“I named my mouse that, and Skoll said I might as well cut off his balls too,” Ajani offered.

Everyone around the campfire roared with laughter. Ajani seemed shocked at first but then joined in on the amusement by adding her own smile. “I’ll go get him now so the mice can meet.”

She stood up and I watched as she walked back to the main house. We were still chuckling when she came back and pointed to her shoulder. “This is Heldmuis. It means hero mouse.”

This set off another round of laughter, and Ajani joined in easily. It was nice to see her smile. She was gorgeous when

she smiled, and I felt proud that I had given her that joy here at my ranch.

I offered Rasling up in my palm and Ajani held hers up too. Her fingertip touched my claw as the two mice skeptically sniffed each other. The mice backed away at first but then changed their minds and began to groom each other with contented little chitters.

“Aww, look, they like each other,” Ajani said. The others were still chuckling, but my focus remained solely on her.

I licked my lips and tasted the memory of her sweet nectar on my tongue. “Aye, lass. They do.”



# Chapter 19 Treasonous Rut

## *Skoll*

As the moons sank below the horizon, the orcs finished off the gravya and stumbled back to the ranch house as they sang drunken tunes. I talked strategy with Vonne and Tornoc while Ajani chatted with the human females.

If I didn't look at her, the illness took over and my brain fogged with thoughts of lust mixed with frustration to the point that I felt like I couldn't handle a moment more without touching her again. But then our eyes met, and she smiled at me.

Knowing she was happy and safe on my ranch made the illness fade and a heated calm settle in my chest. Vonne offered to take Ajani to the Lodestar early, but she surprised me by choosing to stay with me as long as possible.

When we were finally alone together, I brought out my stob, which she called a guitar, and played some songs for her. We talked long into the night. I told her everything about the Alliance, Dolvena, and the battle plan for the Dome. I confessed that I was in fact a "failed" experiment of the Zul, but they didn't have the laboratory back then. In the early days, mothers still lived outside the Dome and the Duigari created Interfactors to enforce the rules. If a child developed horns, they would kill the mothers and send the children to orphanages. My mother eluded them for a long time and then sent me to my uncle for protection.

Ajani shared stories with me of her parents and her home on Earth. She was very poor but the national park allowed her to stay in the ranger's station with the animals. I listened in awe as she told me of her survival struggles under dangerous conditions. She'd planned to become a veterinarian before she was abducted, and she'd earned a scholarship to the school that would teach her. All her dreams were smashed when she was abducted, likely by phukas, and brought to Crone to work in the mines.

“I would love to stay all night and talk with you, Sunshine, but I have much work to do in the lab.”

She stood quickly and stepped away from me. “Of course. I’m sorry. Don’t let me keep you.”

“Every moment with you is my pleasure. Don’t apologize.”

After seeing Ajani safely to her room, I rushed to the laboratory to do damage control. I took another dose of the anti-mating hormone and attempted to focus on my work. Time was running out, and I had many cylinders of perebreum to prepare.

What happened in the barn was... Even the mildest thought of it made my cock swell painfully again. If I gave in to the constant thoughts of her hot core rubbing up and down my shaft, the desire to race to her room became overwhelming. I shuddered, trying to shake it, but it was no use. It had me. Whatever it was. She had me.

I pulled out the components for the tracking device I was working on. In my mind, I envisioned it flying through the Dome, finding its target, and attaching to the side of the Zul’s escape pod. In reality, the chances of it working were slim. I stayed up all night fine-tuning the tracker, and as the sun came up, I began to work on the perebreum.

As I was mixing elements for the compound, Bazur came into the barn and grunted to get my attention.

“What is it?” I scowled at all my work which had become a huge mess on my laboratory table.

“The romfeldae are here.” Bazur’s soft voice pulled me from my mania.

“They’re early. That’s fantastic.” I ran out of the barn, and sure enough, in the pasture, a herd of romfeldae was snacking on the low grass there.

“Did they all survive?” I asked him as I began to count their heads.



“They did. The guide was skilled. They need care and training, but we’ve got them. They’re safe. Getting them up the mountain was a challenge, but they made it.” He smiled with pride as he gazed at the grazing herd.

“Excellent. You paid the guide well?”

“Aye. He was very happy with the exchange.”

“Good. So he won’t be a problem in the future.” I approached the largest of the beasts and placed a hand on her flank. She pulled back, but I kept it firmly in place. “There, there, lassie. You’re safe now. All female?” I asked Bazur.

“One bull. He’s in the front there.”

The bull had separated himself physically from the females but was clearly part of the herd. “They’re majestic. Aren’t they?”

“Truly. A great addition to the reserve.”

Dolvena had come through for me. The deal she’d crafted worked out perfectly, and they looked like Ajani had described. Long proboscis, curved pearly tusks, large flaps for ears. A flutter of joy rushed through me and eagerness to show her, but I had to appear at the decoy spot first to assuage the Duigari that I was where I’d said I would be.

“Their tusks put yours to shame.”

“Aye, they do.” Bazur laughed. His tusks were merely elongated teeth while the romfeldae had tusks to rival my longest sword.

“Take them to the enclosure by the waterfall. Show them their new home. I’ll bring Ajani to see them after I get back.”

“You look worn, Skoll. You should sleep.”

It was kind of Bazur to look out for me. Since my uncle died, he’d taken on the role of substitute father to me, but I was still his boss and did not answer to him.

“I’ll sleep when I’m done. There’s too much to do. Too much at stake. I have to go and make an appearance at the

decoy spot this morning. Make sure Ajani doesn't see them before I get back."

Bazur looked like he wanted to object, but I ignored him and walked to my quarters to shed my bretien. I changed into my Duigari compliant clothes for off-duty guards. I loathed the leather pants and jacket, but if I did run into one of them, I had to appear to be in order.

Blex. My beard. I'd allowed it to grow out while I was on my break, and now I needed to shave to comply with the Duigari appearance codes. In my water closet, I took my razor to my face and stopped short. My beard was white instead of blue. My lashes as well. My hair was a lighter blue. I removed my hat to inspect the dehorning incisions. Short, silvery white hairs grew from my scalp.

What was going on here? I roughly shaved the hideous white hair from my lower face before covering up my runes with paint. I gathered my hair under the helmet and the screws sunk painfully into my scalp. My reflection showed an official Duigari guard in fully compliant gear.

Even with the traitorous hair gone, I couldn't stop staring at my eyes. They appeared much lighter in this light. Even my scales were glinting the palest blue. It couldn't be.

I dashed back to the lab at top speed. Where were they? In the storage area. I'd placed them there the night before I left. I tore through the cabinet, breaking bottles as I cleared the shelves to find the container.

I found them.

My horns.

I'd salvaged the remnants and preserved them in gel. I dropped to my knees, and the container broke open on the rough ground.

White horns spilled out in the mess of gel before me. Solid white. They'd been dark green when I put them in there. Now, they were as white as the tusks of the romfeldae.

My horns changed color while separated from my body.

How could this have happened?

It was impossible. I'd taken the anti-mating hormone. I'd been cautious with Ajani, and yet, despite all my efforts to prevent it, I'd bonded with her.

I contacted Raxteemi via the comms.

"How are you, Skoll? I heard you're back at the ranch temporarily?" he asked brightly.

I didn't have a moment for his idle chatter. "The horns. After you cut them off. Have you ever seen them change?"

"What do you mean?"

Och. How could he be so obtuse at such an important time? "After you remove the horns and you dispose of them, do they change color?" I had to struggle to speak clearly as my mind was racing.

"I don't keep them for long. They don't change color. Why?"

"Is there any reason that discarded horns might turn white in preservation gel?"

"Nai. The gel should stabilize the color. Did yours change to white?" His voice rose in alarm as he began to comprehend the situation.

"Aye. In the storage cylinder. In the gel. The remnants are solid white like Tornoc's."

He was silent for far too long before he finally said it. My worst fear confirmed by the medic. "Then you must've bonded. Have you been intimate with one of the females?" He dove straight to the heart of the matter.

"Nai." I gritted my teeth and forced myself to stop denying it. "There is one that is special, aye. I rescued her earlier than the others. I took an anti-bonding hormone. It should've worked." I slammed my fist on the ground. How could I have let this happen?

"What kind of hormone?" he asked.

"The one for the shakturs to prevent the rut."

He gasped. “That’s very species specific. You should’ve tested it before trying it on yourself.”

“I tested it on the mice. It worked. Then I estimated the dose for my size.” I had to struggle to hide the tension in my voice. This would be catastrophic if it were true.

“A rut is quite different from a bond. The chemical agents involved...”

He rattled on, but I didn’t hear him. I was too busy searching for Rasling. Where was he?

I found him in a cove in the wall.

With Heldmuis.

Happy little squeaks coming from both of them.

As they rutted.

I looked closer. Not that I wanted to watch two mice going at it, but something was different about them.

They were both solid white. Not a shred of color on either of their bodies.

“Blex.”

Useless pets.

“Useless you are. You hear me? Useless.”

They did not hear me as they were fully enthralled in their treasonous rut.



## Chapter 20 Rogue Orb

*Skoll*

Sprinting back to the main house, I stumbled over a divot in the pasture and landed face down in the sod. “Blex!” I clammored to my feet and resumed my run. I’d have to ask Vonne about the bond later. Right now, I had to get to the decoy spot and make an appearance as Krath. I grabbed my Duigari issued blaster and headed through the house. Running from the inescapable.

Bonding now was inconvenient, impossible, and everything I didn’t want. Returning to the Dome would be challenging enough without worrying about the bond and the potential to shift into an out of control Rage Monster. The women and the orcs were depending solely on me.

Yet, a huge part of me was selfishly thrilled. To have a bondmate, even for a short time, would make my entire existence meaningful, even if it led to my imminent death.

Glasha found me in the foyer. “Good morning, Skoll,” she offered with her kind and calm voice as her eyes took in my appearance as a Duigari guard again. “Are you heading out?”

I was completely frazzled and incoherent but managed a gruff response. “I’m going to my decoy spot. I’ll be back in the evening. See to Ajani while I’m gone.”

“She seems to be doing fine on her own.”

“See to her!” My voice came out unusually rough.

She flinched and closed her eyes. “Anything else?”

Driff. The Rage Monster was already rearing his ugly head. None of this was Glasha’s fault. “I’m exhausted.” And frightened, and confused, and extremely horny. “Och, aye, one favor you can do for me.”

“What is it?” Her eyes lit up like I was about to give her a present.

“Can you inquire at the market if they have something like turmeric?”

“I’ve never heard of that before. Is it an herb?”

“Aye. Or a spice, from Earth. For Ajani.” I spoke quickly as I situated my weapons on my belt.

Her face fell, but I barely noticed. I had no time left. I’d wasted it all.

“If you find it, ask for root stock and any other fruits and vegetables that we could grow here that might be similar to what she likes from her region. Get mesanclou seedlings so we can start an orchard.”

“I thought she was leaving...”

“Quiet!” I clenched my fists and summoned my last thread of self-control. “Glasha, please don’t ask me any more questions. Just see to her and find out about the flora from Earth.”

“A’write.” She smiled weakly.

I hadn’t said what she wanted to hear, but I was in a frantic hurry. I left her behind and walked out to the garage that housed my hoverbikes.

They floated in the electromagnetic bays of the vise that kept them upright for storage and maintenance. I was about to disable the flux in one of the bays when a distant whirring sound drew my attention. It grew louder, almost deafening, and I walked out to find the source.

It came from the southeastern quadrant of the magnetic shield. A large circle shimmered and buzzed. Something was trying to get through.

My hand instinctively reached for my blaster. Since I’d constructed the protective barrier, nothing had penetrated it.

The sound peaked as a vibrating silver sphere breached the shield with a burst of light, leaving ripples in its wake.

An orb that was only the height of my knee landed and rolled toward me. It came to a stop and emitted a flashing red

laser beam from the center. The beam locked on my chest and stopped flashing. The orb began to beep, likely signaling it had found its target.

Me.

I aimed and fired at it.

The laser blasts bounced off and refracted to the side.

“What is it?” Bazur approached with his sword drawn and a rope in his hand. What did he think he would do, lasso the thing like he did a bull?

“It looks like some kind of surveillance device.” I took a step closer, and the laser beam tracked my movements. “But how did it get through the shield? It must be diamagnetic. It repelled the laser too.”

“Whatever it is, I want it out of here.” He raised his sword.

“I don’t think a sword will...”

He brought the blade down on the top of the orb and made a small indent in the metal. The ball rolled slightly to the side and sent out another laser that locked on his chest.

Bazur frowned at the laser and drew an axe. He swung and hit it like a piece of wood. The bottom portion of it sunk into the dirt, but the orb didn’t remove the lasers from our chests.

I figured it couldn’t hurt, so I drew my dagger and stabbed the thing in the sensor. The tip of my blade barely scratched the thick surface. I attempted to wedge it into the seam of the clear plate and use leverage to force it open.

A blue light shot from the sensor and burned my face. I jumped back. “Blex!”

It shot several rounds of blue lasers at Bazur, and he was forced to drop his axe as he inspected his wounds. “That daft thing.”

The thing shot me again in the chest, creating a hole in my uniform and charring my scales. I picked up a mound of peat and tossed it at the sensor. The red light disappeared from my chest. “Throw some dirt at it.”



Bazur threw a chunk of peat as well. “Take that, you blexing bacrass.” The red light on his chest flickered, and the thing shot him again. Bazur charged at it. “Now, listen here, you daft orb. Get your light off me and stop shooting my chest.”

“It doesn’t have voice communication, Baz.”

He grunted and glared at our mysterious intruder.

“I have an idea. Come with me.” I walked back toward the garage and the sphere didn’t move. When Bazur came toward me, the sphere rolled behind him, the red light tracking his backside. He continued to send evil looks to it over his shoulder.

Inside the garage, I stopped at the hoverbike vise. “If it’s diamagnetic, I should be able to capture it if I switch the polarity of this induction field to reverse the flux.” I perused my control panel for the switch that would do that.

“I’ve no idea what you’re saying, lad.”

As I searched for the switch, the sphere began to beep loudly and shoot laser blasts in all directions. Bazur flinched and started banging on it with his axe.

The sphere shot at me again, and I had to duck to avoid getting hit. “I’ve almost got it.”

I found the switch, but it was stuck in position. I’d never used it before. I grabbed my trusted sledge and slammed that switch hard.

The vise dropped the hoverbikes as the inductive flux changed direction. The orb wobbled for a moment then flew toward the vise as if being sucked into a black hole. It hovered in the center between the thick plates that produced the flux.

“Smash it to bits,” Bazur said.

The thing sent several more blasts at him and started landing them on my body. The visor protected my eyes, but the ones that landed on my chin and neck burned like fire. I pushed through it and searched the control panel for the vise’s

movement lever. I smashed it into the closed position and the plates began to close.

“Stand on this side, Bazur.”

The frame of the structure and the metal of the control panel provided some cover from the blasts the sphere was shooting out rapidly now.

He came to stand next to me, and we watched as the powerful plates closed on the orb. The satisfying crunch of metal filled the garage, and the lasers slowed. I ramped the force up to maximum levels. The plates quickly and easily smashed the sphere to a flat plane. All lasers stopped and the orb's lights went out. It whirred as its power left it.

“You're scrap metal now,” Bazur said to the thing.

I laughed. “The question remains who sent it through the shield and why.”



## Chapter 21 Recalled

*Skoll*

“Krath!” I stopped short and turned my head. Was I hearing voices now?

“Krath. Allow us to pass immediately!”

Blex. Driff. Someone was verbally requesting entrance at the boundary. Bazur and I ran out to see who it was. Dagmar and two guards on golden hoverbikes waited at the perimeter. My scales rising, I stood frozen as I watched my worst enemy demanding entrance into my sanctuary.

The last time the Duigari had entered the ranch, my uncle and half the orcs were massacred. My muscles braced for a fight. I had to protect my property.

An image of Ajani running for her life came to my mind, and all I wanted to do was kill him.

But no. He believed I was Krath. He'd called me that name. I was wearing the Duigari uniform, and so I had to fall back into my role as guard.

I spoke quietly to Bazur. “I have to let them in. They believe I am a guard. Hide Ajani.”

He nodded but growled toward the hovering bikes.

“I see the hate in your eyes, Baz. Don't fight them here. The time will come. We'll get our revenge, but you must wait.” It was foolish of the orcs to challenge them last time. Their weapons were stronger than anything we had, but the orcs were a proud species and rarely turned away from a fight.

He grunted and took off back toward the house.

I waited as long as possible and then walked to the lab and deactivated the shield.

Dagmar's focus was drilled in on me as he entered through the opening in the mountain and landed in the main pasture. I was grateful for the visor over my eyes that would hide the

physical changes I was experiencing. My cover was intact for now.

“Dagmar.” I stomped my tail in greeting and took several breaths to school my features, but inside I was reeling.

He parked and glanced around as he approached me, his two guards hanging back by the bikes. He didn’t greet me or stomp his tail. He seemed to be equally tense from the tight set of his jaw.

“I sent in a reconnaissance drone. Where is it?”

Blex. I’d just smashed his drone. “It’s in my garage. I disabled it.” His gaze moved to the holes in my uniform. “How did you find me here?” I asked to distract him.

“We followed an orc who said he’d seen you.”

“Ah. One of the ranch hands.”

“This doesn’t match the location you gave for your residence during your break.”

“Right.” I had to think fast, but my brain was exhausted and worried about Ajani. “This was my uncle’s ranch. He passed, and I’m here to make arrangements.”

“I never knew this place was here.” He was lying. The Duigari knew all about this ranch and had raided it when they first took over Krassoks. They were the reason for the magnetic shield that I’d invented. There was no way he hadn’t heard the story.

“My uncle was a bit of a recluse,” I said.

He squinted and leaned forward to inspect my face. “You look pale and have burns on your skin. Are you ill?”

“Nai. My scales always lighten when I visit my uncle’s ranch. Less sun on this side of the mountain. My scales are molting. “

He appeared dubious then started looking around. “Ajani is missing.”

“Which one was Ajani?”

“Specimen 2568B. You know her. Don’t act coy.” He walked toward the barn, and the beast inside me roared in frustration.

“Oh, yes. I remember her. The one who could not be touched.” I followed behind him dutifully, struggling not to wedge my sword into his back.

“Correct.”

The barn was in complete disarray. Perebreum compound and technology were strewn about. At least my white horns were hidden in the mess I’d made of the storage area and the wreckage of his drone was out of sight in the garage.

He headed straight to the bench and inspected my tools. “You’re dealing in contraband?”

“Nai. This is all my uncle’s mess. I’m here to dispose of it.”

He grabbed a cylinder of perebreum and held it up. The distinctive blue color was a giveaway. I couldn’t pretend it was something else. “Let me guess how he died. He got caught.”

“Something like that.”

He was terrible at feigning ignorance, but I played along.

His eyes scanned the rest of the barn as he turned the cylinder and gripped it firmly in his palm. Then he walked out with it still in his hand. The filthy thief was stealing it from me. I’d promised it to the orcs, and I didn’t have time to prepare more.

I fought every instinct not to knock him down and take it back.

“We are all out on the hunt for Ajani. We could use your help,” he said over his shoulder.

“Of course. As soon as my leave is over...”

“Tomorrow. You’ll come back and join the search party. She has to be around here somewhere.” He arched his neck to peer inside the main ranch house. Then he walked toward it.

Ajani's room and the kitchen were empty as his boots clomped on the floor of the foyer. It appeared that Bazur and Glasha had made it to the safe room in time.

Dagmar poked at the wall with his laser gun. "Anyone else here?"

"Just a few workers."

