



SILVER  
*SPICE*

WARRIORS OF VALOSE SAGA 7

IONA STROM

# SILVER SPICE

Warriors of Valose Saga 7

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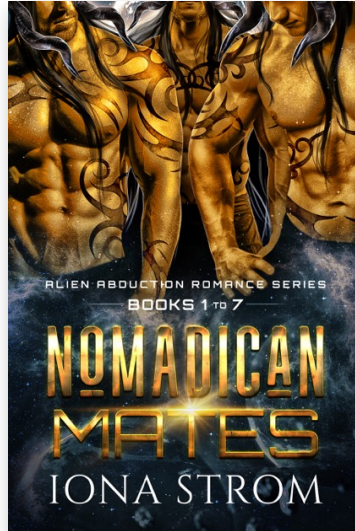
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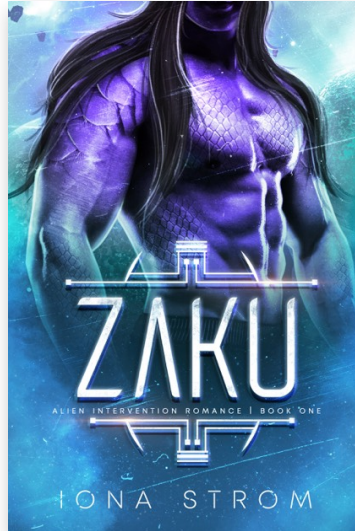
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## About This Book

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### *Wynnter*

My spirit mate had eyes for another, yet her spirit called to mine. While my ancillary heart pumped andrenalyne through my veins, I warred with my instincts to pummel the male she favored, but her preference can't be forced. She must choose me.

Another battle takes precedence to mine when an unimagined conflict wages in the sky above us. The clouds burned with the battle as their ash rained down on our heads, making my role in the survival of my species paramount. It was vital that I tempered my rage, so I could work together with the male I wanted to thrash.

### *Rose*

A nerdy girl from the inside out, I had never been faced with having two males vying for my attention. Never considered a pretty girl, it's both strange and exhilarating to feel so desired. Who should I choose? The male I've grown attached or the newcomer who called to my soul?

There was no time to savor my novel situation. With the safety of so many resting on the success of our mission, I must set aside my personal needs until later. For now, the three of us must work together as a team to penetrate the dome so the warriors can retake the city of Huren.

# Chapter One

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This female had proved to be more of a distraction than a rexose fighting a patooga. I scrubbed my hands hard down my face trying to erase her sweet scent burrowing into my spirit.

I needed to concentrate on the mission. Something as simple as reconnecting a sensor array should not be this difficult for someone with my level of skill.

As Rose worked beside me—her every movement caught in my periphery—had been impossible to ignore. Every little sound she made; my sensitive auditory system amplified a hundredth-fold.

Every inhale. Every exhale. Every delicate sigh expelled from her perfect mouth conjured sounds of a mating I craved. I imagined her gasp as my cock claimed her, then her groan when I moved within the tight sheath of her body.

My hands fumbled the fibrous tubing with my erotic pondering. When she found her pleasure, would she bite down on her lower lip the way she did when deep in thought, or would she throw her head back with her mouth parted in pleasure?

Her hand brushed mine in the most chaste of touches, but enough to trigger a spike of adrenalyne to ignite my veins. My scales flashed in a riot of sizzling blues as I jerked away, afraid I'd grab her and not let go until she was wearing my shawra.

Our eyes met and my hearts pounded in tandem inside the cage of my ribs. I swallowed the need to thrum to her.

“Are you okay, Wynnter?” Rose’s pretty face pinched with a mixture of concern and confusion. “Your hands are shaking. Don’t worry, we can fix it.” She scooted closer. I didn’t budge, wanting her as close to my body as possible. “Here. Let me do it.” She slid the tool from my hand. “My hands are steadier than yours.”

Beyond words, my strong reaction to her made it impossible for me to string two words together, so I just nodded like an idiot.

My mouth went dry, and my scales flashed with want as she moved in close to make the repair I was tasked with. When she leaned over me to connect the fibrous tubing to the jumper, I prayed to the Spirits she didn’t notice the thickening bulge inside my breechcloth.

“Done,” she said and sat back on her knees, gifting me with a warm smile that blistered the marrow of my bones. “You’re like me. Once my level of frustration reaches a certain point, I lose all patience.”

It had not been a loss of patience that had me quaking but my internal struggle to not act on my lustful yearnings.

As with every time I clapped eyes on her, my attention first went to the dots scattered across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. Frek-kells was what she’d called them.

“I know the portable gate took a hard fall when those a-holes battled it out in the sky, but don’t worry.” She laid her hand on my forearm which I immediately captured and held in place under mine. “Between the three of us, I know we can get the gate working.”

I nodded unable to tear my gaze away from her upturned face. I’d seen the images of her world stored on the human comm the females called a cell phone. They’d said there was no need for camouflage on their world, so I wondered as to why my Rose was speckled in such a way.

She was a female to be marveled, admired—*ravished*. So vivid in her coloring, her beauty hurt my eyes, but ached worse when she was out of my sight.

Her mane was a spiraling riot of what she named brownish rh-eed, always tousled in touchable disarray. Her flesh, a pleasing pale shade ready to be caressed.

“Can I have this back now?” Her lips turned up into a grin as she slid her hand out from under mine. My fingertips trailed along her skin, finding her flesh softer than any pelt on Valose. My eyes closed briefly, absorbing the feel of her to memory.

I burned with the need to explore every inch of her. The longer I denied answering the bond, the faster and more urgent my spirit swirled within my chest. Every sec spent in her presence only coiled me tighter, until I had become overheated with agitation. A frantic yearning of which I could not answer.

I itched to snatch her up and carry her off to someplace private. Someplace where I could strip her of the kiltus-dress covering her delectable body and explore the treasure between her slim thighs.

“If you two are finished with the sensor array, we need to take the device outside and attach it to the dome.” Zikkar jarred me from my musings.

As the other male’s voice rang out through the spherical craft, my ears flattened against my head, grating on my nerves. Untamed lust turned to rage and before I could temper my reaction, I sprang to my feet and growled, “I know what needs to be done, Huren. I don’t need you to tell me.”

Zikkar stood his ground, unflinching, when I rushed at him, bumping my chest into his in a show of dominance. The relationship he had with Rose prior to my awakening wasn’t something that should cause me anger. Bedmates were common among couples who hadn’t yet found their spirit mates.

“Okay, boys.” Rose wedged her body between us. “I know it sucks being stuck inside this tiny spacecraft, but let’s not

lose our cool. There's a lot of people counting on us to complete this mission."

Zikkar's laser stare continued to bore into me as he stepped away. The Huren tech was protective of her even though his ancillary heart did not beat for her. They were friends and that was all.

Despite the obvious mutual respect, they had for each other, I longed to drive my fist into his face. To pulverize him into nonexistence. My joints cracked as I squeezed my hands into fists at my side. The veins in my forearms stood out in stark relief against the flash of my scales.

The swirl of his stare was too cutting for my liking. I couldn't shake the feeling that he was judging whether he could trust me with Rose. I might not be as refined as him having been born and raised in the forest of Trisess rather than the city of Huren, but I would never hurt my spirit mate.

"We're ready to move the device outside." Zikkar opened the door to our craft and announced to the warriors guarding the perimeter.

Wexxor and Sazzar, the Huren exiled warriors sent with us as personal guards, cast around observant eyes. I watched through the transparent hull as they made a final check of the jungle's edge for any creatures, then the city beyond the dome for any signs of life.

As was usual, nothing moved inside the city of Huren. For the most part, it sat barren and cold as if it were deserted. On occasion, a roaming Gretolic would pass by in a small open-aired craft to check the perimeter of the dome.

Deemed safe, the warriors waved us out. The twin suns sat high in the sky as the nocturnal jungle slumbered. During the light hours was the safest time to emerge from the protection of the spherical craft. Inside the craft, we were nothing but a faint wavering distortion against our surroundings.

Outside, we faced the perils of the jungle's creatures and made ourselves visible to anyone living inside the city of

Huren who might happen to see us messing around the perimeter of the dome. So far, we'd remained undetected.

"Ready?" Zikkar helped Rose don a fur cloak against the chill of the cold season.

My growled response earned me a nod from Zikkar and a roll of the eyes from Rose. There was no help for my aggression where she was concerned. It was a natural reaction to another male showing interest in my spirit mate.

I respected Zikkar. I really did. If Rose was not between us, I would befriend the tech.

My sire's death left me as the only tech in my clan. With no other males who shared in my same interests, left me with no one to talk of mechanical devices or trade theories over conceptional designs, so I had become something of a recluse.

One male had taken a liking to me, befriended me, and taught me skills with the spear. Synnox, born of the warrior class, had been my only youngling friend. Under his tutelage, I'd learned much about fighting and could hold my own with a spear.

Grateful for the warrior's friendship, we had little in common and had grown apart with the passing yerons. I longed for a like-minded companion.

When the new Sia of my clan, Tikkot, had requested I partner with the techs from another clan to help work on a nutrone based device capable of opening a gate in the dome that protected the city of Huren, I jumped at the opportunity. My solitude had finally been broken.

My new adventure had not turned out as I'd hoped. Hexxus was extremely intelligent but lived mostly inside his own head. Lennox had been taken by force from Clan Jurigon and was leery of others.

The male I had the most in common, Zikkar, also had an affinity for the female my spirit called to. The friendship I'd sought for so long ended with the first beat of my ancillary heart. Instead of wanting to converse with him about all



thing's tech, I couldn't get past the urge to choke the life from his body.

To Zikkar's credit, he'd stepped away—albeit reluctantly—from the physical relationship he had with Rose. I knew his sudden rebuff confused her. Yet, they remained close, and that made me bristle.

Rose was not born of Valose and knew nothing of our ways. I could see it in her body language that she still held desire for the other male.

As we worked together to reconstruct the neutrone based weapon into something that could displace light in solid form, she'd started to show a restrained interest in me. But she held back. Most likely out of respect for her former bedmate which was making me crazy.

I was a level-headed male, analytical in my thinking. Not where Rose was concerned. And especially not when all three of us were in the same room together.

The tension within me had stretched taut. Long past the point of snapping. The project I'd leapt to participate, had become an internal battle between my instincts and what I felt was fair to Rose.

Rose remained ignorant of my awakening. The complication of her relationship with Zikkar kept me from pulling her aside to explain.

I was a stranger and didn't want to frighten her. My only hope was that she would follow the pull of her spirit and would seek me out.

Ignorance of her species plagued me. What if human females didn't respond the same as Valosian females? Would her spirit even recognize mine?

Now here the three of us were, holed up in a transparent cage, forced to work as a team for the good of Valose. It was cramped quarters on a good sun-rise, and with the addition of our personal guards, made it all the more constricted.

It was stifling to witness the closeness with which Rose and Zikkar interacted with one another.

If things hadn't been complicated enough, Zikkar had a secret that was long overdue to be shared with Rose. Something that would change the dynamic between them and win her over and possibly give me the leverage I needed to pull her to my side.

It was not my place, but his, to tell her there was another.

Zikkar carefully lifted the device from where it sat on the floor and carried it out the narrow door of our craft. Once outside, Wexxor took the lead with Sazzar bringing up the rear. Single file, we crouched low and crept around the exterior of the hull until we reached the outer ring of the dome.

We paused a moment, waiting to see if our movements had been witnessed. As usual, no one roamed freely inside the city of Huren. There had been only slight movements since our arrival.

Zikkar had said the city was once a thriving metropolis, always busy with the bustle of people going about their lives. Ever since the Gretolic invasion, the city had become desolate.

"Fingers crossed we fixed the damage to the device when those ships attacked." Rose held up both hands with her fingers overlapping.

My head tilted in confusion. She'd made this gesture before. The human custom of holding her fingers in such a way made no sense to me as to how this would help ensure the repairs had worked.

I held aloft my hands and mimicked her gesture which earned me a radiant smile. Despite the warmth I saw there, with each passing sec she showed Zikkar favor, I grew more concerned that she would never be mine.

Doubts and concerns continued to plague me. Maybe since she was of another species, she didn't feel the need to bond as I did. Was this attraction all one-sided? Did her eyes flare when she looked at me for another reason? Were her kind smiles and lingering looks just her way?

What of the blooming scent of her arousal when she was near me? Was I only imagining what I wanted to be true?

The sooner we completed this mission, the better. It was imperative I get her away from Zikkar. I needed to know what, if anything, she felt for me.

“The dampener coil is loose again.” I wiggled the part with my fingertip. “We should have brought the nydriver with us.”

“I’ll run back in and get it.” Rose volunteered.

Wexxor followed close behind her. Together, they crouched low and hustled around our craft to the door on the opposite side, giving me a rare opportunity to speak with Zikkar in private.

“When do you plan to tell her?” I kept my voice low and cut Zikkar a hard glare.

“I haven’t found the right moment.”

“The right moment should have been with the first beat of your ancillary heart for another,” I hissed and looked around. “Rose is confused as to why you are no longer bedmates,” I whispered harshly. “It isn’t fair to leave her in the dark. You need to tell her she is not the one.”

“I could say the same to you, *friend*.” Zikkar tossed back. “Rose is not of our world, and she deserves to know why she suddenly feels a strong pull toward another male. When do you plan to tell her that she’s your spirit mate?”

I opened my mouth to spew a feeble excuse, but the fucker was right. Rose needed to be told the truth from the both of us.

“You need to talk to her first.” I stabbed my finger at Zikkar. “You may no longer share your bed with her, but she still looks at you expectantly. She will not accept me as her spirit mate if she thinks the two of you are still bedmates.”

Zikkar thought a moment, then agreed, “You are right. She is a faithful female.”

Rose rejoined us, handing me the nydriver and ending any further discussions. That didn’t keep the two of us from glaring accusatory daggers at one another.

I had never found myself in this situation before. I’d only ever had a few bedmates, and none of them had ever found

their spirit mate in another while they were with me.

Unlike Rose, those females had all been Valosian. Having to explain the undeniable attraction when a spirit mate was found would not have been necessary.

With all of us stuck inside the small craft, there had been no privacy for personal conversations, and repairing the unexpected damage to the portable gate had taken precedence.

“Could you guys finish drilling holes in each other’s heads later?” Rose huffed. “We need to attach the device to the dome and check our repairs before someone inside the city sees us.”

As always, her voice was the only reasonable one in our threesome. She had been an integral part in reconfiguring the device found inside the mountain by Sia Tikkot.

Her fresh approach to the alien technology had been what was needed to redesign the prototype of a weapon meant for mass destruction into one that could open a door in a barrier made from solidified light.

Zikkar gestured to the warriors guarding us that we were ready to test the gate. Sazzar remained at our backs while Wexxor crept along the dome’s perimeter, making sure no prying eyes saw what we were about to do.

At Wexxor’s nod, we lifted the device and set it into place close to the dome. The shielding wavered a translucent glow. It was a marvel of technology. One designed and built by the gray invaders still entrenched within the city.

For the gate to remain open, we’d used disruptor discs attached to fibrous tubing to create a collar that would reflect the shields power and displace the light to create a gate.

The tricky part had been retrofitting the power dampener taken from an excavator Sia Tikkot and Synnox had used to tunnel out a secret room right under Clan Jurigon’s feet. None had been the wiser and my clan had learned that Sia Xennox’s mountain fortress was, indeed, penetrable.

Rose released the stabilizer and pulled slack in the tubing that connected it to the device. She handed me the collar with

a wavering look and tugged her fur cloak tighter around her body with a slight shiver.

Locked in a flicker of heat that radiated from her stare, Rose caught herself and blinked it away. Her eyes darted to Zikkar, and I watched her throat work through a measure of guilt.

“Soon, we will talk.” I hadn’t realized I’d spoken aloud until she responded.

“I think the both of you owe me answers,” she said with a heated glare shared between the two of us.

I kept low to the ground and edged my way to the dome. After attaching the disruptor discs, I signaled for Zikkar to activate the device.

Silently, the fibrous tubing began to glow. Evenly, the trio of disruptor discs distributed the power from the nutrone. Just when the dome should have given way to the collar, a surge of energy burst free and lit the discs up like a solar flare. As one, we dropped to the jungle floor and waited.

The warriors went on high alert. Their eyes darted around as they held their weapons at the ready. When all remained still, I popped free the discs and collected the burnt tubing.

“Must have sustained more internal damage than we thought,” Zikkar scratched his head and mumbled.

“Let’s get this piece of shit back inside and figure this out.” Rose didn’t wait for anyone but popped to her feet and stormed back inside the craft.

## Chapter Two

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I shrugged out of my fur cloak and briskly swiped away the beads of sweat dotting my forehead with a frustrated hand. Here in the jungle, it was twenty degrees colder than what it had been on the island, so perspiration shouldn't be a thing.

*Focus, Rose, I inwardly chanted as I inspected the manifold couplings for damage. Focusfocusfocus.*

The cold season on Valose was fast approaching. I was no stranger to cold weather having lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts where I had been attending MIT before my abduction. Acclimation wasn't the reason why I wasn't bothered by the falling temperatures.

The cause of my heatwave moved in my periphery, and once again, my eyes flipped to the Trisess tech as they so often did. Wynnter was driving me insane with his heated looks and feral growls.

I shouldn't be eyeballing him with my head full of dirty thoughts, but the male was practically naked, loaded down with muscles, and had a cleft in his chin in need of a good licking.

I most definitely should be concentrating on finding the cause of the power surge and stop measuring the width of his shoulders and the thickness of his thighs. Zikkar was my bedmate—the Valosian version of a boyfriend. So, lusting over another guy was a no-no.

Guilt was a hard punch to the gut as Zikkar sorted through the blackened fibrous tubing on the floor next to me.

Something had been up with him. Ever since Wynnter had joined us on the island to help convert the nutrone based weapon into a portable gate, my bedmate had taken to sleeping on a separate pallet.

I was too afraid of his answer to ask why. It wasn't like he was treating me any differently, except when it came to the sleeping arrangements—no more cuddling and no more sex. Our intellectual relationship was as strong as it ever was just minus the intimacy which I missed.

Though I still desired Zikkar, that craving was lessening as my ache was building for another.

I swallowed hard, hoping he hadn't noticed my wandering eye. I prided myself on my loyalty, but the attraction I felt towards Wynnter was out of my control. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt Zikkar.

Wynnter had said we would talk. Curiosity ate at me over what. Right now, personal issues had to take a backseat to making the gate operational. There would be no defeating the Gretolics until we could create a way for the warriors to get inside the city of Huren, so whatever it was would have to wait until later.

I examined the last coupling, placed it back with the others, and released a long exhale which gained me a rub on the shoulder from Zikkar. "We will make it work," he said in that unwavering calm way of his. "It will just take a little longer than expected."

My sigh wasn't about our failed project now spread out in a million different pieces all over the floor of the bubble craft, even though the three of us had been sitting in the midst of this mess for hours, examining every component for signs of damage from the unforeseen power surge.

Nope. My aggravated exhaustion stemmed from my constant state of arousal and not from the tedious task of fixing intricate machinery, which I usually enjoyed.



Wynnter's low growl increased the longer Zikkar's hand remained on my shoulder. As if Zikkar had something to prove, he turned to face the other male and pulled me back to his front. With both hands, he kneaded at the tension I carried in my neck and shoulders.

Unlike Wynnter, who was practically a stranger to me, Zikkar knew I wore my stress up high and knew what to do to help me relax. We had an easy familiarity with one another that I was afraid of losing.

Aggar had saved me from the rynose stampede, but Zikkar had been there when I'd woken up. Our friendship had quickly turned into more.

But after I clapped eyeballs on Wynnter, my sex drive had shot into overdrive. The insta-attraction had been a shock, and I was pissed my hormones had thrown me for a loop.

Zikkar was my man and I'd hoped we would bond like some of the other girls had with their mates.

Unlike some, I wanted to stay on Valose. Even with all the dangers and the alien invaders, I felt like I belonged here more than I ever did on Earth. Plus, with a treasure trove of knowledge and technology at my fingertips, I was in my own version of heaven. I had barely scratched the surface of what I could learn.

Aggar had been my first teacher. I'd learned so much from the warrior despite the glaring looks from Marie, who had apologized to me later for her behavior. But her baby crush on him had evaporated just as quickly as it'd struck after she'd met Draggar. One look at the scarred warrior and she was done. Now they were bonded as spirit mates and shared a matching shawra.

I had wanted that with Zikkar. He was perfect. Smart, handsome, built like a track star, great in bed. What more could I have asked for?

My eyes flicked over to where Wynnter sat brooding with a fire in his eyes over Zikkar rubbing my shoulders. Having two males interested in me at the same time had never been a

problem. I was the nerdy girl, the ugly duckling among the swans with unruly curly reddish-brown hair, boring brown eyes, and a freckled face.

Wynnter's body stiffened as if ready to pounce on Zikkar for touching me. Something inside me flipped. My heart jumped in my chest and the tight knot that had developed behind my sternum when I'd first met Wynnter, warmed.

It was exhilarating to know both males wanted me but overwhelming just the same. Marie had teased about me sleeping with both.

Despite my New Year's resolution of wanting to add some spice to my dull life, nothing like that had ever happened. I wasn't into that sort of thing. Even if I was, I had a feeling Wynnter would fight Zikkar to the death, if he even thought about having sex with me.

Why now, damnit?

I didn't want to be attracted to two males. I had been perfectly happy with my friends-with-benefits arrangement with Zikkar.

We had mutual respect between us, and I loved to listen to him ramble on about technology that was light years beyond what I knew from Earth. We had a comfortable companionship that I didn't want to end.

Wynnter was as intelligent as Zikkar, but that was where the similarities ended. Zikkar was always well put together. He had a placid demeanor where Wynnter's mood was stormy and unpredictable. You never knew what you were going to get with him. One minute he was calm and the next he was spitting venom and baring his fangs.

The male was heedless with his looks as if he had better things to do than check himself in a mirror before walking out the door. That should not have made me itch to run my fingers through his silvery locks or straighten the haphazardly plaited braids barely keeping his hair from falling in his face.

Wynnter was not my type—*he really wasn't*—always grumbling beneath his breath. And like a silver Tarzan, his

gaze was as feral as his scantily clad body.

Unlike others born of the civilian class, he didn't have that lean swimmers' body. No. Wynnter was all rolling, bunching mass of the warrior class—and wearing only a breechcloth—*all* his muscles were out on display.

I tugged at the neckline of my kilt-dress. My gaze darted down to where the strip of cloth covering his man bits hung scandalously low across his pelvic muscles.

Wynnter bent at the waist to arrange a pile of connectors. His abs and the thick V of his pelvic muscles crunched into something delectable.

Before crash-landing on Valose, the closest I'd ever gotten to muscle-bound men were on the cover of romance novels. Now I was surrounded by males with zero body fat. But there was something about Wynnter...

My skin flared with unnatural heat. I tore my gaze away from Tarzan and wiped the beads of sweat threatening to drip into my eyes. Warmth swirled in a sharp vortex behind my sternum. A lick of heat swept between my thighs, tightening my abdomen with coiled desire.

Now I knew how Marie felt when she'd first met Draggar. Her initial attraction to Aggar had been a match flame compared to the nuclear explosion of what she'd felt for the other male. I recalled her saying he'd rocked her to the core...

My brain fizzled out as the obvious hit me like a cold, hard slap.

What Marie had described was exactly what had been happening to me. Except Marie hadn't acted on her crush for Aggar like I had with Zikkar.

Once she met the male her spirit called to, she'd become singularly focused on him. And the crush she had for Aggar? Snuffed out by the winds of an inferno for the male destiny had chosen to be hers.

As Zikkar finished my shoulder rub, my heart sank knowing my time with him was ending. Somehow, I knew he was aware of it too. I didn't want to lose my friendship with

him. If Wynnter was my spirit mate, he would not tolerate Zikkar anywhere near me.

I could fight the pull. I didn't have to give in to destiny's arranged marriage. I was a free woman. I could choose whoever I wanted to take as a mate. It didn't have to be Wynnter.

The swirling knot behind my sternum began to pound as if it were angry with me. I rubbed at the spot wishing it would stop. Wishing I had never laid eyes on the Trisess tech. If we'd never met, this would not be happening and Zikkar and I could continue on as we had been without this added complication.

The males knew as well as I did this drama between us had to wait until later. We were in a race to open a stable portal for Jakkar, so he could lead an army inside the city and take back Huren from the remaining Gretolics before their vessel returned with more.

Their numbers were down. The time could not be more perfect for the warriors of Valose to strike. Yet here we were having technical difficulties. With a final growl from Wynnter, we all got back to work.

"The terminals are all fried," Zikkar stated flatly, holding up the charred versions of what should have connected the cooling coils to the power converters.

"I brought extras, so those won't be an issue to replace." Wynnter closely studied another blackened part before handing it over for Zikkar's inspection with a sneer. "However, this burnt transformer will be a problem."

I tried to push aside my emotional dilemma and focus on sorting through a pile of transistors. As I sat stewing in the juices of my own indecision, I couldn't shut off my mind from cataloging each males' attributes.

There should be no contest. Zikkar was the one for me. I wasn't going to throw away what we had together over a stranger no matter how strong the lure. I gave up on the transistors, sat back with a huff, and studied the two males playing tug-of-war with my sanity.

Both were unbelievably handsome with their long silvery hair and strong features. Wynnter's face was more angular than Zikkar's with a hard jawline that constantly ticked as if he were always clenching his teeth.

Zikkar was easygoing, maintaining his composure in every situation, while Wynnter was aggressive and easily ruffled.

*I preferred stability over unpredictability, I coached myself. I preferred the low-key male over the feral one. But wouldn't it be fun to tame him?*

I licked my lips. Hadn't I decided my boring ol' life needed a little spicing up?

Wynnter was just the spice I needed. When I looked at the Trisess tech, my pulse quickened, and my breath hitched. I was drawn to him in a different way than I was to Zikkar.

Although words of love had never been exchanged between Zikkar and me, I knew I would forever hold a special place for him in my heart. Was there room in there for two?

