



ALIEN CRUSADER'S MATE

LATHARIAN MATE PROGRAM

New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

MINA CARTER

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BOOK 2

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“*I*’m sorry. Could you repeat that?” Halle choked out, her eyes locked on the white-coated doctor.

“Of course. The cost for Oliver’s treatment will be five hundred thousand credits,” Doctor Crane said, his voice echoing in the sterile, dimly lit room.

“Five... *hundred* thousand?” Halle whispered.

She wasn’t sure if she was hoping for confirmation or praying it was a cruel joke. No, it had to be some cruel joke. A camera crew would leap out of the cupboard or something any moment now...

But the doctor just shrugged, as if the figure he had suggested was a mild inconvenience, not something that could bankrupt her ten times over.

“We do offer payment plans at very reasonable terms.”

Her heart sank. It wasn’t just a number; it was a ransom note for her nephew’s life. She looked through the one-way glass into the observation room off the doctor’s office. Ollie sat on the brightly colored sofa, wrapped in a blanket rather than playing with the toys as a three-year-old should. Her heart wrenched at his pale skin and the deep bruises under his eyes.

The room closed in on her, the off-white walls suddenly oppressive and the low hum of the air conditioning unit a screaming siren in her ears.

“You’re welcome to take Oliver to another care provider,” the doctor said emotionlessly, locking eyes with her.

Time froze, and ice spread through her veins. Doctor Crane was the only doctor they could afford. Without him...

Before she could collect her thoughts, Sadie blurted out, “Yes, we’ll do it. Anything for Oliver.”

Halle's jaw tightened, her throat thick. Her sister didn't understand money, never had. She said that as easily as if she was agreeing to a dinner date, not the sort of astronomical debt that would keep them in the grindstone of the Anselm factories for the rest of their lives—probably Ollie's life as well.

"It won't be a problem. Will it, Halle?" Sadie turned toward her, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears and hope. Halle knew that look all too well. It said, "You can fix this. Right? You always do."

The weight of her sister's trust bore down on her as a mountain she'd carried ever since their mother had disappeared into a bottle when Halle was six, leaving her to look after her baby sister. It had been the two of them against the world ever since, but this... this was an enemy they couldn't conquer.

For a moment, she wished she could be like Sadie, always wearing her heart on her sleeve and never bothering to understand the intricacies of their predicament. Sadie's dreams were filled with sugar plums and fairy godmothers, where everything worked out in the end.

But Halle was a realist, who made things work. And right now, nothing was working. Nothing *would* work, not with a debt like that.

She tried to swallow the lump in her throat to get herself together. Give some answer that would make this all go away. But what could she say? She was the big sister, the responsible one, the fixer. She couldn't afford the luxury of breaking down. Somehow, she offered her sister a smile. It was wobbly, but it held.

"Sure, Sadie," she said, her voice steadier than she felt. "We'll figure something out. We always do."

"Well, I do have other patients," the doctor said, ushering them out of the office. They passed a couple in the doorway, a sick-looking toddler in the woman's arms.

Halle recognized the look of desperate hope in their eyes and wanted to scream at them to run. To find another solution that wasn't the leech that was Crane... But she knew they were stuck in the same trap as she and Sadie were—lower-level workers with no option but to do anything they could to get treatment... any treatment... that wasn't the Anselm Care System. Because once ACS picked up a child, that was it; they would never see them again.

"I need to get Ollie. He won't be happy to stop playing," Sadie said as she

turned toward the observation room door.

Halle shook her head. Sadie was always in denial about how sick Ollie was. She watched as Sadie disappeared behind the opaque door.

“Ms. Keare?” Mrs. Crane, beckoned her over.

Halle bit back her shiver as she crossed the room to stand in front of the desk. Mrs. Crane was a cold-hearted corpse of a woman. Halle doubted she had any human feelings whatsoever.

“Here is the paperwork for Oliver’s plan,” Mrs. Crane said, pushing a data-flex across the desk. “It needs to be signed before we can start the treatment.”

Halle’s gaze ran over the dense text, legal jargon interlaced with medical terms, figures, and dates. It made no sense to her whatsoever.

“I would advise you to sign quickly,” Mrs. Crane continued. She looked at Halle over the top of her glasses, her piercing grey eyes chilling.

Halle bit back a shiver. This was not a woman for whom medicine was a calling. Halle doubted she had a caring bone in her body, and her blood probably ran with figures as she totted up the profits she and the doctor made off the desperate.

“We only have two treatment slots left. They start next week, so I’ll need this paperwork back within twenty-four hours to secure a place for Oliver.”

Halle nodded, flicking through the payment plan terms. They were draconian, with escalating fees and penalties for late payments. One misstep and Crane Medical Services would not only own her soul but also the right to harvest her organs for extraction on a sliding scale for each infraction. How many parents had lost kidneys to pay for their child’s treatment?

“And if we don’t?” she asked, looking up.

Mrs. Crane shrugged, her thin lips drawn in a tight line. The implication stole Halle’s breath. If she didn’t comply or sign away her life to this horrifying payment plan, Oliver’s chances were...

She nodded sharply. “I’ll look at it this evening and return it to you first thing tomorrow morning.”

Sadie appeared at her side, Ollie wrapped up in his blanket in her arms, and the two sisters left the office. As they stepped out of the clinic’s suffocating environment, the slap of cold wind on Halle’s face was almost welcome.

It snapped her out of her shock. She couldn’t afford to be out of it right now. Not on the streets. She took a deep breath and kept her wits about her as

she guided Sadie and Ollie down the road toward the metro station.

Evergreen had once been an affluent, upmarket area of the city. Now it was anything but. The buildings rose around her like crooked, grey tombstones, a constant reminder of the life she was stuck in.

Addicts huddled like zombies in the narrow alleyways, their sunken eyes reflecting the grey sky. Sadie spotted them and moved closer, Ollie on the shoulder closest to her sister. Halle, meanwhile, had her hand in her purse on the extendable baton she always carried.

Crytoxine-7 addicts were usually docile, standing empty-eyed in groups until the authorities moved them on or some charity or other rounded them up to spend the night in a shelter. But sometimes they could get a bad batch, and then they were volatile and unpredictable, not to mention *fast*. She'd once seen one go into a rage near a metro station. It had been awful and left four people needing hospital treatment.

She didn't know what was more horrifying... the fact that the ordinarily zombie-like addict had hurt people or that the attack had left the victims, all residents since no one came to Evergreen unless they were forced to, with lifelong debt for their hospital stays.

So she kept an eye on the vacant-eyed shuffling groups, her shoulders tense as they hurried along the street to the station. She hated living like this, hated the xine-heads... but more than that, she hated what they represented. They were reminders of what Evergreen had become, what she might become.

Even the air smelled of desperation, the odor of decaying rubbish that was never collected in time mingling with the metallic tinge of the ever-present smog from the factories, all clogging up their lungs as they headed down the steps to the metro station.

Her hand instinctively found Sadie's for reassurance as they made it to the platform. A quick scan revealed no xine-heads down here. Halle breathed the tiniest sigh of relief and checked the board above the platform. The next train was due in a few minutes. They wouldn't have to wait long. Even though the platform was free of addicts now, that didn't mean it would last.

"It won't be long now," Halle said, guiding Sadie to the bench in the middle of the platform so she could sit down. Her sister was quiet, her usually bright eyes dull and glassy. It hurt Halle more than she wanted to think about. "Then we'll be home, and Ollie can get a nap."