He inspected the kitchen but nothing caught his eye. On his way out the back door, he tripped on the threshold. He tumbled on his side and fell on twisted legs. He turned and glared at me like I had done it.

The entire ranch went silent as he took a breath and climbed to his feet. My heart pounded as he walked slowly back toward his hoverbike. I tried not to celebrate early, but I was excited that I'd passed the inspection and he seemed to still believe I was a legitimate guard. "Ajani was always trouble," he muttered as he slipped my perebreum into his saddlebag.

Och, nai. He'd better not say her name again, or I'd allow the wild beast inside me out to smother him to the ground.

"A bit of a whore, that one. She was always seducing me, trying to get me to do her favors."

The monster inside burst into a rage of flames. *Kill him.*

As satisfying as it would be to kill Dagmar, now was not the time. I needed him on my side to earn entry back into the Dome. He would walk today, but soon, soon, I'd tear out his heart and force him to choke on it as he begged for mercy.

"I'll finish up my duties here and report to the laboratory in the morning. I'll help you find her and bring her back." It took all my ability to add a helpful tone to my voice and hide my disgust.

"Aye. And then I'll spank the naughty wench for causing me so much grief with her antics."

Flames stung like hot lava in my mouth. My scales pulled tight, venom dripped from my fangs, and I had to fold my lips over them to disguise them.

“Go get the drone,” he said to one of the guards who had been waiting by his bike.

I followed him into the garage, released the smashed drone from the vise, and handed it to him. He dutifully carried the wreckage out to his commander.

Dagmar eyed the useless drone as the guard brought it closer. “You’ll pay for that from your salary.”

I nodded and looked down.

To my relief, Dagmar’s interest had faded, and he’d completed his inspection of my dead uncle’s ranch. Finally, he mounted his hoverbike and left with his guards and my perebreum.

As soon as he was gone, I enabled the shield and raced to the safe room in the lower levels of the ranch house.

Ajani was there, huddling in the corner with Glasha. Bazur stood guard at the door. “It’s safe now. You can come out.”

She rose slowly and looked at me with those trusting eyes. I wanted to run to her and pull her into my arms, and yet I couldn’t. She wasn’t truly mine and never would be.

“Dagmar showed up here, but he’s gone now. I’ve been recalled to the Dome tomorrow.”

“So soon?”

“He’s ordered me to join the hunt for you.”

She gasped and her mouth dropped open.

“You’ll have to go to the Lodestar tonight.”

She nodded absently.

“I need to update Vonne right now and send out extra patrols.” I shook my head, trying to clear the chaos and panic. Ajani was safe. I could relax a little, but I had many questions for Vonne about the bond and the Raseri that was flaring to life inside me. “Then I have a surprise for you before you leave.”

“I love surprises,” she whispered, her voice stunned.



She still wore her nightgown, her hair wild from sleep. Imagine the joy of waking up with Ajani looking so perfectly messy every day. A joy I'd never know but would spend my life dreaming about after she left me. "Get dressed, and I'll be back to pick you up before midday."

"It's a date."

I didn't understand her meaning, so I faked a grin and took a moment to catalog the image of her in my mind. When she was gone, I'd only have my memories of her to ease the pain.

I walked away from her. Glasha and Bazur followed behind me silently. "Thank you for protecting her."

Bazur grunted. We were shaken by the reminder that the Zul was controlling us all, even if we were not in the Dome.

My plan had taken a major hit. The perebreum for the orcs wasn't ready, the tracker wasn't finished, I was hopelessly bonded with my mate who was completely unaware and planned to leave me, and I had an unpredictable monster inside me that could foil the whole thing.

I had always known that Ajani would leave me. I wanted her to return to her planet where she would be happy, but I never imagined the overwhelming agony that would seize my soul at the thought of being separated from her.

There was no time to dwell on my sorrows. The bond complicated things, but my cover was still intact. I could still save them all. I might sacrifice myself in the process, but Ajani and the other women would be free from the Dome and the Zul's evil experiment. My life was a small token to offer for that reward.



## Chapter 22 Cured

*Ajani*

My hands trembled as I dressed in my kilt. Seeing Skoll in his uniform again sent a chill down my spine and threw me right back into the laboratory.

A specimen held against my will by aliens who looked just like him with their silver helmets and shields over their eyes that hid their true emotions.

It wasn't until he'd smiled at me that I'd recognized him as Skoll, my undercover hero. I'd grown too complacent here on the ranch. He'd made me feel so safe that I'd forgotten the true risks. I'd escaped from the Dome. I was a fugitive, and Dagmar had teams searching for me. The reality of it hit me like a fierce sandstorm.

I had a choice to make. Curl up and hide or be brave and face this uncertain future. I'd promised Skoll in the beginning that I was strong enough to handle this, and now it was time to ante-up. I pulled on my boots, combed out my unruly hair, and wrangled it into a thick braid that hung to the middle of my back.

As I followed Tobian through his morning chores in the menagerie, I could barely hold in my excitement. I felt like gushing to him about Skoll, but I couldn't. I asked him a few questions, but he didn't offer me any new info. His mind was fully focused on the animal feed and care.

At lunchtime, I was still wondering what Skoll's surprise could be. Hopefully, it was something I could take with me when I left for the Lodestar. If it would have to stay here, I'd be disappointed to only have one day with it. Heldmuis came out of his hiding spot and climbed up onto my lap. "Hey, friend. I've got some sad news."

The familiar arms of grief gripped my chest. If it hurt this much to say goodbye to a mouse, I hated to imagine the pain leaving Skoll would bring. We'd become so close in such a short time. We'd made huge breakthroughs with my phobia,

and he'd come to mean a lot to me. The kisses and intimacy we'd shared were magical, and my head was still buzzing from the thrill. It sure felt like a lot more than just a lesson, but he hadn't confirmed any of that. As far as I knew, he was still determined to avoid bonding like Glasha had said.

So all that I had with him was fleeting. My long term solution waited for me on that ship and hopefully back on Earth. My first conscious trip on a spaceship. I was both excited and terrified of the strange new things I'd see.

Skoll arrived in the kitchen wearing his bretten and beanie again instead of the guard outfit. He looked good but very different. He'd shaved his scruffy beard that was between my legs not too long ago. Splotches dotted his face, and white eyelashes framed his sky blue eyes. He stomped his tail, and I attempted to smile, but I couldn't hide my worry. "You seem a little ashen. Is it the illness?"

I couldn't read what was going on behind his stoic face. "The lack of sun on the ranch mutes my colors. I had a run in with a drone earlier." He shrugged like these were all normal things.

"Oh." His factual answer didn't sit quite right with me. He'd said he was sick, and now he looked pale after Dagmar's visit. Even the tattoos on his arms appeared light gray when they were solid black before.

He frowned for a second then distracted me with a devastating smile. "Are you ready for your surprise?" He had several swords strapped to his back and an axe tucked into his belt. What kind of surprise required him to be heavily armed?

"Yes." I shoved my last bite of lunch into my mouth and stood to clean up my dishes.

As I washed them in the water basin, he started talking. "Today when I saw Dagmar, I had a vision of you running for your life. The thought of him catching you terrified me." His voice was tight, and his shoulders were stiff.

I turned around and leaned against the counter as I dried a dish. "Don't worry. I'm very fast. He looks like he'd be slow. I

could outrun him.”

“I’d like to see that.” He huffed a disbelieving laugh as his shoulders slowly relaxed.

“You want me to prove it?” He had no idea I was a very fast runner. Back home, it was my favorite sport with my animal friends. “Where are we going today? I’ll run there and show you how fast I am.”

“We’re going to the waterfall.” He raised his chin in challenge, a wry grin growing on his lips.

“Perfect. Are you ready? Try and catch me.” I took off running out the back door, laughing as I heard him grunt and shuffle to catch up.

My boots pounded out a steady beat, and the wind brushed my face, cooling my teeth because I couldn’t hide my smile. I heard his footsteps behind me and felt his presence getting closer. I ran as fast as I could, juicing up my legs like I used to do when I ran through the bush with Ophelia. Elephants can run surprisingly fast.

I peeked over my shoulder, and he was right behind me. I squealed and kicked up my pace, giving it all I had. We were nearly at the waterfall when he chuckled behind me. He was keeping up without even getting winded. He could easily reach out and grab me, but he didn’t. “You can catch me.” I knew he’d never touch me without my permission, but it didn’t take him long to process my request.

A strong arm snaked around my waist and pulled my back up to his chest. I struggled for breath as we stumbled to a stop and he continued his taunting laugh.

He leaned his head down and his breath brushed my ear. “Good girl.” His deep voice rumbled like thunder and I shivered.

My chest felt tight, and the panic bubbled below the surface, but it was all mingled with the delight of the chase. “Was I faster than you thought I’d be?”

“Aye, you’re a lightning bolt.”

I smiled proudly, not only because I'd impressed him with my speed, but also because he'd touched me, and I didn't freak out. "What's my surprise?"

He let go of my waist and pointed to the base of the waterfall. At first, I saw what looked like large purple boulders, but as my eyes focused, they shifted slightly and something flapped in the wind like a flag. Were they elephants?

"Oh my God. No. You didn't."

"I might have done so."

I started to run toward them, and he huffed a laugh as he easily kept pace behind me. Pure joy and excitement propelled my legs forward. I ran up over the barriers at the edge of the enclosure and jumped down.

"They're quite wild. It might not be safe."

I ignored Skoll's warnings and ran right up to the closest one. They weren't exactly elephants, more like woolly mammoths, but they were definitely related to elephants. I pressed my body against the side of one of them and held my arms out. This was how I hugged Ophelia, with my cheek to her flanks and my arms as wide as possible.

And for a brief moment, the gaping hole in my heart where Ophelia used to live was filled again. I was whole. The shock of it surged up through me in a wave of tears. Skoll had given me the greatest gift.

I'd had other elephants at home, but none of them felt like this. This was what I needed. This one was special. I didn't know why, but I was definitely already bonded and in love with this beast.

I sensed Skoll standing close behind me, likely ready to protect me if needed, but if these beasts were anything like elephants, I'd be safe.

I hugged my alien elephant and cried, my shoulders heaving.

Skoll moved to the side so that I could see his worried face. His hands came up like he wanted to touch me, but he pushed them down to his sides.

“I’m okay,” I said tearfully.

“Why do you weep, my sweet lass?” The confusion in his voice made me feel terrible for misleading him.

“I’m not sad. I’m happy. This feels like... It feels like home. Like Ophelia has found me across time and space and we are back together, and I know it’s not her, but my heart just feels so full. I think I love this elephant more than I could ever love anything in the universe.” As I said it aloud, I realized how ridiculous it sounded, but my chest was bursting with love so strong, it could’ve knocked me over. “I’ve never felt like this before with an animal I just met, but I love this thing, whatever you call it.”

“Romfeldae.”

“Oh my God, that’s a beautiful name.” I released the first one I had embraced and walked around her to the next one. “I’m just going to call them elephants.”

“I figured you would.” Skoll watched from farther away this time. I still felt the love but didn’t cry when I wrapped my arms across the next elephant’s flanks. I didn’t touch her tusks because I knew they might be sensitive, but I walked to the front and reached up to massage her trunk. She had deep grooves in her wrinkled skin and sad eyes. “What’s wrong with her?”

“She wore chains. She was a worker romfeldae. She dragged logs up steep mountains.”

“Oh no, my poor baby.” I caressed her proboscis as high as I could reach, but still, I didn’t cry. The overwhelming emotion had passed, I guess. I turned away from her, and Skoll was closer now, standing humbly next to me with his shoulders relaxed, his face patiently observing me with the elephants. My heart lurched, and I had to hold back a sob. “You rescued them?” My voice was a squeaky whisper.

He nodded slowly. “I had some help, but I arranged it. I found out what species we had that was most like your elephants, and Dolvena located a herd that was being used to clear the forests. She sent a team out to negotiate for the beasts, and here they are.”

He shrugged like it was nothing that he had gone to such an effort for me when he had so much to do to prepare for rescuing the other women.

A force like a strong wind pushed at my back and drew me toward him. I felt the urge to jump up and hug him, wrap my arms around his neck, my knees around his hips, and kiss him all over for the kind and thoughtful thing he’d done for me and the animals.

This new feeling was confusingly indiscriminate. At first it was clearly directed at the elephants, and now it seemed to be related to Skoll. It was as if it were moving around, a tangible presence in my heart that changed direction.

To test it out, I moved away from the herd and walked toward the waterfall. The roar of the cascading water helped to clear my thoughts, and the wind blew the mist onto my face and arms.

When I turned around, Skoll was standing to the side watching me. I looked at the herd and listened to my heart. They were stunning, and I was elated to see them, but I didn’t feel like crying.

As my gaze fell upon Skoll, love pulsed in my chest like a booming drum. My shoulders heaved and my heart clenched, bringing a swell of tears to my eyes.

And that was when I knew.

It wasn’t the elephants that I loved so much and made me feel so good.

It was Skoll.

Oh my God. I was in love with Skoll.

The big mountain of an alien who had rescued me from the experiment and risked everything to sneak me out under his



cloak.

I loved him.

The alien who'd said he would never bond with anyone. He'd gone so far as to take hormones to prevent it.

With all that I'd been through and all that we'd done to avoid it, I'd fallen in love with the big blue alien.

It was wonderful.

And awful.

He didn't want it. He'd made that very clear.

My lips pressed tightly together, I held it all inside. I couldn't tell him. He had work to do. He was on a mission that was so important to him that he'd removed his horns. I couldn't be the one to distract him with my silly crush.

Many females had probably fallen for him. He was charming and brave with a killer body and fierce eyes.

God, I'd messed up. Falling for someone completely unavailable to me. How ironic. I finally found a man I loved, and it was impossible to be with him.

He was slipping away before I even had a hold of him. I was destined to leave him tonight. That was my fate. It was what I wanted.

We'd be millions of miles and years apart soon. We only had a few hours before I'd be whisked away to a mothership out in space and he'd be risking his life to save his planet.

It was selfish of me, but I wasn't thinking straight. This was my only chance to be with him, and I was going to make the most of it. I didn't want to leave this planet without having known his touch.

He'd done nothing but hold back with me and treat me like I was fragile. I wanted to see what it was like to experience him full-force without any restraints. When I thought of it, there was no fear or sadness. Just heated desire, longing, and eager wanting. I'd never wanted anyone to touch me more than I wanted Skoll's hands on me everywhere.

I caught his pretty ice blue eyes with mine, and he waited patiently for me to speak, like he always did. So patient even with time and pressure crashing down on his head.

“I have to tell you something.”

“What is it, lass?” He started walking toward me slowly with his gaze narrowed. A spike of fear bubbled in my throat. If he rejected me, I’d regret my next words forever, but if he gave me what I wanted, which Skoll often did, it would alter my life permanently.

“I’m cured.”

His head snapped back and he paused. “What did you say?”



## Chapter 23 Everywhere

*Ajani*

I sucked in a quick breath and held it as Skoll's bright eyes scrutinized me.

Safe. Moving forward. I love him.

"I said I'm cured. The elephants cured me." The wobble in my voice didn't sound convincing to me, but his mouth tipped up on one side.

"Then I should've brought you an elephant instead of a mouse in the laboratory." Mirth tinted his tone.

My gosh, he was so handsome when he smiled, and the heat in his eyes made my stomach flip. "How would you fit an elephant in that room?" I teased.

"If it cured you, without doubt, I'd find a way." His gaze seemed locked on my smile as well.

"Dagmar would've noticed." My cheeks ached from grinning so wide.

"Curse Dagmar. He'll never touch you again." His smile faded, and I was left with his intense eyes on me.

The mist hung thick in the air with unsaid words as he closed the distance between us.

"If you're cured then..." His hands twitched, but he didn't reach out.

"You can touch me if you want to."

He leaned down and hovered his lips by my hair over my ears. "Ajani. I am exhausted and out of my mind with worry over you. Dagmar was here in my sanctuary, and I'm being forced to leave you early. Don't toy with me. I can't guarantee you the patience I've shown you so far." He inhaled deeply like he was smelling me.

I turned and met his gaze with steely determination. "I'm ready."

He growled and gripped my arm with one hand, the back of my neck with the other. “Are you certain?”

“Please touch me, just this once before I have to leave. One time to feel you on my skin. To be truly free.”

His lips slammed into mine, and his fingers clenched in my hair, pulling it painfully tight. I opened and his tongue invaded, filling my mouth and fighting for dominance. Oh boy, he’d been holding back last time because this time he was demanding and forceful. He broke the kiss and licked roughly along my cheek to my ear. “Anywhere?” his deep voice rumbled.

“Everywhere,” I answered.

He delved into my mouth again, and I lost myself in the kiss. The suckers on his tongue were divine as they tugged and rotated slowly around. He released my arm and trailed a claw up my thigh, lifting the skirt of my kilt. I didn’t feel any fear at all, just raw hunger and desire for more, more, more.

Our gasping breaths mingled as we stood in front of the waterfall next to the herd of elephants. “Someone may see us.” I peered behind him to see if we’d been spotted already. It looked clear, but if we were going to do this, I didn’t want an audience.

He grunted and bent down, raising my thighs around his waist as he easily carried me behind the cascade. A tiny rock cove hid behind the water. The rocks were slick with mist, and the humidity plastered my hair to my head.

He set me on my feet and fell to his knees. He pressed his forehead between my breasts. “To touch you like this...”

“I know. It’s amazing.” I caressed the strong muscles of his neck. All these new sensations made it hard to focus.

His hand came up and the claw on his index finger gently pushed the sash of my kilt aside, revealing the top curves of my breasts. He cupped the weight of them in his huge palms and licked across my chest. “We should stop now.”

“Why? I don’t want to stop.”

“I can’t take your innocence from you before you leave. When you return to Earth, you’ll regret it. Whoever you are meant to be with should be the one you trust with that gift.”

“Mmm. About that...”

He peered up at me and I smiled.

Slowly, he stood with his gaze locked on mine. “You continually shock me, and I’m already weak.”

“I’d be open to staying here if...”

He kissed me and tugged on the fabric of my kilt, exposing my breasts fully to him.

“If it’s okay with you...” I finished my sentence when he released my mouth.

“I’ll not separate you from your homeland.” He trailed his lips from my chin down to the valley of my cleavage.

“Africa is part of my soul, but it is with me wherever I go. I’d like to stay here with you.” My skin felt hot despite the cool mist. Skoll’s hungry touch was like a blowtorch. I hadn’t fully thought through what I was going to say, but now that it was out there, it felt right.

“Only on the Lodestar until the ranch is safe again.” He was talking fast now, his mouth exploring my navel.

“Will you be on the Lodestar?” His lips came back up to my breast and kissed the underside.

“If I survive the attack on the Dome, I’ll be wherever you are.” His tongue teased my nipple, and I arched my back as the tingle surged through my spine. “I want to bite you here. Pierce the skin with my fangs. My venom will stimulate you.”

“Will it hurt?”

“At first, yes, but then it will feel good for you.”

“Then do it.”

He dropped his jaw and sunk his fangs into the side of my breast. I gasped at the pain, but his tongue was there quickly, lapping at it. His lips worked in a sensual slide, and he

groaned long and deep as a trickle of blood seeped into his mouth. I never knew how absolutely sexy a bite could be.

The spot where he bit me began to vibrate and spread. “Oh.”

Before I could adjust, he sunk his fangs into the other breast and lapped up the drops of blood. The incredible vibrations pulsed out through my nipple, and his tongue vibrated as if answering my call.

He quickly removed the rest of my kilt and lowered his head between my legs. It was as if I'd unleashed a whirling dervish and he was taking all that he could in case I changed my mind. He inhaled deeply before he sunk his teeth into my mound. My entire bottom half started to vibrate as I struggled to keep up with all the sensations. His hands pulled my thighs apart, and he leaned his head back to lick between my legs with his swirling, vibrating tongue.

