

Holiday
heartmates

WHISKED
AWAY

BY
THE

ALIEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JULIE K. COHEN

WHISKED AWAY BY THE ALIEN

A Curvy Girl Hannukah Sci Fi Alien Romance

(HOLIDAY HEARTMATES)

BOOK 1

JULIE K. COHEN

Julie K. Cohen

WHISKED AWAY BY THE ALIEN

Holiday Heartmates (book 1)

There's an alien in my kitchen wearing an apron... and nothing else.

There's something delicious cooking in my kitchen and it isn't the donuts or latkes. The tall blue alien with horns that hit the ceiling has arrived in time to save Hannukah for my family, but he knows nothing about cooking. Why is he really here? And how do I tell him that under that apron he's supposed to wear clothing!



Mine to Eat!

Whisked Away by the Alien is a steamy alien first contact romance laden with discovery, love, and temptation. Expect twists and turns and a very Happy Ever After.

WHISKED AWAY BY THE ALIEN

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Alien Claimed](#)

[Orc's Possession](#)

[Thank You!](#)

[Series by Julie K. Cohen](#)

[Exclusive Content](#)

[About Julie](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Contact Me!](#)

CHAPTER ONE

GOLDA

As fast as I can, I slam the door shut before the winter storm grabs it out of my hand. I stand completely still as I realize too late that slamming the door could be my downfall. Ten. Twenty seconds pass. No crying baby. Yay! I didn't wake her. I love my niece, but she's a little hellion when it comes to napping, and I need a little R&R after the week I've had at the warehouse.

Taking in the familiar surroundings, the comfy velvet blue sofa, the wood dining room table, and all the books lining the floor to ceiling bookcase relaxes me. So many memories here, most of them good. There's nothing like coming home for the holidays. Everyone is in a festive mood and Mom cooks my favorite dishes.

Of course, the trade-off is dealing with the usual questions and unsolicited comments. Who are you dating? Why aren't you dating? You need to lose weight. You won't catch a man dressed like that.

Hopefully, Sadie will distract her enough to forgo the usual interrogation. Contrary to my mom's beliefs, finding a decent guy has nothing to do with my weight, clothing, or job. I just haven't met a man who makes me smile.

As I remove my coat, a delicious scent from the kitchen grabs me, reminding me of camping. My lungs pull in the clean fresh air of the woods with a hint of smoke from a bonfire, only more refined, more... bone deep. The aroma

invades me down to my soul, making my entire body crave something I've never had before. I can't peg what precisely, but I know I need it.

My mind races down the list of holiday foods. It's not latkes, apple sauce, brisket, matzah ball soup or any of the substitutions Mom makes when she can't get the right ingredients. With dad's connections in the government, he usually brings home whatever Mom needs, even when food is scarce. Which fortunately hasn't been the case since Earth regained its freedom two years ago.

With one quick yank, I rip off the bright pink hat and mittens Bubbe knitted for me and dash to the kitchen. "Mom? What are you cooking?"

"Is that you, Golda?" my mom calls from upstairs the moment my hand lands on the kitchen door.

"I got the day off. A Hannukah miracle!"

A very loud clank comes from the other side of the swinging door that leads into the kitchen. I back away. No one else should be home at this hour. It's only ten a.m. Rachel's in school during the day, dad never walks in before six, and Bubbe's not coming until tomorrow.

"Mom?" I call up the steps. "I think there's someone in the kitchen."

My mom appears at the top of the stairs. She's dressed in her long black wool coat, but she's holding my half-naked niece, who's squirming in her arms. "That's Zankov. Or Stankov. Or... Oh, hell, I can't remember. Some Russian name. Your father's friend in Earth Intelligence sent him over to help with the cooking and cleaning. Anything we need. The poor guy has no family nearby and needs some help acclimating to New York and practicing his English. He'll be here for the week. I haven't had a chance to greet him properly. These damn cloth diapers are not as good as what we had before the war. I had Sadie all dressed and ready to go to the doctor's appointment, and now I have to change her outfit."

“Are you telling me you left the door open and let a stranger walk into our house?”

“Not a stranger. Someone your father sent. Sadie’s a handful. I can’t get everything done and take care of her, too. I’m glad you’re here. I’m leaving you in charge while I take her to her appointment. Don’t forget to polish the menorah.”

Now I have two reasons to grab the menorah. To get it ready for the first night of Hannukah, and to clobber the guy in the kitchen if he turns out to be some freak.

As I fling open the dining room buffet drawers, searching for the menorah, that damned scent wraps around me, making me hungry, but not for food. Something more.

With my fingers curled around the silver menorah my grandfather made back in Poland, I tiptoe to the kitchen, hoping to spy on the stranger my mom let walk into the house. What if it’s some random guy who found the door unlocked and now he’s robbing us blind? It’s not like we’re the wealthiest family around, but food is food and not always easy to get. Not that we’d turn a hungry person away. Even so, people can turn violent over food.

As I lean against the swinging door to listen, the door opens and I go flying into the kitchen. I land face-down and the menorah pops out of my hand and skitters across the hardwood floor.

Military boots, large ones—some gargantuan size that shouldn’t exist—appear before my face.

“Let me help you up, female.”

“Female?”

He holds out a large blue hand. It’s one of those trust or don’t trust moments. I know nothing about him and I should keep my distance, but he’s already standing over me, waiting patiently. He definitely has the advantage here, but there’s a softness to his expression that convinces me to trust a little.

When I take his hand, the corner of his mouth kicks up in a mixture of relief and something I can’t quite identify. There’s

an honesty and wholesomeness to him that permeates the air between us.

Effortlessly, he pulls me to my feet, as if I'm a child, not a grown woman who indulged in a few too many latkes last year and still hasn't worked them off. Not that last year's holiday celebration impacts this year's. Everyone knows calories don't count during the holidays and I'm looking forward to jelly donuts.

As I straighten my torso, the enormity of this alien strikes me. His horns—yes, actual horns!—lightly scrape along the low ceiling until they angle back. Even without horns, the male towers over me. And yet, those large, bulging muscles and handsome face hold my attention. I find myself mentally undressing him.

Golda! Get a hold of yourself! Alien. ALIEN!

I clear my throat. "Just one lick."

Oh, God, I didn't say that out loud, did I?

"Lick of what?" he asks.

"Nothing! I was thinking about... candy. Yes, candy! That's it."

"Candy?"

"I have a sweet-tooth." And I'd love to lick this delicious piece of candy standing before me, from head to toe, leaving no part untouched. This time, I keep my steamier thoughts to myself, though my cheeks flush.

I can't stop staring. He's the most gorgeous male I've ever seen. Muscles cover every inch of him, straining against his thin black t-shirt. Did I mention this blue piece of candy has tribal tattoos across his biceps? I wonder where else he's tattooed.

Damn, no question about it. I'm horny. It's bad enough I've never had a serious relationship, but I'm not even in the privacy of my apartment to, um, take care of *business*. Worse! I'm standing in my *parents'* kitchen fantasizing about a guy I know nothing about. An *alien*.

“Oy.”

“Oy?” he repeats.

“That’s Yiddish for OMG.”

“OMG? Female, you’re not making any sense.”

“You’re an alien.” *So witty and observant, Golda!* He must think I’m an idiot.

My eyes fixate on that handsome face with the brows that pinch slightly as he assesses me. I wonder what he sees when he looks at me.

Grace? Nope. I face planted right in front of him.

Wit? That’s a definite no. I can’t string more than four words together without embarrassing myself.

Friendly? Hardly. I haven’t introduced myself or even said hello. I only commented on the obvious. That he’s an alien.

Maybe I’ll get points for being observant.

“From my perspective,” Mr. Tall, Blue, and Very Handsome begins, “You’re the alien. Though I can see your point. I’m a guest on your world.” Now both sides of his mouth kick up. Is he flirting with me?

God, I hope so.

“I’m guessing you’re lost. This is my family’s kitchen, not the Department of Alien Affairs. Their office is in mid-town somewhere.” My voice wavers, and not because he’s drop-dead handsome. Okay, maybe that’s why. I’m wearing a baggy old sweatshirt and jeans, my hair is in a messy ponytail, and I skipped putting on makeup this morning. Yay me for thinking I’d never meet anyone today since I was only going home to my parents!

“Are you not Mrs. Gertie-She’s-A-Lovely-Though-Somewhat-Crazy-Woman Birnbaum?”

I laugh, mostly because he has my mom pegged perfectly. I don’t think he knows that’s not her name, though. He’s looking at me with pursed silver eyes, waiting for an answer.

God help me, I have a hot-as-fuck alien in my kitchen, unwittingly insulting my mother, and I can't stop laughing. He tilts his head, his gaze fixed on my face.

He probably thinks I'm crazy. Maybe I am, because right now, I'm thinking of letting him stay instead of kicking him out. This is post-occupation Earth; the only aliens here are the ones the DAA gave permission to be here.

"I'm not Mrs. Gertie-She's-A-Lovely-Though-Somewhat-Crazy-Woman Birnbaum. That's my mother." I'm Horny-As-Fuck-Golda-Whose-Making-An-Ass-of-Herself -By-Gawking-At-The-HAF-Alien Birnbaum. But I don't say that. In fact, I suck in my cheeks to keep from saying it because I'm so damn tempted. He really is the most gorgeous man I've ever seen.

When he dips his head slightly, acknowledging me, a lock of thick, dark hair falls forward. Forget running off at the mouth. My impulsive nature finds another outlet as my fingers brush back his hair. I accidentally strike some bumps on his head near his horn. I'd love to run my fingers over his horn, but I've already invaded his space. Ha! I invaded an alien's space... nice change of pace around here!

His horns, tall, majestic, and as dark as his hair, slowly rise, making me think of another part of him rising... something I shouldn't be thinking about. I step back, hoping I haven't offended him.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have touched you. Habit, I suppose." WTF am I saying? Who has a habit of brushing someone's hair back? "I mean, your hair was in your eyes."

"Not a problem, Daughter of Mrs. Gertie-She's-A-Lovely-Though-Somewhat-Crazy-Woman Birnbaum."

"Oh, my name! It's Golda. But my sister calls me Goldie, or Goldilox because I love lox and bagels, and my roommates called me GR sometimes." Please, someone shoot me or staple my mouth shut!

Mr. HAF grins, just enough to make me bounce on my boot heels. I am so going to get drunk when I get home today because if I don't, I'll be replaying every stupid thing I've

done since meeting this guy and I don't think I can handle those memories.

He steps closer to me, that huge body of his moving with grace and purpose. "I enjoy your touch, Golda."

That heavenly scent from earlier explodes all around me. Maybe I've been wrong to judge him prematurely, because he has to be one hell of a cook. Except when I look around the kitchen, I realize he hasn't cooked anything. Where is that intoxicating smell coming from?

Before my eyes shoot to him, I know he's the source.

Oy. I *can't* be attracted to an alien. And worse, that's at least the second time the word *oy* has popped into my head when I've looked at him. God help me, there's an alien in my kitchen *and* I'm turning into my mother!

I fan myself, trying to cool off and calm down. I'm not sure what's worse at this point. Knowing I'm attracted to this handsome alien or realizing I have to let my mom know exactly who she let into her home.

"Are you in the right place... ah... I didn't catch your name."

"I didn't throw it."

Despite maintaining an air of political correctness, I grin. I like him and his sense of humor, though I'm not entirely sure he's joking.

Aliens who come to Earth always know Common. It's the one language the majority of people on Earth speak thanks to nearly two decades under Coalition rule. But this guy's been talking to me in English. It's hard to say how extensive his command over the language is, but I'm going to have fun finding out.

Down, girl, I chastise myself.

At twenty-eight, I shouldn't be lusting over a guy, but apparently my hormones didn't get the memo. Every part of my body's heating up and I can't take my eyes off him. Maybe I'll get what I want for Hannukah this year after all. To lose

my virginity. I envision him wrapped in a shiny red bow... and nothing else. Yes, I'd love to unwrap him.

I lift my chin and take a slow, deep breath, trying to handle this like the adult that I'm supposed to be.

“Let's start over. It's nice to meet you. I'm Golda. The youngest daughter of Mrs. Gertie-She's-A-Lovely-Though-Somewhat-Crazy-Woman Birnbaum. Not that I'm that young. I'm twenty-eight. Though that's practically spinster age, if you ask my mom. Sometimes I swear her sole purpose in life is to marry me off.”

Still rambling, Golda!

I don't usually babble like this. It could be because he's an alien.

In my kitchen.

And he's not only hot-as-fuck, but he smells soooo good. I keep thinking of campfires and s'mores.

His eyes move over me slowly, and my girls snap to attention. “No one could mistake you for a youngling.”

A wave of heat spreads to my nether region. I'm overheating and the stove isn't even on. If I don't peel my sweater off soon, I'll start sweating. Sweating in front of a guy isn't sexy. Not that I should be concerned with sexy. Hell, no. My parents would never let me date an alien.

What the hell, Golda Rose? You're an adult. You don't need their permission!

“How old are you?” I ask. Yep. I'm turning into my mother. Just throw the question out there without any subtlety. He doesn't smile, but those warm silver eyes haven't left me. No wonder I'm burning up. I should put some distance between us, but I don't want to.

“Thirty-one by the measure of your Earth years.” The pads of his fingers move over my forearm, making me tingle *everywhere*. “Are all human females this soft?”

That intense heat settles in my cheeks. If I don't take my sweater off soon, I'm going to be sweating bullets.

Did I wear a bra today? It's laundry day, which means I took the shortcut of wearing a baggy sweater. Of all the days to—

“Is there a problem, Golda? Your cheeks are red.”

“I'm a little overheated, that's all. It happens when I come in from the cold outside. I didn't expect you to be so hot. I mean the kitchen! I didn't expect the kitchen to be so hot!”

God, please, I beg you. Strike me down with lightning, the plague... anything. Just spare me the embarrassment of having to face this gorgeous guy any longer... and without a bra on!

CHAPTER TWO

STENIKOV

This beauty before me is utterly fascinating. I can't quite figure out what about her captivates me, but I'm determined to find out. Despite her initial fear when she found me in her family's kitchen, she stood up to me and talked to me as an equal. That is not something I've encountered here on Earth.

The Coalition occupied this planet for twenty years, destroying more than their infrastructure. They deprived the females of their rights even to the basic necessities such as education and the ability to defend themselves. The males do not respect their females or recognize them as the gifts they are. Some do, but most do not.

My people have an embassy on Earth in a city called Los Angeles. Zyan's leaders see something more to these humans, something I have yet to experience. Perhaps this is why Commander Kesk assigned me to New York City.

"I am Stenikov. You may call me Sten."

"My mom's right. Your name sounds Russian, but I'm guessing you're not from Russia."

"I'm from Zyan, but I'm stationed in New York as part of GI7."

"GI7?"

"Galactic Intelligence, Sector 7. The primary mission of Galactic Intelligence is to ensure the Coalition and Grud never

rise to power again. Sector 7 protects witnesses vital to the fight against the Coalition. We coordinate with Earth Intelligence when we identify humans as potential witnesses or targets or we need to hide a non-human witness on Earth.”

“That’s very interesting, fascinating even, but it doesn’t explain why you’re here, in my parents’ brownstone. My dad’s an engineer over at Fahrven Technologies and my mom tutors women who are learning to read and write.”

I’m interested in hearing more about the family who lives here, but my thoughts fixate on Golda. There is a vibrancy to her that shines as much as her beautiful brown eyes. She wears a baggy sweater that hides her figure, and I cannot say she moves with grace, but the swell of her breasts beneath that bulky garment, her utterly divine scent, and her sweet nature call to me. My pleasure cock already strains against my pants. A tough, unforgiving fabric humans call jeans. I prefer the loose pants zyanthan warriors wear, but Commander Kesk emphasized more than once the importance of blending in with humans when possible.

“I was told to come here to aid your family with whatever they need for the week. My commander says I need to understand humans and their culture better. And you, Golda, what is your profession?”

She tucks a strand of silky brown hair behind her ear, the red of her cheeks deepening. “I do office work in the warehouse district for Jenkins Imports. I want to be a social worker, but the government doesn’t hire many social workers. The higher-ups don’t consider it a priority job. I must say, your English is really good, Sten.”

My name rolls from her lips with heart. Everything she says is with optimism and confidence. She’s so different from other humans.

“Would you prefer I switch to Common, Zyanthan, Tunzen, Keentan, Banth—”

She holds up her hand, stopping me. “You’ve had quite an education. And here I thought I was one of the lucky ones.”

“In what way?”

“I read and write English and Common. Most women my age can’t read or write either. I’d already learned to write and read before the invasion. After that, I had my parents and Bubbe to teach me math, science... anything they knew, even though it was illegal.”

“Who is Bubbe?” I imagine a well-built male with his arms around this female’s waist, and I don’t like the image. Not at all.

She taps her finger against her lips. Red, lush lips that I find myself memorizing the contour and color. She chooses her words carefully. “Some would say Bubbe’s the scourge of the neighborhood, and—”

Golda rushes forward and removes a small wooden box from the counter beside the sink, which is filled with soapy water and several dirty dishes. “Sorry, I noticed someone left this out. If it gets knocked into the water, Bubbe will kill whoever left it out.”

I instantly take a disliking to this Bubbe. Golda moves the box to another counter, away from the water.

“You are a risk taker,” I surmise from what she’s told me of her life so far.

“Hardly! But I do like when things are neat and organized. That makes me good at my job. The bookkeeping and inventory part. Enough about me. My mom said you’re going to help out around here.”

As this tiny female runs her eyes over me, I realize it might be some time before my pleasure cock relaxes. Focusing on my tasks here would be best for all.

“I will do whatever is required of me.”

The way she scrutinizes me, with her eyes squarely locked on my face, throws me back to my entrance interview for warrior training. The warriors there had many questions as well, namely how a male who came from a family of all females would fare under the strict rules and regimen at the training center in Izoran on Zyan. They’d seen my lack of a

father as a detriment, since most fathers teach their sons the basic skills of a warrior before they enter the training center.

“Can you cook?” Golda asks with an intense stare. She reminds me of my weapons instructor who had an uncanny way of knowing when a person lied. Not that I have any reason to lie to this female.

“I’ve caught and skinned many kuvaks during my teens and twenties. I’ve been told the way I cook their meat over an open fire surpasses that of other warriors.”

She folds her arms under those lovely breasts and shakes her head. “Not a cook then.”

I don’t usually tolerate anyone implying I’m a liar, but she doesn’t have any malice in her expression or her heart.

“My commander said I need to understand humans better. This is why he assigned me to work for Mrs. Gertie-She’s-A-Lovely-Though-Somewhat-Crazy-Woman Birnbaum.”

Golda’s brows lift. “About that... You should call her Mrs. Birnbaum. It’s shorter. Believe me, she won’t be insulted.”

“I will defer to your insight.”

Beautiful brown eyes widen. “Really? You don’t look like the type of guy to defer to anyone, for any reason. What precisely is your job for GI7? I mean, when you’re not playing chef?”

“I relocate witnesses. Guard them. Sometimes I infiltrate enemy territory to help a potential witness escape, but that usually falls to GI5. My primary mission is to ensure the safety of the witness.”

Her lovely smile disappears for a moment, replaced by worry. “Are you here to protect someone in my family, Sten?”

“No.”

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

She’s wise to question, and unfortunately, I have no way of proving myself to her. “You don’t.”

“Since the war ended, we don’t see many aliens in Manhattan, let alone in our kitchen.”

I’ve alarmed her, which was not my objective. “This is a learning period for me. Nothing more.”

Her eyes widen with an excitement I don’t understand, but it lights a fire in me I have not felt in many years. Fighting the Coalition, being away from Zyan and my family, only to be sent to this distant planet, has worn on me over time.

With one fluid motion, I peel off the t-shirt I’m wearing to show her the warrior tattoos on my chest and biceps. “Warriors often undergo additional training for whatever mission or task we’re assigned. We do whatever is required of us.”

She cocks her head in an adorable manner. I can see her thinking, analyzing... me, the situation, everything. But she hasn’t armed herself with any of the knives laying on the counter or chased me from her family’s home. Nor has she spewed words of ignorance and hate. Instead, a smile overtakes her round face, lifting her deep brown eyes in a way that warms me.

“Whatever is required of you?” The lilt of her voice and the uptick in her smile make my horns want to shoot straight up, but I will them to remain still, despite the extreme concentration that requires. Another skill my commander insists I improve.

“Yes. Anything.”

“Oh, Warrior, I think we need to work on your English.”

I do not know what I’ve said wrong, but I love the way she says warrior. With respect, curiosity, and a teasing to her voice that intrigues me. I wish I knew what she was thinking. My cocks twitch, eager to accept whatever challenge she throws at me.

My cocks twitch... *both* of them. That cannot be! My pleasure cock, yes, but not my mating cock. I freeze, stunned by this development, and I panic... something a warrior should never do. I shift one leg, then the other, trying to adjust my cocks without actually touching them in this female’s

presence. The tight pants these humans wear leave no room for a male's cocks to move. That has to be it. With my pleasure cock reacting to this shapely female, it must have nudged my upper cock. Nothing short of being with my sholani, my heartmate, will awaken my mating cock.

CHAPTER THREE

GOLDA

“I make you nervous,” Stenikov says, noticing how I keep looking toward the kitchen door.

My mom can come down any minute. No wonder I’m still a virgin. The thought of mom barging in and catching me makes it impossible to relax around a guy even when all I’m doing is talking to him.

“Not you exactly. But, well, you’re an alien.”

“That’s twice you’ve mentioned that. Is my being an alien a problem for you, female?”

“As much as my being a female is a problem for you.”

His eyes rake down my body slowly, sending a tingle through me. My nipples harden and suddenly not having a bra on feels sexy, dangerous. For a brief moment, I’m no longer the self-conscious woman I am around the guys at the warehouse where I work. Maybe because they’re all assholes who only make passes at me and treat me like the only job I should have is lying on my back with my legs spread for them. Certainly not keeping track of inventory and doing the books.

“I have no issues with females. Or humans.”

He’s shifting from leg to leg. The poor guy looks like he’s about to burst out of those jeans that have to be at least one size too small for his large frame.

“Stop calling me female and we’ll have no problems.” With a nod from him, I turn to Bubbe’s recipe box and walk

my fingers through the index cards, stalling.

“It was not my intent to insult you,” Stenikov adds when I turn my back on him.

I spin around, abandoning the recipe box. “No insult taken. Help me figure out what we’re going to do, okay?” I can’t help getting bossy. My mind’s racing a million miles a minute trying to figure out how to keep hurricane Gertrude from coming down here and scaring off this huge hunk of heavenly alien.

Not that I think anything will scare him. But I can definitely envision my mom chasing him out of the house with her broom like she would a mouse. In fact, she did that once to a boy I brought home. Chased him with her broom all the way down the street. I’d liked him, but Mom said he wasn’t good enough for me. It turns out she was right, but I was sixteen, stupid, and we were still under Coalition rule. I thought dating a guy who’d joined the Brotherhood would benefit us. I was wrong.

As I look at Sten, I wonder if my ability to judge people has improved over the years. I sure hope so. He’s sweet and seems like an honest guy, but he has horns. Really big horns like the type that are made into the shofar we blow into during the high holidays in the fall.

Blow. Oh, God, the area between my thighs is heating up. I’ve heard my roommates talk about giving blow jobs, and how they love it. Picturing myself on my knees in front of this guy isn’t the way to start a friendship.

“What are we going to do about what?” His deep voice pulls me and my thoughts out of the gutter.

“You,” I answer point blank. “We can’t have an alien here.”

“My orders are to perform tasks for your family. I knocked on the door and your mother commanded me to enter and proceed to the kitchen to cook.”

“My mom has a way of barking orders like she’s in the military.”

“She would make a superb commander.”

“You don’t know the half of it. Between her and Bubbe, I don’t have a lot of freedom here. That’s the reason I got an apartment. Technically, I share one with four other women. But it’s still freedom compared to living here.”

His brows pinch together. Likely because I’m babbling. Poor guy shouldn’t have to endure listening to me ramble. “You said someone ordered you here?”

“My commander. He’s giving me another chance to prove myself. Commander Kesk warned me to be on my best behavior and not insult any humans while I’m here. Or to have sex in public.”

My mouth drops open.

Stenikov places a thick finger beneath my chin and closes my jaw. “I had that same reaction when Commander Kesk cited that rule. Is having public sex a privilege reserved for humans on Earth?”

“Definitely not. I mean, no, it’s not reserved for humans... I mean, no one should be having public sex, human or alien. Don’t even suggest otherwise around my parents or Bubbe.”

“This Bubbe sounds like a formidable opponent.”

“A hundred pounds of spit and fire.”

“A huntsu from the fire pits on Trinoth?”

“Just a badass from the Lower East Side. Bubbe will be here for dinner tomorrow night.”

Sten pulls a knife from the butcher block on the counter. “I am prepared.”

I’m tempted to ask if he’d prefer to use a vegetable peeler for the potatoes, but he looks more comfortable with that knife in his hand. Which has me thinking about how I should make use of him in the kitchen.

My eyes jump to the center island that’s sturdy enough to support my weight. God, help me, my mind keeps returning to the gutter, ready to set up permanent residence there. It’s

Stenikov's fault for being drop-dead gorgeous and mentioning public sex.

I reach into a drawer and take out the rolling pin. "We better get started cooking. We'll start with latkes. They're easy enough to heat up the next day. One less thing to cook tomorrow."

"Latkes?"

"Potato pancakes. They're delicious. And messy. Which reminds me... Aprons!"



STENIKOV

AS GOLDA ROOTS through a drawer filled with fabric, I watch her shapely backside. The thoughts going through my head are not proper, especially while I'm working. Though my usual duties don't include cooking, I'm here to interact with humans and to learn about them and their confusing ways.

And my drekking cock keeps pressing against these pants that I'm now convinced were created to torture males. How do humans put up with such confining fabric? Is this how the females here fight against the males who oppress them? I will have to watch myself around Golda, as she is not only beautiful, but clever.

"Found it!" She springs to her feet, with a white fabric in her hand.

"What is this?"

"An apron. All cooks wear them. The smart ones, anyway."

"A uniform?"

She tilts her head in an adorable manner. "I guess you can call it that."

"If I wear this, I may stay? To fulfill my training?"

“I’ve got you covered. Both with the apron and on convincing my mother not to toss you out the moment she sees that you’re an alien.”

Golda stops talking. Her lovely smile disappears, worry reflected in her face, but then she bounces on her heels, lifts her chin, and says, “You’re one of the good guys, as we say. The DAA wouldn’t have let you land otherwise. That’s all that matters. I’ll handle my mom if and when she objects to you being here. She put me in charge of the cooking and I’ll take whatever help I can get.”

“Yes, Commander.” I dip my head. My people do not have a salute like that of Earth’s military.

“I’m not a commander.”

This female takes control quickly and decisively like any commander I’ve ever known. So to me, the title fits.

“The apron is essential, so you don’t stain your clothing. Working with oil can get messy.”

“You cook with the crude energy that your land vehicles use?”

“Cooking oil, silly. Not car oil. Latkes aren’t hard to make, but they splatter when we fry them.”

She holds up white material that looks like half of a bartah, a traditional dress zyanthan females wear back home. And when I say half, I mean there is no way that dress will cover both sides of this female. If she wears it in front, then her backside will have no coverage, not that I mind the image. On the other hand, covering her back and ass will fully expose her front. Rather enticing, either way.

I should not picture such things, especially with my pleasure cock easily aroused by this female. I lift one leg then the other, trying to adjust myself in these tight pants without calling attention to my erection.

She tosses the apron to me. “That’s yours.”

As I catch the thin, half-garment, the dilemma’s now mine. How should I wear this meager cloth without violating the

rules my commander set forth?

Three rules of being a marshal, Stenikov. First, you do anything to protect your witness. Second, you remember your training as a warrior at all times. And third, no public sex, even if it's with your mate.

The second rule includes a warrior conducting himself with honor and dignity. This garment does not appear dignified. I wonder if it was clothing such as this that led to my commander's third rule, about no public sex. It is not our way on Zyan to have sex in public. Golda said it was not acceptable here either, or did she mean because I'm not her mate?

Her mate... I don't dislike the idea.

But I am not here to find a mate. I've been in this home less than thirty minutes and already I realize I have much to learn about humans. And not only the rules of their culture but how they think and communicate.

Since I arrived on Earth two weeks ago, I've faced mostly fear and hatred. Golda displays neither, but humans don't have horns like zyanthans, which makes reading their body language difficult. Zyanthans convey much with the position of our horns and how quickly we move them. With humans, I must rely more on facial expressions.

And this female is quite expressive. Her eyes do more than follow me with curiosity; they narrow and widen at various intervals. At least I can detect her color changes. A drop of two shades in most species reflects anything from mild concern to surprise. An increase in a being's color usually indicates embarrassment or excitement.

"Are you mated, Golda Birnbaum?"

"Call me Golda. Or Commander," she adds with an uptick of her mouth.

Yes, she is quite astute. And adorable. I will enjoy taking orders from her.

"Does that mean you have no mate?" I repeat my question. I'm extra careful around a mated female, as I do not wish to

anger a mate in any way.

She points to the fourth digit on her left hand. I see nothing there. Perhaps she is suggesting an activity with me? One that involves only a single finger. I can think of several.

“Why are you grinning, Sten?”

“I was thinking of home.” I don’t wish to lie to her, but I don’t think she wishes to hear how I would use my fingers on her. And my tongue. And my—

“Is Zyan similar to Earth?”

“In some ways. Similar atmosphere, but our grass is blue and we have different animals and produce. It is the culture here that baffles me.”

“You’ll get used to it, I’m sure. And no, I’m not married.”

I start to smile and instantly force it back. My imagination has led me astray. Not good for a warrior, especially for one of thirty-one years.

“We better start cooking or we’ll never have dinner ready in time.” She pats the white cloth I’m clutching. “Put the apron on, Warrior. You can’t cook dressed like that.”

I can and I have, numerous times, but I don’t contradict her. I’m a guest in her home, and she’s technically my teacher. Disrespecting a teacher would not reflect well on me or zyanthan warriors as a whole.

As I open the cloth, ties unfurl from the top of a narrow square of fabric. Longer, thicker ties spill out from the middle of a wider square next. Neither section provides enough material to cover my cocks and ass at the same time.

“And this one is mine,” she says, holding up fabric half the size of the one she gave me.

When I turn my apron around, I see the word **BIG** followed by **BIGGER**, both in large red print.

“Sorry for the lack of imagination on there. I made that apron when I was five and was just learning to read and write.”

“This uniform will not cover much.”

“It will cover enough. Trust me.”

When she says I should trust her, I do. This alone surprises me. Trust is not easy for any warrior. We tend to only trust those we fight alongside. And of course a mate. But Golda is neither.

“Golda, we’re ready to leave. How is it going in there?” her mother yells from the living room.

“I’m showing Sten where everything is.”

“I moved the mixer since you were last here. You’ll never find it. Give me a second to put Sadie in the stroller and then I’ll show you.”

Golda’s eyes widen with panic. “Stay here,” she orders and races through the kitchen door like an advance scout determined to assess the danger ahead and protect her team. It makes me wonder why she works in a warehouse. With her forethought and fast decision making, she would do well as a scout. As curious as I am about her mother, I’ve been given my orders. I hold the apron up, trying to figure it out. I’m a warrior who has disarmed bombs and snuck into enemy encampments. This swatch of fabric will not be my downfall...

CHAPTER FOUR

GOLDA

Oh, God! I can't let Mom ruin everything. I'm just getting to know Stenikov. If she comes in here, she'll chase him off.

I fly out of the kitchen to see my mom removing her coat. Sadie's already wrapped up in her winter bunting and lying down in her stroller, ready for her outing.

"I'll carry the stroller down the porch steps for you, Mom."

"I need to show you were the mixer is first."