I went back to sorting through the transistors only to grow agitated over my flagging concentration. My growl of frustration turned all eyes my way. "There's no logical reason why this piece of shit should have overheated."

Zikkar merely raised a silvery eyebrow over my outburst. He never really understood me on an emotional level because he was always so cool-headed. He was so smart and analytical—two traits I coveted in a man. But how could he be so even-tempered all the damn time?

Wynnter cast me a feral stare. A wild sneer turned up one side of his full lips. My anger seemed to fuel something dark and wild inside him. His body coiled and tensed as if he were preparing to pounce. I knew if he were to get his hands on me, I would be as good as devoured.

# Chapter Three

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Nearly a munthis had passed and the device was no closer to being repaired than it was the first suns-rise when we disassembled it searching for the cause of its failure. I'd held onto hope that between the three of us, we could salvage the transformer damaged from the unforeseen power surge.

We had tried everything to repair the part, but nothing worked. Simply replacing it was easier said than done. We were working with alien technology, so there weren't any spare parts just lying around. They would have to be found and scavenged from some other Gretolic contraption.

"It's past time we pinged Sia Jakkar." Zikkar placed the pieces of the fried transformer in a bag and set it aside. "We need to let him know we cannot proceed until we can find a fresh transformer."

Sia Jakkar had shown great patience waiting for us to fix the device. Every time we contacted him to update our progress, he remained optimistic and told us to keep trying despite all that had happened while we were away.

I still could not believe the Nuttaki had crossed the rapids of the Sien River and attacked my clan on Trisess soil. Even more implausible was the bizarre alien Sia Tikkot had described who had crash-landed inside Trisess territory after the battle had waged in the skies above us.

It had all begun with the destruction of Clan Jurigon's mountain fortress. *Fucking Helios!* I shook my head,

scrubbing my hands down my face. The blast from the center of that Gretolic craft was like nothing I ever wanted to see again.

Then all those smaller crafts had descended from the sky and attacked the Gretolic vessel. In mere secs, war had erupted from the clouds—our skies filled with laser fire. And all we had been able to do was cower down and watch with shocked eyes. Humbled to our cores, we had no long-range weapons to defend ourselves. Even the plasma gun Sia Jakkar kept hidden couldn't help us.

I may not have been born of the warrior class, but I'd spent enough time with them to have inherited their sense of pride, and hiding instead of fighting wasn't in my repertoire.

“We are in over our heads!” I hadn't meant to curse aloud, but there it was—the vile truth of our situation. “Inside the dome is the safest place for all the clans until we can create weapons to defend our planet. Yet here we are unable to create a way inside. We have failed!”

Rose turned frightened eyes up to lock with mine. I hated that there was nothing I could do to squash her fear. Even more, I hated that she turned to Zikkar for comfort.

Her hand had easily slid into his much larger one. My eyes narrowed on where they were joined. There was no help for my low growl or my bared fangs.

What good could he do her? There would be no thrumming coming from Zikkar. No soothing melody to comfort her. Only I held the power to resonate my spirit mate's song.

Rose was *mine*!

What I knew in my spirit didn't matter. She would have to choose me. I would never force a mating even though I had scented her arousal as she bloomed for me. The choice had to be hers.

And it was past time for Zikkar to tell her his truth!

I forced myself to look away from the scene before my hands found their way around Zikkar's throat. Swaying my



spirit mate to my side would not do well if she were to watch me choke the life from her former bedmate with my bare hands.

Rose raked a hand roughly through her unruly mane. “Any ideas from where we’re going to find a Gretolic transformer?”

I had yearned to bury my fingers in her wealth of curls. To push aside the silky mass and nuzzle the delicate skin of her neck. Maybe I would carefully rake my fangs along the column of her throat just to feel her shiver with want.

“Maybe we could build one out of parts taken from the nutrone spears or perhaps there’s a more compatible one on the open-aired craft that Maxxon stole from inside the dome,” Zikkar pondered.

I jerked myself back to the now and mulled over Zikkar’s suggestions. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, his ideas held merit.

My gaze flickered to where Rose had seated herself at the center console and bit down on her full bottom lip as her mind worked to find a solution to our current dilemma.

My thoughts had turned rampant, picturing Rose with her little blunt teeth raking across her lip to keep from crying out as I claimed her in every position imaginable.

I forced my back to her, taking deep breaths to cool my desires and stop my scales from flashing an erratic blue. Now was not the time for this. Restless and agitated, I took up pacing. Around I went, but it didn’t take many of my steps to complete the circle of our small craft.

Not ready to face the power my spirit mate held over me, I paused to peer through the wavy shielding that kept everything and everyone out of the city of Huren except for the enemy, who were safely ensconced inside.

A remarkable feat of ingenuity. Light solidified into an impenetrable dome powered by nutrillium, a mineral mined from beneath the very city it protected.

Before my clan had become aware of the Gretolic’s presence on our world, we’d been in awe of Clan Huren’s

invention. I recalled how my gut churned with envy and wishing I could get inside the minds of the Huren techs.

Never could I have predicted at what cost Valose would pay for my wish to become reality. Had I been given the choice, I would have remained that wishful, lonely Trisess tech rather than face an enemy we had little hope of defeating.

Off in the distance, the palace glittered against the waning light of the twin suns like a crown jewel fit for a king, or kings as it were. Neither of the twin rulers was in residence. One having been exiled by the other. The second having been rescued by the very ones he exiled. How was that for irony?

“You said at one point the dome showed signs of failing.” I didn’t turn to look at Zikkar when I posed the question. “Why have the power fluctuations stopped?”

“Hexxus witnessed the Gretolics harvesting small pieces of nutrillium from the cellpods that generate power to the shield. It is believed the nutrillium mines have run dry. They needed it to power up their main engine thrusters on their long-range craft.”

“Makes sense,” I grunted. I’d dreaded this inevitable sun-rise, but we’d explored and exhausted every idea to repair the transformer. Now it was time to admit our failure to the Sia of Valose. “I’ll ping Sia Jakkar and give him the bad news.”

“He and I are of the same clan,” Zikkar reasoned, making his way over to the console where Rose sat in the center of the craft. “I’ll do it.”

As he neared my female, something inside me snapped. She was *mine*! I rushed forward, lunging to place myself between Rose and Zikkar. He would not be touching her again.

“I already said I would,” I snarled, wanting so badly for him to grow angry, yet he remained as calm as ever.

It was infuriating knowing the male wouldn’t fight back. I wanted this to come to blows. I needed an outlet for my pent-up frustrations.

With every sun-rise that passed, and my spirit remained apart from Rose’s, I had grown more aggressive. I took a step

into Zikkar's personal space, bumping his chest in hopes of fueling the male's anger.

"It's past time you told her, *Huren*," I growled, happy to finally see a spark ignite in the placid swirl of his gaze.

"I could say the same for you, *Trisess*."

"Stop fighting!" Rose wedged herself between us. "Isn't it enough that our portable gate is fucked?" Rose planted her palms on Zikkar's chest and pushed. The male took a step back before she whirled around on me. "You said we would talk, so talk!" Rose threw up her hands. "Tell me what this big secret is the two of you share."

Fear of rejection compressed my lips into a thin line. In the time we'd spent stuck inside this cramped space, Rose had always turned to Zikkar for comfort. I had seen the spark of interest she held for me, but I was not wholly convinced she would accept the truth that I was her spirit mate.

She was not of Valose. What if the call of my spirit to hers wasn't strong enough?

Judging by the pinched expression on Zikkar's face, he had been thinking the same. His truth would require as delicate a delivery as mine.

"We can't fix the transformer," I said, lifting my eyes to Zikkar. "Staying here accomplishes nothing. We are nearly out of rations. All the loodskins are drained, and it's too dangerous for Wexxor and Sazzar to keep traveling alone to the river to keep filling them. Not to mention we all reek from lack of a decent washing. The device can't be repaired. We have no choice but to leave and find a replacement."

"Agreed. I'm contacting Sia Jakkar now," Zikkar announced. This time I didn't stop him.

Wexxor and Sazzar stepped back inside the craft. The frequency of their perimeter patrols had increased with the passage of time. I suspected they risked exposure to the jungle's creatures to get away from the incessant bickering between the three of us.

As Zikkar spoke with Sia Jakkar, Rose's eyes narrowed on me. She was waiting for me to talk. To spill the secret Zikkar and I shared. When I only returned her stare with my mouth tightly closed, she stormed away in a huff, though she didn't get far in the tight confines.

I didn't need to feel her emotions within me to know that she was furious her inquiry had gone unanswered.

With her arms crossed tightly across her chest, she kept her back to me. Her angry stance only gave me leave to admire her feminine shape with a hard swallow.

Her backside had brushed against me when she'd stepped between us. As volatile as my mood had been, I'd had to fight the temptation to wrap my arms around her waist and pull her back against me.

"And you're certain you can trust this alien male?" Zikkar's question whipped my head around. I moved closer to the console to better hear Sia Jakkar through the muffled transmission.

"He has proven himself in the battle against the Nuttaki and earned a place as a warrior with Clan Huren. Stay where you are," Sia Jakkar commanded. "I'll relay to him what you need and get back to you. He may be able to salvage something from either his ship or the Gretolics."

Zikkar and I exchanged a curious look after ending the comm transmission with Sia Jakkar. No one commented, and our small craft remained oddly quiet.

It wasn't long before Sia Jakkar pinged us back. "Zaku and Synnox are on their way with what you need."

"Zaku?" Wexxor scrunched his brow as Zikkar concluded the transmission.

"I trust Sia Jakkar's judgment but can't help but be leery of this alien on his way to help us," Sazzar stated flatly.

"I feel the same about this stranger from the stars though I trust Sia Tikkot's chief scout." I nodded in agreement. "I've known Synnox since we were younglings."

“Let me get this straight.” Rose rubbed her temples before throwing out her hand, palm up. “An alien that crash-landed only a few weeks ago has become a clan member and is now on his way here with Gretolic technology?”

“That is what Sia Jakkar stated.” Zikkar calmly crossed the short distance to the device and crouched down to check our work.

Seemingly unfazed, I wanted to snatch the male up and give him a good shake just to get something more out of him than his usual blasé reaction to everything.

“And this Zaku person is legit?” Rose’s voice pitched high with concern.

“I can vouch for Synnox,” I replied. “I trust he would not intentionally put us in harm’s way.”

Her wary gaze swung to mine. “None of you find it odd that an alien who fell from the sky has stepped up to lend us a hand? Since when did we start trusting aliens?”

“Technically,”—Zikkar attached one end of the fibrous tubing collar to the manifold— “you are an alien who fell from the sky as well, Rose. And you’ve been helping us. Is there a reason why we shouldn’t trust you?”

She whirled around on him so fast, her movements blurred. “Are you freaking joking with me right now, Zikkar?” Her fiery mane swung around her head in a wide arc to settle around her shoulders.

“No. I’m merely stating a fact.” Zikkar flicked his eyes to hers before returning to his work. “The only difference between you and Zaku is your gender. Why would you consider yourself more trustworthy simply because you are female?”

Rose opened her mouth, then closed it with an angry snap.

I couldn’t decide if Zikkar was deliberately provoking her or if he was simply being his usual logical self. Either way, it was delightful to see them bickering.

My eyes danced with mirth. I covered my mouth with my hand and rubbed at my jaw to covertly cover my amusement.

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# Chapter Four

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“**F**ucking *Helios!*” Zikkar and Wynnter swore as one.

“Are we really gonna let that guy in here?” I slung my hand towards the approaching alien. “He’s purple! And really freaking huge. Jakkar can’t be serious.”

Wexxor turned and shared an uneasy look between Zikkar and Sazzar which only heightened my anxiety. Still bristling over the techs brushing me off, it was a nasty combination that churned in my gut.

If I was correct about my feelings, I was Wynnter’s spirit mate but that wasn’t all there was to it. My gut told me Zikkar was keeping something from me, and for whatever reason, these two weren’t in a hurry to spill.

Wexxor pushed the button to open the door. The transparent barrier that had kept us hidden and safe from the jungle’s predators, was suddenly gone in a silent *whoosh*.

The other males moved back, giving Zaku room so the gigantic purple alien could squeeze through the narrow door. His presence was as vast as the space his huge body consumed.

Synnox brought up the rear. I could hardly get a look at Clan Trisess’ chief scout with the wall of purple alien obstructing him.

Air rushed from my lungs when my back hit the far wall of the hull, jarring me from my stupor. I hadn’t even realized my feet had carried me backward.



It was rude to stare, but how could I not? This purple male had slitted eyes like a cat, shoulders a linebacker would envy, and so tall, the black cap of his liquid hair touched the highest part of the ceiling.

Wynnter lunged at me, blocking my body with his. When Zikkar made to do the same, Wynnter snapped his jaws, baring his fangs. Zikkar backed off, lowering his eyes to the floor.

“I am Zaku.” The alien touched his chest and tipped his head respectfully. He gave the males’ faces a cursory scan then addressed me with a kind smile. “You have nothing to fear from me, female. My mate is also a human. Her name is Ivy.”

“I’m... Rose...” I gulped, peering around the bulk of Wynnter’s biceps. My words, thin and raspy with panic.

Zaku grinned and bobbed his chin at me. After a quick round of introductions, Zaku carefully unshouldered the pack he carried and squatted before the device. “You are needing a new transformer for the gate?” I was shaking like a leaf, and I suspected his slow movements were for my benefit.

“Ours is fried.” Zikkar handed Zaku the remains of our transformer he’d bagged and dropped down next to the alien as if he’d known him his whole life. “We haven’t determined the cause of the power surge.”

“Let’s have a look.” Zaku opened the bag and dumped the charred remains of the part we’d failed to repair in his large palm. “Definitely caused by an energy blast. Maybe the nutrone chamber needs adjusting.”

“Adjusting how?” Wynnter asked.

“Sia Jakkar said the device was first a weapon and now reconfigured to disrupt the dome to open a gate.”

“That’s right,” My interest in what Zaku had to say overrode my fear of him. I eased around Wynnter. “What would adjusting the nutrone chamber do?”

“The chamber acts as a power regulator,” Zaku explained. “Depending on how it’s calibrated, the walls of the chamber may not be configured to correctly diminish the amount of power emanating from the nutrone.” Zaku popped open the

hatch and pulled free the cubed power module. “Looks like,”—Zaku turned the module over in his hands and tapped the side with the blinking lights— “it was calibrated to a lower setting. Now. That should do it.”

I moved away from Wynnter. I turned to look at him when he grabbed my arm. “It’s okay.” Reluctantly, he released me, and I sat on the floor near Zaku. “We didn’t know there was a way to change the amount of shielding around the nutrone inside its chamber.”

“I wouldn’t have expected you to since this is Grites’ technology and not Valosian.”

“You mean Gretolic?” Wynnter crouched next to me.

“No.” Zaku opened the pack he brought with him and lifted out a similar version of our fried transformer. “I mean Grites. Gretolics are nothing more than genetically modified creatures grown in test tubes.”

Cue the screeching brakes. “Are you serious?”

“Very.” Zaku worked fast as he made some slight modifications to the part in his hand. “They are an abomination gone wrong. The Grites have lost control of their laboratory creations.”

“What do the Grites plan to do about the Gretolics on Valose?”

“That, I don’t know. I was told one of their ships was taken down by the Gretolics.” Zaku tried to fit the new transformer into the manifold. When it met resistance, he took it back to make more modifications with tiny tools from his pack. “I haven’t had an opportunity to explore the Grites’ ship. Ivy and I have been busy in the lab trying to find a cure for the modified rubella which killed all the Valosian females.”

My hands turned clammy and my mouth went dry. “Modified?”

“We found a protein that shouldn’t be there.”

“You’re a scientist?”

“Yes. Both Ivy and I. On my planet of Moktu, I was learned in the virological arts.” Zaku made a final modification and positioned the transformer. This time the part slipped into the manifold like it was created for it.

“Are you able to find a cure to the virus?” I asked, barely above a whisper with an image of a pregnant Lily front and center in my mind.

“The first step was the discovery of the modification of the virus. An obvious biological weaponization by the Grites to infect the Gretolics who defied their makers,” Zaku explained as he worked. “My mate... My Ivy is a geneticist and studying the virus on a molecular level. However, it is slow going. Much of my lab equipment was damaged when we crashed.

“I’m told there is a fully functional lab under that palace.” Zaku lifted his chin to the crystalline structure in the city’s center. “With Amy and Lily’s help, I feel confident we will find a vaccine, and a cure for any that are infected, very soon. But first, we must get through this shielding.”

Everything seemed to be hinged on us opening the dome. Ridding the planet of the unwanted Gretolics. Finding a cure to the altered rubella in case Lily’s unborn baby was a girl.

My mind spun in a whirlwind of irony that of all the people in the Universe, two scientists had crash-landed on Valose. By the way Zaku was quickly going over every component of the device, he was well-versed in more than just viruses. It worried me why he was so familiar with the Grites’ technology.

“Looks like the rest is in order.” Zaku shut the last compartment and connected the fibrous tubing collar to the manifold. “Shall we take it outside and test it?”

Synnox joined Wexxor and Sazzar, going out first to check the perimeter and make sure no predators were lurking in the thick of the jungle’s foliage.

When they gave us the signal for the all-clear, Zikkar picked up the device, and we all filed out the narrow door of

the bubble craft. We crept low as not to be seen by anyone living inside the dome.

I tugged my pale blue fur cloak over my head to hide the shock of my reddish hair against the blues and silvers of my environment. I envied the males their natural ability to camouflage.

As we moved into position near the dome, I watched their silvery scales flush with color until they were nearly invisible against the jungle's foliage.

Wexxor, Sazzar, and Synnox formed a semi-circle around us. Their swords and spear pointed toward the thick of the jungle. In high alert mode, their pointed ears swiveled and perked for the slightest of sounds from any potential threats. We were well-protected as Zikkar set the device he carried on the ground near the dome.

The city of Huren appeared desolate. From the time I'd spent parked outside in our spherical abode, little to no activity was normal. Today had been no different. Huren looked as abandoned as it always had. A sad testament of an enemy invader to what should have been a bustling Valosian city.

Wynnter attached the three disrupter discs to the dome and shaped the fibrous collar into a large triangle. Then he kept low to the ground and hurried over to squat next to me where I sat off to the side in the cover of the fluffy blue grasses that sporadically grew in lush tufts.

Zaku watched as Zikkar powered up the device. We all held a collective breath as the fibrous tubing began to glow. The trio of disrupter discs appeared to be distributing the power evenly. We'd reached the point of our last failure when the wavy distortion that was the dome silently gave way to a clear view of the city.

My eyes grew wide as I saw the crystalline palace clearly and without the distortion of the dome for the first time. I had thought it beautiful before, but to see it free of obstruction—the multi-faceted structure was spectacular.

The males around me pumped their fists in silent celebration. Zikkar clapped Zaku on the back for a job well done. Wynnter wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me in for a jostling side-hug.

I smiled up into his too handsome face and what I saw there stole my breath. Rarely did a smile ever grace his handsome features, but when one did, it was worthy of an angel's sigh. My heart fluttered before falling over in a swooning collapse.

Lost to the heated swirl of his gaze, my body flushed a hundred degrees and that nagging tug behind my sternum coalesced into something turbulent and unrelenting.

As the test was allowed to run for a time to ensure the gate remained stable, I stared up at Wynnter for a thousand years. Now that we'd accomplished our mission, the war with the Gretolics could commence. If successful, all the clans would be living under the safety of the dome.

*All* of us. Me, Zikkar, and Wynnter. And I would finally have my answer as to why Zikkar had been keeping me at arm's length.

If what I suspected was true about Wynnter, at least the city would lend me some personal space. I could take a step back from the two males churning up my emotions and look at my situation with a clear head.

I knew my time with Zikkar was ending but that didn't mean I was going to give up my friendship without a fight. I didn't feel ready to give in to the call of my spirit to Wynnter either, no matter how much my body craved his. He was practically a stranger to me.

I also knew to resist the pull of a chosen spirit was an exercise in futility. I'd listened to enough of Isobel's stories of how she'd tried and failed to resist the charms of the cocky, Tikkot.

She'd said ignoring the draw had only made it that much worse. I had believed her. After working so closely with

Wynnter while keeping him at a distance, had done a number on my sanity.

I had been hot and itchy in my own skin. Everything that touched me, even the soft undercurrents of filtered air blowing throughout the craft, felt as prickly as my fading self-control.

Lost in my own head, I jerked to attention as the three warriors surrounding us dropped to the jungle floor as one. At first, I thought a creature had been approaching. It was getting dark and that's when all the nasty nocturnal beasts woke up to search for breakfast.

As I turned eyes to the darkening horizon, my skin shrank to my bones. A one-manned silver craft, exactly like the one that had fired upon the Gretolic's vessel, was dropping from the sky like a stone.

The shiny metal of its hull caught and glinted the last of the twin suns' rays as they kissed the horizon goodnight, then dropped into the thick canopy of the jungle not fifty feet from us.

Zikkar and Zaku shut down the gate, snatched the disruptor discs off the dome, and gathered the fibrous tubing. We were ushered around to the back side of our bubble craft by the three warriors. The invisible hull blocking our huddled forms from view of anything that might wander out of the jungle.

Wynnter crouched protectively at my back as we waited for directions from the warriors. After a time of them watching and listening for any unusual sounds, they gestured for us to go. Zikkar and Zaku were the first to duck inside our craft with Sazzar following.

Wexxor and Synnox signaled that it was our turn but then abruptly dove to the ground and waved us back. Before I had time to turn and take cover behind the craft, Wynnter grabbed my arm and hauled me backward. We landed together in a heap with me on top.

Careful footsteps moved off in the distance, coming closer. The debris littered the jungle's floor alerting us to a presence.

Wynnter placed me between his big body and the craft's hull. I couldn't see a damn thing with Wexxor and Synnox out front.

“Ni twy lin siff!” a stranger's voice shouted, and I tensed.

The translator tucked behind my ear ticked and tweeted as it tried to decipher the new language.

“Drop the weapon or die!” Wexxor was not fucking around.

More of that bizarre language confused my translator as I tried in vain to peer past the mountain that was Wynnter's girth. I wanted a look at who had been flying the one-manned craft.

More yelling was followed by a red blast that hit the shell of the dome with a resounding ripple.

Wynnter and I were showered in a spray of stinging sparks. The male curled his body around mine, limiting my exposure. What hit my skin, he briskly brushed away with his hands.

On the heels of steel hitting solid flesh with a cringe-worthy *thunch*, came a blast from a neutrone spear. I didn't need to see the body as it hit the ground. I could smell the seared flesh from where I remained hunkered down with Wynnter.

“It's safe,” Synnox called out. “Get the female inside before a predator scents—”

As if called, a rexose stormed through the foliage and that was when everything went to hell.

# Chapter Five

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**W**exxor was thrown backward. His back had hit the dome hard enough to cause a rippling wave of disruption sure to alert the Gretolic's in control of the city that something was happening outside the dome.

The gray aliens would investigate and here Rose and I were behind one of their stolen spherical crafts with our noses practically pressed up against the shielding.

Several blasts from Synnox's nutrone spear had rung out in quick succession followed by the angry howl of a rexose. Normally a solitary creature, when called, more of its kind would come to aid another in need of help.

Wexxor recovered quickly from his blow, popping to his feet as soon as his ass hit the ground. I opened my mouth to ask if he was hurt, but he threw himself back into the fight before I could get the words out.

"Get the female to shelter," Wexxor yelled back as he raced toward the action.

I eyed the second craft parked nearby. Either craft I chose; I'd have to run through the fighting to reach the door.

I peered around the hull of our craft. Sazzar and Zaku had joined in the fight against the rexose. The beast wasn't affording them a sec of latitude, lunging, and snapping its jaws.

One strike narrowly missed taking off Synnox's arm, but Zaku had dived and retrieved the weapon from the downed

body of the Yulineon.

With a well-placed blast, Zaku hit the rexose in the sensitive flesh under one forearm causing the beast to take a step back. That was just the opening I needed to get Rose safely inside our craft.

“Wrap yourself around me.” I snatched my spirit mate off the ground. “We’re making a run for it.”

“Run for it?” Rose slung her arms and legs around me in a tight squeeze. “Oh, shit—”

A fresh rush of adrenalyne pumped through my veins, fueling my thighs as I took off around the craft. Now opened to the fighting, I kept my head down and my body wrapped around as much of Rose as I could reach, limiting her exposure to the beast. Better if I were bitten than her.

Steps away from the opened door, I skidded to a halt as the rexose’s head whipped around. I dodged and veered off in the opposite direction toward the second craft and away from the clawed hand that swatted at us, but the rexose followed.

The beast locked in on us, ignoring the warriors trying to distract it away. I turned to the side to take the bite I thought was imminent.

Synnox hit the rexose in the hindquarters with a nutrone blast that finally gained its attention. The large head of the beast came around knocking the Trisess scout to the ground.

Wexxor was suddenly there, greeting the snarling creature with a slice and a stab of Valosian steel to the center of one slitted eye. Blood sprayed from the punctured orb in a sticky flow.

The rexose slung back its mighty head, tossing Wexxor and the sword through the air. The warrior crashed through the heavy foliage on a reckless descent, taking out branches and prickly brush in his wake.

With mere secs to make my move, I slapped my hand over the panel and opened the door to the second craft. Without another thought, I spun on my heel and flung Rose into the

opened door. She was more important than any of us. Saving her was my primary goal.

Her arms and legs flailed as she became airborne and landed in a crumpled heap on the floor of the craft.

“Shut the door, Rose,” I shouted and waved my arms to take the attention off my female. The rexose zeroed in on me again. Only this time it tilted its head and peered at me through one eye, seething with ferocity over its latest injury.

“Wynnter, no!” Rose yelled back.

“Do it now!” I cut her a scathing look meant to broach no argument.

I heard her whimper just as the door to her craft slid closed. She watched the battle from inside. I could feel the burn of her eyes on me. Weaponless, I was prepared to meet my own demise to save my spirit mate.