God, that felt good and I gasped, holding onto his head for balance and accidentally knocking the beanie off. Stark bumpy scars marred his scalp where his horns used to be.

He paused, waiting for my reaction. I placed my palms over them. “You're beautiful everywhere, Skoll.” He moaned against my sex. “I see now what you gave up for me.”

I shivered when the suckers from his tongue brushed over my clit, briefly grabbing on and then spinning away with a slight pop, only for another suction cup to narrow in on it until I could barely stand. An orgasm rushed through me as I came with his face between my legs.

“Aye, lass. Good girl. You taste so good, I could live here.”

The area became very sensitive, and I pushed his head away. He stared longingly at it as he stopped. He licked my taste off his lips, and my legs wobbled. He caught me as I fell to the wet stone.

I reached for his belt and worked it open. His kilt fell away, his erect cock pointing up to the top of the cave like some kind of art sculpture. He pulled me close and kissed

along my shoulder. “I want to sink inside you so badly. I need to claim you as mine.”

I lay back and pulled on his biceps, encouraging him to climb on top of me, and when he was there, I smiled. Warmth heated my chest and love surged through my body. It felt like home. “Do I seem afraid now?”

“Nai.”

“Then do it.”

The tip of his cock prodded my entrance, and I groaned.

He pulled back. “It’s so tight. You’re fragile.”

“I’m really not. Don’t hold back. I’m ready to feel.”

Spurred on by my command, he thrust forward and I gasped. I anticipated pain but it didn’t come, just very intense pressure. He vibrated with me, and it all fit together like a key in a lock. It just needed a little grease and some jiggle. I was soaking wet, and his cock tremored like an earthquake. Inch by inch he pressed forward until he was seated fully inside.

“Zenas, blex.” He grunted like he was struggling to adjust. “Your cunt squeezes me so tight. It’s so wet and hot. Zenas blexing blex.”

He continued to curse and grunt my name, but I was lost to reality. His sandalwood scent filled my nose, his strong muscles eclipsed my vision, and the deep rumble of his voice sucked me under like a rip current.

He withdrew an inch and nudged back in again, the suckers inside creating all kinds of sensations that brought me higher and higher. The beautiful ridges of his abdomen rubbed against my clit in the most delicious way.

“You ready, lass? No turning back after this.” His hand wrapped around my neck, emphasizing the risk I was taking.

“Mmm-hmm,” was all I could manage to utter.

He growled and pulled fully out. I felt a brief emptiness before he plunged in deeply and closed his hand tightly around my neck, limiting my air flow and pinning me to the rocks.



A massive cloud engulfed me, filling every corner of my soul. Strong, huge, deep, passionate. His chest rubbed my vibrating nipples, sending shockwaves everywhere. My body seized, breath lodged in my throat, stars forming behind my eyelids.

An orgasm erupted through me like a thunder strike, and he released my neck, a surge of air sucking into the void as I exploded around him.

His deep voice grounded me. “That’s it, Sunshine. Take it like that. I’m doing that to you. Only me. Only I make you come apart. Remember me. Remember this.” He curled his back to hold me close as I shuddered through the tremors. His scales seemed to expand under my fingers, and I dug my nails in, scratching and clinging to hold him to me.

“Don’t leave me. I love you.” Who said that? Oh shit. I said that. Out loud.

His voice was like sharp metal scratching glass. “Aye, lass. I’m here. You are mine now.” He pounded into me, punctuating each word with a strong jab of his hips, his cock so deep inside me I didn’t know where I ended and he began. “Mine. Forever.”

“Yes.” I lost my grip on his arms and held onto his waist, which became impossibly wide as he stretched me to the point of pain. I cried out, and he instantly withdrew.

He held his cock in his fists as he backed away on his knees, eyes wide in shock. “Ajani...”



## Chapter 24 Making Waves

*Ajani*

“What is it? What’s happening?” I was so lost in the frenzy, it felt like a fever dream. He was with me, I was recovering from my orgasm, everything seemed to expand, and then he was gone.

Now, large white plates covered his entire body, and sharp horns protruded from his head.

He arched his back and roared, neck muscles bulging. His hips bucked, and his hands tensed around his quaking cock. Fluorescent white cum spouted from the end in thick streams. Like an out of control fire hose, it swished and sprayed everywhere. The cum landed on the walls of the cave and quickly washed away in the water.

The pained grimace on his face broke my heart. “Are you all right?”

Shocked icy blue eyes stared back at me. He was so different. A full-on dragon monster. I would’ve been scared if I didn’t know Skoll was in there.

He panted as he fell to his side on the wet rock. Oh God, what was happening to him? Was he in pain? I moved closer and put my hand on his shoulder. “Talk to me.”

He pulled away, climbed to his feet, and skulked to the water. My gosh, he was huge. Several times bigger than he had been before. The large plates covered his body and looked like ivory armor. He jumped into the pool at the base of the waterfall.

“Skoll! Come back!”

With my kilt wrapped around me like a blanket, I scampered out after him. “Skoll!”

Still in shock from all that had happened, I peered into the water and tried to catch my breath. I didn’t see him at first, but

then I was able to make out the edges of his white form under the surface of the water.

“Skoll! Come out! Come out right now or I’ll jump in. And I can’t swim.” I actually could swim, but he didn’t know that.

He remained submerged, so I dropped my kilt and jumped in, feet first. The chilly water swallowed me as I went under.

His hands were there within seconds to catch me and bring me up. We surfaced together and our frantic gazes locked. “Go back to the house, Ajani.” His deep voice echoed off the rocks.

“No!” I had to yell over the sound of the crashing water.

“I don’t want you to see this.” A shadow passed through his features. He looked so sad.

“Why?” I wiped my hair from my eyes and attempted to focus on him. Small white plates covered his face. His mouth protruded out with many rows of pointed teeth.

“Just go.” He was treading water and holding me afloat with his hands under my armpits. He held me far enough away that I couldn’t reach out and touch him.

“I said no. I’m not leaving you like this. I’m here for you.” It was a little scary seeing him in this form, but I needed to know that he was okay.

He brought me to the edge and pressed my back against the soft wall of rock. My body was still hot and aching, and I tried to wrap my legs around him, but he held himself too far away with his long arms. He didn’t raise his head to look at me.

“Come closer to me now,” I demanded. “Don’t hold me at a distance like this.”

He bent his arms, and the water swooshed as he moved closer. I placed my hands on his face and forced him to tilt his head up. Despite his gruesome appearance, I knew he was in there. I could see his sweet soul. “Don’t hide. Look at me. Do I look like the kind of person who’d judge you for this? I’m

the one who loves animals like people. You look different, and it's shocking, but it's still you. I think it's beautiful."

He chuffed a humorless laugh.

"Don't hide, Skoll. Just tell me what's going on."

"The mice were rutting," he said inexplicably.

"Heldmuis and Rasling?" I had no idea how this was related to his sudden transformation.

"Aye. And I'd tested the anti-mating hormone on Rasling before I left. I'd used it before on the livestock. It seemed to be working, but earlier, in my laboratory, they were rutting and both had turned white." His voice sounded defeated, like he had failed some grand experiment. They were just mice who liked each other.

"So they're mates?" Awesome. My mouse found a mate.

"Bondmates chosen by Zenas. Rare on this planet. And my hair turned white, so I checked my horns, which are stored in a gel in a vessel in the lab..." It was so odd to be talking to this beast who I knew was Skoll and spoke like him but looked almost nothing like him.

"They were white too?"

"Aye," he said despondently.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that you own me, body and soul. I am yours." He dipped his chin and touched his forehead to mine carefully so as to not pierce me with a sharp horn.

"Really?" Hearing that come out of this dragon's mouth felt surreal, but my body was still vibrating and the love still glowed strong in my heart, so I believed him.

"It's undeniable. We are bondmates. Unbreakable. Coveted."

When he pulled away, I caught his eyes with mine. "I feel it too. I thought it was the elephants, but it was you. It's very strong. My heart has never felt so light. You might not believe that I can understand and accept you like this, but trust me.

I've been judged before by something out of my control, so I would never do that to you."

"Because of the bond, I can transform into this monster. It is much like the Raseri that Rasling is named after. I'm sure I look hideous to you."

"Not to me. You look like a white dragon. It's impressive, and I find it extremely attractive. I think it's sexy. It's still you on the inside, just a little bigger on the outside." I reached down and grabbed his cock. "A lot bigger." I giggled and he broke a small grin.

He dipped his head and pressed his lips gently to mine. "You are an angel sent by Zenas to bless me with your love and acceptance."

I chuckled. "Not quite an angel but okay. Thank you. Now kiss me again. I'm still vibrating for you. How long will it last?"

"I don't know. You're my first."

"Your first bite?"

"My first kiss, bite, mate, everything."

My heart swelled with love and desire for him. He was so sweet and humble. I reached for him with my legs, but he moved his hips back. "What's wrong?"

"If I can't control it inside the Dome, I'll give it all away, and then the women will not be saved. Everything I've done since I cut off my horns would be wasted."

I swung my legs out again, and this time he let me catch him. I tugged on his hips, and he swam in closer to me.

"Then you'll need to learn to control it before tomorrow."

"Aye. Vonne gave me some tips. Said to focus on you. Tune into the resonance of the vibrations, focus on my love for you."

"You love me?"

"The word seems insufficient to describe how I feel for you."

“Oh thank God. I thought it was only me. Alright. Let’s try something. Focus on me. Look at the water.” Small ripples had formed on the surface around us. “Come closer.” I tugged him even closer with my feet around his hips. His giant white cock was hard between us and rested against my belly. “Our vibrations are making waves in the water.” The small ripples swelled and bounced off the walls of the pool. “Focus on that. Don’t worry about anything else. Kiss me.”

He kissed me slowly, and we both carefully adjusted to the new size of his fangs. They pressed against my chin, and I imagined them sinking into my skin, making me vibrate and come again. I groaned into his mouth.

That seemed to be the answer he needed because his tongue came out and mingled with mine. It was much bigger and tougher now, but I accepted it as part of him. I was careful not to touch the sharp horns on his back and hugging him felt a little like hugging a boulder, but I loved it. It was exciting and new.

Huge waves formed in the pool, splashing out over the side with violent heaves. “We caused that. We’re making the waves.”

“Aye, Sunshine, we are.”

As we kissed again, slowly his scales began to recede and soften. His shoulders grew smaller, and his face returned to normal under my hands. He grinned and peered into my eyes. “You did it,” I said.

“With your help.”

“We help each other. That’s what we do.”

“And now I want to take you again.” He growled and rolled his hips. “But we have run out of time. I need to get you to Vonne and then return to the Dome to begin the hunt for you.”

“I hope you find me.”

He laughed. “No, you don’t. If I find you, I’ll have to bring you back in, and I never want to see you there again.”

“How long will I have to wait for you on the Lodestar?”

“It may take some time. I don’t have all the perebreum for the deal with the orcs, so I have to negotiate to get it to them later. Hunting for you will take me out of the Dome and delay the plan, but my cover is still intact. I still think it could work.”

I wrapped myself fully around him and enjoyed the feeling of us vibrating together. “I believe in you, and I’ll be waiting.”

“Before you go...”

“Yes?”

“I want you to know that even if my horns did not change, I wanted you. Zenas has gifted us with the bond but make no mistake, without the bond, I would still be here sitting awestruck and in love with you.”

My heart nearly burst out of my chest as I smiled at him. “When you brought me the plum, I knew you were different. When you brought me the mouse, I knew I loved you.”

“We have much to talk about, but it will have to wait until later.”

He moved to lift me out of the water, but I squirmed and made it hard for him.

“What is it, lass?”

“Skoll, please. Take me again one more time before you leave. The vibrations are so strong. I’m aching for you everywhere, and you’re right here.” I reached down and stroked his cock under the water in the same way I had done in the barn last night.

He groaned and kissed me again. “I can deny you nothing, my mate.”

Then he took me again in the water, filled me fully, and claimed me as his. The water overflowed the sides of the pool, and we nearly caused a tidal wave on Skoll’s ranch.





## Chapter 25 Tell Them It's Me

### *Skoll*

Leaving the waterfall with Ajani was difficult. I wanted to stay there with her forever inhaling her unique scent and exploring her body. But my mission was close to complete and many beings were relying on me to be true to my word. Not only the human women and Krassokdro females left behind in the Dome, but the orcs as well.

This was my chance to finally end the breeding experiment that had caused so much strife and pain on this planet.

I walked Ajani to her room to pack for her trip and returned to mine to change back into a Duigari guard. Black leather suit, silver helmet, eye shield. Runes disguised. Swords exchanged for guns, and I was indistinguishable. Hopefully this would be the last time I would have to dress as one of them.

I contacted Vonne via the comms. "Skoll. How did it go?"

Incredibly well because of her. "I transformed into a white Raseri. She called it a white dragon. I was able to control it as you instructed." Because of Ajani's patience and kindness, we'd figured it out together.

"Excellent. How did she react?"

I took a deep breath and pondered how to answer that. "She's much stronger than she appears."

"Good."

Enough chatting about my mate. We needed to make arrangements for her transfer. "Dagmar showed up here on the ranch. He recalled me early to search for her, so I'm leaving at sunrise."

He hummed as he absorbed the new information. "Ajani should come to the Lodestar now then."

I hated the thought of being apart from her, but she would be safer with Vonne and the other Nivveok on the mothership.

“Aye. Let’s meet at the cargo station at the edge of Krassoks. We’re leaving as soon as I gather Ajani. Can you make it in time?”

“Aye. I’ll bring Tornoc as well in case of trouble.”

The Rage Monster wanted to protest the idea of another Raseri protecting Ajani, but it was necessary to complete the mission. “One question about the bond.”

He grunted, waiting for my question. He didn’t seem impatient, but possibly concerned that he didn’t know the answer.

“When will I know if we have the telepathy you mentioned?” I began packing the bag that I would be taking back into the Dome. My unfinished tracking device, the small amount of perebreum compound I was able to produce that wasn’t stolen by Dagmar, and the explosives I needed to implement my plan.

“The first time it appeared when we most needed it. After it was established, I simply had to ask permission, and she allowed me in.” He paused. “It may be different for you or you may not develop it.”

“I dislike the amorphous nature of this bond.” I added a few other items to my bag and glanced over at the shakturs in their stalls.

“You’ll grow accustomed to it. It will become a great asset for you.”

“It already is.”

I ended our connection and prepared to leave my laboratory for the last time. I petted the shakturs on my way out. “Tobian will take good care of you until I return.”

Ajani looked me over as I approached her room. She smirked and propped a hand on her hip. “I feel conflicted right now because you’re hot, but you’re also one of the guards.”

“It’s all a ruse.” I reached her and pulled her into my arms. Something I would never grow tired of. Her acceptance of my touch was a great honor.

“I know. I thought you looked good in a kilt, but those leather pants with your thick thighs... And now that I know what you’re packing in there.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief as she glanced down at my pants.

“Quiet.” I squeezed her gently and kissed the top of her head. I felt the urge to tug her bretten off and take her in her bed like I’d dreamed of many nights.

Instead, I pressed her back to the wall and crowded her in. My cock fell softly into place along her belly. “When I return, I want to hear more about this yoga practice you’ve mentioned and test your flexibility.”

Her cheeks flushed and her pulse quickened. “Oh really.”

I lifted her legs with my arms behind her knees and she grunted. I raised them higher and ground my cock into her core. She panted with her mouth upturned toward me in invitation. I kissed her and my cock swelled. I feared I’d never have enough time with my mate. “Curse the timing of this mission.”

She placed her palms flatly on my cheeks. “It’s okay. We’ll have time to be together when you return.”

The Rage Monster growled when I released her and her feet touched the floor again. “We’ll leave the ranch with you under my cloak. We’re meeting Vonne at a cargo station at the border where he’ll take you on a flier to the Lodestar. Are you ready?”

She took in a deep breath and nodded as she smoothed her hair back. “What about Heldmuis and Rasling?”

I hadn’t thought of them. “We can leave them here. Bazur will look after them, and they have each other.”

“Can I take them with me? I want to keep them safe.” She peered up at me with her dark, soulful eyes.

I could not deny my mate her mice or her elephant or anything else that brought her comfort, including me.

“Pack them in your bag then and give me a final kiss because we won’t be able to do it at the station.”

“Not final. Just goodbye for now.”

“Aye, lass.” I bent low and gave her a goodbye-for-now kiss that she would not soon forget.

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As we mounted the hoverbike, I attempted to reach her with my mind several times and received no response. The bond felt strong between us, but I didn't hear her in my head.

“Ajani, keep your mind open for me.”

She settled her backside on my tail as she'd done before. “What do you mean?”

I swung my cloak over her shoulders and worked to make sure she was concealed. “You may hear me in your head. We may develop telepathy.”

“That would be amazing. I don't hear anything now.” She wrapped her hands around my waist, and I patted them with my palms. She moved them back under the cloak.

“Vonne said it came to him when he most needed it, so we'll wait.”

She popped her head up so her mouth was close to my ear. “Will you be able to read my thoughts?”

“Everyone is different, but Vonne implied there was a boundary that he asked to cross.”

“We've already done that.” She laughed and ducked back under.

“Aye, lass. We have. And it was my pleasure.” Happy with her position on my back, I started up the hoverbike and headed for the energy shield.

We made it out of the ranch without being detected. We traded my hoverbike for the golden Duigari bike at the decoy spot. No phukas this time. The last part of the trip included views of the burnt out forest of Krassoks that changed into the purple tree canopy at the border with Vasada. The sun lowered and the moons rose as we arrived.

“I’m Sköll chasing the sun forever now. You are the sun,” I said to her over my shoulder.

“Aww.” Her thighs squeezed against my side, and the bond pulsed between us.

The station bustled with fliers and shuttles. I chose a spot toward the back behind a wall that would allow some privacy for the handoff. Vonne hadn’t arrived yet, so I would have precious moments to be with Ajani before we were separated.

With as much stealth as possible, I helped her out from under my cloak. I wrapped her bretteen over her head to provide her with some disguise as well. She gripped her bag containing her belongings and her mice over her shoulder and peered up at me.

“Did you bring your skeedu?” I asked her.

“Yes.” She nodded and a fierce determination passed through her eyes. My Sunshine had found her strength, and I cherished that.

I stepped away from her and stood up straight as I would if I were an on-duty Duigari guard.

Vonne appeared in the distance and gave a discreet nod. This was it. She just needed to walk away, and she’d be safe. The bravery faded from her eyes, and they went hazy like she did when she was lost in her thoughts.

“My heart is always with you, Ajani.” I attempted to draw her out with my voice, but her hands began to shake.

She nodded, but the little bumps appeared on her skin. “I know.”

“I will come back to you as soon as possible.” I said it forcefully, willing her to believe it so she could find her courage again.

Her eyes came to mine and the determination settled there. Her hands curled into fists and her muscles tightened. “I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

I nodded and thought to myself that she was a good girl, being bold even though she was afraid. “You should go now.

Vonne waits to your right.” I kept my hands to my side, but she reached out and touched my arm. It burned through the fabric and traveled from my skin to my soul. I ached to pull her into my arms and kiss her, but we couldn’t risk more time in public. “You must walk away from me now. Remember our last kiss at the ranch. This will never be easy, so you have to feel the fear and take a brave step. You’re my brave girl. You can do it.”

Instead of walking away, she stepped closer and gripped my other arm. I grabbed her elbows to pull her off and turn her around. I began to walk her toward Vonne, but her legs were stiff. She was shutting down. Soon, she would collapse in tears. Vonne took a step towards us to assist.

“You there!” A voice from the crowd called out toward us. “Officer Krath? Is that you?”