"I'll find it. It's a mixer, not a tiny earring that can fall between the cracks in the floor and disappear. Besides, I'm not making the donut dough until tomorrow. Latkes and apple sauce today, right?" We always make a few dishes the day before Hannukah to spread out the work.

Mom eyes me. I'll never understand how she can be so dense about some things and yet see through me when I'm trying to manipulate her. In two strides, I pick up the stroller and head out the front door. She has no choice but to follow me.

After I set the stroller down on the sidewalk, I kiss the baby, and then Mom. "At least it's not bitterly cold today. Take your time going to the appointment and watch out for black ice."

“I’ve lived here my entire life. I know how to walk in the snow and ice. Find a husband, then have children and mother them, not me.”

“Yes, Mom.”

“And don’t talk back to me.”

I open my mouth to object, but I don’t want this turning into a fight. “I’m sorry.”

She kisses my cheek. “Get back inside. You’re not wearing a coat. You’ll catch cold.”

Hmm, now there’s a thought. If I catch cold, maybe a certain alien would warm me up.

When I head up the steps, my mom hums a lullaby to Sadie as they leave. I wait outside for a minute longer, to make sure she doesn’t suddenly turn around with the excuse she forgot something. I’d like to get to know Stenikov, without her barging in and ruining everything.

Once inside, I lock the door and shake the snowflakes off me before they melt. Now’s the perfect chance to spruce up a bit. I keep some clothing here for when I visit. I race upstairs to my old bedroom, quickly strip out of my sweater, throw a bra on, and change into a light green button-down shirt. I drag the brush through all my tangles then pull my hair into a neat pony tail. One last sniff of my underarms and I’m good to go.

I’m eager to continue where I left off with Stenikov, but instead of running down to the kitchen, I force myself to walk down the stairs like a lady. My mom’s voice is in my head, influencing me even though she’s not here.

As I set my hand on the kitchen door, I take a moment to compose myself. My heart’s fluttering and a kaleidoscope of butterflies has invaded my stomach. One, final, deep breath to calm myself and I push open the door.

And freeze.

“You’re naked!” I shout, unable to tear my eyes away from the sight before me. The most perfect blue moon I’ve ever seen.

With his horns raised high, Stenikov stands in the middle of the kitchen completely naked except for an apron. Apron strings dangle down his backside over a magnificent set of tight buns. I've had buns in the kitchen before but nothing I ever wanted to knead more than that glorious blue flesh.

When Stenikov turns to face me, I worry that he'll have nothing on in front, but it's an apron so at least he'll be covered... *there*.

"I'm wearing the uniform you gave me for cooking. Did I put it on wrong?"

"Yes!"

"Then I will remove it and you can demonstrate." He reaches back to untie the apron...



STENIKOV

"No!" Golda yells, with one hand outstretched and the other covering her eyes. "Don't undress."

When Golda left the kitchen to speak with her mother, I shoved the zipper on my jeans down fast, at substantial risk to my cocks. I did not wish to be slow in following her instructions. Impressing this female with my ability to follow orders seems paramount for some reason. Infinitely more than the need to impress Commander Kesk.

I must temper myself though, because Earth is fraught with dangers, some quite small, such as the zipper on the jeans I wear to blend in with the human populace. Those metal teeth remind me of a visca that does not let go once it bites. Fortunately, this time the zipper parted without fighting me. My cocks sprang free, finding instant relief. After several torturous hours in the denim that I'm starting to believe is not a human invention, but a torture device of the Coalition's making, I appreciate how the cooking uniform loosely covers my cocks, even though it fails to cover my ass.

“What are you doing?” The red in Golda’s cheeks deepens an impressive four shades.

“I will remove the apron, so you can demonstrate the correct way for me to wear it.”

“But you’re naked!”

I look down. Although my pleasure cock tents the soft fabric, I am covered. “I am not naked. Not yet.”

She swallows hard, her throat seductively undulating. I’m mesmerized and imagine her swallowing more than air.

“Turn around,” she says.

Well-aware that my bare ass somehow caused this female’s distress, I still do as she commands.

“I can...” She coughs. “...see your... um... tush.”

“Tush? I don’t know this word.”

“Derriere. Gluteus maximus. Rump. Fanny... not to be confused with the girl down the street. Buttocks. Any of these ringing a bell?”

I turn my head, angling my right ear towards the front of the home. “I don’t hear any bells.”

She laughs, a carefree and joyous sound that lifts my soul. All too easily, this female distracts me from my goals, which at the moment includes learning the meaning of the word tush and how to don the cooking uniform properly. Correcting my behavior holds the highest priority if I wish to stay with this female. If I disobey, she might send me away. Not that I fear what Commander Kesk would say, but I do not wish to leave this female. She... makes me smile.

“I didn’t mean actual bells, like on a church. I’m guessing if I say it’s a place where the sun don’t shine, you won’t understand that either?”

“My education as a youngling included planetary sciences. There are many worlds where the sun doesn’t shine much of the year due to the planet’s orbit and rotation.”

“That confirms it. Basic English it is.”

“Is what?”

“I can’t use idioms with you.”

“Ah, yes, Commander Kesik explained the misuse of words to me before I left Los Angeles. You should use them, as I need to learn as much of human culture and language as I can.”

Her eyes narrow. “Are you sure? Around here we use some Yiddish on top of English. It’s not exactly a widely used language.”

“You should behave and speak as on any other day. Please explain the term *tush*.”

She turns around, quite seductively, and wiggles her lush backside. My hands itch to reach out and curve over what I imagine is soft flesh.

And third, no public sex, even if it’s with your mate.

Zirkov’s words return. Although Golda and I are alone, I cannot take advantage of the female. Even if I were not a guest in her home for the week, this female deserves respect, as do all females. But this one in particular... I see something special in her.

Before I succumb to the temptation of this female, I shove my hands behind my back... and hit bare flesh as the apron only covers my front. Suddenly, I figure out what she’s been trying to tell me.

“Do you mean *ass*?”

“Yes!” she says, wiggling hers once more.

Humans have too many words for a body part that is common to most of the universe. Though I must say, I enjoy her teaching methods. My pleasure cock approves as well, tenting the front of the apron. Her eyes follow mine to where the word BIG overlays my erect cock.

She covers her mouth, trying not to laugh. Not the reaction I expect when a female sees my interest, but I already know I’ve erred in my use of this apron.

With the promise of hot oil splashing, my instinct was to protect my cocks, not my ass. “Should I turn the apron around?”

“No!” Her hand covers mine, stopping me from untying the strings at my waist. Her touch reminds me of silk. Soft, yet strong, and it affects me in a way I did not expect. My horns rise, followed by other parts of me. More than my pleasure cock...

This cannot be! A zyanthan’s mating cock only rises for his mate. Golda cannot be my mate. She’s human. It must be an after-effect of wearing the constricting jeans for so long. Dressing will solve the problem, but I dread the idea of dressing in human pants again. They were not designed for a male with two cocks.

When Zirkov advised I dress like the humans, I may have misunderstood. He was speaking in English at the time. Now that I recall, he was wearing the comfortable pants of a zyanthan warrior, not jeans.

To reach down and touch my mating cock, to see if it’s rising as I suspect, would not be appropriate, even if she is my mate. I need a distraction, something that takes my mind off the lovely female whose eyes are full of life.

“Perhaps you should demonstrate the use of the apron for me, Commander.”

The corners of her mouth kick up again. She likes when I call her commander. I will have to be careful not to call her that in front of anyone else. Zirkov might consider it disrespectful if he ever discovered I call a civilian by a title he’s worked hard to earn.

“Okay, Sten. Let’s start over. Watch me.” She takes the strings of another apron and wraps them around her lovely waist to tie in back.

“The apron goes over your clothing. See? To keep your clothes from getting ruined.”

I see my error all while I find myself jealous of that apron, hugging her form so nicely. I should have asked for a

demonstration from the start.

“Thank you for explaining.” Maybe I’m stalling since I’ll have to put my pants back on, but this desire to flirt with her is too great, too pressing. I want to hear her laugh again and see her smile, and I know how to do it. “To be clear, you wish me to dress in my clothing again?”

“Yes.”

“It’s cooler like this.”

“I bet it is.” A tiny smile appears, but then her eyes shoot to the door. “My mother wouldn’t understand, and I have no idea when she’ll return. I still have to convince her having an alien here is okay, and that will be easier if you have clothing on.”

“Very well, I shall put my pants on.” As I untie the apron and remove it, she turns her back to me. I’m guessing to give me privacy. I’ve made her uncomfortable, which was not my intent.

“My commander assigned me to assist in your parents’ home so I will learn about humans and their customs,” I say as I dress.

“I doubt learning about aprons will save a witness.”

“Small details are often the key to succeeding. I’m dressed. You may turn around.”

After a quick glance, she motions toward my cocks. “You can zip up now.”

“No, I can’t.”

This time when her eyes dart down, she notices the bulge. “Oh!”

Golda’s face turns redder than a keenta in heat. She bites her lip, glances to the door one more time, then holds the apron against my chest as she slides behind me to tie it in back.

The apron’s front drops low enough to cover my hard cocks pushing through the partially open zipper. It’s coverage,

so I don't complain, but I suspect this female is braving through her embarrassment to spare me.

Her lovely breasts press against the thin green shirt she wears as she ties the top part of the apron around my neck. My mouth waters, but I refrain from licking my lips. Or anything else.

Though I'm tempted. Sorely tempted.

My cocks are on fire now, demanding attention. Even if my life depended on it, I cannot force them into these drekking pants. I'm very thankful this apron covers my lower half.

With Golda's face inches from mine, an enticing aroma hits me with the force of blaster fire. Every part of my body demands I pull her to me and fill my lungs with the sweet air. Despite my efforts to resist, her scent wraps around me, reminding me of circanni blooms in the spring back home. Sweet and calming. Truly magnificent.

I never imagined a human could be so captivating, but Golda is everything a male wants in a female. She's smart, brave, patient, and beautiful. I'm ready to surrender to her, though she's made no demands of me, other than to cook.

"I guess we should get started. Get you engrained in cooking so my mother can't object. Though don't be surprised if she finds a reason. She can be highly critical."

"My mother is the same. Though without a sholan at home, it became necessary. I'm one of five, and she had to be strict to maintain order. She became both mother and father to us."

"Did your father leave your mother for another woman?"

It's an odd question. A sholan would never leave his sholani for any reason other than to protect his female, younglings, or world.

"Heartmates are bound to one another." I try to leave the hurt out of my voice and answer honestly, which is what I see in her lovely brown eyes. Honesty. She wants to understand. "My father died when the Grud attacked his battlecruiser near the coalition border. This was before the Grud invaded Zyan."

“I’m so sorry. That must have been very hard for your whole family.”

The expression on her face melts my heart. This female grew up on a world so different from my own, but her heart is full of love. Her curiosity and open-mindedness is refreshing, especially compared to the other humans I’ve met since I arrived on Earth.

“How old were you?” she asks.

“Five. The youngest. I did not fully understand the loss until later, when it came time to prepare for warrior training. When I turned eight, my mother showed me proper knife throwing techniques, as my father had taught her, but she did not have the time or skill to teach me what the other males were learning from their fathers.”

“She must be very proud of you.”

“She is proud of all her younglings. My sisters have families and positions in the government, except for Lajana. She’s third lead at a med center, but I’m confident she will become first lead in time.”

“Very impressive. It sounds like your mother did a fabulous job and you were all good listeners. That probably helps when training to be a warrior.”

At her praise, I stand taller, allowing my horns to reach high in the kitchen, nearly touching the low ceiling. “I have never dishonored my fellow warriors, but at times I don’t follow orders very well. Our instructors in Izoran teach us to be independent and work as part of a team. Balancing the two can be elusive. It’s why I’m here in New York. I need to prove myself to my commander. He’s ordered me to do whatever the Birnbaum family requires during my stay here. ”

“You’re staying here? In this house?”

“Yes. For one week.”

“Oy. This keeps getting better and better.”

CHAPTER FIVE

GOLDA

Stenikov's staying in my parents' house for a full week. There go my plans to stay here for the holiday. I don't think I can be in the same house with this hot guy for a week and, well, stay a virgin. Not that I'm trying to stay a virgin. Quite the opposite, in fact. I want to be at that point in my life where I'm intimate with a guy, but it has to be the right guy.

I look at this tall, gorgeous male and wonder if he could be the one. My stomach flutters and my nipples harden. I could see myself with him, but losing my virginity with my parents across the hall is definitely not the way to go.

A hand brushes against mine, pulling me from my thoughts and sending a jolt of pleasure through me. I freeze, not because I'm scared. If I stay still, he might touch me again, and I really, *really*, want him to touch me again.

"Mrs. Birnbaum directed me to get started on Hannukah dinner for the family. I am unfamiliar with what is required. I examined the contents of your pantry and chiller and do not see any kuvak or kirkas beef, only a flat piece of meat with a thick layer of fat on it."

I'm amazed by how fearless he is, coming to a world where everything must be so strange compared to what he knows. "That's the brisket. We'll make that tomorrow. Are you comfortable cutting and slicing?"

He pulls out a four-inch knife, tosses it in the air, and catches it by the hilt... all while his eyes remain on me.

That is so incredibly sexy. And that grin of his is panty-melting. I should know because mine just burst into flames... incinerated.

One side of his mouth kicks up, sending my heart racing. Heat fills my cheeks and upper chest. I'd love to open the window, but it's the middle of winter. Instead, I unbutton the top two buttons on my shirt, tempted to keep going. I need Stenikov as much as I need air to breathe. In my head, that sounds foolish, but my head's not the part of me in charge right now.

"I shall demonstrate my skills." Sten takes the knife by the tip of the blade, pulls his arm back and throws.

"Golda, I'm home." Mom opens the kitchen door as a swoosh fills my ears. The knife sails across the kitchen and lodges in the door frame as she enters.

Mom looks at the knife, then Stenikov. I expect her to scream or run from the kitchen.

No, not my mom. New York born and bred, she not only survived an alien invasion with her entire family intact, but she also makes a lion look like a kitten when she's riled up. Mom grabs the skillet from the stove and charges at Stenikov.

"Golda, call the police! Get the gun!"

Gun? We have a gun in the house? Since when?

Everything moves in slow motion as my mom swings the skillet at Stenikov with enough force that I envision a baseball flying into the stands at Yankee Stadium. My dad took me to see a baseball game when I was five, before the Grud invaded. Except it's not a baseball I envision, rather a blue head with horns. Mom's swinging that skillet like a pro.

With lightning-fast reflexes, Stenikov picks up the rolling pin and blocks the skillet. Crack! The skillet hits wood with enough force to launch Sten into outer space, but he maintains his position.

“Female, I’m not here to harm you!”

I can’t seem to make my feet or mouth move. I knew something like this was going to happen. I’m thankful she didn’t come in when he was half-naked.

When she swings again, I yell, “Stop! He’s a friend.”

The skillet stops in mid-air. “He’s an alien! Call your father!”

“Seriously, Mom? Even if Dad weren’t out of town, I’d have to race down to Mr. Kaplan’s and use his comm to contact Dad’s office. Do you think an intruder’s going to stand here, tapping his foot, waiting for Dad to get home?”

“What are you doing here?” Mom demands, glaring at our holiday helper.

“I’m Stenikov. The male you told to enter this morning while you tended to the youngling.” He bows his head slightly while keeping his eyes on my mother. Slowly, he sets the rolling pin on the counter. We both look at my mother, waiting for her to surrender the skillet.

“You are not Stenikov. He’s the young man staying with us for the week.”

“Mom, this *is* Stenikov, the man you’re hosting. He was in the kitchen when I arrived this morning.”

“I said man, not alien.”

“My Commander spoke with Mr. Charles Harrington from The Department of Alien Affairs.”

“That’s David’s friend,.” Mom lowers her skillet an inch.

I reach over and ease the skillet from her hands. “Sten is here to help with whatever we need and in exchange he’ll learn about human customs. Why don’t you take Sadie for a walk down to Mr. Kaplan’s and use his comm to call Dad?”

“I’m not leaving you alone with an alien!”

“He’s not Grud or Coalition.”

“You don’t know that!”

I roll my eyes. “Sure, Mom. The Coalition’s infiltrating our kitchen to learn the secrets behind our recipes. That will help them breach Earth’s defenses.”

“Don’t get flippant with me, Golda Rose.”

“Who’s being flippant? I mean, if they take Aunt Evelyn’s recipe for matzah balls, those things are like lead cannon balls. They could have the next great weapon to win a war!”

“Now you’re being mean. My sister’s matzah balls aren’t that bad.”

“Look me straight in the eyes and say that again, Mom.”

“Rose?” Sten interrupts our side conversation. “If I recall correctly, that’s an Earth flower. I’m sure I’ve seen it as part of my field guide when I studied about Earth. It’s a beautiful flower, though not as beautiful as Golda.”

Oh, he’s smooth, complimenting me in front of my mother.

There’s a shift in the air, like when the coalition forces withdrew from Earth. We could feel... hell, we could *taste* freedom. Right now, I can see the wheels turning in my mother’s mind.

She’s looking him over.

Squinting her eyes.

Assessing his potential.

“You think my Golda is beautiful?”

Boom! There it is! My mom’s tone instantly morphs from Jewish Terminator to plain ol’ Jewish Mom-Who-Wants-Her-Spinster-Daughter married.

Nope, I’m not going to stand here and have my mom embarrass the hell out of me by trying to make a match. Taking her by the shoulders, I turn her around and gently push her out the kitchen door.

“Go. Take Sadie for a walk. Check in with Dad if you want but get out of my kitchen so Sten and I can start cooking.”

“*Your* kitchen, young lady?”

“You put me in charge. So, yes, my kitchen.”

“Hmm. I think I’ll take Sadie for a walk. Maybe check in with your dad.”

Didn’t I just say that?

“Don’t leave my kitchen a mess, Golda Rose. And put on something decent.” She waves her hand up and down, encompassing all of me. “A dress or a blouse that makes you look pretty.”

Those gears don’t stop turning in my mom’s head as she assesses the tall hunky guy standing in the kitchen doorway.

“He’s only here for a week, Mom. And I’m guessing he’s not Jewish.”

“You don’t know that. Not all Jews are Caucasian. We’re a religion, not a race. There are Jews all over the world. Black. White. Asian. Native American—”

“World, Mom. Not Universe.”

“Who made you the authority on where Jews can and can’t be?”

“Fine, Mom. After you call Dad, walk to the rabbi’s house and ask him.” That should keep her busy for an hour or two.

“I don’t need the rabbi to tell me what I already know. Anyone can be Jewish. It’s what’s in your heart, a few lessons with the rabbi, a quick slice of the knife, and he’ll be good to go.”

Yeah, I had enough trouble explaining an apron to Sten. I don’t think the idea of a circumcision will go over well.

It’s amazing how as I guide my mom toward the stairs to collect Sadie she keeps talking as if she’s made a shidduch, a match. The poor guy came to learn about humans. He didn’t realize he’d be taking on my mother, Educator and Grandmother by day, matchmaker by Night.

I remind myself I’m her only client on the matchmaking front and I never hired her for the task. Nonetheless, she’s still my mom, which means I get plenty of practice being patient.

“He’s not here to be converted or circumcised. He wants to learn about humans. Now, get out of my kitchen. We have work to do.”

Clearly, I need more practice on the patience part.

“You can carry on our traditions, Goldala. It’s the woman who sets the tone of the home. A yarmulke would fit between his horns quite easily. Though I could see needing to raise the wedding chuppah so those horns don’t shred it.”

“Mom! Leave. Now.”

With an upturned nose, my mom saunters upstairs to get my niece. Crisis averted.

When I turn around, Stenikov is standing in the kitchen doorway, grinning. I don’t know what he’s thinking, and quite frankly, I’m afraid to ask. Hopefully, he doesn’t know a chuppah is a canopy under which a Jewish couple marries. My mother means well, but she can be a handful.

Ignoring that cute smirk on Sten’s face, I slip past him and enter the kitchen. Acting like nothing weird just happened, I start pulling onions and potatoes from the pantry.

“I like your mother, though you misled me.”

That stops me. I’m a lot of things, but I’m no liar. “How so?”

“You said the name *Mrs. Birnbaum* was more appropriate. I believe Mr. Harrington was correct when he told me her name is *Mrs. Gertie-She’s-A-Lovely-Though-Somewhat-Crazy-Woman Birnbaum*.”

I love that Stenikov has a sense of humor, especially after my mom attacked him with a frying pan. “Believe me, you don’t know the half of it.”

“She reminds me of my mother.”

That look of longing in his face makes me thankful I have my family here. I can’t imagine being thousands of miles away from my family or my world. I wrap my hand around his arm and lead him to the butcher block island.

“You can have mine if you’d like. Or we can share her. At least for the week you’re here. Maybe you can call her Mom if that’s easier for you. She always welcomes strangers in need into our home. Having a guy who misses his own mother calling her Mom... I think she’d like that.”

“That is a nice offer, Golda. I will consider it.”

“Let’s get started, Sten. This food isn’t going to cook itself.” I set the bag of potatoes on the kitchen island.

“Your mother was wrong. You are very pretty no matter what clothing you’re wearing.”

“Thank you,” I say as I turn my back to him. Taking compliments isn’t my strong suit. And I don’t get many, especially from people I don’t know.

I sort through the pantry, taking the other ingredients we’ll need for the latkes and apple sauce. Stenikov can peel the potatoes while I wash the apples and set up a huge pot of water on the stove.

As I take the Foley Food Mill to crush and strain the cooked apples later, I point to the knife still sticking in the wall. “You’re definitely comfortable with knives.”

Stenikov rocks the blade free from the wood doorframe and discreetly slips it into his boot. Why is the way he handles a knife so damn sexy?

“Thank you for not hurting my mom.”

“I’m not here to hurt anyone.”

“But she attacked you.”

“A warrior only uses force when other measures to contain the combatant don’t work.”

“I like that you’re so calm and easy-going.” The words leave my mouth before I can think about it. Handing out compliments, even factual ones, will derail my plans to get through the cooking without thinking about how handsome and nice Stenikov is.

“To fry the latkes, you’ll need the largest skillet, not the one my mom tried to kill you with.”

Before I have the chance to tell him where to find the pan, he moves like lightning through the kitchen and withdraws the largest skillet from the correct cabinet. No guessing involved. He must have memorized the contents of every drawer before I walked in here this morning. Even if he doesn’t know how to use all the various utensils and cookware, he clearly likes to learn his surroundings.

One by one, Stenikov opens the spices I’ve taken out of the pantry and smells them. He scrunches his nose. “These are interesting.”

“That’s rosemary and thyme for the soup tomorrow. We’re lucky to have them. Part of the benefit of working in the warehouse. The workers get first pick of items coming in. We still have to pay for them, but we don’t have to go through any middle men, which lowers the cost. The warehouse where I work only deals in packaged foods, nothing fresh, as well as clothing, tools, and raw materials. The government only concerns itself with technology, leaving medicine to the black market and everything else to those brave enough to build businesses and stand up to the Brotherhood. Given his job, my dad has some pull with the government. Like the year Mom wanted honey for Rosh Hashanah. Honey’s a luxury item, more than sugar. One of dad’s friends tracked down a bottle a few states away and shipped it in on the next military transport.”

“I read your father is a scientist working for a private company, not the government.”

“His company does a lot of work for the government. Wait... where did you read about him?”

“The file on your family.”

“We have a file?”

“Routine procedure. Earth Intelligence compiles information on families of scientists.”

“I should have guessed that. Our leaders rule mostly by fear these days, with an emphasis on ensuring the best of everything—natural resources, people, technology—goes toward securing the planet. Anything that helps prevent another invasion gets top priority.”

“That is the only reason your leaders tolerate non-humans. They need Galactic Intelligence’s help. We are only welcome here as long as we can provide value. Even then, I do not believe your people trust us. But this is not something I say to other humans.”

“Very politically wise of you not to say that to people you don’t know. Except you don’t really know me, which means you’re taking a chance trusting me.”

His horns move slightly while the rest of him remains as still as a statue. I probably shouldn’t have said that, but the fact that he trusts me warms me. Just the same, I should make him feel welcome. Being on a new world with no support nearby has to be daunting, even for a warrior.

“I see why you’re in Galactic Intelligence. You’re exceedingly smart. You’ve passed part one of the test,” I tease.

“The test?”

“An informal checklist my parents have to see if a guy is qualified to marry me.” I can’t believe I just said that! My mother *had* to go there and plant that idea in my head. Clearly, she’s not the only one without a filter!

Sten’s eyes widen and his horns twist at the tops. “I’m not here to mate you.”

“Sorry! I’m not saying that! Hell, I don’t know what I’m saying. I tend to ramble when I’m nervous.”

“I make you nervous?” That grin returns. I must admit, I don’t want to see it fade. He’s cute and funny. Yeah, he makes me nervous, but in a good way.

I pinch my thumb and forefinger together, leaving a small space between. “Just a little. You’re so…” How do I tell the guy he’s hot, that he’s way out of my league, especially when he seems so perfect? Sure, the horns take some getting used to,

but they're rather flirtatious the way they move up and back, and twist at the tops. If I'm reading him correctly, the movement is tied to his emotions. The more I talk with Sten, the more I realize how very human he is.

"I'm so what?" he asks.

"Tall." I throw the first adjective out that I can think of. Thank God I didn't say hot-as-fuck. I want to know him better, but I'm going to scare him off if I say what I'm thinking.

I suck at the whole dating thing. And flirting's not exactly my strong suit. But I'm not one to quit, not when I see something I want. Move over chocolate pudding, I've found something else I'd rather eat.

Good God, Golda, what is your problem? And in Mom's kitchen? She could burst in here any time—again!

"Being tall is an advantage in fighting," Sten says.

I look up at the top shelf, to where my dad put the box grater, and I now understand where height has its advantages in cooking, too. But that stubborn part of me doesn't want to admit it and ask for Sten's help. I think it's a knee-jerk reaction from working alongside men in a warehouse. Show one bit of weakness, even attempt to ask for help, and they believe they're entitled to *payment*. As I see it, there's always a work-around in life, you just have to get creative.

I clear my throat. "How about you make the latkes?"

"Can you provide instructions?"

"Use the medium holes on that grater up there to shred the potatoes." I point to the box grater before shoving my sleeves up and digging into the pile of dirty dishes in the sink.

As I start cleaning the breakfast dishes, I hear the sound of grating behind me. I'm smiling again. He's such an easy-going guy, and fun to be with.

When I turn around, Sten is shredding the potatoes with the skins still on. And he hasn't washed them.

"Ah, Sten? I'm guessing you never cooked potatoes before." I'm wondering what to do at this point. The war and

occupation are over, but that doesn't mean we waste food. "We need to wash and peel the potatoes first."

When he looks at the potatoes he's already shredded and frowns, I add, "It's my fault. I didn't instruct you properly."

"I should have informed you of my lack of experience in this matter."

"You asked for instructions. I screwed up, not you. Either way, it's fine. We can fix this. And don't feel bad. We're getting used to working together, that's all. Here..." I grab a bowl of cold water and plop the shredded potatoes in. "We have to soak the potatoes to remove the starch, anyway. A little dirt never hurt anyone, right? Though Bubbe might disagree, so let's keep that missed step a secret."

His frown deepens. Stenikov's so wonderfully expressive. "I wish to meet this Bubbe."

"Oh, you will. Tomorrow night at dinner."

Sten's back straightens and the fingers of his right hand slide back and forth over a knife sheathed at his waist. I hope I didn't stress him about the potatoes. I forgot I have a novice here, at least as far as cooking human food.

"What can you do, besides hunt and throw knives?"

I don't really need him to cook. I can handle this by myself, but I don't want to see Sten out of a job. If he can't cook, then I'll find something else more suited to his talents.

"I know how to take orders, Commander."

Ooh, he's so cute. I'm starting to like that nickname, too. Hell, I'm really starting to like *him*.

I'm soooo tempted to give him an order that's not cooking related. My furtive eyes glance at his crotch. The apron's covering him nicely. While intentionally tempting a guy has never been my thing, I can't help myself with Stenikov.

"Ah-hm." Someone clears a throat outside the kitchen. "I'm now walking into the kitchen," Mom says loudly. This is why I'm not adept with subtlety. Mom is a horrible role model.

“Come in, Mom. We’re starting the latkes.”

The door opens part way, and a head pops through. When she sees we’re draining the water from the shredded potatoes, she enters.

“Sadie’s asleep in the stroller. I left a message for your father. He won’t be back from his trip until tomorrow, but I spoke with Charlie. He assures me we are perfectly safe with Warrior Zelin. Since my husband intended for you to sleep at our house during your time in New York, you may have Golda’s old bedroom. Golda, you will sleep in my bed with me.”

That sounds like a good idea, but I don’t trust myself in the same house with Sten. His scent has been driving me crazy all day and I have this incessant itch to touch him. Once I touch him, I’m not sure I’ll be able to stop.

“I have to check in at work tonight, Mom, so I’ll stay at my place.” I wonder if she’ll see through the lie and push me to stay here. If she knew how attracted I am to Sten, she’d forbid me from staying. I haven’t dismissed sleeping here as an option for later in the week...

CHAPTER SIX

STENIKOV

I wake to the sound of a youngling crying for attention. For a brief moment, I think I'm at my sister Maza's home with her youngling waking me in the middle of the night, but this is not Zyan.

One more cry has me on my feet, fully dressed and debating if I should enter Sadie's room and see to her needs. Doing so might alarm Mrs. Birnbaum after what happened last night. Golda and her mother had eaten a modest meal, an item they called sandwiches, while I walked through the neighborhood, determining the best defensive positions and escape routes should they become necessary. I always strive to learn from my mistakes, and I don't want what happened in Los Angeles to happen here. While Golda and her family aren't witnesses under my protection, I would still defend them with my life.

When I returned from learning the area, a plate with a large cut of meat and a pile of roots they called carrots and potatoes awaited me. Golda said I needed to keep my strength up for the week I'd have here. I'm not sure what she meant by that as this is a fairly easy assignment.

Before I had a chance to eat the meal Golda prepared, she left to go to her workplace. I'd watched her from the window, not even distracted by her lovely backside swaying as she walked down the street. I worried for her safety as she ventured out into this city full of irrational and dangerous humans.

Mrs. Birnbaum caught me watching Golda from the window and asked why I was spying on her. I told her the truth, that I worried about Golda's safety. Mrs. Birnbaum chuckled, saying her daughter grew up in New York City and that made her savvy enough to avoid trouble, but she remains suspicious of me. I ignored my instincts to catch up with Golda and escort her, all to prevent a misunderstanding with her mother. My behavior troubles me. I must remain true to who I am as a warrior.

When I hear Mrs. Birnbaum across the hall quieting the youngling, I head downstairs, seeking a task to keep my mind off Golda.

"Stenikov?" Mrs. Birnbaum calls down to me. "Help yourself to breakfast."

"I do not require nourishment at this time," I call back up to her as I mindlessly organize cans of food in the pantry.

"Don't be shy. A big guy like you needs food. You're practically wasting away."

A giggle grabs my attention. I turn to find Golda behind me. Relief at seeing her safe sweeps through me, but I growl, which steals her sweet smile.

"What's wrong, Sten?"

"My apologies. I'm upset with myself, not you." I did not see her enter. No one should be able to sneak up on me. I nod my head deeper than usual, not because my growl created a breach of etiquette, which it did, but because I truly do not wish Golda to think I'm upset with her.

Seeing her lifts my spirits. I no longer struggle with missing my family. Well, not as much. I do miss them. But being with Golda, and even her mother, reminds me of home.

"Let's start again," Golda says, once again gracing me with her beautiful smile. "How did you sleep? Any problems? Did my mom drive you crazy?"

"This is a comfortable home and I am very grateful for your mother's hospitality."

“Yes, it is, and she’ll appreciate that. Hold on to that thought because by the end of the week, you’ll be pulling your hair out. Then again, she’s usually on her best behavior for guests. *I’ll* be pulling my hair out.”