Before the creature could bite my head off, Zaku and Synnox concentrated their handheld weapons on the belly of the beast. Then, using the creature’s blind spot to his advantage, Sazzar hacked at the tough hide of its hind legs in an effort to fell it.

I stole the opportunity to go after Wexxor. The warrior had come down just inside the line of the heaviest foliage. The dark hurs were upon us, so I dropped my dark penetrating lenses into place with a single blink and searched until I found his still form tangled in the jungle’s undergrowth.

“Wexxor,” I hissed and fought my way through the web of thin, twisting branches.

The male didn’t move when I reached him. My head was on a swivel as I pressed my fingers to the artery at his throat and quickly scanned the area. I huffed out a breath, feeling his pulse beating strong and steady beneath the tips of my fingers.

My relief was chased away by tremors that shook the ground. The rexose had continued to howl and something big had answered its call for help.

With no time to assess Wexxor's injuries, I hefted the warrior off the ground and slung him across my shoulders. With one hand holding his wrists and the other gripping the calf of one leg, I sprinted toward the second craft.

I broke through the thick of the jungle. The distorted outlines of the invisible hulls were barely discernible. I flattened my back to the first craft I came to, the one with Rose safely inside. I edged my way around the backside to avoid being seen by the rexose.

As I drew near the door, the battle came into view. Zaku and the other two warriors were putting up one serious fight. It appeared they were gaining the upper hand. No small feat for three males against the deadliest predator on Valose.

"Another rexose is on the way!" I yelled out, warning the warriors.

I took two more lunging steps and, thankfully, Rose greeted me with an open door. I side-stepped through the narrow opening wearing an injured Wexxor.

"Is he alive?" She closed the door and rushed over to the far wall to slide out the cushioned table.

I laid Wexxor down and turned to Rose, gripping her slim shoulders. "Yes, but I need you to tend his injuries, so I can go help the others."

"But you're not armed."

I searched Wexxor's prone form and pulled free the dagger he had sheathed on his calf. "Now I am."

"With that? Ohmygod, Wynnter, seriously? It'll be like fighting a grizzly bear with a toothpick."

Some of her words failed to translate, but I got the gist from her sarcastic tone.

"Synnox trained me as a warrior, and it isn't in my nature to stand by while others fight."

On the heels of her protests, I hurried over to the door only to pause as I caught my first real look at the defeated alien. Facedown in the blue dirt, he wore a two-piece garment that

covered most of his whitish flesh. Packed with muscle, his build was similar to a Valosians, and so was the length of his silvery-white mane.

If I didn't know better, I would have mistaken him for one of my kind.

“Wynnter look!” Rose shouted.

My eyes followed the point of her finger.

“We have to leave now!” I opened the door and called out. “A Gretolic patrol is on the way.”

All eyes swung to the small open-aired craft drawing near. A single Gretolic flew the craft, its bulbous head the only part of him that was visible.

“You,”—Zaku pointed at me— “stay put. Zikkar! Keep the door open to your craft.” Zaku shot the rexose in the belly with the Yulineon's weapon before hauling his body up by the waistband and tossing his corpse into the other craft with Zikkar. “I'll keep the rexose distracted. Get your asses inside the crafts. We are leaving!”

Sazzar cursed and dove for the open door of Zikkar's craft. As a warrior, he was trained to stand and fight, so running for cover went against every fiber of his being.

The nutrone in Synnox's spear had dimmed from the power drain of shooting the rexose's tough hide. The warrior aimed for the beast's side, holding the blast steady. “Your turn, Zaku! I can hold it.”

Our huge purple ally kept firing at the rexose as he lunged for our craft. Rose and I stepped out of his way. His bulk hit the floor with a muted thud so hard, it rocked our vessel.

All eyes turned to Synnox as he edged his way backward towards Zikkar's craft. His weapon losing strength with every blast.

I stepped just outside the craft and flung the dagger clutched in my hand. Hilt-over-hilt, Valosian steel sailed through the air until it met its target with a sickening pop as the weapon embedded itself in the beast's tough hide.

The rexose slung his head back and roared to the silvery moons, giving Synnox the secs he needed to join the others in Zikkar's craft.

I leapt back inside and slammed my palm over the panel, closing the door. Before any of us could brace, Zaku lifted us off the ground just as a second rexose crashed through the jungle and into the clearing where we had just been parked.

"Zikkar!" Zaku pinged the other craft. "Get out of there. Turn on your tracker and follow me."

My knees buckled. The sudden upward momentum took me to the floor. I scrambled over to Rose who had dived to buckle an unconscious Wexxor onto the table as we lifted higher into the dark sky.

I gathered her up and together, we sat on the floor and watched as the distortion of Zikkar's craft followed us over the jungle's canopy.

"Wexxor needs medical attention, and the gate needs to be taken to a safe place," Zaku said, while he flew us to a spot near the Sien River and landed. "We also need to search for the Yulineon's craft and find out why he landed here. That ship will have a tracker, and we need to remove it and dispose of the body. When the male doesn't report in, more will come in search of him."

"Rose and Wexxor will go with Zikkar and the others," I said to Zaku over my protesting female. "I will go with you to find the Yulineon's ship."

"Agreed." Zaku pinged Zikkar with our plan as soon as his craft touched down next to ours.

"Put me down." Rose squirmed and fought against my hold when I gathered her in my arms and carried her out the door of our craft and into Zikkar's. "I'm going with you."

"No. You will be safer in Trisess, Rose." I deposited her in the seat at the console and clicked the strap across her lap before she could get up.

She continued to fight, struggling with the strap to try to unfasten it. I covered her hands with mine to still them. When

she opened her mouth to argue, I silenced her with a firm kiss.

It had been a spontaneous move. One that worked to shock her into submission. I hadn't been sure of her reaction if she would push me away or pull me to her. I had only meant to shush her, but the moment my mouth fell across hers, she took control.

Her hand came around to cup my neck as she parted my lips with the hot tip of her tongue. I hadn't been prepared for the blistering of my spirit. Our tongues tangled and I wanted more.

I wanted *all* of her.

When I knelt and tried to pull her closer, I couldn't understand why she didn't budge from the seat, so lost to the feel of her.

My name being called from someplace far away lured me back to reality. Reluctantly, I dragged my lips from hers. The harsh rasps of our breaths mingled as we stared at each other for an eternity, savoring the intensity of the connection that simmered between us.

"Please go with Zikkar." I thrummed out my request in hopes it would soothe her into compliance and brushed my fingertips down her cheek. "I will feel better knowing you are safe at Trisess."

To my surprise, she simply nodded. "I will be worried about you."

"Zaku will have my back."

"We need to get going," Zaku stated, and I realized it was his voice that had interrupted our first kiss.

"See you in Trisess." I didn't trust myself to kiss her goodbye, so I leapt to my feet and hustled out the door to the other craft.

# Chapter Six

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**W**exxor had been brought over and placed on the cushioned table of Zikkar's craft while the broken body of the Yulineon now lay at my feet.

"What will we do with him?" I pointed to the alien.

"If we are successful in locating the Yulineon's ship, I'll remove the tracker and put it on the body." Zaku took his spot behind the console and started up our craft. "We can keep the ship and then dump the body with the tracker into the Caspeen Sea. More will come in search of him when he doesn't return. With any luck, maybe we can trick them into thinking he flew too close to the water and was snatched out of the sky by a squidlin."

Zaku and I waited until the other craft lifted off the ground and traveled in the direction of Trisess before we took to the air. I expelled a relieved breath knowing Rose was headed out of the jungle and on her way to safety.

In Trisess, she would be surrounded by my clan of warriors along with Sia Jakkar and a few of the females. I knew nothing would happen to her there.

I peered down into a face with features not so dissimilar from my own. A pang of guilt followed. Did this male have a family on some distant world who would miss him? Would dumping his body in the sea be viewed as a dishonorable burial to his species?

“If we share a common enemy, why not request their help to fight the Gretolics?”

“If not for the females, your idea would have merit.” Zaku squinted down at the transparent floor of the craft. “Your eyes are better equipped than mine to see in the dark. Help me look for any evidence where the ship has broken through the trees.”

Zaku flew us so low over the canopy of the jungle, the bottom of our craft skimmed the tops of the tallest trees. “What do you mean about the females?”

“The Yulineons are the guardians of infant galaxies. The planet, Earth, falls under their jurisdiction. Universeval Rule dictates that any humans found off-world are to be killed on sight.” Zaku’s grizzly explanation turned my blood to fire. My scales flashed with anger.

“They will not be killing any of the females on Valose,” I snapped. “I don’t care what their rule says.”

Adrenalyne soared through my veins burning away any guilt I had felt over the disposing of his corpse.

“There!” I pointed to a circle of broken branches.

As Zaku lowered us to the jungle floor, the small alien ship came into view. Along with it, a strange device set upon a spike had been driven into the ground close by.

“Fuck!” Zaku landed with a curse. “The Yulineon deployed a scanner.”

“What’s it scanning for?”

“Hopefully Gretolics and not humans.” Zaku powered down our craft. “Arm yourself.”

Zaku shouldered his pack filled with hand tools and palmed the alien’s blaster-like weapon while I clutched a spear left behind by one of the warriors. Cautiously, we exited our craft and over to the boxy scanner sticking up out of the ground.

I wanted to examine the alien’s technology, but Zaku was the expert, and someone needed to watch his back for any nocturnal predators.

The foliage that surrounded us was thick and impenetrable. Nothing like what I was accustomed. With my spear out and ready to strike, I quietly paced off a circle around where Zaku worked to dismantle the device. My ears perked and swiveled to pick up even the tiniest sounds of any predators on the ground.

Surrounded by the unfamiliar, it was times like this that I missed the forest of Trisess the most. The width and rapids of the Sien River kept out all the Huren jungle's predators. All except one. The wetlock.

That winged beast had proven with an attack on the island nestled far off the western seaboard, that its leathery wings were more than capable of carrying it across the choppy seas.

We just needed to complete the last leg of this mission and I could return to the forest. Back to my home high up in the majestic trees of Trisess. Where no predators roamed the ground. Where I could sip vernbury tea and marvel at the beauty of the dark hurs from the deck of my home.

I hoped to share such a suns-fall with Rose.

"I've deactivated it." Zaku carefully placed the device in his bag. "I'll need to take it with us and check the data settings before I can determine what the Yulioneon was scanning for. Anything coming at us?"

My ears swiveled and cupped. "A herd of rynose grazing to the south, and a rexose on the hunt to the east, but nothing close by."

"That's some impressive auditory abilities you've got going on."

"Happy to help." I tipped my chin at the new alien craft. "You can fly that ship?"

It was smaller than the Gretolic's spherical crafts we'd taken as our own. A shiny silver ball, the vessel was barely as tall as me.

"Yes. It's a Yulioneon long-range fighter. A simple design made for easy maneuverability."

Zaku ran his hand along the bottom of the hull until he came to a seam. With a small tool from his bag, he pried off a panel to reveal the inner workings.

I itched to get my hands on the small round ship. Clan Trisess had only rudimentary technology until the first Gretolic had shown its gray bulbous head. After that, my clan was given alien devices in trade for harboring their ship under the cover of our heavy boughs.

Our former Sia, Havvar, had tasked me with dissecting and studying what the Gretolics had given us in exchange for our cooperation. But they were only trinkets compared to what we had been promised—a device capable of penetrating the dome over Huren.

It was the only way to get inside so our warriors could defeat Clan Huren and take the hunting grounds on the opposite side of the Sien River before our clan gave into starvation.

The Gretolics had never made good on their end of the agreement and instead of a dome-penetrating device, they had demanded twenty of our warriors to act as guards on a mission to the stars.

Sia Havvar had made a grave mistake in trusting the invaders. I still didn't know the whole of it, but Sia Havvar had gotten in too deep with the enemy.

Thank the Spirits for the former chief scout, Tikkot. If he had not learned the truth and brought the Huren exiles back to Trisess to fight the gray invaders, I don't know what would have become of the twenty warriors Sia Havvar had planned to hand over to them.

On our own, we had created what the Gretolics had denied us. Ironic that we would be using the very thing they had promised us against *them* and not Clan Huren.

It would be a war for the ages. An army combined of all three clans led by a single Sia. One we had crowned as our world's leader, Jakkar, would lead Valose in victory over the aliens, and rid our world of their pestilence once and for all.

As Zaku made his way around the intricate workings of the alien's ship, I felt little more than a novice. Technology from the stars was so far advanced, it would take me yerons to learn how all of it worked.

When the Gretolic's embedded in Trisess had been defeated, I had been the first one aboard the craft, learning and absorbing all I could from their machinery, but I had a long way to go in understanding it all.

"The tracker is removed." Zaku stood with a heavy sigh of relief. In the center of his giant palm sat a tiny, blinking device. "Let's plant this on the body and get rid of it before any more show up."

I followed Zaku inside our craft. He knelt and tucked the tracker inside the pants pocket of the Yulineon's strange garment. "It will take two of us to dump the body. One to fly this craft and the other to shove the dead weight into the sea."

"What's your plan?"

"You fly this craft to Trisess. I'll follow you in the Yulineon's ship and leave it there. Then together, we fly way off the coast and get rid of the body."

"Let's do this," I said.

I was taken aback when Zaku presented his forearm for me to clasp in the customary way of the warriors. I wasn't born of the warrior class, but Synnox had always shown me this respect.

"Glad to have you as an ally." I clasped what was presented and tried not to gawk at how much smaller the bulk of my build was compared to his.

"And me as well."

Rose had called his scales purr-pell. An unusual shade to be sure. I found the huge alien as fascinating as the Yulineon's ship.

"The Valosian people have so much to learn." I felt insignificant and vastly ignorant next to this purr-pell being.

“I will be glad to teach you.” Zaku clapped me on the back. “After we get rid of the Yulineon,” he called out as he left my craft and boarded the small silver ship.

I pinged Sia Jakkar as we took to the air and told him of our plan. He informed me Rose and the others had just landed. Profound relief that my spirit mate was safe inside Trisess territory bloomed warmth over my scales. We had not been apart for very long, but already I was anxious to be back with her.

It didn't take long before the trees of my forest homeland came into view. My lips curled into a smile at the sight of the familiar landscape after having spent so much time on the island and in the jungle of Huren.

We landed and Zaku disembarked from the small silver ship. His huge frame unfolded from the horizontally raised door. He waved a hand at Sia Jakkar and the other warriors who had been awaiting our arrival as he jogged over to me.

“Fly us far away from the forest. Go west until the land disappears from the horizon. That's when we'll dump the body.”

I tried to catch a glimpse of Rose as I silently lifted us off the ground. The contrast of her bright mane against the silvers and blues of the forest was nowhere to be seen.

I pointed us west as Zaku wanted and kept going until the Caspeen Sea gave way to the same dark, turbulent waves of the Haydian Sea. I swallowed back the fear that crept up my spine the more distance I put between us and the land.

The island to the east had been the farthest I'd ever ventured out to sea. Before the Gretolics, Valosians didn't have flying contraptions, and vessels that floated were out of the question.

The squidlin, sea creatures with massive tentacles, would snatch up anyone in or near the sea. Without the natural rock barrier like around the island, no one could venture too close to the shorelines. There was no safe place within the reach of their tentacles.

“I think we’ve flown out far enough,” Zaku said. “Slow and hover here but keep us high enough above the water so a squidlin doesn’t snatch us from the air.”

I did just that, keeping the craft level while Zaku drug the body of our unwanted visitor across the transparent floor. The seal on the door popped open. A gust of cold, salty sea air rushed inside, filling the craft.

In a single shove, Zaku heaved the body of the Yulineon out the door. He dropped like a stone, his whitish mane so like my own, flagged out behind him.

As if lying in wait, the length of a thick tentacle uncoiled from the sea to snatch the alien from his fall. The squidlin surfaced for only a sec, revealing one bulging, horrific eye that was centered in its fat head.

The creature scanned the sky as if waiting for another snack to drop before it sunk below the churning waves, taking with it our new enemy from the stars.

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# Chapter Seven

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**W**ynnter's kiss still coated my lips and had scorched a memory I knew would never be forgotten.

Inside I was fighting against a restless burn. It wasn't anger that made me edgy but something else that swirled heavy with angst. Though I hadn't liked being made to return to Trisess while Wynnter had gone off with Zaku, it was the separation from him that was causing me grief.

And I worried about his safety. The Huren jungle was a dangerous place. I'd had some close calls and scary experiences in my short time on Valose.

I'd wanted to protest but something in his kiss had cooled my argument. Lost to the swirling silver in his eyes and the song his soul sang to mine, I had given up my fight to join him. It had made logical sense for me to return to the safety of the forest.

I would have only been a distraction for him wanting to protect me as he had when the rexose had attacked. He'd put himself in harm's way to toss me into the safety of the craft. I couldn't let him place himself in danger again because of me.

I desperately wanted an up-close look at the Yulineon's craft. I hoped Zaku could remove the tracker so he could bring it back to Trisess where Zikkar was about to fly us over.

I had only been in Trisess briefly and wanted to know more about the place where Wynnter had grown up. My silver

Tarzan. I could just imagine him hanging out in the fluffy boughs of those massive trees.

His muscles would be out on full display, wearing only a breechcloth. The feral set of his intense gaze would be scanning the ground below for dangers. His waist-length hair he never bothered to comb would be billowing out behind him, begging for my fingers to straighten it. He would swoop down and snatch me from the ground. I would be held tight against the strength of his chest as he whisked me away to safety.

I swallowed hard against the picture my mind had painted of my silver Tarzan. Although the image had been close to the truth, he hadn't swooped down from a tree but had grabbed me up and bravely gotten me to safety, then faced off against a dangerous predator to keep me from harm.

He had been my hero.

Zikkar turned to me after landing us near the craft where we had helped the Huren exiles defeat the Gretolics. "There is something I need to tell you."

"Please," I said, struggling with the strap across my lap. "You guys have kept me in the dark long enough."

"However, this is not the place." Zikkar released the strap and I pushed to my feet. "Once you're settled, I will come find you."

"Nope." I crossed my arms defiantly. "You'll tell me now. I'm done waiting another damn second. I already suspect Wynnter is my spirit mate, so say what you have to say."

Several throats cleared. I heard Sazzar and Synnox moving around at the back of the craft. I knew they were maneuvering Wexxor's unconscious form out the door.

Zikkar's eyes darted around to the action going on behind me before he placed both hands on my shoulders as if preparing to lay something on me that was going to be big.

His normally steady gaze bounced all over my face. And I knew this was as close to frazzled as I would ever see him. "My spirit has called to another."

I recoiled in shock. “It did?”

“Yes. That is one of the reasons I no longer shared my bed with you.”

“Why did you not just tell me?”

“It never seemed the right time.” He ducked his head before flipping sad eyes up to mine. “I was afraid to hurt you.”

My heart lurched and tears rushed to fill my eyes. “It never occurred to me that you had found your mate.”

“I’m so very sorry it wasn’t you, Rose,” Zikkar rushed out.

I had to bite down on my lower lip to stop it from trembling. “Me too. I had wanted it to be you.”

“So did I,” he thumbed away a stray tear from my cheek. “So did I, but the spirit is never wrong.”

“I had thought it was because of Wynnter.”

“I know you are not entirely unaffected by him.”

“No,” I admitted with a bright blush. “Not entirely.”

Zikkar smiled at me tightly. “He will make a fierce protector for you. A better one than I ever could.”

“What about our friendship?” I held my breath. “Is this goodbye for us?”

“No.” Zikkar shook his head. “Unless you want it to be.”

“That’s not what I want at all.” I grabbed his lean biceps and squeezed with both hands. “What if I decide to bond with Wynnter? Will we be allowed to stay friends?”

“Why wouldn’t we?” Zikkar’s brow furrowed. “Before the germ took our females, bedmates weren’t uncommon until the spirits found their mates. I will always be your friend, Rose. Nothing can take that away from us. Not even the bonding of spirits.”

I sagged in relief. All the guilt I’d felt over my attraction to Wynnter bled away. And for the first time since my heart stuttered for another, my insides no longer felt like I was choking on them.

“I’m so happy to hear you say that.” I flung my arms around Zikkar’s neck and held on tight. “I hadn’t wanted to lose what we had together.”

“Oops,” a voice I recognized as Isobel’s said. “Didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“You’re not.” I stepped out of my friend’s embrace. “We were just getting ready to take the device out to Jakkar.”

I turned to find a smirking Isobel and a grinning Elise, who waved at me with an excited hand.

“I can present the device to Sia Jakkar,” Zikkar said. “You go with the females and get something to eat.”

I hadn’t noticed the aroma of roasting meat until after Zikkar’s mention of food. My mouth watered from the rich scent. I couldn’t remember when the last time I had eaten something other than dried meat from a pouch.

“I won’t argue with you.” I turned to face him. “Thanks, Zikkar.”

My gratitude was for more than just delivering the weapon to Jakkar, but I could feel the tears already building. I didn’t want to leave Zikkar as an emotional wreck. How did I explain to someone so reserved with their emotions that it was his lasting friendship, understanding, and mostly, his honesty that was about to send me into an ugly cry?

I squared my shoulders, straightened my fur cloak, and met the girls while Zikkar disembarked with the device.

Isobel immediately pulled me in for a quick hug.

“Where’s Lily?” I asked.

“She’s busy barfing from the smell of the cooking meat.” Isobel waved a hand as if this was a regular occurrence.

“But she’s otherwise okay?” I asked while I returned Elise’s embrace.

“Yep. Happens all the time now.”

“Poor girl.”

“Poor *you*.” Isobel pinched her nose. “No offense, but you’re a little gamey.”

“The perils of camp life in the wilds of Huren,” I giggled.

“Whew, girl,” Isobel laughed. “I guess.”

Elise wrinkled her nose and fanned a hand in front of her face.

“Oh, you too?” I crossed my arms and huffed, feigning offended.

Elise nodded, then wrote on her tablet. “*Definitely shower time. I’ll get food and bring it to you.*”

I pointed to Elise’s retreating back. “Did she mention a shower?”

“Yep. We even have you your own treehouse set up and ready to go.” Isobel talked as we left the craft. Snow had fallen sometime earlier. My feet crunched on well-trampled snow as we started down a path through the forest. “We figured after being stuck in close quarters with all those guys, you’d want some privacy.”

I took a last look back before we rounded a corner around a massive tree trunk to witness Zikkar and Jakkar clasp forearms. The scales on Zikkar’s face flushed a deep blue and I wondered if this new show of emotions was due to his awakening.

Zikkar wasn’t the only male who had been awakened, and he’d confirmed my suspicions—Wynnter was my spirit mate. Thoughts of him out in the jungle of Huren after dark made my stomach recoil away from my appetite.

“...it’s not exactly hot water, but it’s a shower,” Isobel was saying. “You okay, Rose? You’re looking a little pale. Nullar is still here with the survivors from Jurigon. Do you want me to go get him?”

“No, I’m fine. Just tired,” I lied, not wanting her to know how upset I was about my male being in the jungle. I wasn’t in need of a medic. I just wasn’t ready to answer questions about Wynnter. “Anyway, I’ll take any kind of shower I can get after

weeks of being cooped up in that bubble craft. A PTA bath can only get you so clean.”

“PTA?”

“Pits, tits, and ass.”

Isobel burst out laughing, drawing the attention of some passing clansmen. “You’re too funny.”

“We got word that Elise had taught all the warriors American Sign Language, so they could fight with earplugs,” I said. “That’s a genius way to block the Gretolic’s mind control.”

“More like her and Vallon’s version of it. She named it VSL. Valosian Sign Language. It’s a cross between the English and Valosian alphabet.” Isobel’s eyes grew wide. “Can you believe those two made up their own language?”

“I can. She and Vallon have been like two peas in a pod ever since she woke up from her injury.”

“They bonded while you were away.”

“It certainly took them long enough,” I sniffed. “I’m glad she found her soulmate.”

“Me too,” Isobel agreed. “They adopted an orphan named Gavvin. Now they’re a happy little family.”

“I’m so happy for her.” I really was and hated that my melancholy tone didn’t match my words.

As we passed by a low tree limb covered in snow, I reached out and collected a handful, absently forming it into a ball.

“Heads up. I made the mistake of thinking it would be fun to engage Tikkot in a snowball fight,” Isobel cackled. “I didn’t land a single one. He whipped my ass and then some.”

“Good to know.”

As Isobel went on about how agile Tikkot had been, dodging and weaving her pitifully thrown snowballs while she was being pummeled, a renewed ache for the stranger that was

mine hit me square in the chest. I rubbed at the knot twisting behind my sternum.

“You sure you’re okay?” Isobel looked at me with concerned eyes.

We’d stopped in front of the lift that would take us up to a treehouse. Lost in my heart and in my head, I hadn’t realized my feet had stopped moving.

“I was thinking about what an amazing woman Elise is to have taught all the warriors sign language,” I commented, directing Isobel’s attention away from me.

“Just as amazing as you,” Isobel puffed. “Look at the machine you guys made. All that sci-fi shit is over my head.”

“No biggie. Plus, we had help,” I pointed out as we stepped onto the lift.

“You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

Isobel surprised me with how easy it had been to crank the wheel that took us up. Way up. The bottoms of my feet had begun to tingle from the lofty height before we reached the deck jutting out from the tree.

Stepping off the lift, I was struck with a yearning to experience the magnificent view with Wynnter. Maybe we could even repeat that toe-curling kiss.

Heat licked between my thighs and warmth bloomed behind my sternum. Stranger or not, I knew it was only a matter of time before I gave in to the call of my spirit to his.

# Chapter Eight

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Zaku and I had just landed after dumping the body of the Yulineon into the Haydian Sea. Finally back in the forest of my birth, I should have been running down the paths and enjoying the feel of the first snowfall of the yeron on my bare feet.

As soon as Zaku and I had touched down, all I'd wanted to do was find Rose, but we'd been told to attend a hastily called meeting by Sia Jakkar. Packed inside the treehouse facing the southern seashore, I stood shoulder-to-shoulder with warriors from all three clans.