Blex! We’d been spotted.

“Quickly, Ajani.” I pushed her through the crowd faster, but the voice grew closer.

“Did you find her?”

Ajani froze and looked back. Behind us were two Duigari approaching quickly.

I drew my sword but didn’t turn. When Vonne reached me, we’d strike them down to protect Ajani.

*No, Skoll. Don’t fight them.* I heard her voice, but her lips did not move.

The telepathy. Now, when we needed it.

*I will kill them,* I sent back to her with a growl.

“Let me go.” She began to thrash in my grip. “Asshole.”

I tried to release her, but she swayed her body so that I was forced to grab her to support her.

The guards reached us. “Is that her? You found her?”

*Tell them it’s me.*

*Nai.* I held her facing toward Vonne, my back to them.

She thrashed and arched her neck to look behind me. “It’s me. I’m the one you want. Specimen 2568B Ajani van Rooyen. That’s me. This big brute is roughing me up and won’t release me.” She grunted and gritted her teeth, pretending to pull away all while keeping her arm in my grasp.

Good Zenas. She was doing this for me. Turning herself in to preserve my cover.

“Dagmar, we have her. She’s at the Krassoks border station. Krath found her.” The guard spoke into his comm device, excited to report his find to his supervisor. It was too late. They’d notified Dagmar. My mate had sacrificed herself so that we could save the others.

I signaled to Vonne to stay back and gripped Ajani firmly by her upper arms. “Settle down, lass.”

The guards grinned. They knew Dagmar would reward them generously for bringing in the fugitive. “We’ll escort you back to the lab.”

She stiffened like she’d just realized the implications of what she’d done. Her heart pounded loudly in my ears.

I gripped her arms tighter, hoping she found comfort in my solid grasp. *Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.*

It would add another complication to an already severely hindered plan, but I could sneak her out with the other women when the time came.

She’d have to fend off Dagmar until the moment was right, but I had faith in my brave little lass.





## Chapter 26 Not Without You

*Ajani*

Time stopped as we rode back to the Dome. I wasn't sure what had happened. I'd acted on instinct, protecting Skoll in whatever way I could. Now that the blue dome approached, the implications of my actions were staring me down.

Skoll's body was rigid in front of me, but he wrapped his tail around my waist in a way that would look like he was restraining me, but he really sent soft gentle touches through it. The bond between us glimmered in my chest like he was the sun burning bright and I was a planet held tight by his gravitational pull.

We finally arrived and stopped in a black rectangular warehouse just outside the Dome. One of the guards said it was a twenty minute wait before we could enter, and a hologram clock appeared near the wall. They inspected us closely, looking at the way we were touching each other, and for a second, I thought for sure they'd see right through us. Skoll kept his calm and acted like a detached guard as he climbed off the bike. They walked away without a word, seeming to fall for it. Man, he was good at this.

My biggest fear was facing Dagmar again, but I would do it for Skoll. He'd sacrificed so much for this mission, I couldn't let him throw it all away. Taking this risk was worth it while he executed his plan and then we'd free the other women.

It seemed impossible right now, and it was terrifying, but we could do it together. Plus we had a secret weapon. The telepathy was awesome.

*Are you angry with me?* I asked him.

*Nai. Never, my brave lass.*

A hologram of Dagmar appeared. "Och aye, there she is. You sneaky minx. How did you escape and avoid capture for so long?"

Skoll somehow managed to control his reaction.

“Fuck you,” I said to the hologram.

Skoll’s head snapped slightly, but he regained his composure. *Don’t anger him. We must placate him until it’s time.*

*Okay. I’ll distract him for you.*

*Be careful.*

“I’m actually happy to be back. I shouldn’t have escaped. I didn’t know what to do without you, Dagmar.” I laid it on a little thick, and my voice didn’t sound convincing to me.

His wrinkled forehead doubled over when he smiled so maybe he bought it. “Bring her to my room, and we’ll work out a reconciliation.”

Skoll’s angry growl rumbled through the bond, but he didn’t show any reaction externally. He impressed me with his control considering all we were going through and his lack of sleep.

*Good girl. I’ll be close by.*

*I’ll be okay. Good luck.*

*He will not hurt you. I won’t allow it.*

*Go save the world. I can handle the ugly dude.*

A muscle ticked in his neck, but the rest of him remained a stoic officer of the Duigari guard.

“Time,” one of the guards announced after the timer on the wall disappeared.

Skoll climbed back in front of me, powered up the golden hoverbike, and we left the warehouse. The giant blue dome became larger as we drew closer to the entrance. I’d never seen it from the outside before, and it was much bigger than I expected. We passed through a checkpoint and turned down a path that ended at a large white structure. I assumed it was the laboratory.

He walked me inside, and my bravado shriveled as we traveled the sterile white corridors. We stopped at Dagmar's door, and Skoll waved his hand over a sensor. After a brief pinging sound, the door opened to Dagmar standing inside his garish black room. His hungry yellow eyes came right to me. "She wears your cloak?" he asked Skoll without looking at him as he stalked toward me.

"I gave it to her for the ride," Skoll answered authoritatively, leaving no room for question.

Dagmar pondered it for a moment then quickly dropped it, suddenly more interested in ushering me inside. "Mmm. Thank you, Krath. I'll see to it you get a recommendation for finding her and returning her to me. You can go."

Skoll bowed deeply and turned away. As he left, he sent me one last message.

*Be brave through the fear.*

He must've sensed my apprehension and was giving me my final pep talk.

The door closed behind him, and I was alone with my worst enemy. "You left me, my pet."

*Of course I left your sorry ass because you're a nasty fucking liar who was gaslighting me and not feeding me.*

I looked down. "I'm sorry." God, this was hard. How did Skoll do it for so long?

"What were you thinking? I was so worried. I had teams looking everywhere for you." His tone was scolding like an arrogant father. "I should spank your arse for your insolence. How did you even get out?"

I had to say what he wanted to hear, placate him like Skoll had asked. "I was wrong. I thought I wanted to go back to Earth, but now I don't."

His beady eyes narrowed. "It's very suspicious that you returned with Krath wearing his cloak and disappeared the same day that he left."

Uh oh. “No. I did this by myself. I escaped in a parcel, and then I was so lost out there, I missed you. I saw him and asked him to bring me back. I want to be here with you. I didn’t realize how good I had it until it was gone. I trust you to take care of me like you promised. Can you forgive me?”

His head twitched, and his eyes unfocused as I talked, like my words were affecting him deeply. I doubted anyone had ever spoken kindly to him before. He probably didn’t believe me, but he wanted it to be true so badly that he didn’t push it.

“You missed me?” He stepped toward me, and I fought the urge to shrink back. Could I do this? Was I strong enough to let this vile creature touch me?

“I did. You’re very... nice.” Ugh, I sucked at this. I thought of the way Skoll acted so convincingly as Krath and his advice to be brave through the fear. I managed a smile that hopefully looked genuine. “You’ve taken good care of me, and I enjoy your company.”

He stepped closer and held up a clawed hand. “Then you won’t mind if I touch you?”

This was dangerous, but it was also working.

I closed my eyes and held my breath. “Yes.”

Leathery fingers wrapped around my upper arm. My stomach turned, but I didn’t panic. I smiled to myself. I did it.

Another hand gripped my neck and squeezed. I smelled his rancid breath near my face. “Look at me.”

I forced my eyes to open, and his ugly nose was right there. Still, the panic didn’t come. Instead, anger brewed in my gut, and I held back a snarl. He traced a curled claw from my neck, over my shoulder, to my elbow. He grabbed my hip and pulled me toward him as he forced his mouth on mine. I pulled away but he tugged me tighter.

He gripped my arms and pushed me back against the wall. My head hit it hard, and I winced through the dizziness. Now the panic rose, but I remained strong, holding onto the anger instead of succumbing and crying.

I squirmed to get away, but he pinned my arms to the wall and smashed his lips to mine. His disgusting tongue came out and licked my lips. “Open for me.”

“No.” I turned my head to the side. “I’m not ready for that yet.”

“You ran away and came back, and now I can do with you as I wish, and I wish to rut you. I have wanted it from the first time I saw you.” He pressed his entire body against me, and I felt his hard cock in his pants against my stomach.

“No!” Forget placating him. I wasn’t going to let it go that far. I had Skoll’s knife inside my kilt. If I could get to it without him noticing, I could slice off his balls, if he had any.

“You dare refuse me? You said I was nice and you enjoy me.” He tossed me on the bed. “Enjoy this.” He unfastened his pants and climbed on top of me.

“Stop. Get off me.”

“Where did you get this brette?” He gripped the sash at my shoulder and ripped it down my arm. Luckily, it was wrapped tight enough that my breasts weren’t exposed. I struggled with him with one hand, with the other, I tried to reach inside the fabric to free the knife.

My heart pounded and the panic bubbled, but I placed all my focus in the struggle and remained strong.

A pinging sound from the door caused him to freeze. He stared at my face for a long time before climbing off me. A pained look of regret crossed his features. “I didn’t want to force you, Ajani. I wanted you to want me.” This guy really thought he had a chance with me after the way he’d treated me?

I struggled to catch my breath. “It’s just too soon. I need some time.”

He nodded and swiped his hand over a sensor that opened the door.

Skoll stood there looking giant and threatening, but kept his head turned away and his face unaffected.

Dagmar glared at him. “What are you doing here?”

“The subject’s room and injection are ready.”

“Take her then.” He turned away and huffed out a breath, obviously frustrated with me.

I quickly scampered from the bed and left the room, and Skoll walked behind me.

*Are you injured?* I could sense the restrained anger in his tone as he followed me down the corridor.

*No.*

*As much as I would’ve enjoyed seeing you cut off Dagmar’s balls, it’s not time yet.*

My heart thudded and my veins pulsed with adrenaline. He’d touched me. He’d attacked me. And I didn’t cry. We entered my old room, and I turned toward him. “Listen—”

“You must wear the white uniform,” he said sternly.

“Okay?”

*The room is monitored now.*

I took my old white jumpsuit with me into the bathroom area as he waited silently by the door.

When I came out, he pointed to a needle on a tray. “You must take the injection.”

“I hate it.” Pretending not to like him pained me, but I understood the stakes and took the injection in front of him with a scowl on my face.

*The plan will be activated tomorrow before moonrise.*

*That fast? Good news.*

*There will be an explosion. Don’t panic.*

*Okay.*

*The orcs will bring you to me, and we’ll depart on a shuttle with the Nivveok and the females.*

I nodded but kept my eyes on the needle that was now empty and back on the tray.

*You won't leave with him?* he asked.

My mouth fell open, and I stared at his facemask, trying to see his eyes. Did he still need reassurance after all we'd shared?

*I'm not leaving without you. No way. And if he takes me somewhere, I'll fight like hell to get back to you.*

He couldn't grin, but I felt warmth in my chest from the bond.

*Good girl.*

His body remained rigid as he stood guard over me, and I fought to hide my smile.

He left me in the dark, and I lay down in the bed and tried to sleep.

My black and white prison surrounded me again, but tomorrow would be a new day. We'd be heading back to Skoll's colorful world and this time we'd have the other women with us.

*My love for you is never ending, lass.* Skoll sent one last message through the bond, and I smiled.

*Same for me, my white dragon. Same for me.*





## Chapter 27 Cross His Heart

*Skoll*

Her white dragon.

She said it casually without any awareness how much it meant to me that she accepted my Raseri form. The knowledge that my love for her would help me control the Rage Monster made me feel powerful. If loving her was all I had to do, it was an easy task.

Back in the disposal area, I messaged Gerzog to join me. He arrived minutes later.

“Do you have the perebreum?” he asked right away.

I handed him the two cylinders I had brought with me. “I have the rest at my ranch. Will you take a voucher?”

He examined the cylinders I’d given him. It was good quality, and he could use it to make weapons to protect his clan.

“I swear on Bazur’s life that I will not cheat you.”

He looked up at me when he heard his brother’s name. I had not seen Gerzog grin before, and he still didn’t now, but he grunted and a light glowed in his eyes. “I am anxious to see him again,” he admitted. “But I worry the others won’t forgive us for what we’ve done.”

“I believe they already have, even without an explanation or apology. They’re aware you’re here against your will.”

He nodded and looked down, his tusks making him look strong, but his wrinkled face belying the eons of pain he’d suffered under the Zul’s rule.

I leaned in close and whispered in his ear, “This will all end tomorrow. The plan should weaken him enough to earn your freedom and the females in the experiment. As the rounds finish tomorrow, you’ll hear word of a conflict at Grosfgr.”

His gaze came to mine and we exchanged a look. “It will need to be big.”

“The biggest you have seen yet in the war with the Duigari.”

His face grew even more serious. A large-scale battle meant high risk for casualties.

I walked deeper into the disposal area and picked up a crate. “The goal is to make it epic enough to get the Zul’s attention. Force him to order most of the Duigari out and move the guards from the lab into their vacant positions inside the greater Dome.”

He followed behind me and dumped waste into the incinerator as we had done together the first time we met. “But we won’t go.”

“Nai. This is where I need your word that all of the orcs are supportive of the rebellion. If even one of them betrays us, we all die.”

He crossed his arms and dipped his head. “I have their word and loyalty.”

“Good. In the chaos, I will set the explosives on the ceiling of the laboratory and blow a hole through the roof of the Dome. Make sure all the orcs are out of the gestation chamber at that time. I believe the pods will be strong enough to withstand the force.”

“And you?”

“I’ll do my best to detonate from a distance.”

He frowned and stared down into the fire that burned below us. “That is the part I dislike.”

“It’ll be fine. I have some secret defenses you don’t know about.”

“Aye.” He grunted and lifted another crate of waste, dumping it slowly into the disposal.

“You’ll instruct your orcs to gather the females from the holding facility and bring them to the gestation chamber. One of them, Ajani van Rooyen, she is my bondmate.”

His eyes widened and he held the crate aloft, stunned by my words. “You are bonded with a captive? A human at that.”

“Aye. I trust you to bring her to me after the explosion.”

“I will do this, Skoll.”

“Good. The Nivveok will enter through the hole caused by the blast. One shuttle for the pods, another for the rest of the females. We load everyone up and leave together.”

I left out the part where I’d kill Dagmar, but I would gleefully end his miserable life and then place the tracker on the Zul’s escape pod, because he would run like the coward that he was.

He grinned. “It’s an insanely risky plan, but I like it.”

So many crucial pieces could go wrong. The explosion, the movement of the guards, Dagmar, the pods, the other females, the battle at Grosfgr.

I rubbed my hand over my face to clear the haze. “I must get some rest as I avoided it last eve, and I want to be alert for this.”

He patted my shoulder and tipped his head. “May Zenas’ fortune shine on us all tomorrow.”

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Sleep eluded me as my thoughts speculated on all the contingencies regarding Ajani. If I were put in a situation where I had to choose the mission or her, I would pick her every time.

She had filled a chasm in my heart I never thought would heal, and her safety came first above all else. Vonne and Tornoc would understand, but the non-bonded Nivveok like Leehem and Renzun would vilify me if I jeopardized the plan in order to save her.

As the day passed, the orc guards offered covert glances that bolstered my courage. Bazur and Gerzog would be pleased with the respect I’d earned from them.

Ajani was not on my rotation, so I checked on her frequently through the bond. She felt apprehensive but otherwise stable and hopeful. Just before the night bell, the air in the laboratory grew thin.

I waited in position outside the gestation chamber with the perebreum bomb in my hand. A small device but it should get the job done.

A warning bell sounded, and a global announcement rang out through all the corridors. "Quick Response Force engage immediately."

Within seconds, a team of Duigari guards ran past me.

"What's going on?" I asked.

One of them stopped to look at me. "There's been an incident at Grosfogr. All QRF units have been called out. Report to your Emergency Operations Command Post now."

"Aye."

I stomped my tail, but he was already running to catch up to the others.

The gestation chamber was empty when I entered and climbed the walls to the ceiling. With a firm twist, the device attached to the spot I had calculated would provide the best impact. I ran back to the door and hit the detonator as it closed. While I had anticipated it, the force and volume of the initial blast took me by surprise. It was possible I had overestimated again.

Powerful shockwaves created a deep rumbling sound as I opened the door to see the result. Through the settling debris and dust, the pods appeared to have survived the blast. The bomb had carved a gaping hole in the ceiling and the roof of the blue dome beyond it. The gray skies of Krassoks showed through as the rumbling engines of two massive shuttles descended into it.

All was going well so far.

The orcs entered with the females from the holding chamber. They all stared in shock as the thrusters hissed and

metal landing gear locked into place. With a rush of wind and a series of alert beeps, the shuttle thudded to the floor, and the cargo bay doors opened.

The second shuttle whirred and hovered above. The hole was much bigger than needed, but there was not enough space to safely land. Nivveok warriors emerged from the cargo bay with Vonne and Tornoc in the lead. They immediately began helping the orcs load the females from the holding chamber into the first shuttle.

As several orcs worked on detaching the pods, Gerzog ran to me with panic in his eyes. “Ajani was not in her room. We couldn’t find her.”

“Blex!” I quickly turned to Vonne. “I have to go find Ajani.”

He nodded and stomped his tail. He had the operation under control. I ran out into the corridor and raced to her room. It was empty. No one in Dagmar’s room either.

Blexing blex.

*Ajani, where are you?*

I felt her struggling to reach me.

*Skoll!*

Her voice in my head felt far away.

*Dagmar is panicking. He’s dragging me down corridors.*

*Where?*

*I don’t know.*

I kept running the direction I felt that her voice was coming from.

*Look up to the corner. Read me the label.*

*It’s dashes and dots.*

*Try this. Take a mental image of the sign and send it through the bond.*

An image came through with the location. Directly above me.

*Hold on. I'm coming.*

Now was a good time to test my Rage Monster's strength. I focused on her, thought of the ripples in the water, felt the bond glow in my chest, and summoned the white Raseri.

The monster responded instantly. He could not be contained any longer. It didn't matter now if Dagmar knew. The Dome had been breached, and the shuttle was being loaded. My cover was moot now.

Dagmar needed to die, and my Rage Monster was eager to deliver the death blow. My scales felt tight, my perspective shifted, and suddenly sharp horns on my head were piercing the ceiling. It felt good to have horns again. That was who I was.

My fist easily punched a hole through the material to allow me to climb through to the next level. I caught sight of Dagmar's back as he turned a corner with Ajani in tow.

When I caught up to them, he was waiting for me with his laser pistol aimed at my chest. Ajani cowered behind him.

"Go ahead. Shoot me." I raised my arms to the sides as I stomped closer to them.

I didn't know for certain if laser blasts would penetrate my armor, but Vonne and Tornoc both were impervious to it.

He fired and the blue beams knocked me back but didn't kill me. They deflected off the armor and dissolved in the air. He kept it up as I stalked toward him. The impact spot started to burn, and I felt like my chest would explode.

I was nearly upon them, and he began firing at my face, blinding me. I blocked it with my forearm, but I'd lost sight of him.

Suddenly, the blasts stopped, and Dagmar's pained cry rang out through the corridor. I couldn't see, but I heard him drop to the floor.

*Ajani?*

*I'm okay.*

As my vision cleared, I could make out Ajani standing over him as he rolled on the floor, curled up in a ball with his hands between his legs. Her face was locked in shock, and she held my skeedu in her closed fist. She'd stabbed him in the balls.

“Good girl.”

I made it to her and checked her for injuries but she seemed fine.

“You're burned.” She stared at my chest.

I looked down and my white armor had black holes burned into it. Any longer and I would've been burnt to ash.

“Go back through the hole now.”

“Not without you.”

“I don't want you to see this.” I reached down and grabbed Dagmar by the neck, exactly where he'd punched me on my first day as a guard. He struggled to pull my hand away.