Without thinking through the consequences, I stroke Golda’s long brown hair which lays seductively about her shoulders. Warriors are supposed to be experts in controlling their impulses. If I wanted, I could pull away and never touch the soft strands, never see her beautiful eyes sparkle or hear her breath catch, but I don’t want to. That’s the problem. I wish to touch more of this female. To get to know her in a way that is not part of my assignment.

“I hope you’re ready for a full day of cooking,” she says as she squeezes past me. The top two buttons on the red shirt are open, giving me a partial view of what lies beneath.

My training tells me to move aside to allow her through. Instead, I plant my feet and enjoy how she wedges herself between me and the shelves in the pantry, brushing her ass against my groin as she reaches for a glass jar of beige granules on the second shelf.

“Tonight’s the first night of Hannukah, so we’ll do the bulk of the cooking today. Yesterday gave you an introduction to the kitchen and how I work.”

Even when she lifts up on her toes, inadvertently rubbing against me, she can’t reach the jar. My instructors at Izoran taught us many strategies to help us survive and defeat the enemy. But none ever taught us how to handle a female who distracts a male with nothing more than her presence.

“Sorry, Sten. Tight space in here. I’ll get the footstool.”

Two choices lay before me. Grabbing the jar for her would take me two seconds. Problem solved for her. But my pleasure cock has never been harder. I opt for the second choice by placing my hands on her waist and lifting her high so she can retrieve what she needs.

She squeals as I lift her. It’s a cute sound and I’m thoroughly enjoying holding her. The moment she grabs the

jar that's smaller than my hand, a huge smile graces her beautiful face.

"So that is what you wanted," I say, to cover my manipulation of the situation.

"Thanks! You're really handy to have around."

When I set her on her feet, she's once again wedged between me and the shelves in the tiny storage closet. Her scent wraps around me, invades my nostrils, and pulls at me. I don't want to let go of her. If only I could taste her lips, and—

My pants tighten further, which I didn't think possible. I cut off another growl, angry at myself for not returning to my ship last night and acquiring proper pants. These jeans are pure torture when I'm near my...

When the word *sholani* pops into my head, I shake the thought away and unsnap the button on my very uncomfortable pants. The promise of relief pushes me to continue. Slowly, I lower the zipper so I don't catch myself in the archaic contraption.

"Whoa, there, Nellie!" Golda shouts, her hand outstretched with a halting motion.

"It's Sten," I correct her even as I wish she'd reach farther and touch me. Anywhere. Even my arms. I'd enjoy that very much. With that thought, my drekking pleasure cock turns hard as steel. "You may also call me Stenikov. Or Warrior. Any of these is acceptable, but not Nellie as this does not describe me."

"At least put on your apron," she says, tossing the uniform to me. I quickly don the apron, covering my cocks, but not before I notice the smile teasing her lips as she furtively glances at my lower half.

She slaps her palm against my chest, then follows with a few smaller, softer taps before her eyes finally find mine. "Now that you've got the boys taken care of, it's time to start cooking!"

So much of what she says remains a mystery to me, but I'm noting every word, every phrase. One day, I will ask her to

explain the meanings, if nothing more than to keep her in my presence as long as possible.

Hours go by in a whirlwind of activity. I learn many things during my time in this kitchen. First, food is as much an art as a science. Second, Golda is an excellent teacher and good at handling several tasks at once. While I use a knife to pluck feathers from the dead bird called a chicken, Golda makes a round food called matzah balls for the soup. After combining egg, cinnamon, and a coarse, toasted breadcrumb, she lovingly shapes the mixture with her hands. I want her handling me like that...

Clearly, I've lost my focus.

I avert my eyes and practice a breathing technique warriors use to block out distractions. Except now I'm inhaling all the delicious smells of the food we're preparing. One scent in particular won't let go of me. Golda.

She's standing over the pot of chicken soup, dropping the slippery balls into the pot one at a time. I can't take my eyes off her, even though I'm supposed to be checking the level of tomato juice in the pan with the slab of meat she set on the stove several hours ago.

"Golda, after the evening meal, would you like to take a walk with me?"

The lid slides onto the pot with a clank as she turns to me. "I'd like that. But first, we'll have to survive dinner."

"I excelled at survival training. What danger accompanies eating the ritual foods?"

"It's not the food, but who will be here. My parents and Bubbe. This time, you'll sit and eat with us, Sten. No roaming around the neighborhood to avoid my mother's questions, okay?"

Golda's perceptive, seeing through my actions last night. I'm not one to avoid danger, but Mrs. Birnbaum reminds me of a vilda beast one hunts before a mating on Zyan. Single-minded, determined, and dangerous when cornered. Her gaze

moves from me to Golda often. When Golda notices, she glares at her mother, a silent war brewing between them.

Mrs. Birnbaum doesn't worry me, though. She is a mother protecting her youngling, nothing more. I'm more eager to meet this Bubbe person Golda has mentioned several times. Experience has taught me that bullies need to be dealt with swiftly, decisively.

Mentally, I run through the number and placement of my knives, should I need them. Being prepared is key to surviving. I have my horns and claws as well, features humans lack. Then a thought occurs to me.

The only aliens on Earth are attached to the embassies in Los Angeles, work for GI7, or are witnesses under our protection. Another handful of aliens temporarily reside here while they help the humans build up their planet's defenses.

"Is Bubbe human?"

"Yes." Golda's eyes pull tight. "I'm not sure how to describe Bubbe. Okay, got it... Have you ever seen a tornado?"

"I studied Earth's weather before arriving. A tornado is a vortex of wind."

"That's Bubbe. An unpredictable force of nature that can cut you off at the knees and wipe the floor with you or leave you standing untouched. There's no predicting which fate you'll encounter. Just be on guard."

My horns shoot straight up, scraping the ceiling. I will protect my female from this Bubbe at all costs.

My female... Drekk, I did not just think that, did I?

"Oh, and Sten?"

"Yes, Commander?"

The corners of her mouth lift, the smile reaching her eyes. I could look at her all day and never get bored.

"I'll be here to save you if you step in anything, Sten."

Quickly, I scan the floor. I have not spilled anything since the flour yesterday. We're in no danger of slipping. I appreciate her willingness to save me, but it will take more than a slick floor to bring me down. My bigger concern is Bubbe and his treatment of Golda. I look forward to confronting him. I flex my fingers and hands; it's been a while since I've had a good fight.

"Whoops! I forgot to polish the menorah." Golda swipes a tarnished silver object from the back of the counter.

"What is this relic?" The object has eight branches stemming from the base, and a ninth in the middle, set slightly higher than the others. The tops are hollowed cups, each smaller than the tip of my last finger. When I first met Golda, she'd fallen on the kitchen floor and the object had flown out of her hands. At first, I'd thought it was a weapon, the way her fingers had been tightly wrapped around it. Upon further inspection, I found no energy source or sharp edges to qualify it as a weapon.

"This is a menorah. We place candles in each of the holders. One for each of the eight nights of Hannukah. Thousands of years ago, my people revolted against their oppressors. When they reclaimed their temple, they found enough oil to light the temple for one day. It lasted eight."

Golda searches beneath the sink and retrieves a small jar of thick pink cream. She rubs the cream on the menorah, bringing out the silver's luster.

"Each day that the oil lasted was considered a miracle. Today, we use one candle to represent each of those days. And it's why we fry the latkes and donuts in oil. To remind us of the miracles."

"A worthy ritual. But there are nine holders on this menorah."

"The ninth one is the helper candle. It's there to light the other candles."

"A helper. Like me."

Golda lightly taps my cheek with her palm. “Yes, like you. Thank you for being here. I’ve never had so much fun cooking, and everything’s getting done on time. I’m sure this all seems dull to you and you’d rather be protecting a witness, but you’re helping the entire family. My mom’s watching Sadie for a few days to give my sister Rachel and her husband some alone time. Between school and the baby, Rachel’s been overly-stressed lately, which makes Eli stressed. And that affects Sadie, which aggravates Rachel. Then Eli’s mom complains to my mom who gets frustrated and snaps at my dad. Everyone’s on edge.”

Golda pushes up on her toes and kisses my cheek. “Thank you for being so sweet and open-minded.”

Her kiss sends a fire through me and her compliment humbles me. She is the one who’s sweet and open-minded. From the start, she accepted me for who I am.

A bell chimes and Golda jumps up and down, excited. “That must be Bubbe!” She races out of the kitchen, the door swinging in her wake.

My mood sours at how excited she is to see Bubbe. I have a rival I did not expect. I never expected to have feelings for Golda either. I’m still not sure if she’s my sholani, but even if she isn’t, she’s special, and I cannot allow her to be with this Bubbe alone. While I was sent here to observe and learn, I’m still a warrior and will always protect those in danger, especially Golda.

Ready to take down the visca who’s terrorized my female in the past, I punch the swinging kitchen door open to make a statement and warn this Bubbe not to challenge me.

Instead of finding a male with Golda by the front door, there’s an older female, shorter than Golda and with more wrinkles than dried quirky fruit.

Golda takes the female’s coat and links her arm to the elderly woman, escorting her toward the eating area with the table big enough to fit my family back home. Drekk, I miss my mother, sisters, and their younglings. I haven’t even met the two born last year. Or the one the year before.

The older female finally notices me standing by the kitchen door. Blue eyes, as bright as my mother's, peer through thick glasses. They move over my body, taking in my warrior tattoos, the weapons on my belt, and my horns, which I strive to keep back in a non-threatening stance.

My body tenses under her scrutiny. I've been through this type of meeting several times since landing on Earth. Usually the humans, females and males alike, spit or curse at me then walk away. A few take up whatever lies nearby to use as weapons. Bricks, pipes, chairs, even a shoe. I never engage. I understand their fear. The Coalition occupied Earth for nearly two decades. Aliens from many species brutalized these people. Their enemy, as they see it, is any person not born of Earth.

"What are you?" the woman asks in a strong voice.

"I'm a warrior. From Zyan."

"Sten, this is my bubbe. Bubbe, this is Stenikov. He's staying here for the week as part of a cultural training program."

"Bubbe?" This frail female is Bubbe? This female barely comes up to my stomach. If I blow in her direction, she'll fall over.

"Bubbe is Yiddish for grandmother," Golda explains. "Her given name is Helen Katz. She's my mom's mom."

"Take me closer, Golda. I can't see him. From here he looks like a giant blue margarita with two straws sticking out of his head." Golda sucks in both lips to keep from laughing as she escorts her grandmother to me.

When the females reach me, I fully bend my head forward, aiming to get on Bubbe's level so she may see me face to face. Likewise, the female tilts her head back, straining to see me. I don't think I've ever seen such a tiny female who was full grown.

"Stand up straight, young man. Slouching is unseemly."

I snap to my full height, surprised she has the demeanor of my former commander. Everyone in his command towered

over him, but no one challenged him, not with the way he carried himself.

“Bubbe, Sten’s a guest. Be nice.”

“Nobody trusts a person who slouches. He should remember that. You both should.”

Golda’s back straightens, then her head lifts as her eyes lock with mine. Her face fills with empathy as she nods her head toward her grandmother. Ruby-red lips move as if she’s speaking, but I don’t hear what she’s saying.

Once again I remind myself to be patient. This is why I am here. To learn about humans, which includes the various ways they communicate.

“Bubbe, Sten is here to help for the week while Mom babysits Sadie for Rachel.”

“He doesn’t look Russian,” Bubbe says. “Your mother said he’s Russian.”

“I only said his name sounds Russian, Ma. He’s from Zyan.” Mrs. Birnbaum enters the house with the sleeping youngling snuggled against her chest.

“I don’t care where he’s from, you need to turn the heat up in here. The young man’s turned blue.”

“Is that all you notice that’s different about Stenikov?” Mrs. Birnbaum asks.

Blue eyes in a withered face move up and down my torso with an intensity that reminds me of warrior training. I stand taller, clasp my hands behind my back, and let my horns rise.

“He’s bigger than that schmendrik you married, Gertrude.”

Golda rolls her eyes. “Daddy’s not a schmendrik. He works very hard, and he loves all of us, including you, Bubbe.”

“He got your mother pregnant. She was seventeen. A child.” The woman starts sputtering in a language that is neither English nor Common.

I look to Golda for guidance. She sighs and throws me a weak smile.

“Excuse my bubbe. She has a long memory. And it’s one-sided. Dad’s only a year older than Mom but Bubbe makes it sound like he was twenty years older when he got her pregnant.”

Getting a female pregnant that is not mated doesn’t happen on Zyan. It can’t. A male’s mating cock only rises for his sholani, his heartmate.

“Sten, my mom left the stroller on the sidewalk. Would you mind carrying it up before someone steals it?” Golda asks while glaring at Bubbe. I sense my commander is about to lay into the troops, so I nod and do as she asks.

When I reach the stroller, there’s a male there picking it up. “This does not belong to you,” I inform him.

He looks at me, drops the stroller, and runs through the falling snow. Fast, for a human. Several other people cross the street to avoid me. This behavior is not new, but it reminds me how isolating life on Earth will be for me.

Except now I know Golda. That fact fills me with joy and warmth.

I pick up the stroller. The design is clunkier and heavier than what we have on Zyan. Humans are not as advanced as much of the universe, but they are an interesting and worthy species. I believe they will do well as part of the galactic alliance.

Yelling pours out from the Birnbaum home and my horns straighten. I’m on alert, but I hear only female voices. A family squabble. I fear my presence has caused a problem for Golda and her family.

I carry the stroller to the top of the steps and wait outside. My assignment was to learn, not cause trouble. The few aliens who live on Earth have to be on their best behavior at all times and try to repair the damage the Coalition caused. The physical damage is merely a matter of time and resources, but the emotional damage may last decades.

I will not leave unless ordered. My heart tightens at the thought of not seeing Golda again.

The door opens, and my beautiful female stands there, the tightness in her face quickly relaxing the moment she sees me. “I thought you’d left.”

“I would not disobey orders, Commander.” Her face brightens... because of me.

“I’m glad you’re still here.” A snowflake catches on her eyelashes and I’m incredibly tempted to reach out and touch it... to touch *her*. “I was afraid our little argument scared you off.”

“A warrior does not scare easily.” I peer past her shoulder. Her mother and grandmother scrutinize us, their eyes moving from Golda to me and back to Golda. I swallow. Warriors don’t scare easily, but we’re also not fools. These females were definitely arguing because of me.

“Good, because eating with my family can be like sitting down with the enemy. Any minute, someone could lob the next grenade and break the fragile truce. You need to stay sharp, expect the worst, and hope for the best.”

Without delay or hesitation, Golda grabs my hand and pulls me inside. Her mother and grandmother haven’t taken their eyes from me.

I lean down to Golda. “I will wait in the kitchen while your family eats the meal.”

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Birnbaum says. “You’re our guest. You’ll eat with us as soon as my husband arrives.”

“Have you met my son-in-law, the schmendrik?” Bubbe asks.

“I’ve never heard of schmendriks. Are they located in coalition space?”

Golda’s hand brushes my arm to gain my attention. “Schmendrik means *fool* in Yiddish. Bubbe doesn’t exactly like my father.”

It's all I can do to focus on the conversation and ignore the electricity her touch sends through me.

"It all goes back to the pregnancy before they married. Dad's been with Mom for thirty-three years, given her everything he can, and still my grandmother complains."

"I had an instructor like that. No matter how well we performed, he never praised us, only told us our performance was acceptable. But when a warrior failed, his comments and scorn seemed unending. His ways appeared harsh at the time, but looking back I see his approach motivated many warriors to push themselves harder than they did for other instructors."

"I don't want you to be insulted by anything Bubbe says." Large brown eyes pull me in. I could get lost in them. Nothing her family says or does could make me leave here, not as long as she wants me to stay.

Golda leans into me, subtly bumping her body against me so her family doesn't notice. "Are you okay, Sten? You look uncomfortable."

"I'm fine. I fit my cocks back into my jeans without much problem."

CHAPTER SEVEN

GOLDA

Lesson learned. Be very careful what questions you ask an alien, especially when your mother and grandmother are in the room.

“He put his what back into his jeans?” my mother asks. She looks like she’s going to faint.

Meanwhile, Bubbe chuckles and pours herself a glass of wine. “His cock, Gertrude. He said he put his cock back into his jeans. Maybe you need a hearing aid.”

“I heard him just fine, Ma.”

Before this goes too far, I wave my arms wide to catch their attention. “There is a language issue going on here, so before you jump to any conclusions, let me say nothing has happened between Sten and me. We cooked earlier. Period. End of story.”

Bubbe shakes her head. “You’re becoming as brazen as your sister, Golda. I blame the schmendrik.”

I say nothing. There’s no need to. My mother is quick to jump to my dad’s defense and immediately the age-old argument between Mom and Bubbe erupts. Stenikov watches my family with intense curiosity while I debate how to explain to him why he shouldn’t repeat what he said about his cock again, especially when my dad arrives.

I grab hold of his hand and pull him toward the kitchen. “Let’s start bringing out the platters.”

The moment we're in the kitchen, finally alone, Sten leans his face close to the nape of my neck. One tiny puff of air from his lips skitters over my skin, waking every part of me. I don't know if that's his breath, or he's blowing on me, but I don't want him to stop.

"You smell wonderful, Golda."

"That's the brisket."

His breath trails along my jaw. My entire body thrums, tempting me to surrender to whatever he's planning.

Anything, but not here! my mind screams, well aware of the Mom and Bubbe on the other side of the kitchen door. They may argue for several minutes, but they're suspicious people. And nosey. If we're gone too long, they'll plaster their ears to the door to spy on us.

Not that we're doing anything. Yet.

"Sten?"

"Yes, Commander?" His deep sultry voice sends the most delightful shiver through me.

"Do you have any questions about anything?"

"I have many questions. More than time allows." His lips graze the sensitive shell of my ear.

I hold my breath and shiver with anticipation as his lips glide along my cheek. A fraction of an inch... That's all I have to move for his lips to brush mine.

"Golda, what's going on in there?" Mom yells from the dining room, her voice shattering the spell.

When I inhale, preparing to yell out that everything is fine, my lungs fill with the most delicious smell in the kitchen. Sten. He's the only person I've ever seen stand over a pot of hot oil, frying donuts in a kitchen with crappy ventilation, who doesn't smell of sweat. His scent rivals that of the donuts. Delicious, manly...totally invigorating. Nothing like the dirty dock workers I see every day. I definitely wouldn't mind taking a bite out of him.

OMG, what has gotten into me?

“Golda?”

“Coming, Mom!”

With the tops of his horns twisting, Sten carries the platter of brisket in one hand and latkes in the other, while I carry the tureen of chicken soup. As soon as he sets down the dishes, he heads back to the kitchen for the vegetables and apple sauce.

“He seems like a nice young man, Ma. And Golda likes him.”

I freeze, still holding the tureen. *Oh, God. Change the subject. Anything. Find something to say before they start match-making!*

“You’ve been hoping to find some blue decorations for Hannukah this year,” Bubbe adds.

“He’s an *alien*, Ma, not a dreidel.”

“I can see that, Gertrude Miriam. Stop yelling. The neighbors will hear you.”

“Oy gevolt! As if the neighbors are our biggest worry right now.”

“Of course not!” Bubbe says. “You should worry about whether this alien goliath will crush the stemware. That’s my mother’s crystal that I saved from getting blown up during the war. It’s irreplaceable.”

“I’m talking about Golda, Ma. She’s not getting any younger. Sten has a job, and he’s a patient young man.”

Too late! I wasn’t fast enough.

Okay, time for damage control.

Diversion. Something that can’t lead back to me.

“How do you like living at Aunt Freida’s, Bubbe?”

“Your Aunt Freida is a lazy schmegegge. My Jacob’s too good for her.”

Bingo.

“Freida’s a good wife and mother, Ma. And she waits on you hand and foot. She simply has no taste in clothes and can’t cook to save a starving man’s life.”

Sten places the last dishes on the table and takes the seat next to me.

I lean in and whisper, “When my sister had the baby four months ago, Bubbe left to live with my uncle’s family. Rachel and her husband Eli were living here at the time. Two months ago, they moved to his parents’ place. They have the top floor at his parents’ house. Nice and private. When they lived here, they were on the same floor as my parents.”

“Will I meet your sister?”

“They’ll come by in a few days. Rachel won’t want to be away from Sadie too long.”

“What about you, Sten? Are you married?” Mom asks.

“Mom!”

She shrugs nonchalantly. “It’s just a question.”

“I have not found my sholani yet, Mrs. Birnbaum.”

“Sholani sounds like a Hebrew name. Like Shoshana. Is she lost?”

“Sholani means heartmate. The one destined for me.”

I’m afraid to look at Sten, of what I might see in his face. This attraction I have toward him is probably one-sided.

A crisp wind chills the dining room as my dad stomps through the front door. He shakes the snow from his hat, looks at the four of us already sitting at the table, and shuts the door as if everything is normal. Part of me wonders if he avoided coming home on time so he wouldn’t have to deal with Bubbe’s reaction to Sten.

Extending his hand to Sten, my Dad says, “You must be Warrior Zelin. I’m David Birnbaum.”

Instead of taking my father’s hand, Sten nods. “Thank you for this opportunity, Mr. Birnbaum. My commander said I would find it beneficial.”

“Call him Sten or Stenikov, David. And you’re late.”

Dad lowers his hand and returns Sten’s nod, accepting the alternate greeting. “The bus got in late from Philly. But the presentation went well. I think they’re going to green-light the project.”

Mom takes his coat from him, shaking the big wet flakes off before hanging it in the foyer closet. “Where did you find Stenikov, David?”

Her tone sends the hairs on the back of my neck straight up. Sten’s been here since yesterday, but that doesn’t mean Dad’s off the hook. Mom doesn’t like surprises or unilateral decisions.

“I’m paying back a favor. Charles said he needed to find a place for Stenikov to go during the holidays and he thought we’d be perfect.”

“Why did he think that?”

“I owed him a favor. Gertie, why are you making this so complicated?” Dad takes his place at the head of the dining room table.

“Because you’re a schmendrik,” Bubbe inserts herself into the quickly devolving conversation. My family’s loud, fights over the stupidest things, and I’m used to it, but I’m worried about Sten. He came to observe us. To *learn* from us.

“You’ll have to excuse them, Sten. We normally get along quite well.”

“My presence is upsetting your family rituals.” Sten looks toward the door to the house. I grab his arm to keep him from getting up, so he’ll know he’s wanted here.

Wanted... I *want* him. That can’t be. I’ve only known him two days. And yet I’m struck by how warm and perfect holding his hand feels. How having him beside me makes the holiday complete.

Stenikov wraps his fingers around mine, making my stomach flutter and my heart soar. Despite how out of place he must feel among a bunch of humans, celebrating a holiday he

never heard of, he seems genuinely happy to be here. I hope we can make him feel at home.

The room falls stone silent and I turn to see everyone, and I do mean *everyone*, staring at me. Sten has this look of longing in his eyes that makes me want to press my lips against his, but my parents and bubbe have a completely other expression on their faces.

“What are you doing, Golda Rose Birnbaum?” Mom asks.

I look down to see my hand not only resting on his arm, but my wayward finger is lightly caressing him, back and forth. It’s an innocent touch, though hard to explain, especially when I didn’t realize I was doing it.

“I’m trying to keep him from leaving.”

“If he wants to leave, you shouldn’t stop him,” Bubbe says.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ma. We don’t turn someone out when he’s hungry,” Mom comes to his defense. “Especially after he cooked all day.”

“You’re right,” Bubbe said. “Feed the giant blue margarita, then he can go.” She pushes the plate of latkes toward him. “Eat. There’s not an ounce of fat on you. You’re wasting away, Stenala.”

Stenala. Lovely... She’s yiddifying his name. “He’s not Jewish, Bubbe. At least I don’t think he is.” I turn to Sten. “Are you?” Never have I felt so stupid as the moment the words come out of my mouth.

“There’s an easy way to tell.” Bubbe’s eyes move down toward his crotch.

“Bubbe!”

“Ma!”

Hey, look, my Mom and I are on the same page for a change!

“Settle down and let’s eat.” Dad digs the serving fork into the sliced brisket and serves himself. He chuckles as he passes

the platter. “You’ve been here since yesterday and you’re still alive, Stenikov. That’s a testament to your fortitude.”

Sten looks to me for guidance. A warmth spreads through me knowing he trusts me to save him from this den of lions that is my family. “He means you’ve survived the scrutiny of my mom and bubbe. It’s a joke. Mostly.”

“Ah, Earth humor.”

“You invited an alien into our home without telling me first, David.”

And we’re back to that subject....

“Hon, I told you he was coming to stay with us for the holiday. I simply didn’t give you his planet of origin. I vetted him through several sources, all of which assured me the family would be safe with him here. Safer than usual, in fact. It’s like having our own personal body guard for the week.”

“We don’t need a bodyguard.”

“That’s true, but he needed a place to stay while he learns about humans.” Dad spoons a heap of glistening, sugary red apple sauce onto his plate. “No one told me Golda would be here. Hi, sweetie.”

“Hi, Dad. I got a few days off at the last minute. There was some trouble at the warehouse. A few shipping containers went missing.”

“How do shipping containers go missing? They weigh five thousand pounds empty and close to fifty thousand at full capacity.”

“It’s not the containers so much as their contents. During a random inventory audit a few weeks ago, I discovered a discrepancy. The bills of lading listed four crates, but we couldn’t find them in the warehouse. There’s no trace of the missing items being received, stored, or shipped out. Someone’s stealing from the warehouse, or a shipper, maybe a few, are inflating the inventory at their end to charge us for product we don’t receive. Either way, someone’s counting on us not keeping accurate records.”

“You discovered the problem, Golda?” Dad asks.

“Yes. And I reported it to Mr. Kelly. That’s when he sent me home, *after* questioning my accounting methods. It’s not an error at my end. I triple checked. I have today and tomorrow off while they figure it out.”

“They?” Sten asks.

“The men. No one ever questioned my work there before, but I’m a woman, so they assume I’m the cause of the discrepancy.”

“They’re going to fire you,” Mom the doomsayer adds.

“They’re not going to fire me. But arguing with my boss would make me look guilty even though I’m the one who discovered the problem.”

I shrug as if the prospect of losing my job is no big deal, but the truth is I’m worried. Not many businesses hire women. Not because so few women have received an education, but because most men have been raised to believe women aren’t smart. Without a job, I won’t be able to pay my rent, which means I’ll have to move back here. While that’s not the end of the world, it sure feels like it. Living in my parents’ home, under their rules... Not. Going. To. Happen.

“You should go back in to work tomorrow and make them listen to you,” Mom pushes.

“When they realize they need my help to figure this out, they’ll call me back in. Until then, paid vacation!”

“You’re too cocky, Golda. No guy likes a cocky woman. Right, Stenikov?”

Tell me she did not ask him that.

“If you return on your day off and offer to help, they won’t think you’ve done anything wrong.”

“I *haven’t* done anything wrong.”

“What if they think you have? This is what you should tell your boss—”

“Why don’t we eat?” I cut her off. I don’t need to be told what to say or do. I’m a grown woman, capable of handling my own affairs.

Affairs. Damn, my lower half heats again and this time I’m afraid to look at Sten, like he’ll know I’m thinking about him.

“Good idea, sweetie. Let’s eat,” Dad says to keep this from turning into an argument. “I’m starved. We don’t need any fighting tonight. Especially with a guest in our home.”

“Don’t worry, Sten, if fighting breaks out, I’ll protect you,” I joke.

“Protecting is my job, not yours. I will not allow any harm to come to you.” Stenikov’s face goes from relaxed and smiling to very serious. He’s upset, though I’m not sure why.

“Relax, Sten. We only fight with words around here. That and a healthy dose of guilt now and then.”

“Guilt?”

“I’ll explain that another day. Too much culture shock at once isn’t good for anyone. My point is, you’re here to learn, not protect.”

“Golda, it’s not polite to tell a man his business,” Mom reprimands.

“I wasn’t telling him what to do. And since when do you want me staying silent? The Coalition is gone. You’re the one who taught me to stand up for myself. That women and men are equals.”

“Yes, we’re equals, but you’ll never catch a man if you don’t learn to be a little submissive and ladylike. Right, Stenikov?”

Kill. Me. Now.

Sten’s horns twist at the top as he raises a brow. He may be confused, but he’s blessedly quiet despite my mother’s attempts to insert him into our little head-butting session.

“We’re not having this discussion,” I say through clenched teeth. “Dad’s right. We have a guest.”

“Stenikov’s been here two days. He’s practically one of the family.” Mom dons a killer smile as she looks at me and tilts her head toward Sten.

She’s playing match-maker, only this time she’s targeted an unsuspecting guy who’s never encountered Hurricane Gertrude in her element. This is Passover with Aaron Rubinstein all over again. *That* was an unmitigated disaster. The guy was ten years older than me, socially awkward, and smelled. And not in a good way like Sten.

“I know what you’re doing, Mom. Stop. *Now.*”

“One day, you’ll wake up all alone and realize your youth passed you by and it’s too late to live your dreams.”

“My dreams or yours?”

“Hey, where’s the menorah?” Dad, the peacemaker, speaks up. “We have to light it before sundown.”

“I’ll get it.” I jump at the chance to disappear into the kitchen. I’m afraid to look at Sten right now, fearing what he thinks of my family. Of *me*. I love my parents dearly, but they don’t always bring out the best in me.

I’m not slim and perfect or have a great career in the making like Rachel, but that doesn’t mean I’m desperate to take any guy because he’s single. The maddening part of this entire evening is that I like Sten, despite my mother pushing me toward him.

There’s this battle warring in my head trying to figure out my feelings. I just met the guy yesterday, but I’ve never been so attracted to a man before, and it’s more than his gorgeous body. It’s the way he watches me, talks to me, and puts up with my family. But if anything’s going to happen between us, it needs to be on our terms, not my mother’s.

Once in the kitchen, I take a deep breath, push back the lock of hair that fell out of my pony tail, and make sure the girls aren’t slouching.

Two more deep breaths. Then, with a smile I plaster on my face, I’m ready for round two. And there *will* be a round two. There always is with my mother when she gets an idea into her

head. I have to forget about her and her comments and just be me. Get to know Sten and forget the fact that I'm surrounded by my well-meaning, wacky family.

I grab the menorah from the kitchen counter and push through the swinging kitchen door in time to hear the tail end of a conversation.

"You're very close in age to our Golda. She's young and sturdy. Good hips for birthing babies."

Sturdy? Birthing babies? WTF!

I'm beyond mortified. The heat rushing to my face kills any chance of pretending I didn't hear what my mom said. I'd love to yell at her right now but then I'd look like a child having a tantrum. The quicker we light the candles, the sooner we can eat and then I can escape this insane asylum and go back to my place with a shred of dignity still intact.

I hold my head high, clear my throat to interrupt the conversation, and set the menorah in the window facing the street. "I couldn't find the candles."

"That's because we don't have any." Mom rises and ties the drapes back before I get the chance. "They only had red and green in the market. Don't get me wrong, I love all the Christmas decorations everyone puts up. Our entire planet needs a lot of sprucing up, but red and green are not the right colors for Hannukah. We need blue. Or white. Or the full rainbow."

"It doesn't matter what color candles we use." Shutting up is not my strong suit. "And you don't put up decorations on bombed-out buildings and call it sprucing up."

"In my time," Bubbe chimes in, "we got creative with what we had on hand. If we didn't have candles, we lined up eight matches in molding clay and lit them. Granted, it was the tiniest menorah, and the matches burned down fast, but we had a menorah."

Dad lifts the decanter that matches the stemware. "I like the menorah my father made the year we got robbed. I think I was fifteen. Anyway, the thieves took my mother's silverware

and the brass menorah my grandfather made. My father filled eight shot glasses with schnapps. Then we drank.” He pours the red wine into his glass and throws back the drink.