Not all the males present looked ready to forget the lifetime of grievances each clan held for the other. In particular, the males wearing fur pants with metalloid buckles in the shape of patoogas.

*Clan Jurigon.*

They shifted on agitated feet, always scanning the males from the other clans as if looking for weaknesses. From what little we'd learned while out in the field, Aggar had returned with only a few survivors. The clan had lost not only their Sia, but their home in a single blast from the Gretolic vessel.

Once the Gretolics were defeated and Huren was back in Valosian hands, what then? Would the accord even hold? And for how long?

The premise was for all three clans to live under the safety of the dome with the three Sias from each clan governed by a

primary ruler. It was an ideal scenario. One I wasn't so certain would last.

Clan Trisess had seen the merit in such an alliance. However, judging by the intensity of the scowl worn by the new Sia of Clan Jurigon, Murrox, the union was looking rather temporary.

How many of the survivors could be trusted, given their former Sia, Xennox, had collaborated with the aliens to build a nutrone based weapon meant for mass destruction right under their mountain fortress.

The smaller version being the very thing that would be opening a portal in the dome to destroy the faction embedded inside the city. The same faction who had already left Huren carrying with it hundreds of Huren males and human females. The same spaceship the Gretolics inside Mount Jurigon had meant to destroy.

None of us were innocent. Trisess and Huren had collaborated with the aliens too. All of us for our own selfish reasons. Maybe, I shouldn't judge the Jurigon males so harshly.

We needed their numbers to defeat the remaining Gretolics. We'd all have to play nice if we wanted to rid Valose of the little gray freaks.

Grumblings that we would be attacking the Gretolic's inside the city as early as the next sun-fall filtered through the crowd. The rumor had my scales prickling and flickering in every shade of blue and silver.

I'd planned to fight alongside the warriors with my Sia's consent. My eyes sought out and found Sia Tikkot in the crowd. He lifted a chin in my direction, and I returned the gesture.

If what was being gossiped about was true, that didn't leave a lot of time for me to spend with Rose.

Every muscle in my body went tight as Zikkar entered the room behind Sia Jakkar. His eyes flashed and held onto mine,

but I looked away when the ruler of Valose addressed the crowd of warriors.

“Settle down males.” Sia Jakkar flashed a silver palm to quieten the crowd eager for information. “Now that the techs have created an operational portal, we can proceed with the attack against the Gretolics and take back the city of Huren.”

A cheer from the males crescendoed into thunder that shook the floor of the room. My ears flattened to my head to save them from ringing.

Sia Jakkar allowed the roar of zealous combatants to continue for a moment before the flash of his palm silenced the group. As Sia Jakkar briefed, I peered around at the gathered males. It was an unprecedented time in Valosian history with all three clans in one place, plotting an attack against a mutual enemy.

As he went on to confirm the rumor of the war to commence on the start of the next suns-fall, I found it difficult to remain attentive.

Zikkar’s gaze had not wavered from mine. The Huren tech had something to say to me. I cracked my knuckles. My hostility rose with the buzz of warriors around me ready to fight.

He’d always been overprotective of Rose where I was concerned. If he thought to school me in the ways of bonding with my spirit mate, I would be hard-pressed not to knock the words back into his mouth.

I’d never so much as exchanged words with any other clans before I was asked by Sia Tikkot to team up with the Huren techs to create the gate. If it hadn’t been for the underlying aggression caused by my awakening, it would have been an easy transition to work with the Huren males.

If things had been different, I might have even considered Zikkar a friend.

“I should not have to remind you to be careful of my kinsmen under the influence of the Gretolics.” I tuned into Sia Jakkar’s brief of the upcoming battle. “They are not to be

killed.” He cut hard eyes at Murrox. “Incapacitate them. Once you kill the Gretolics spouting in their ears, they will disengage.”

I knew nothing of Clan Jurigon, only of the perpetual feud between them and us for as long as I could remember. Territorial boundaries had always been the bulk of the argument.

And, of course, their lack of sharing the rare mineral, nutrone, that could only be found in one place on Valose—under the mountain inside Jurigon territory. Instead of a savvy negotiator, our former ruler, Sia Havvar, had only made matters worse with his unyielding approach.

Nutrone would have come in handy to arm our spears. If we’d banded together like we were doing now, we could have wiped out our common enemy, the Nuttaki, long ago. Then my clansmen who had lost their lives in the attack while I was away, would still be among those in the realm of the living.

Sia Jakkar now done with his briefing, the restless warriors began to disband. It was a slow process as they had to take the lift down in small groups. Once the males had thinned enough for me to reach both Sias, Jakkar and Tikkot, at the front of the room, the blood in my veins pounded with the need to fight.

I needed an outlet for the raging aggression I’d had to hold at bay for the good of the project. I gave my knuckles another good cracking. Sia Murrox took notice and I matched him glare for glare. His face would do just as nicely as Zikkar’s.

“Challenging a Sia is a fight to the death,” Zikkar warned close to my ear. His whispered words grated across my nerves.

“I have no interest in the burden of a crown,” I sneered. With the amount of adrenalyne pumping through my veins, I was cocky enough to believe I could snap the hulky Sia’s neck before he twitched so much as his pinky finger.

“We need to talk.”

“Brave of you, given how juiced I am right now.” I snapped my head around to face off with the male I wanted to

pummel the most. “Whatever it is you have to say will have to wait.”

I broke away from Zikkar to catch the two Sias before they descended on the next lift.

“I would like to join the ranks of the warriors,” I volunteered.

Sia Jakkar simply nodded to me with a pleased grin.

“Synnox has spoken highly of your skill with the spear.” Sia Tikkot gave me a cursory once over. “How quickly can you learn Elise’s hand language?”

“As fast as she can teach it to me.”

“Be back here as soon as the twin suns break the horizon,” Sia Jakkar said. “Elise will be giving a final review of the hand language to the warriors.”

“Yes, Sia.” I bowed slightly and presented my forearm for him to clasp. Then repeated the gesture with Sia Tikkot. “Thank you.”

I watched as both Sias boarded the lift, followed by Zaku and Sia Murrox, and had begun their descent before I whirled around on Zikkar.

“Talk,” I barked at Zikkar, who had been patiently waiting for me.

“It’s about Rose.”

“You told her?” I asked with narrowed eyes.

“Yes,” Zikkar said. “She was under the impression we could no longer be friends. I assured her that was not the case.”

“Did you?” I scoffed.

“She will need time to digest my awakening... And yours.”

My scales flashed with every word he spewed. I respected the tech, but— “I don’t need advice where my spirit mate is concerned, Huren,” I snapped.

“Rose was my friend long before your ancillary heart took its first beat.” His voice remained calm even though the colors of his scales gave away his inner fury. “I don’t wish to fight with you, only look after Rose’s best interest. All I’m asking is that you show her patience. Give her the time she needs to get to know you before you bond with her.”

Zikkar’s sound reasoning diluted the rising anger within me that was set to boil. Rose had said the same thing to me herself. I was a stranger. It wouldn’t be fair to push the bond on her. Her sweet arousal was there but I wanted her to choose me for a reason other than lust.

“She’s waiting for you.” Zikkar pointed to the canopy of a tree not far from here. “She was worried about you going off with Zaku.”

My throat worked through a hard swallow. Rose had been concerned for my welfare. Did that mean she felt the pull of the bond as strongly as a Valosian woman?

I was suddenly struck with a bout of nerves. Every ounce of aggression bled away, stripping me of the relentless anger that had been riding me hard.

I nodded to Zikkar and numbly boarded the lift. Aggression and lust had overshadowed all else. We’d been together every moment since I was brought over to the island to help work on the gate. On the ground, I ran the path to the base of her tree.

From the very sec my ancillary heart had begun to beat; the stronger my spirit’s call had become until it was a constant scream inside my mind and body. The bond had been all I could think about.

Panic gripped me as I peered up into the weighty boughs of Rose’s tree. The bond aside. What if she didn’t like the person I was?

# Chapter Nine

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I should have been scarfing down the plate of roasted meat and veggies Elise had brought up to me while I was in the shower. We'd been eating dried rations ever since we'd first landed at the perimeter of the dome, weeks ago.

What gnawed at my gut wasn't a craving for fresh food, but concern for the one my soul cried out for. Seated at the small table in my room, I picked at what was growing cold, lost in my head.

Movement at the entrance to my treehouse caught my eye. I knew it wasn't Isobel because she had hugged me before leaving me alone to shower.

I looked up to find the male my mind was consumed with, standing there. The solaries rocks scattered around the room bathed his handsome features in soft light.

I blinked a few times thinking I was only imagining him. When he remained and moved aside the divider that blocked the brisk, winter breeze from the circular opening to my room, I knew he was real.

"You're back!" I launched to my feet. My forgotten fork clattered to the wooden floor.

"I'm interrupting your meal..." he took one step inside then hesitated.

"No," I rushed over, my palm finding the center of his chest. "You're not."



His much larger palm covered mine.

“You’re not hungry?” His eyes darted over my shoulder to my neglected meal.

“I was...” I licked my lips, unsure of how much I should admit. “I was too worried about you to eat,” I blurted.

“Were you?” His scales flashed vivid blues.

Wynnter brushed a cupped hand down my cheek before running his thumb along my jaw. An involuntary shiver washed over me, followed by a lick of heat that unfurled low in my belly.

Under my palm, his chest began to vibrate out a melody that both relaxed and excited me. My eyes hooded as my soul absorbed his spirit’s song.

Wynnter’s eyes dropped to my lips. I desperately wanted a repeat of our first kiss, but I’d promised myself to take it slow. I knew if his lips touched mine, I’d lose myself to the sensation.

When it came to Wynnter, self-control was an issue, but I owed it to myself to try. The bonding was inevitable, but I could at least take my time getting to know my soulmate before we officially mated.

I shook myself from my lustful stupor and cleared my throat. “It looks like you made it back all right. No run-in with any jungle creatures?”

“No,” he said softly. His hand dropped from my jaw and lifted a lock of my damp hair to rub between two fingers.

“That’s good,” I breathed. “Were you able to bring back the Yulineon’s craft?”

“Yes.” He stepped in closer to me.

“I can’t wait to explore it.”

“Me too.” The way his eyes raked over me led me to believe he wasn’t referring to the craft.

Wynnter lifted the lock of hair he still held between his fingers to his nose, closed his eyes appreciatively, and inhaled

deeply. “You’ve made use of the loodfall.”

“I did. Just as soon as we got back.”

“I meant to return to my home first to do the same, but after the meeting with Sia Jakkar, I didn’t want to waste any more time away from you. It’s been forever since I saw you last.”

“It’s only been like an hour.” I ducked my head, stunned by his confession.

“Has it?” Wynnter’s lips grazed my ear. “Because every sec that passes and you’re not in my presence feels like an eternity.”

My eyes fluttered up to meet his. Where had all the air gone on the planet? My lungs had emptied, and it felt impossible to draw breath.

“I...” My mouth moved but no words could get past the lump in my throat. Choked on an eruption of joy, all I could manage was a slight shake of my head.

I’d never taken Wynnter for a sweet talker, but this man... er, male had some serious game beyond his muscular build and gorgeous face.

The longer we stood there eyeballing each other, the louder and more intense his thrumming. If I didn’t find a diversion soon, I would be completely under his spell.

“We should get you something to eat,” was all my muddled mind could think to say.

“I could say the same for you,” he grinned. “Your food looks like it’s been there a while.”

“I did manage a shower. I’m sure you’d like to get cleaned up too.” My face flashed hot when I realized what I’d babbled. “Not that your gross, or anything. I mean... I’ll bet if you were covered from head to toe in mud, you’d still be sexy as sin.” I clapped my mouth closed. “I’m gonna shut up now.”

His smile grew wider the more I stumbled over my words. If I’d ever had any doubts about how socially inept I was before, I’d just squashed them. I inwardly cringed

remembering why I never went out in public. “Sorry, I say stupid things when I’m outside my comfort zone. I do the public a service by staying inside and keeping my nose in my work.”

Wynnter chuckled, a deep resounding sound that seeped into my bones. Shower deprived or not, this guy was sex on a stick. I wanted to make him my lollipop.

“I’d make use of your loodfall, but I don’t have a clean breechcloth to change into. Then I would be naked.”

“Well, we can’t have that.” Flustered, I blushed and giggled like a teenager. “You could always run home and come back—” I stopped when his face dropped into a frown. “Or not.”

“You could come with me to my home.” Wynnter’s eyes brightened as his idea took shape. Then he tilted his head in the most enticing way. “Afterward, we can share a meal and I can show you all my projects I was working on before I was called to the island to help with the dome. Maybe I could get your thoughts on a power separator that’s got me stumped.”

Whether he knew it or not, Wynnter was catering to my ego. For me, the best compliments weren’t about my appearance, but about my intellect.

“I would love to see your projects,” I beamed.

Down the lift we went, following a path through the forest. The silvery moons were perched high in the night sky. I shivered from the crisp, cold air, and pulled my fur cloak tighter around me.

“How are your feet not freezing?” I peered down at Wynnter’s bare feet as we crunched over the packed snow.

“My body regulates my internal temperature, so I’m never too hot or too cold.”

“No. You’re always just right,” I giggled again.

He gave me a weird look.

“You know? From the fairytale called *Goldilocks and The Three Bears*?”

“What? No.” He shook his silvery head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Of course, you wouldn’t know, silly.” I playfully swatted at his arm. “It’s an old fairy tale told to children on my world.”

Gawd, what was Wynnter doing to me? I’d always been an introvert and sort of shy, but I’d never been a giggler. And I sure as hell was never flirtatious. Walking along the path with this muscular silver male striding at my side, I was all giddy on the inside.

I fell into a nervous babble explaining the old fairy tale that lasted until we stepped onto the lift that would take us up to his treehouse. I was curious to see his place. To get an inside look at who Wynnter really was.

The minute we stepped off the lift and onto the deck, Wynnter sprang into action, rushing around his space, making apologies about little messes here and there. I smiled at his actions, so much like a human bachelor’s.

It was obvious he’d up and left in a hurry. He’d been gone for weeks, helping us to create the portable gate. Everything had been as he’d left it.

“I’ll just be a moment,” Wynnter said, fishing out a white swath of fabric from a trunk. “My home is yours.” He gestured around the space. He gave me a nervous grin before disappearing into a room I knew to be the equivalent of a bathroom which the Valosian’s called a sanitare system.

His space was set up similar to the one I had been given. Sprinkled with solaris rocks for lighting, there was a small table and chairs on one side and a bed covered with furs on the other.

I wandered over to the bed and ran my hand across the bedding. I lifted his crudely made pillow to my nose. His spicy scent made my head spin as it always had. The lick of heat that struck me between my thighs made my belly swirl with a primal need.

I groaned, returning the pillow, and tried to get a hold of myself. I couldn’t give in to what my body ached for, no

matter how badly I wanted him. This was the time for us to get acquainted.

The water started to run in the shower. I pictured him naked and stepping under the waterfall. His hands would be lifted to his head as he tilted it back to wet the length of his hair. His back would be arched, and his cock would be jutting from his body—

“Jesus, Rose.” I shook away my dirty thoughts. “Get it together, perv,” I mumbled and peered around the room for a much-needed distraction.

His furnishings weren’t as sparse as mine but were just as rustic. He had a large desk of sorts, littered with scrolls and machinery parts, and a single stool tucked beneath. I padded over to where a few diagrams had been attached to the wall above the desk.

My jaw dropped. They were amazing sketches of various inventions. I looked down at what lay scattered about the desk to find the start of the same designs being worked.

“I’m not quite finished with this long-range tracker.” I jumped at Wynnter’s voice suddenly behind me. “I got these parts from disassembling a device given to my former Sia by the Gretolics.”

“It all looks so fascinating.” My earlier nervousness forgotten, I pummeled him with a zillion questions. I loved anything tech. What he had in this small area was more advanced than anything we had on Earth. I wanted to learn about all of it. Like, right now.

Wynnter pulled out the stool and offered it to me. I sat down, my questions flying out a mile a minute. The Trisess tech didn’t disappoint, answering everything and then some.

Then he showed me the device that had him flummoxed. “My intent is to divide power within a single device. A smaller version of the manifold we used in the portable gate. I can’t seem to figure out why the jintru bar won’t grab and hold.”

“Hmm...” I took the tiny device he handed me and looked it over. “Interesting how you used a cam driver to move the

devest plate.”

We fell into an easy chat about his invention. The more we talked, the greater my respect for him grew. The male was a freaking genius. He’d added some Gretolic tech to beef up his creations, but what he was working with was miles behind what the Huren techs had access to.

Even still, the devices he was creating were incredibly intricate. I hoped that once we were a mated pair, he would reconsider friending Zikkar. With their brilliant minds combined, there was no telling what the pair of them could create.

Maybe even a spacecraft that could take the girls who wanted to leave, back to Earth.

“While you look over this, I’m going to the cookery and bringing back food.” Wynnter, who had been leaning over me where I sat, stood to his full height.

“Oh.” My eyes flipped up to meet his. “I can go with you. Sorry, I was prattling on. You must be starving.”

“It was my pleasure to discuss all things tech with you, Rose.” Wynnter reached down to cup my chin. “Your words were enough to sustain me.”

There he went again, charming me with his words.

“Stay here and relax. I won’t be but a moment.”

I took Wynnter in as he strolled to the deck and onto the lift that would take him back down to the ground. His hair hung loose and brushed across the top of his firm backside with every powerful stride. The ends just beginning to dry from his shower.

For a nerdy tech guy, he was gifted with a drool-worthy display of muscles. I measured the width of his shoulders and raked my eyes across his sculpted back until they tapered down to his Tarzan breechcloth that hung impossibly low around a tight waist.

“Whew, damn.” I shook myself.

Wynnter was fine as hell. And destined to be my soulmate.  
*Mine!* We would share matching shawras just as soon as I got  
over my prudish ways and gave myself over to him.

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# Chapter Ten

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I had run so fast to the cookery; my feet never touched the ground once. My hearts hammered inside the cage of my ribs as I raced down the path, knowing my sweet Rose was waiting for me back inside my treehouse.

I still couldn't believe I'd found my spirit mate. And she was seated at my worktable, looking over all my projects. The spirits had chosen well for me. She was lovely in both face and form, but more importantly, she possessed an intellect that matched my own.

I could not have asked for a more compatible mate.

The aromas of roasted meat and cooked vegetables hung heavy in the air as I boarded the lift and cranked the wheel to ascend to the room above. Though the last meal of the sunrise was at an end, the culinary males were still present and packing away the surplus food to be consumed at another time.

It was stifling up here from the heat wafting off the enclosed cooking pit near the entrance. My internal body temperature fuddled over the sudden rush of hot air.

"You're just in time Wynnter," Yonnof, the head cook announced. "We were just about to finish up here."

I accepted the tray Trisset, another of the cooks, handed me. "Help yourself," he said. "The more you take, the less I have to store."

"Many thanks," I nodded to the males who worked hard to provide freshly cooked meals to the clan.

“Our thanks go to you and the other techs who made it possible to breach the dome so the warriors can eradicate what’s left of those gray freaks,” Yonnof said.

“Let us hope the Spirits show us favor during the battle on the next suns-fall,” I replied as I loaded down the tray with select meats and the best vegetables I could find for my Rose.

Now that we were allowed to hunt inside Huren territory, thanks to Sia Tikkot and Sia Jakkar’s accord, there was plenty of meat to choose from. There was a time, not so long ago, when we were lucky to have had meat at all.

Standing in the thick of the aromas from the cookery, it felt good to be back among the familiar. But I knew our time in the forest was limited.

Once the city of Huren was back under Sia Jakkar’s control, we would all relocate under the safety of the dome. I both dreaded and wished for that to happen.

I’d lived there the whole of my life. Though safety was paramount for all of us, there was nothing appealing about living under the distortion of a solidified light bubble.

On a clear suns-fall, there was nothing better than gazing up at the stars with a bowl of hot vernbury tea.

“Hungry, tech?”

“Very.” I didn’t elaborate on how I was feeding two but grabbed a few pouches of vernbury and two bowls for tea. “Thank you again.”

The males called out their polite responses as I descended in the lift. Carrying my tray brimming with hot food, I raced back.

Rose was exactly where I had left her when I burst through the entrance of my treehouse, startling her from where she sat examining the unfinished power separator.

“Oh!” Rose whirled around on the stool. “That didn’t take long. Did you like, run the whole way?”

I set the tray of food down on the table that I rarely shared with anyone. So busy inside my own head and tinkering with

my projects, I normally took my meals alone.

To have another—my spirit mate—to share it with sent a surge of warmth through my body that radiated throughout my limbs.

“Yes, I did,” I admitted the obvious. I took a few deep inhales to slow my rapid breathing and gestured to the table. “Will you join me?”

Rose’s face tinted a brighter shade. She ducked her head and set the device down. I watched her stand and pad over to where I’d pulled out the chair for her to sit.

The slight sway of her hips set my pulse to pounding and my cock to thicken. I chastised my errant member for having a mind of its own.

Bonding with a human had a different set of rules than with a female of my own species. Once a spirit recognized their compliment in another, it didn’t matter if the couple were familiar with each other or not.

Valosian females knew it would be a perfect match. None ever questioned the call of their spirit to another. They simply accepted their fate and acted upon it.

That was not the case here. I would give Rose all the time she needed and hoped, in the end, she would choose me.

“This feels sort of date-ish. Don’t you think?”

“I don’t know what it is you speak of.” I took the seat opposite her and passed her an eating utensil.

“Well,”—Rose shyly tucked a lock of her fiery curls behind one ear— “a date is when a couple goes out to share an experience together, usually a meal or a drink, to get to know more about one another.”

“Ah.” I nodded as if I understood, but the odd tradition from her world still baffled me. Complimentary spirits were, unquestionably, each other’s destiny. There was none of this strange courtship prior to bonding.

We ate together in companionable silence. Rose mostly picked at the food on her side of the platter while I savored

every chunk of roasted chiksin that slipped past my lips.

“You don’t get it,” she stated, knowingly.

I swallowed what was in my mouth. “What don’t I get?”

“You don’t understand about human courtship.”

I raised my eyebrows at her, questioningly.

“You’re rockin’ a crease.” Rose indicated the place between her eyebrows. “You always do that when you’re working through something in your head,” Rose chuckled. “We worked together for weeks, remember? I noticed that about you.”

“What else did you notice?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Well, I...” Rose’s eyes dropped to my mouth and then lower to my chest before she looked quickly away. Then she tucked a strand of her unruly mane behind the delicate shell of her ear.

“You do that when you’re nervous,” I said in a whispered tone. “I noticed that about you. Do I make you nervous, Rose?”

“Yes...” she answered shyly and poked at the food growing cold on her side. “But not in a bad way. I mean, I’m not afraid you’ll hurt me or anything, just... you know... first date jitters.”

“Like whenever I look at you and my belly fills with the fluttering of a hundredth moth?”

Her eyes shone brighter as she looked at me wide-eyed and happily shocked. “Yes. Just like that.”

I reached across the table and laid my hand out, palm up. She paused only a sec before laying hers gently into mine. “I’m glad we share this feeling.”

“Me too.”

“You better eat before the chiksin gets cold.” I led by example and forked up another chunk of the white meat from the platter and chewed.

Rose finally did the same. Her wariness slowly bleeding away. “You’re a lot different now that it’s just the two of us. Calmer. Not as volatile.”

“Surges of adrenalyne are difficult to manage when another male shows interest.”

“Not to upset you, because I like your calmer side. But...” Rose hesitated. “He and I are only friends now. Are you going to be okay with that? I would love it if the two of you could be friends too once he’s mated.”

I didn’t need clarification on the *he* she was referring. I gave her hand a reassuring squeeze and breathed through the blast of adrenalyne at the very thought of Zikkar around my Rose.

“I do not want you to discard your friendship with Zikkar.” It took every ounce of civility inside me to say his name. “I even hope to become friends with him myself.”

Rose released a delighted squeal and rushed around to my side of the table. She threw her arms around my neck and hugged me so tightly, I could hardly breathe.

“I’m so glad to hear you say that. I think the two of you could be great friends. You’re both so smart, I know that you’ll create all kinds of amazing things together.”

“Only if you are there to help us will we accomplish great things.” I squeezed her back.

She let go of my neck and stepped away, resting her hands on my shoulders. “How do you always know the right things to say?”

“Because I’m your spirit mate. We are fated to be as one.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Rose resumed her seat.

“There’s no maybe about it. The spirit is always right.”

“That’s what Zikkar said too,” she admitted with a small grin.

“Then, he is, indeed, a wise male.”

We finished our meal, stealing glances at one another and exchanging casual smiles. My mood had turned considerably lighter now that I knew her and Zikkar were well and truly friends only.

“I can’t eat another bite.” Rose plopped back in her chair with one hand on her abdomen.

“Say that you have room for a drink.” I picked up one of the tea pouches and wiggled it in the air.

“I’m intrigued. What have you got there?”

“Vernbury tea made from the ground seeds of the white fruit which only grows on the trees in the Trisess forest.”

“A rare delicacy,” she grinned as I handed her the pouch to sniff. “Ohmygod! It smells like chocolate. Where did you say you got this?”

I collected the platter and utensils. Carried them to the basin at the back of my treehouse and cleaned up our mess while explaining how the seeds were harvested from the fruit, then dried and crushed for proper steeping.

“He goes out to get dinner *and* he does dishes.” Rose looked me over with disbelief.

“Are those desirable qualities the females of your species search for in a mate?”

“Considering my lack of experience with men. Yes, from what I understand, those are great qualities.”

I smiled so wide my jaw cracked. “Good.”

I wasn’t sure if it was the fact that she had little experience with males of her own species or that she considered me to have desirable qualities that kept the huge grin on my face as I heated a pot of lood over a cook-plate, then dropped in two tea pouches.

As the tea steeped, I unfolded the framework of my outdoor seat and laid out a cushion that covered the length of it. “This is where I relax during the dark hurs while enjoying a bowl of tea.”

“That’s a fantastic pastime. I love your deck lounge, by the way.” She ran her hand over the softly woven fabric I’d stuffed with dried leafing from the tree boughs to form a giant pillow. “Is there room for both of us?”