“I want to watch.” She nodded and took a few steps back but kept her eyes on me. I lifted Dagmar and held him against the wall.

“It's over, Dagmar. No more.” I shifted back into my normal form to reveal myself.

“Krath...”

“You can call me Skoll.”

His eyes darkened with the realization that I'd betrayed him. “Have mercy. I kept her alive. I saved her.”

“Nai. That was me.”

It was true Ajani didn't end up in a pod, but he'd hurt many females over the years. He'd also attacked her and hurt her while she cried for him to stop. He didn't deserve my mercy.

My fist tightened around his neck until his eyes bulged. He clawed at my arm. I angled my body so Ajani couldn't see what I was about to do. With my blade, I carved an X over his



heart, reached in, and pulled it out. I stuffed the thing into his open mouth until he choked on his own ugly heart. After his last croak, I dropped his limp body to the ground and turned to see Ajani's reaction. She had turned her head and didn't watch the last part. Good. She didn't need to see that, but I definitely needed to do it.

“Let's go.”



## Chapter 28 Unleash the Inferno

*Skoll*

Ajani followed quickly behind me through the hole in the floor, and we ran back to the gestation chamber where the rescue operation was underway. As I quickly washed the blood from my hands, I saw that the first shuttle had left already, and they were loading the pods onto the second shuttle. No signs of any resistance. Excellent.

I guided Ajani to the loading dock. “Go on without me.” I pulled out the tracking device and held it ready in my hand.

“You’re injured.” Her eyes locked on the marks the lasers had burned into my chest.

“I have one last mission.”

Her gaze moved from my chest to my hand. “What is that?”

“Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

I began to run from her, but Vonne stopped me with a palm up. “Where are you going?”

“I have designed this device to track the Zul. I believe he’ll attempt to escape. We’ll hunt him down and kill him later.”

Vonne scanned the room before his gaze came back to me. “Why don’t we kill him now?”

I stepped back. “Now?” Was he insane? “This... We are here to rescue, not assassinate,” I replied.

“If he escapes again, he’ll be seeking revenge for these attacks. Safer for all involved if we eliminate him early.” His eyes flashed to Ajani briefly.

“And his guard?” I asked.

“The Raseri can burn his guards to ashes.” He spoke with casual confidence. It was true. I’d seen and heard about the Raseri fire melting the Duigari who’d opposed Tornoc and

Vonne in previous battles, but it had been chaotic and unproven on a large scale.

“He has hundreds of guards. We only have three Raseri, and I’ve yet to discover if I can even throw fire.” I disliked challenging Vonne because he was my superior, but he wasn’t being logical and he was about to risk everything I’d achieved so far.

He squinted as he scrutinized me. “The Dome guards have been called out to Grosfgr. We might as well use the distraction to our full advantage. And we have five Raseri now.”

“Five?” I’d only heard of Vonne, Tornoc, and myself.

“My blood brother Kerr is circling overhead in a flier. I can call him in if I need him.”

Och, aye. I’d forgotten about him. He was a quiet one. “That’s still four Raseri against an army of guards. Who is the fifth?”

“Did you not notice any changes in Leehem?”

I turned my attention toward Leehem then for the first time since before I’d left for the Dome. His horns were solid white. He sent a gleaming sharp-fanged smile my way. “I’m in.”

Vonne’s mouth twisted in a wry grin. “Five fire-throwing Rage Monsters have a decent chance.” He shrugged as if he weren’t talking nonsense.

“I’d prefer to have five hundred before we attempt this.” I paced away from him and made eye contact with Ajani as she waited at the shuttle. It was too dangerous. The Zul was the most guarded entity in the galaxy. We had never worked together as a team of Raseri before. We hadn’t practiced one maneuver, and he wanted to go straight to the final battle?

I paced back to him and stopped abruptly. “I’m not even sure the tracker works.”

“Zenas doesn’t bring glory to cowards.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Only valor creates heroes.”

“Oh, so yer the wise prophet now, are ya?”

He laughed and called his brother Kerr on the comms, telling him to land and prepare to shift into his Raseri form.

“Should you not consult with Dolvena first before such a bold move?”

He rubbed his chin with his thumb and forefinger, curved claws waving in a threatening arc. “She’s overseeing the battle at Grosfgr. I am the leader of the Nivveok warriors. We’ll take only the five Raseri.”

“Dolvena will not be happy if you kill all five of her accumulated weapons. She doesn’t even know I have bonded yet.”

He shook his head and turned away. He’d made his decision, and we were going after the Zul right now. My doubt morphed into exhilaration as I walked back to Ajani and took her hands in mine. “I have to go.”

“I know. I heard. I think you should do it.” Her face lit up, likely sensing my excitement at the possibility.

I pressed my lips to her cheek and inhaled her sweet scent. “I will and then I’ll return to you. You’ll be safe with my brothers and the orcs until then. I’ll meet you back at the Lodestar.”

She jumped up and wrapped her arms around my neck, her legs around my waist, and a surge of pride at how far my Sunshine had come washed through me. “Be safe.”

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As the Nivveok and orcs finished loading the second shuttle, Ajani climbed aboard and took a seat. After making sure she was strapped in safely, I left the room with Vonne, Tornoc, Kerr, and Leechem. They watched as I engaged the tracker and released it into the air. It beeped and spun, much like the drone that had appeared at my ranch, but this one was much smaller.

The speed of the beeping increased and the sphere zipped away.

“Is that what it was supposed to do?” Vonne asked.

“Aye.” I engaged the tracking unit and took off following it. As its speed increased, I realized we’d need to shift now to keep up with it.

I focused on my love for Ajani and briefly checked on her through the bond. She sent back a pulse of impassioned love with a taste of arousal behind it. That was all I needed to release the Raseri. My scales pulled tight and expanded, muscles burned as bones elongated. Fangs pierced my mouth as my perspective changed. Suddenly taller, faster, stronger, I ran behind the four other Raseri who had shifted much more quickly than me.

Vonne’s, Kerr’s, and Tornoc’s monster forms were mostly black apart from their white horns. Leechem shifted into a fiery red Raseri with wings! I could not pull my gaze from him. He was the largest of us all.

“Leechem, I have many questions.” I growled and peered up at him as he flew overhead. We barely fit in the corridor, our horns and Leechem’s wings ripping holes in the walls and ceiling.

He chuckled low and deep and huffed out a small puff of smoke. “Later.”

“Aye.” I turned my gaze forward again. We had an important task before us.

We caught up to the tracker at the highest level of the Dome. It buzzed in front of tall black double doors, and I realized if Vonne had not insisted that we follow it now, it wouldn’t have worked. It could not penetrate boundaries. I internally cursed my stupid scientist mind for not thinking of this.

I channeled my frustration into my fists and pounded on the door.

We waited for them to open, but there was no response.

“Might be a good time to ensure you can throw fire, brother,” Vonne said calmly, even though we were standing on the precipice of a great battle.

I breathed out lightly and felt the heat on my tongue.

“Throw it with rage,” Tornoc said, and even though I had not spent much time in my Raseri form, I knew exactly what he meant.

I thought again of my frustration with the tracker. I imagined Ajani scared and alone in the shuttle worried about me. I thought of the risk she would be in if the Zul discovered she was bonded to me, and I thought of my mother who was lost to me long ago because of him.

With my next inhale, the fire raged in my chest, and it was easy to spit it out at the doors. A crimson blaze burst forth from my open jaws and licked the flat surfaces.

“More!” Vonne insisted.

I focused everything on the barrier before me, hating that it was keeping me from finishing my mission and returning to Ajani. Fiery plumes gushed from me, engulfing the doors and melting them to liquid.

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Beyond the doors, we were faced with an angry army of silver-headed guards wielding laser blasters. The Zul appeared to float in the center above a dais in his long black robe, most of his features disguised except for his yellow eyes and pointed nose. The guards surrounded him in concentric circles, facing us.

I braced to receive their fire, but it didn't come. Instead, the Zul's thin voice trickled down from above.

“Ahh, there are five of you now?” His voice wobbled with weakness that grated my nerves. He used this tone to manipulate people into submission. They found him non-threatening when he pretended to be weak, but he was vicious and dead inside.

“That you know of,” Tornoc replied.

He stared down at us, his guards waiting in anticipation of his attack command. A wrinkled finger emerged from his robe and pointed at us. “You are an abomination.”

“We are the reckoning,” Vonne answered.

“We are your sons,” I added just to goad him. He hated the idea that his genes produced monsters like us. “The failures of your wretched experiments.”

His yellow eyes flared under the cape of his robe. “Strike them down,” he ordered.

With a roar, the front row of guards began to move toward us. Vonne ran in to meet them and we flanked him. With a grunt, Vonne sent a small flame as a warning, and the guards halted their forward movement.

“Advance!” The guards hesitated at the Zul’s order, obviously not eager to charge to their fiery end at his command. Instead, they retreated and began to fire at us.

The hot laser beams deflected off my armor as I dropped my jaw and blew out a massive stream of fire upon the guards. Their helmets melted away first, and they screamed as the flames charred their hides. One by one, they fell to the ground in a scorched heap.

I laughed with satisfaction. Who knew unleashing my fury would feel so good?

With my brothers in an arch to my left, we pitched curling flames that licked at their bodies. A large group in the front broke formation and ran to the exits.

“Block them,” Vonne ordered, and Leehem took flight. Their desperate shouts were drowned out by the roaring inferno Leehem rained down on them.

The Zul watched in shock as we engulfed row after row of his eternal guards and moved closer to the dais.

“Stop now or I will blow up the Dome,” he screeched with desperation. He shuffled over to a holographic control panel. He could’ve been bluffing, but I wasn’t taking any chances with my bondmate.

*Ajani, have you left the Dome?*

*They’re preparing to take off now.*

*Tell Renzun to launch immediately. The Zul is threatening to explode the entire Dome.*



*What about you?*

*Tell him!*

*“Skoll says we have to leave now. The Zul will blow up the Dome.”*

Through the bond, she sent a picture of Renzun receiving the message and nodding as he snapped into motion.

We had pushed forward half of the distance and were nearly close enough to reach the dais with our flames. The guards still fired at us, but they didn't advance. Instead, they backed up and smashed together around the pedestal of the dais.

Leehem began to fly to the Zul, but I stopped him with a hand up. “Leehen, wait until the shuttle is safely launched.”

His giant wings flapped as he hovered above the carnage below. Hot ash covered my feet as we marched closer. Pride surged through me at being an integral part of a row of fire throwing Raseri hellbent on a mission to destroy.

An outer ring of guards scattered, and I swept them up in an arch of twisting blue and orange flames. They cried out as they fell to the floor in smoldering heaps.

*We're airborne, Ajani sent through the bond. Be careful.*

*No worries, lass.*

I actually had no idea if my brothers and I would survive the explosion the Zul was threatening. I could only hope our Raseri forms were strong enough to withstand the impact if he actually did it.

“Move!” I cried and charged the dais with my brothers. Leehem swept overhead, and we reached the Zul together. We released a raging firestorm upon him, incinerating everything in our path.

Just as he succumbed to the inferno, a massive blast hit my body and forced me to my back. My ears rang and darkness descended as the heat licked around me. I could not see or hear my brothers by my side.

An ominous silence replaced the noise and chaos of the battle. My fire stopped. Nothing remained in the void. He did it. He blew up his own blexing Dome. If we survived, we'd have much to celebrate. If we did not, at least we knew we'd done what we could to rid the universe of the Dome and the evil Zul.



## Chapter 29 Roasted

*Ajani*

After years of suffering alone in tiny rooms and scary caves on an alien planet, I suddenly found myself hurtling through the dark expanse of space toward an unknown mothership. I longed for Skoll's strong arms to support me as I stared out a porthole at the stars that zipped past in brilliant streaks. The bond remained eerily silent despite my constant attempts to reach him. Tears threatened, but I held them back, clinging to hope that he'd survived the massive explosion we'd seen and felt behind us as we fled the Dome.

After an immeasurable time of waiting and twisting my fingers into a painful mess, a massive silver spaceship that was as big as a planet came into view through the front shield of the shuttle.

Renzun maneuvered the vessel inside a mountainous door that lowered for us. We docked with a mechanical click, and the shuttle erupted into urgent motion. The orcs and warriors moved quickly to move pods of what appeared to be frozen women out into a giant loading area.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and wandered out into the chaos, struggling to catch my breath as I took it all in. This was my first time on an alien spacecraft, and I was completely alone.

"Ajani! Here!" Nefer with her beautiful black braids and tiny horns came running toward me with her arms open. She stopped short and ducked her head as she waved at me. "Uh, hi."

Stella walked up behind her and tucked her hands behind her back. "Where are the boys?" Worry etched the beautiful features of her face.

I heaved out a sigh of relief seeing my human friends again and launched myself forward. Nefer stiffened as I hugged her around her upper arms. She laughed and slowly put her hands on my back. "Okay then."

“I’m so happy to see you. You can touch me now. I need a hug!”

She squeezed me gently, and I inhaled the sweet scent of her hair, the warmth of her skin, and her delicate hands patting me on the back. We ended our embrace, and I turned to Stella. She hugged me even tighter, and I was grateful to freely receive physical comfort from another woman for the first time since before my mother died.

“Where are they?” she asked again.

“I don’t know. There was an explosion. They were going to kill the Zul as dragons! He didn’t send images through the bond. Are you getting anything?” I asked them.

“No. We’re too far away,” Nefer said. Stella shook her head and frowned. At least I was not alone in my dread over the possibility of losing my bondmate.

I took Stella’s hand in mine. “They’ll survive. They have to.”

She nodded and looked away, tears forming in her eyes. “Tornoc is strong. I believe in him.” She sniffed and held her fingers under her nose.

“Me too,” Nefer added. “Vonne wouldn’t dare die on me now, not after everything we’ve been through to get to this point.”

Renzun, the horned Nivveok who had been flying the shuttle, walked past us and stopped to speak to a petite alien woman with small horns and white hair. Her arms were crossed over her chest as she listened to his report, her eyes locked on the movement of the pods.

She must’ve been Dolvena. Skoll had told me about her. She was the boss lady in charge of the Alliance.

Renzun said something quietly to her that caused her body to lock up and her face to briefly morph into shock, but she recovered quickly and nodded. He stomped his tail in response and walked away from her.

As he passed by me, I wanted to say something but was too afraid to interrupt his confident stride. Fortunately, he stopped in front of me and the other women. "I'm going back to retrieve them." His voice weighed heavy with implications. I could almost hear him saying "dead or alive," but he didn't actually say that. He just said he was going back to get them.

"Thank you," I whispered and watched as he walked to a flier that was parked in the loading area.

All around us, the flurry of movement continued. The orcs and Nivveok warriors from the shuttle rushed to set the pods up on metal stands in a room off to the side of the loading dock.

A scuffle at the edge of the room caught my attention. Two orcs stood defensively in front of a pod. "You're doing it wrong," one of them said to a horned warrior with brown skin and a scar across his face.

Dolvena saw the altercation and stepped up to the men. Within a few seconds, the orcs backed away but continued to watch closely as the horned warrior with the scar worked at the base of the pod.

She turned to face the group. "Anyone who is not on the medical staff must wait on that side of the room." She pointed to a bench that ran along the wall near the entrance.

I took a seat next to Nefer and Stella and waited. Many of the orcs scowled and grunted but eventually stepped away and stood next to the wall.

Sitting down gave me my first opportunity to view the pods closely. The gel inside was opaque around their faces but clear in the middle. Their bellies swelled at various stages of pregnancy.

After all the pods had been assembled, the one who appeared to be the lead doctor said something to Dolvena and she nodded. He approached one of the pods and carefully removed a plug at the bottom. The gel began to seep out. Slowly the woman's face was revealed.

Several other aliens stood around her, their focus shifting from holographic screens that floated in the air beside the pods to the actual women in the pods.

The orcs and Nivveok warriors oozed tension around me. I hadn't realized the full scope of all of this before, but now I understood. When I saw her face, I felt a sob rush up from my chest. She wasn't human, but humanoid. She had a thick brow and huge eyes like Skoll's and the others of his planet. Her neck was long, and her skin was the palest purple. As the gel drained, I saw more of her. She had scales, claws, and a tail. Her naked body remained motionless in the pod.

"Is she Nivveok?" I asked Nefer quietly.

"No. Only the offspring of the experiment are Nivveok. She is likely Krassokdro."

One of the doctors lifted the pod on the side, and it cracked open like a coffin. He cleaned away the remaining gel as we all waited silently and watched the woman in the pod. A female alien covered her in a blue fabric as her eyes blinked open.

After endless moments, she coughed ever so slightly. A collective gasp broke out in the room. It was amazing to see her come to life like someone who had drowned but spit out some sea water and started breathing.

The doctors got to work checking her vitals and adjusting things on the screen. "She has reached normal temperature. She and the baby will live," the brown-skinned doctor announced.

Several hoots rang out and tails stomped on the ground. Dolvena approached the female and began talking to her. I couldn't hear it all, but she was smiling, and her tone was calm and comforting. She was likely explaining that she had been part of an experiment and now she and her baby were safe.

Once again, I ached for Skoll's presence. He should've been here for this. He'd want to see it so badly. This was all that he'd been working for, sacrificed so much for, and he was missing it.

I sighed and looked down. *Where are you, my love?*

*Here.*

My head popped up just as Stella and Nefer rose from their seats.

“They’re here? They’re alive?”

But no one answered me. They were too busy running from the room out to the landing dock. I watched with my mouth open as Renzun’s shuttle landed with a graceful clink. A huge door opened on a hinge and hung in the air.

Slowly, five giant dragons emerged from beneath the open door. They were covered in black dust, but I recognized the third one as mine. Stella squealed and ran to what I assumed was Tornoc in his dragon form. Nefer and Vonne’s dragon embraced. I jumped into Skoll’s arms, and he caught me with his massive hands around my butt. He chuckled and smoke came from his nose. “You smell like you’ve been roasted at a braai.” Ashy soot covered me and turned my white jumpsuit dark gray.

“I don’t know what that is, but the roasted part sounds about right.”

“A braai is like the bonfire gathering we had back at the ranch when we had the curry.” I placed my palm flat on his cheek and charred plates scraped my skin.

“Aye. That was a good time, lass.” He pressed his blackened lips to my ear. *It was just after I’d tasted your sweet cunt for the first time.*

My face flamed with heat and a full-on shiver raced down my spine. “Oh my God. I’m so happy you’re alive.”

“Och, aye. Me too, Sunshine.” He grinned as he carried me toward the room where the pods were being dethawed.





## Chapter 30 Open Yer Eyes

*Ajani*

He had to duck his head to clear the doorway and enter the room. All eyes turned to us briefly then resumed their important work. The other Raseri didn't follow us into the space. They'd taken off somewhere else with their mates.

“Do you need medical care? Are you injured?” I asked him.

He was slowly returning to his normal form. His Duigari guard uniform hung in tattered shreds from his muscles, and he had large patches of what looked like dried blood all over him.

“Nai. I'm fine. I want to be here.” He began to walk toward the first pod where the woman was awake and talking.

Dolvena scolded him with her wagging finger. “Uh-uh. No way. You stand over there.” She pointed toward the bench on the wall where the orcs were impatiently waiting.

His shoulders rose and fell as he glanced between the bench and the still frozen pods.

*I can do nothing now but watch.* He sounded so defeated that it tore at my heart.

*You did well, Skoll. They're going to be okay. Let's sit. I'll stay with you.*

He nodded and sat on the bench with me held firmly on his lap. His eyes were locked on the team of doctors as they moved to the next pod.