“That’s hardly lighting candles, dear,” Mom says as she heads into the kitchen.

“We got lit. Close enough.”

I laugh, but Bubbe doesn’t appreciate my Dad’s sense of humor.

“Noodnik,” she says without even trying to hide the fact that she’s insulting him. I look at Sten and force myself to smile. I hope he doesn’t hold my family against me.

His horns angle back and his focus remains on me. I wish I could remove that worried look from his face. He should enjoy himself here, not let my family’s antics stress him.

Beneath the table, I pat his hand. “Relax. This is normal.” My hand lingers longer than it should. The second Mom returns, I snatch it back. This is why I don’t live at home. I forget I’m an adult.

Mom’s carrying a small bottle of olive oil and twine. It’s not the first time we’ve poured oil into the tiny cups of the menorah and used twine for wicks. Production of luxury items like birthday and Hannukah candles ceased during the occupation and never resumed after the Coalition left. When we do find candles this time of year, they’re homemade ones people sell in the market for extra income.

I soak the twine in a bowl of olive oil before cutting it into small pieces for wicks and handing them to Mom to set in the menorah. As she lights the helper candle, she says the prayers for the holiday and lights the first night’s candle. I slide into my seat next to Sten as the tiny golden flames shimmer in the window for everyone in the neighborhood to see.

“It’s not as bright as all the beautiful Christmas decorations,” I say watching the tiny flames. “But it’s still special and holds a lot of meaning, especially now.”

“How so, sweetie?” Dad asks.

“Because we never gave up fighting against the Coalition. Eventually, we won.”

“The Coalition left Earth because of trouble elsewhere which threatened their sector of space,” Sten says.

“I know. But we fought. That has to count. Either way, they left, and I think of that as a miracle.”

“A Hannukah miracle!” My dad holds up a glass for his toast and downs more wine. This isn’t like him. I guess he had a tough week at work.

“Maybe it was a Christmas miracle,” I say to be contrary. I really need to get out of here, and soon.

“Who cares which holiday? The bastards left,” Bubbe says. “May they never return.”

“Amen,” my parents and I say in unison.

Sten’s brow furrows and then he follows with, “Amen.”

“See, we found something in common!” Mom declares.

I’m not sure Sten knows precisely what’s happening here, but he’s going with the flow. I tap his thigh beneath the table to get his attention, not expecting to hit pure muscle. God, he’s built. Now that my hand is on his thigh, I find it difficult to remove.

With one finger, I draw small circles against his pants, inching my way closer to his inner thigh.

Sten turns to me and raises a brow. He’s got to be wondering what I’m doing beneath the table. I’m wondering the same. Especially with my dad seated to my left and my mother and bubbe across the table from us.

“Do you know the word meshugena?” I ask Sten, wondering if I should explain it in reference to my family or my wayward fingers. I’ve never done anything so bold and foolish, especially on a first date. Not that this is a date, but hell, it should count as one given what my family’s putting Sten and me through.

“Does meshugena mean taking a risk?” he asks.

He's definitely assessed the situation correctly. And yet my hand remains on his thigh.

"Hmm, that could be one way of defining it. Usually it means crazy. As in, I have to apologize for my family. They're crazy."

"They are fascinating. And precisely what I need." His eyes flick to my hand on his thigh, *not* to my family.



STENIKOV

ONCE MRS. BIRNBAUM lights the wicks, the family passes food around the table, clanking utensils and glasses. Everyone talks over one another between bites of food while I sit silently, observing.

This family intrigues me and even reminds me of home, though they are nothing like my mother and sisters who rarely yell and never talk at the same time. I find it fascinating that four humans can talk concurrently over and around one another in what seems to be one, two, three, *four* conversations. No, five. Golda switches from talking with her father about work and with her mother about... me. Or rather, she's trying to *not* talk about me. Again, my presence has disrupted the family. Leaving after being invited to stay would be rude. And I truly do not wish to leave. I like these people. Even if they are loud and confusing.

The love between them comforts me. Even from the matriarch, Mrs. Birnbaum. She is considerably smaller than me, but I've learned not to underestimate people of any size, especially small females. And this one is crafty. I see how she looks at me. She's plotting something, although I cannot imagine what.

Three times now, Mrs. Birnbaum has left the table to retrieve a spice or utensil from the kitchen and each time she throws a look of reprimand at Golda. This strong female beside me glares back at her mother. There is as much silent communication occurring here as audible. I wish I could read

their body language beyond the shading of their skin. When Mrs. Birnbaum speaks, Golda's skin turns three or four shades redder than usual, indicating embarrassment or anger, though I cannot discern which.

"Is there a problem?" I ask Golda.

"Apparently, I didn't set the table right."

"You set it just fine, dear."

Golda's back stiffens and I wish to jump to her defense, though I'm not sure what the issue is precisely. I must trust that she will tell me if she needs my help, because right now I'm at a loss.

"Mr. Birnbaum, what will my other duties be while I'm here?" When a war appears inevitable, distract the combatants until they forget their issues with one another.

"That reminds me." Mrs. Birnbaum looks at her husband, not with disdain exactly but more like displeasure. "Where precisely did you plan to put Stenikov when you committed us to hosting him?"

"In Rachel's old room."

"My mother's staying for several days. She'll be sleeping in Rachel's Room."

"Then Golda's room."

"Where will Golda stay?"

"I'll go to my apartment like I did last night, Mom."

"You left when it was still light out. It's dark now. You'll stay here, where it's safe. You can sleep on the floor of our room."

"Nonsense, Gertie. She has a perfectly good bed at her place. Stenikov can escort Golda to her apartment, right Stenikov?"

"I would be honored."

Mrs. Birnbaum resumes eating her meal, with a smile peeking out from under her fork. Golda, meanwhile, glares at

her mother.

There's so much about human communication I do not understand. Though I must admit, I look forward to walking Golda home tonight. A chance to be alone with her...

CHAPTER EIGHT

GOLDA

Despite my mom playing matchmaker, I'm jumping up and down on the inside. Stenikov will walk me home after dinner! Yay! And I don't have to get into a fight with my parents over it either. It was their idea.

Their idea.

My stomach turns sour, but it's not from the under-sweetened apple sauce. I don't like being manipulated by my mom. But let's face it, I haven't been myself. The apples-sauce being proof. I've never screwed it up before. If I hadn't been so distracted by the gorgeous alien in the kitchen, I would have tasted it and realized I hadn't used nearly enough sugar. Then again, that means more room for dessert, and I don't mean the jelly donuts we fried.

Damn, my mind's in the gutter today. Stenikov's got muscles everywhere and a delicious set of tattoos peeking from beneath the short sleeve t-shirt he's wearing. I want to see more of the tattoos, more of him.

Lust. Nothing more than lust, Golda. Get ahold of yourself.

"What religion do your people practice?" Mom asks.

"I do not practice a religion. Though we have gods on Zyan."

"He believes in gods, plural. We can work with that," Mom says. "We simply need to whittle it down to one."

Is she serious? First, she wants to kick him out because he's an alien, and now she's looking at him like he's husband material.

Being home messes with my head. I have the knee-jerk reaction to do the opposite of whatever my mom wants. But I like the idea of being with Sten.

"You don't ask a person to change his religious beliefs, Mom."

"I'm only saying anyone can convert."

I push my chair back, the need to escape suddenly overwhelming. "Enough. I'm not searching for a husband. Stop pressuring me."

"By your age, Rachel was already married. Now she has a baby. And she's going to school to become a doctor."

Yada, yada, yada. I consider waiting for my mom to go into full-blown lecture mode that I need to do something with my life, but I'm not willing to be embarrassed—again—in front of Sten.

"I'm only twenty-eight. You're talking like I'm a hundred."

"One hundred is too old to have a youngling. Except on Tekkla. They have advanced technology."

We all stare at Sten.

"Why don't we finish eating," my father comes to the rescue.

Sten doesn't seem to notice anything amiss as he pulls the platter of latkes closer to him. "Is there a protocol for serving oneself?"

"We're informal here, Stenala," Mom says.

"My name is Stenikov. Or Sten, if you prefer. Or as Mr. Birnbaum noted, Warrior Zelin. But not Stenala."

I face-palm myself because right now I don't want to look at the hunky alien who Mom has somehow turned into a five-

year-old by modifying his name. “Mom, we’re adults. His name is Sten. No one wants to have ‘*la*’ added to his name.”

“Of course, Goldala.”

“Sometimes I wish I could shut my family up,” I mumble beneath my breath.

“I can shoot them if you’d like,” Sten offers.

My mouth drops open. Is he serious?

The corners of his mouth quirk up into a delightfully mischievous grin. “Zyathans have humor too.”

I release a deep breath and sink back into my chair. I’m getting the impression he understands how much my family is stressing me out. I should have realized he was joking. I don’t see any guns on him. Which makes me curious about his weapons.

“Are you packing?”

“Golda!” my mother scolds.

“I meant a weapon, Mom. Good grief.”

“It’s impolite to ask a guest such a personal question,” she says, lifting her head high trying to recoup any lost dignity she just suffered. Yup, she can butcher his name but I can’t ask a simple question.

“You’ve already seen my weapons,” Sten says so innocently that I choke on my water. He’s probably not familiar with the euphemism, and likely meant his knives. I *hope* he meant his knives.

“I am a trained warrior. We never go anywhere without weapons. Throwing knives are standard equipment because they require little maintenance. We usually carry a blaster as well, but I do not have one at the moment.”

“I know you’re part of GI7, but why were you sent to New York?” Dad asks.

“GI7 plans to open a field office in New York City so we have agents closer to the witnesses located in this half of the continent. First, I have to gain a better understanding of

humans and their culture to ensure I can protect our witnesses here.”

“That explains what Charles meant when he said you needed hands-on-experience. How long have you been on Earth?”

“I arrived on Earth two weeks ago. Los Angeles. Four days ago, my commander reassigned me to New York City. As part of my preparation for working on Earth, I learned English and studied all available material we have on your planet. But it’s not as effective as learning through experience. My Commander sent me here partially as a test.”

“I wish Charles would have told me you don’t have cooking experience. I would have come up with something else for you to do during your stay.”

“I’m expected to teach myself whatever is required in any situation. Usually that means finding new routes, the best place to set charges and infiltrate enemy territory. Not how to fry a potato. But nothing we learn is considered useless.”

“Like adding eggs to a recipe means removing them from the shell first,” I tease.

“But you threw the entire apple into the mill to make the applesauce,” Stenikov counters.

He has a point.

“The mill grinds everything and separates the skin and seeds from the pulp. But you didn’t do anything wrong. I was the one in charge. It was my job to provide all the necessary instructions.”

“Yes, Commander.”

“Golda is not in the military and never will be,” Mom pipes up. “I know they’re allowing women in, but those are women who know how to finish what they start.”

Here we go.

“I didn’t enjoy working with Mr. Townsend, Mom. Mixing chemicals bored me.”

“There’s a big need for pharmacists. Three weeks isn’t enough time to discover what you like.”

Okay, this one’s on me. I engaged her. I know better. One quick glance at the clock on the wall doesn’t save me as Mom continues lecturing me about the warehouse being no place for a bright woman, and how I’ll never meet the right type of guy there like I would at a pharmacy.

As I run through the bus schedule in my head, deciding when I should escape, a large hand wraps around mine beneath the table. Sten’s holding my hand! That nearly knocks the breath from my body.

“On Zyan, adults choose their own field, based on interest and talent.”

That shuts Mom up. I want to look at Sten, but I’m afraid if I do I might cry because he’s done something no one else has ever done in a similar situation. Stood up for me. And if I cry now, Mom will take that as confirmation that my job and personal life make me miserable. But they don’t. Do they?

It’s hard to think objectively with Sten holding my hand. All my troubles melt away with his touch. He’s a stranger to our world, thrust into the craziness that is my family, and yet he’s helping *me*. It should be the other way around. I should be helping *him*.

He squeezes my hand, then releases it. The loss tears me from my thoughts and I turn to see why he let go.



STENIKOV

THE MORE I observe this family, the more fascinated I become. Mr. Birnbaum, a calm male, rarely reacts to his wife’s or mother-in-law’s comments. Mrs. Birnbaum and her mother are often rude and invasive, and yet loving at the same time. Yet I worry about Golda. My sweet female appears... lost. She’s pulling back, defensive around them, unlike when we were in the kitchen, just the two of us.

I don't quite understand the dynamics here, but I can see Golda's family stresses her to the point that she won't even look at me. My heart tightens at the very thought that I'm the source of the trouble, especially when my Golda withdraws from the conversation. I want nothing more than to see that beautiful smile on her lovely face.

When I take her hand in mine under the table, I'm stunned, not by how soft her skin is, but that our hands fit together like puzzle pieces. I wonder if our bodies would fit together perfectly, too.

My pleasure cock hardens at the mere thought of being with Golda. I need to keep my thoughts elsewhere. I'm not here to share pleasure with a female, but to learn. From the mistakes I've made thus far, it's clear I have a lot to learn if I'm going to understand humans fully.

When Bubbe rises, I release Golda's hand and push away from the table to help the elderly woman. She leans on my arm, allowing me to guide her to the sofa. While gaining her acceptance would go far toward earning respect among these humans, that is not why I help Bubbe. She's elderly and needs aid, but I must be cautious how I deal with her. While this female is frail on the outside, she has the heart of a kuvak, ready to pounce on anyone who crosses her. And her tongue and mind are as sharp as a kuvak's claws.

"Golda, bring the sufganiyot to the living room. I'll get the coffee," Mrs. Birnbaum orders.

"I must help in the kitchen," I announce to Bubbe.

"Bend down so I can reach you, Stenala."

I do not bother to correct her regarding my name this time, as the nickname appears to be a social convention. Instead, I bend down as she commands.

She pats my cheek. "You're a good boy, Stenala. Now, go. Help that granddaughter of mine, and I don't mean with the dessert."

With a brief nod, I head into the kitchen, still trying to decipher Bubbe's words. Golda's rushing around, placing the

donuts we made earlier onto a tray.

“Can you hand me the powdered sugar up there?” She points to a glass container with a fine, white substance on the top shelf in the pantry.

“Thanks,” she says when I hand the jar to her. As she sprinkles the fine powder over the donuts, many of the particles waft into the air and cover Golda’s sweater and face. She’s too distracted to notice.

“Are you upset with me?” I ask.

“It’s not you. My parents...” She shakes her head. “Never mind.”

With one finger, I brush a speck of white powder off her nose.

Soulful eyes lift to me. “Are you sorry you’re here, Sten?”

“I’m very grateful to be here. To know you and your family. To learn from you. Why would you think otherwise?”

“Because of all the drama. This is part of why I moved out. It’s a lot of work managing my parents and doing crisis control. Don’t you feel all the tension?”

The only tension I feel is in my pants. Drekking jeans. I look forward to using these pants for target practice, but that must wait until I retrieve a pair of trou from my ship.

“I see the tension in you, but not your parents or the kuvak.”

“Kuvak?”

I need to avoid thinking of people in terms of the vicious animals I’ve encountered in my past. “Wrong word. Your mother’s mother.”

“Oh, Bubbe. So, kuvak means grandmother in zyanthan?”

I think I now understand the meaning of the word *oy* she’s used many times today. But I shouldn’t use it until I’m sure of its meaning. “Not exactly. I can teach you some of my world and language, if you’d like.”

That earns me a smile, one I will treasure when she leaves here tonight. And for some time after.

“You have more powder on you, Commander.”

“Oh!” She starts brushing the sugar off her chest, calling attention to the lovely mounds beneath. This does *not* help my situation with the drekking jeans.

“Let me.” I gently brush the powder from her cheeks and chin. My fingers slow as I do not wish this task to end.

“Do you have powdered sugar on Zyan?” she asks in a dreamy, seductive voice, unintentionally tempting me.

“I’m not sure we have anything like it.”

“You need to taste it.” She dips her finger into the container of powder and holds her finger out to me.

In the interest of cultural exploration and since my duty requires me to live as a human for this week, I will taste the unusual-looking food. I lean in to Golda, ignoring her finger as I slide my tongue along the sugar on her neck. Her breath hitches and the delicate vein beneath my tongue pulses faster and harder, arousing me beyond belief. The sugar on my tongue is overly sweet, but the female beneath tastes like spring on Zyan. Fresh. Airy. Clean. And utterly divine.

My tongue traces higher to her jaw. Softness greets me as I press my body against hers. Her breasts, her belly, her thighs all cushion me and I imagine the heavenly pleasure of sinking into her heat. One of my hands laces through her hair, pulling the tie there free until the silky mass cascades onto my arm. My other hand slides down her back to the top of her ample ass. I’m no longer a warrior as I squeeze her backside.

I want so much more with her...

CHAPTER NINE

GOLDA

Sten's licking my throat and jaw and pressing his body against me, creating a fire in me I don't know how to extinguish. How I got myself into this position baffles me, but I like it. Very much. *Too* much.

The hard length of a huge cock nestles against my belly, sending a rush of excitement right to my core. As my hair falls down and he squeezes my ass, I release a throaty moan. Then my hips take over, grinding against him. Shameful, but I don't give a damn. I'm loving this too much to care that a single girl isn't supposed to behave this way.

Maybe this will be the night. But not unless I can bring myself to touch him. I've never touched a man before. Not *there*. No man ever interested me. But with Sten, I find myself wet between my legs merely from flirting with him.

I glide my hand over the top of his jeans and then slide lower until my fingers touch the hardness there. My brain says I should stop, but the rest of me keeps going... lower and lower and lower. How huge is this thing? I may be a virgin, but math is math. He'll never fit.

"My cocks have risen for you."

Cocks? There's that language issue again. I certainly won't correct him every time he misspeaks, especially over something so minor as making a noun plural, and especially not while he's nibbling on my earlobe. Oh, God, why does that drive me crazy?

“What’s taking so long?” my mother calls from the dining room.

I jerk out of Sten’s hold with the jarring reminder that we’re not alone.

“I spilled the powdered sugar and we’re cleaning it up,” I yell out as I straighten my sweater and throw my hair back up into a ponytail. I can’t help being frazzled. I’m making out with an alien in the kitchen while my parents are literally feet away, separated only by a thin door.

“I forgot why we are here,” Sten says. Then a grin overtakes his face. “But I don’t regret the cooking lesson, Commander.”

I glance down at the huge bulge in his pants and my pussy clenches. He’s going to split me wide open.

“You’re really *big*, Sten.”

“You’re just tiny compared to zyanthan females.”

Tiny? No one’s ever called me that before. Even when I was a kid. I’m bigger than most women my height, but if he wants to think of me as tiny, who am I to burst his bubble? Especially when he might be the one to pop my cherry?

“Sure. We can go with *tiny*. I knew there’s a reason I like you.”

He presses his hips forward again. “I can give you another.”

“We need to get dessert out there before my mom comes in.” I reach over to gather the platter of donuts and point at the coffee for him to carry.

“My cocks will adjust to you. You will take me, female,” he says with absolute confidence as he picks up the coffee tray.

“Adjust?” I can’t believe I’m asking, as if having sex with him is a foregone conclusion.

“I will fit.”

I ponder that as I lead the charge out of the kitchen and into the Birnbaum battlefield.



STENIKOV

GOLDA'S BEHAVIOR changes the moment we leave the kitchen. Her previous tension returns and she barely looks in my direction. But when she does, her color deepens and I know she's thinking of our interlude in the kitchen. I, on the other hand, cannot take my eyes from her.

She made my cocks rise. Both of them. A zyanthan male's mating cock only rises for his sholani, the female he's destined for. I can no longer deny the truth.

Golda's my heart mate.

Never had I expected to find my sholani at such a young age or among another species. I've heard of other warriors mating humans and producing younglings, which means our two species are compatible. But many zyanthan males live for decades without ever finding their heartmate. While I'm ready for a mate and a family, I worry that Golda is not.

I know all I need to know about her. She's a warm, intelligent female who cares very much about her family and her people. True, she and her mother have an unusual relationship, but she listens to her mother, helps her, and clearly cares about her. This caring nature is what I want in a female...in my sholani.

"Stenikov, did you hear me?" Mr. Birnbaum asks.

"My apologies. I'm distracted. Please repeat your question."

"I asked how long you've been working for GI7."

"Three months. I worked as a marshal on Tunzen before coming to Earth. Zyan Defense Command assigned me to GI7 due to the marshal shortage. Before that, I handled recon as part of a special ops team."

"You've only been on Earth for a few weeks and already your commander promoted you to New York. That's

impressive.”

“I would not call it a promotion.”

“You’re here alone. Before the field office has been built. Sounds like your commander believes in you.”

“I’m a warrior. I go where I’m ordered. Commander Keskov ordered me here because he believes I need additional interaction with humans. And some... supervision.”

Mrs. Birnbaum stops pouring the coffee. “Why?”

“While in Los Angeles, I had a confrontation with a male. I fired my blaster and was reprimanded as a result. It’s why I no longer carry a blaster.”

“What happened?” she asks.

“I met a group of males playing a game called basketball. I asked them about it. They did not like my presence. One of the males challenged me. He told me to take my best shot and threw the ball at me. I shot it. It was a good shot, too, though not a true demonstration of my skills. I can shoot much smaller items at greater distances. The basketball exploded, and the males ran off.”

All four humans laugh at my story. How very confusing. None of the males playing basketball laughed. Nor the policemen who reprimanded me. Or Zirkov. He sent me here for *training*.

Not that I regret it. I never would have met Golda otherwise.

“Finish up, Golda,” Mrs. Birnbaum says. “Your father and I will clean up. I don’t want you to miss the last bus. Stenikov can walk you to the bus stop.”

Mrs. Birnbaum has that look in her eyes again, one that I cannot interpret. As always, I turn to Golda.

She’s glaring at her mother as she puts down her coffee. “She’s right. I have to get going. Are you sure you don’t mind walking me to the bus?”

I've been looking forward to the chance to be alone with her again. While I find her family intriguing, they don't occupy my thoughts as much as Golda. Which makes sense. She is my sholani.

CHAPTER TEN

GOLDA

Heavy snowflakes glide to the ground as we leave my parents' brownstone. Despite the chill in the air, I love how fresh and hopeful my neighborhood looks coated in a fresh, crisp-white layer of snow.

"Did you leave something at your parents'?" Sten asks when I stopped walking.

"I'm taking in the snow."

He's wearing a pair of jeans and a light jacket but doesn't appear cold. Meanwhile, I'm bundled up in a knee-length, dark gray wool coat and hot pink hat with matching mittens that Bubbe knitted for me. My mom bought me the coat, so I'd blend in with my surroundings and be less of a target to men looking for trouble. Bubbe intentionally used hot pink yarn so men looking for a wife would notice me.

I live a life of mixed signals, but I know what I want. A nice home, a career that brings my life meaning and joy, and most of all, a guy who will love me for me.

I'm grateful for the coat, hat, and mittens. They're technically all I need to stay warm. My eyes lift to Sten's, and I envision cuddling up next to him for a better source of heat.

My foot catches on the uneven pavement and I go flying forward. Before I slam to the ground, strong arms catch me and set me on my feet. Damn, how embarrassing. Face-planting in front of a guy two days in a row can't be explained, even if I had two left feet! This time it's my own damn fault,

too. I know better than to walk distracted. The government spends its money fixing critical infrastructure, which doesn't include sidewalks.

"Are you okay?" Sten asks, the concern in his face unmistakable.

"I'm fine, thank you for catching me. It's been a long day. I'm sure tomorrow will be better."

"You will return? I will see you again?" His silver eyes light up, bright and shiny like the silver on my parents' menorah. Mine are plain brown, nothing special. I wonder what our kids would look like.

OMG, I did not just go there, did I?

"Is that your bus stop?" On the corner, a bus pulls up to a crowd of people.

"One more block. I have another five minutes or so before it arrives."

"Why don't you live with your parents?"

"They can be a bit controlling at times."

"But they love you. Protect you."

"Don't get me wrong, I love them and I don't know what I'd do without them, but I still need to live my own life. If my mom had her way, I'd be married with three kids by now."

"You don't like younglings?"

"I love them. But I have to meet the right guy first. Until then, I'm content living in Cobble Hill with four other women. They're nice and quiet, and our apartment is closer to where I work, over in the Waterfront District."

As we reach the bus stop, I realize Sten has been watching the surroundings the entire time. I've been doing most of the talking while he's been assessing the people and dangers nearby. Which is what I'd do if I were on my own but with him here, I relax. He won't let anything happen to me.

"Hey, Sten? Would you... like to see my place?" When he faces me, I suddenly worry I'm being too forward. "It's okay if

you don't want to travel that far. And I totally forgot the buses stop running in an hour so we can do it another time."

Or not at all. I can see it in his face. He's only escorting me to the bus because my parents asked him. Duty, nothing more.

"I would be honored." Sten adds a slight nod, his eyes never leaving mine. He's watching my reaction, which must be one of shock because I didn't expect him to say yes. "I do not require a bus to return to your parents'. I will memorize the route and walk back."

"That's five miles!"

"Then I will run. Much faster. And learning my way around this city is part of my duties."

He laces his fingers with mine. Warmth spreads through me and I know it has nothing to do with the wool coat.

A group of five people arrive at the bus stop ahead of us, with a second group close behind. The last bus of the night will be crowded, but if we miss it, that means I'll be sleeping on the floor of my parents' room thinking about Sten all night and unable to do anything about it.

Still holding hands, I start running. "We better hurry or we'll never get a seat."

"Do not worry, Golda. We will get seats."

The moment the bus pulls up, everyone piles on. By the time we board, it's standing-room only. When Sten climbs the steps, bending so his horns don't scrape the ceiling, everyone in the front half of the bus flees to the back, crowding together like sardines in a tin can.

With six rows now empty, we have our choice of seats. My sweet alien sits down in the third row. "See, it's easy getting a seat."

I slide in next to him, wondering if he realizes how scared those people are. Oh, who the fuck cares? I get to sit! Yay!

"You're smiling," he says.

"I never get a seat on this bus."

He rests his hand on my thigh. Now I have a better reason to smile.

When he squeezes my leg, I say, “Find something you like?” I’ve never been one to flirt, but with Sten it’s easy. Natural. And I can’t seem to stop.

“You’re soft,” he says.

“Good soft or bad soft?”

“Pleasurable soft.”

My stomach flutters and parts lower respond with a pulsing. When we get to my apartment, what then? I’m slightly panicked. I’ve never done anything like this before and could screw things up.

Am I ready to go all the way with him? Will he think I’m easy because we only just met? What if he’s not the right guy for me? Nothing says I have to marry the guy I lose my virginity to, but I don’t want a one-night stand.

I want more.

I want... Sten. And for more than one night.

“Did you enjoy the meal?” I ask, because when conversations get uncomfortable in my house, food is always a safe topic.

“Very filling.”

“That’s not a regular meal for us. It’s too much fried food and too much food in general. Cooking oil is expensive, but my parents are big on maintaining customs so we remember where we come from. When Rachel and I were kids, we used to get a small present each of the eight nights of Hannukah, but that dropped off as we got older. Now, we exchange gifts on the last night. As Sadie gets older, I suppose we’ll go back to giving gifts nightly. It makes the holiday more special for the kids.”

“On Zyan, we don’t give gifts often. Perhaps between two mates, but I can’t recall much from when my father was still alive. We do have plenty of rituals to ensure health and good lives. When a youngling turns a month old, we perform yenun.

We dunk the youngling in water to wash away the sins of the family and ensure a bright future for the youngling.”

“That’s lovely.” I finally glance outside and realize I almost missed my stop. With a quick tug of the cord above the window, the bus slows. “This is our stop.”

When I step into the aisle, I turn to the people still huddling in the back of the bus. “Not all aliens are bad,” I announce loud enough so they can’t pretend they didn’t hear me. “Like not all humans are good.”

Without waiting for any of them to respond, I head to the doors up front. Sten’s right behind me, protecting my rear. Oh, god, he has an unobstructed view of my backside! I should hold my head up high and proceed off the bus. But no, I give in to my impulsive nature and shake my ass at him.

I’m hopeless!

With the squeak of the bus doors closing behind us, I start walking, too embarrassed to look him in the eyes. “You didn’t see that, did you?”

Please, please, please, say no!

“See what?”

Relief washes through me. “Nothing. My place isn’t far from here.” I point in the general direction of my apartment, still trying to dissect what’s gotten into me. My parents aren’t here so I can’t use them as an excuse. Often, I do the opposite of what they say, just because.

Then it dawns on me. I’m acting carefree and a little reckless because I’m with Sten. Being myself around him is... easy.

“Lead the way, Commander.”

That name gets me every time, and he knows it. That teasing grin on his face says as much. I return his smile and weave my fingers through his. “Thank you for walking me home tonight. I’m glad you’re here. I had a really nice day with you.”

“Which part? Teaching me how to cook or protecting you from your family?” He says that last part with an adorable chuckle. “Or letting me taste you? I truly enjoyed that part, though I’d like to taste more of you.”

My cheeks flush and I’m hot *everywhere*. If the snow weren’t coming down in buckets, I’d chuck my wool coat.

“Do you have snowball fights on Zyan?”

“What is a snowball?”

Yeah, I’m weak when it comes to temptations, and right now I want to see Sten laugh and let loose a little. Not that he’s stiff... Oh, God, there I go again! My mind is definitely in the gutter. I need a distraction. Nothing’s better than a good ol’ fashioned snowball fight.

I race ahead and pack snow together. The snow is wet and heavy, perfect for making snowballs. In seconds, I have not one but three snowballs balanced on my forearm and ready to throw.

“These are snowballs.” Without further explanation, I launch them one after the next at Sten. The first one explodes against his jacket, causing his horns to rise high. I’m pushing my luck because I throw another snowball. This one strikes his left horn.

A clump of snow balances on his horn like snow on a branch. Wet snow slides down the side into his hair.

I don’t care what anyone else thinks. Blue, horns, tattoos... They’re all external features, different from me, but meaningless. The guy within, the one who’s reaching up to touch the snow melting in his hair, isn’t upset with me. He’s curious, patient, forgiving... loving. He makes my heart beat fast.

When I reach up to brush the snow off his horn, strong arms wrap around me and pull me in against a very hard, large body. Soft lips crash down on mine, making me forget the world around me. The last snowball falls from my hand as pleasure sails through me. I don’t understand how I can be falling for a guy so fast, but I am.

As Sten deepens the kiss, my hand threads through his hair. I'm flying high, weightless in his arms and melting against a fire that warms my soul.

I place my hands on his chest while I catch my breath. His horns tip back and his eyes glow like two tiny moons. No one's ever kissed me like that. Ever.

"That was nice. Really nice," I say.

"I like snowball fights."

"You're supposed to throw a snowball back at me. One of us runs while the other chases."

"I enjoy a good chase. But when I capture my prey, I like to play with it..."

Yes! Take me!

He looks up at the snow which is falling faster. "I should return to your parents' home."

"Maybe you should stay with me. It's getting nasty out here."

"I've slogged through worse. I'm expected to be there to aid them when they need my help. Will you return to cook tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow will be leftovers. No cooking required." His face falls, and I understand precisely how he feels. I want to see him again.

"I have to check in at work for a bit. I'll definitely be at my parents to light the candles before sunset. Maybe earlier. I'm sure my mom could use some help with the laundry. Or washing floors."

I'll think of something we can do together. Anything that will give me more time with him. If I could, I'd blow off work completely, but I'm eager to check in and make sure I still have a job.

I can't believe I've only known Sten two days. Both flew by so fast, and I had an incredible time cooking with him. And

then there's all the flirting... and kissing! Every minute with him feeds my soul.

He waits at the bottom of the steps as I turn the key and open the door to my apartment building. "I'll see you tomorrow, Sten. Thank you for the snowball fight."

He nods and the corners of his mouth kick up. "Sleep well, Commander. By the way, Golda?"

"Yes?"