“I will always make room for you, Rose.” I thought I heard her sigh as I searched my trunks for an extra fur, knowing she would be cold out in the open air. With no luck, I settled for peeling one off my bed.

Out on the deck, I gestured for her to sit and handed her a steaming bowl of vernbury tea then laid the fur over her bare legs.

“Thanks,” she grinned at me.

Her happy face stunned me with its beauty. It took me a sec to recover. I stood like a statue staring down at her before I finally managed an answer, “You’re welcome.”

My outdoor seat was a cross between a bed and a chair. I sat down on the foot of the long seat. I could feel Rose’s gaze on me as I sipped from my bowl of tea.

With her first tentative sip, she moaned so deep, my cock answered with a jolt.

“Yum. It *does* taste like hot chocolate only weaker. I was afraid it would be bitter like baking chocolate.” She went on to explain when I looked at her with a furrowed brow. “Once when I was a kid, I found what I thought was a bar of chocolate in my grandmother’s cupboard. I thought I’d found a hidden treasure,” she laughed. “When I bit into it, it was so bitter, I never thought to get the taste out of my mouth.”

I shared her smile, even though most of what she had said made no sense to me.

“Have your cooks ever made cakes or cookies out of these chocolate seeds?”

“Vernbury is an acquired taste. Most of my clansmen don’t like it.”

“Really? Well, I know a bunch of girls who are going to love it.” She sipped more from her bowl. Her eyes closed with

appreciation. “Tell me more about you. I’ll bet you’re glad to be back home.”

My eyes swung to the dark sky above, scattered with a dazzling display of stars. “I missed being up here, enjoying the dark sky. Do you miss your home?”

“Yes.” Her eyes followed mine skyward. “I miss my mom the most. Even if there was a way for us to return to Earth, I feel like with all that’s happening on your world that I would be more useful here, helping your people. And there’s this thing going on between us that makes me feel as if I leave you, I’ll be leaving behind a huge chunk of myself.”

I studied her profile as she peered up into the sky. Warmth from her admission spread throughout my limbs until I tingled with joy. I could empathize with the loss of her family, but I was elated she had chosen to remain on Valose.

“What about your family?” Rose turned her head and looked at me. “Any siblings?”

“No siblings.” I was never much of a conversationalist, but this was Rose, so I would try to step out of my comfort zone for her. “My parents bonded later in life. I didn’t know my mother as she died giving birth to me. And my sire was already advanced in age when I was growing up.”

“Wait. If they were from the same clan, it seems odd to me that they didn’t meet each other until later.”

“They knew each other as all Clan Trisess does. Spirit mates sometimes take longer to express themselves,” I explained. “The calling of a spirit to another doesn’t always happen upon the first meeting like it seems to do with your species.”

“Really? Why not?”

“I don’t know the biology of how it works.” I shrugged. “I just know when it does, the pull to the other is impossible to ignore.”

“I wonder why it’s instantaneous with humans.”



“Maybe the differences in our species are what makes us more compatible,” I reasoned. “I’m no medic, so I can only guess, but there does seem to be a lot of matings happening and very quickly.”

A moment passed between us, I could only hope was longing on her end.

“So, with no family, you must have been lonely here.”

“Not often.” As I said the words, the realization was a deep hollow in my gut of how alone I truly had been before she came along. “When I felt the need for another’s company, I would seek out Synnox.”

“You mentioned he taught you how to use a spear?”

“Yes. My sire thought it best for me to socialize. Since he and I were the only techs in my clan, he didn’t want me to be a lonely adult. I was very introverted as a youngling, and he worried I would never have any friends.”

“I can relate to that,” Rose added. “I spent a lot of time alone in my room reading or tinkering with my latest invention. I was a total nerd growing up. My mom worried that I didn’t have any friends because I was always studying.”

“My sire too. Most suns-rises, my sire sent me to the youngling sanctuary where we were taught the history of Valose. That was where Synnox befriended me. He was born of the warrior class and thought it important I learn how to protect myself,” I smirked. “He was a forward-thinking male to want to step outside his class and teach warrior skills to a civilian.”

“In turn, did you teach him tech stuff?”

“I tried. Synnox has no patience when it comes to tinkering with devices,” I chuckled thinking back to when I tried to teach the warrior how a comm worked. “What of your family?”

“My parents divorced when I was little. I was mainly raised by my mom and grandmother. My dad wasn’t around much.”

“My sire was all I had, but I always felt, he was only with me in body and not mind or heart. I’d been told my sire was never the same after losing my mother. Now that I’m older and look back on the time I’d spent with him, there was always a sadness about him. He was always so thin too. He never ate much. I think he was in perpetual mourning over the loss of my mother.”

“That’s awful,” Rose said. “I’ve seen the faded shawras on some of the males’ chests. Is everlasting mourning a typical response when you lose a spirit mate?”

“Sometimes,” I said. “I’ve been told when one mate dies, the living feels a great loss for the other’s essence within. When the germ swept through our clan, taking all our females, there were some that couldn’t handle the loss and mourned themselves to death.”

“I never considered there were suicides.”

“You misunderstand. To enter the Realm of the Spirits, it cannot be by your own hand,” I said. “There weren’t many, only a few like my sire, who couldn’t come to terms with their loss. Most others know they will be reunited with their mate once they pass and that is enough to sustain them.”

“Why bond at all if the loss is so horrific?”

“Because the bond is rumored to be wondrous.”

We stared at each other for an eternity. The swirling need to make her mine tightened and ached behind my sternum. It banged to get out. To join with hers in the most primal way.

I set my bowl of tea on the deck and moved closer to her. She did the same. We met in the middle and I cradled her face in my hands. When she didn’t object, I lowered my mouth to hers. Her lips parted on a sigh, and I dipped my tongue inside to tangle with hers in a slow exploration.

Heat smoldered between us. This time was unlike the hard lick of flame that we had created on the spherical craft when I kissed her for the first time. This was meant to last, a slow burn to carry us through the dark hours.

Her fingers tunneled through my mane before she eased back, breaking the kiss. “I’ve wanted to get my hands on your silvery hair ever since I set eyes on you.”

“Have you?” I growled.

“And to lick you here.” Rose flicked her tongue along the cleft of my chin.

“And where else did you have a notion to lick?” My hips curled up tight.

“Anywhere.” Rose pushed at my chest and shoved at one shoulder. I went along willingly, switching places with her so she was on top. “Everywhere.”

Her mouth crashed down over mine. The world melted away with the probe of her seeking tongue. I was lost beneath her touch as her hands roamed freely down my chest and over my arms.

“You were driving me crazy stuck inside that bubble craft,” she panted against my mouth. “I shouldn’t have wanted you as badly as I did when I had a boyfriend.”

My hands followed the curve of her spine until I cupped the swell of her hips and squeezed. “None of that matters now. You are *mine*.”

She straddled my hips, and I captured the soft globe of one breast, flicking my thumb across the stiff peak through the coarse weave of her dress.

All that separated us was the thin fabric of my breechcloth and her finely woven undergarment. The heat of her sex burned across the ridge of my erection.

I felt her wetness, soaking through the fabrics that lay between us. I could easily tear through both and push inside her scorching heat, but I resisted. Instead, I slipped my hands beneath her dress and tugged her undergarment to the side. With my free hand, my fingers found the sodden petals of her sex.

I groaned when the scent of her ripe arousal shot straight up my nose, heightening my need to be buried deep within her

slippery heat.

With my arm wrapped around from behind, I slipped one finger then two inside her tight sheath. She ground against my invasion, and I scooted down in the seat, giving her greater access to the ridge of my shaft.

I undulated beneath her, rocking my hips until we were both lost in a frenzy of passion. My breechcloth chaffed but I didn't care. It only added to the bittersweet pleasure she was fueling.

Her hands gripped my shoulders as she threw her head back, finding her pleasure against the ridge of my shaft with my fingers filling her slick heat. I could only imagine the intensity of the sex if my cock were buried inside her.

If she wasn't ready, I wasn't going to push her no matter how much my body called out to join with hers. I would let her decide if or when she wanted my cock inside her. It would be a simple matter of her pushing my breechcloth aside to spring free my erection.

As if my thought had summoned her decision, Rose reached between us and stripped the garment from my body. I groaned from the sudden rush of air across my engorged flesh.

"Are you sure?" I couldn't believe I was staying her hand when she wrapped it around my shaft.

"Positive," she stood up my cock, pulled aside her undergarment, and positioned the swollen tip at her entrance. "I can't take it anymore. I need you."

Before I could say anything further, she drove herself down, joining us in a single heated plunge. My back arched and a soft blue light materialized between us. With a pulsing heat, my spirit erupted from my sternum, leaving an elaborate design in its wake.

I gripped the hem of her dress and whipped it off over her head. Next, I ripped her undergarment in two and tossed it to the side, revealing our joined sexes. I nearly released at the sight of her pink lips stretched around my cock in the most intimate of hugs.

She released a sultry giggle, smiling down at me with a naughty gleam in her eyes.

I raised up to flick my tongue over her tight buds tipping each breast before sucking one then the other into my mouth. I was thrumming so hard, it hurt my chest. My scales had erupted in a turbulent array of blues and silvers.

Rose sucked in a harsh breath and planted her hands on my chest, shoving me to my back. I grasped her hips as she began to grind her sex against me.

Delirious with her incredible heat surrounding me, my pelvis exploded upward, slapping our bodies together. Her silken sheath encased my shaft as if she were made for me. In a way, she was.

Our spirits knew we were meant to be united as one. To share our lifeforce with the other. To share the experience of our emotions.

In a sensual dance, our bodies moved together, giving and taking pleasure. Her eyes hooded and gleamed as she made use of my cock in the most possessive way.

I bared my fangs, releasing a hiss as the triangular flaps at my base erected, bumping against the sensitive nub nestled between her delicate folds. Her pleasure had become mine as our spirits coalesced, the bond between us a tangible thing that grew in intensity the closer we came to our mutual release.

Her sex clenched around mine. Her back arched with the toss of her head. The pressure to climax doubled as we shared in each other's passion.

With every stroke of her slick walls along my shaft and every upward thrust of my cock filling her, we were caught up in a wild current. My roar joined her cries as we rode out the exquisite ride to completion.

Rose collapsed on top of me. Her breaths as ragged as my own. I wanted to close my eyes, to revel in our stormy union. To languish in the feel of her spirit swirling with mine in lazy contentment. To give myself over to the sleep that was already tugging at me.

Instead, I wrapped my arms around my spirit mate and easily stood with her. My cock still joined us as one as I walked us inside. I soothed away her squeak of protest with gentle strokes down her back. In turn, she wrapped her arms and legs tighter around me.

“It’s too dangerous to sleep out in the open. Wetlocks don’t usually dive through the boughs to get at prey, but I won’t chance it.”

Rose clung to me as I kned my way onto the bed to lay her on her back. I meant to disengage and pull back the furs, but my insatiable spirit mate had other ideas.

Planting her feet on the soft mattress, she started to roll her hips to an enticing rhythm that I gladly matched stroke for stroke. All too soon, we were lost in a frenzy of lust.

I reared up, holding my weight on straight arms to let my hips swing free. Rose gripped my forearms, clinging to me as I thrust in and out of her, diving deeper and deeper with every stroke.

As she started to tremor beneath me, her flesh hugged mine in a climax that stole my breath. My scales flashed in every shade of blue as I followed her to a fiery crest that peaked and exploded into a sky full of blistering stars.

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# Chapter Eleven

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“Here.” I slapped his meaty hands away. “Let me braid it for you. Give me the comb before you do any real damage.” Not that I was an expert at braiding, but I’d wanted to straighten his haphazardly plaited braids since the first day I’d laid eyes on him.

Wynnter grumbled with a playful twitch of his full lips and allowed me to push him down into the chair. As tall as he was, even seated, the top of his silvery head came to my nipple line as I moved around to stand behind him.

“Are you always so bossy?” he tried to sound gruff, but I felt more than heard the underlying amusement in his voice. It was strange yet exhilarating to feel the tendrils of his mirth swirling around inside me as if his emotions were my own.

Laughter burst from my throat. “I’m not bossy, Wynnter. If I were, I would order you to go with me to the island and not join the other warriors in the battle tonight.”

He grunted in answer.

His body had relaxed as I began to run the comb over his scalp, but his mind remained coiled tight with anticipation of the fight to come. He might have been born of the civilian class, but somewhere inside him lived a warrior.

Even if I couldn’t feel his determination to rid his planet of those pests to the marrow of my bones, I wouldn’t deny him his vengeance.



His silky hair was a tangled mess. It was mostly my fault. All it had taken was one taste of his lips, the probe of his questing fingers, and all my inhibitions had fled. I couldn't keep my hands off him. I'd pulled his hair and ripped off his clothes, taking what I wanted like a rabid whore.

He turned slowly and landed a smoldering look on me that curled my toes. "You have a naughty mind, my tasty little spirit mate."

I squealed when he spun around to grab me around the waist. One moment I was standing behind him and the next, I was straddled across his lap. He shoved my dress off over my head and loosened his breechcloth to reveal his engorged sex.

"You should finish what you've started in your sexy imagination," he hissed.

I found him rock hard. His erection standing straight up from his body. My pussy wept to have him inside me again.

I found my footing and stood over him. He palmed his cock in one meaty fist and lined up the fat tip with my sex. With my hands planted firmly on his shoulders, I bent my knees enough to tease myself with the head of his cock by sliding it through my wet slit.

I dropped enough to pop the head in and out. In and out. Until I couldn't take it anymore and slowly impaled myself on his girth, inch by thick inch until his heavy sack was pressed against my backside.

I loved to watch the play of colors over his scales when he was lost to passion.

I reached down where we were joined and teased the triangular flaps to erection. My hands back on his shoulders, I ground against his cock. I rose up, my clit caught the flaps with every downward stroke, building into a deep ache that threatened to explode me from the inside out.

Wynnter captured my breasts in both hands, suckling, and licking while I worked myself out on his cock.

My shawra glowed brighter. The swirl of my essence in a frenzy that came out to dance with his.

Wynnter reared back and hissed, baring his beautiful fangs as he pounded up into me. Standing on tiptoes, I let him take the lead, fucking me as I held onto his shoulders for dear life.

I lost my balance as he spun out of the chair. Hands around my waist, he hooked one thick forearm under my knee and lifted, exposing my core.

My legs were spread as wide as they would go. I should feel self-conscious being completely exposed. But I didn't. Naked in front of my mate, there was no part of me he didn't revel in.

It was a heady thing to be fully accepted by another. To know there was nothing he didn't like about me. I was perfect in his eyes. I let myself go and arched my back, exposing myself more.

“What are you waiting for, Wynnter? My pussy can't get any wetter.” The bawdy talk I never knew I was capable of came out to play as did the triangular flaps I knew would tease my clit until I was crazy with desire.

I slapped a hand on the table to steady myself as he entered me in a solid thrust that stole my breath and drove me up on my toes. He plunged into me from the side, taking me higher and higher until I was ready to scream from the thrill of it.

His urgency combined with mine curled a fire in my belly that exploded in gripping waves. Our spirits culminated and I felt the pleasure of his release join with mine.

My body sagged with blissful exhaustion. Wynnter caught me up in his strong arms and sat in the chair with me cradled on his lap. My head rested on one beefy shoulder while my palm covered the soft, blue glow of his shawra that matched mine.

“I don't want you to go, but I understand why you want to fight,” I sighed and nuzzled his shoulder.

He didn't say a word, but he didn't have to. I could feel it in the thirst for vengeance simmering just below the surface. I couldn't stop him, nor did I want to. I would never take away

his chance to avenge all those who were lost against the ones that ravaged his world.

I had done the same thing in this very forest, what felt like a lifetime ago. The girls and I had bravely caused a diversion to lure out the Gretolics hiding inside their craft, so the exiled warriors could slaughter them before they had the chance to use their mind control.

I lightly placed my fingers across his lips when Wynnter opened his mouth to speak. “Save your breath. I’m gonna be concerned for your welfare even if you tell me not to worry.”

Wynnter’s lips shifted under my fingers into a grin. He took hold of my wrist and kissed my palm. “Then I won’t tell you not to worry, my bossy little spirit mate.”

“I’m not bossy.” I chuckled. “Now let me up, so I can do something with your rat’s nest before you have to go.”

“My what?” He wrinkled his nose in the cutest way.

“Your hair.” I tapped the tip of his nose and wriggled out of his hold.

Wynnter released me with a swat to my backside. We dressed and I went back to detangling his silvery mop. Once the back lay between the width of his shoulders like a silk sheet, I moved around to the front to stand between his parted knees.

“My shawra looks good on you.” He traced the design between my breasts with a lazy finger.

“Why does it have to be *your* shawra? Maybe, we should say *my* shawra looks good on you instead,” I teased.

“We could.” Wynnter peered up at me with pursed lips. “Or, we could say, our shawras look good on each other.”

“I like that better. Makes us sound like we’re on equal footing.”

“Are the females on your world treated as equals to your males?”

I ran the comb through his long locks that framed his face, smoothing them with my hands while I considered his question. “Unfortunately, not always. Women still encounter less pay for the same work. We aren’t always taken seriously in male predominant fields.”

“That is shit,” he grumbled. “We couldn’t have reconfigured the weapon without your help.”

“You make it sound like it was all because of me. All of us that worked on it had a hand in creating the gate,” I gently corrected. “Ultimately, Zaku was the one who made it work.”

“Yes. But still, your creative thinking was what we needed to design the manifold and distribute the power through the tubing.”

I ducked my head and batted a hand at his chest. “Stop. You’re making me blush.”

“You’re among the smartest people I know, Rose. I would never think of you as less than my equal. Even if you are a little bossy,” Wynnter mumbled the last under his breath.

“Well, thank you,” I giggled.

We fell silent as I plaited the front of Wynnter’s hair down both sides of his face to hang in front of his elfin ears. With his strikingly handsome face and powerful build, he could have stepped right off a high fantasy movie set featuring warrior elves.

But he was real, and he was mine. My very own elfin warrior.

I cupped his chin and tilted his face up to get a better look at my handsome mate. “On my world, we have an annual tradition to set personal goals at the first of the new year. My New Year’s resolution had been to become more adventurous. To spice up my boring life of school and work.

“I had no idea where that goal would take me, or who I would meet when I got there. You’re my New Year’s resolution realized. You’re what I needed to spice up my dull existence. My very own silver spice.”

“And you are mine, Rose.” Wynnter placed his hands possessively on my hips. “I never knew how lonely I was until I met you. Now, I can’t imagine my life without you in it.”

A slice of light spilled in from the treehouse entrance to bathe Wynnter’s face in a warm glow. My heart sank knowing what that meant.

“You better get going.” I moved his hair aside and kissed his throat. “Jakkar said Elise’s class starts at sunup. I don’t want you to be late.”

“If I am, I’ll blame it on you,” he scolded me with a crooked grin. “You’re a major distraction.”

“I can live with that.”

“I’ll be training for the entire suns-rise,” he said, and I stepped back as Wynnter rose from the chair. “And you’ll be on your way back to the island soon. We won’t get another chance to see each other before the battle at Huren.”

My throat worked through a hard swallow.

“I know,” I sniffled through a watery smile. “Please be careful.” That sounded so lame to my ears. I was sending my male off to war. I searched my mind for the right words, but nothing seemed fitting.

“You have nothing to worry about. I can more than handle myself with a spear.”

“I don’t doubt that you can take care of yourself.” My words hitched with the sob I barely kept in check. “Why do I feel like I’m sending you off to meet your doom?”

Wynnter bent to meet my eyes. His firm confidence did a little to ease my concern.

“All will be well, Rose. You’ll see.” He cupped my cheek and kissed me so sweetly, I wanted to cry. So, I did. Big crocodile tears spilled down my cheeks.

“No more tears, Rose.” Wynnter swept the pads of his thumbs under my eyes, erasing my tears. “I will see you at Huren. We will explore the palace together.”

“Promise me?” My bottom lip trembled.

“I promise.”

With a final kiss, I watched him collect his spear and leave. I rubbed at the budding warmth that had tightened around my heart into something powerful.

If this was love, how had I fallen so fast?

I roamed the space wondering how long it would be before we could return. I shivered. The treehouse felt cold and barren without him even though the echo of his emotions swirled within me.

I should pack up his drawings and inventions to take with me to the island. I didn't know if we'd be allowed to return to gather our belongings once the Gretolics were cleaned out of Huren and we all moved inside the dome.

I needed a distraction, so I searched the trunks lined up along one wall until I found something like a duffle bag. The next trunk I opened held his neatly folded breechcloths. I took the entire stack and placed them in the bag.

Next, I carefully removed his drawings from the wall, rolled them up, and tucked them next to the garments. In a scrap of material, I gathered up his inventions and all the parts and pieces and added them last.

I turned in a tight circle looking for anything to occupy my time until I met the other girls to return to the island. After making the bed, showering, and taming my unruly curls with Wynnter's comb, I was out of things to do.

With nothing else to keep my disquiet at bay, fear and anxiety for Wynnter's safety took root and grew until I was teary-eyed and breathless. Ready to run after him and beg him to change his mind and come with me instead of fighting.

Fear wrapped an icy claw around my throat. I could hardly fill my lungs from worrying. Not that I thought he was incapable of fighting, because he possessed the same strength as the other warriors. There must have been warrior blood somewhere in his ancestry.

He was so smart; I had no doubt he would learn the sign language Elise and Vallon had created, with ease. Then it was off to put the gate to use and fight the Gretolics. A gate I helped to create.

Please tell me I hadn't lent a hand in ushering my mate into the hands of death. I don't think I could live with myself if that were the case.

I felt his essence shift within me. What had been still and focused now stirred with apprehension.

*Shit!* I needed to get ahold of myself. He should be concentrating on learning the sign language Elise was teaching, not feeding off my fears. He was right. I was a distraction.

If he was going to come out of this battle at Huren unscathed, I had to do my part. And freaking out about my mate going off to battle would only be a hindrance.

I took a deep, fortifying breath and held it before releasing it slowly. I could not burden him with my turbulent emotions. I forced my insides to cease churning.

He was going to be fine. Nothing was going to happen to him.

"Rose." Lily's voice seemed to come from far away. "Earth to Rose." I turned to meet her pretty face. "Hi."

"Hi." I waved at her where she stood at the entrance. Her fur cloak bunched up around her neck for warmth. "Sorry. I didn't hear the lift come up."

"You looked pretty distracted." Lily came forward with a scrunched brow. "Are you okay?" Her eyes flipped down to briefly touch my shawra.

I nodded and recalled the day we crash-landed. Lily had broken her ankle while getting out of her cage. She'd been a mess. Injured and scared. She had bravely ventured out on her own to find us help. Here she stood in front of me, mated to an alien and very pregnant with his offspring.

I was hit with a full-body flash of heat. Lily was the first of us to get mated. After what Wynnter and I had done, I could have conceived too.

Was I ready to be a mom to a hybrid child?

“Are you ready to go?”

No, I wasn't. I was suddenly overwhelmed with the possibilities of an uncertain future. A grim feeling that I wouldn't be back here for a long time settled like hot asphalt in the pit of my stomach.

I didn't trust myself to speak, so I nodded lamely, donned my cloak, and shouldered the duffle bag.

“All right, then.” Lily wrapped an arm around my shoulders as we stepped onto the lift. “Not in a chatty mood today. I can understand that.”

Lily took the wheel to lower us, but I unshouldered the bag and gently nudged her away. “Let me. I'm less pregnant than you.”

Lily laughed and relinquished her hold. “You're worse than Jakkar. I'm carrying a baby, not crippled.”

The wheel turned easily under my hands. “Are you worried about Jakkar?” I blurted.

“Always.” Lily rubbed her hand over her shawra. “I try to focus on the strength he exudes. It makes me feel safe and frees him up to not worry about me.”

“That's good advice.”

“It's gonna be okay.” Lily's smile was tight with resolution. “The warriors will win. Try not to worry.”

On the ground, we followed the path I knew would lead us to the southern shore where a large open field met the sea and all the crafts had been parked. The other girls, who were still in Trisess, were there waiting for us.

“That explains the weirdness between you and Zikkar.” Marie quirked an eyebrow at my shawra.



“I didn’t know you were here.” Feeling paranoid, I tugged my cloak up to my chin to hide the soft glow.

“I flew over with Draggar.” Marie’s usual smirk withered into a worried frown.

Isobel was the first to hug me, then Elise. “Congrats. Looks like you’ve joined the Valosian wives club.”

“Oh, I like that,” Lily giggled. “*The Real Housewives of Valose*. We could be the next reality TV stars.”

“*Except Isobel and Rose would be treehouse wives.*” Elise jotted down and flashed her tablet at us.

A genuine smile creased my face and I laughed, not feeling so heavy in my skin. The essence of Wynnter that lived within me calmed and focused. I needed to stay in this frame of mind. To be calm and strong for him.

“*He learned very quickly.*” Elise wrote and showed her tablet to only me.

I didn’t need to ask who she was referring. I gave her a covert thumbs up and mouthed, “*Thank you.*”

As we were about to board the bubble craft, a blonde woman carrying a tote who I’d never seen before, came sprinting over.

“Looks like I made it just in time,” the blonde said and stuck her hand out for me to shake. “Hi. I’m Ivy, Zaku’s mate. You must be the Rose I’ve heard so much about.”

“That would be me.” I shook what she offered. “Good to put a face with a name. Zaku told me a little about you when he came out to save our asses.”

Ivy laughed. “He told it differently. He said you all were this close to completion.” She held up two fingers squeezed close together.

“Brought your work with you, I see.” Marie gestured to Ivy’s tote.

“Always.” Ivy repositioned the tote on her shoulder. “I have a feeling it’s going to be a long night. I need something

to occupy my mind instead of worrying about Zaku.”

“I can understand that,” I mumbled.

A Trisess male I’d never met before, strolled over. He introduced himself as Kryyet. He was to be our pilot.