"Halle..." Sadie's voice was little more than a whisper, carried away by

the warm wind heralding the train not far off. “We *can* do it. Can’t we? Pay for Ollie’s treatment, I mean. And...” Her voice got brighter, happier. “When he’s better, we can take him to Bartham Lakes. He’ll *love* that. Look, Ollie, see the water park?” She leaned into the sleeping child, trying to get his attention.

Halle looked at the poster on the wall opposite the platform. Bartham Lakes was a water park just outside the city with happy children in bright swimsuits playing in the shallows with slides behind them. Adults, presumably models picked for their similarity to the kids, beamed as they watched their “kids.” It was as much a fantasy as the poster of an alien paradise on the wall beside it.

Pain lanced Halle’s heart like a bolt of lightning. Sadie was in cloud cuckoo-land again, her brain already glossing over the unpleasantness of Ollie’s treatment and moving on to a place where everything was perfect again. Seriously, Halle wondered what went on in her sister’s head sometimes. She must think they were in some sitcom, like the ones they’d watched on the vidscreen as kids.

Then the writing on the alien paradise poster caught her eye, and she focused with a frown.

Start again in an alien paradise! was emblazoned across it. *Sign up with the LMP and start your life again. Never work again! Live in luxury!*

She snorted. Never work again? That was a fairytale. But she watched as the screen scrolled around, and the location of the nearest LMP office appeared at the bottom of the screen.

LMP, the Latharian Mate Program. She’d heard of it. Ads for women to sign up were everywhere.

Five hundred thousand credits... She frowned.

“Halle?” Sadie prompted.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. I’ve got this, Sadie,” she said, squaring her shoulders.

The cost of Ollie’s treatment was an astronomical sum, but she would find the money, one way or another.



KAAS V’AANT STRODE down the sleek metallic hallway of Devan Station, his

boots ringing against the floor with each step. His expression was stoic, fearsome even, if the way other personnel in the corridors hurried to get out of his way was any indication. His lip wanted to curl back, but he kept it in check. Non-Lathar were so nervous at times.

He reached the service elevator on this level and stepped inside, catching a glimpse of himself in the reflective doorplate as he did. His scars stood out pale against his tanned skin, even across the sides of his head, where his hair was shaved close to his scalp. Okay... so maybe his appearance was a little fierce.

Despite that and his aura of confidence, his stomach still churned. In his defense, it wasn't every day a warrior spent time with one of his ancestors. Kind of... Lynara Varaant was his many times over great-aunt and a kinswoman he only discovered existed a week ago when he'd been called upon to help rescue her from the clutches of Purist rebels who had wanted to use her as bait to get President Murphy to detonate an ancient weapon to destroy humanity itself.

The rescue mission had been dangerous, especially as a mixed force of mercenaries and Izaean had had to work together and fight the fanatics. He'd like to have dismissed them as just that, fanatics, but they had all been imperial at one time before they'd forgotten their honor. They were well-trained and fighting for what they believed was the survival of the Latharian people itself, which had meant many casualties.

His expression tightened as he rode the elevator up to the deck the station VIPs were housed on. He was no longer a healer, but nothing could have prepared him to see a female of his own species gravely injured on his ops table, and old instincts had kicked in. As he'd worked to heal her broken body, staring down at the first female Latharian he'd seen for many years, something primal and protective had awoken within him. She was his blood, his kin, and he would have done everything in his power to save her life.

Now though she was fully recovered and had requested to meet with him before departing for Earth. The elevator pinged its arrival, and he stepped into the VIP section.

Two heavily armed guards turned his way, took one look at him, and instantly found something more interesting to look at. He bit back his smile as he walked past them, ignoring the bead of sweat that rolled down the side of one guard's face. As the emperor's interrogator, he had access anywhere and everywhere. No warrior could block his path.

Nodding to them, he continued down the corridor, looking for the code Lynara had given him. It was one of the larger suites, an obvious sign of the emperor's favor.

Pausing in front of the door to Lynara's quarters, he hesitated and pulled his jacket straight. Nerves assaulted him, which was utterly ridiculous. He was a hardened warrior, the emperor's interrogator... meeting a kinswoman shouldn't have him this tied in knots.

Squaring his shoulders, he took a deep breath and pressed the chimes.

Almost before his hand had left the plate, the door whisked open to reveal Lynara, resplendent in what he assumed was the new uniform of the Human-Latharian Academy. The navy jacket accentuated her slender waist while golden piping drew the eye to the rank insignia at her high collar.

He inclined his head in greeting. "Commodore."

"Kaas." She smiled broadly. "So good of you to come!"

Before he could react, she yanked him into a hug. Her slender arms were surprisingly strong, and warmth blossomed in his chest at the contact. He couldn't remember the last time someone had hugged him.

Too soon she pulled back and gestured for him to enter. "Don't stand on ceremony... Please, come in!"

"Thank you." He inclined his head and followed her into the main room.

It was spacious and graciously appointed, as befit her station, but very obviously a guest suite at the same time. It had none of the personal touches that would indicate she intended to live here full time.

Of course, that could also be because she had only been here a little over a week and probably hadn't had time to purchase new things to replace the ones that had ended up under the ice with the *Elysium*.

"How are you finding your new role?" he asked, searching around for small talk as he sat on the couch she indicated. Being expected to sit was new, but then, one did not sit in the emperor's presence.

"Challenging but rewarding," she replied, her eyes sparkling. "It's been... interesting combining human culture with Latharian, but necessary. I want our peoples to understand each other. We have more similarities than differences."

"That's not surprising," he offered. "Given, as I understand it, your crew became humanity's ancestors? That's bound to affect their culture."

"Indeed! Can I offer you some refreshments?" Lynara asked, her eyebrow raised as she moved gracefully to a sideboard lined with decanters and

glasses.

“Thank you, but no,” Kaas replied. “I am content.”

Selecting a jewel-toned liquor for herself, Lynara returned and sat on the couch opposite him.

“I asked you here for more than just a social visit. As you may know, the emperor has tasked me with restarting the Latharian Academy.”

Kaas inclined his head. It was common knowledge on the station. “I have heard so, yes.”

She smiled. “Well, I wish to discuss the medical courses I plan to offer there.”

Kaas blinked in surprise. “Surely the Healer’s Hall would deal with all things medical? Perhaps your query is better directed to Lord Healer Laarn?”

She pursed her lips, shaking her head. He was momentarily distracted by the dance of her hair over her shoulders. She was mated and a kinswoman, so he had no interest in her as a female, but it was nice to be around a female who looked like him. Who had that sense of...rightness that females of alien species did not have.

“The healer’s hall training works for Latharian healers, but it’s not something I would suggest a human try, especially given the neural and physical requirements,” she said. “We need medical courses for all levels—from first aid right the way up to surgery—without...” She broke off and indicated his scars. “As such, I hoped to secure your help and expertise as a former healer.”

He froze, watching her. How much did she know of his past? He supposed his medical knowledge had been plain when he’d treated her wounds after the rescue. Still, her request honored him.

“I would be pleased to advise you in any way I can,” he said, warmth flooding the center of his chest.

“Truthfully, I was hoping for more than just advice.” She smiled, swirling the liquor in her glass. “I want you to become an instructor at the academy.”

He stiffened. “You do me great honor, Commodore. However, I must decline. Though I did heal you out of necessity, I gave up the healing arts long ago. My talents now lie in... other areas.”

“Why did you give up healing, Kaas?” Lynara asked, her melodic voice turning serious. “A talent such as yours... without which I wouldn’t be here. What caused you to abandon your calling?”