"Nice ass."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GOLDA

Normally, I love sleeping in, but today my eyes snap open at eight thirty. Yesterday turned into a complete disappointment. I woke up, expecting to go to work before shooting over to my parents. Instead, the entire city came to a halt. Four feet of snow kept me and every other New Yorker trapped at home. Not a single bus drove down my street until after the snow plows cleared the road at nine pm. Government, military, and hospitals always get priority. Residential areas are last on the list. Thankfully, the storm only lasted one day. Nothing's going to keep me from visiting my parents today.

My roommates, Nancy, Brenda, and Theresa went home for Christmas and Luciana is staying at her boyfriend's place in Harlem. I have the place to myself until after New Year's. Yesterday, I spent the day cleaning my apartment and dreaming of Sten. I'm hoping he'll escort me again tonight, and this time stay over.

It's the day before Christmas, and Jenkins Imports has done so well this year, old man Jenkins is giving everyone off tomorrow through New Year's. I want to stop in and pre-empt any ideas management may have of firing me. Someone might blame the inventory discrepancy on me in my absence, even though I discovered the issue.

After showering and dressing, I head out into the frigid temperature. A thick blanket of snow still covers the

sidewalks, but I've waited long enough. The sooner I get to work and do whatever they may need, the sooner I'll see Sten.

The warehouse bustles with activity as I climb the stairs to my office on the second floor. Mr. Wilson's sitting in my chair going through a stack of papers on my desk that wasn't there when I left. Several cabinet drawers are open with file folders sticking out. If Mr. Jenkins were sitting there, or even Mr. Kelly, then I'd be concerned. But Wilson's the dock foreman. I don't answer to him and he definitely doesn't belong up here. Whatever he's looking for, he's not even trying to hide the fact that he's trespassing.

"Uh-hum." I clear my throat, loudly.

Wilson's head snaps up. "Birnbaum. You're not supposed to be here."

"Neither are you. Ever. You handle the dock. I handle the office."

"We're trying to track down a missing shipment."

"Last I checked, my desk wasn't big enough to fit a shipping container."

He pushes to his feet hard enough that the chair—*my* chair—rolls back and hits the wall. "Don't get smart with me, woman."

My instincts tell me to back away, but I can't. If I show fear to any of these guys, it will only make my job harder. I'm already a goldfish swimming with sharks, but I use my attitude like a sharp knife, cutting through all the bull. When that doesn't work, I grab the baseball bat from the corner of my office... the other side of my office where I can't reach it.

I wish Sten were here.

I keep my feet planted on the creaking floor boards by the door. "If you want something in here, ask. But stay out of my desk and files. You're messing everything up."

"Maybe if you showed up on time, I wouldn't need to." He flings a blue file folder at me. That's the most important file in my office. The one with my master list of shipping containers

by vendor along with the map of where they're located on the docks. The file opens and papers fly everywhere.

"Mr. Kelly gave me a few days off. I shouldn't even be here right now."

"No, you shouldn't."

That air of superiority and condemnation rubs me the wrong way, but I've learned a lot from watching my dad over the years. Staying calm usually keeps a situation from escalating. Unfortunately, I also have a lot of my mom's quick-to-heat blood in me.

"If you have an issue with my hours, take it up with Mr. Kelly."

"You have a smart mouth on you." Wilson barrels past me to the door, but not before knocking over the two-foot stack of papers on my desk... papers he pulled from the filing cabinet without their folders.

I step back, giving him a wide berth. When he's gone, I shut the door and lock it.

Nothing appears missing and I'm still not sure what he was doing up here, but I'll talk with Mr. Kelly when I see him next week. I stare at the mess the asshole left for me. It will take me hours to sort and file everything.

I curse him as I start cleaning the mess. I should be with Sten. He fills my heart with light and joy. I have to get my ass in gear, so I can get out of here as fast as possible.



BY THE TIME I finish organizing my files, it's well past noon. Since I'm not being paid to be here today, I hop on the next bus to my parents'.

Two hours later, I walk through the door to my childhood home. The city cleared the streets in and around my neighborhood, but not uptown, which tripled my time on the bus. Standing, of course.

“Anyone home?” I call out as I shuck my coat. The place is unusually quiet. “Mom? Sten? Anyone?”

The baby’s cries seize me. Something’s wrong! I toss my coat onto the sofa and race upstairs to the nursery. The moment I step inside, I freeze at the sight before me.

My panic disappears, replaced by laughter which I struggle to contain.

Stenikov’s holding my squirming four-month-old niece under her arm pits while a cloth diaper hangs from her little thighs. I tilt my head forty-five degrees trying to figure out what, besides a miracle, is keeping that diaper on her. Or is it diapers, plural? That’s too much bulk to be one diaper.

Sadie’s bare and very well powdered bottom hangs out over the monster-diaper, she’s crying, and Sten’s horns twist at the tips. And, yes, there’s a cloth diaper hanging from one horn. How or why, I’m afraid to ask.

“Here, let me.” I ease Sadie from his hold, trying not to laugh as I realize her bottom isn’t the only thing covered in copious amounts of baby powder. Sten’s black hair has turned white, and not from the shock of how much work a baby can be. His royal blue skin doesn’t look as vibrant under several layers of powder, but the smile that forms when my hands brush against him as I take Sadie tells me all is right with the world again.

“How many battles have you fought?” I ask as I quickly remove the numerous layers of cloth diapers and the ten—*ten!*—safety pins holding them together.

“Too many to count. But never one as challenging as this.”

With a kiss to Sadie’s forehead, I lay her down on the changing table. After I quickly flip the two front corners of a fresh cloth diaper to the middle and pull them up through her legs and across her belly, I pin the sides to the back corners of the diaper.

“Done!”

“You make that look so easy, Commander.”

Sadie's little arms wiggle as I thread them through the winter onesie. "Probably no different from a soldier breaking down a gun and reassembling it. If you do it enough times, you can do it in your sleep."

"Thank you for rescuing me."

"Here, hold Sadie while I clean up." I thrust Sadie at him because I need to clean up the mess and there's something about seeing this massive guy holding a tiny baby against his chest that makes my insides flutter.

Sadie settles against Sten, her bright blue eyes focused on his face. He smiles at her and my lady parts quiver. God, he's sexy.

"Your mother has a cold and a headache. She's been sleeping most of the day."

"Where's Bubbe?"

"She went to the market."

"And she left you alone to care for Sadie? Do you have any experience with babies?"

He shakes his head. "According to your grandmother, I need the practice for when I have younglings."

It sounds like something Bubbe would say. "Well, I don't think you should be stuck here babysitting Sadie. Let me tell my mom we're taking the baby to Rachel's so she can rest."

Quietly, I check on my mom. When I find her sleeping, I leave her a note by the glass of water on her nightstand. I pin a second note to the fridge for Bubbe so she won't worry when she returns and realizes Sadie's gone.

As I bundle Sadie in her baby bunting, Sten's expression remains dubious. "What's wrong, Sten? You look unsettled."

"I do not like to fail."

"You didn't fail. Sadie's alive and well. A little mess is nothing. Bubbe had no business leaving you alone with a baby without teaching you the basics."

After I lay Sadie down in the stroller, Sten takes my hand and pulls me to him. His hands curve around my back and he simply holds me. “I missed you. Your mother had me shovel the entire block yesterday. It’s not as fun as cooking with you.”

“She shouldn’t have done that,” I say, upset with my mom while also wracking my brain about things to cook with him.

“I did not mind. She said it would help the elderly neighbors.”

And Sten, since they’d see an alien helping them. My mom may be intrusive and drive me crazy, but she’s smart when it comes to people.

“One male, Mr. Jacobs, offered me a cup of coffee to warm up. I do not like coffee.”

“What did you do?”

“I drank it. And burned my tongue. Ignoring such an offer is rude in my culture.”

“Let me see your tongue.”

Sten sticks his tongue out. Tiny blisters cover a good portion of the tender blue flesh.

“How fast did you drink it?”

“Fast. I hadn’t finished shoveling.”

“My poor sweet alien.” I tip up on my toes and kiss him on his cheek. “That’s for your abused tongue.”

The memories of my morning fade away in Sten’s presence, as does my foul mood. I slide my hands around his neck, breathing in his male musk mixed with baby powder, an enticing combination. This time, I kiss him squarely on the lips.

I’m about to tell him I missed him too, but his tongue delves into my mouth and his hand cups the back of my head. Before I realize it, I’m pressed against the wall with his hard length pushing into my belly.

Instinctively, I rub one calf down a muscular leg. He grips my calf and wraps my leg around his waist, bends his knees

and presses his dick harder against me, striking me right where I want him. Except the damn jeans grind against my folds, not the handsome male. Of all the days to wear jeans!

Sten slides his hands under my butt and lifts me. With both legs wrapped around him, I cross my ankles, locking him to me. A sense of awe strikes me when I realize he lifted me and he's supporting my full weight as if I weigh nothing!

I'm loving the attention, the way he takes control, and especially how he deepens the kiss. Just when I think nothing can break us apart, Sadie cries. I bundled her up so well she's probably overheating.

"We should go," I say softly, pulling my lips away from his. He sets me down as gracefully as he lifted me up.

"I will remember this position for later."

"I like how you say that. As if we're not done with each other."

"We are not. You, Golda Birnbaum, have burrowed your way into my heart. I cannot ignore how you affect me. Nor do I want to."

That's scary. Terrifying. And heart-poundingly sweet. I say nothing in return, because I'm overwhelmed.

I want this guy, in every way possible.

Once Sten carries the stroller down the steps to the sidewalk, I cover Sadie with baby blankets. It doesn't take long to realize the stroller's not doing well on the icy sidewalks. At my request, Sten takes the stroller back to the house while I carry Sadie. She's wide awake, enjoying the fresh air and light snow falling. Fortunately, we only live a few blocks from Rachel's in-laws.

Sten slides his arm around my waist. I don't want to chance dropping Sadie, so he can't hold my hand, but this is better. Each time I slip, he steadies me.

"You're very good in snow. Do you have a lot of snow on Zyan?"

“In the northern mountains. We train there as well as in the desert, water, marshes, and fire pits.”

“Fire pits?”

“Zyan’s geography is similar to Earth’s but we train on other worlds as well, to ensure we’re prepared for any conditions. On Elini, fire pits open without warning. One opened up in front of me as I was about to set my foot down. I nearly fell in.”

A cold chill goes through me as I imagine what he’s been through. “That explains why diapering a four-month-old didn’t stress you.”

“It did. But warriors don’t give up.” He stares into my eyes. “Ever.”

I let that sink in as we reach Rachel’s new home. From the outside, her in-laws’ brownstone looks similar to ours, but they have three levels whereas we only have two. Rachel and Eli have the third floor to themselves. Mom took Sadie for the week so Rachel and Eli could have some alone time. They’ve had enough. I’d like my own alone time... with Sten.

Knocking on the door does nothing. No one answers. No one’s home, but I don’t want Sadie out in the cold any longer than necessary. I hand her to Sten while I fish out my emergency key from my jeans.

Before I insert my key, the door swings open. There stands Rachel in a silky pink robe at three in the afternoon, her long blonde hair tousled about her. For a moment I wonder if she’s sick too, but then I notice her puffy lips and... Is that whipped cream in her hair? Ew. I don’t want to think about her and Eli getting busy.

“Eli!” Rachel screams as she grabs Sadie from Sten and slams the door in our faces.

Sten doesn’t look puzzled. I guess he’s used to that type of reaction. Well, I’m not.

I pound on the door. Sure, I can use my key, but I want Rachel to know I’m not happy with her rude behavior.

The door opens again, and this time it's Eli. He grabs me by my coat, pulls me in, and slams the door shut, harder than before... leaving Sten alone outside.

CHAPTER TWELVE

STENIKOV

I t's not hard understanding what's happening here. These humans are afraid of me. Normally, I'd walk away, but that male grabbed my female and pulled her inside. I don't know who he is or what his intention is.

I'm about to pound on the door, but then I hear Golda's voice inside. "What the fuck, Rachel! Open that door this instant."

"He's an alien!"

"Really? I hadn't noticed." Golda's voice drips with sarcasm and anger, but not fear. My female is fine. This is nothing more than a few humans avoiding me.

The door opens and there stands my beautiful female, still in her coat, the snow on her hat melted, and ire in her eyes. Until she sees me. Then her expression softens.

"Shut the door, Golda!" the male yells at her.

I don't like him yelling at my female. I enter and walk past Golda until she's safely behind me. "You will not scream at Golda."

Both the male and the blonde female who's holding the youngling step back. The male reaches for a three-foot-long piece of iron. A deadly weapon... if he reaches me, which he won't. I have all my knives on me, but there are females and a youngling here. I need to de-escalate this situation. Before I can speak again, Golda pushes past me.

“Put the poker down, Eli. Sten is with me. He’s staying at Mom and Dad’s. In fact, he babysat Sadie all morning because Mom’s not feeling well.”

The blonde’s mouth drops open, and the male doesn’t surrender the weapon.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Golda says as she marches over to him and yanks the weapon out of his hands. With a clank, she sets it against the fireplace. “Enough already. You’re both acting like you’ve never seen an alien before. Sten’s nothing like the Coalition.”

“I didn’t know any good aliens existed,” the female says.

“Sten, this is my sister Rachel. Supposedly the smart one of the family. And that’s her husband Eli. Just as dumb as my sister, but otherwise a good guy.”

“Hey!” Eli objects.

“I said you’re a good guy.”

I love this female’s biting humor, not to mention the way she takes charge. She’s fierce, like a warrior. Except incredibly soft and adorable.

“You let him babysit Sadie?” Rachel clutches the youngling to her chest so hard the infant cries. “See, he scares her. What else did he do to her? Oh, god...” Rachel runs to lay Sadie on the sofa and begins undressing her.

“I fed her one bottle of milk from the cooler, then put her on my shoulder and patted her back until she burped. I mimicked how Mrs. Gertie-She’s-A-Lovely-Though-Somewhat-Crazy-Woman Birnbaum fed the youngling yesterday.”

Rachel stops her inspection of the youngling and stares at me, while Golda laughs so hard tears leak from her eyes.

“Oh, Rach, you should see the look on your face! I told him not to call Mom that, but I guess I should have been clear not to refer to her by that name to anyone else, too.”

Rachel breaks into laughter and in that moment looks very much like Golda, though not as beautiful. Golda has an

openness to her that her sister lacks. Perhaps that is why I'm falling for her.

"It's not a bad description," Rachel says, looking at me now with a little less fear in her eyes.

"It's rather apt," the male—Eli—says. His shoulders ease but he still watches me closely. This is his home. I'm the intruder here. I cannot fault him for defending his family.

Golda takes my hand and pulls me with her into the center of the room. "Sten's a zyanthan warrior working for Galactic Intelligence on Earth."

"So you're a zyanthan," Eli says as he cradles his youngling in his arms. "Zyan has an embassy on the west coast. I always figured your people prefer warm weather which is why I've never seen one of you here in New York. You're rather different from the banth and og'dals who occupied Earth."

"Dal is part of the alliance that makes up Galactic Intelligence, not the Coalition. They are not responsible for the occupation of Earth. Some of their people, however, were and still are involved with the Coalition."

"Those four-armed bastards stole a lot of women from Earth."

"Galactic Intelligence tasked Sector 5 with bringing og'dal slavers to justice as well as rescuing any Earth females still trapped in coalition space. I'm part of GI7. Witness protection."

"Why are you staying at our parents' house?" Rachel asks.

"My commander believes I need to improve my understanding of humans and their ways so I can better ensure the safety of our witnesses on Earth."

"I can see where learning our norms would be helpful. Like, you don't show up on a man's doorstep holding his baby without an explanation," Eli says, glaring at Golda.

Golda crosses her arms over her chest. "What did you want me to do, Eli? Have Sten hide in the bushes while I told you

there's a blue alien with horns waiting to come in? You would have taken Sadie and slammed the door in my face. Oh, wait, you did that anyway. Except this way, I didn't have to make him feel like a second-class citizen."

"He's not a citizen," Eli argues. "That's the point. He's not *human*."

"You know what I mean." Golda grabs my hand again, this time taking large strides as she moves deeper into the home. "I'm starved. Have any lox and bagels?"

It's an interesting strategy, pulling me along with her, inserting me into her family's bunker so deeply they cannot keep objecting. She's a strategist, my female.

My female. I like how that sounds.

"Why is he smiling?" Rachel asks, pointing to me.

"I don't know. Why don't you ask *him*? And he has a name. It's Sten. He's fluent in English and Common, and a few other languages. But not much Yiddish yet."

"Yet?"

"Bubbe came for Hannukah."

"Ahh," both Eli and Rachel say in unison. It's rather curious the effect that one elderly human female has on so many people. I must study Bubbe more.

"You have my sympathy," Rachel says. It's the first nice thing this female has said to me. I think.

"Your grandmother is like a fierce warrior, except she spars with words instead of weapons. I suspect she comes across grumpy intentionally to mislead those around her."

"No, she's an old grump," Rachel says, but the female offers a slight smile, as if she's trying to accept me.

I look to Golda, whose genuine smile lights the entire room. My getting to know her sister is important to her, so I strive to be as non-threatening as possible, starting with forcing my horns back.

“Your daughter is a very easy youngling. She doesn’t cry much, but she wakes very early each morning.”

Rachel’s brow furrows. “Thank you?”

“You remind me of my sister Aja. She is suspicious of most people but can be reasoned with.”

“You have sisters?”

“Yes, Rachel,” Golda says as she withdraws a container from the cooler in the kitchen. “And Sten has parents. Funny how similar aliens are to humans. Hide the horns with a stovepipe hat, then douse him in a little more baby powder and he’ll be a regular, albeit, broader Abraham Lincoln.”

“Baby powder? You’re talking in riddles again, Goldilox.” Rachel pulls the container from Golda’s hands. “And that’s fettucine alfredo. Too many calories. The celery’s in the bottom drawer.”

“A, I’m not a rabbit. B, I’m hungry and I want real food. I didn’t get to eat lunch today. I spent a few hours cleaning up a huge mess in my office at work that I didn’t even make. And C, you’re not in charge of me.”

“Don’t be a brat.”

“That’s it. We’re out of here.” Golda slams the cooler shut and grabs my hand once again. She moves fast, my little female, scooping up her coat, and heading out the door with only a brief delay as she stops to kiss the youngling’s forehead. A minute later we’re walking down the snow-covered street. Neither of us talks. I sense Golda needs quiet right now.

Human families are complicated, and Golda cares about hers immensely. Otherwise, I do not believe she would be this upset with them.

I slide my hand over hers and bring it to my lips to kiss her palm. “Tell me what I can do to help you, Commander.”

Big brown eyes look up at me. They’re glossy, filled with tears that she quickly wipes away.

“I’m sorry, I get oversensitive sometimes. Rachel’s always been the pretty one. And smart, I mean really smart. Book smart. She means well, but her comments hurt. I shouldn’t let what she says get to me, but I do. And in front of you, yet. That’s not how I wanted today to go. I wanted you to like her, and for her to like you.”

As I peer into her face, I cannot understand why she thinks her sister is ‘the pretty one’. Golda is far more beautiful, on the outside and inside. She has deep brown hair that matches her eyes, a soft lush body that I have trouble keeping my hands off of, and the most expressive face I’ve ever seen. She stood up for me today and the first day I met her. And the second. Defended me against insults and physical threats.

“Families are often the source of our greatest joy and our greatest sorrows, but we are usually better people for having them in our lives.”

“I bet you and your sisters all get along.”

“Pff. Aja never believes anything I or our sisters tell her unless we can prove it. Bozi thinks only of herself most of the time and Maza tends to pit us against one another, but I think that is because she’s so bright that she’s bored.”

“And what of the other sister?”

“Tali? She’s sweet and... fragile. We all look out for her, and that makes us closer as a family.”

“That’s really sweet. I bet you miss them.”

“I do. Very much. It’s been many years since I’ve seen them and talking to them over the comm is not as personal.”

“Why do you have such a long name and your sisters have short ones?”

“My mother says I’m four times their size so I need four times the name.”

When Golda steps in front of me, I stop short and she bounces off me. I grab her upper arms to keep her from falling. If we both fall, then I’ll twist my body so my female falls on top of me and not the hard cement. Instead, she grabs my

jacket and pulls me into a kiss that stirs both my cocks, even in these drekking jeans.

Each time I touch her, the realization strikes me again, leaving me both stunned and grateful to the gods for giving me such an amazing sholani. I kiss her forehead, overjoyed as a truth settles in my soul. Golda is mine.

“Thank you, Sten. For being you.”

I could not have picked out a more beautiful, special person than my Golda.

My Golda. I love how that sounds.

A new realization sets in, dimming my joy. Not all heartmates end up together. I must figure out how to tell Golda what she means to me. Then, I must find a way for us to stay together. In five days, I'm leaving Earth.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

STENIKOV

On Friday, I surprise Golda outside her apartment building. She's standing at the top of the steps, radiant in her gray coat, pink hat, and matching mittens. The moment she sees me, her face lights up, as does my heart.

"Sten, what are you doing here? I was heading to my parents'."

"Earlier this week, you promised me a walk."

"You walked me to the bus. And then all the way home after the bus ride."

"That was per your parents' request. Though I enjoyed it very much. This is for us."

Her brows dance and she bounces in her boots, making my heart race. My Golda has no fear about showing me who she is.

"I'd love to walk with you."

When she slides her hand in mine, my entire body comes alive. I use all my restraint to keep from kissing her. Both cocks pulse with need, but I want to spend the day getting to know my female. I have only a few days left on Earth. I'd like to learn as much about Golda's home and culture through her eyes, while I can.

Over the next few hours, Golda shows me her favorites places to shop, walk, and do a task she calls people watch. Another odd human custom that I do not quite understand, but

I admit I'm focused more on Golda than the city. After walking around Manhattan all morning, we're both hungry and could use a place to warm up.

Golda points to a small coffee shop on the corner. "How about here? I hear they have good coffee." She bites her lip. "On second thought, no more coffee for you. Ooh, but I really want you to try my favorite drink. Hot chocolate. But don't gulp it down. You need to sip it, savor the flavor."

The only flavor I wish to savor is hers. But this is not the time. I glance at the coffee shop. "The sign says *no aliens*."

"They have no right excluding you. But if they try, they'll have to go through me." She holds up two fists in pink mittens as her brows pinch together. She's ready to fight for me, as a sholani would, but no one would be scared of such a sweet female. Her sense of justice and determination fuel my desire to give her everything she wants in life.

"I look forward to trying chocolate that is hot."

"With whipped cream if they have it."

"Whipped cream?"

"The stuff Rachel had in her... Never mind. We'll skip the cream."

"That was food in her hair? Did her mate throw food at her? I can imagine a youngling throwing food, but not a mate."

"Not exactly *throwing*. He...ah... I think he was licking it off her... other parts of her body."

I gain new respect for Eli in this moment. "This human ritual intrigues me. We shall try it."

Golda's face flushes, a deep red. I restrain my chuckle as I hold the door open for her and we enter a crowded shop with a long line at the counter. The smell of fresh baked goods entices me, though still not as much as the female beside me.

The murmurs start the moment we step inside. Insults and slurs reach my ears as the humans whisper to one another, some pointing at me. It's not the first, nor will it be the last

time I encounter such behavior. Words do not hurt. Except when they are slung by family.

“I don’t understand why you said your sister has always been the pretty one. You are beautiful. Did you grow into your beauty over time or did your sister grow homely with age?” I ask as we step into the long line.

Golda’s eyes widen. “You think I’m prettier than Rachel?”

“Golda, you are exceedingly beautiful. Beyond measure. How do you not see this?”

She shrugs. “I’m heavier than I should be.”

My eyes roam over her body again and I love every curve I see. I remember how she shook her ass at me getting off the bus. Nothing is sexier than a confident female.

I pick her up and sling her over my shoulder, then twirl around. Golda’s laughter and shrieks of delight fill me with joy. For a brief moment, I forget where we are, until I hear nearby tables and chairs scrape against the floor as the other humans flee. This dampens my spirits, but I will not let Golda see this.

Carefully, I set my Golda down on her feet and press my lips to her forehead. “Not heavy. Heavenly.”

Her smile reaches her eyes. I didn’t think it was possible to fall for her any more than I have, but I am.

“Hey, we’re in the front of the line!” she says.

“Golda, there is no line. Everyone left. Because of me. I scared them.”

“We were having fun. Nothing wrong with that.”

“I do not wish to scare the humans here. They are not the enemy.”

Golda hooks her arms around my neck and kisses me on the lips. “No they’re not. But neither are you. If it helps, look at it this way... We moved up to the front of the line because you’re a VIP.”

“What is VIP?”

“Very important person. People get out of the way for and give benefits to VIPs.”

While I’m glad Golda considers me important, I do not think the other humans agree. The only one who remained is the owner behind the counter. He’s glaring at me. I must apologize to him for scaring off his patrons.

The male points at the door. “This is why I have a sign that says *no aliens*.”

“I am on Earth legally.”

“You’re causing trouble and no one wants coalition scum here.”

“Stop acting like you have a stick up your butt,” Golda says with her arms on her hips and a glare that could melt snow.

“He scared everyone off, woman!”

“He twirled me around, that’s all. If he were human, you would have ignored it. And he’s from Zyan, you idiot. An allied world. He has a good heart, that’s all that you should care about.”

The short man with mousy hair raises his voice. “This alien just cost me a lot of business. Though you look like you’ll eat enough to make up for everyone who left.”

When Golda charges forward, I grab her around her waist before she attacks the male. I will not chance her getting injured. I was wrong. Words do hurt. This male wounded her with his comment, and I see the hurt in her eyes.

With Golda safely tucked behind me, I lift the male by the front of his shirt until his feet dangle two feet off the ground. He grabs my wrists but cannot break my hold. Now that I have his full attention, I question my next move. As a warrior, I know what I should do, but as the one who holds the honor of protecting my female, I’m tempted to pound him into the ground.

A gentle hand lands on the middle of my back, calming me. “I will not fight over words of ignorance,” I say as I lower

the male to his feet. “But if you continue speaking with a loose tongue, you may lose it.”

“Is that a threat, alien?”

The male isn't a coward, I'll give him that.

“It was a warning meant to save you, human. I'm not the only alien on Earth. Most do not have my restraint, but all are very good with knives.” My fingers itch to draw a knife and show him how dangerous I can be, but I'm under strict orders not to cause trouble in New York unless I have no choice. Instead of drawing a knife from an inside pocket I withdraw a credit chip and toss it onto the counter. “For the loss of your income.”

I lead Golda to the door, curling my arm around her shoulders and pulling her close to me. I watch the male as we exit to ensure he does not draw a weapon.

“I wanted to hit him,” she says once we're outside.

“I know.”

“One punch. Or a well-placed kick to the groin.”

“You are stronger than him and his insults. I pity the male.”

“How is that?”

“That type of hatred comes from a place of ignorance. Ignorance is to be pitied because it festers inside a person, keeping him from experiencing all that life offers.”

“Are you always so wise?”

If I were wise, I'd have figured out how to tell her she's my heartmate, but I do not think she's ready to hear that.

Half-way down the block, I spin her to me, trying to draw out one of her beautiful smiles. I've ruined her day by my confrontation with the shop owner.

“Where should we go next, my Golda? Shall we continue exploring or head to your parents' home?”

She bites her bottom lip, as if she wants to say something. My comm vibrates and I glance at it. “The weather satellites are tracking another storm front. Larger than the last. It will hit this city tonight.”

“My place,” she blurts. “I don’t want to get stranded at my parents’.”

She loops her arm through mine and my entire being swells with pride. I kiss her forehead, thankful for the extra time I’ll have with her. By the end of tonight, I will tell her that I am her sholan.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GOLDA

After we leave the coffee shop, we walk toward my apartment building. It's a good seven blocks away, but I enjoy being with Sten. We could walk all day without any destination in mind and I'd have a fabulous time merely because I'm with him.

His arm tightens around my waist but not too hard. Enough to show me he's there for me. I'm upset about the coffee shop, especially since it reminds me about what happened at Rachel's yesterday. Sten's going out of his way to ensure I'm happy, but he doesn't realize I'm on top of the world when he's with me.

Sten's the one. I can feel it in my bones. And other places. I've connected with him in a way I didn't think I ever would, with anyone. He understands me, he *gets* me, even when I don't get myself. Every time I look at him, touch him, I want to give him everything that I am.

Tonight's the night. All I need to do is invite him in.

As we approach my apartment building, his teasing grin emerges. Instantly, my heart speeds up, but then my nerves get the best of me and I fall silent. What if I screw this up?

I look down the street, struggling to find the words to tell him how I feel. This is crazy. He's so easy to talk to and yet I can't string two words together.

With the backs of two fingers, Sten caresses my left cheek. "You are troubled. By my behavior in the coffee shop."

“Not at all.” This is about me and my insecurities, not the incident earlier. How do I tell him I’m inexperienced and have no clue what I’m doing?

When I slide my hands into his, our fingers lace together. Instantly, my nerves settle.

“You are unusually quiet, my Golda.”

Hearing his voice makes me smile and stand taller. How does he do that?

“Would you like to come up and see my place?” I dive in full force, because sometimes that’s the only way to get through the unknown. Throw caution aside and venture forward.

Everything *will* be fine. This is Sten, my sweet alien warrior. I repeat the thought over and over.

“I would love to learn all about you, Golda Birnbaum.” His voice deepens, sending chills through me. The good type. I don’t know if we’re quite on the same page here, but I’m about to find out.

After I unlock the front door, we walk the two flights to my floor. My hands shake as I put the key in the door. All of five keys and one pocket knife on the chain and I fumble and drop it.

Warm fingers slide over my hand as Sten takes the keychain from me and unlocks the door. One glance at him calms my nerves. He’s a patient guy. I love that about him, especially since I’m frozen in place, unable to enter my own apartment.

My expression must be really bad because Sten draws a knife. With the stealth of a panther, he enters my apartment. A moment later, he returns, knife back in his boot and his horns relaxed. “Your home is clear. No intruders.”

“Why would you think—”

“You were scared. That’s why you did not enter.”

“I’m sorry. I’m nervous about... being together. I’ve never gone all the way.” I have no reason to be nervous. This is Sten.

He's sweet and spicy rolled into one delicious dessert, like a spiced chocolate cake. And I really want to bite into him.

His brows dip then raise before his horns lay flat against his head. "You are untouched? How is this possible?"

I shrug. "No one's ever been interested in me. I mean, I've had offers, but always from guys who wanted a one-night stand. I want more from a relationship."

Sten's hand sifts through my hair, stirring parts of me that a moment ago had retreated like Uncle Marty anytime someone in the family needs money. My eyes find their way to Sten's handsome face. The concern there blows me away.

"You will not be rid of me so easily, sholani."

Part of me wonders if that's a line, because believing in him, in us... It's hard to accept that I finally found everything I want in a guy.

"I very much want to be with you, my Golda."

Sten's lips brush mine and my breath hitches. The world around me disappears as our tongues twine together. When my hand sneaks under his shirt, hard abdominal muscles flex beneath my fingertips, pulling me under until I'm lost in a pool of desire.

I deepen the kiss, thrusting my tongue in as far as I can. Sten bends at his knees and grinds his hard cock against my sex.

I want more. *Need* more.

We stumble our way into my apartment and the door slams behind us. Sten must have kicked it shut. I can't think straight as his hands move over me. My coat lands on the floor with a soft thump. My hat and mittens are next, followed by his jacket and shirt.

We can't get enough of one another as our mouths lock together. My hands move lower, teasing the button at the top of his jeans. One flick of the wrist and the button pops open.

"Yes, Golda," he moans, emboldening me. My hand glides lower, moving over his hard length. He's huge, not that I have

any real benchmark against which to compare. When I stroke him over his jeans, another moan spills from his throat and vibrates down to my core.

Sooo fucking sexy. I did that! I elicited that beautiful sound from this gorgeous man.