“Sorry to be in a rush, but I will need time for the round trip to and from the island. The warriors will need all the crafts we can spare to transport everyone to the dome at the sun-fall.” Kryyet said and ushered us onto the small craft and assumed his place behind the console.

He told us how all the warriors would land, open the portal, and enter all in one fail swoop. It was to be a surprise attack.

Hopefully, with their super-sensitive ears plugged and their ability to communicate with their hands, they would win the battle against the Gretolics and reclaim the city of Huren.

We found our places, seated on the transparent floor at the back of the bubble craft. We sat close together, much like we did when we had first arrived, unsure and nervous about being on a new world.

As we silently lifted off the ground, I knew everything was about to change. I just hoped it was all for the best.

The puffy boughs of the immense trees blurred as we rose higher into the sky. I wished with all my heart and soul; I could have hugged Wynnter one last time.

I knew he could feel that my heart belonged to him, but it seemed too soon to utter words of love. Yet, I wasn’t on Earth anymore. I was on Valose. His world had a different set of rules.

It was a place where soulmates were real. The proof of it was a softly glowing flourish etched into my flesh. The echo of his emotions now lived inside my heart.

A small group of males stepped out onto the deck of the southernmost tree where Elise had taught her class. One was large and purple. The others were a silvery blue. Their

upturned faces blurry dots as we rose higher into the sky, but I knew which male was mine.

My palm flattened to the clear floor. Sniffles of the other females around me joined mine.

Pride and adoration welled within me. I harnessed it and wrapped it around the swirl of Wynnter's essence. My spirit mate, who I was just beginning to know, flashed the silver of his palm before laying it over his shawra.

*"Be safe, my silver spice. I silently willed my words to reach him. We will be together again soon."*

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# Chapter Twelve

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The spherical craft I was crammed into landed with the rest of the fleet of various alien vessels that had been collected since the start of the invasion.

We kept to the densest part of the jungle, letting the thick foliage provide coverage from anyone wandering about inside the city.

No need to alert the Gretolic's until we were ready to attack.

Zaku had piloted the Gretolic craft that had taken up residence in the southernmost part of the Trisess forest ever since Sia Havvar had made his awful deal.

Aggar had stood behind the helm of the largest of the vessels. The one Sia Sakkar had flown on several missions while under the influence of the enemy we were about the thrash.

Every spherical craft, except for the one Nekko kept on the island, waited, brimming with warriors ready to fight.

By the order of Sia Jakkar, they were all to wait until the gate was opened and ready for them to pass through the dome. No need to tempt fate with a buffet of males as the jungle's beasts had begun to wake with the setting of the twin suns.

Zikkar had left earlier, bringing Hexxus over from the island and had landed ahead of everyone. They were already at the dome setting up the device.

The goal was to get as many warriors as possible through the gate before we were seen and the alert that the city was under attack was sounded. With all three clans combined, our numbers were great and our chances of prevailing over the gray invaders better than they had ever been.

Thanks to the sound deafening plugs made by the Huren medics and the hand language taught to us by Elise, we were protected from the Gretolic's mind control. We were sure to win.

The narrow door to my craft opened, and I slipped quietly out into the jungle of Huren. Zaku joined me from the craft he'd flown and together, we crept through the darkening jungle until we reached Zikkar and Hexxus.

Squatted low at the westernmost point of the dome's perimeter, the two techs flanked the portable gate device we had worked so hard to complete.

Although the warriors waited inside the crafts, the apprehension of the upcoming battle was a thick fog that lent weight to the air around me. My palms itched to get inside and paint my spear with the blood of my enemies.

My body hummed with blood lust, though my thoughts were never far from Rose. I could sense her fight to remain calm, so I could stay focused. I knew her efforts had cost her.

Instinctively, my hand covered my shawra. Without words, she had sent me a message through the echo of her spirit to mine. I grinned like a loon knowing that my earlier fears that she may not like me had been for naught. Warmth clung to my spirit in a tight hug from her heartfelt message.

My eyes locked onto Zikkar. I strode directly up to the male, not wasting a sec to unload what I had to say to him. "You and I have never gotten along," I began.

"No, we have not."

"I have no right to ask this of you," I paused. "If something happens to me in there..."

"You don't need to ask." Zikkar threw up a hand. "Rose is my friend. I will look after her as if she were my own family."

I presented my forearm to the male I'd butted heads with since our first meeting in the customary way of the warriors. He gave me a peculiar look before he clasped what I had offered. "Thank you."

"Looks like you've completed the bond." Zikkar gestured to my shawra.

"It was her that took the lead," I volunteered. "I let her decide."

"She chose well. You will make a great protector for her." Before he turned me loose, I was pulled in for a firm clap on the back. "Be safe, my friend."

He released me and I answered him with a curt nod as we got to work setting up the gate.

I blinked back the shock of how easily he'd just forgiven my savage behavior towards him. It hadn't been so long ago that I'd wanted to trounce the male. All that aggression had bled away with the formation of my shawra and the coalescing of my spirit with Rose's.

He knew better than anyone what it was like to be awakened and not yet have claimed his mate. He understood the surging emotions and the onslaught of excess energy the adrenalyne brought with which there was no outlet.

A myriad of emotions washed over me in a rush. I had already been ready to fight the Gretolics with the burn of fresh adrenalyne pumping through my veins. Damn Zikkar and his forgiveness. It was all too much to hold inside.

I filled my lungs with as much air as they could hold and released it slowly to calm the turmoil of emotions within me. I needed to stay focused on the upcoming fight.

"The manifold is aligned," Zaku stated and turned to Sia Jakkar. "Sia, we are prepared to open the gate."

Our planet's leader nodded an affirmation and gave the signal for all the warriors to exit their crafts. They did so in a hurried, but orderly fashion, filling the jungle with a sea of silver heads.

Sia Jakkar then gave the signal for all to don their sound deafening earplugs.

Zikkar fished the plugs from his kiltus pocket and pressed them into his ears as I did mine. I hated the feel of the gadgets meant to deafen us. Hated more the loss of a faculty I counted on the most but had always taken for granted.

Zikkar and I had been Elise's last students. Vallon's mate had directed her teaching at us but had also been giving a review to the warriors she had already taught.

Zikkar flipped a few switches to power up the device. "*It's ready,*" he signed to Zaku.

Our alien ally signed his understanding and pushed the last button to energize the device with the proper amount of nutrone. The gate opened with a lack of flourish.

One sec the dome was whole and the next, a large triangular opening appeared. Even with the lack of earplugs, the gate made no sound. The disrupters were designed with dampeners to contain any rippling effect in the shielding.

It had worked perfectly.

I turned in time to see Sia Jakkar signal to the army of warriors to advance through the gate. Two by two, they went in pairs to watch each other's back.

We all had our orders. Briefed before we had ever left Trisess on what to do once we stepped foot into Huren. Two in and two out. That was the most important rule. Stay with the male you were paired with at all times. It was safer that way with the lack of our auditory abilities, so we were not caught unawares.

Civilians who had aided the Gretolics on their own accord were to be taken into custody, if possible. The males under the influence were not to be killed unless left with no other option. The Gretolics were to be shown no mercy.

I had no idea why I had been assigned to Murrox, the new Sia of Jurigon and the surliest male I had ever laid eyes on. We'd nearly had a run-in when I'd first arrived back in Trisess. Fighting at his back was going to be interesting.



As the warriors rushed past me in a crowd, I searched for my boorish partner. He would be easy to spot. Standing a forehead taller and a shoulder-width wider than even the stoutest warrior, Vallon. With his vile mood and hot temper, he would be a storm within the pack.

I couldn't fault him his wicked temper. I was sure it was because of the blast that had destroyed his home.

I pictured Trisess destroyed at the hands of the Gretolics, and a singular rage pumped a fresh rush of adrenalyne through my veins. The echo that was Rose twisted with agitation. I tried to calm my racing hearts, so she wouldn't be so anxious, but there was no help for the vortex of brewing violence.

I would prefer to release my pent-up energy between my spirit mate's thighs. My hand squeezed the shaft of my spear. Not this suns-fall. This suns-fall, I would be taking my aggressions out on the gray freaks who thought to take control of my world.

I wouldn't be fighting for just Valose but for the survival of the females brought here against their wills by that same enemy. Ironic that had it not been for their abductions, I would have never met my spirit mate. I planned to thank them with a spear to the heart.

I stood off to the side as the Valosian warriors streamed past, entering the gate by twos as I waited, coiled and ready, to spring into action at the first sight of the brooding male that was to be my battle partner.

There he was. Bringing up the rear of the males—a snarling fury.

Murrox was impossible to miss, barreling toward me. I bounced on my toes, ready to fall in at his side. The moment he got within range, he greeted me with a snarl and off we sprinted through the gate, me and the other techs had worked so hard to create.

Inside the city, the need for my enemy's blood dripping from my spear was a fever that needed to be tended. To my

grave disappointment, the field of battle was void of all life. The only thing moving was us.

We'd all anticipated the Gretolic's would come out of hiding and meet us as soon as our presence had been detected. At the very least, we expected to be met with the Huren males under their mind control. Yet, there was nothing.

The city of Huren remained completely still.

Sia Jakkar, who had led the pack through the gate, signed for us to fall into formation once everyone was inside. The warriors who held the few nutrone based weapons, kept to the perimeter to protect the fighters.

For the first time in Valosian history, all three clans stood united on the field of battle. If only our enemy would show their faces, we could get on with the bloodshed.

As all remained still, a ripple of unease rolled over us. Made even more eerie was the lack of my sensitive auditory system. Sia Jakkar shifted on uneasy boots, scanning the city for any signs of movement. When nothing came at us, our leader turned and addressed the group.

*"This reeks of an ambush,"* Sia Jakkar's hands formed tight words. *"Fan out around the city, clear all the outbuildings and dwellings of any Gretolics. Remember what I said about the Huren males under the influence. Save the palace for last. We meet back here before any proceed inside."*

I hadn't been schooled in the entire hand language, but I caught most of what Sia Jakkar had signed. I suspected the centerpiece of the city was where we would find all the action. I was sure they were all hiding inside the giant, crystalline palace. Whether to lure us all inside or because they didn't have the numbers or the weapons to fight us, I wasn't sure.

The warriors dispersed at Sia Jakkar's silent command. I followed Murrox's lead and aimed for a small hut. We flanked the door with our backs pressed up against the exterior wall. Murrox used his fingers as a countdown before he whirled around and kicked in the door.

Through my dark penetrating lenses, the only thing we'd managed to rustle up was a spray of dust particles that filtered through the moons' glow spilling through the smattering of slitted windows.

It looked to be a tanner's hut, filled with pelts of all kinds. Sticking close to the walls, we searched in opposite directions inside the small space.

No one was found hiding behind the piles of furs, so we left the door opened and moved on to the next dwelling, and then the next and the next until there was no place else to search but the immense palace of the royals.

We made our way back to the assembly point by way of the dome's perimeter, Murrox paused to lift something from the ground. He turned the disc-shaped object over in his meaty palm before jamming it into the pocket of his pants. At my questioning look, he simply shrugged.

As the assembly of warriors regrouped, Sia Jakkar's features were as tense as I'd ever seen them. *"Looks like we will have to flush them out."*

We were divided up into groups of four. Each group was given a different floor and location to search inside the palace, starting from the outside in. The goal was to surround and then push the enemy out through the main entrance and into the line of fire of the waiting warriors that remained outside.

Murrox and I were teamed up with two Huren warriors, Wexxor and Vannes. Neither of whom I knew very well. The four of us raced around the backside of the palace where we accessed a service door that led one level below the ground floor.

Once inside, we found signs of a hasty retreat. Doors left open to rooms lining the length of the hallway still swung on their hinges. At the dead-end of the run, a lift began its descent.

Wexxor grabbed our attention and signed, *"That lift goes down to the only entrance into the nutrillium mines."*

*“Is there an exit where they can escape?”* Murrox signed back.

*“Not before our exile,”* Vannes said. *“Afterward? Maybe. Marie fell into a shallowly dug shaft way outside of the city’s dome.”*

*“Quickly search every room on this level,”* Murrox’s hands formed hard words. *“Then, let’s go after them before they can leave the city.”*

We weren’t concerned with keeping quiet, overturning the sparse furnishings, and kicking in doors. I knew without the earplugs; we had made enough noise to wake the dead.

It didn’t matter if we stayed quiet. They knew we were here and had shown signs of an immediate retreat.

Murrox and I entered the last room on the left side of the hall with a firm plant of my barefoot to the center of the half-closed door. It ricocheted off the wall, and I shouldered it out of the way as I entered.

My spear led the way inside. Murrox went left, while I went right.

Many crates lined the back walls. The room looked to be used for storage. On cautious feet, I crept along, peering inside every crevice large enough to hide in.

The slightest of movements grabbed my attention. I almost doubted my eyes until I focused on a slim gap between two crates and saw the movement for a second time.

The Gretolic had somehow wedged its stringy body behind a stack of crates.

My mind warped into a frenzy to get at the enemy. With my spear clutched tightly in one hand, I planted my foot and kicked over the crates. They went flying across the room revealing the gray freak.

The creature’s slashing mouth gaped open in a cry that did not reach my ears. With every ounce of restrained ferocity, I plunged my spear into the center of the alien’s chest, pinning it to the wall.

I roared as my spear tasted the bright, stinking blood of its first Gretolic. It bared its razor-sharp teeth as it fought for a final breath.

I pulled my spear from the carcass of my enemy, watching in grim satisfaction as the body crumpled in a mangled heap at my feet. Murrox looked at me with a satisfied sneer. We left my kill where it lay in a viscous pool of its own gore before we rejoined the others.

Back out in the hall, Wexxor and Vannes dragged the body of an unconscious Valosian between them. His chest rose and fell in normal breaths and a thin stream of blood trickled from his forehead where one of the two had knocked him out.

Crouching over the prone body, Wexxor removed the comm device from behind the male's ear. It was exactly where Sia Jakkar said it would be. Wexxor pocketed the device.

With this level cleared, we raced to the lift. Wexxor and Vannes pried open the double doors to reveal the empty shaft. The lift sat three floors down.

*"That is the level that leads to the nutrillium mines,"* Wexxor signed.

*"We jump down."* Before anyone could object, Murrox leapt into the shaft and dropped three floors below with a hard, muted vibration.

*"Fucking Helios!"* I read the curse dropped from Wexxor's lips.

I knew Murrox was a bit wild, but now I knew the male was full-on crazy. One by one, we dropped to the top of the lift. A hatch in the roof allowed us access to the car where the double doors stood open.

Beyond was the entrance to Huren's nutrillium mines. As we made entry, the air grew thick and cold.

Being a tree-dweller, I wasn't one for underground spaces. I even hated the trek to the youngling refuge when I was little. It was only when the room opened up to the Caspeen Sea that my heart would stop racing.

As a group, we sprinted down the dark tunnel carved out of the ground. Dotted with solaris rocks, they did little to brighten the space. It was as if the dirt absorbed the light.

It felt as if we'd been running for miles underground before I was ready to call off the search. Whoever had used this as an escape route was long gone.

Murrox was of a like mind. He slowed his pace, then turned to the side to sign. That was when the blow came from around the slight curve in the mineshaft's tunnel, dropping Murrox to one knee.

The Jurigon was made of tougher stuff and leapt back onto his feet with his sword, which looked more like a large ax, drawn and ready to swing.

When we stood our ground against the advancing males, more filed in from behind us.

We were cornered and grossly outnumbered by Valosian males who were clearly under the influence of the Gretolic's. Their eyes were dull and lifeless inside their skulls. Their bodies were thin and gaunt from malnourishment, hefted weighty weapons to do the bidding of their captors.

Murrox was the first to swing as we retreated. We fought back-to-back, to return to the lift. Wexxor and Vannes fought the males blocking our retreat while Murrox and I fought the advancing males coming out of the endless tunnel.

Steel met steel in a song of battle. I deflected blow after blow, doing my best not to harm the Huren males as Sia Jakkar had requested.

They quickly weakened as they continued to fight. It would be a miracle if all these males made it out alive. We were careful as we could be fighting against males' intent on killing us. We managed to knock a few out, the others stepping over the unconscious bodies to get at us.

Not far behind were the gray freaks with their wrist comms, directing the males to do their bidding. We were making headway down the tunnel, so close to the shaft's lift.

Once there, we could make our escape and bring in more warriors to halt the fighters and their gray masters.

The blade that ran me through had come out of nowhere. Breath exploded from my lungs. I peered down to see the tip of Valosian steel protruding just below my hearts. The pain was searing when the blade was extracted with a firm jerk.

I kept a grip on my spear but slapped a palm over my fresh wound to keep any more of my life's blood from flowing onto the packed dirt floor.

My energy was fading fast despite the rush of adrenalyne meant to give me added strength and endurance. The solaries rocks had begun to dim. I wondered how the walls seemed to be pulsating as the dirt floor rushed up to meet my face.

I fought to keep my eyes open. Murrox stood over me, his movements choppy and stilted as my eyelids blinked heavily. He fought like a male possessed, cutting down the fighters with every deadly swing of his giant sword.

Sympathy flowed for the innocent Huren males who were unaware of what they were being forced to do. The only ones that should be cleaved in two were the little gray freaks seething into their wrist comms, and hiding behind the kiltus of the Valosian males forced to do their bidding.

The last sight before my eyes drifted shut was of Murrox's ferocious face. His mouth was peeled wide, fangs out on display. I could almost hear the roar I knew had to be ripping from his throat as he cut down the male who had run me through.

My final thoughts weren't for myself as the light of the Spirits reached for me in the darkness, but of my spirit mate. My Rose, who I would be leaving in this realm and would be waiting on her in the next. How I would miss her sweet smiles and heated kisses until she joined me there.

# Chapter Thirteen

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I hadn't thought the night would ever end. We'd all piled into the cave below the clinic as soon as we'd landed on the island. Maxxon and Nekko were there to usher us safely below to wait out the battle waging inside the city of Huren.

Sleeping pallets were plentiful, but no one made use of them except to sit. All the girls had scattered about trying not to look as anxious as we felt. Especially the ones of us with shawras.

Amy's mate, Maxxon, was among the handful of males not participating in the fight. Being one of the few medics, Sia Jakkar was not willing to risk him getting hurt or worse. The clan needed him as a healer more than a warrior.

Nekko stood guard just inside the entrance to our cave. His restless movements gave away his frustration. Body language alone spoke of his displeasure at being left behind while others fought to reclaim Huren.

Nekko paused and scanned our faces, his eyes locked on and held the new girl, Gia, before returning his attention to the island beyond.

A warrior at heart, I knew it was killing him not to be in on the action even though his duty of guarding us was just as important to him. He was a male of action.

As Jakkar's second in command, he would be the next Sia if something untimely were to happen to Jakkar—for Lily's

sake, I prayed nothing did— so both males couldn't fight in the same battle.

Resigned to the long wait, I leaned my head back against the stone wall. The cave above us was the clinic. Ivy was up there, working away on her vaccine for the altered rubella the Grites had unleashed to infect their wayward science project.

Amy was up there too, helping her mate, Maxxon, with the remaining patients still recovering from the abundance of gas and liquid the Gretolics had used to keep them in stasis for over a year.

I crossed my arms over my chest and groaned. Gawd, I envied them their distractions—*wait!*

How could I have forgotten?

The bag at my side contained all the distractions I needed. I fished through the bag I'd packed and carried with me from Trisess, until I found the power separator, the device Wynnter had asked me for help with.

“What's that thing supposed to be?” Isobel leaned in.

“Mainly a distraction to keep me from going crazy.” I tinkered with the device, turning it over in my hands. “This waiting is killing me.”

“Yeah. Me too,” Isobel puffed out a breath.

“What kind of vibes are you picking up from Tikkot?” I asked her.

“He's antsy like he's bouncing on his toes waiting for the action to start,” she replied.

“*That's what I'm getting from Vallon too,*” Elise wrote on her tablet and flashed it at us.

“Same here.” Marie gave us all a shaky smile. “Draggar feels like he's being held back on the end of a short leash.”

It looked as though Marie was barely holding herself together. The girl liked to pretend she was a cast-iron bitch, but she couldn't fool me. More than once, I'd seen her melt in the arms of her scarred warrior, Draggar.

The male was a coiled fist ready to strike. He would run headlong into battle and Marie knew it. Her anxiety was palatable as her fingers worried with the hem of her kilt-dress.

“Hey, girls. Don’t be shy.” Lily patted the spot beside her. “Come over here and sit with us. You too, Jane.”

“No. I’m good over here at the window.” Jane’s hand found its way to the blaster Aggar had given her. She touched it as if knowing it was there was a comfort. Probably because it was a reminder of her former life as a detective. “I need to cover Nekko’s blind spot. He can’t see this side of the island from his position.”

Jane was among the bravest out of all of us. She’d woken up alone, strapped to a table, with a Gretolic posed and ready with a medical tool in hand about to do something unspeakable to her lady parts.

Even worse, she had ridden out the crash-landing alone and had lost most of her long-term memory. She still couldn’t recall her name. She had described the vague puzzle pieces of her life that had returned like flashes of screenshots.

Jane had survived and remained hidden inside the crashed Gretolic ship, with only herself for company, until Aggar had found and caught her. Now she proudly wore his shawra and had embraced what little she recalled of her past to help the warriors defend and protect us.

I also knew by the rigidity of her stance that she was pissed she wasn’t with Aggar fighting in the battle at Huren. I didn’t know the details of why she wasn’t included, but she didn’t look very happy about it.

Lily patted the spot next to her again and looked pointedly at Rowan and Gia. They were the only two out of the ten women who had been found and rescued from captivity under the palace who felt well enough to be up and moving around.

The two girls hesitantly made their way over from the far side of the room to join us with quivering smiles of uncertainty. Their eyes flitting around, touching on our shawras.

“How are you two feeling?” Lily asked.

“A lot less groggy, but okay,” Gia said, trying not to stare at Lily’s swollen abdomen as a hundred questions raced across her face.

Rowan just looked around with a vacant expression. I knew she was lost without the twin sister, Brenna, she had called out for when she had first awakened.

I flipped Wynnter’s invention over in my hands and used a small tool, much like a screwdriver, to tweak one of the miniature switches inside. With the hum of Wynnter’s essence in wait mode, I quickly lost myself in the project.

“That’s crazy how that green shit can slow down the aging process.” I was only half-listening to Marie as she nervously prattled. “Is Ivy sure she can figure out the proper doses for us to maintain without turning us into zombies? No offense.” Marie directed the last at Rowan and Gia.

“It wasn’t just the green liquid they pumped us full of but the gas they used to keep us knocked out that took so long to recover from,” Gia said.

“Do you remember anything about your abduction?” Isobel gently asked.

My eyes shot to Gia. It seemed too soon to be questioning the new girls, especially as wide-eyed as they both still were. Rowan shrank away from the question and bowed her head as I knew she would.

“Um, no.” Gia’s gaze floated past our group. I followed her eyes where they landed on Nekko’s wide back. “Not really anything that I can grasp onto.”

The warrior turned his head to the side, cutting his eyes over his shoulder. He had eyes only for Gia. I could understand why. She was the prettiest girl I’d ever seen in my life.

She hadn’t volunteered much personal information and I wasn’t one to dig into other people’s business, but if she wasn’t a supermodel, I’d be shocked. Perfect figure. Perfect

face. Flawless complexion of a creamy mocha that looked as smooth as butter and richer than any caramel.

It was hard not to keep staring at her like Nekko had been doing.

Gia coyly dipped her chin, tucking her dark hair behind her ear, and returned her attention to our group. I wasn't the only one to notice the exchange. Elise covertly raised an eyebrow at me.

I opened my mouth to ask more about the fountain of youth effects of the green liquid when Wynnter's essence suddenly swirled into fight mode. It was so sudden and so sharp; I gasped and slapped my palm over my shawra to hold onto the eruption of energy.

It wasn't just me that had been affected, but all the other mated girls had done the same.

"It's gonna be fine," Marie panted, speaking more to herself than the rest of us. "He's gonna be fine. Draggar's gonna be fine."

My thoughts and myriad of emotions were with Wynnter, but Zikkar's safety was on my mind as well. He was at the dome's perimeter with Hexxus securing the gate for the warriors inside.

My eyes fell on Rowan. Her head was bowed, and she carried the same forlorn expression as she had from the day when she'd woken up babbling about Irish fairy folk called Sidhe. I hoped she would come around. For her sake and Zikkar's.

I sucked back a breath. I knew the moment Wynnter had engaged the enemy. I felt him so keenly that when I closed my eyes, I could visualize his every move based on the echo of his essence.

The swell of victory had been so strong, I could taste it if I'd made the kill myself. That had turned into a head-spinning adrenaline rush.

I wasn't alone. The other girls with mates were working through their own emotional dilemmas.

I buckled when the knife of pain hit me followed by a deep longing and outpouring of affection. I knew Wynnter had been injured.

“Rose! Are you okay?” Willow, who had been silently brooding, wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

“It’s Wynnter,” I moaned.

“Ohmygod, Rose.” Marie reached over and grasped my hand. “Is he...?”

“No. Not dead,” I sniffled. “But he’s hurt. I can feel his energy draining away.”

The other mated girls around me had started to breathe heavily as if they were running marathons.

“Not me,” Willow cursed and looked around. “No way am I signing up for this shit. I’m on the next ship off this rock.”

Too caught up in my own situation, I didn’t reply. Only held onto myself, and Wynnter’s lazy swirl that was slowly fading.

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IT WASN’T until the twin suns broke the seal on the dark horizon and cast their soft blue glow across the land before Nekko answered his comm and stepped inside the cave to announce the victory at Huren.

That was where the celebration had ended. He reported that many warriors had been hurt. Some had been lost. And Wynnter had been among the wounded.

I didn’t need Nekko to tell me that. I could feel the weight of the dreaded quiet in the center of my chest. I was thankful my male still breathed. Dead was dead but wounded could be healed.

It took the spacecrafts coming over from the continent to pick us up forever to arrive. Since my male was hurt, I was among the first group to leave the island.

We landed in the expanse of the warrior's old training field inside the city of Huren next to a bunch of those open-aired crafts that Marie called deviled eggs.