He tensed, his nails digging into his palms as memory assaulted him. His

unit, laughing around the fire. The snap of the trap closing. Screams and blood as flesh tore. The empty eyes of his battle partner as Kaas lowered him to the muddy ground.

“My unit was slaughtered in a massacre,” he rasped finally. “I hunted the creature responsible. Cornered it in a nameless swamp.” The creature’s howls as it hunted him still echoed in his sleep. “Then I learned the truth.”

Kaas forced himself to meet her gaze. “Our commander ignored the intelligence on the planet, and my unit was slaughtered.”

Lynara reached forward and took his hands, compassion shining in her eyes. “What happened wasn’t your fault. You did what you needed to do to survive.”

Kaas let out a breath. “That’s not the end of it. I tracked our region commander and made him talk. And he talked... spilling details of a plot against the emperor himself.”

Lynara’s eyes widened slightly, but she remained silent, waiting for him to continue.

“After I exposed my commander’s betrayal, the emperor took notice of my... skills. He needed someone to question enemies, extract information.” He smiled grimly. “And I excelled at making them talk.”

Lynara didn’t flinch. “So he made you his interrogator.”

“He did.” Kaas’s jaw tightened. “But the ghosts of my unit still haunted me. I couldn’t save them, but I could honor them.”

“As is right,” she murmured.

“I traveled to their homes, one by one. Handed their grieving families the medals they’d earned.” His voice turned rough. “Mates, parents, younglings... I owed them that much.”

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. He appreciated that as much as the reassuring squeeze she gave his hands. “A worthy mission, one filled with honor.”

Kaas nodded, but his wrist comp chirped with a notification before he could reply. Frowning, he looked down at the message.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, concern creasing her brow.

“My apologies, Commodore. The individual I have been tracking has just arrived on Devan Station. I must go.”

“Of course! I’ve already kept you long enough, and I have a meeting with the emperor soon that I need to prepare for. Think about my offer,” she urged, “and let me know if you’re interested.”

“Of course.” He stood, straightening his combat jacket. “Please accept my gratitude for this audience. Our discussion has given me... much to think about.”

Lynara stood and offered him her arm in the traditional warrior’s greeting. At his surprised look, she smiled. “We might have been naval officers in my time, but we were still *Imperial Navy*.”

He smiled, amusement rolling through him. “Of course. Interesting how little that has changed over the years.”

“Absolutely. Like how you and Savaar look so much like my brother, Riaan.” She studied him a moment more before nodding as she released his arm. “Good luck with your meeting.”

“Of course. And likewise with the emperor,” he said and strode from her quarters. He tapped out a response on his wrist comp, sending a message to the new arrival on base to meet him at a small eating establishment off the main airdocks.

What was the going rate for a mail-order bride these days? Halle nibbled the inside of her lip as she hurried along the crowded sidewalk. Hopefully, more than enough to fund Ollie's treatment and set her sister up comfortably while she was... She couldn't finish the thought. The idea of leaving Sadie and Ollie hurt her heart.

Her comms device chirped in her purse, and she reached for it automatically.

"Dammit, Sadie, can't I get five minutes to myself?" she muttered, expecting to see yet another message from her sister asking her to pick up something frivolous that they didn't need from the store while she was out. Anger was a safer emotion than the fear and panic that welled in the center of her chest, so she gave in to it, gritting her teeth as she flipped the device open, ready to rip Sadie a new one.

Time is running out to secure Oliver's place for treatment, the words on the screen screamed at her. Each one hammered a spike into her skull to feed the migraine she had forming. Please submit signed paperwork within the next twelve hours. Crane Medical Services.

Halle sighed and flipped the device shut with more venom than was necessary. It was an old model, the best she could afford, but practically an antique... and therefore bombproof. She'd had to tape the panel on the back into place, but other than that, it worked perfectly. More or less.

Growling in the back of her throat, she shoved the comms deeper into her bag until the muffled chirping went silent.

Out of sight, out of mind. At least, that's what they said. So why did her

purse feel heavier now?

She tried to focus on putting one foot in front of the other, dodging left and right to avoid bumping into haggard faces fresh off their shift at the factories.

But despite the crowd milling around her, she'd never felt more alone. The pressure of saving Ollie weighed on her shoulders, pressing down until she could barely breathe.

Why couldn't Sadie understand the gravity of their situation instead of just ignoring it and escaping into the fantasy of her soap operas? Halle was forced to make the tough choices while her sister floated along on dreams of a happily ever after fed to her by the big networks.

If Sadie had to sign up to become an alien mail-order bride, she'd have tripped right into the arms of a handsome alien as he came to inspect the offices, and they'd have fallen in love at first sight. Oh... and he'd be a billionaire space pilot ace who rescued cute alien dogs on the weekend and had already cured world hunger on at least three planets. Somehow, it would also be Christmas, and they'd share a hot chocolate or something.

Where was the nearest waste bin? She was going to be sick. Shaking her head, Halle continued. It didn't take her long to reach her destination. She turned a corner, and there it was up ahead. The nondescript grey building housing the Latharian Mate Program office squatted between a laundromat and a corner store selling synth-rice out of grimy windows.

She faltered, doubts swarming like insects. Could she really go through with this? Leave Earth behind to marry an alien? Become a broodmare for some super hot alien guy. That only happened in Sadie's trashy soap operas and romance vids. No, she would get one with a face only his mother could love and probably fourteen arms. Or tentacles. She shuddered. She hoped it wasn't tentacles...

Questions rolled through her mind as she approached the LMP building. Would she even be able to communicate with her Latharian mate? Would he treat her well?

Like most of the human population, her knowledge of the almost seven-foot-tall aliens came only from the newsfeeds followed by rumor and gossip. Supposedly, the Latharians had been forced to seek human brides after a genetic plague had killed all their women. And they were humanity's ancestors, which was why they looked so much like humans.

Well, at least that was the tentacles out, she supposed.

The comms device chirped again, muffled but insistent. Halle pictured Ollie's wan face and glassy eyes, so different from the vibrant, giggling boy he'd been just months ago, and her spine snapped straight. It didn't matter if the Latharians had two heads and an appetite for human flesh. She'd do whatever it took to get the money for Ollie's treatment. Striding forward, she yanked open the door and walked in before she could chicken out.

The office was warm and inviting with pictures of exotic beaches and beautiful nebulas on the wall, like an upmarket travel agent. Comfortable chairs surrounded each associate's desk, and ambient lighting cast a soft glow over the room.

Behind the nearest desk sat a young woman with a wide, toothy smile. She reminded Halle of an actress playing a role, trying too hard to project cheerfulness.

"Hi there! Welcome to the Latharian Mate Program! I'm Emma. I'll be your associate today," she chirped, shuffling through data sheets on her desk. "Please, take a seat. We're so excited you're here to take the first step toward an amazing new life among the stars!"

Her bubbling enthusiasm set Halle's teeth on edge. She eyed Emma warily as the woman kept speaking.

"The Latharian Mate Program offers humans like you an incredible, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!" she gushed, her eyes bright. "Imagine—the chance to travel to distant stars and live on an alien world lightyears from Earth. Experience new cultures, technologies, and wonders beyond anything you've ever dreamed!"

Leaning forward, she spoke faster in practiced excitement. "You'll get to see the majestic rings of planet Lotaas up close... feel the tingling caress of the electromagnetic storms on Xriias Four. Your life will be one thrilling adventure after another!"

Halle shifted in the comfortable chair, her arms folded over her chest as she resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She recognized a sales pitch when she heard one.