They repeated the process I'd watched on the last pod, and the woman woke up. She was given a warming blanket and a wake up speech from Dolvena. The next one was human. Nefer and Stella were called in to speak to her. They were covered in gray soot too. They spoke softly to her as they explained everything. The now-free women stared down at their swollen bellies in shock.

As the procedure continued, Skoll watched with an intensity I'd never seen from him before. He seemed extra interested when their faces were revealed like he was looking for someone. It took a long time, but he watched every pod like it was the first. I counted a total of fifty-five pods. Fifty-five lives ruined by the Zul and his ruthless experiment.

There were only three pods left when Skoll lowered his head for the first time.

“What’s wrong? They’ve all survived so far. I thought it was going well.”

“Nothing.”

“Something is bothering you greatly. What is it?”

He shook his head. *Part of me hoped...*

*That one of them was your mother?*

He nodded slowly.

*I'm so sorry,* I sent back through the bond with a mental hug.

*It was foolish.*

*There's three left.*

His head came up, but the enthusiasm he had all night was gone. His shoulders slouched, and he wiped the ash from his eyes roughly with his hand. He had returned fully to his normal form.

As the gel drained from the woman's face, his ears perked and his shoulders grew tight. From what I could see, the woman was Krassokdro, and her scales were a blue gray. She was skinny and more frail than the others. Her baby bump was only the size of a large potato. She had wrinkles around her eyes and a pained look on her face.

Skoll stood and placed me carefully on the floor next to him.

*Is that her?* I asked, but he was gone.

He'd rushed over to the pod. He glared down at her, his face twisted in concentration.

The woman didn't wake. She didn't cough like the others, and the doctors began to frantically change things to try and revive her.

"Heal her!" he ordered one of the doctors.

Dolvena approached and held up a hand softly to warn him, but she allowed him to stay by the side of the woman's pod.

I felt the bond pulse between us, and he dropped to the floor. He sat on his knees, back slouched, head down, like he had been weakened and beaten. He looked completely defeated.

"Zenas, save her. Good Zenas, what have I done?"

*Is it her?* I asked him.

He lifted his head slightly and his gaze slid to mine. *Aye.*

*She's not waking up.*

*Nai.*

*Oh, Skoll. Touch her hand before she dies. Touch her.*

He peered up at me with doubt in his eyes but slowly rose. He reached into the pod and brushed her hand with his soot covered hands. He picked up a cloth and began to gently wipe away the remnants of gel coating her skin. I had to agree it didn't look good, but the doctors were working like crazy.

One of them, a female doctor, covered her with a warming blanket and then unearthed a white wand. She scanned it over his mother's body, holding it longer over her belly and head. Skoll continued to clean the gel from her skin with his gentle caresses.

I stood on the other side of the pod, mostly to support Skoll but also praying for her to wake up.

With the back of my forefinger, I touched her cheek. Skoll looked at me, his eyes deep with pain.

*Good girl.*

Aww. He was praising me for touching someone who wasn't him. It was his mother, and she was clinging to life. Hopefully, somehow she could feel the love that we were pouring into the touch.

"Open yer eyes, Mum," he begged quietly, and I choked on a sob.

After long, tense minutes just staring at her lifeless face, a muscle twitched in her cheek. I took her hand in mine, not worrying at all about the gel or the ash. I was trying to reach her. Skin on scales.

Skoll did the same thing, taking her fragile hand in his big strong mitts.

Her eyelids fluttered like something was under there trying desperately to get out.

Skoll drew in a long breath and held it. I think everyone in the room was holding their breath.

Then she opened her eyes.

Skoll's face scrunched up, and I could see him fighting tears. I'd already lost the battle, and the salty drops streamed down my face.

The doctors buzzed around her pod, and the mood in the room lightened. She opened her mouth and drew in a ragged breath.

Hoots and tail stomps erupted again. Skoll looked up at me and smiled.

*She's alive.*

"Your dream doesn't seem so foolish now. It was perfect. She's alive because of you. You saved her life and the lives of all these women and their unborn babies."

He looked down at his mom again. She peered into his eyes and began to cough. Skoll had to step back while they checked her breathing and vitals and cleaned off the ash we had rubbed on her skin.

Dolvena began to speak quietly to her, telling her she was safe now. Telling her to stay calm. She was among friends. She was free.

Skoll and I backed away, giving her some time to adjust to her situation.

He drew me into his arms, and there was another round of hoots and hollers.

“Skoll is a hero,” one of the orcs called out.

He looked up at them. “There’s still two more females.”

Everyone laughed because the chances were very good for the other two women, and we were close to done.

We sat down again along the wall, and I could feel the shock and tension draining off of him.

“You must be so happy.” I placed my hand over his.

“Will she remember me?” *What if she doesn’t want me?* His voice was timid through the bond.

“Why would you say something like that?”

He turned and looked into my eyes. “I was her son with horns. She sent me away to hide.”

“To protect you because she loved you.” I squeezed his hand.

“She never came back.” He gazed out at her pod as the doctors worked on her.

“Maybe she was in that stupid Dome the whole time.”

He looked back at me while he processed all that I’d said like he was seeking answers in my eyes.

The doctors removed his mother from the pod and cleaned her off. She was wrapped in a blue kilt and given a bed to lay on. She drank water through a straw and peered down at her round belly.

The exhaustion of it all started to settle in on me. “Maybe we could come back and see her after some rest,” I suggested.

Skoll nodded, finally pulling his eyes from his mom across the room. “She needs time.”

We stood to walk away but were stopped by a fragile voice from across the room. “Skoll? Is that you?” He froze and looked to her again. “Skoll? My son...”

He walked quickly toward her, taking her hand in his again. “Aye. Tis me, Mum.”

“My baby.”

“All grown now.” His voice broke and his lips pressed firmly together.

“I wanted to... I tried to reach...” Her voice was weak.

“Hush, Mum. We’ll talk about it later.”

“I tried to reach you, but they wouldn’t let me leave or send a courier. I tried to befriend one of the orcs to find Bazur, and they killed him.”

“It’s a’write. I looked for you everywhere. The only place left to look was inside the Dome. I found you.”

“Thank Zenas you did.” Her eyes rolled up in her head, and she heaved out a heavy sigh. “I’m so tired.”

“You sleep now. We’ll talk later. You’re safe, and these doctors are very good. They’ll make sure you have what you need. I’m here for you. Not leaving.”

She slurred out a *thank you*, but she was asleep again. She looked peaceful, and her face was turning a brighter blue with rich undertones instead of the pale blue gray she had been before.

“Get going now!” Dolvena waved her hand at Skoll to move away. “She’s sleeping. You need sleep too. Go!”

“There’s two more females,” Skoll protested.

“I have a fresh team coming on now. We’ll take care of them. Unless you think one of them is your sister or something?”

He chuckled. “Nai.”

“Off you go. Nice to meet you, Ajani. I’m Dolvena.”

I laughed. “I know that now. Thank you so much for everything.”

“We’ll celebrate tomorrow. Tonight you rest. Are you injured?” She pointed at a burn mark on his chest.

“I’m healed.” He looked at me and grinned his devilishly handsome grin.

“Then take your mate to your quarters and make sure you sleep. I don’t want you up all night fucking, and you miss sunrise meal with your mother.”

He wrapped an arm over my shoulders and guided me out of the room.

“She’s funny,” I said.

“Mmm. That’s one word for it.”

“Heldmuis and Rasling! Where are they? Did we leave them at the Dome?”

“Nai. I gave them to one of the orcs. They’re safe for now.” He tugged me closer. “We’ll collect them at sunrise.”

“Okay.”

“I have plans for you right now.” His voice was deep and scratchy.

So far all Skoll’s plans had been great, so I was eager to see what he had in store for me.





## Chapter 30 Payback

*Skoll*

With my arms around her waist, I led her in front of me to my assigned bay on the ship. She easily allowed my touch now, and I cherished it, but I also worried about her mental state with all that had happened.

Now it was my turn as her mate to care for her emotionally.

As we entered the bay in the east wing, I crowded her from behind to guide her toward the bed.

“Uh, shouldn’t we wash or something?” She resisted lightly but not seriously. The tension between our bodies as I forced her forward caused my cock to rise to attention.

“I’m just going to get you dirty again.” I growled in her ear as the remaining dirt and grime of the battle rubbed from my scales to her soft skin.

“Oh.”

She landed on her stomach on the bed with a grunt. I lay down on top of her, connecting us as much as possible with her body below me as I took care not to crush her. My rigid cock pressed into the crease of her gorgeous ass and began to vibrate.

She groaned, but it wasn’t a desperate plea for me to take her. No, I knew what my mate needed.

“You are very comfortable with my touch now.” I moved her hair aside and pressed a gentle kiss to the back of her neck.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“That’s good, lass.”

Her muscles relaxed, and we sunk deeper into the bed.

“You stabbed Dagmar in the balls today and then watched me cut his heart out.”

She made a quiet noise of affirmation. “And then feed it to him,” she added.

“Och, aye. I thought you didn’t watch.”

“I saw enough.” Her voice was lazy with exhaustion now.

“Right. So you’ve escaped the Zul for the second time.”

“Yes.” Insecurity laced her tone, and her muscles tensed.

I kissed down her neck and placed a soft lick between her shoulder blades. My fangs dripped, but I held back the monster. “Watched many females dethaw and awaken in a strange place, one of them being my mother, who you touched and nursed to life.”

“Thank God.” She squirmed and tilted her head deeper into my touch.

“Saw a mothership for the first time.” I raised my body so I could trace a claw down her side. She shivered and giggled. “This makes you laugh?”

“I guess I’m a little ticklish there.”

“Ahh. I’ve often wondered if my touch could make you laugh.” I teased my fingers down her side, and she arched her back as she bit back a giggle. Beautiful. I ignored my twitching cock and pressed her deeply into the bed. “So now you must sleep.”

She lifted her head weakly. “What?”

“You are safe in a bed on a well-protected mothership. I am here keeping guard. You will sleep.” I slid to her side, keeping my hand on her back, turning to make eye contact with her.

Her face looked disappointed but also weary. “I wanted to be with you.”

“And I want it too. My cock and my Rage Monster are sulking about my decision, but there will be time for that later. First, let me bathe you and then you sleep.”

“Okay. Twist my arm,” she said lazily. I didn’t know what that meant, so I carefully removed her laboratory clothes and

threw them in the disposal. “You’ll never wear a white suit again.”

“No. I hated it.”

“It is already burned.”

“I like the kilts.”

“The bretten?”

“Yes. I like the blue ones.”

“That’s good. Mine are blue because I am from Krassoks. And you are from me, so you will also wear blue. You can of course wear any color you like.”

My cock reacted to seeing her beautiful body naked, but caring for her was my top priority. I peeled off my tattered uniform and got rid of it as well. I carried her to the cleaning basin and held her closely as it filled with warm cleaning fluid. I stopped it before it reached her shoulders and gently caressed her skin and hair. When we were both clean, I dried her with a cloth and carried her back to the bed. The blue bretten I discovered stored in the room was much too big for her, but I wrapped it around her anyway then covered her with a soft blanket of furs.

“You were like a superhero tonight. So brave.” She looked so peaceful in my bed, her skin clean and bright.

“My love for you makes me brave,” I answered honestly.

“This wasn’t for me. This was for your mom and the other women.”

“Mmm.”

I climbed in beside her. The bed was barely big enough for both of us, but I pulled her close and tucked her hips into mine, curling my body around her back. My hand rested on her belly, and she sighed heavily. “It is my honor to be your hero.”

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At sunrise, I lay beside her and woke her with light kisses down her neck, my hand gently caressing the soft curves of

her hip over her bretten.

She slowly opened her eyes and smiled when she saw me next to her. “What’s going on?”

“My idea to be noble was stupid. I should let you sleep, but the Raseri in me can’t wait any longer. You feel good, smell good. My heart is connected to yours. I need our bodies connected too.”

She stretched and slowly opened her legs for me as she let out a soft moan. “Yes, please.”

The urge to bite her flared strong, the beast inside growled to be released, but I had plans for my mate and my primal desires would have to wait. “Keep your arms there.”

“Hmm?”

“Keep your arms above your head.” I brought my tail up and wrapped the end around her wrists. She pulled against it, and I tightened it enough to let her know she wasn’t getting away.

“Why?”

I climbed between her legs and forced her thighs apart further with my knees. Her floral scent hit my nose, and my aching hard cock pulsed in anticipation.

“I want you to see what it was like for me. To love you and want you and not be allowed to touch you. It was a slow painful torture of mind and body.”

She whimpered, and her eyes fluttered closed again as she writhed beneath me. Zenas, it felt amazing to finally have her the way I wanted her. Fully at my mercy and desperate for my touch. No worry or guilt.

With my lips by her ear, I asked, “Are you stopping me, lass?”

“No. Please do it,” she replied eagerly.

When my fangs brushed her neck, her back arched, chin up toward the ceiling. Her wrists tugged against my tail, but she

wasn't trying to escape. I didn't sense any fear through the bond, only blazing unanswered lust.

I kissed her then, licking into her mouth and claiming what was mine. We'd both waited far too long for this, and the sweet sweet anticipation had my heart racing. Her body rolled up against mine, but I kept a small distance between us, drawing a frustrated groan from her lips.

"Settle in and hold fast." I trailed my fangs down her face to her neck and shoulder then kissed her again before repeating it on the other side. Her skin pebbled in each spot that I passed, and I ached to lick it but she needed to wait just like I had to wait until now.

My fangs dripped venom and left a slick trail on her skin as I pushed her brettens aside and bared her breasts to me. She trembled when I teased my fangs over her nipples, not biting, just tempting them into hard little buds with my hot breath and subtle brushes of lips.

I continued my slow perusal of her body with my fangs down her belly and teased the spot that had made her giggle before. This time she sucked in a shaky breath as the bumps raised on her skin there. As I traveled down her legs, I carefully avoided her core.

"Please," she begged, her hands flexing uselessly in the grip of my tail. I ignored her, taking my time to caress the bottom of her feet with my fangs. She was ticklish there too and tried to pull away. I forced her feet apart and pressed her knees to the bed in a way that opened her up to me.

"Hush. Patience," I whispered as I nipped at her inner thigh.

I climbed back up to her face, brushing my fangs along her navel on the way. I kissed her again. This time she tasted of pure hunger and desperation. As our tongues licked together, I slowly removed the rest of her brettens without touching between her legs despite her squirming to get my attention.

"Roll over," I growled into her ear.

She whimpered and purposefully brushed against me as she turned.

I forced her ass up high, spreading her knees wide, baring her sweet pussy to me. “Careful, lass, or it’ll last even longer. And it’s going to take a long time as it is.”

She buried her face in the soft bedding, her back arching in a supple curve. My Sunshine was flexible from all her yoga practice.

“That was what my fangs feel like on your beautiful front. This is what my tongue feels like on your stunning backside.” I gripped her hair in my fist and tugged her head back, licking up her neck to behind her ear, breathing her in, feeling the heat rise in her body. She moaned long and deep, making my cock weep to be inside her.

I traced a path down the bumps of her spine with my tongue, pressing it flatter in some places. When I reached her luscious ass, I started spinning it. This drew a long, satisfying groan from her throat.

My tongue trailed along her legs and licked the bottom of her feet. Her skin was different on the back, rougher in some spots. The scent of her arousal called to the monster, and I couldn’t resist finally dipping my tongue into the sweet ambrosia. She was so wet there, I could drink it forever. I drove deeper, and she cried out my name, her walls clenching hungrily around my tongue. I stayed there for a long time, bringing her higher, and when I sensed she was close, I stopped and licked my lips as I stared at her luscious ass.

She moaned and flexed her hips.

“It makes me blexing hard to know I was the first one to taste you like that.”

“Mmm,” she hummed her agreement.

“The only one who will ever know the perfection of your nectar. I want you to make more for me.”

“Yes.”

“Later.”

“No,” she begged, and I laughed.

“When you’re ready, I’m going to take you here.” I drew my tongue up the valley of her buttocks. She gasped but didn’t say no.

My lips reached her neck again, and she tensed. “Now? Will you take me now, Skoll? This is so hard. It’s so hard to wait.”

“I know. Isn’t it painful?” I pressed my vibrating cock between her ass cheeks.

“Ugh. Yes, but in a really really good way.”

I chuckled and rolled her over to her back. I kissed her again, letting her taste mingle between our lips.

“Next round, my hands.”

She threw her head to the side and arched her back. “Another round? How many rounds?”

“As many as I need.” My cock was ready to burst but watching her struggle was worth the wait.

With my hands, I spent less time on her neck and shoulders and focused on her nipples and breasts, pinching and twisting them, cradling their weight, careful not to dig my claws in too deep but enough that she knew they were there.

With my hands behind her knees, I bent her in on herself so they were near her ears. Aye, very flexible, my little mate.

“Lock them behind my neck.”

She quickly complied. I passed my claws over her core again, and she closed her eyes tightly, biting her lip with her blunt teeth.

“Watch me, Sunshine.”

She opened her eyes and looked down as I placed my hand on her pleasure spot, rubbing small circles into it. “Like this?”

“Oh yes.” She raised her hips off the bed to push my palm deeper against her clit.

Her breath hitched and I sensed she was close.



So I stopped.

“Oh my God!”

I chuckled and slowly removed my belt and bretten. She sucked in a huge breath and held it when she saw me naked on top of her.

“Next round.” Her feet trailed over my backside as I brought my cock up to her face. Her tongue eagerly lapped at the sides. I nearly exploded right there and had to pull away to keep it in check. Her feet urged me closer along the backs of my legs.

I dragged my cock down her front between her breasts, the suckers reaching out and grabbing her, not wanting to let go.

When I got to her feet, she tried to grip it with her toes.

“Ah, ah, ah. Naughty girl.” I pulled it out of her reach, and she growled in frustration.

My shaft was vibrating strongly now, and I hadn't even bitten her yet. I brought my cock to her core and slipped the tip into her searing wet heat. Her hips arched high up off the bed, trying to push it in deeper. I pulled it out and placed it on her stomach. “Now, we start over with the fangs on the back.”

She groaned. “Are you fucking kidding me? No fucking way.”

“Aye, lass. I jest. I can't wait any longer.” I rose up and bit her neck, sinking my fangs in.

“Yes!” She sighed, her breasts heaving beneath me.

I didn't lick the puncture wounds because I wanted to leave my mark there. Ajani was mine forever and everyone would know.

I pierced her breasts and drank in her sweet blood, and she began to vibrate in resonance with me.

The final bite at the apex of her thighs sent her into convulsions, and she yanked her hands from the grip my tail had on them.

Her hands dropped quickly as she reached behind my neck and pulled herself up to face me. “No more waiting. Do it now.”

“Anything you say.” I surged inside her, her tight wet heat nearly knocking me unconscious. I groaned long and hard into her mouth and she swallowed it.

Too desperate to have her lay back again, I pulled her chest against my torso. Her legs straddled my hips and ground my cock deeper into her. She made a grunt that sounded like discomfort so I stopped there. It was further than we’d gone last time, but I was in no rush to push her to take all of it.

“You feel so good squeezing my cock tight, my good little lass. You take me so well.”

*Deeper*, she sent through the bond.

*Anything you say.* Acting on pure instinct, I pulled back and surged up inside her, tugging her down to collide with me. We both moaned loudly as she rocked her hips, causing the ridges of my abdomen to massage her pleasure spot.

“That feel good?” I asked her.

“Yes. So good,” she breathed. She canted her hips, forcing me impossibly deeper, smashing my muscles against her clit, taking what she needed. With that one greedy move, my last thread of control snapped. I grabbed her waist and worked her harder and faster over me, thrusting wildly without measure or reason. In... Out... Jagged, short punches and chaotic spasms. Embarrassed by my lack of control but too far gone to correct it, I gave in to it all. I took greedily from her and thank Zenas, she let me. She trusted me enough to be my primal self with her.