I should have been pumping my fist in the air when a large portal opened in the top of the dome, and we flew through like we owned the place. Clearly, the warriors were in control of the dome.

My concern for Wynnter superseded all else. The second the door to the bubble craft had opened, I ran toward the palace as fast as my feet could carry me, skirting the remains of the battle that littered the city.

Stinking bodies of the Gretolics lay everywhere. The uninjured warriors milled about, piling up the dead of their enemies and taking great care with the few warriors who had died in battle.

I kept my eyes averted away from the carnage as I sprinted toward the palace. I wasn't ready to see the faces of the warriors who had died taking back Huren. It was all so surreal and horrific.

Zikkar must have seen me coming because he cracked open one leaf of the enormous double doors that marked the entrance to the palace.

"He's lost a lot of blood, so he's in a healing sleep." Zikkar reached out to steady me when my face blanched and I swayed on my feet. "Riccof assured me that his surgery went well. He's strong, Rose. He will live."

"Is that why it feels like he's floating like a hazy cloud?" I pressed my palm over my shawra.

"I would venture to say yes." Zikkar steered me toward a pair of sleek paneled doors. "I've never been bonded to a spirit mate, so I don't know what you're feeling."

I paused to peer up at the male I'd befriended when we'd first arrived. "You will, Zikkar. You're a good male and deserve to be happily mated."

Zikkar cupped my face and grinned down at me, a bittersweet smile that tugged at my heart. "Thank you, Rose."

I wanted to say more. Wanted to reassure him that Rowan would come around. As dejected as she always appeared, I didn't want to feed him any false hope.

“Come along.” Zikkar guided me onto what turned out to be an elevator with a gentle hand on my back. “I'll take you to Wynnter.”

We stepped inside and the sleek double doors closed us in. Zikkar touched a panel with little lights and down we went.

“You're okay?” I quickly looked him over. “You weren't hurt?”

“Hexxus and I saw no action where we waited,” Zikkar said. “Plus, we had the protection of a spherical craft until after the warriors reclaimed Huren.”

“That's good. I'm glad you were kept out of harm's way.”

When we came to a smooth stop and the double doors opened, calm turned into organized chaos. Doors lined both sides of a long hallway. I caught glimpses of the medics, Nullar and Riccof, rushing from room to room, triaging and treating the injured.

I followed Zikkar off the elevator and down the bustling hallway. Uninjured warriors rushed to do as the medics directed. My eyes bounced around at the hive of activity until Zikkar cupped my elbow.

“He's in here.” Zikkar quietly opened a closed door.

The room was dimly lit, small but functional, with one wall featuring various kinds of whirring medical machinery. Taking up the center of the room was a single bed with a large figure covered with a white sheet.

I raced forward and clasped the hand of my mate. A thin tube connected him to the machines. Some kind of blue fluid was being pumped directly into his arm like an IV. His scales were as cool and pale as his face. I gasped when the echo of his essence jumped.

“I'll come back later and check on you.” Zikkar was at the door with his hand on the knob. “One of the medics will be by



shortly to check on Wynnter.”

“Thank you, my friend.”

“Anytime.” Zikkar left with a soft click of the door closing.

Somehow, Wynnter knew I was here even though his eyes were tightly shut. His lethargic presence that lived within me took a lazy spin around my heart.

“Ohmygod, Wynnter,” I sniffled. I hoped a medic came soon. Wynnter was as white as the sheet folded across his chest. I’d never seen anyone look so close to death.

Time was irrelevant as I stood at his bedside, clutching his hand. I jumped when a soft voice interrupted the silence of the room.

“Sorry, I meant to get in here sooner.” Nullar stepped inside and shut the door. “Maxxon has brought over the patients from the island and there are many wounded.”

“I appreciate you coming,” I sobbed.

“He’s already healing nicely,” Nullar said, running a square device over Wynnter’s chest and abdomen.

“He looks so pale.”

“As a defensive mechanism, when we are injured, our scales will assume the color of our immediate surroundings to help camouflage us from predators.”

“So, he isn’t knocking at death’s door?”

“No, but his injury was severe. He will heal after plenty of rest.”

For the first time since I sensed his injury, I took a full breath and relaxed. “That’s the best news I’ve heard in as long as I can remember.”

Nullar finished his exam and left us alone inside the stillness of the room. The hand I was holding gently squeezed mine. My eyes shot up to meet Wynnter’s that were barely cracked.

“Up here,” he mumbled.

I leaned down, unsure of what he’d said. “What was that?”

His eyes had reclosed. I thought he had fallen back to sleep until he mumbled again. “With me. Over here.” He tapped the bed opposite of where I stood.

I rounded the foot of the bed and gingerly climbed up to lay next to him.

“Better,” he sighed.

I was careful as I snuggled into his uninjured side. Tears of relief flooded my eyes as our spirits entwined in a loose tangle.

Wynnter was going to live, and I was exactly where he needed me to be.

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# Chapter Fourteen

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I came awake as Rose tucked the sheet in around me. “You’re awake.” She breathed a sigh of relief. “Nullar said you would be all right, but I couldn’t help but worry.”

“It would take more than a sword through the gut to remove me from this realm.” I turned my head and captured one of her hands in mine, and slower than I liked, brought it to my lips. “Or to separate me from my spirit mate.”

I hated how weak I felt. There stood my spirit mate next to my bed and I should be on my feet protecting her. That was my duty and honor as her mate. Yet, I was flat on my back with a bandage tight around my waist.

“Still a charmer even though you’re laid up in bed.” Rose peered down at me; her face pinched with worry.

In just the short time I was conscious, my energy had drained to nil. I fought to keep my eyes open. “Feels like forever since I saw you last.”

“Shhh...” she gently shushed me. “Save your strength. All the medics agreed you need as much of that deep healing sleep as possible.”

“So bossy...” I chuckled with a heavy sigh.

Rose just shook her head at me and smoothed back my mane from my face. “Stop fighting it and rest.”

“I want to stay with you.” My eyes threatened to close, but I forced them to remain open.

“You are with me.” Rose placed her hand on the sheet that covered my shawra. “And I am with you, right here. Can you feel me here?”

“Yes.” The echo of her spirit danced with mine in a lazy swirl.

“Rest now and heal. I’m not going anywhere.” Rose brushed her fingertips lovingly down my cheek.

“Stay here...with...me...” I was drifting fast.

“I’m not going anywhere, Wynnter. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

With the warmth of my mate’s spirit comforting mine, I gave myself over to the blissful lethargy of a healing sleep.

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THE WHISPER of Rose’s sweet voice lured me awake. She wasn’t speaking to me. A male voice responded in hushed tones. Curiosity cracked open one eye to have a look at what I was missing.

Synnox had paid a visit and judging by the rich scents that filled the small room, he had brought food with him. My stomach woke with a loud growl turning all eyes my way.

“You’re awake.” Rose’s spirit warmed me from the inside out.

I knew from seeing other mated males in my clan, how happy they always appeared. Now I had a taste of what they had been privy to.

That was before the germ swept through, taking with it every Valosian female. As I looked into the face of my mate, I embraced the swirl of her spirit within me. I was among the few lucky males to have found a spirit mate in a being from the stars.

“What is it?” Rose peered down at me. “I can feel your emotions surging. Do you need a medic? I can call for Nullar.”

“No,” I said groggily, my voice heavy with sleep. “Just waking up to your lovely face takes me a moment to absorb my good fortune.”

The swirl of Rose’s energy turned as bright as her complexion. I clutched her hand, never wanting to let her go.

“I will leave you two alone.”

“No. Don’t leave, friend.” I stopped Synnox before he reached the door. “Stay and visit.”

Synnox came to stand on the opposite side of my bed as Rose. A bandage wrapped one biceps.

“You’re injured.” I gestured to his wound.

“Not as bad as you.” Synnox presented his forearm for me to clasp in a show of respect. “Wexxor and Vannes told of how well you fought. I knew I’d taught you well.”

“You were a good teacher, however, being run through from behind doesn’t speak well of my fighting skills.”

“From what Murrox described, the four of you were trapped and outnumbered inside the main mine shaft,” Synnox said. “Surrounded by fighters under the control of the Gretolics, it was a wonder all four of you weren’t killed.”

I felt Rose blanch more than I saw it happen. The short time I’d been awake, she hadn’t asked the particulars of how I’d been injured. I had a feeling she was just hearing this for the first time.

“And the other members of my team? How did they fare?”

“All sustained injuries, but all will live.”

The relief that washed through me darkened to memories of Murrox’s ferocious sneer and bared fangs before I had lost consciousness. “And the innocent males who attacked us?”

“Most were spared and are recovering. The lengthy mind control has taken its toll on their sanity as well as their bodies. The prolonged lack of food and lood in favor of the stasis fluid pumped into them has weakened them. Maxxon has his hands full rehabilitating so many.”

Synnox scrubbed a hand down a weary face. “There were casualties, but we knew not all could be saved. The Spirits showed us favor and all the Gretolics inside Huren were slaughtered. The city belongs to us again.” His expression brightened with a smirk. “Tales are being woven of Murrox’s heroic efforts as he stood over your prone form while fighting the males determined to finish you off.”

“I need to thank him for saving my life.”

“He hates the attention. Even Sia Tikkot got no more than a passing grumble. He’s as angry as ever. Even more now than before the battle if that’s even possible. I’m not sure he would care to hear your thanks, but you can try.”

I pondered Murrox’s deepening rage. I could sympathize the loss of his home and clan, but that didn’t seem like all that was fueling his wrath?

“Riccof said you’d be waking up soon, so I brought your favorite.” Synnox rolled a table over with a covered tray. “You need to eat and get your strength up so you can help the techs strengthen the dome.”

I went to sit up and was met with a fresh stab of pain in my injured side. I hated the weakness I presented in front of my spirit mate. Though I wasn’t born of the warrior class and hadn’t been raised with their strict discipline to never show weakness, I still had my pride.

Appearing feeble before my spirit mate washed me in a bitter light of shame.

Synnox sensed my distress and came to my rescue by angling the head of the bed into a seated position. I closed my eyes and rested a moment, letting my wound settle into a dull ache.

When I opened them, Synnox lifted the cover off the tray of steaming chiksin. My stomach fisted with the need for nourishment, but I held up a hand when Synnox pushed the rolling table closer. “My mate eats first.”

“I have already eaten, Wynnter,” Rose assured me. “While you slept, I’ve had an array of visitors bringing me everything

I could need. The girls have all stopped by to check on you along with every Sia, tech, and warrior, including Zaku.”

“How long have I been asleep to have missed so much?”

“Two suns-rises since the battle ended,” Synnox provided.

“That long?” I shared an alarmed look between Rose and Synnox.

“Riccof said it was normal for you to sleep so long,” Rose assured me with a squeeze to my biceps. “You lost a lot of blood. You’re lucky to be alive, Wynnter.”

“What all have I missed?” I shook my head in a daze. Two suns-rises had gone by, and I hadn’t even been aware?

“Eat while I get you caught up.” Rose encouraged me by putting the eating utensil in my hand and nudging the tray towards me. “Nullar said you should be up and walking around soon, but you need to eat to regain your strength first. Don’t forget you promised to tour the palace with me.”

“I always keep my word.”

“I know that you do.” The warmth of Rose’s smile was a healing balm in and of itself.

As I scarfed down everything on the platter Synnox had brought, he told me every gory detail of our victory over the Gretolics. Of the heroics of so many and of the few warriors that had been lost.

“One warrior is too many,” I said and stuffed another chunk of chiksin in my mouth and chewed.

“I agree.”

“What of the mineshaft? Vannes said the Gretolic’s had extended the original tunnels way past the city’s perimeter. Was it used as an escape route?”

“It is possible some Gretolic’s escaped into the jungle. Maybe even a few Valosian supporters,” Synnox growled. “Initially, Sia Jakkar sent a squad of warriors to search it. The shaft splinters off in hundredths of different directions. It will take time to search them all, so it was ordered that the main



shaft be barricaded. Hopefully, the jungle's beasts will finish the battle we started."

"What of the Royal Council who exiled Sia Jakkar?" I asked. "I'd heard they were acting without the influence of the Gretolic's."

"That's correct," Synnox confirmed. "Them, as well as several others, were all taken into custody and are rotting below us on the prison level until Sia Jakkar can decide their fate."

Then it was Rose's turn to tell of how Zaku was leading the techs to strengthen the shielding of the dome.

"Aggar and Lennox are trying to tap into the transmissions from the ship that left with all those males and women who were being held here," Rose said. "They hope to track their travels and predict when they might return. They're putting their heads together to design a long-range weapon to protect the planet from any more alien attacks."

"Oh! And we've been given our own room in the palace compliments of Jakkar." Rose wagged a slim, glowing rectangular device at me. "This is the key."

My eating utensil poised at my lips, I stared at her open-mouthed. It was a great deal to take in. As one of the techs, I was anxious to get out of this bed and help with everything Rose had just mentioned.

"Sounds like there's much to be done." I swallowed the last bite of food on my tray and swung my legs over the side of the bed. The room spun and I clung to the heavy forearm Synnox had thrown out to keep me from landing flat on my face in front of my spirit mate.

"Tomorrow, Wynnter." Rose covered me with the sheet after Synnox helped me back in the bed. "I'm too tired to tour the palace today. Let's rest here a while longer." Rose stretched her arms over her head and faked a yawn.

My throat worked hard to keep all the food I'd eaten inside my stomach as I clung to the spinning bed. Rose was there

with a cup full of cool lood. I took careful sips until the churn of my belly faded.

“On the next suns-rise.” I blew out a slow breath, thankful to have a sensible spirit mate who was peering down at me with love and understanding rather than shame over my weakened state. “We go on the next suns-rise. After you rest.”

With my belly full, my friend on one side, and my female on my other, I didn't fight my eyelids as they drifted shut.

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# Chapter Fifteen

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I 'd managed to keep Wynnter in the clinic for two more days. Now that he had regained some strength, there was no keeping the male in bed. Riccof had removed the bandage covering his wound, giving Wynnter the green light to be up and around.

“How did you heal so quickly?” I ran my fingertips over his freshly knitted scales.

“I wouldn't call several suns-rises quick,” Wynnter stated. “Not to knock your spungie bats—because I love the feel of your hands on me—but I could stand under a loodfall for a yeron.”

“You mean sponge baths.” I giggled at him as he donned the fresh breechcloth Synnox had left on his latest visit.

“That's what I said.” He kissed my nose and snagged the glowing keycard off the side table. “Let's go find our room and make use of the loodfall before our tour of the palace.”

“Maybe we could take the tour tomorrow and catch up with the techs.”

The echo of his spirit beamed and swished.

“You've been talking about touring the palace since before we got inside the dome. Are you sure you want to wait?” Wynnter loosely gripped my shoulders. His silvery eyes scanned my face as his soul touched mine.

“Stop trying to read my mind,” I smirked. “You can’t hide your restlessness from me. I know you’re itchy to help the other techs with all the new projects, and so am I.”

“How did I get so lucky to be paired with such a smart and beautiful female?” Wynnter wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me into him, cupping my chin with his free hand.

“You did say that the spirit always chooses right.”

“And a good listener as well.” The kiss he gently placed on my lips curled my toes inside my boots. “Let’s get out of here before I change my mind to stay and toss you into that bed.”

“Probably wouldn’t hurt for you to rest a little longer.”

“Rest isn’t what we’d be doing,” he growled.

“Come on Casanova.” I nudged him back with a playful hand. “Let’s go find our room.”

“What is a kass-e-nove-ah?”

“Not a what, but a who.” I flip-flopped my hand through the air and stepped out into the hall. “It’s just an Earth expression. Come on. Let’s get showered. Jakkar has called a meeting of the minds in a few hours. He’s invited us if you were up to going.”

“When were you planning to mention that?”

“After I knew you were going to be all right to travel.” I raked my eyes over his perfect body from head to toe and back again. “You look ready to do all kinds of things.”

“Keep looking at me like that and I’ll be demonstrating all the wicked thoughts running through your mind, my little spirit mate.”

My laugh was deep and throaty as we exited the room Wynnter had recuperated from the injury that could have stolen him away.

I could feel his desire to mate as if it were my own. I worried that much stimulation might set his recovery back even if my silver Tarzan looked ready to swing from the trees with me tucked under one arm.

I hadn't been outside Wynnter's clinic room since Zikkar had first brought me here. I'd been terrified to leave his side for even a second, afraid he would take a turn for the worst. Once I was convinced that he would recover from his grievous wound, I had stayed put, not wanting him to wake up alone between his frequent naps.

I'd made him a promise that I would not leave his side. With all the visitors coming and going, they had made keeping my word easy, bringing us food and water which we shared while talking about everything and nothing. He never stayed awake long, falling back into a healing sleep after he ate.

I had access to a partial sanitare system but no shower. Since Valosians' bodies were more efficient than a human's, he never had to leave his bed to relieve himself.

I purposely kept my steps slow as we headed toward the elevator. What I thought had been a high-tech-looking keycard, turned out to also be a map to the room. The floor plan of the clinic was backlit in a pale blue against the black backdrop of the card. A white arrow pointed the way as we walked, kind of like a GPS.

Up one floor, the elevator stopped, and the map pointed us through a narrow hallway that emptied out into an expansive and elaborate foyer to a second set of sleek elevator doors.

I briefly recalled racing through here. At the time, I hadn't cared anything about taking in the beauty of the space. Getting to Wynnter was all I'd cared about.

On this trip through, I looked up with an expression of awe the same as Wynnter. How in the hell had they gotten a three-story cascade chandelier inside here?

It looked to be made of the same crystalline material as what the exterior structure was made from. It shone and glittered from the tiny lights running through it, like a trillion diamonds, falling in layer after layer until it reached twelve feet above our heads.

"That's impressive," Wynnter mumbled.

"What's it made of?"

“Crylite.” I followed Wynnter into the sleek elevator. “It’s actually a byproduct from turning nutrillium into a usable power source. The mineral must be heated to high temperatures to separate it from the crylite before it can be used as clean energy. Otherwise, the nutrillium will be weak.”

“And those mines only belong to Huren?”

“Yes. Given the palace was constructed from crylite, it would have taken an army of Huren clansmen and yerons to mine the amount of nutrillium needed to collect this much crylite.”

“Or a bunch of gray aliens with more advanced mining machinery.” As the elevator began its ascent, my mind went back to what Marie and Draggar had stumbled upon in the mineshaft she’d accidentally fallen into after she’d been abducted by Rayyar.

They’d said the shaft had been overrun with Valosians and the Gretolics controlling them. They’d been using mining equipment with noise dampeners. Where Marie had fallen in was way outside the city limits.

“How far did you travel inside the mineshaft before you guys were cornered?”

“It felt like we walked for milose,” Wynnter said. “It was hard to tell how far we traveled being underground with no landmarks. Why?”

“Jakkar said he thought the mines were drying up. That would explain why the Gretolics were having to dig so far away from the original shafts,” I figured. “What happened to all the nutrillium they dug out?”

“I don’t know?” Wynnter’s brow furrowed. “Maybe the Gretolic’s took it with them when they left. Maybe to that trading port on Tirius Zaku told us about.”

“If so, then what in the hell are they trading it for?”

The elevator came to a stop. I could feel the same questions spinning inside him as he clutched my hand, and we stepped out into an elegant hallway.

“Zaku mentioned a form of currency called rillium. Maybe they are trading for that.” Wynnter looked down at our keymap pointing us forward. “We will be sure to ask him at the meeting.”

Solaris rocks were set at regular intervals between the doors that lined both sides of the hall. They were held in elaborately designed metalloid wall sconces.

The ceiling and walls shone as if they were made from polished stone. Veined like Carrera marble, except the lines were blue and not gray. When I brushed my fingertips along the surface as we walked, it was cold to the touch.

In contrast, the floors were strangely warm and looked to be covered in a coarsely woven matt almost like jute or seagrass.

At the keycards flash and beep, we paused outside a closed door. Wynnter touched the card to a small panel off to one side. The door clicked open to reveal a dream.

“Who do I need to thank?” Wynnter wandered inside with eyes as wide as my own.

“This place is fancier than the Ritz,” I breathed. I’d never actually stayed in a fancy hotel. Only seen them on TV, but this place was amazing.

I shucked my boots at the door that I closed behind me. Furs were scattered across the floor. My feet tingled to feel the luxury, to wiggle my toes in all that softness.

A giant bed took up most of the room. Heavily pillowed and layered with fine materials, it was the closest thing to an Earth bed I’d seen in ages.

Light filtered through a gossamer fall of drapery covering a floor-to-ceiling window that took up the majority of the far wall. I padded across the plush fur rugs to reach it. With a slight tug, I pushed them aside.

The scene below stole my breath.

Wynnter came to stand next to me. “The fountain looks even more spectacular from up here.”



“I think we have the best view in the house.” We were eight stories up and had a view of the grounds to the west that reached all the way to the perimeter of the dome. I wasn’t sure the exact location where we had stayed hidden in the jungle beyond while we work on the gate, but I was definitely looking back at where we’d been.

Scattered around were smaller dwellings and outbuildings were pathways ribboned throughout to connect them all together. Centerpieced was the pool of sparkling water, or lood, as the Valosians called it. Some sort of pump jetted it straight up in the air in a mesmerizing dance that was a visual feast.

From our vantage point, we could see the fountain in its entirety, and it was spectacular.

“I’m glad for the protection, but I don’t think I will ever get used to this.”

At first, I thought Wynnter was talking about our lush accommodations. As my gaze followed his up to the top of the dome, I understood what he meant.

The sky was obscured by the wavy shielding. The fluffy clouds that floated past, looked muddied by the translucent hue of the dome. The air was flat and stagnant with no breeze. Even the air temperature was wrong. I knew outside the dome; it was frosty cold. It was like being trapped under an upside-down contact lens.

Instead of feeling safe, I felt stifled. Trapped. We’d fought hard to get inside the dome. Some had even given their lives for the cause. I wasn’t about to complain over the hard-won victory even if I was feeling a bit claustrophobic.

“Come on, handsome. Let’s go check out the bathroom. In a room like this, I’ll bet it is amazeballs.”

“What kind of balls?”

I laughed and led him by the hand over to the only other door in the room. When I nudged it open, it was even better than I expected.

“In all my yerons, I’ve never seen a sanitate system like this one.”

“Kohler would get a hard-on for this.”

Wynnter wrinkled his nose at me. “You say the strangest things, Rose.”

“Is all this carved from stone?” I walked inside, running my fingertips along the sleek surfaces. It even had a private space for the toilet. “How is this even structurally possible?”

“Fuck if I know.” Wynnter gave a droll laugh and walked past me to the shower. “I grew up in the trees. All I know for sure is the loodfall is large enough for two.”

Wynnter’s breechcloth was suddenly puddled around his feet. He turned and curled his fingers at me with a wicked grin.

How could I resist such a charming Tarzan? I beamed back and loosened the ties of my kilt-dress, letting it fall to the ground.

He started the fall of water and together, we stepped under the warm spray. Beneath the flash of his scales and the echo of his spirit that burned me with the need to mate, was a bit of sorrow that needed to be soothed.

“I know this isn’t your home, and neither is it mine, but until we can figure out some kind of planetary defense, maybe we can think of this as an extended honeymoon in an exotic location,” I said and settled my hands on his tight waist.

Wynnter wrapped his hands around my back and stepped into me. The shower flowed between us and surrounded us in a watery cocoon. His cock a steel rod sandwiched between us. My sex bloomed in answer to the frenzied need that was echoing inside me.

Wynnter cocked his head at me. “What is this hoo-nee-muun you speak of?”

“Honeymoon,” I annunciated. “It happens after a couple gets married, or mated, in our case. They spend most of their time under the covers, getting to know each other better.”

His face turned from one of mild confusion to one of sultry expectation. Heat whipped between my thighs. Here we stood sex to sex. Heat to heat. My blood pounded in my ears in a deafening cadence only Wynnter's erotic thrumming could penetrate.

In a sudden rush of movement, Wynnter curved his hands around my backside and squeezed, pressing the hard ridge of his erection between us. His engorged flesh pulsed with a fiery need that matched the ache between my thighs.

His hands dropped lower, and I was lifted from the floor, my thighs parting to wrap around his waist. I locked my feet at the ankles at the small of his back. The tip of his thick sex probed at my slick entrance.

My hands dove into his silver tresses as he claimed my mouth in a scorching kiss that set my blood on fire and melted my core.

He entered me in a single slick glide as our tongues tangled. My moan matched his groan as he curled his hips and began an easy rhythm. As the burn to release built between us, his thrusts quickened and deepened.

The kiss broke and I clung to the width of his shoulders and ground myself shamelessly against the triangular flaps that teased my clit with every upward stroke.

Lost to lust. Euphoric with the building pleasure. I clung to the knife-edge of release not wanting this moment to end. There was no hanging on. My grip slipped, and I fell into a mind-shattering void of ecstasy.

Wynnter followed me into the pulsating abyss and together, we shared in each other's pleasure as the blue light of our coalesced spirits receded to soften into the dim glow of our shawras.

With the water washing over us in a warm spray, I rested my forehead against Wynnter's. In his arms, I found home. I would miss Earth and my mom, but I knew it in every fiber of my being that he was mine and I was his. There was no leaving Valose or my soulmate behind.

“I love you.” The words flowed out on their own. One second, I was thinking it and the next I’d verbally expressed them.

Wynnter reared his head back and peered down at me adoringly. His hands cupped my face; the pads of his thumbs sweeping over my cheeks. “And I love you, my bossy little spirit mate.”

My laughter couldn’t be helped. “Bossy, huh? You’re determined to pin that stigma on me. Okay, my silver spice, let me boss you around then.” With my legs still wrapped tight around his waist, I ground against his pelvis. His cock already growing hard for round two. “Get to pounding. Don’t stop until my eyes roll back in my head, and I can’t walk right for a week.”

“Yes, my bossy little spirit mate.” He pulled back his hips, punctuating his words with hard, powerful thrusts that took my breath away. “I promise not to stop until you beg me.”