His hands slide beneath my sweater, skimming over my ribs, belly, and then the side of a breast. Pure and unadulterated decadence! And better than any chocolate cake, ever!

Silver eyes capture me. “I want you, Golda.”

“I want that too.”

He pulls my sweater over my head and gazes at my breasts. A finger dips into my bra and circles my already hard nipple. Those butterflies that were in my stomach are long gone, replaced by an electricity surging through me. Large hands cup my breasts making me feel sexy, desired, dainty.

Instinctively, I arch, offering more of myself to him. Sten pulls the cups down and my breasts spill out of my bra. His skilled tongue circles and flicks one nipple until it aches for much more. With a teasing smile, he blows on the tight peak making it extra sensitive to the cool air in the apartment and heightening the sensation of lying here exposed and vulnerable to him.

When he sucks on my other nipple, his hands push my jeans down past my hips. Now there’s nothing between us except one pair of lace panties, the sexy pair I’ve owned for years but never wore until today, for a guy who means a lot to me.

Sten’s hand moves over my mound and then he eases the lacy material to the side. “Let me in,” he whispers in my ear. My legs separate and his finger slides through my folds.

This is so dirty, and it’s still not enough. I crave his moan as dirty thoughts, all designed to drive him wild, enter my head. Making this powerful, beautiful man melt under my touch will fill a fantasy I didn’t know I had.

“My turn,” I say, without knowing what to do. But I’m determined to figure it out.

“Not yet. First, I taste you.”

“Taste me?”

He slides his fingers into his mouth. The expression on his face... OMG, he looks ravenous... for me!

“Pants off,” he orders. *Orders!*

Without delay, I kick off my boots and my pants go with them.

“Turn around, let me see that gorgeous ass.”

I turn around, facing the back of an overstuffed chair that’s thigh high. My bra suddenly goes slack and falls down my arms. He unhooked the back. I can’t believe I’m standing here almost completely naked in front of a guy.

A hand grips the base of my neck, holding me still while the other runs down my back, touching every inch of me. “You’re perfect, Golda. And soon, you will be mine.”

Sten squeezes my ass. My body tenses. I try to turn around but he holds me still and squeezes again, this time with an animalistic growl. “You will not hide from me.”

“But my ass is...”

“It’s perfect. Now, sholani, remove the fabric covering your sex. I wish to see all of you.”

“Don’t I get to see you?”

“You will do more than see. You will take my cocks in each of your tight holes, starting with your lush mouth.”

I’m stunned at his frankness. And did he say cocks, plural? I must have misheard. I’m overwhelmed from all the new sensations. Until his hands caress down the sides of my breasts and his bare chest presses against my back. The hardness of his length against my panties is doing things to me I’ve never imagined. I have an irrepressible urge to spread my legs, grind against him, and have contact with him any way I can.

I reach back and feel the warmth of skin over hard muscles along his abdomen. I'd like to reach lower, but I might touch his cock and I'm still feeling my way through this, literally and figuratively. My hand slides over his hip. There's no question. He's definitely naked behind me.

This is really happening. Those butterflies return, and they brought their cousins with them, fluttering like crazy until his hands settle on my hips.

“Let me taste you, my Golda.”

The very thought of him putting his fingers in me again shoots me into the atmosphere. Eager for his touch, I roll my panties down, and god help me, I wiggle my ass as I do so.

That same growl from before echoes through my apartment, making me forget that I'm completely naked. Then his mouth skims my ear and I melt beneath his touch.

“Do you still want me?” he whispers even as his fingers pinch my nipples and hold them captive.

“What if I say no?” I tease. I don't want this to end. I want him to take control, to show me the elusive pleasures he's dangling before me.

“I will stop touching you if you wish. If that happens, sholani, you will stand there and watch while I touch myself as I dream of being deep inside you.”

OMG. He'll do it, too! Wetness drips down my leg.

“I smell your arousal, my little flower. Let me taste you.”

“Yes!”

One hand presses against the middle of my back, draping my upper torso over the chair until my ass rises high in the air. Powerful thighs press against mine, pushing my legs apart. Oh god, I can't believe—

His hands separate my folds and then his *tongue* moves through me. He's *licking* me up and down. Waves of pleasure roll through my body, holding me hostage. He could do anything to me right now and I'd gladly submit.

I spread my legs wider, fully expecting him to fuck me, but he's not done with his mouth. His tongue flicks and plays with my clit before he sucks on me. I'm starting to squirm from the intensity that's building. I've had orgasms before, alone in the dark, but nothing like this monstrous wave ready to consume me.

“That feels sooooo good. Fuck me, Sten. Please.”

A finger enters me, taking me by surprise. That wasn't what I meant, but I can't argue with everything he's doing as my body shatters beneath his ministrations and my knees buckle. I grab hold of the chair, but Sten's there, his shoulders supporting me as he peppers kisses over my ass.

“You are tight, sholani. We will take this slow. My pleasure cock first.”

“Pleasure cock? Wait... what?” On shaky legs, I rise and turn around to see a magnificent male body. His warrior tattoos go from his right shoulder across his chest to the opposite hip. A matching set of tattoos circle the biceps on his right arm. Every part of him is a sculpted piece of art. And he's very naked.

My eyes fall to where his hand glides back and forth over a massive cock with black bumps running along the length of it. Ooh, that looks like it will add something extra in the pleasure department. He's pumping his cock, making my mouth water.

And above that... is another, larger cock.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

STENIKOV

Tasting my heartmate, my sholani, lifts me in ways I never imagined. In a universe filled with death and destruction, I'm no longer faced with the sting of loneliness but the excitement and fulfillment of companionship and love.

Golda has an amazing spirit and puts her heart into everything she does. She's never been with a male, which makes the trust and faith she's placing in me all the more precious. I no longer notice her lack of horns or how her skin isn't blue. I see warmth, humor, and love wrapped in a lush body that calls to me. It's hard to believe we are from two different species.

Until I see her expression fall. She's staring at my cocks.

"Do they not please you? Am I not comparable to human males?"

"You... you have... two."

"All zyanthans do. Even eeshone." Then I remember that not all species have two cocks. "Are you thinking of keentas? They have three cocks, though I cannot imagine why. Two is all that are needed."

"Humans only have one."

One? She must be teasing me. Except the corners of her mouth don't lift and her eyes remain wide.

“Two is normal for my species. Two eyes, ears, horns, arms, legs, cocks.”

“What... I mean, why...”

She’s as frozen in place as she was outside the apartment earlier. I’ve scared her.

“Touch me, Golda. You will see there is nothing to fear.”

That brings a smile to her face. “Of course, I don’t fear you. I’m just unsure of what I’m doing and this... I guess this complicates matters. I’m trying to figure out the logistics.”

I place her hand on my upper cock, the one that proves she’s mine. “I’m hard because of you.”

“All men say that.”

“You don’t understand. Zyanthan males have a pleasure cock so they can enjoy sex, find pleasure with a female, but there is no semen, no way of getting a female pregnant. Only the mating cock releases semen, and my mating cock will only rise for my heartmate. The one I’m destined for.” I cup her cheek. “You.”

“You talk as if we belong together.”

The doubt in her voice worries me. As soon as we mate, with both my cocks in her, we will be bound as any other couple. But I won’t force her. She must want me and recognize that we are heartmates.

I caress her face. “Perhaps we should dress.”

Her eyes move to my cocks again. “I need to get used to this.” Her face falls in horror. “Oh, God, I’m sorry, Sten. I didn’t mean it like I don’t approve or that they’re not nice cocks. I have to reorient my thinking. That’s all.”

“But my horns don’t bother you.”

That devilish smile returns to her face. “They’re very sexy.”

Her hand, small and delicate compared to mine, wraps around my mating cock. No female has ever touched me there.

A zyanthan woman ignores a male's mating cock, knowing she can do nothing to arouse it unless she's his sholani.

Simply thinking of Golda makes me hard with both cocks. I've never used both. I'm suddenly nervous. While I'm experienced in using my pleasure cock, my mating cock has laid dormant all these years. What if how I use my upper cock, which is longer and thicker, is not as simple as other males have said and I fail to please her?

Now I understand why she's struggling to get used to the idea of two cocks. I am, too.

"This is the first time anyone's touched my mating cock."

"You mean you never... I mean, even when you're alone and needy?"

"The mating cock only rises for a male's sholani."

"You called me that once before. What does it mean?"

"Heartmate."

"I like that. Sounds more intimate than girlfriend and boyfriend." Her hand slides up and down my hard length. "It feels like silk over an iron rod."

My eyes roll back in my head at the sheer pleasure of her hand on me. The sensation in my mating cock has to be three times that of my pleasure cock. I'm struggling not to thrust into her hand as my body craves. She needs to become comfortable with me.

As her hand squeezes me, her pace increases. I inhale, willing my body to calm despite the growing pleasure. "I take it we're not getting dressed."

"Not yet, my warrior."

With the playfulness in her voice, my horns dip back exceedingly far.

"What is the other cock for? The one with the black bumps."

"That is my pleasure cock, the one we use with females until we find our sholani. The bumps are frem nodes."

“Frem?”

Her hand slows, yet the pressure building within me doesn't subside. I want to release inside my sholani, not in her hand, not our first time together.

“Frem strengthens the female's orgasm by lubricating and relaxing the muscles here.” I slide my hand between her ass cheeks to her back hole. “And here...” My other hand moves to her slick folds.

Her eyes lock on me, her nervousness clear. I must do better for her.

“Close your eyes, sholani. Relax.”

The moment she closes her eyes, I move my fingers through her delicate folds. She gets so caught up in my touch that her hand slides off my pleasure cock. I can survive the loss, because her little mewls of pleasure affirm what I already know about us. We belong together.

When I remove my hand and slide my lower cock through her folds, her eyes open and she searches my face, waiting for me to guide her. Slowly, I rock my hips, driving my cock closer and closer to her entrance. I desperately want to be inside my female, but not with my mating cock, not yet. My pleasure cock will discharge frem to lessen any pain she might experience her first time.

“That's so good,” she moans.

I slide in a fraction of an inch, loving the way her eyes roll back in her head.

I've fucked before, but never with someone so precious. The word fails to describe the intensity, sense of completion that comes with being with Golda. I can only imagine what this will be like with my mating cock which currently presses against her belly, seeking relief.

Easing my pleasure cock into her, not thrusting in to the hilt, proves incredibly difficult. My primal need demands I thrust, but the frem needs time to work.

Golda's breathing turns heavy as she grips my shoulders and looks down at where I'm entering her.

"Look at me, sholani."

The trust I see in her face astounds me, but I use the distraction and thrust into her fully. She barely flinches. A moment later, a huge smile blooms on her face, reassuring me that the frem has prevented any pain.

"Now we begin," I announce as I wrap one of her legs around me. "Hop up, little flower."

With blind faith, she follows my every lead. I catch her beneath her ass as she wraps her other leg around me. My sholani hooks her ankles together behind me, locking me to her.

This is where I'm meant to be. Caught in the grip of my heartmate, giving her pleasure, Soon, she will be mine.

Still inside her warm heat, I carry her to her bedroom. I already know which one is hers. I surveyed the apartment when we first arrived. Only one room held her sweet fragrance and the bright colors that match her personality.

I ease her onto the bed and pull out to the tip, then thrust back in again, deeper than before. Her eyes widen, but her smile never fades.

"Kiss me, Sten."

"Yes, Commander." I will gladly take any order from her. She has more than captured my heart, she commands it.

The moment my lips meet hers, her tongue slips in and searches. Like a shadow dancing in the sun, my tongue matches her every move. We dance together, losing ourselves in a kiss. Pulling my mouth away from hers proves near impossible, but I force myself. I watch her every expression, to learn what she likes, especially as I suspect she does not yet know.

My balls slap against her as I thrust with more fervor. Golda's head tips back, exposing the graceful slope of her

throat. I know where my lips will go next, until Golda teases her bottom lip, drawing my eyes.

“What are you up to, little flower?”

“I have an idea. Shall I show you?”

“Always. I am yours to command.”

“I like that.”

“You mean this?” I pull nearly completely out and press my thumb against her nub. A beautiful rosy color infuses her chest and cheeks, at least three shades deeper than when I first thrust into her.

“God, everything you do is so good.” She grabs hold of my horns and thrusts her hips at the same time. Endorphins flood me from where she presses against the pleasure nodes on my horns. She couldn’t know that’s a key erotic point for a zyanthan male. Perhaps that’s what makes her so perfect for me.

“Faster,” she begs. I accommodate, both with my hand between us and my pleasure cock.

Her grip on my horns tightens as do her inner walls, sheathing my cock with intense pressure. I can no longer hold on. As my pleasure cock issues a copious amount of frem inside my female, my mating cock releases against her belly.

Sheer bliss overwhelms me.

When I ease back, Golda runs her fingers through my hair, her expression filled with concern. “What’s wrong?”

“My mating cock released.”

“It’s okay. We didn’t use that one for sex.”

She doesn’t understand. I’m amazed, not upset. I never realized sex could be so euphoric. “Today was a first for both of us.”

“I’m glad you are my first.”

“You are not my first, but you are the only one who counts. We are heartmates. There will never be another for me.”

Her brows pinch together as she stares at me. “You mean that, don’t you?”

“Before you, I existed in darkness, sholani. You are a light I didn’t know I needed.”

“You’re so sweet, Sten. This was wonderful. All of it.”

I kiss her forehead. “It’s only the beginning, my dear Commander. We will enjoy many days and nights of pleasure together. You are a gift from the gods that I will always treasure.”

“Gift? Oh, my gosh!” Golda jumps off the bed. “The candles! I forgot to light them!” She races naked through the room to the window where I see a small menorah and tiny candles. The candles are pink, red, white, and green. When she chooses a blue candle for the helper, I wonder if she’s thinking of me.

“I found birthday candles the other day. The person charged me four times as they should have, because they’re so rare, but I had to have them. I don’t usually splurge like that, but for a holiday I don’t mind. They’re the perfect size for my menorah. No need for oil.”

I wrap a blanket around Golda’s naked body. She’s standing by a window and I do not wish other males to see what is mine. She tilts her head up at me. Unable to resist, I kiss her.

“I can’t believe we’re halfway through the holiday.” She repeats the blessing I’ve heard each night this week. Words I do not know but she recites with love as she lights each candle.

As I curve my arms around her, we watch the tiny flames in silence. I wonder what she’s thinking. When she leans her head back against my chest, life is perfect. I’d stay here forever with her, if I could.

“Sholani, my orders have changed. I’m leaving New York.”

She falls silent as she stares at the flickering flames. They burn bright and steady, but unlike our connection, they will not

last. I hold her tighter, not sure what she's thinking.

She leans into me, placing her arms atop mine. She's not ready to let go. My heart soars with hope.

“California's so far, Sten, but we'll figure it out.”

My heart tightens. She doesn't understand. “No, Golda. Not California. In four days, I'm leaving for Zyan.”



GOLDA

STARING OUT THE WINDOW, I discover it didn't snow last night. Not even a light dusting. Why I'm focused on the weather, I'm not sure. Maybe it's because it's too painful to face reality right now.

I've gone from the highest of highs as he made love to me, to the lowest of lows with his revelation. He launched me into the clouds and then let go without any warning, any safety net. I'm plunging back to Earth, crashing into the cold ocean, and sinking to the deepest recesses.

He's leaving.

“You mean you're leaving for a visit, right? To see your family?” I grab hold of other possibilities, hoping this is nothing more than a miscommunication.

“I've been reassigned to a base on Zyan.”

“That doesn't make any sense. Your commander sent you to my family to learn about humans, to better understand us.”

“Yesterday, I received new orders. I will still interact with humans, but as a marshal on Zyan. The marshals of GI7 work on various worlds. There's a growing number of humans on Zyan, making it a good location to settle some of our protected witnesses. This is why my commander is transferring me there. He feels I have taken too long acclimating to Earth and would be a better fit back on Zyan.”

“Tell him you can’t go!” I grab a sweatshirt and sweatpants from my dresser and shove my limbs into the clothing. This is a decision that I have no say in, no input but that doesn’t mean I have to be logical. I have every right to be selfish. This is Sten. I *can’t* lose him.

“I cannot disobey orders.”

I realize what’s eating at me besides the fact that I’m losing him. “You deceived me,” I shout.

“I’m telling you the truth. I would never lie to you.”

“You knew you were leaving. *Before* we slept together. And you didn’t tell me.”

His horns move back. “I wasn’t sure how to tell you.”

“No, you thought you’d worm your way into my bed, one last conquest on Earth before going home.” I’m being totally unreasonable but I can’t think clearly. I told him I didn’t want a one-night stand. He doesn’t care.

“I understand leaving Earth will be hard for you since your family is here.”

“What do you mean? I’m not leaving Earth.”

“But you are my sholani. We are meant to be together. You will come with me. To Zyan.”

He wants me to leave Earth... to leave my parents, Bubbe, Rachel, Sadie... “I can’t leave my family, and you know it. This is just some excuse, to make it seem like you’re doing the honorable thing by saying you’ll take me with you. You used me!”

“Golda, we are heartmates.”

“Empty words!” I’m not sure what he’s saying anymore. Or what *I’m* saying. Nothing makes sense. I only know I love him and he’s leaving.

I shove his clothing at him. “Take your jacket, your knives, and go. It’s what you’re good at, right?”

Venomous words spew from my mouth at a dizzying rate, which could explain why he looks confused and hurt. I hate

how that tears at my insides. I'm hurting, too. Like an elephant stepping on thin ice, a million cracks splinter outward from the center of my heart. But it hasn't shattered. Not yet.

I still love him.

I shake my head, trying to knock that idea from my head. Whatever I feel for him can't be love. Not after only knowing him for a few days.

That's what I tell myself because it softens the blow. Does he really think I'd leave my family for a guy I only met earlier this week? Of course not. That's why he suggested it.

Stenikov's not only heartless, he's trying to come off looking like a good guy. He's a rotten, manipulative scoundrel. But I'm the fool here, because I fell for him.

"Get out of my apartment!"

The tops of his horns twist and untwist. As he stands before me, holding his clothing in front of his cocks, he reaches forward and kisses the top of my forehead with such care and gentleness tears cloud my eyes. I strain to keep from crying.

"Please go," the words limp out of my mouth.

He lifts his chin and his horns rise high, full of determination. "Now that I've found you, I will not lose you, sholani. We will resolve this."

"I need to be alone right now." My voice breaks, as defeated as the rest of me.

Silently, he dresses in the common area of the apartment. "Will I see you at your parents for dinner tomorrow, Golda?"

For once in my life, I have utterly no interest in food. Perhaps this is the way to diet... let someone you really care about break your heart.

"No. And don't return here tomorrow. Or the day after."

"But, sholani—"

"Don't call me sholani! I'm not your heartmate. You used me, Stenikov. I told you I didn't want a one-night stand, that I

wanted a real relationship.”

“This is real. I want you to go with me.”

“Just like that? You expect me to leave my parents, my grandmother, my sister and my niece... everything I know and love, and fly off to another planet five days after meeting you?”

“We’re heartmates.”

“Leave, Sten. And don’t come back.”

“Aji kali faztov, miz sholani.”

I don’t know what he’s saying, but I hear the pain in his voice. It matches the pain in my heart. As silently as Sten came into my life, he shuts the apartment door and disappears.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GOLDA

I stayed away from my parents' house all day Saturday because I'm afraid of running into Sten. Likewise, I skipped joining them for Sunday brunch, but here I am, walking back and forth in front of their brownstone hours later, debating my options.

The anger has disappeared, leaving a mountain of hurt in its wake. I want to yell at Sten all over again, but mostly I just want to feel his strong arms wrap around me as he whispers everything will be fine.

I've thought of nothing else since I kicked him out of my apartment. That's the problem... I removed him from my home, not my heart. I love the big blue ganiff. Yes, I'm calling him a thief, because that's what Bubbe would call him. Sten stole my heart and my dreams.

Two days. That's precisely how long he has left on Earth. The same amount of time I wasted being mad at him. This could be my last chance to see him and make things right between us, if that's possible.

I keep replaying our conversation over and over in my head, and it always ends the same. With me yelling at him and kicking him out. That's not the way a woman behaves if she cares about her guy. Did I even give him a chance to explain?

Heartmates. It sounded so nice at the time but ended up being nothing but bullshit. We never did get that monster snow storm, the one that convinced me to invite Sten back to my

place. I used the storm as a perfect excuse to spend more time together. Was he doing the same? Did he make up the storm, hoping to get me into bed?

No. That's not who he is. But I'm so damn confused right now. He's leaving...

"Golda, what are you doing out here?" Mom asks. Dressed to go shopping, she's standing at the top of the steps of the brownstone.

"I forgot my key."

"Then why didn't you knock?"

"I didn't think you were home." The lies roll off my tongue too easily. I'd like to blame it on Sten, since he lied to me, but it's not his fault I'm a coward and don't want to tell my mom what happened. She loves me, and I love her, but I'm not ready to hear the 'you're being too picky' or 'lose a little weight' words of wisdom she always gives when things don't go right.

I'm not even sure Stenikov lied to me. What if this was some misunderstanding? I never gave him a chance to explain. Everything from Friday night is all jumbled in my head.

All it would take to clear it up is talking with him, but... I'm scared. Scared to discover that he really doesn't love me.

"Come in before you freeze to death, dear."

"I'm not so lucky," I mumble as I follow her inside.

"What type of talk is that?" She shuts the door behind me. I forgot she has super good hearing, not that I care at the moment. I want the comfort of being home, where I'm loved no matter what I say or do.

Sten loves you.

"Shut up," I scold my inner voice.

"What's that, dear?"

"I'm talking to myself. Ignore me." The moment I dump my coat on the chair by the front door, I smell that delicious musk that is Sten.

“Is he here?” I should have asked that *before* entering.

“No. Stenala is helping your father with an assignment. Top secret apparently. I swear, sometimes I don’t think your father trusts me.”

Maybe it’s a male thing. After all, Sten said he’d just found out about his transfer the day before. *Before* we’d had sex. He should have told me earlier.

Would that have made a difference?

Honestly, I’m not sure.

“What type of secret could Dad have?” I need to get my mind off Sten. “I mean, if it’s work related, he can’t share it with Sten unless he has clearance.” And there I go... right back to thinking about Sten.

“I’m fairly certain Fahrven Technologies doesn’t employ any aliens. I think your father was making an excuse to get Stenikov out of the house. He’s been moping around here since he returned Friday night. Because of you, Golda. What did you do to him?”

“What makes you think I did something?”

“Because he spent all day yesterday and this morning staring at your picture on the living room wall. And that apron you made as a kid went missing. I found it neatly folded on his bed. He’s latched onto any and everything that reminds him of you. So, I’ll ask again, what did you do?”

“Why do you always assume I’m the one in the wrong?”

“He loves you, Golda.”

My heart pounds at hearing those words, especially from my mom who wouldn’t lie about something so serious. “He told you that?”

“No, but that’s the only thing that can hurt a person so deeply.”

My heart falls again. I’m on an emotional rollercoaster, but I’m far from ready to get off. I need to know more, especially whatever it is my mom knows.

“What if I told you he lied to me?”

“I’d tell you to get over it and fix this.”

“You don’t even know what the lie was.”

“Do you think you’re going to meet another guy as caring and good as Stenikov? He loves you, Golda. And you’re not getting any younger.”

Okay, this one’s on me. I engaged her in detailed conversation. Might as well leap into the lion’s den, full force. “He’s leaving Earth in two days.”

“Go with him.”

My mouth drops open in shock, and then I realize she’s not surprised. At. All.

“He told you?”

“He said nothing to me, but you can’t afford to pass up on a good man.”

“And you don’t care that he’s an alien?”

“Alien schm-alien, you can still raise the kids Jewish.”

I can’t believe we’re talking kids. Or about me leaving Earth. Or even religion, as if that’s what’s important here. “You’re talking like I’ve been dating the guy for years and passed up a marriage proposal. I just met him.”

“Not all marriages are for love. Some are arranged and they work out because both the man and woman learn to love one another over time. Of course, it’s easier if you find the man attractive. Stenikov has a fine body, Golda.” She winks at me. Please tell me I’m having a brain hemorrhage and didn’t just see that.

My mom lifts her eyebrows in a suggestive manner as if she’s one of my roommates and not my mom. “Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed.”

I’m starting to wonder where the real Gertrude Birnbaum is, if maybe aliens have come down and swapped her out with this woman who’s trying to convince me to leave my family

and disappear into space. Except leaving with aliens is something she expects of *me*.

“A man like that has needs. He won’t wait around forever for a woman like you.”

A woman like me. And there we have it, Ladies and Gents, we’re back to my weight. Or my age. Or my supposed lack of goals. She thinks I deserve better than working in a warehouse, doing inventory and bookkeeping for a bunch of unappreciative assholes. I do, but what career path I take is my choice, no one else’s.

“I’m not having this conversation, Mom.”

“Good, because I have to get groceries for dinner. Golda,” Her tone turns serious. “Find Stenikov. Tell him you’re going with him.” She grabs her coat again and her burlap shopping bag. “I’ll buy extra food and we’ll have a big party as a sendoff.”

“Honestly, Mom, are you trying to get rid of me? Am I that much of a burden to you and this family?”

She holds my face in her hands. “My sweet baby girl, you are not a burden to anyone, and we love you very much. Open your eyes, my Goldala, and see what you’re about to throw away. Sometimes we only have one chance at love in this life. I don’t want you to miss yours. Stop making excuses, pack your bags, and go build a life with a man who loves you.”

Loves me? Does he?

And do I love him enough to give up my family and my world?

These are the questions I have to answer.

I kiss my mom goodbye, grab my coat, and race out of the brownstone. I have to figure out what Sten means to me... and what I mean to him.



STENIKOV

WHEN MR. BIRNBAUM and I return to his home, I peel off my jacket and immediately catch several scents. Mrs. Birnbaum has been cooking, and she's already lit the menorah... with six plus the helper candle. Her sholan found and bought red candles for her. Yesterday, I witnessed the expression on Mrs. Birnbaum's face... love for such a simple act, even though she'd objected to red candles a few days ago. Apparently, Earth females often change their minds for not discernable reason. It's quite confusing.

Mixed in with the scent of food and burning candles hovers the most decadent scent of all... Golda. Her bouquet imprinted on my brain the moment I met her.

Golda was here. This fills me with hope that she is not lost to me.

I remember my first day in this home, helping her in the kitchen. I bonded with her long before my mating cock rose, before I knew she was my sholani. I need to tell her how I feel about her, how I've felt about her since the moment we met.

When I grab my jacket, Mrs. Birnbaum points to a chair. "Sit."

"I have something I must do. I will return shortly."

"Don't go to her, Stenala. Not yet."

How does she know where I'm going?

"We have something for you." Mrs. Birnbaum takes a box from the dining room table and hands it to me. She wrapped the box in brown paper and tied a red ribbon around it. The box would fit a pair of shoes, but not boots. I wonder what's inside.

"Golda says you're leaving in two days, which means you won't be here the last night of Hannukah. In our family, we give each other a present on the last night. This is from Mr. Birnbaum and me. But you're not to open it until the eighth night."

"Why?"

"Tradition."

“Thank you, for the gift and for welcoming me into your home. I’ve learned much about humans during my stay.” I accept the gift and set it down for now. I will collect it when I return. “I do not wish to be rude, but I must speak with Golda.”

“She didn’t come for you, Stenala. Golda came for my approval.”

“Approval for what?”

“To leave Earth and be with you.”

My heart soars at this news!

“Gertie?” Mr. Birnbaum asks, his brows hitching upward.

“Hush, David. I have to keep our daughter from making the biggest mistake of her life.”

My horns pitch forward. “You do not wish her to be with me?”

“Of course not! And I told her so. Don’t misunderstand, Stenala, you are a fine man, and I wish you all the happiness, but you and Golda are not suited for one another.”

I thrust my arms into my jacket. I must find Golda immediately and undo the damage her mother has caused. Drekk... I need to undo the damage *I* caused. Since Friday, I’ve thought of nothing else except Golda and what led to my sholani sending me away. I should have told her immediately about my reassignment.

“My daughter can be prideful and stubborn, but this is not one of those times. Whatever happened between you two is for the best. Now, let’s sit down and eat.”

My training did not teach me how to be respectful to my host and also tell her to stay out of my business. Golda is her daughter, and while Mrs. Birnbaum loves her, I will not let her or anyone stand between us. I’m leaving in two days, and I must see Golda again. To convince her to come with me.

And if I cannot... Drekk, I have no answer for that possibility. But a warrior never gives up, especially on the female he loves.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GOLDA

When I leave my parents, the thought of returning to my apartment and staring at the bed where Sten and I made love doesn't sit well with me. I'll rehash everything that went wrong, instead of focusing on what is right between us.

Despite all her criticism, my mom's very perceptive, especially when it comes to how stubborn I can be. I take a deep breath. I need to talk with Sten. But I'm not sure what I'll say. I need more time to think through what I want out of life, but that's part of the problem. Sten leaves in two days. I want him *and* my family.

If Sten still wants me, I'll have to choose between them. How can I do that?

I enter the warehouse, hoping some routine work will clear my head. Since it's a Sunday and during Christmas break, the giant building will be empty, allowing me to sulk in private.

When I open my office door, I freeze at the sight inside. My filing cabinet is open with folders and papers scattered across the floor. My desk drawers lay on the floor, overturned, along with my chair and even the plant stand where I kept a small aloe plant. The plant itself has been uprooted, the dirt dumped out of the pot. I left this place immaculate but someone had torn through here like a tornado decimating a house of cards.

Last week I ended up with my files all over the floor because Wilson was being an ass, which is normal for him. This level of destruction seems personal.

I should leave my office as is, to show my boss after the holiday, but I need to keep busy. Every time I think about Sten, I start to cry. I can't imagine losing him or leaving Earth. I hang my coat on the back of the door and get to work, hoping the answer will come to me in time.

As I pick up the papers and place them on my desk to start sorting them, I realize what's truly bothering me. Not the mess or the vindictiveness with which someone trashed my office, but the fact that I'm here, avoiding Sten when I should be talking with him. Stubborn and a coward. What does he see in me?

Fuck, I need to get out of here. I leave the mess as is, determined to show it to Mr. Jenkins. That was my mistake last time. Letting Wilson get away with trashing my office. This was probably him again, searching for whatever he didn't find the first time. Or he's sending me a message. A warning.

I don't give in to bullies, but I'm starting to suspect Mr. Kelly never told Mr. Jenkins something fishy might be going on with his business and this is all connected. What if Mr. Kelly is a part of this?

Mr. Jenkins won't drop by until after the holiday. Hopefully, he won't turn on me and fire me. I have no idea what if anything Mr. Kelly's said to him at this point. I'm debating how to handle my situation, especially if Mr. Jenkins doesn't drop by for a while. I don't know where he lives, to approach him discreetly. If I remain on Earth, I'll need this job.

My stomach turns at the thought of not going with Sten. I want him, with all my heart and soul. Being with him is easy to think about, even though it means traveling to a distant planet that might be exceedingly different from Earth. But leaving my family and possibly never seeing them again. That's the part I can't wrap my head around.

My mother is right about one thing; I shouldn't pass up a good man. Not because I need to get married, but because I love him.

I sit back in my chair as the realization sinks in. I really do love him. Why did it take so long to see that?

Because he misled me.

Maybe he didn't. Maybe I only heard what I wanted to hear, because I was looking for problems where none existed. Because no one has ever been that into me before and I expected something to go wrong, as if I'm unworthy of love. But I'm not, damn it. I deserve to be loved the same as anyone else.

I need to find Sten and figure out if he really loves me.

As I yank my coat off the peg on the back of the office door, I glance at the wall clock. It's two p.m. I have five minutes before the next bus. The next one won't be for another two hours.