The Rage Monster roared through his victory. My body began to shift, and she cried out in shock.

No. I held it back, fighting the razor-sharp edge of pleasure and pain.

The bed oscillated at the same frequency as our synced vibrations. Each stroke amplified and stoked the fire in the

wave. The bed jolted and surged with us like a ship fighting an angry sea.

Through all the chaos, with a breathless grunt, her entire body pulsed around me, gripping me tight and sucking the light from behind my eyes. I felt exactly what she was feeling through the bond, and it became part of me. Unbridled energy stewed deep in my pelvis and rended up through my hips, bursting from my cock in a massive explosion. I released everything into her in lightning strikes of passion.

*Mine*, I sent to her as I planted myself deep and savored the hot bliss of being joined with my mate this way. *Only mine*.

*Yes, baby. Yours. I love you so much.*

And I could feel it through the bond. She did love me. It heated the room with its magnitude. It burned a gaping hole in my heart and filled it with pure joy.

The bed rocked much harder as the waves multiplied out of control. I forced her back to the bed and covered her just before my backside smacked into the ceiling with a vicious thud.

It smashed me deeper into her and we both grunted.

I regained some control after my release and focused on pumping into her hard, thrusting and ramming, working her up again, prolonging this forever. I managed to wedge my tail between us, and it vibrated exactly where she liked it.

Her breath hitched and she squealed loudly as she came undone. She screamed my name through her orgasm as we hit the floor and then the ceiling again.

That sent another climax through me, and I didn't know where I ended and she began. We were a tidal wave of ecstasy exploding in the room.

After many long parsecs, the rocking slowed and the bed settled to the ground. My knot swelled and she gasped. A fine sheen of sweat glistened on her skin. I licked her shoulder but stopped at her neck. "I marked you here," I said, my voice ragged and deep.

“You did?” She kept her eyes closed as she lazily reached up to touch the spot. “Was good,” she said with a sleepy drawl.

“It’s permanent. Do you want me to lick it and remove it?”

“What? No.” Her eyes popped open and she glared at me. “Don’t you dare.” She laughed and pushed my face away from her neck. “I want it.”

“Good girl.” I pressed my lips below my mark and didn’t lick it. It would be there forever. “I love being with you like this, filling you up, sinking my fangs into your soft flesh, watching you come undone from my touch.”

“Mmm.”

“It means so much more because I know the courage it took for you to let me do it,” I murmured against her neck, feeling her pulse return to normal beneath my lips.

“It wasn’t so hard. You’re hot as fuck.”

I chuckled and my knot began to recede.

“I nearly lost control.” In fact, I did lose control.

“I want that. I want to see you unrestrained, wild, taking what you need selfishly. I want that more than anything. Every time. I like knowing I made you feel that way.”

“Mmm. Anything you want, Sunshine. Always.” I stayed a little longer inside my mate, slowly stroking in and out, feeling grateful that Zenas had brought her to me, until she fell asleep again, fully sated in my arms.



# Chapter 31 Post Action Meeting

*Ajani*

We did end up missing breakfast even though Dolvena had warned us not to. When we finally pulled ourselves out of bed, I saw the mark on my neck for the first time. It glowed like the ones I'd seen on Stella and Nefer, but it was smaller and more precise. Just four glowing dots where his fangs had pierced my skin. They looked like stars. "I love it."

He admired my neck and smiled. "I will add to it."

"Oh boy."

By the time we were dressed and ready to go, we were a few minutes late for the post-action meeting Dolvena had called in the great room.

Several pairs of slitted pupils in a rainbow of eye colors glared at us as we entered the room. I gulped down the huge lump in my throat and fought the urge to turn around and run back to the safety of our room, but Skoll squeezed my hand and pulled me protectively to his side as we entered the room.

*I once saw Tornoc pull his mate to his side in a meeting just like this, he sent through the bond.*

Stella and Tornoc stood at the front of the room next to Dolvena. To her left was Vonne and Nefer. The rest of the warriors stood facing them.

Alrighty then. This would be a standing meeting. No chairs for the warriors, I guessed.

*I was so moved that I cut off my horns and went undercover in the Dome. Had I not seen that and wanted it too, I wouldn't have done it and I wouldn't be here with you right now.*

I peered up at him and smiled. The bond pulsed in my chest.

"Let's get started." Dolvena clapped her hands, and the low talking stopped. "I have good news. The mission

yesterday was a huge success thanks to all of you.”

The mood in the room instantly lightened.

“No casualties at the Battle of Grosfgr. We greatly reduced the numbers of the enemy and provided ample distraction for the main mission inside the Dome. Most importantly, the Zul is dead, burned and sentenced to Efreeen by the Raseri.”

A cacophony of short hoots startled me. Tails stomped the floor and handsome smiles broke out on fanged faces. Several of the warriors glanced at Skoll, and I could sense the appreciation in their gazes. They’d pulled off an incredible feat yesterday.

Dolvena raised a large sword with a gilded handle, pointing the sharp end up to the ceiling as she held the hilt in two hands. It was almost as big as she was. “Skoll O’Kelleher, Nivveok warrior of Eastern Krassoks, step forward.”

Skull’s shock beat through me for a moment before he stepped in front of her. He immediately climbed down to one knee and lowered his head.

“Turn to the side.”

He pivoted on his knee until his arm was in front of her. She took the giant sword and began to carve into the scales of his bicep. “For exceptional bravery under extremely dangerous circumstances, I award you with the Nivveok mark of honor.”

I cringed as Skoll’s blue blood seeped down his massive arm, but he didn’t flinch at all. Dolvena struggled to hold the blade, so she couldn’t have been being gentle with him.

“Your loyalty to your oath and to Aziza will long be remembered. You may stand.”

He stood and stomped his tail before he returned to me and took my hand again. The other warriors all stomped their tails on the ground several times.

I could feel and see the pride bursting through him but also the humble undertone that he felt he didn’t deserve such accolades.

“I am working with the leaders of other free planets to draft a governing document that will allow us to rebuild.” Dolvena resumed her speech. “We’ll be protected if one of his successors decides to try to take over. We will never be held captive again.”

More hoots and tails stomps rang out around the room.

“So now our mission has changed to a protection focus instead of aggressive action. Our efforts have turned to rebuilding, earlier than we expected, but we’re ready. I have assembled teams of scientists that will restore the forests. We will begin the process of replanting and reintroducing flora and fauna as they become available.”

Another round of short hoots and tail stomps echoed off the walls.

Skoll stomped his tail. “I’d like to offer my help with that. I own a collection of male and female pairs of many of the species of the Krassoks forest. I’d be happy to help with the repopulation efforts.”

For a moment, Dolvena lost her tough facade, and her eyebrows came up, mouth curved in a cute pout. “You kept pairs of each species?”

“Many of them, aye. I recently acquired a herd of romfeldae if you’d like to start with the larger species.”

Dolvena’s mouth moved but no words came out. Finally, she shifted her gaze to me and gave me an *oh my God, he’s so sweet* look.

She gathered herself and squared her shoulders. “Well, that’s all very impressive and will greatly improve the speed of restoration efforts.”

Skoll grinned proudly. I never knew the reason why he kept his menagerie, but now it all made sense. He’d always wanted them to go back to their homelands, to his homeland. He’d always believed it would be restored. I felt this in my soul because I would do anything for South Africa if I had the resources to do it.



A loud bang sounded at the door, and the warriors dropped into fighting stances with their hands on their swords. Skoll pushed me behind him and crouched forward to protect me. Well. My goodness. That was an impressive sight. I wouldn't want to be the one on the other end of their intimidating glares and spiked horns.

“Open the door!” A gruff voice called from the other side.

Dolvena looked to Skoll for guidance.

“It's Gerzog. Allow him to enter.”

“He is not sworn. This is a high-security meeting.”

Skoll growled. “After all they've done, you still don't trust the orcs?”

The pounding at the door continued, but no one moved. All eyes were on Dolvena.

“Very well. Let him in, but do not discuss anything confidential. We'll find out what he wants and then he will leave.”



## Chapter 32 Googly Eyes

*Ajani*

Skoll walked to the door and opened it by waving his hand over a sensor. “Gerzog, come in.”

An orc stomped into the room but stopped short when he saw the congregation of horned warriors with Dolvena, Vonne, and Tornoc at the front. “Where is your leader?” He looked toward Vonne, expecting him to speak.

Dolvena rolled her eyes. “I am their leader.”

“You?”

She sighed and dipped her chin. “Dolvena of Ditha, Architect of the Alliance. And you are?”

“Gerzog, chieftain of the Blackwind Horde of the orcs of Eastern Krassoks.” He didn’t dip his head. In fact he lifted it and stared down at her almost in a challenge. He stood with his arms out by his sides, one hip cocked, and his fists tight.

*The Blackwinds were displaced by the Zul, but Gerzog holds out hope they will thrive again.*

Skoll’s voice through the bond drew my attention from the powerful orc in the center of the room. I realized now that this orc had helped with the rescue efforts and was the one complaining they were doing it wrong last night.

“And why have you so elegantly pushed your way through the door?”

I had to smile at Dolvena. She wasn’t intimidated at all by the bluster of the huge green hulk that had rudely interrupted her meeting.

“We want the females,” he said with no hesitation.

Dolvena’s eyebrows rose. “In what way do you want them?”

“We want to... care for them as we did in the Dome.”

“Really? Orcs abused them in horrible conditions in perebreum mines then held them captive in the lab and forced pregnancies upon them and now you ask to care for them?” She shook her head. “Too late.”

It was true what Dolvena said. When I had been at the mines, the orcs were discipline enforcers for the trolls. They’d been much kinder at the laboratory, and they weren’t all the same orcs. They’d helped with the rescue yesterday, so I had actually forgiven them, but maybe I was wrong to do so.

“We wish to serve as penance.” Gerzog finally lowered his eyes in humility.

Dolvena crossed her arms. “They are under the care of the Alliance. Find your forgiveness elsewhere.”

“We were forced into servitude of the Zul. Surely you understand that.” He reached out with his hand, palm flat, his voice ragged. “We didn’t want to hurt them.”

“And yet you did. The pain you’ve caused will not easily be forgotten by them. They will not trust you anymore than I do.”

“We will earn their trust,” Gerzog pleaded.

Dolvena stomped her foot and pushed her shoulders back. “Leave now.”

Skoll stepped forward quietly, and her gaze slid to him. “I can testify for the orcs. They are fiercely protective and loyal. We would not have any of the females here without their bravery. They helped to free my bondmate, Ajani. They took great risks yesterday, and that should count toward their character.”

“They were critical to the success of the mission,” Vonne added.

Tornoc didn’t say anything but shared a meaningful look with Stella. She had been at the mines with me, but Nefer had not. Stella then looked at me with question in her eyes. She probably felt as conflicted as I did.

“What do you say, Ajani?” Dolvena asked me. “Would the females from the mines and the laboratory ever forgive the orcs for what they’ve done, even if they were responsible for rescuing them?”

Gerzog made eye contact with me, and Skoll’s hand tightened on mine. “I believe it’s possible, but you really should ask them.”

Dolvena frowned. “It doesn’t matter because the females will be cared for and protected at a base on-planet that is secure.” She clearly didn’t like it when her plans were challenged.

“Wherever the females go, the orcs will go too,” Gerzog proclaimed confidently.

“The orcs will not be allowed inside the base.”

Gerzog growled and took a menacing step toward her. “That mountain belongs to us, and you know it.” All the horned warriors braced, ready to defend Dolvena if necessary.

“The orcs lost the mountain in the Great Battle. It belongs to the Alliance now.” Dolvena was not backing down.

Gerzog visibly shook, his nostril’s flaring. “You’ll just take them from us? As if we delivered them to you so you can send them to live on the military base you have erected on our land?” The orc did not hide the disgust in his tone.

“They will be well cared for and safe,” Dolvena replied.

“And soon they will have children. What facilities do you have for them on this base? A medical staff and soldiers? Who will provide the real care these females need?”

Dolvena didn’t answer but gritted her teeth and avoided eye contact with Gerzog.

It appeared Gerzog had revealed a flaw in her plan.

“The rescue of the females came earlier than we anticipated because Skoll—”

“The orcs will care for the pregnant females and their young under our mountain.” Gerzog interrupted her. “And you

will vacate the land you have stolen.”

“Absolutely not.” Dolvena’s voice rose.

“You can’t take them from us. *We* care for them!” Gerzog was yelling now and several warriors stepped out to stand in front of Dolvena. The orc was far outnumbered and quite brave to threaten the leader of all these horned warriors, five of whom could shift into giant dragons if they got angry.

*Would you be open to offering the ranch as a safe haven for them?* Skoll’s voice in my head pierced the tension in the room.

I peered up at him. *Of course.* My heart nearly exploded at the idea. I hadn’t even thought of it, but Skoll, in his wisdom and compassion, had anticipated they would need a safe place.

His mother would be on his ranch. We could all help the women through their pregnancies and births.

*Oh my gosh, yes, do it.* I sent him an image of small children playing with the dogs on the ranch and another of them running through the grass with the elephants.

“I offer my mountain ranch as safe haven to the females, their children, and the orcs, who may come and care for them and protect them there until Krassoks is rebuilt and they can all resettle.”

Dolvena’s gaze slid to mine again, and this time she wasn’t surprised. She knew how amazing and giving Skoll was already.

“It’s well fortified and as safe as the base,” Skoll continued. “I have several orcs living there already, and they will be happy to be reunited with their clan. I am indebted to the orcs for all that they have done to save my mate, my mother, and the other females. In exchange, I offer my ranch, my resources, my protection, and my fidelity to all of them. Does this please you, Gerzog?”

“Aye, brother. Until the mountain is ours again.” Gerzog’s face lit up with hope.

“A’write, fine.” Dolvena tapped the sword on the ground to get the attention back on her. “Skoll will make arrangements with Gerzog and the medical team to transfer the females to Skoll’s ranch as soon as they are stable and the accommodations are ready for them.”

“Nai,” Skoll interrupted. “First we will ask them what they want. Their choices have been made for them for far too long. They are free now.”

Dolvena’s mouth dropped open. Stella and Nefer smiled knowingly. “Very well. They will be offered many options, and we will fulfill their wishes the best we can.”

Tails stomped and voices hooted all around.

Gerzog was smiling, his tusks on full display.

“Gerzog, you must leave now,” Dolvena ordered.

He walked out with a nod to Skoll.

*I’m so excited, I said to Skoll through the bond. I think they will all choose the ranch. That was a fabulous idea.*

“We have one last matter to discuss. Skoll has bonded with the human, Ajani van Rooyen of Addo, South Africa of Earth.”

My face heated as all eyes turned to me.

“Tonight we’ll meet on the holodeck for the joining ceremony of Skoll and Ajani.”

Skoll grunted. “If that’s what my mate wishes.”

“Right,” Dolvena said awkwardly. “If you wish.” She made googly eyes at me again like I’d be crazy to say no.

It was sudden, and I didn’t know exactly what it meant, but whatever it was, I was all in with Skoll.

“Yes! I would love that.”

Dolvena sighed and looked up at the ceiling. “Thank Zenas. Finally a cooperative one. Meeting adjourned.”





## Chapter 33 Reunion

*Skoll*

We left the meeting, and I hoisted my mate over my shoulder to carry her quickly back to my bay. Her little squeal traveled through me like a jolt. “Skoll! What are you doing? Let me down.”

“I’m in a hurry.”

“Why the sudden rush?”

I placed her carefully on her feet and kissed her as we both laughed. “The meeting with Dolvena went well.”

Her mouth opened wide, and she inhaled deeply. “That’s an understatement. I’m so proud of you, and Dolvena was really impressed. Her eyes were bugging out every time you said something stunning and then you said something even more fabulous. I mean you really shocked her, and she seems so in control.”

“I only did what I felt driven to do.” I held her close and wrapped her in my arms. Her lavishing of praise on me made me uncomfortable.

“Well, you were driven to be an incredible hero and a white monster dragon. That’s very impressive.” The awe in her tone was humorous and exaggerated.

“Stop now, lass.” I tapped her nose with my claw. “I have something for you.”

“You do?” Her smile filled most of her face, and all her little blunt teeth showed. I loved to see her glow like this.

I left her and raised the door to a small compartment in the wall. Heldmuis and Rasling poked their white noses out before scampering to Ajani.

“Hey, you guys. You survived! I’m so happy to see you.” She nuzzled them up by her neck, and they crawled into her hair, chittering happily. She shifted her gaze to mine. “Thank you so much. I was worried about them.”

I kissed her again and felt the urge to claim her, but I had something to do first. “Let’s go to the sick bay.”

“Right now?”

“I want you to meet my mum.”

She quickly settled the mice back in the hole in the wall. “Okay. I’m suddenly nervous even though I sorta already met her once when she first woke up.”

“Nothing to be anxious about. My mother had a soul like yours. Gentle and accepting, embracing everyone in a warm light. She always said there were no strangers, only extended family we hadn’t met yet.”

“I should bring her something. On Earth, we bring gifts when we visit someone who is sick, or even if they aren’t sick, you always bring something.” She looked around the room, but it was fairly sparse. “What about a plum?” In the food supply bag, she found a ripe purple mesancloi, what she’d called a plum, and held it. “Like you brought to me in the beginning.”

“Excellent idea.”

We walked to the sick bay and found my mother in a private room. A blue bretten covered most of her body, but the bits of her scales that I could see were becoming more vibrant, and she looked bright-eyed.

“Skoll. So happy to see you.” She pushed herself up higher in her bed and grinned at me.

“How are you feeling, Mum?” I took her tiny hand in mind.

“It’s so nice to hear you call me that. I’m doing much better.” Her voice sounded much stronger than before.

“And the baby?”

She placed her other hand on her belly. “Your baby brother is well. The medics here are very skilled.”

Ah, a brother. Nice. I wondered how many other brothers I had out there. I’d have to ask her at some point when she was

ready to discuss it. “This is my bondmate, Ajani van Rooyen of South Africa on Earth.”

Her eyes widened. “Hello, my child, I am Siva O’Kelleher of Eastern Krassoks.”

Ajani took her other hand and smiled. “Nice to meet you. I brought you this plum, or whatever you call it here.”

“Ah, it’s been a long time since I’ve had a mesancloi. Thank you so much.”

“Let me slice it for you.” I took it from her and used my skeedu to cut a wedge out for her. Her gaze traveled over my body and up to my head. “Where are your horns?”

“I had them removed so that I could go undercover in the Dome.” I avoided her eyes. She likely wouldn’t approve of my decision. She wanted me to keep my horns.

“Thank you, Skoll. I thought I’d never be free again.”

“You are now.”

“Hard to believe.”

I handed her the mesancloi pieces and cleaned off my skeedu. “We’d like to talk to you about that.”

“A’write?” She took a bite and chewed it slowly. I glanced at Ajani, remembering her first solid food after being starved for so long.

“Dagmar is dead,” I stated plainly, no need to dance around it.

Her eyes quickly came to mine. “Oh, well, that’s good. I loathed that creature.”

“And the Zul is too. The Dome has been destroyed. Krassoks will be restored.”

“That’s wonderful.” She took another bite of her mesancloi, seemingly only halfway listening to me. She’d been through so much, and this was a lot to hit her with so soon after her reawakening.

I knelt next to her bed and made sure she could see my eyes. “So now you have choices. We won’t make any decisions for you, and whatever you decide, we’ll support you.”

She smiled at me and then Ajani. “What are my choices?”

“You can live at the ranch with us. The other women from the lab are welcome to come too. It will be safe. You can give birth there. We’ll have a medical staff.”