Oblivious, Emma continued, "The Latharians are deeply spiritual people whose society values family above all else. As the mate to one of their warriors, you'll want for nothing. You'll live in luxury with only your husband's happiness to consider."

She finally paused and leaned in, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "I probably shouldn't mention this, but if you're matched, your mate will

shower you with gifts and treasures from across the galaxy. All yours to keep!”

Leaning back, she smiled widely. “So what do you say? Are you ready to leave Earth behind and start the greatest adventure of your life?”

Halle stared at her stonily. “So I just need to leave behind everything I’ve ever known, marry some alien guy I’ve never met, and then have his alien babies. Is that about right?”

Emma’s smile faltered slightly. “Well, when you put it like that... I mean, there are certainly many benefits to becoming a Latharian mate.”

Halle fought to keep her expression neutral. Benefits, huh? She doubted this chirpy woman had thought about what it would actually mean to leave her home and family forever.

“What about if I want to come back and visit?”

“Well... I guess you would need to get your mate’s permission,” the other woman started, looking confused. “But why would you want to come back here?”

Halle arched her eyebrow. “Maybe... to visit my family?”

Emma smiled brightly, the practiced mask back in place as she slid an application tablet across the desk. “All our warriors are *very* invested in ensuring their mate’s happiness, so I’m sure you’ll be able to... persuade him to allow a visit. Did I tell you about Lathar Prime already?”

Halle tuned out the woman’s prattling and focused on the application tablet in front of her. Her hands shook as she began filling in her details, each tap of the screen taking her closer to the point of no return.

A future on an alien planet, bound to an alien she’d never met... could she really go through with it? She hesitated, the stylus hovering above the screen as a bead of cold sweat trickled down her spine.

Ollie’s pale face appeared in her mind’s eye again, and her jaw tightened in determination. She had no other choice. This was the only way to get him the treatment to save his life.

She reached the end of the lengthy application and looked up.

“I have a condition before I submit this,” she said, her voice firm.

Emma’s fixed smile faltered briefly. “Oh? Well, the Latharian Mate Program provides everything you could need...”

Halle cut her off. “I want an upfront payment of six hundred thousand credits before I agree to any match. That credit must be deposited within twenty-four hours of matching.”

The other woman paled, her carefully curated cheeriness slipping. “That is...highly irregular. All expenses are covered up to arrival on the Latharian mate’s home world or permanent residence, but we do not make upfront payments.”

Halle arched an eyebrow. “I understand, but if my future mate wishes to earn my favor, he will provide the credits up front. I know I’m an attractive match. Many men... err, mates would leap at the opportunity. Why don’t you ask them?”

Emma blinked. Halle got the feeling the other woman was a few seconds away from wringing her hands. She bit back her smile. She had the woman backed into a corner, and she knew it. They needed human brides badly. Otherwise, why would they have opened an office in Evergreen?

“Well... in special cases, we can add stipulations,” the other woman finally conceded. She quickly typed notes on Halle’s application. “Your mate will be informed of your request. We cannot guarantee he will agree, but we will certainly encourage him to accommodate this one.”

Triumph coursed through her, but she kept her expression neutral. “Thank you. I’m sure you can understand I want security before leaving Earth forever.”

Emma nodded and took the tablet from Halle’s outstretched hand. Her smile bounced back. “Of course. We aim to make this transition as smooth as possible. Let me upload this now for you and get the ball rolling.”

“Of course. Thank you.”

Halle leaned back in the comfortable chair, feeling all the stress of the last few months weighing down on her. Her eyelids were heavy, and if she just closed them...

“We’ve found you a match.”

Halle blinked, focusing on Emma after a few moments. Damn, she had nearly dropped off then. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

Emma looked surprised as she read the screen in front of her. “We have a match for you.”

“What... already? It’s been like... thirty seconds.”

Emma beamed. “Our matching program is out of this world.”

“Yeah, not surprising, given aliens created it,” Halle replied, unable to stop the slight sarcasm from escaping. “So I have a match?”

“Yes!” Emma practically squealed with excitement. “And good news, he’s on Devan Station. He wants to meet you... immediately!”



KAAS MADE his way through the base from the Imperial sector to the civilian one. Given the code of the message he'd received, he was expecting the family of his former unit's tactical officer. He hadn't known M'aatar well yet had respected the warrior immensely.

Oddly, though, Kaas didn't recall M'aatar mentioning a family. Unlike some of the others, M'aatar had always been a private sort, keeping his own counsel. But during their rare R&R periods, the male emerged from his self-imposed shell.

Kaas still remembered the sound of M'aatar's deep baritone filling the night air as he sang Latharian folksongs around the campfire. Those moments painted M'aatar in a different light, shifting from a warrior to a bard, his voice resonating with the wisdom and depth of their ancestral tunes. The memory brought a ghost of a smile to Kaas's stern face, the corners of his lips twitching upward in a rare display of humor.

As he approached the airdock, uncertainty knotted in his gut. He'd been on the brink of abandoning hope of locating M'aatar's family when a blip from one of his hunter-seeker programs had piqued his interest. It was a hit for M'aatar's genetic code, and given that M'aatar's parents and brothers were long dead, any living record could only mean a child.

He spun around, finding himself in the heart of the bustling airdock. Two interstellar flights had just touched down, filling the space with the commotion of nearly a thousand passengers. The sea of people, all rushing to retrieve their luggage or catch their next flights, caused a chaos that would make even the most experienced warrior's head spin. Still, he held his ground, scanning the crowd for a face he'd never seen, a child he'd never met, connected to him by the memory of a man long gone.

He sighed as a short, stout *kalaxian* surrounded by at least a dozen yapping *binzis* circling like fuzzy, annoying satellites, walked right in front of him and cut him off.

"Thanks, not like I'm walking here!" he said, but the *kalaxian* was already gone, swallowed by the crowds.

Then he looked up and froze. Right in front of him was a smaller, younger version of M'aatar. Kaas's eyes widened. Now, he could understand why the family had arrived in the civilian sector of the station. The lad's green hair and frills down the side of his neck behind his ears explained

without him uttering a word.

He was half *Llaroxi*. And that made total sense. Their unit had been stationed on Llarox before heading out for their final, fatal mission.

“Warrior V’aant?” The green-haired youth stepped forward and offered his hand. “I’m Hunter Kravin. Your message said you had information on my father?”

Kaas took his hand, carefully avoiding the poison spines along his wrist and forearm as he tried to figure out how old the kid was. He had to be at least fourteen or fifteen, which would fit...

“Oh, he will have information!” a shrill voice announced.

Kaas froze as a woman he knew emerged from the crowd behind Hunter. *Trall*, he should’ve recognized Hunter’s orange eyes.

“Elarina.” He nodded by way of acknowledgment. Elarina had been one of their guides on Llarox, but he hadn’t realized she and M’aatar had gotten close.

“How are you?”

“Your message is sixteen years too late.” She snarled, getting up in his face but stopping just short of shoving him in the chest.

Anger hardened her orange eyes.

“Where were you when I was left alone with a newborn?” she demanded. “Alone and abandoned by the father of my child?”

“M’aatar didn’t abandon you,” he argued, unsure what to do with a nearly hysterical female.

The crowds around them had started to slow down, people pausing to look at them curiously. Tension rolled down his spine, setting his shoulders in a hard line.

“M’aatar was killed on a mission shortly after we left Llarox.”

“Then why am I only just finding out about this now?” Elarina wailed. “I lost the love of my life. I was cast off and alone!”