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# Chapter Sixteen

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**I**t was a while before the shower shut off, and we were putting on fresh clothes. It would have been even longer had we not needed to attend the meeting at the hangar next door.

As Wynnter had finally disengaged and set me on my feet, he had done exactly as I'd asked. My eyes had rolled back in my head with the countless orgasms he'd given me. With my legs turned to jelly, I knew I wouldn't walk right for a week. I could still feel the echo of his girth from where he'd stretched me to accommodate for his impressive size.

As I dried off and dressed, I took notice of the deep wrinkles on my fingers and toes. They could rival that of a prune. But I couldn't have cared less. I had been well sated by the male I loved.

I *had* fallen in love with Wynnter.

I couldn't pinpoint the when, but it had happened sometime between the first time I'd laid eyes on him and the alone time we'd spent together in his treehouse.

Any reasonable woman would throw the bullshit flag at me. Love at first sight, or even love in such a short period of time was total crap. But it wasn't. Not on Valose, anyway. Not with the tugging of the very essence that animated us banging to get out and embrace the essence of the other person.

Fate or destiny wasn't something I ever believed in. I believed in scientific facts. Shit I could touch and measure

with precision instruments.

I wasn't one to believe in true love, and most definitely not soulmates. Here I was living a science fiction romance with a muscled silver elf on another world.

When I lost myself in the swirl of Wynnter's gaze, soulmates didn't seem so far-fetched. What we had between us was real, and tangible. Every time we had sex, a piece of our spirits would emerge through our matching shawras and intertwine with the other. We shared an echo of each other within us.

It couldn't get any more real than that.

I still couldn't believe I had said the words even though they were true. I was in a whirlwind romance with the hottest guy in the Universe. The best part was, I knew without any lingering doubts that he felt the same about me because we shared emotions.

Dressed and ready, we traveled down to the elaborate foyer and out a side door that faced a large rectangular structure that was the hangar.

Just as we were about to enter a side door, Murrox strode over to meet us. His surly temper was a dark cloud that followed him everywhere.

"I heard you were up and about." Murrox cocked his chin back at Wynnter after giving me a slight nod then crossed huge arms over his mighty chest.

The smile I greeted him with faltered. The male was freaking enormous, even larger than Vallon, yet the enormous Jurigon didn't possess the same gentle disposition as Elise's mate, Vallon. There was something uneasy about him that put me on edge.

"I was hoping to run into you." Wynnter wasn't put off by him the way I was.

"Then it's a good thing we were both called to this meeting."

“I wanted to thank you for saving my life.” He extended his forearm to Murrox.

Murrox looked at the forearm Wynnter extended and shifted his weight between his feet before awkwardly clasping what was offered. The huge male mumbled a response before stepping back with crossed arms and toeing the hard-packed dirt under his feet.

It shocked me to witness his discomfort over Wynnter’s expression of thanks. His scales flushed a deep blue and that was when it dawned on me Murrox was having an *aw-shucks* moment.

Was the center of this burly beast nothing but marshmallow filling like Marie’s scarred warrior, Draggar? Was his exterior only a hardened but wounded shell?

I found myself smiling and looking at Murrox in a whole new light. Maybe there was more to this big burly ox than what he presented to the world.

The door to the hangar suddenly swung open. One look at the woman exiting and Murrox stepped back, giving her a wide berth.

“Murrox.” Jane narrowed eyes on the Jurigon.

“Jane,” Murrox responded tightly. *Wait*. Was that a flicker of fear on the Jurigon’s face?

I’d heard the story of when Jane and Aggar had been taken captive by the Jurigons and how she had punched Murrox in the nose, dropping him to one knee. That must had been one serious punch.

“Oh, good!” Jane turned to us. “Aggar was hoping you two would be able to come to the meeting. He was finally able to listen in on some interesting transmissions between the Gretolics and another alien.”

My smile vanished with the shiver of fear that raced down my spine. “Why does that sound ominous?”

“Any news concerning the Gretolics is bad unless it’s about their demise.” Jane cut a hand through the air. “I’ll be



right back. I forgot something in my room.” Jane left us at the hangar door and raced to the palace.

“My curiosity is killing me.” Wynnter opened the door for me to go inside first. “After you, Sia Murrox?”

“I am not your Sia. You don’t need to address me as such.”

Wynnter presented a slight bow. “Still, you are the Sia of Clan Jurigon. I would show my respect.”

“I’m not so sure I care for the title,” he growled. “Murrox will do just fine.”

“Until you decide otherwise, Murrox it is.”

Inside the hangar, my mouth dropped over the expanse of space. It was so large; it was capable of housing every spacecraft we’d collected so far.

Wynnter immediately zeroed in on the Yulineons craft as I had. His curiosity over the latest conveyance spiked as high as mine. Zaku’s enormous, purple body was buried halfway inside when we stopped in front of it.

“Good to see you were able to make it.” Zaku peered at us through the spacecraft’s innards as he continued to work. “As well as your spirit mate.”

“Hi.” I felt so stupid and small waving at the gigantic male. Being in his presence was overwhelming, both because of his size and his intellect.

“Hello,” he returned with a huge grin.

“How is Ivy?”

“Working all night and too busy for her mate,” he chuckled. “I’m joking, of course, but she is hard at work in the secret lab Maxxon found along with Amy and Lily. That threesome has been scouring every sample and every log entry they can find that the Gretolics left behind. With the advanced lab equipment, they are close to a vaccine. Ivy should be on her way soon.”

“Wonderful!” I clasped my hands together. “Now Lily won’t have to worry about her baby if it’s born a girl.”

“That is good news,” Wynnter chimed in.

“It is, and we’ll take as much of that as we can get.” Zaku unwedged his body from the Yulineon’s craft with a component of some kind in his meaty fist.

I leapt out of my skin when the hangar door banged open like a gunshot going off in a confined space.

“So, it’s true!” Willow stormed over, ignoring us, and didn’t stop until she was toe-to-toe with Zaku. “You’re really taking parts off the Yulineon craft? The only ship capable of taking us home.”

“It is necessary, Willow. I need the immex capacitors to stabilize the additional energy if we are to increase the dome’s shielding.”

“Blah, blah, blah...” Willow talked with her hand. “Shielding, smielding. Fuck the dome! I want to go home.”

“Willow!”—I stepped between her and Zaku— “We will find another way. For now, this is the safest place for all of us.”

My heart went out to her. I knew she wasn’t happy and the longer we stayed here, the more unhappy she became.

“I’m sorry for sounding like a bitch, Rose. I just want off this planet so damn much.” Her lower lip trembled. “I miss home.”

“The dome is all that is protecting us from another attack. You didn’t see what that single blast did to Mount Jurigon.” I jumped at the deep voice that reverberated out behind me.

Willow’s eyes flipped up and over my shoulder. Her eyes burned with rage through her unshed tears.

I looked back to find a glowering Murrox.

“I’m sorry about your home, Murrox, I truly am, but you can fuck right off with that sour look and your piss-poor attitude.” Willow gave him her back and stormed off to the opposite side of the hangar.

Murrox sighed and quickly hid his scorned expression while rubbing a circle in the center of his chest.

“Oh, shit,” I murmured. I knew Willow was dead set on leaving. If Murrox was her spirit mate, that choice might be taken from her if the pull to mate became too much.

No one commented on the obvious as we all followed Zaku over to join Aggar and the other techs. Zikkar gave us a polite nod where he stood with a hazy-eyed Hexxus at his side.

The highest-ranking warriors from each clan filed in through a back door along with Isobel, Ivy, and Lily. Willow stewed in her corner, as far away from Murrox as she could get. Jakkar and Tikkot rounded out the attendees.

Aggar stood behind a console that had been removed from one of the crafts—I wasn’t sure which—and had made some obvious modifications.

“We’ve intercepted a transmission from the Gretolic craft that left here with our males and the human females.” Aggar indicated Lennox as he addressed us. “They were speaking in a strange language and some of the transmission was broken. After running it through a translator Lennox devised, we found that they were negotiating a deal with another alien called a trollis.” Aggar tapped some buttons. “I was able to record most of it.”

Even through the translator, the Gretolic’s gritty voice made my skin crawl. I stepped in closer to Wynnter’s side. My mate wrapped a protective arm around me as we listened.

*“...no less than five-thousandths rillium for the Valosians,”* the Gretolic was saying. *“The Mannocks are worth double that.”*

*“Three for the Valosians and seven for the Mannocks.”*

*“Unacceptable!”* the Gretolic exploded. *“You will be wealthy beyond your dreams, trollis, with what I have aboard my ship, and well you know it.”*

*“Eleven for the lot,”* the trollis countered.

The transmission garbled before clearing. *“...more than that. To sweeten the deal, I have a compatible pair ready to mate.”*

*“I have no use for bonded spirit mates, Gretolic!”*

*“They have yet to bond. You can sell them to a pleasure cruiser. The wealthiest beings in the Luartick Sector will pay handsomely to witness the forming of shawras when they bond. Maybe even enough rillium to trade for the tellic needed for the creation of kript you’re so desperate for.”*

*“Twelve!”* the trollis shouted. *“That is my final—”*

The transmission abruptly cut off. The hangar went still. No one moved or even seemed to be breathing. We all just stood there absorbing what we’d heard.

“Am I guessing right that the Mannocks are the women?” I was first to break the silence.

“Yes.” Zaku nodded. “You are correct.”

“Those vile creatures dare to sell our males and the humans!” Jakkar let loose a string of curse words that would have put a seasoned sailor to shame. “What of the spirit mates?”

“A pleasure cruiser is a leisure spacecraft designed for the wealthy,” Zaku explained.

“Akin to a cruise ship on Earth,” Ivy tacked on for the benefit of the girls in the room.

Zaku cleared his throat, a forlorn expression fell over his features. “If the pair is sold as the Gretolic suggested, they will be forced to mate in front of an audience.”

“And what of the rest?” Nekko seethed.

“Sold to the highest bidder,” Zaku paused, before telling us the rest. “They will either be sold as sex slaves or as laborers. Maybe both. Depending on what species purchases them.”

“That cannot be allowed to happen!” Draggar growled. “We have to find a way to go after them.”

“Agreed!” Synnox pounded his fist into his open palm. “A rescue mission needs to happen now.”

“Do you know where they have been taken?” Truxxet, a Trisess warrior looked to Zaku for an answer.

“Tirius,” Zaku stated flatly. “It’s the only trading port the trollis are allowed to sell flesh.”

“If you know the location, then we need to fly one of these spacecrafts there and go get our people back!” raged Nekko.

“It isn’t that simple,” Aggar interjected.

Zaku stepped forward and raised a hand to quieten the simmering crowd. “The only long-range ships we have capable of traveling the distance to Tirius have either crashed and are unusable, or we need components from them to increase the dome’s shielding.”

“Why scavenge parts from every ship?” Willow spoke out. “Why can’t you at least keep one intact?”

“Even if we kept one craft space worthy, we would only have enough fuel for a one-way trip to Tirius and that’s in the Yulineon craft,” Zaku explained. “It will only hold two males, or at the most, two females and one male. What good is a rescue if we can’t make it back here?”

“Two males could go and rescue all of them,” Nekko suggested. “Then hide them on Tirius somewhere until we are able to bring them all back here.”

A crescendo of agreeance rose from the group of nodding heads.

“The planet is desolate,” Zaku reasoned. “There is no food or water. It would be certain death for all involved.”

“We need the immex capacitors from the Yulineon’s craft to equalize the additional energy between the cellpods,” Zikkar backed Zaku up. “We can save more lives here by concentrating our efforts on the dome.”

“What about the craft Clan Trisess hid inside their forest?” Murrox asked. “Is it not a long-range craft?”

“It is,” Lennox said. “But the power cells are nearly drained dry. This explains why they didn’t simply take the twenty Trisess warriors and leave. It was because they couldn’t. By the looks of their dismantled thrusters, they were trying to reconfigure them to burn nutrone. It was the only fuel they had access to since their own alien fuel was depleted.”

“The Gretolic’s have strip-mined our nutrillium,” Hexxus stated in a rare moment of lucidity. “The only source of power we have to maintain and increase the shielding to keep everyone safe from future attacks—like the one on Jurigon—is to take it from the crafts themselves. Their alien fuel has similar properties to our nutrillium.”

“I hadn’t realized how dire the circumstances,” Wynnter whispered.

“It gets worse,” Zaku warned. “I’ve studied the scanner the Yulineon set up before we killed him. Its biometric readings were set to scan the area for humans and Gretolics. Rose was at the dome with us close by where he landed. The data from the scan was set to go outbound, so there’s a good chance the Yulineon’s know humans, or at least one,”—Zaku looked pointedly at me— “is on Valose. They will send patrols to eliminate her or any other human they find.”

“We can’t just sit here and hide under the dome!” Brunnex, Murrox’s second, exclaimed.

“We’re not,” Aggar said. “We’re working on a long-range weapon to destroy any crafts that breach our atmosphere.”

“So, shoot first and ask questions later,” Willow challenged. “What happens when that Gretolic craft comes back to collect the rest of the males and women no longer caged under the palace, Aggar? That craft could be used to take us home or go after those people on Tirius. You can’t just shoot it out of the damn sky.”

“There’s a chance we can retrieve the fuel from the ship you crashed in, Willow.” Aggar stood his ground. “If we can collect enough fuel for a round trip to Tirius and to Earth, you have my word as a warrior of Valose that the long-ranged spacecrafts we’ve removed components from will be restored

if we are able. Until then, the dome is our best defense against all invaders.”

“Even if we could travel to Earth,” Zaku gently added. “Landing there without being detected by the Yulineons is almost impossible. If their patrols catch us, you will be killed on site.”

“If that’s true, then how did you go undetected the entire time you were on Earth helping Ivy?” Willow fired back.

“Using a molecular transporter,” Zaku answered.

“So, use that to take us back undetected.”

“I traded it for provisions for mine and Ivy’s journey to the new Nomadican home world which we never reached.”

“Let me get this straight.” Willow cut her hand through the air. “Even if we could make it back to Earth, if we’re caught by the Yulineon patrols, they’re gonna kill us?”

“That is what I’ve tried to explain to you many times over.” Zaku’s hard gaze never wavered from Willow’s.

Willow’s eyes shifted from Zaku to lock onto Murrox while she absently rubbed at the spot on her chest where a shawra would form. “Fuck this shit!” Willow spat and stormed out of the hangar.

“Crap,” Isobel cursed and ran after her.

Murrox watched Willow go, running an exasperated hand through the length of his silvery hair. The male looked ready to crack. I wondered how long they had been fighting the demand of their spirits to mate.

“What is tellic?” Hexxus asked no one in particular. His silvery eyes gone foggy. “I’ve never heard of this.”

“It is a highly concentrated form of energy used in spacecrafts for hyper-jumps,” Zaku explained.

“Hyper-jumps?” Zikkar gave Zaku a sideways look.

“Ships designed to withstand high speeds can travel light-years in only a few seconds with tellic.”

“This kript?” Jakkar prompted. “What is it?”

“The last I heard, kript was merely a scientific theory.” My mouth dropped as Zaku rattled off quantum physics that were way over my head. “It has been theorized that if enough tellic is smelted with a mineral called borin, it can create a stable wormhole in space. Anyone in possession of such a thing could travel from one end of the Universe to the other in the blink of an eye. There are still millions of uncharted galaxies beyond our reach.”

“Just another reason to go after our people!” Nekko stormed. “If the trollis takes our people through this wormhole, they will be lost to us forever.”

Hexxus started to pace, his eyes gone wild as he began to mutter to himself about planetary shielding which was definitely in the realm of science fiction at this point.

The male had clearly lost his mind. I could understand why. There was no way to get our people back and the odds were stacked against us. All we could do was defend ourselves against the possibility of so many overwhelming threats.

“There may be a way to get the people back, or perhaps some of them.” Zaku rubbed the purple scales covering his chin. “I think I can modify this console to transmit a message to the Xecor Sector. We could offer the Lizordian brothers that live on the asteroid belt a hefty purse for every human and Valosian returned to us alive and unharmed.”

“Wait.” Ivy rubbed her forehead. “You’re talking about enlisting the help of bounty hunters?”

“Reavers, actually. But yes. Until we are able to travel and search for them ourselves, it is the only way I can think of.”

“Won’t that be like sending out an engraved invitation for more aliens to come to Valose?” Ivy questioned with a scrunched brow.

“The transmission will be scrambled. Only the brothers will be able to decode it,” Zaku clarified. “They operate outside of Universeval Law and they have no love for the Yulineons.”



“They sound like a rather unscrupulous bunch.” I shivered.

“They are lawless,” Zaku agreed. “But efficient when it comes to hunting down bounties. For the right price.”

“If we do this,” Jakkar began. “With what will we be paying them?”

“Nutrone,” Zaku stated flatly. “We no longer need the portable gate. We can pay them with the nutrone used to energize it. Once that is spent, I will lead a team to the Jurigon mountains in search for more.”

Murrox released a menacing growl.

“With the Sia of Jurigon’s permission, of course.” Zaku dipped his chin respectfully at Murrox.

Jakkar placed his hands on his hips and stared at the floor before he looked out over the small crowd. “Does everyone agree to Zaku’s proposal? We request the help of these reaver brothers to find and return as many of the humans and Valosians as they can?”

Grumbles of uncertainty rolled through the group. Several side discussions took place, but in the end, all agreed to enlist the help of these Lizordian brothers. I swallowed hard wondering about these aliens that resided on an asteroid belt in a part of the Universe I never knew existed.

“This long-ranged weapon you have yet to build,” Murrox began. “Why not send a squad to retrieve the one the Gretolic’s built under Sia Xennox’s mountain fortress?”

“It was destroyed along with the fortress,” Aggar answered.

“You sure about that?” Murrox countered. “You saw the remains of the weapon?”

“No.” Aggar shook his head. “I searched every inch I could of what remained of your home looking for survivors. I saw no evidence of the weapon.”

“It could still be there. Buried under the rubble,” Murrox argued.

“Maybe we could use a tragore device to search for the nutrone that powers it,” Lennox added.

“Maybe,” Aggar pondered.

“Between the two of us, Sia Jakkar and I have two plasma guns.” Zaku surmised. “Perhaps we could use that energy for our planetary weapon.”

As chatter of one possibility after another sprang up all around me, the more my head spun. Brainstorming new gadgets was a fave pastime of mine, but this wasn't about creating a device for fun or enjoyment. This was about life and death. Survival on a planet that aliens had targeted.

Things were changing so fast. Our futures were more uncertain than they'd ever been before. It was only a matter of time before the Yulineons returned to hunt us down and kill us.

What would we do when the Gretolics returned? Would the dome hold against another attack like the one that destroyed Mount Jurigon?

The long-range weapon was only in the planning stages. We weren't ready for any of this. And here we were on the verge of bringing even more unknowns to this world.

“It's going to be all right, Rose.” Wynnter turned me to face him and that was when I realized I was close to hyperventilating. “With your inventive mind, I know we can build a weapon to defend Valose. Increasing the shielding to the dome is already being worked. I will never let anything happen to you.”

The echo of Wynnter's spirit within me had gone rigid with determination. His cool confidence calmed me almost as much as his unwavering stare and loving smile.

“I believe in us,” Wynnter leaned down to whisper in my ear. “Together. You and I can do anything, my bossy little spirit mate.”

I grabbed onto the strength of his resolve, let it sink into my bones until it dissolved my fears.

“I believe in us, too.” I beamed up at my mate. “We have a lot of work to do. I guess we better get to it, my silver spice.”

***Turn the page for what’s coming next in the Warriors of Valose Saga!***

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Coming Up Next

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SILVER STORM: WARRIORS OF VALOSE SAGA 8



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## ***Murrox***

Everything had been lost in a single blast. Fellow warriors I'd known my whole life, taken before my very eyes including the one I had trusted the most. As I picked up the pieces of what was left of my clan, betrayal had begun to surface until I had no use for the crown I had been bequeathed.

Anger had become my only companion as I trusted no others. The truth lay in the ruins of my home. With a new threat looming on the horizon, I was resolute in my determination to go after it. Then my spirit tossed me a distraction of the most feminine variety. Why *her*? She was even more bitter than me.

## ***Willow***

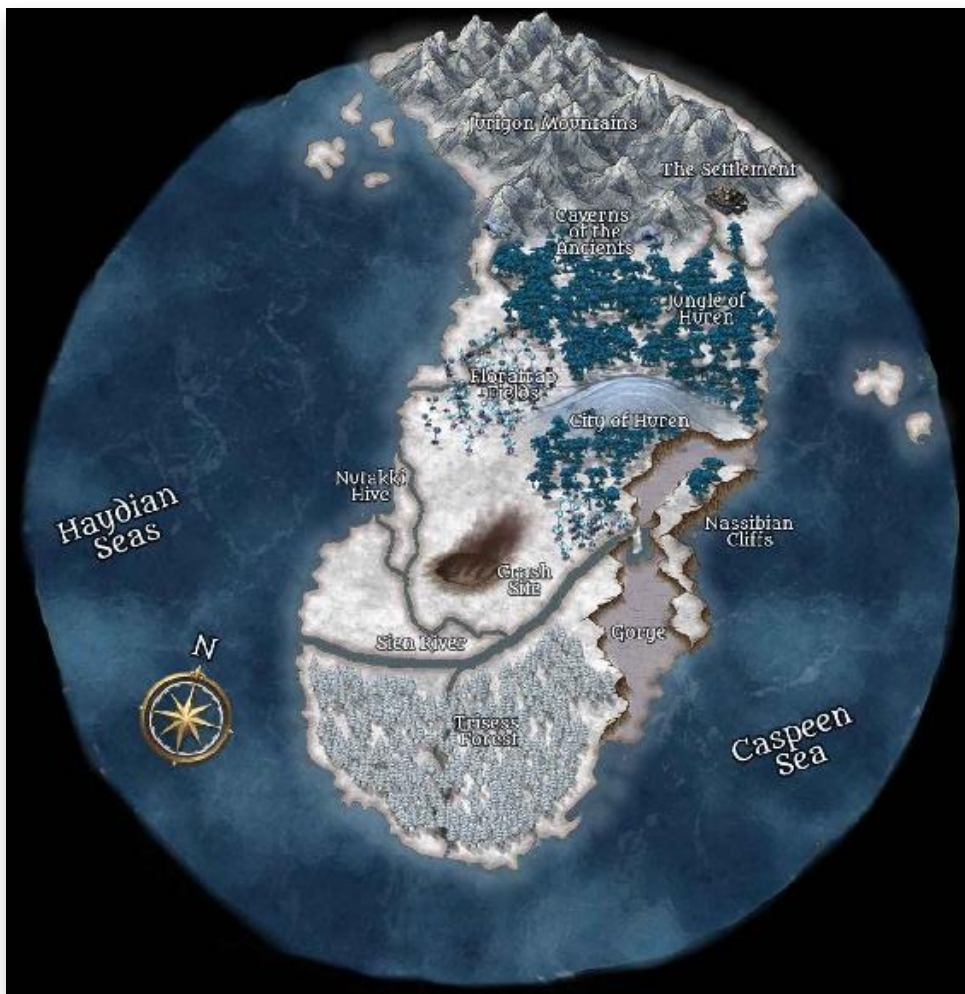
Obsessed with finding a way off this death rock, there was absolutely nothing that could sway me from my goal—not even him. Especially not *him*! Definitely not the biggest, brooding a-hole on the planet. Like me, he had a reason to be pissed off, but that didn't mean I wanted to be stuck with him for eternity.

Then he goes and does something colossally stupid, and I couldn't help myself but follow.

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# Map of Valose

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## Glossary of Valosian Terms

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### Special Note:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Fibrous tubing- Similar to fiberoptic cable.

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

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

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

Hundredths- A measurement equivalent to a hundred.

Hurs- A Valosian equivalent to an hour.

Insectoids- Nuttaki species of insect-like mammals.

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

Lood- Valosian equivalent to water.

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

Luminetric barrier- Impenetrable transparent shielding.

Mims- The Valosian equivalent to a minute.

Milose- A Valosian measurement equivalent to a mile.

Mothis- A flying insect with fuzzy wings.

Munthis- A Valosian equivalent to a month.

Nula- Term of endearment like sweetheart.

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

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

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

Penitentrium- A building used to house prisoners.

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

Rynose- A herbivorous beasts similar to a rhinoceros.

Sanitate system- Is the Valosian equivalent of a toilet.

Sec- The Valosian equivalent to a second.

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

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

Solitarium- Isolated prison cell.

Splinth- A clear shell used to set broken bones.

Spirits- Valosian Gods.

Squidlin- Massive carnivorous sea creatures with multiple tentacles.

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

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

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

Tondru- A massive wolf-like beast.

Tragore- A device used to detect power sources.

Turculine- Very close in hue to turquoise.

Yerons- A measurement of time approximately 365 days.

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# Acknowledgments

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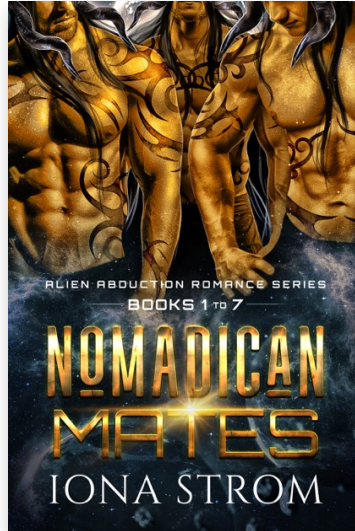
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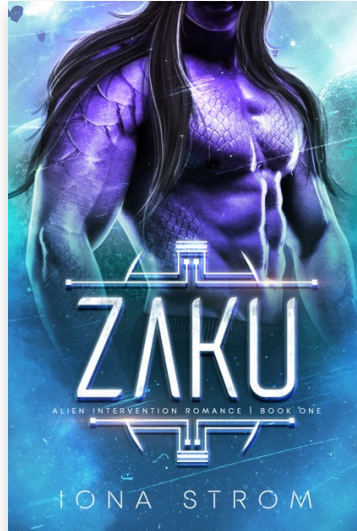
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