I race down the steps, glancing at the industrial clock over the front entrance as I reach the warehouse floor. 2:02. Fuck. Once out the front entrance, I'll have to loop around the length of the shipyard to reach the bus stop. That's a fifteen-minute walk. I'll never make it in three minutes, even if I run.

The fence! If I can squeeze through the hole in the fence by the docks, that will place me right by the bus stop! I hope I can fit through with all my winter layers on.

When I exit the back door of the warehouse, I see Wilson, Ridge, and three men I've never seen before gathered around an open crate of guns. Blasters, to be precise. Illegal *alien* weapons that will crush law enforcement and the military alike.

Ridge looks up and spots me. He slams the crate closed. "It's the office girl. Get her!"

I run back into the warehouse, laser focused on making it to the front entrance. I'm hundreds of feet from escaping when the sound of gunfire erupts all around me. The window above

the main door explodes and glass rains down in front of me. They've cut off my escape.

My feet take over, racing into the belly of the massive warehouse. Fleeing is instinctive at this point, but I need to think strategically.

Pallets of shrink-wrapped products stored floor-to-ceiling in a hodgepodge of shelving units dominate half the warehouse. The other half consists of wooden and metal crates of all sizes forming haphazard paths. I'm like a mouse in a maze, trying to find my way out. Except there is none. Wilson and his men guard both exits.

“Spread out! Find that bitch and kill her!”

There are a thousand places to hide in here, but I'm not exactly a skinny person.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The sound of footsteps grows louder. I need to hide!

This is a make-it-work moment. No time to be strategic. I squeeze between a crate and a shrink-wrapped pallet of glass pickles. If I can fit behind the pallet, they won't see me. It's a tight fit and I make it... barely.

“Look up, too. She could have climbed.”

The warehouse falls completely silent except for the rhythmic tapping of heavy boots approaching. I slap my hands over my mouth, trying to stifle my heavy breathing. My heart's racing. I can't calm down.

Close your eyes, sholani. Relax.

Stenikov's words reach me. I picture him, calm, patient, full of strength and confidence. No matter how much I wish he were here, he's not. But thinking of him calms me, allowing me to regain control of my breathing and stay as quiet as possible.

What do I do next? I can't stay hidden forever. There are five men searching for me, and it might take them a while, but time is on their side. No one will miss me or come looking for me here, especially on a day we're officially closed for

Christmas. And why did I drink so much damn coffee this morning?

Gotta pee. Gotta pee.

Focus, Golda!

“Sholani? Are you here?” Stenikov’s voice echoes through the warehouse.

OMG, he’s here! Relief squashes all the fear and I start to squeeze my way out from behind the pallet of pickles. That’s when I hear footsteps close by. I can’t leave my hiding spot or call out to Stenikov.

“No one here except warehouse workers, alien. You’re trespassing. Leave,” Wilson orders loud enough that I hear him all the way back here. He sounds pissed off, too.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The footsteps are so close.

“Golda is here. I’m sure of it.” Stenikov’s voice gives me hope, but he’s in danger and doesn’t even know it. Five against one. If he doesn’t leave, those men will kill him. The weapons they’re dealing are illegal. They won’t risk him discovering their secret.

My stomach lurches at the click of a gun cocking. “Trouble?” a man calls out to Wilson. He’s so close! Just when I think he’s found me, his footsteps grow faint. He’s walking away. Toward Sten!

How do I warn Sten without getting myself killed?

Slowly, as quietly as possible, I remove and open my pocket knife. Raised voices up front echo through the warehouse, but I’m too focused on cutting the layers of shrink wrap without making any noise to absorb what they’re saying. Once I’m through the plastic, I grab a jar of pickles, sneak to the edge of the pallet, and look both ways. A guy with a thick beard pokes his gun between the pallets on the other side of the aisle as he snakes his way toward the front of the warehouse.

As hard as I can, I lob the glass jar at him. I don't expect to hit him from thirty feet away, but I don't need to. The bottle lands all of ten feet from me, but when it crashes and explodes, the man spins around and shoots at it.

Gunfire erupts in the distance. "Get that fucking alien!" Wilson screams.

As I arm myself with another jar of pickles, the massive guy hauls me into the aisle by my coat. "I have the female," my six-foot two captor shouts.

"Sten!" I yell.

"Kill her!" Ridge orders.

When I hear a gun cock behind me, I spin and slam the pickle jar against the man's head.

Blood runs down his temple. Dazed, he raises his gun hand to touch the wound. He looks stunned. I am too, but I don't freeze up. Not this time. I break free of his hold and run as fast as I can.

Since I'm in charge of inventory, I know every twist and turn of this convoluted layout, but these killers can be around the very next corner. That guy almost killed me.

Stenikov! Oh my god, what if he's injured or worse? I have to find him!

I force myself to slow down as I near the end of the next aisle, but I can't stand here as my attacker regains his wits. My heart leaps into my throat as I listen for the slightest sound... and turn past the end-cap. No one's there. I keep going, passing one, two aisles before ducking down the next one.

An eerie silence blanketing the warehouse prompts me to find another hiding spot. No one's moving. Does that mean Sten is dead? *Please, let him be okay!*

Crawling into another space where I could be trapped scares the hell out of me, so I settle for crouching beside a pallet of road salt that's sitting partway in the aisle.

"Show yourself, Birnbaum," Wilson calls out from three or four aisles over. "You can't escape. I have men at every exit

and the alien is dead.”

No!

Wilson’s words leave me gutted. My hands shake and I want to throw up. Sten can’t be dead. He can’t be. I love him.

“I tell you what, Birnbaum. We’ll pay you to keep your mouth shut. Even better, we can work out a deal going forward. With you fudging the records, we’ll be able to expand our operation. You’ll get a steady cut. A win-win for everyone.”

My fingers dig into the pallet. I can’t be a sniveling coward, not until I know for sure what’s happened to Sten. I can’t trust anything Wilson says. Sten could still be alive. Maybe injured. I have to find him.

When I edge out of my hiding spot, a man grabs my arm and pulls me to my feet. “I have her!”

If Sten is dead, it’s because of this asshole. My fists clench and I swing at him with all my might. And miss! But I’m mad, beyond mad. Sten could be bleeding out and this guy’s keeping me from finding him.

I keep swinging and kicking, determined to hurt this low-life because right now I want to hurt the entire universe for whatever’s happened to Sten. The arms dealer sweeps my legs and sends me crashing to the ground.

My head and back strike the concrete, knocking the air from my lungs. For what feels like an eternity, I can’t breathe. Then suddenly air rushes in and I open my eyes expecting to see a gun pointed at me.

Instead, my attacker lies on the ground two feet away, blood pooling beneath him, his throat sliced open like a ripe watermelon.

I seal my eyes shut, figuring I’m next. Someone scoops me off the ground and presses me against a solid chest. Confusion disorients me until I breathe in a scent I know better than my name.

“Sholani,” Sten whispers in my ear. “No one will ever touch you again.”

I throw my arms around Sten in a crushing hug. Tears rush down my cheeks and I press my face into his chest. “You’re alive.” It’s all I can manage to say before I choke up.

Warm lips press against my forehead, a touch I never thought I’d feel again. “Open your eyes, sholani,” he whispers.

I’m afraid to look, fearing this is a dream. Once I open my eyes, I’ll wake up... alone. And Sten will be gone.

When his lips brush mine, I practically inhale him. It’s really him!

My eyes snap open to the sight of beautiful silver eyes. I’ve never been much of a crier but seeing him alive overwhelms me. Tears stream down my cheeks.

Gently, Stenikov brushes away my tears. Then he presses a finger to my lips, motioning me to stay quiet. He holds up three fingers, which I take to mean there are still three men hunting us. My hand gently brushes over the long gash on his forehead, but his kiss calms me. With one playful smile, he reassures me that all will be well. Despite the presence of three men trying to kill us, he’s not worried.

And neither am I. Sure, there’s still some fear rattling around in the back of my mind because we’re effectively trapped in the warehouse, but it’s tucked behind a giant blue wall of muscle. He won’t fail me.

When Sten holds out his hand, I eagerly slide mine in his and squeeze. I have my alien again and I’m never letting go.



STENIKOV

MY SHOLANI SHAKES WITH FEAR, even shock. I don’t know what happened before I arrived at the warehouse, but the moment I entered, I smelled her sweet scent. The males lied when they said she wasn’t here. And they carried weapons,

more than knives. One held a blaster, an illegal weapon on Earth. Only a few aliens have permission to carry them. My fellow marshals. And me, before I lost that right.

Now, I'm left with nothing but my knives and my wits to protect my sholani. But that is more than enough.

With her hand in mine, I'm re-energized, despite the wound that's left me dizzy. I killed the male who held the blaster at the entrance before he had a chance to draw. One knife thrown to his left distracted him, giving me the opening I needed. He fell to the ground dead, a throwing blade between his eyes. Normally, I would not kill unprovoked, but the situation required extreme measures. Criminals roamed a warehouse in which my female was hiding or captured. I did what was necessary to reach her.

The moment the male's body dropped, I found myself up against four males all brandishing hand guns, crude weapons unique to Earth, but quite deadly. One of the bullets grazed my head as I dove for cover. The blaster disappeared. It would appear I'm not destined to use the weapon every warrior carries.

"Last chance, Birnbaum. Join, or die," the male's voice echoes through the warehouse, grating on me. It's the same male who'd called out to Golda earlier and told her I was dead. I feared she'd emerge. The human intended to draw her out, or he expected me to call to her. Either way, he'd confirmed Golda was here, hiding and in danger.

Golda tugs my hand, reminding me I need to focus. Wounded or not, I have a job to do. Protect my female.

She points to a shadow on the floor at the end of the aisle, twenty feet from us. Given the angle of the pendant light hanging from the forty-foot ceiling, the shadow could be from any of the items stacked on the massive shelving unit. The shadow hasn't moved, but I'm not one to ignore the instincts of another. Especially my sholani who is both smart and observant. And Golda works here. She knows this building.

I hold my hand up, motioning her to remain in place while I venture forth. Releasing her hand unnerves me, as I do not

wish to leave her unguarded, but neither will I intentionally lead her into danger. My goal is to get her to safety, then return to arrest these males. Or, if I'm forced, to kill them. Either way, she is my top priority, and always will be.

As I near the end of the aisle, the shadow moves, confirming Golda was right. My horns tuck flat against my head as I dive and roll into the open. The movement draws his attention, but he's too slow. Two of my knives sail through the air.

Bullets whiz by, missing me as the male falls flat on his face. My knives found their mark. One in his throat, the other in his heart.

I turn in time to see another male racing toward my sholani, his gun pointed at her.

"Down!" I yell. Golda throws herself to the floor.

To avoid hitting my sholani, I aim wide. My knife catches him in the shoulder. It's enough to throw off his aim. With muffled thuds, bullets sink into a nearby pallet.

Seconds later, my fists connect with his head, over and over. I should kill him quickly as I've been trained, but I want him to suffer for trying to kill Golda and for the anguish and fear he caused her.

When my opponent strikes me in the head with a pipe, I stumble back and draw one of two remaining knives. He's too close. If I reach back to throw my blade, he'll hit me with the pipe, possibly knock me out. But I'm as skilled with a blade in hand-to-hand as I am in throwing.

One, two, three lunges and I have yet to connect with him. He's an agile drekker, I'll give him that. Repeatedly, he avoids my swings. When he swings the pipe, he knocks the knife from my hand. My head wound has left me off balance and slow. Another swing catches my left hand, stealing the last of my weapons, all except the ones the gods gave me.

The drekker grins as he slaps the rod against his palm. "After I kill you, I'm gonna have some fun with the girl before I slice her up."

A veil of red covers my eyesight and I charge. I'm dizzy and nauseous, but even with my head bowed, I manage to keep my balance until my horns impale the drekker. Killing a person with one's horns is a desperate move, but not considered dishonorable. A warrior will use whatever means he has to kill the enemy. And this drekker threatened my female.

The clank of the iron rod hitting the cement floor echoes through the warehouse. It's what I need to hear before extricating my horns.

With a yank, I free my horns and step back. I hate that I had to impale the male, leaving two sizeable holes in his torso. He gasps for air, the shadow of death darkening his face.

I kick the rod away from him. "No one touches my female."

"Sten?" Golda's sweet voice pulls me out of the blood-haze. I turn to block her view, but it's too late. She's seen everything, including how cruel I can be.

"We have to go." When I bend to pick up my knives, I stumble, nearly falling over. Golda rushes to support me on my left side. As much as I'd love to accept her aid, one male remains and I won't allow her to risk herself.

"Stay behind me," I order as I gently dislodge her from me. When her fingers lightly press against my lower back, I start moving.

"Be careful. I don't want you to get hurt," she whispers.

I love that she worries about me. It's a sign we're meant to be.

Only one male remains. I will return for him after I get my sholani to safety. As I make our way toward the front of the warehouse, the sound of gunfire surrounds us as bullets bounce off metal shelving. Hot fire travels through my left arm.

I shove Golda to the ground and throw a knife as I turn. The knife lands squarely in the male's chest, but he doesn't fall. He aims again, forcing me to throw a second knife. This

one lodges in his gun hand. The gun falls a second before the man.

When I bend over him to make sure he's dead, a wave of nausea and dizziness overtakes me. I can't stop from falling, but that's not what scares me. It's hearing Golda scream and wondering if I miscounted the number of males hunting us...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GOLDA

“**S**ten!” I scream when he falls. Did Wilson shoot him? If that bastard wasn’t already dead, I’d kill him.

When I reach Sten’s side, I roll him onto his back and feel for a pulse. It’s strong. I lean over and hug him. “I’m here, Sten. I’m gonna take good care of you.”

As hard as it is, I peel myself off him long enough to grab Wilson’s gun in case anyone else shows up. Then I return to Sten and run my hands over him, looking for injuries. I find a bullet hole in his upper left arm. The bullet tore all the way through, and he’s bleeding. I grab a crowbar and open a nearby crate of towels, all while cursing myself for not seeing the crowbar earlier. It would have made a nice weapon.

I bind the wound the best I can, repeatedly glancing at that gash on his head. Of the two wounds, his head injury worries me more. He was off-balance before getting shot. I need to get medical help, but in post-occupation Earth, there are no phones or communication devices in non-military and non-government buildings. The comm on Sten’s wrist catches my eye. I slide the comm around and find a bullet lodged in the device.

Okay, Golda, Plan B.

Dragging him is impossible. He’s huge. After several tries, I give up. Even if I could pull him a few feet at a time, the bus stop is a fifteen-minute walk. It would take me hours to drag him that far.

Plan C.

Fuck, I don't have a Plan C!

Think, think, think, you idiot. There has to be something—

“Sten, I’ll be right back. I’m going to grab a few things to make you comfortable.”

After a quick kiss on his mouth, I sprint to my office where I have a few blankets for when the temperature in the warehouse dips down close to freezing. I fill a bucket with water in the bathroom and head downstairs.

He lies there so still as I wash the blood from his arm and head wounds. Even when I clean his horns with cold water, he doesn’t stir. My fear escalates the longer he lies there not moving.

“Wake up, Sten, so we can talk. Please.”

The cold cloth against his face and forehead do nothing to rouse him.

Plan C. No choice now!

After I cover Sten with blankets and place a folded towel beneath his head, I head out into the biting cold. No one else will show up here for days since we’re closed for Christmas. It’s why the criminals were here. Total privacy. Except for me. Because I was too scared to go home to my lonely apartment and face my future.

Sten only followed me here because he didn’t want to lose me.

Now, I could lose him.

I never should have avoided talking to him. This mess is all my fault. But I will fix it. I won’t let Sten die.

I shut the warehouse door behind me, realizing how dead and isolated this place really is when it’s not a work day. I see no one in any direction. No buses moving. No one walking. And the snow’s coming down in buckets now. At least I had the good sense to wear my boots.

Between the harsh winds and blinding snow, the fifteen-minute walk turns into thirty. I'm freezing and can barely feel my fingers. The temperature's dropping fast. This isn't a normal snow storm. It's a blizzard!

I wait at the bus stop for twenty minutes past when the bus is due. There aren't many buses on a holiday, but this is a main stop. Or it used to be. Nothing's moving here and in the distance. No yellow headlights shine through the snow and no red brakes light the darkening sky.

If I stay out here much longer, I'll freeze to death. My only option is to go back to Sten and make him as comfortable as possible and pray he survives.



STENIKOV

I WAKE WITH A START. Wherever I am, it's dark in here. And cold.

Something's pinning my shoulder and arm down. Memories rush at me all at once.

"Golda?" I call out as I bolt upright.

"You're awake!" She embraces me in a fierce hug that alarms me until I realize she's fine, and only scared for me. I'd passed out. When I reach up to the gash on my forehead, I don't feel blood, fresh or dried. The tenderness tells me I didn't imagine getting injured.

"I cleaned your head wound. And your arm."

"My arm?" My left arm stings as I rotate it, but I haven't lost function.

"The bullet went through and you stopped bleeding. I found some alcohol to pour on it to prevent infection."

So smart, my female. She bandaged my arm expertly; I see no need to undo the cloth. She cleaned my horns, too. I wish I'd been awake for that part. I would have enjoyed her fingers caressing my horns one last time.

“We lost power a few hours ago.”

With a click, she turns on an archaic lantern. We’re in the warehouse, laying on a thin layer of towels on the cold hard cement with a thicker layer of blankets piled on top of us. This is roughly where I killed the last male, but I don’t see his body.

“Where are the bodies? Why are we on the floor?”

“I dragged them to the back and covered them with a sheet. I couldn’t move you more than a few inches. I wanted to get the police to help you to a hospital, but the bus never came. And it’s a blizzard out there, Sten. There are no phones here. We don’t have a way of calling out.”

I peer at my comm, shattered by a bullet. “Come here,” I whisper so softly she’s forced to bend really close to me. When she does, I pull her down on top of me.

“Sten! You’re injured.” She tries to break free of my hold but I don’t let go. I need time to decompress and the best way is with her in my arms.

“I’m going to crush you,” she says as if that’s possible. My female is tiny, despite her insistence otherwise. But I must admit, I enjoy how she’s squirming against me, waking all of me to her presence.

“You could not possibly crush me. And it’s a flesh wound. I’ve had worse.”

“You could have died.”

“And leave you unprotected? Never!”

She laughs and stops fighting my hold. “You make everything sound so easy. Five men tried to kill you. Doesn’t that unnerve you at all?”

“No, but it angers me that you were in danger. And alone. What happened before I arrived?”

“Remember that discrepancy I told my family about? It turns out no one’s been stealing from the warehouse. The Brotherhood’s been shipping illegal weapons into port with legitimate products. By the time we weigh the containers, Wilson and his goons unload the illegal goods. That’s why the

shipping containers weigh less than what's listed on the bills of lading."

"You know for sure the Brotherhood is behind this?"

"One of the guys involved, Ridge, I've seen him with known Brotherhood members before."

I run my fingers through Golda's hair, very thankful she wasn't hurt. "When the storm ends, I'll report this. On my own. I don't want you on record as a witness."

"But—"

I place a finger against her lips, silencing her objection. "Trust me in this, Golda. I protect witnesses all the time. It's better that the Brotherhood has no reason to believe you're involved with the discovery of their operation."

"But you'll be a target."

"I'm leaving for Zyan. And even if I weren't, I'm a trained warrior. You are not."

Reluctantly, she nods then bites her bottom lip. "It's a blizzard outside. Is this the blizzard you told me about a few days ago?"

"Yes, though it arrived later than forecasted."

"Oh."

My finger trails down her beautiful face. "You're troubled. The storm won't last forever. You will be fine."

"It's not that."

"Then what?"

"Why did you come here today?"

"When I returned to your parents' home, I scented you'd been there. I asked your mother, but..." I stop talking. I will not hurt my Golda with the truth. I'm not sure how to proceed. "Never mind."

"Don't tell me she sent you to make up with me."

"No."

“Good. I don’t want her interfering. Whatever happens between us has to be our decision, no one else’s.”

“Your mother said she told you we do not belong together. I could not let you believe that, my Golda. I had to tell you how I feel, even if you’re still angry with me. I never meant to mislead you. I love you. I would never do anything to hurt you.”

Her eyes grow wide and alive with excitement. “You love me?”

“Very much. I fell for you the first day I met you. Even before my mating cock rose for you. When I slept with you, I wasn’t thinking about my transfer. Only that I loved you. I should have told you about my new orders earlier.”

Her mouth opens, but she says nothing. My nerves fray with worry. I do not know what she’s thinking. If she loves or even likes me. Or worse, feels nothing for me.

Golda reaches up and runs her hand along my horn. Dreck, that feels fabulous. Each time her fingers brush over the nodes at the base, endorphins flood my system. My cocks rise in response, but I must contain myself. There is too much at stake here to think of sating my physical needs.

“My sweet warrior, you don’t realize what you’ve done.”

My horns rise in alarm. “Tell me. I will fix it.”

A smile blooms on her face. “You fell into my mother’s trap. She told you that we weren’t right for each other so you’d march in here and prove her wrong. She thinks we belong together.”

I pull Golda down on top of me. “Your mother’s not crazy after all.”

“You’re saying that because she wants me to be with you.”

“Then let me show you how much I love you...”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

GOLDA

Slowly, Stenikov undresses me. I can't contain the shiver emanating from my excitement and the cold. We've only made love once before and there's still so much to learn about one another, but I trust him. One thousand percent.

"I've done a poor job keeping you warm, sholani," he says as he pulls his layers off one by one. "The best way to stay warm is skin to skin."

"How did I know you were going to say that?"

"Because we are heartmates."

I'd rather not think about being heartmates or the decision I have to make in less than two days. I want to enjoy my time with him and show him what he means to me.

As he positions himself over me, propped up on his forearms to keep from crushing me with his full weight, his cocks slide along my very wet pussy. Already hard, my nipples become a source of unexpected arousal as his skin brushes over them.

When his lips meet mine and our tongues twine together, I'm thrown back to my first time with him. My first time ever. I still can't believe this is only my second time because being with Stenikov feel so right, so natural.

"Open for me," he commands, and I spread my legs wider as his tongue finds a breast. His mouth heats my cold skin, like fire against ice, adding another layer of sensation as he slides

into me. The nodes on his cock massage my inner walls. Soooo good. He's using his pleasure cock, which surprises me. I guess he doesn't want to risk pregnancy, not if I stay behind.

"What's wrong?" he asks, noticing I'm distracted.

"Everything is perfect." I loop my hands around his neck and focus on him as I lift my hips to meet his. I wonder what his mating cock would feel like inside me, the one that is similar to a human male's. The truth strikes me at that moment. I've never slept with a human man and never will, because no one could ever compare to Sten. Not even close.

"I want all of you. Both cocks."

"Both? Are you ready for that?"

"Just tell me what to do."

"Turn over. Balance on your hands and knees."

After I get into position, his hands massage and part my generous backside. Part of me feels a bit embarrassed, and definitely exposed, but the growl I hear coming from him tells me he's excited as he coats my back entrance with frem.

A tingling sensation spreads through the area, but I'm not scared, only nervous about the unknown... until I remind myself this is Sten. A moment later, his mating cock presses against me and slides in with ease.

Oh, I never thought I'd like this, but the pressure, the fullness, literally takes my breath away. There's no pain, rather a sense of possession and joy. The farther he eases in, the more his lower cock rubs against my clit, sending me higher and higher.

"Yes, sholani," he says as I lift my ass and push back on him. Strong hands hold my hips firmly and a moment later he thrusts into my pussy with his pleasure cock. Now, I understand this position better. He's using both cocks, but he can't get me pregnant.

My hands clench against the towels beneath me, but they offer no purchase and I slide forward. Sten's grip on me remains solid despite the growing force of his thrusts. His

moans of pleasure fill the warehouse, adding a new level to the ecstasy rolling through me. In all my wildest dreams, I never imagined how alive I'd feel, how immeasurably addictive being the center of another's pleasure could be.

“Nothing is better than being inside you with both cocks, sholani. Except seeing your face.”

He wants to reverse position, which means having his mating cock in my pussy.

I want that too, but the risk...

When his thrusts gain intensity and speed, I lose my ability to match his rhythm. He pounds into me, rough and fast, freeing me in a way I never imagined. He's possessed me. More than my body. My heart.

Unexpectedly, my body clenches from my pussy to my thighs, trapping him and his cocks inside me.

“Drekk, yes!”

I ride the orgasm, unable to move as my walls grip him tighter than a vise. His cock in my ass pulses and frem, cool and soothing, slides down my backside.

Alien words pour from Sten. They sound utterly filthy; I wish I understood what they meant.

His lips brush over the back of my neck, then down my spine. I barely notice him pull out as he's now kissing my ass, my pussy... every part of me. It's as if he cannot get enough of me, which mirrors how I feel about him. My body finally gives out and I sink to the towels, where I roll over. I'm sweaty, flushed, and desperately need to see Sten's face again.

“What was it like for you, using both cocks?” I hope his first time was everything he imagined it would be.

He covers my body with his again, our little tryst coming full circle. Both cocks, hard as ever, press against my lower region. Do all men get hard again so fast? Or did his cocks remain hard after he orgasmed? It doesn't matter. I'll never sleep with or fall in love with another male. I don't want to. Sten is the one for me.

“I’ve never experienced such intense pleasure, sholani. Your body is the perfect playground.”

I giggle.

“You think I’m joking?” Silver eyes flash in the dim light from the camping lantern I snatched from my office earlier.

“You make me feel like I’m the prettiest woman alive, but a playground, Sten? That’s a bit extreme.”

He licks one breast. Then the other. Then continues down until he’s at my pussy and guiding my legs onto his shoulders. He doesn’t move slowly this time. No, he practically eats me, that wicked tongue of his circling my clit before he sucks on me all while three thick fingers fill me. My body hasn’t calmed from the last orgasm and suddenly he rips another from me, sending my ass high off the floor.

“A playground,” he says as if it’s a fact with no room to debate the point.

Lesson learned. Never challenge a warrior unless you’re prepared for the onslaught. I’ll have to remember that and think of additional challenges.

His horns bend back slightly. “You are grinning.”

“Most definitely.”

A proud expression settles on his face as he lies down beside me and draws me against his side. He’s deliciously warm. I almost suggest he forgo the blankets he pulls over us. I found heaven in the arms of an alien in a cold warehouse. That smile stays on my face, even as I drift off to sleep in his arms.



I DON’T KNOW what wakes me or how long I’ve slept, but Sten’s gone. Pulling my sweater on doesn’t do much to combat the wicked cold. We should go up to my office. It will be slightly warmer up there, but not a lot. Especially with my damn space heater broken.

Sten turns the corner and walks down the aisle toward me. His left arm where he got shot close to the shoulder doesn't seem to be bothering him. Over that shoulder, he's carrying a queen size blanket filled with supplies. He looks like a big blue Santa Claus, which is fitting considering it's Christmas Eve.

"I was wondering where you went."

"Hunting." He dumps his treasure trove at my feet. "The blizzard will keep us trapped here for a while."

I sift through the supplies. "Four down winter sleeping bags and a tent. That's perfect! I totally forgot we received a shipment of military supplies. I should grab the full inventory list from my office to see what else we can use." I jump to my feet.

"Sit. We have everything we need here, and it's past sundown."

"So?"

"You need to light the candles. And say the prayers."

"I don't think that's critical considering a bunch of men tried to kill us and now we're snowed in."

"That's exactly why you must continue your ritual. To let the lessons of the past guide you in the present and future."

I love that. Remembering those little but important parts of my upbringing can be hard, but Sten sees the big picture.

"We don't have a menorah or candles," I add, again getting bogged down by details.

He unwraps a box. There's no way he found a menorah in the warehouse, since Mr. Jenkins doesn't deal in religious items, so I'm curious what Sten has in that box.

"A menorah, sholani. For you." I'm shocked. He didn't find a menorah... He *made* one.

He pulls out a mirrored base with nine bottle caps glued to it, each one lined up. No, make that ten bottle caps since he's given the shamash an extra bottle cap to ensure it's higher than

the others. Immediately, I recognize the mirror from the bathroom in my office. In place of candles or oil, he used seven tiny pieces of wood that will definitely light!

“Where did you get the kindling?”

“I broke down one of the pallets.”

Genius! I jump up and throw my arms around him. Sure, I’m giddy and over-the-moon excited, but it’s not because I have a menorah with which to celebrate Hannukah. Sten cared enough to fashion one for me. He understands the importance of traditions and holidays.

“Thank you, Sten! This means everything to me!”

“You mean everything to me, sholani.” He presses a box of matches into my palm. “Light the candles and say the blessings.”

After I light the helper *candle*, I use it to light the six remaining wood slivers. My sweet Sten wraps his arms around me and we watch the tiny flames reflect against the glass base, warming the cold space in the warehouse. This has to be the most perfect Hannukah I’ve ever had.

“I have a gift for you, my Golda.”

“Another one?”

“You said it’s tradition to give a gift on the last night of the holiday, but I will be gone by then. If you come with me to Zyan, I can give it to you at the proper time. But—”

“But I haven’t said yes yet.” I look up into his eyes and watch the tiny flames reflected there. Enthusiasm fills his face and I feel like a heel. I’m so torn, I don’t know what to do.

He runs the backs of his fingers against my cheek. “Even if you don’t come with me, I wish for you to still think of me. This is why I am giving the present to you now. It will remind you of me.”

“Oh, Sten...”

Despite his efforts to mask it, I see the pain in his face. Everything’s happened so fast between us and I haven’t been

able to wrap my head around the idea of leaving my family behind. But the alternative, Sten leaving without me... My heart tightens just thinking about it.

“Please don’t make me decide right now.”

He sets a small brown velvet pouch with silver cord cinching the top into my palm and kisses me. “Assuming the storm ends in time, I’m scheduled to launch at five p.m. two nights from now. Until then, we will enjoy one another and the holiday. Which is why I wish you to have the gift tonight.”

“Don’t go,” I plead.

“I have no choice, sholani. I’ve been ordered to return to Zyan.” His face lights up at the mention of his planet. He misses home.

“How long has it been since you’ve seen your family?”

“Seven years. I served on Tunzen before coming to Earth.”

I understand his sadness now, more than ever. And yet it drives home how much I’ll miss my family if I go with him.

“Open it,” he says with a smile that curls my toes.

I forgot about the present I’m holding. With a child’s excitement, I pull apart the silver tie and tilt the pouch upside down. Out spills a gold chain with a gold rose pendant made with rose gold. That’s a bit of a mind bender, as is my dilemma.

Sten looks so hopeful. I can’t destroy him. I can’t.

“It’s beautiful,” the words spill from my mouth. I love the gift. Even if it were the ugliest necklace on Earth, I’d still love it because Sten gave it to me. No one’s ever given me something so special. But what I really want is Sten.

“Your father helped me find a talented craftsman. I told him I wished to buy a golden rose for my Golda Rose.”

“I love it,” I say as he puts the necklace on me. That’s where he and my Dad were when I dropped by my parents this morning. Out looking for a present for me. *That* was their top-secret mission.

How do I say no to Sten when my heart wants to say yes? I want the best of both worlds, but that's like asking for a miracle. The irony doesn't escape me. It's Hannukah, a time to celebrate miracles. I've been given the best miracle of all. A man who loves me as much as I love him.

But loving him means losing my family. Despite how much my family drives me crazy, they have always been there for me, breaking the rules and risking their lives during the occupation to make sure I had everything possible, especially an education, a sense of worth... and love. I've always been surrounded by love.

Sten loves me as well. I see it in his eyes and I hear it in his words and the way he touches me. But how can I walk away from my family as if they don't matter?

CHAPTER TWENTY

STENIKOV

My Golda shines when I give her the necklace. Then a sadness settles over her. I understand her dilemma, even though she doesn't speak of it. She has family here. A family who loves her. Leaving Zyan was not easy for me, but I made the choice to be a warrior, knowing I might be assigned off Zyan and possibly never see my family again. Now I'm asking Golda to face that same choice, but she's only had days to get used to the idea.