“But, Mom, Nanna and Gramps looked after us. We weren’t alone,” Hunter tried to interrupt his mother, shifting his weight from foot to foot as he looked around, seemingly as embarrassed by her outburst as Kaas was.

Reaching forward, he tried to pull her away, but she latched on to Kaas, her hands clutching his uniform jacket. He’d never liked Elarina. Now he liked her even less. And he definitely didn’t like her in his personal space.

“We were alone. Unprotected!” she hissed into his face. “The least the empire could have done was provide for us! When Hunter was a baby, not

now!”

Kaas paused, trying to prize her hands from their death grip on his jacket, and looked down at her. The *Llaroxi* were tall, but he was one of the largest Lathar he’d ever met, so she was tiny in comparison.

Her words struck him. Was she under the impression that he had contacted them about some form of financial reparation?

“The empire did not know about your predicament,” he informed her, retreating behind his professional persona—the interrogator who made even hardened warriors blanch and run for cover.

She backed up, wrapping an arm possessively around Hunter’s shoulders. The kid still looked embarrassed but didn’t try and shake her off. If anything, his confidence when he’d greeted Kaas had disappeared. Now he just looked defeated and resigned.

“What about now?” she demanded, her eyes sparkling greedily. “What compensation is the empire offering me for all that I have had to suffer?”

Hunter flinched at her words.

Kaas’s face set as sympathy for the kid rolled through him. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled free a small box.

“I’ve spent the last fifteen years tracking down the families of my slain comrades,” he explained, offering the box to Hunter.

Inside was a medal of valor and the corresponding honor bead to be worn by M’aatar’s descendants in perpetuity.

“I apologize to you, Hunter, son of M’aatar, that it has taken me so long to find you.”

Elarina snatched the box before Hunter could take it. Her expression tightened with fury as she opened it and saw the contents.

“Is this it?” she screeched, her hands transforming into the claws her kind were famous for and scratching the side of the box. “After everything I’ve been through, this is all the empire sees fit to offer? Is this all I’m worth to them?”

His expression hardened as she threw the box at Hunter. The kid barely caught it, saving it from clattering to the floor.

“The empire is offering *you* nothing, Elarina,” he said in a hard voice.

He’d spent a lot of time among the *Llaroxi*, so he recognized the heavy bangles and necklaces she wore as those of the principal wife of a tribal leader. Her life would not be hard. She would have many subsidiary wives to boss about and servants to do her bidding.

“The honor is awarded to M’aatar’s son, and M’aatar’s son only—”

His words came jarring to a halt. With every other interaction he’d had like this, the families had been pure-blooded Lathar. The fathers, brothers, or sons were significantly older than Hunter and well into their journeys as warriors. Well, apart from the one that had gone mercenary...

They had all taken the medal and the bead and thanked him for taking the time on his mission. He had walked away with his head held high and not given them a second thought.

But he couldn’t do that with Hunter. Not with a mother like Elarina. No doubt he’d heard the constant refrain that he’d ruined his mother’s life... that she’d suffered because of him. He couldn’t do it, nor could he send Hunter to an Imperial Training Hall where his mixed blood would never be accepted.

Kaas made a decision there and then. Catching Hunter’s eye, he said, “When you’re ready, make your way to the Human-Latharian Academy. Tell them that I am sponsoring your application.”

Hunter’s eyes widened, and his mother huffed.

“A fat lot of good a sponsorship will do him,” she sniffed. “Can he eat a sponsorship? And I cannot afford to send him there or outfit him for training.”

“Yes!” Kaas snapped. “As his sponsor, I will support him through the academy sponsorship program. All his accommodation, food, and equipment will be supplied.”

He had no idea if the HLA had a sponsorship program, but they did now, even if it was only a program of one.

“You can do that?” Hunter asked, virtually vibrating with excitement.

Kaas smiled.

“Yes. I’m an instructor with the academy, and my—” *Draanth*, how did he explain his relationship with Lynara? “The commandant is my kin.”

“Thank you!” Hunter surged forward, and Kaas was enveloped in a bear hug before he knew it—a surprisingly strong bear hug, given Hunter’s size.

“You’re very welcome,” he said, returning the embrace and clapping Hunter’s shoulder before letting him go.

Before he could say anything else, his wrist unit chirped with an incoming message. He glanced down and read the words on the screen.

Presence required LMP office. Deck fourteen, human sector, Devan Station.

He walk back to the LMP offices was longer than Kaas remembered, but that wasn't a problem. It gave him time to think. Excitement and anticipation had made his heart leap when he'd first read the message, his immediate thought being that they had found him a mate.

The more he walked, his boots barely making a sound on the metal of the deck plating, and thought about it, the more he realized that probably wasn't the case. They would have said they had found him a mate in the message, surely? But then again, they may not have. They would want to avoid an overeager warrior storming through their office doors in excitement.

He frowned as he reached the human sector, his visage making several human females scatter in alarm. He paused for a second. Was one of these females his match?

Actually, no. If they were outside this deck's restricted section, they couldn't be. The program was still so new that the unmatched females were protected for safety. These must already have been claimed.

"My apologies, ladies," he murmured, adding a slight bow. He didn't look at them directly, just in case. He might be among the most highly decorated warriors in the empire, but even he didn't want to mess with an enraged male who thought Kaas was competing for his female.

He continued down the corridor. The LMP offices were just round the next corner, so he ignored the nerves that tried to hook their claws into him. Did he have what it took to look after a female? From what he'd seen of his friend Rohn, being mated had utterly changed his life, and he seemed happy about it.

But Kaas was a creature of habit. He liked his life and his surroundings, his personal space, the way it was. No matter where he traveled or what ship he was on, he lived out of his pack and always set his sleeping space out the same way. How would he cope with a female in that same space? Rearranging things and, he shuddered, bringing in things like throw pillows?

It was good that they had called him back to the LMP. He could tell them to put his file on hold until he'd sorted out how a female would fit into his life. When he'd initially applied, he had been hyped up on the excitement of Rohn's bonding ceremony, but in the cold light of day...

The receptionist looked up and smiled at him as he walked through the double doors. And that smile didn't falter when the system announced who he was in her earpiece, as it undoubtedly had. That was another change he was having to get used to.

"Interrogator V'aant!" she exclaimed. "So good of you to arrive promptly!"

"Not a problem." He stopped in front of the reception desk.

Even though psychologically he was in the more dominant position, looking down at her, the female didn't seem intimidated. "Can you tell me what this is about?"

...did you find me a mate yet?

Her pleasant expression didn't alter. "I'm afraid there has been an issue with some of the program data cells. We're going to need you to submit a new DNA sample," she explained. "Can I ask you to sit in the waiting room, please? A technician will call for you when it's your turn."

He blinked in surprise. That hadn't been what he'd expected at all. As far as he knew, the mate-matching program had been set up by the *B'Kaar* clan. Did that mean that some of their data was corrupt? If it was... it would be a huge problem since most of the empire's technology ran on *B'Kaar* data.

As though sensing his confusion, the human female smiled again and leaned in conspiratorially.

"Seriously, it's nothing to worry about. As far as I know, they're just making sure your records are all correct. We wouldn't want you guys to get matched to the wrong women. Now would we? What a disaster that would be!"

The thought hadn't even occurred to him, but he doubted any of the myriad warriors desperate for a mate would care if the female they were presented with wasn't a perfect DNA match.

“No. Of course not,” he replied, inclining his head and moving toward the door she’d indicated.

Beyond it was not the empty waiting room he’d expected. Instead, most of the comfortable chairs, plush and in keeping with the luxurious decor of the LMP offices, were filled with Latharian warriors, none of whom looked comfortable.