“My brother?”

“He was killed by the Duigari.”

She looked down and nodded slowly. “Is the waterfall still there?”

“Yes, and it’s gorgeous.” Ajani smiled.

“The orcs will be there though,” I added.

She frowned. “The orc guards from the lab?”

“Aye.” All the females would likely have the same reaction to the orcs that kept them in captivity. “They wish to help now as repentance. Or you can live on a military base with the Alliance, a rebel movement that was formed to fight the Zul. You’ll be safe there too but no animals or natural sunlight. Krassoks will be restored eventually, and you can live there when it’s ready.”

She closed her eyes and chewed slowly. A soft humming came from deep in her throat. “Mmm. I think I’d like to come stay with you and Ajani at the ranch. You can meet your sibling, and we can be a family for the first time.” Her lips curved up at the corners.

“I would like that, Mum.” I caressed her hand gently.

Her neck relaxed and her head sank deeper into the pillows. “That sounds lovely. My dear Skoll, I must rest now, but thank you for coming to see me and talking to me.” She dropped the mesancloi onto the bed.

“It’s over. You will heal now. Your life is your own again.” I picked up the remaining fruit and placed it on her bedside

table.

“Thank you.” She hummed softly.

“We will visit you again tomorrow,” I whispered and tucked her hand beside her hip in the bed. Ajani and I left silently.



## Chapter 34 Full of Life

*Ajani*

I took a seat next to Stella, Nefer, and Ciara, on the front porch of the main ranch house and raised my feet up on the block we used as a footrest. Leehem's bondmate, Ciara, was quiet and reserved, but very sweet. I respected that and gave her some space. When she was ready, she'd share herself with me and the other girls.

"They look fine riding those things," Stella said as she gazed out at Skoll, Vonne, Tornoc, Leehem, and Renzun riding shakturs in the pasture. Their kilts flew behind them, thick thighs hugging the flanks of the creature. Skoll's horns hadn't grown back, but his hair was now a light sky blue, and he'd let it grow to his shoulders. I missed the beanies, but his hair was silky smooth and felt especially nice between my legs.

Glasha arrived with a tray of drinks for us. We each took one and said thank you. When we all returned to the ranch from the Lodestar, Glasha found out that I had bonded with Skoll. I thought it might be awkward between us, but she took it in great stride. She'd said she was happy for us and even confessed she had a crush on someone else whose identity she would not divulge.

"Sit down. Join us. You're working too hard."

Glasha smiled and sat down next to Ciara. "I suppose I can relax for a second."

The men began a series of jumps on the shakturs, and Glasha's eyes brightened when Renzun made the jump. Hmm. Interesting.

Samhuel, Vonne and Nefer's son, played with the dogs in front of the house. Sam had beautiful purple scales like Vonne's and cute little green horns. Skoll's mother, Siva, was watching Sam play as she rocked Skoll's newly born brother, Lancel. He was named after Skoll's uncle and he had the cutest itsy bitsy green nubs for horns.

Our ranch family was growing, and it was good to see.

“Do you think you guys will have one?” Stella asked me as she rubbed her pregnant belly.

“Probably not anytime soon. We’re happy with the animals and all the kids on the ranch.”

“Don’t fuck the monster then.” She laughed.

“No. I haven’t.” Well, not since that first time at the waterfall, but I had thought about it often.

“Mmm.” Nefer smiled.

“Let me guess. I’m missing out?”

Stella smirked and looked down at her belly. “It was fun making this little bugger in here.”

“Any progress with the orcs?” Nefer asked as she spied two orcs getting kicked out of the back door of the smaller ranch house.

“A little.” I lied. The women didn’t want anything to do with the orcs, but they’d chosen the ranch over a military base, so now we were adjusting.

Stella eyed the orcs warily. “I understand how they feel. My mind knows the orcs must have good intentions, but it’s hard to forget what they did in the mines. Those kinds of memories don’t fade easily. No offense, Glasha.”

Glasha pulled her eyes from Renzun. “Huh? Oh, I agree. Orcs can be very annoying.”

“The mothers we have so far wouldn’t allow the orcs near their babies.” I nodded toward Skoll’s mother. “But many more are due soon. Dolvena sent some staff, both male and female. They don’t get along with the orcs at all. To be honest, even the horned warriors aren’t great nursemaids. They’re too serious and regimented. So the women are doing most of it themselves. Glasha and I are helping where we can.” I felt guilty when I left them to study the animals with Tobian, but that was my true calling. Animals were much simpler. “It’s like running a bed and breakfast for three warring countries.” It felt good to tell them the truth I’d been struggling with.



“It’ll take time to build up the trust,” Nefer said, but sometimes I doubted that this was the right decision. The male orcs weren’t exactly the type of company you wanted around you when you were pregnant. They partied all night and were often still drunk or passed out in the morning. They lurked in the shadows like predators which made everything worse.

“Have they done anything wrong?” Stella asked.

“Apart from constant drinking and fighting and swinging in the trees? We’ve had several complaints about them peering through windows in the middle of the night. They smell horrible because they don’t bathe. They steal things, and poor Glasha is fending off their constant advances.”

Glasha laughed. “It’s a’write. I can handle them.”

I sighed. “We just have a long way to go. Skoll is almost a full-time referee and bouncer, and that’s not what he envisioned when he invited everyone here.”

Nefer smiled and shook her head. “Nothing’s ever easy on this planet. I thought with the Zul gone, it would be more peaceful. Dolvena’s working herself to the bone to reduce the chaos, but she’s only human.”

“True that,” Stella laughed.

I wasn’t sure what she meant by that. “I’m really not complaining though. Life here is amazing. Skoll is wonderful and attentive. He’s here all the time and I enjoy watching him manage all the different personalities.” When Skoll wasn’t working the ranch, he was with me, usually in bed or making love somewhere in the house. We were insatiable, and the drama with the orcs provided the only distraction worthy of getting dressed.

Suddenly all the guys dismounted and started running toward the house. They passed us without saying anything which was odd. Skoll didn’t even stop and thump the belly of his little brother with his tail like he always did to make him laugh.

We followed them inside where they were strapping on swords and guns. “What’s going on?”

“We found his number two,” Leechem said to me with a crazed gleam in his eyes.

Skoll glared at him and he looked away.

“Whose number two? The Zul?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you.” Leechem mumbled, and Skoll growled so deep it rumbled through my chest.

Skoll had told me briefly they were monitoring the Zul’s subordinates who had survived the explosion at the Dome and they were still a threat.

“On this planet?” I asked.

No response from any of them.

“Where?”

No response.

They were leaving me here alone with all these orcs and pregnant women?

“You’re all going to another planet?” Stella asked.

*Talk to me*, I said to Skoll through the bond.

Tor, Vonne, and Leechem paused and stared intently at their mates. We were all probably having silent conversations through the bond. Renzun and Glasha even shared a longing look.

Skoll sighed and walked to me with his head down. “We’re going to the Lodestar to plan a highly confidential Nivveok mission.”

“When will you be back?”

“Soon.” He kissed me, licked my face, and stomped his tail.

The other two men gave brief but claiming kisses too.

“What about the orcs?”

“They’ll behave. I’ll ask Dolvena to send more warriors if she can spare one.”

Great. None of the warriors were going to want to come here and babysit orcs and actual babies when there was a big exciting mission going on.

He reached behind my back, pulled my body flush to his, and kissed me with a passion that made my stomach drop. I was instantly heated and aching for him. He growled as he withdrew his spinning tongue from my mouth.

I licked my lips and peered up at him. *They'll understand if we dip out to the waterfall for a bit first*, I sent through the bond.

*I'm sorry, Sunshine. This one is urgent.*

And with that, he was gone. I was shocked when Renzun bent down and licked the side of Glasha's face then all of them hopped on hoverbikes and took off toward the energy shield.

"I guess that's what it's like being the wife of a warrior." I plopped back into my chair and tried to see them fly through the boundary but they were already out of sight.

"Yeah, but it was hot," Stella said as she caressed the mark on her neck.

"Mmm-hmm." Glasha hummed and touched her face where Renzun had kissed her.

"Even hotter when they come back." Nefer wiped her bottom lip with her thumb.

"Reunion sex is the best." Stella agreed.

"Oh my God. I'm gonna end up pregnant, aren't I?" I slapped my palm to my forehead.

We all laughed, and they sat down again next to me. We had a few more drinks and relaxed on the porch, getting used to the absence of our larger-than-life warriors.

"Never a dull moment on Aziza," Nefer said.

"Nope," Stella and I answered in unison. Ciara nodded silently.

"I'd still choose it over Earth any day." Nefer smiled and shook her head.

Rasling and Heldmuis crawled up my arm and settled in the crook of my neck. The elephants trumpeted in the pasture beside us.

“Oh, absolutely me too,” I said wistfully. “Nothing like this on Earth at all. Nothing even close.”

Later that evening, as the sun had set and the orcs were starting to get rowdy, Glasha retired to her room and my girlfriends decided to go back to the Lodestar. Before they left, Ciara leaned down and whispered in my ear, “Ask Raxteemi about birth control for the dragon.”

I peered up at her and grinned. She winked.

“Okay,” I mouthed. “Thank you.”



# Epilogue

*Ajani*

Skoll said he had a surprise for me on the Lodestar. Well, I had a surprise for him too. He'd returned safely from his secret mission and asked me to meet him there. When I exited the shuttle on the loading dock, he stood eagerly waiting in his gorgeous blue kilt, swords strapped to his back, tattoos shining on his muscular arms that slowly rose to invite me closer.

We slammed into each other with a claiming kiss, and I thought to myself that Stella and Nefer had completely understated the joy of being reunited with your warrior after a mission. The fervent power, majesty, and reverence of the kiss made me feel like the elusive Greek god Zeus himself was here in the flesh worshiping me and welcoming me to Mount Olympus.

We separated, breathless, and held hands as he walked me through the mothership. He led me up to the holodeck where we'd had our joining ceremony not too long ago. My heart flooded as I remembered all the warriors and my human friends wrapping us in bands of white silk as they wished us a long life together.

I sent him an image of how he looked that night and the fire of desire that stirred in my belly even stronger today. He grinned and squeezed my hand in his as he sent back an image of me spread before him naked later that night. I blushed as the doors opened with a whoosh, and all thought was instantly zapped from my brain. I nearly fell to my knees at the sight of the expansive African outback before me. He supported my weight with his arm around my side.

The breathtaking view recreated my home on the Addo Elephant Reserve, complete with roaming herds of real elephants. It was like we'd stepped into a painting of acacia trees and savannah grass.

He picked me up and carried me inside. The grass crunched under his feet and the pungent smell of the bush hit

my nose. He carried me over to a small tent and sat me down on a bench in front of a smoldering campfire set up with a traditional braai grill ready for cooking. The heat warmed my skin.

“Oh, Skoll. This is unbelievable.”

“I wanted to give you a taste of home because I know you miss it.”

“I do miss it, but I’m happy here with you. I truly am.” I took his hand in mine and squeezed it.

“I have done some research and found out that your country is doing well. The conservation efforts have made much progress while you were gone.”

“Oh that’s good. I wish I could take you there, but this is close enough. Do you love it too?” I asked him. I was curious what he thought of all this.

“Aye. I think I would’ve loved your country as much as you do.”

We roasted food on the braai, and it tasted very close to the food from home. Skoll had planted a garden with his version of turmeric, plums, and many other Earth-like fruits and vegetables that I’d described to him.

In the middle of dinner, he cleared his throat to get my attention. “I have learned from my time with my brothers that on Earth, women wear rings on their fingers to signify they are mated.”

I coughed and nearly choked on a biscuit. “I mean. That’s true. Men wear them too.”

He frowned and unearthed a bag from his bretten and placed it in my hands. “I didn’t know what kind of ring you’d prefer.”

I opened the bag to find an assortment of shining bands in all colors with gorgeous gems mounted in gravity-defying ways. A blue one with a round central gem caught my eye. “This one reminds me of you.” It was a deep blue like the Sardinia Sea and his eyes before they had changed.

When I looked up, he was on one knee before me, his eyes glossy. He took the ring from my shaking hand. "Here?" He worked the ring onto my left ring finger. Oh boy, he'd done his homework.

"Mmm-hmm." My lips trembled and tears dropped down my cheeks. "It's beautiful."

"I didn't realize I would need one too." He searched the bag and found a simple golden one that matched the ones on his tail. He stuck his thumb through it to stretch it out and then slipped it on his ring finger.

I reached up and kissed his cheek. "You were already mine, Skoll."

"Now, it's more certain."

I smiled as we finished dinner, quietly ruminating on the rings and all that it meant to us.

"I have something for you too, not nearly as romantic." My voice cracked. I was nervous about this, but Skoll had taught me to be brave through the fear.

"What is it, lass?"

From my pocket, I withdrew the small stone that Raxteemi had given me. "He says that if you swallow this, the Raseri will be infertile until it passes."

His eyes widened. "You want this?"

"I really want to fuck the dragon." My cheeks flushed hot, but it was true. I'd wanted it since that first day I saw him change. "He is part of you and therefore part of us."

He took about three seconds to ponder it before his eyes darkened. He set his plate down quickly and plopped the stone into his mouth, making a point of swallowing it loudly. "The anti-mating hormone didn't work with us. This may also fail."

"I'm okay with that too. I'd like to wait, but I'm open to it if it happens."

He grinned and picked me up with his arms under my knees and behind my back. He carried me into the tent and set



me on my feet before he closed his eyes. I knew he was focusing on me and our love, so I put all my attention on the glowing heat in my chest. I watched in wonder as he transformed into a hot as fuck dragon warrior. He became much too big and ripped the tent off of us as he towered over me. A mostly white giant stood before me. He had a protruding mouth like a dragon's snout and long fangs, many sharp horns down his back, and huge white plates on his chest. He held his hard cock in his fist.

“Are you afraid, little girl? Did you ask too much?” His voice was a deep bellowing sound that vibrated down my spine to my toes.

“I'm afraid of how much I love you. I'm terrified that I'll lose myself in you and won't be able to come back. I'm frightened I might die in your arms because it feels like Heaven.”

He took one predatory step closer to me. “Mmm. And are you going to let this fear stop you?”

I took a deep breath and peered up at him. “No, because it's the most beautiful fear possible, and I know underneath it all with unequivocal certainty that you will catch me.”

He bent down to press his snout to my ear. “Good girl,” he murmured. “Don't worry, lass. I'll make sure you are fully ready to take me, and I'll stop if I sense any pain from you.”

My thighs clenched thinking of the ways he was going to make me fully ready and wetness pooled between my legs. My fear died as raw desire overwhelmed me again. I wrapped my arms around his massive chest and he cradled me beneath him. It was a little sharp and confusing to figure out how it all would fit, but his bite distracted me with the incredible vibrations.

I writhed through two earth-shattering orgasms from his magic tongue between my legs, and when we finally joined, the resonance of our love overtook us. It transcended all our worries and cocooned us in pure bliss. It turns out it did fit just fine in a fantastically magical way. After a long while, when I

became too sensitive and his knot receded, he settled beside me and slowly shifted back into his normal form.

“You did so well, my mate.” He pressed kisses down my neck and over my collar bone.

I rolled to the side and hummed. “Thank you.”

He pulled my back against his front, tucking my hips into his with his hand resting on my thigh. “I worried bringing you here would make you sick for home,” he said softly.

“No. It made me happy,” I answered honestly. “I loved sharing this with you, but I wouldn’t go back if I could. I’ll never leave you. Wherever you are is my home.”

###



## **A Note From The Author**

Thank you for reading My Alien Hero. It was inspired by my deep yearning for a world full of color, love, and sexy aliens in kilts. If you enjoyed this book, please help spread the word by writing a review on Amazon or Goodreads, and sharing the love on social media or your blog.

Cheers, Lyra Stark



# Glossary

Most of the alien words in this book were inspired by or taken from Norwegian or Scottish Gaelic, but they aren't direct translations and are not meant to be regionally accurate in any way. It's just for fun.

<b>Alien word</b>	<b>English meaning</b>
a'write	all right, alright
aye	yes
Aziza	home planet/main setting
bacrass	asshole
blex	expletive similar to fuck
bonnie	pretty
bretten	kilt-like skirt/wrap
bucnag	a cow-like species used for meat
caneen	a dog-like species used to guard livestock
cordyline	sweet ti plant
dille	beetle
Drahl	The Devil
driff	shit
driffsek	shitsack
Efreen	Hell
elksan	friend/darling
eons	years
goolchex	a goat-like creature used for milk
gravya	whisky-like drink
graymaw	dinosaur-like spined predator

kyott	food
lavmet	quiet
lad, lass, lassie	boy, girl, girl
melanach	congratulations/kudos
mesancloi	stone fruit - plum
mija	my daughter, darling, sweetheart
Mioengi Province	a region in Krassoks
moon/moonrise	one day/nightfall
moon cycle	one month
nai	no
Nivveok	failed experiment/elite breed of warrior
nolug	pig-like creature
och, och aye	oh, okay yes, oh yes
olseg	stay
parsec	second
perebreum	a blue poisonous powder
pimaris	a glowing substance
qhilzin	a manticore-like creature
Raseri/Rage Monster	dragon-like serpent that breathes fire
shaktur	polar bear horse like creature
skeedu	small blade with a black handle
slanvae	long life
snuppa	babe
sommeful	butterfly
stob	a guitar-like instrument
thuvix	troll

troglodyte

Orkken species

vypse

bee

voca

coffee-like drink

wee

tiny





# Character List

<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Description</b>
Ajani van Rooyen	human - park ranger from South Africa
Axane, Kerr, Blairn Bhuttu	Nivveok warriors
Bazur, Glasha, Tobian	Orcs that work on Skoll's ranch
Dagmar	Duigari leader of the laboratory
Dohlan	The troll that held Stella captive
Dolvena of Ditha	Architect of the Alliance
Duigari	Military soldiers for the Zul
Estella (Stella) Navarro	human - hair dresser from Las Vegas
Fenris Jarlath	leader of the Duigari Interfectors
Finty	Vonne's shaktur/Polar bear horse like creature
Gerzog, Korben	orcs from the Dome
Icass Zul (the Zul)	Supreme Leader, dictator
Interfactor	assassins for the Zul
Kuntar	pirate for the Zul
Leehem (Lee-am) Murtagh	Nivveok Warrior/hunter
Raxteemi	doctor for the Alliance
Renzun (ren-zoon) of Galant (gah-lahnt)	Nivveok warrior/strategist
Samhuel Bhuttu	Hybrid Nivveok and human, son of Vonne and Yazmin
Siva O'Kelleher	Skoll's mother
Skoll O'Kelleher	Nivveok warrior
Tornoc Roth	Nivveok warrior - rhymes with door-knock moth

Tribute Lodestar

The Alliance mothership

Ursa

Tor's hoverbike

Vonne Bhuttu

Nivveok warrior - rhymes with gone tutu

Yazmin Hawkins/Nefer Bhuttu

human - singer from Los Angeles

Yemmel Siltar

Vonne's adopted father

Zenas

goddess of all that is good and pure



# Playlist

And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going - Jennifer Hudson

Before You Go - Lewis Capaldi

Drops of Jupiter - Train

Good Girls - 5 Seconds of Summer

Take Me To Church - Hozier

Therefore I Am - Billie Eilish

Uninvited - Alanis Morissette

Unsteady - X Ambassadors

Warriors - Imagine Dragons

We Are The Reckoning - Peter Katz

Welcome To The Farm - Luke Bryan

When Doves Cry - Prince

Where My Girls At - 702



# Other Books by Lyra Stark

Horned Warriors

My Alien Captor - Book 1

My Alien Thief - Book 2

My Alien Hero - Book 3 (This book)

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