"Tell me your thoughts, sholani."

She looks up at the row of windows high in the warehouse. The raging storm covers the windows with layers of snow and ice. "I'm hoping this blizzard lasts a few more days so you miss your flight to Zyan."

"I have my own ship. Even if I am delayed, I am expected to be on Zyan on schedule."

"Please stay."

She knows this is not my choice. But I understand her plea. I gather my courage, hoping what I say will not divide us. "You are my heartmate. You will come with me, to Zyan." It's not an order exactly, but I'm making a difficult decision for her... if she allows it.

She doesn't react poorly to my order but shakes her head so subtly I almost miss it.

“Leaving Earth, leaving my family... You’re asking me to choose between you and my parents, Bubbe, Rachel, and Sadie. And all my uncles and cousins you haven’t even met. So many people. How can I forget about them like they don’t exist?” Tears fill the corners of her eyes. “But I can’t imagine losing you. I love you, Stenikov. More than life itself.”

She loves me... Drek, I’ve wanted to hear nothing else since the moment I realized she was my sholani. This is indeed a joyous occasion, darkened by a decision she must make.

Two days to choose between me and her family.

Zyan’s laws permit me to bring my sholani with me, but I do not have permission for the rest of her family to accompany us, even if they would want to go with her, which I doubt. Her sister barely tolerates my presence. I cannot envision Rachel on Zyan. But Golda is fierce, brave, and open to new ideas. She would do well on my world.

Except she won’t have her family. Golda is a person who needs her family around her. They are a part of her. She will have me and my family, but will that be enough?

My fingers thread through her hair. “Sholani, we will find an answer. Together.”

When I call her sholani, the gravity of my situation hits me. I’ve been permanently reassigned to Zyan. It’s likely I’ll never return to Earth.

I don’t know what I will do if she doesn’t come with me. The prospect of leaving her behind is unfathomable. Especially after what happened here today. I nearly lost her.

The very thought of not being here to protect her evokes a fear I’ve never known. Deeper than when my father died, deeper than when I fought alongside my fellow warriors during the Grud invasion of Zyan.

“You don’t need to decide now. You can stay with your family and take your time deciding.” Forcing her to choose is cruel. “The zyanthan embassy in Los Angeles is working on a process to transport humans between our planets for cultural and work exchange. You can come then.”

Her eyes turn hopeful at the prospect. “How long before they’ll have that program up and running?”

“I don’t know.”

The excitement in her face dims. “Things don’t happen so fast here on Earth, except anything to do with planet security. That has top priority over everything. I doubt anyone will consider transporting humans between Earth and Zyan urgent.”

I hold her face in my hands. “Waiting even one day for you will be too long, but the alternative is unthinkable.”

“The alternative?”

“Never seeing you again. You are my future. I wish to make you mine and live our lives together, with younglings to love and worry us with struggles that will test us and draw us closer together until the day we part from this life and enter the next. Even then, I will not rest until I find you again. We will have an eternity loving one another and growing together, in whatever form or place the gods allow.”

“Together. No matter where we are. I like that.” She places her palms on my chest. “I love you, Sten. Will you be mine?”

“Drekk, sholani, I already am. I’m only waiting to claim you.”

“You already have my heart.”

I grip her face between my hands. “A full mating, the one that risks pregnancy, the one where a couple declares themselves to one another as sholan and sholani. We have ritual words.”

“But,” she stammers, and I see the panic in her face.

“Sholani... Golda... I wish to make you mine, even if you remain on Earth. I believe such a bond will bring us together again one day.”

She nods slightly but says nothing. I’m not sure if she’s agreeing to be mine, or if she fully understands what I’m asking. When she pushes me down on the bedding, I no longer

question what's happening. I will gladly take anything my
sholani gives me. I pray this will not be our last time together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GOLDA

I wake to complete silence. With Sten's massive body curled around me, I don't want to move, even though light streams through the sides of the tent. Morning. Wind no longer howls against the warehouse, so I suspect the storm ended during the night. Which means we'll be leaving today.

Back to reality.

Last night had to be the best night's sleep ever, and all because I slept in Sten's arms. As he sleeps, I try to memorize his handsome features. His thick brows give him a very commanding presence, and his full mouth, which feels so wonderful against mine, softens the harshness of his angular nose.

I love how relaxed he looks, especially with his horns curved back, though not fully as when he goes down on me. I want to learn all his nuances. How much of his horns he controls, how much moves instinctively.

This might be our last time together. If I cannot bring myself to leave my family, then I will lose Stenikov, possibly forever. I'm a coward. I should choose him, but I can't walk away from my family... forever.

Sten's eyes open and he watches me for several heartbeats. "You look troubled."

Tears roll down my cheeks

"You've decided."

I bite my lip. How can words possibly express how much I love him?

There's something he said to me the first time I slept with him. He'd never known the pleasure of using his mating cock. For as beautiful as last night was, drawing us closer together, he held back from what he truly wanted. Making love face to face with both cocks in me, despite the risk of pregnancy. And the words that will bind us... It's the best gift I can think to give him.

I run my hand down his chest to his cocks. Both are already hard. "I want to make love to you, one last time."

"Our last time, for now. Not forever," he says as I position myself over him.

As I sink onto his mating cock, the worry leaves his face, replaced by sheer pleasure. Oh, this position is even more glorious than having him behind me.

Sten bucks upward, making me fall forward where he catches me in a kiss. Sneaky bastard, I love him so. I'm reconsidering, thinking I should forget about everyone and everything that ties me to Earth.

"I like you on top. Watching your tits bounce is quite enjoyable."

I push off his chest to sit upright before he usurps control, but he bucks again. This time I grab hold of his horns and his eyes widen.

"What did I do?" I ask, worried.

"You hit the right spot. There are pleasure nodes toward the base of my horns."

"Your horns are erogenous zones? I wish I'd known that earlier."

"Why?"

"Because then I would have done this...." I lean forward and flick my tongue right where my hand fell.

"Golda," he moans my name.

Ooh, I'm gonna enjoy this. My tongue runs over the tiny bumps which remind me of slippery watermelon seeds, but much smaller. Sten squirms as if he's about to peak. When his hands squeeze my breasts, my moans join his. I'm not sure who's louder and I don't care. His reaction, the sheer joy on his face and in his moans, turns me inside-out with desire. My pussy grows incredibly wet, my nipples turn hard, and I need to grind, to move, *to mate*.

I slide back onto his mating cock while his pleasure cock coats and enters my backside. Yesterday, I had both cocks in me, but not like this. Those bumps stimulate me as he eases in, while also creating a tighter channel for the mating cock in my pussy.

“Take me, Warrior. Make me yours.”

From below, Sten thrusts over and over, driving himself deeper each time. I hold on to his horns for dear life, riding him. Suddenly, I understand the term in a new light. He's a bull between my legs, pounding into me, with heavy balls slapping against me. It's all I can do to hang on!

My pussy tightens and I'm about to leap off that ledge.

“You are mine, Golda Rose.”

“Yes, Warrior.”

“You will have no other male. Ever.”

“There could be no other. Only you.”

Words appear in my head. I don't know what they mean, or how they came to be there, only that I must say them. “Aji kali faztov, miz sholan.”

A part of my heart clicks into place and all is right with the universe. Stenikov thrusts one last time, and I explode into a million pieces. Unable to move, I luxuriate in his lips consuming mine, then I collapse on top of him, not even sure if he reached his peak.

His hand pets my hair down my back as he presses his mouth to my ear. “Aji kali faztov, miz sholani.” Those are almost the same words I said to him.

I'm too exhausted to move. He's become my mattress.

"What just happened?" I ask.

"We mated, and we spoke the words that bind us as sholan and sholani." His voice sounds hesitant, as if he's unsure how I'll react. But I couldn't be happier.

Yes, I could be happier. I could go with him.

There's still time to figure out how. He hasn't left yet, and I know he's not one to give up. Neither am I, not when he's the prize. "The words... They just came to me."

"The gods gave you the words. They approve of our mating."

"Then ask for their help keeping us together."

"It doesn't work that way. If our love is strong enough, if we truly are meant to be, then we will find a way." He cradles my face between his hands. "We *are* not done with one another, sholani. This is our beginning, not an end."

I hug him tighter. "Is this what doubles as a wedding on Zyan? Exchanging vows?"

"A full mating with the customary words binds us. But we will register on Zyan as a mated pair as well, if that is what you wish." He cups my cheek. "I will take you however I can have you. I love you too much to do anything that would hurt you, which is why I will not take you from your family and your world unless you wish it. The decision must be yours."

For the first time in my life, I don't want to have a choice. I want someone to decide for me, because no matter who I choose, someone I love will get hurt.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

STENIKOV

Except for a few key roads cleared for buses, the city remains blanketed in snow. After leaving the warehouse this morning and walking two miles, Golda and I finally catch a bus.

Forty-five minutes later, we arrive at a police station where it takes an hour to prove my identity. I detail the events at the warehouse while Golda waits in a coffee shop across the street. I don't like leaving her alone, but it's better than having her here where the police will ask her questions.

The dead bodies law enforcement find will trigger a full investigation. The humans will go through the office papers and find everything they need. Even though Golda deserves credit for the discovery, she and her family will be safer if no one knows she had any knowledge of the smuggling ring.

After I complete the police report, their captain allows me to use their comm to connect to Commander Zirkov and update him. He commends me on uncovering the smuggling ring. Since we're speaking in zyanthan, a language none of the humans know, I tell him the full truth, including that I've found my sholani and wish to remain on Earth.

"I'm sorry, Stenikov. I cannot alter your orders. The order came from the ZDC directly. Command has a special assignment for you on Zyan. You may take your sholani with you. No one will question her presence."

“Yes, Commander.” I had hoped Zirkov might have some influence with Zyan Defense Control. I’ve been on loan to Galactic Intelligence due to GI7’s shortage of marshals. He does not report to the ZDC, but I do, meaning if the ZDC wants me back, there is nothing he or anyone can do about it.

To make matters worse, I must leave tonight.

Holding Golda’s hand in my lap, we sit on a packed bus. As usual, the humans crowd in the rear to avoid me. Golda’s hand squeezes mine as she gazes out the window. I still don’t know if she’s coming with me.

When the bus stops a few blocks from her house, we head to the exit. Golda turns swiftly to face the humans. “He’s blue, has horns, and a heart of gold. You people should be ashamed of yourselves for fearing someone based on his looks.”

I laugh as we exit.

“What’s so funny?” she asks.

“Every time we get off a bus you scold the other passengers and yet you don’t say anything to them when they first move to the back of the bus.”

She shrugs. “I like having a seat.”

“You could take the seat, then leave without saying anything. If you convince them not to fear me, then you won’t have a seat on future rides.”

“It’s a risk, but I’d rather they think like rational people and stop judging you because you’re not human.”

I draw her against my side and kiss the top of her head. “You are brave, Commander.”

“I’m a coward.”

My heart sinks. She’s staying on Earth.

I pull her into a full hug. “I still love you. Always will. And I’m not giving up. I promised we’d find a solution, and we will.”

She muffles her sobs by burying her face in my chest. I break the hold and wipe her cheeks. “Your tears will freeze

into icicles.”

“Stop being so sweet.” She runs up the steps to her parents’ house.

A moment later, Mrs. Birnbaum appears at the door. “Come in here, Stenala, and say a proper goodbye.”

When I enter the home, Golda flings herself into my arms. The rest of her family follows suit, hugging me. I’m surrounded by humans I’ve come to love like my own family. I understand all too well why Golda cannot leave them.

Even her sister Rachel and Sadie are here. Rachel doesn’t hug me, but I see the tears in her eyes. For her sister. The tall blonde gives me a weak smile. I truly believe if I stayed longer, she’d accept me in time.

“Goodbye, Stenikov,” Mr. Birnbaum says, patting me on my back. “Stay safe. Come, Golda. You’re making this hard on him.” When he draws his daughter away from me, the loss of her body against mine hits me like someone has ripped my insides out.

My horns twist and I have trouble catching my breath. I cannot leave like this. I’m a warrior. I force my horns to untwist as I straighten my back, step forward, and kiss Golda one last time.

Salty tears sour the sweetness of her lips, but nothing can diminish my love for her, even her choice to remain with her family. I too had trouble leaving my family seven years ago, but I had no choice. Golda does. I will not rob her of her family.

My mouth slides to her ear where I whisper a private goodbye. Then, I turn quickly and leave the home, before I do something stupid such as throw her over my shoulder and kidnap her. The idea has merit, but it would not solve anything. My sholani is not ready to leave her family.

Without a coat on, Golda races down the front steps and captures my face in her hands. “I love you, Sten. Please, never forget me.”

I steal one last kiss, then break into a run. A darkness descends on my heart. I left my sholani behind. A sholan doesn't do that, not willingly. And yet I did. Even saying goodbye to my father when he was on the funeral pyre wasn't this hard. Can I survive without my Golda?

Her face enters my mind. When we last made love, she called me *warrior*.

I am a zyanthan warrior.

We don't give up.

Ever.

Especially on the ones we love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

GOLDA

You are and always will be a part of me, my sholani.

That's what my sweet alien whispered in my ear before he left.

What have I done?

My mom leads me inside the house and closes the door. This feels so surreal. Ten days ago my biggest worry was figuring out why I couldn't get the records to reconcile at work. Today, I let the love of my life leave without me.

I look at the faces of my family. Bubbe's unusually quiet, sitting on the sofa shaking her head.

Mom sighs. "I'll fix lunch."

"I'll take your bags up to your room," Dad says.

"Bags?" I didn't notice before, but two suitcases line the wall next to the dining room table.

"Your mother packed some clothing, photos, and other personal items for you."

"And my recipe box," Bubbe adds. "You need to feed that boy. He's all skin and bones."

"Bubbe, I think you need new glasses," Rachel says. "That alien is all muscle."

"That's my point! Not an ounce of fat on him. He's wasting away. A male needs to come home to good cooking."

And Golda's a good cook."

They all assumed I'd go with Stenikov. What am I missing? Besides a brain, apparently.

And a heart.

Rachel approaches. I'm surprised to see her here with Sadie. I thought she feared Stenikov.

Her eyes run up and down me. "You've changed. For the better, Goldilox. This alien of yours suits you. Now let me give you a little advice."

Here it comes. She's not going to let me grieve in peace. Right now, all I want is to curl up in bed and cry myself to sleep.

"Go ahead. I can't feel any worse than I already do."

"Get your fucking coat on and go after him, you fool."

"Rachel!" Bubbe scolds. Rachel never swears. No one does in our house.

"I'm not the fool who let the man of her dreams walk out that door, Bubbe. You know I'm right," Rachel says to our grandmother.

"Everyone agrees with you, Rachel, but you don't need to swear, especially in front of the baby."

"Yes, the baby." Rachel's expression turns stern as she dangles her daughter inches from my face, knowing I can't resist kissing my sweet little niece. "Go ahead, Goldie. Tell your niece why she's never going to have any cousins to play with. Because we all saw how you looked at that big blue alien. He's the one for you. They'll never be another. You're going to stay here and turn into a miserable person because you were too scared to go with him."

"I'm not scared of going with him!" I shout. I'm not mad at Rachel, but at myself. I messed up. Big time. "I'm scared I'll never see you, or Mom, Dad, and Bubbe again."

"Stenikov's your family now."

That's the first time she's used his name. And without any slurs. She really believes I belong with him.

Everyone does.

"You want me to leave Earth? All of you?" I'm shocked by the thought. And the realization that I already know the answer. They not only wanted me to go with Sten, they expected it.

"We want you to be happy. To have a full life," my sister says. "Our ancestors fought for their freedom, their happiness, and for their families. Hell, our whole world's been fighting for freedom from the Coalition for twenty years and we finally got it. You need to do the same. You've always been a fighter, Goldie, so start fighting. For you and Stenikov."

She's right. It's what's been tearing me apart. I want to be with Sten, but I didn't think I could leave my family. They're all telling me they'll be fine without me. They'll still have one another. And even if I never see them again, the love will always bind us, all of us.

I hug Rachel and Sadie, then Bubbe. I dash into the kitchen and kiss my mom and give her the world's biggest hug. No words pass between us. She understands.

When my Dad comes downstairs, I hug him. I'm afraid to say *I love you* to them because it sounds like an ending, not a beginning. As I race to the door, Rachel shouts, "Wait!"

"What?"

"Take your coat, Goldilox. Your big blue bear probably does a good job keeping you warm and then some," she says wagging her eyebrows, "but it's still cold out there."

I take the coat from her and hug her one last time. Hell, if my sister can advocate for Stenikov, then clearly I have the approval of my entire family.

I race down the street, trying to figure out which bus connections I need to make it to TAB, Teterboro Airfield B, the section reserved for alien ships. Sten's scheduled to lift at 5pm, which gives me three hours to get there. If the buses are running on time, it should take me two hours. One hour

margin. I'll make it. I have to make it. I refuse to lose my sholan, my heart and soul... the love of my life.



“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, I can't enter?” I snap at the soldier guarding the entrance to TAB. “I'm his wife. He's expecting me. Hail his ship. His name is Warrior Stenikov Zelin, from Zyan.”

“I heard you the first time, Miss. That doesn't change the fact that you're not authorized to enter.”

“Just call him!”

The soldier finally picks up a phone and asks the person at the other end for the status on Stenikov's ship. “Please verify.” He holds up a finger telling me to be patient. Sure, easy for him. He's not in jeopardy of losing the love of his life. “Okay, thanks. I'll tell her.”

“What?” I ask, eager to enter.

“You have access, but I'm sorry to inform you the ship already left.”

“No, you're mistaken. It's only 4:30. He doesn't leave until 5.”

“The control tower ordered him to lift off early since we needed the space for incoming ships from Keenar. Sorry, Miss. I confirmed it. There's no mistake.”

I sink to the ground, unable to process that Sten is gone. Thirty fucking minutes. I was on time. But he's still... gone.

I don't know how long I sit on the freezing ground before two soldiers pull me to my feet and another gives me a cup of coffee to drink. Someone says I'm in shock and they wonder if they should call a medic.

Not shock.

Heartbroken. Shattered. Destroyed.

This can't be real. I couldn't have missed him by thirty minutes. This has to be a prank.

What do I do now?

I find myself standing on a crowded bus. How I got here, or which bus it is, is a mystery to me. Glancing out the window, I recognize the neighborhood. I'm headed home.

When I walk through my parents' door, my family sees my expression and they smother me in hugs and sympathy. Everything after that is a blur. Somehow I end up in bed, a place to lick my wounds, to clear my head, except I don't want to. I burrow under the covers and wallow in self-pity. This is all my fault. I should have followed my heart and not tried to grab the best of everything. I can't have my cake and eat it too. Ultimately, my mom was right. I was too cocky, too sure of myself, about so much.

Not that any of that matters now. I've lost Sten.

Nothing matters. Nothing at all.

"Dinner, Golda," Mom calls from downstairs.

"Not hungry," I reply.

A few minutes later, Bubbe shouts up to me, "Time to light the candles, Golda. We're late tonight, but we still need to light them."

I glance at the clock. 8pm. I can't celebrate the holiday. I'd only drag everyone else down. They shouldn't be miserable because I am.

"Go ahead without me."

Staring out the window into the clear night sky changes nothing, but it reminds me of Sten. Somewhere up there, among the thousands of stars winking at me, is my sholan.

I close my eyes, hoping to dream about my sweet alien.



MY EYES BURN from crying and I can't sleep, despite how hard I try. I need to sleep. Not because I'm exhausted, mentally and physically, but because it will be the only way I get to see Sten again. I don't even have a picture of him. Never thought to pull out our only camera, the one we use for special occasions because it's ultra-expensive buying film and getting it developed. I have no foresight for anything in my life.

The doorbell rings. A moment later, Dad calls up. "Package for you, Golda. Come sign for it. I'm helping your mother with the dishes."

My parents will do anything to drag me out of bed. I fling the covers back. I'm going down once and only once, to tell everyone to leave me alone because I need to sulk, cry, and beat myself up for being an idiot. I swing out of bed, ready to lash into my loving family because I know they can and will take it. I'm still wearing my boots. Such an odd thing to think about when the rest of me is falling apart.

When I trudge downstairs, dad's clearing the dinner dishes from the dining room table while Bubbe sips a cup of coffee on the sofa.

"Don't just stand there, Goldala, let the poor delivery man in before he turns blue from the cold," Bubbe says.

Did she have to say blue?

I open the door. "There's no one there. Dad tricked me into coming down, didn't he?"

"Oh, I forgot, your mom pulled the poor guy into the kitchen to feed him. He looked hungry."

Of course she did. I start climbing the stairs. "I'm going back to bed."

"Without me, sholani?"

I whirl around. "Sten!"

My sweet alien emerges from the kitchen, with my parents behind him. My feet never touch the bottom step as I jump into his waiting arms and he holds me tight. I swear, I'll never let go again.

“I’ll get her bags,” Dad says.

Suddenly there’s a flurry of activity around us but I’m too busy kissing Sten to ask or even care what’s going on.

Then he breaks the kiss and gently pushes my hair out of my eyes. “I couldn’t leave you, sholani.”

“I went to the airfield, but they said you’d taken off.”

“I was ordered to lift early. I made it as far as your moon before I turned back.”

“Why? What changed? Did your commander say you could stay on Earth?”

“No. I’m here against orders, but I could not leave you. I planned to stay until you were ready, and risk punishment by my people. But your parents say you wish to go with me. Is this true?”

“Yes!”

I’ve never seen a wider smile than the one on Stenikov’s face. His smile spans from ear to ear and his horns reach high, nearly touching the ceiling, as I smash my lips to him again.

He twirls me around in joy. “I never imagined I could be so fortunate to have a sholani such as you.”

My dad coughs, his way of interrupting us. “Don’t leave your ship too long, son. It won’t be long before someone reports it and the military swarms in.

He called Stenikov son! That is soooo cool!

“Your father is correct. I must return to my ship soon, before the military surrounds it. I am no longer authorized to be on Earth.”

I turn, about to ask for my coat. My mom’s already holds it open for me. I slip my arms in as my dad gives Sten the two suitcases from earlier. Bubbe returns from the kitchen and hands me a bag with two foil food containers inside. “You both missed dinner. Heat the latkes and brisket before you eat them. I threw extra napkins in.”

“Bubbe, I’m sure he has food aboard his ship.”

“This is just in case. I don’t want you to be hungry.”

I take the food and the love that goes with it. One last round of hugs and kisses and I’m racing down the street, hand-in-hand with Stenikov. No tears this time, just a heart filled with joy. I can’t believe he returned for me. He must have a lot of faith in me, more than I had in myself. That’s just part of what I love about him. He doesn’t give up on people, no matter how bull-headed they are.

We reach his ship within minutes. He landed in a nearby park. Fortunately, it’s night and there’s no one around to cause any trouble. When he presses his palm to a metal ID plate, the door opens, and a plank extends.

He slides my luggage in and then returns, extending his hand to me. I don’t hesitate in taking his hand, but then I look at my world, knowing this will probably be the last time I see Earth.

“Goodbye,” I say to my birth planet, then turn and walk up the plank with Sten. He holds me in his arms as the plank recedes and the door shuts, but I never look back. From this point on, I’m only going to look forward. And I am looking forward to everything life, and especially my sweet alien, have in store for me...

EPILOGUE

GOLDA

I wake, alone in the cabin aboard *Kuvak's Quest*. Parts of me are a little sore, but in a way that has left me quite sated.

We made love again shortly after leaving Earth. I'm not sure if it was Sten's way to distract me from the fact that I may never see my family again, or because he just can't keep his hands off me. Either way, I lost myself in him, and I suspect I always will.

When I reach over to Sten, my hand hits the cool sheets of an empty bed. For a split second I think he's left me for good, but then I remember I'm on his ship. There's nowhere for him to go, not that he would. He disobeyed orders for me. That's after he risked his life for me. Several times. My sweet alien is just that... mine.

As I swing my legs over the side of the bed, I thread my head and arms through Sten's shirt. It's large on me, but it carries his scent making it the perfect clothing to wrap myself in. I press the soft fabric to my nose, taking in his male musk. Only one thing could be better right now... if he were here with me.

I don't need to worry about underwear or shoes as we're alone on the ship. Plus I'm nervous about opening my suitcases too soon for fear I might cry. I don't know what my family packed for me, but I'm sure every item will bring a heavy dose of tears with it, at least initially.

As I pad out of our cabin into the central corridor, I see a faint glow in the distance. It's unlike the ship lighting which Sten told me changes to simulate the day and night cycle of a planet. When we lifted from Earth, the lighting was a cool blue, denoting night.

“Sten?”

“In here, sholani. Join me.”

His voice leads me down the corridor toward the lounge beside the food prep area. When we left Earth, I spent an hour gazing out the window there. Excited, sad, afraid, anxious... Every emotion rolled through me, all while Sten held me close, reassuring me that everything would be fine.

My future will be better than fine, it will be perfect, as long as we're together.

“What are you doing?” I call ahead. “And do I need to be dressed?”

“I prefer you naked, but I will never turn you away, even if you're covered in visca dung.”

There's an image I don't need, even though I have no clue what a visca is.

The glow dances against the ship's shiny black floor and gray metal walls. A flame. Is he cooking on the ship with an open flame? Of course! He's trying to reheat the meal Bubbe sent with us. It's hardly vacuum-packed food intended for long journeys.

I peer back into the food prep area. He's not there. The lounge, then. If it's not dinner, then it's probably some fabulous sight outside that I never imagined existed.

When I enter the lounge, I'm overwhelmed by the sight before me. On the ledge by the expansive window stands my parents' menorah with a full set of white candles. Tonight is the last night of Hannukah and Sten's lighting each of the eight candles.

As he places the helper candle back in the menorah, he recites the blessings. His pronunciation is off, but all the words

are there. Even if they weren't, his heart fills every syllable that he speaks.

"You memorized the prayers," I say, awed by this man.

"They are important to you and your family, which means they are important to me."

Tears stream down my face as I catapult myself into his arms. I'm too emotional to speak, but I don't really need to. My Sten rests his chin on my head and just holds me. Together, we watch the flames reflect against the glass, with the wonders of space behind it. There are so many stars and breathtaking sights out there, and yet it's this small piece of home that holds my attention.

"I can't believe you did this. Thank you, Sten."

He kisses the top of my head. "I'd line up the stars for you if I could."

He would. Sten is just that type of guy. The one who goes out of his way to help another. And here I thought I was the luckiest girl on Earth. As it turns out, I'm the luckiest girl in the universe!

"My ship's window is safer than the ones on Earth. No drapes to catch fire."

"But there's no one outside to see the candles either."

"There are billions of beings out there, sholani. Someone will see. And if not this year, then next year, wherever our home will be. I promised your mother."

"That we'd carry on my traditions? I love that, but I want to create traditions together."

"We will, but that is not what I promised her. She made me swear to your god and mine that I would take care of you and make you happy." He points to the menorah and candles. "And this makes you happy."

I turn and slide my arms around his neck. "*You* make me happy. Just by being you. I love my traditions and I look forward to combining them with yours, but no matter what or how we celebrate, all I need to be happy is you."

“Ah, then, we will be very happy indeed, my Golda, as I am yours, now and forever...”

Thank You for reading! - Julie

How will Golda acclimate to Zyan? What will she do there? She's not one to sit home and twiddle her thumbs. She likes to get involved. And Stenikov will do anything to make her happy...

If you want to find out what happens, read the bonus chapter, “Home Away From Home.” [Click here to receive the free bonus chapter.](#)

Read [Whisked Away by the Alien Bonus Chapter](#)

DEAR READER

If you liked this story, then I recommend you take a look at my [Zyanthan Warriors series](#) (my first series showcasing the zyanthan warriors and what happened to Earth) and the second series [Alien Marshals & Mates](#). You can read the books as stand alones, but for for the best reader experience I recommend reading in order.

Enjoy the books!
Julie



ALIEN CLAIMED

Zyanthan Warriors series (book 1)

The blue horned alien says he won't touch me. What if I want him to?

Ivy

Earth isn't exactly paradise, not since the Coalition took control, but it was home... until Ivy's brother shoved her on an alien ship to be a mail-order bride. The truth be told, she is better off without the murderous psycho, but that doesn't mean she wanted to be thrust into the universe, totally unprepared, and she certainly *won't* marry some horned alien.

She'll make her own way back to Earth and stay far away from her brother and his criminal ties. Nothing will change her mind. Not even a tall, sweet, protective warrior who makes human males look like boys and the universe look much more appealing than she ever thought possible.

Quinnov

Quinnov's alone in the universe. Except for his planet... war torn, burned out Zyan. No one in his family survived the war, except maybe his older brother Jaizon. Quinnov's been searching for him since the war ended. But when he crosses paths with his heartmate, his priorities shift. To keep her safe from those hunting her, he may have to return her to her world, even though she makes his heart soar and both of his cocks harden.



A Warrior For Every Bride

Alien Captured is a steamy Mail-Order Bride Romance with several twists. Each book in the series ends in a very Happy Ever After.

ORC'S POSSESSION

Knotty Monsters (book 1)

My curves are why my people look down on me... and the reason the Orc leader craves me.

My people see my curves and decide I'm not worthy of love.

The Orc leader sees my curves and thinks I'll make a good breeder.

Me? I see nothing but monsters all around me.

I bide my time, waiting for the opening to escape these monsters. But where can I go? My people sold me to the orcs on a world where five alien species compete for resources... and there's no way back to Earth.

For now, Atox is patient with me, not taking me against my will. That won't last forever.

I have a choice to make. Flee into the hostile wilderness or find a way to convince this arrogant, hardened monster that my value includes more than the children I can give him.

Maybe, if I'm lucky, he'll fall for me... like I'm falling for him.



Mine to Possess

Orc's Possession is a steamy monster romance between a hardened orc leader and a curvy human woman. Love doesn't come easily to this duo, but what they build together will strengthen not only them, but both their peoples. Expect twists and turns and a very Happy Ever After.

[Read Orc's Possession](#)

THANK YOU!

Thank you for reading the first book in my Holiday Heartmates series! I'd love if you would leave a review—even if only a few words—about Stenikov and Golda. Just write what you liked about my book or how it made you feel... whatever is in your heart.

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Thank you!

Julie

SERIES BY JULIE K. COHEN

If Julie were an Alien, she'd bounce around from planet to planet, looking for new adventures. This could explain why she writes in several romance genres.

ALIEN ROMANCE

- [Zyanthan Warriors](#)
- [Alien Marshals & Mates](#)
- [Holiday Heartmates](#)

MONSTER ROMANCE

- [Knotty Monsters](#) (Orcs!)

SCI FI ROMANCE (no aliens)

- [Mine to Protect](#)
- [Mindwiped](#)

REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

- [Guardian Wolves](#) (paranormal)
- [Prison World](#) (humans, non aliens, Sci Fi romance)

PARANORMAL ROMANCE

- [Broken Shifters](#) (main series)
- [White Wolves](#) (prequel series)
- [Guardian Wolves](#) (after Broken Shifters; this is reverse harem)

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If you want to receive updates about my new releases, exclusive access to bonus chapters, promotions, giveaways and insight into my zoo (aka my 'office'), [please sign up here](#).

Thank you!
Julie

ABOUT JULIE

Julie K. Cohen has always ‘played’ with stories and plots in her head, but never conceived of putting pen to paper until her high school years. While building a career and family over the years always held the highest priority, she never gave up writing. Through the years, family, husband, and friends encouraged her to keep writing. Without their love and support, and the additional support of the writing community, she wouldn’t be where she is today... sitting in front of her computer, creating new characters, plots, and romances for her readers to enjoy.



JulieKCohenRomance.com

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Julie

CONTACT ME!

I'd love to hear from you! Questions and feedback about what you like and didn't like in my novel are welcome! Please contact via my website JulieKCohenRomance.com or follow me on social media.

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