He took the empty chair next to the only person in the room he knew, the empire’s Starfighter Commander Duke Traxx K’Saan.

“It surprises me to see you here, your grace,” he commented, his voice low as he looked around the room. It was large enough, but so many warriors would make anything but one of the great halls aboard seem small.

“Emperor’s orders,” Traxx grunted. “Keep telling him it’s a *draanthing* waste of time, but he won’t listen.”

Kaas nodded but didn’t offer a further comment. Like Rohn, Traxx was one of the emperor’s cousins, so it was one thing for him to criticize Daaynal but quite another for Kaas to do the same.

Instead, he looked around the room. Even though the males assembled were doing their best not to show it, he could tell they were all nervous.

Then his gaze fell on a warrior near the other door to the room, opposite to the one he’d entered through. Leaning toward Traxx, he murmured, “Is that who I think it is?”

Traxx didn’t look that way; he just nodded. “Yeah. It is.”

Kaas leaned back in his chair and fell silent, watching the older warrior near the other door out of the corner of his eye. He was nearly as tall as Kaas and broad in the shoulders. His leathers were well-made and cared for but showed the signs of repairs from many years of use. His hair, silver with age, was pulled back into a low ponytail and, as far as Kaas could see, was all braided. The thin strands were intricately woven, with multiple beads at the end of each one.

But his face drew the most attention. His features were classically K’Saan. But not the harder, almost feline version of the current emperor. His were the more aristocratic version seen in portraits of K’Saan emperors from a few generations back.

He was Kaarigan K’Saan, the last warmaster of the empire and Daaynal’s grandfather’s cousin. Kaas hadn’t realized he was still alive, even though the stories said he was practically unkillable. So perhaps even death herself had given up...

Kaas found himself a little starstruck. He was one of a small number of warriors in the empire fortunate enough to have been trained by an actual warmaster, but not Kaarigan himself. No, he'd been trained by S'adeen, one of Kaarigan's few students to have attained the rank of warmaster. Once, Kaas had dreamed of following suit and becoming a warmaster, but then the fates had had their hand in things, and his life had turned in a different direction.

He was still lost in his thoughts when Traxx leaned toward him, speaking in an undertone. "If I have my clans correct, the new academy commandant is kin to you?"

Kaas turned his head slightly. What did the duke starfighter want with Lynara? He nodded. "That's correct, yes."

"Is it true that she is full-blooded Lathar? I saw her at her promotion ceremony, and she looked human."

Every warrior in the room had gone still, obviously listening in on their conversation even as they seemed to find the walls and ceiling of the room the most fascinating things in existence.

Kaas nodded again. "She is full-blooded, yes. Her physical appearance to resemble humanity is down to genetic modification." He'd seen evidence of that when he'd healed her. The crude technology from the past had left an awful lot of damage.

Traxx leaned back with a nod, but now curiosity rolled through Kaas.

"Why do you ask?"

The duke cut him a sideways glance, obviously surprised to be questioned. Kaas didn't care. He was the emperor's interrogator, so he could ask questions of anyone, anywhere, whenever he chose.

"She sent me a message," Traxx replied, folding his arms across a broad chest. The leather of his jacket creaked over his shoulders. "She wants to set up a meeting to talk. Since she is newly mated, either he is not performing his duties adequately, and she is looking for a second mate, or she wishes to discuss the new academy. I merely wished to discover which it was."

Kaas fought back amusement. The door opposite opened, and a younger warrior wearing a technician's sash looked in.

"Warrior V'aant," he called out, standing waiting in the doorway.

Kaas rose to his feet and paused to look down at Traxx.

"I can assure you, my kinswoman is happily mated. So I would surmise, given that you hold the rank of lord starfighter, she wishes to talk to you

about the new academy.”

With that, he headed across the room and followed the technician through the door.



BEYOND THE FROSTED glass door lay another corridor, but the decor here was more practical and familiar to him.

“The female at reception said that some data cells had been corrupted,” he commented to the technician as they entered one of the treatment rooms.

It was familiar, laid out like every other treatment room and bay he’d ever been in. He breathed a subconscious sigh of relief. The design had more to do with having a universal layout so that any healer or medic could find what they needed immediately, even on an unfamiliar ship or installation, than with patient comfort. Still, it was soothing to him all the same. Even now, many years later, he could tell you where everything was.

“We’ve had a few issues with some data blocks,” the technician admitted as he prepped equipment to take a sample. He had a badge pinned to his jacket that had terran words on it and underneath latharian text that said, “Hi! I’m S’aad!” with a cartoon smiley face. Kaas raised an eyebrow slightly.

S’aad caught the direction of his gaze. “It helps if the females know our names. It makes us seem more approachable.”

“It does?” He filed that knowledge away for future use. “So you’re having to retake samples?”

He took off his jacket and folded it on the end of the bed. S’aad’s gaze flicked to the many old and faded scars covering Kaas’s skin, but he didn’t say anything as he took the sample. There was a small, barely noticeable pinch on the inside of his arm by the elbow.

“Each sample has to be retaken and reprocessed.” S’aad turned to load the sample for analysis.

“It’s more of a cross-check, really.” He relaxed the professional manner to add, perhaps because he recognized Kaas as a former healer. “We need to ensure the main dataset isn’t affected.”

He stopped speaking suddenly, his attention on the console screen before him.

“Is there a problem?” Kaas asked when the silence stretched out, pulling

his jacket on again.

S'aad frowned.

"I'm not sure. I uploaded your sample and got an immediate hit for a match."

Kaas's heart stalled in his chest, a strange feeling he couldn't identify washing through him.

"Is that normal?" he asked as he moved to look over S'aad's shoulder. But whatever program the younger technician was using didn't make any sense to him. "Could it be a false positive?"

S'aad shook his head, already typing queries with swift, practiced movements. "Unlikely. Not with the quirks in your genetic code and the generational engineering applied to your bloodline. I wouldn't have expected a match until we had many more female candidates in the system."

Kaas's eyebrow winged up. "Is that so?"

His tone must have registered with the technician because he glanced over his shoulder. Then his expression tightened, a split second of panic flaring in his eyes as he remembered who he was speaking to. To his credit, he didn't flap, back down, or even worse, try to apologize.

"Yes." He looked back at the screen again, a crease between his pale brows. "But I double-checked, and this does seem to be a legitimate match. I will need to hand you over to one of our case managers."



KAAS FOLLOWED S'aad down the white hallway, the soft tread of the younger warrior's combat boots against the polished floor the only sound breaking the silence. Unfamiliar apprehension knotted his gut as he wondered what awaited him in the next room.

The last had been all cold metal and sterile efficiency, like every other medical bay in the empire. He didn't like that his DNA had been stripped down to the bare bones and analyzed, exposing every flaw and inadequacy. But that was the price for a chance at a mate.

S'aad paused before another door, delicate silver filigree patterns tracing across its smooth surface. It slid open with a soft hiss, and S'aad gestured for Kaas to enter.

"Katrina will be here shortly," he said before turning and heading back to

the waiting room door.

“*Duke K’Saan, please,*” Kaas heard the technician call out as he stepped into the room, and the door swished shut behind him.

He stood just inside the doorway, all his muscles tense, and looked around. Instead of the sterile white and flashing lights of the medical bay, this room was inviting and warm.

Rich wood panels lined the walls, the dark color broken by brightly woven tapestries depicting Latharian history hanging between columns carved with legendary figures. The plush chairs were upholstered in deep red velvet, one behind the desk in the center of the room and two in front. A couch was set to one side of the room with a low table bearing crystal decanters and glasses beside it.

Kaas sat on one of the chairs in front of the desk, his back rigid as he waited.

The door whispered open again, and he rose, turning as a human female walked in. Silver threaded her hair, and the corners of her eyes were lined, but she moved with a grace that belied her years. Her smile was warm and welcoming as she approached him.

“Hello, Kaas, I’m Katrina. I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.” Her voice was melodic, instantly setting him more at ease, even though he more than knew the power of voice and tone. “Please have a seat.”

“Not a problem,” he replied, keeping to the language constructs he’d read about in the primers on interacting with humans, which were required reading for any warrior who might encounter them. “I’ve not been here long.”

Sinking back into the plush chair, he watched as she settled behind the desk and activated a slim data screen. “I’ll be your case manager as well as a support for whichever female matches you. But first, let’s verify your details.”

Kaas nodded.

“You are Kaas Serys V’aant,” Katrina read from the screen and then paused, looking up at him with surprise. “And your current occupation is... Is this correct? You’re an interrogator?”

Kaas suppressed the slight tension that wanted to flare across his shoulder, tightening them. He was going to have to get used to that. In the empire, his name was known and feared. For humans... they had no idea. His name meant nothing to them. It wasn’t synonymous with the bogeyman and their worst nightmares.

“Yes,” he confirmed, “I have the honor of being the emperor’s chief interrogator.”

Katrina’s lips pursed slightly, her eyes narrowing.

“But I have accepted a position at the academy,” he added quickly, unsure why he was trying to ease her fears. Any female should be glad to match with him. “Teaching. Not interrogations.”

Wariness faded from Katrina’s expression, and she smiled.

“That will be less intimidating for a match candidate.”

Kaas smiled. “Before interrogations, I was a healer. At the academy, I will be teaching medical classes.”

The human’s expression brightened further.

“Excellent! The academy is lucky to have you.” She tapped the screen. “Now, let’s just confirm your match...”

“The technician seemed surprised to get a match so quickly,” Kaas remarked, recalling S’aad’s reaction in the medical bay. “Could it be a false positive? My DNA has been in their system for a while now.”

Katrina shook her head, the silver threading through her hair glinting in the overhead lights. “No, it’s not a false positive. S’aad is very thorough. He would have verified the match multiple times with a strict set of varying criteria before bringing you here.”

Kaas’s brows rose in surprise. The tech may not have been lazing around on the console after all. Efficiency like that was admirable and made him wonder why S’aad was stuck in such a low-level position. He looked young, but the honor beads in his hair said he was an experienced warrior.

“In fact,” Katrina continued, “you got an instant match this time because your match’s information was only just entered into the system.”

She frowned slightly, her gaze skimming over the text on her screen. He couldn’t read it; the Terran symbols meant nothing to him and looked odd. And while the language seemed simple enough, he had no reason to learn it. His mate would be fitted with a translation implant as soon as she arrived, meaning she would understand him perfectly.

Katrina looked back up, a hint of excitement animating her face now. “It seems she’s still in the intake office finishing her application. This was very fast. She only submitted her profile today. Minutes ago.”

Kaas straightened, his pulse kicking up a notch. “She is? Can I see her file? Or at least an image?”

Just like that, the abstract concept of a mate became real. A nameless,

faceless match was one thing, but now an actual female was involved, a flesh and blood female rather than a dream. And her details were mere taps of Katrina's fingers away.

The Terran gave him an assessing look. "I can provide limited information at this point. You need to remember that any match at this stage is tentative. She may well reject your claim, regardless of genetic compatibility."

Kaas blinked, caught off guard. "Why would she do that? We've been matched. Any children would be viable."

And that was the crux of it. He'd seen his brother's suffering as child after child failed to thrive due to the plague and then watched it destroy both Ranovar and his mate. His mate due to the foul disease, and Ranovar to his own hand when he couldn't go on.

If this female could give him healthy offspring, why would she possibly object?

Katrina chuckled, a note of sympathy entering her eyes as she regarded him. "There's more to it for human women than just genetics and the decision of some computer program. It's... complicated. Anyway, this is your matched candidate..."

She turned the screen to face him.

Kaas sucked in a sharp breath, his pulse stuttering as the woman's image hit him like a physical blow. She was stunning, utterly beautiful with wavy dark hair spilling over slender shoulders. But her eyes captivated him, a piercing sapphire blue even in the small photo. They gazed out at him in challenge, hinting at the strength of spirit beneath that exquisite exterior.

Possessiveness roared through him, fierce and primal. Just one look, and he was done for. She was meant to be his; he knew it with bone-deep certainty. He would claim her, protect her, and provide for her and any children she gave him.

She was his. *His*.

He speared Katrina with a look. "When can I meet her?"

But Katrina's enthusiasm had faded, her eyes rushing across the screen again.

"There may be an issue..." Her brows drew together. "Your match has requested a substantial financial settlement before leaving Earth. That's...unusual. The LMP typically covers all costs of transportation and relocation."

Kaas's lip curled, a growl rumbling from deep within his chest. The demand left a bitter taste in his mouth, conjuring echoes of Elarina, Hunter's mother. He had no tolerance for females who prized wealth over honor.

His mother had been cut from the same cloth, abandoning his father for a male with deeper coffers, caring nothing for her mate or the sons she left behind.

He refused to have history repeat itself. This female was meant to be his *mate*, not use him to line her pockets.

Oblivious to his darkening mood, Katrina continued, "I'm not happy about this. I've never seen a payment request like this before. But... your genetic profile is quite unique. From the notes on here, it looks like you're unlikely to get another match."

She looked up, her concern obvious. "But if her monetary requirements are too high..."

"No." Kaas's voice was like tellaron-granite. "This is my match. I will pay whatever she asks."

Katrina blinked, plainly surprised by his easy capitulation. "I see. Well, we can have her brought to the station immediately then."

"Good." Impatience simmered in Kaas's veins. He had waited long enough for a mate. And if he was paying for the privilege, he would wait no longer. "I want her here now. Today."

His eyes blazed with primal need. This female belonged to him. He would have her by his side before the sun set on the planet below.

Katrina nodded. "I'll contact the signing office immediately," she said. "And get her up here on the evening transport."

"Thank you."

Kaas settled back, satisfaction simmering in his veins. Soon, very soon, his mate would be here. And nothing would ever take her from him again. Not even her own greed.

“*W*hat? He wants me to go to the station now?”

Halle stared at Emma in disbelief, her stomach plummeting as she wondered if she should get her hearing checked. It had been years, given the cost of doctors these days and the fact that every spare credit they had went on Ollie’s treatment. But perhaps she should because there was no way Emma had just said what she thought she had.

Emma gave her a placating smile. “Yes, your match is eager to have you on station as soon as possible.”

Halle blinked, stunned. She’d assumed she would have a few days to get her affairs in order before being shipped off planet to an alien mate. The whiplash of this new timeline left her reeling.

With a chirp from Emma’s console, her smile widened even further. “And there we go! The funds from his settlement should already be cleared to your account. Would you like to check and ensure it’s reached you?” she prompted.

“Uh... yeah, hold on.”

She dug into her purse and pulled her comms device free to check her balance. She kept her grimace to herself as she read the figure on screen. It was the most money she’d ever seen. It was blood money, paid so this alien could claim her as his broodmare. The reality of what she had agreed to stole her breath for a moment, a cage around her lungs stopping her from getting a full breath.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, she tried to stall. “It’s past six already. There’s no way I could make it to the spaceport for the last flight out

tonight.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t be traveling from the commercial spaceport,” Emma assured her. “Your transport will be via Latharian shuttle, which is amazing. It’s much faster, and you’ll get your first taste of Latharian technology!”

Halle’s stomach dropped. No spaceport meant no public crowds. No last-minute chance to back out or call for help if things went sideways. She would be utterly at their mercy.

“I know this is sudden,” Emma said gently, reading her hesitation. “But your match is insistent on having you brought to him swiftly. And as part of your contract, and receipt of the advance payment, you agreed to go when called.”

She swallowed hard. She had agreed, spurred by desperation and the promise of a small fortune to pay for Ollie’s treatment. But now cold, hard reality stared her in the face.

“At least let me go home and get my things,” she tried, grasping at straws. “I’ll need clothes, my passport...”

Emma laughed airily, the sound grating on Halle’s fraying nerves. “Oh! No need to worry about passports, dear! And if you sign this form, our staff can pack up all your belongings and close out your rental agreement.”

She eyed Halle quickly. “You do rent, yes? You don’t have property to sell?”

Halle let out a harsh bark of laughter. “Lady, do I look like I own property? If I had so much as a garden shed, you think I’d be selling myself to some alien, sight unseen?”

Emma’s smile slipped a bit, but then, like the facial expression version of a boomerang, it was right back and plastered firmly into place. “Well, no property certainly makes things easier! It’s one less barrier to getting you on the station to start your new life. I need you to sign this so we can close down your accommodation.”

She slid a tablet across the desk toward Halle, a permission form glowing on the screen. Halle shoved it back in a panic.

“I can’t sign that! I have a sister; we share an apartment—”

And the amount she was about to pay into Sadie’s account would keep her going for months and cover Ollie’s treatment. Once Ollie was cured, Sadie would have nothing to worry about.

“Perfect!” Emma enthused. “Then we can coordinate with your sister to handle your belongings. May I have her name?”

“Sadie. Sadie Keare.”

Emma made a note and then said brightly, “And we have your permission to contact her about wrapping up your lease and sending your things up to the station?”

“No!” Halle said forcefully.

Emma blinked in confusion.

“I just said I live with my sister. You can’t just terminate our lease,” she said quickly. “We—they’d never find another place. Housing costs are insane right now; we can barely afford what we have. In case you haven’t noticed, Evergreen is overcrowded as it is! There are waiting lists miles long!”

Emma recovered her smile. “My apologies, I misspoke. The program handles all relocation costs, so we’ll treat this as though you *would* need to terminate and then pay out the remainder of your lease and any termination fee as part of your relocation costs. We’ll pay that in a lump sum to Sadie.”

Halle slumped with relief. At least Sadie wouldn’t get kicked out of their apartment. Her stomach tightened, and she felt sick. She was being hauled off planet in less than an hour. She needed to talk to Sadie first.

“How long until the transport arrives?” she asked tightly.

Emma checked her screen. “About twenty minutes.”

Halle grabbed her bag and stood abruptly. “Then I’m going to call my sister. I’ll be back shortly.”

Without waiting for a response, she fled the office, her heels clicking on the polished floor. Stepping out into the humid evening air, she pulled out her phone. Her hands shook, but she ignored it.

Sadie picked up on the first ring. “Halle? I was getting worried when you didn’t come home. Is everything okay?”

Halle squeezed her eyes shut. Nothing about this was okay, not in the slightest.

“Sadie...” Her voice wobbled, and she took a deep breath and tried again. This time, it held. She sounded almost like her usual self. “I did something, something drastic. I’m so sorry—”

“Halle, what’s going on?” Sadie demanded. “You’re scaring me.”

The words tumbled out over each other before she could lose her nerve. “I registered with that alien mate thing. I’m being sent to their space station tonight to... to meet my match.”

Stunned silence met her confession, the line empty of sound for a moment, and then Sadie exploded. “You did *what*? Have you lost your

freaking mind?”

“I’m doing this for us!” Halle said quickly, trying to head off her sister’s raging. “For you and Ollie. The registration bonus alone was a small fortune. It’s in my account. I’ll send it over as soon as I’m off the call.”

“I don’t want your money if it means you’re selling yourself to aliens!” Sadie shouted down the line.

Halle held her comms unit away from her ear to avoid being deafened.

“This is insane. Give them the money back. Tell them you changed your mind!”

“I can’t.” Halle leaned back against the wall and ran a hand through her hair. “It’s a lot, Sadie. Enough to cover Ollie’s treatment and then some.”

Sadie swore violently.

“When will you be back?” her sister finally asked, her voice the smallest Halle had ever heard.

Her throat tightened. That was what she hadn’t wanted to think about.

“I don’t know if I will be,” she finally managed, her voice little more than a whisper. “The contract is permanent. But if I can convince my match to bring me for visits...”

She trailed off at the heartbroken little sob from Sadie. Tears burned her eyes. “I have to go,” she rasped. “The transport will be here any minute.”

“Halle, no,” Sadie begged. “We’ll find another way, *please!*”

“I’ll call you when I can. I love you and Ollie,” Halle choked out and ended the call, tears spilling down her cheeks.

Drawing a shuddering breath, she swiped the wetness from her face and straightened her spine. Time to face her fate. She strode back inside, her shoulders squared and head high.

Emma glanced up with a smile. “Excellent timing. Your transport just arrived.” She gestured to a tall man waiting silently by the door.

With a gasp, Halle realized he was an alien. Taller than a human, *check*. Broader than a human, *check, check, check...* His golden gaze fixed unnervingly on Halle, and he nodded.

Handing the permission form to Emma with a shaking hand, Halle said, “Okay, I’m ready.”

Emma beamed. “Wonderful! Safe travels and enjoy your new life among the stars!”

Halle just nodded mutely, not trusting her voice. Then she turned to follow her escort, each step taking her farther from everything she had ever

known.



HALLE FOUND herself on the alien space station so quickly that her head spun. It felt like no sooner had she left the LMP signing office in Evergreen than she was stepping off the alien transport shuttle.

She cast a look back over her shoulder. Its duo of hulking, seven-foot-tall pilots hadn't followed the group of human women they'd transported up to the station off the transport. Instead, they looked busy with whatever procedures an alien flight crew needed to handle after a flight.

She turned and took in her surroundings. They'd landed in a small hall, its white walls seeming miles away. She looked up. The ceiling was at least a couple of stories above, and the walls sloped in toward the top.

"Hey! Hurry up!" a voice hissed, and she looked around to see that a door had opened in one of the walls, the human women filing through it. The girl who had sat next to her on the flight motioned for her to hurry up.

"Shit," she hissed and ran to catch up.

"Thank you," she whispered to the younger woman as she joined her at the back of the group.

It was the last thing she said for a while. Her eyes widened, darting around the cavernous corridors they were led down. Everything was bigger here, built to accommodate the aliens' massive frames.

"Ladies, please keep up!" their LMP representative called out. What was her name again? Mila? Tila? Halle frowned. She couldn't remember, even though she knew the rep had introduced herself before giving the safety briefing for the short flight up to the station.

The women with her were a mixed bunch. Some were young and dewy-faced, while others had the first hints of silver streaking their hair. All wore apprehensive expressions to match the twisting in Halle's gut, and she wondered what had prompted each woman to choose to sell herself to an alien.

"Just a little longer, and we can get you all settled into your new quarters!" The rep's voice rang out with a polished cheer that Halle tuned out in favor of studying her surroundings.

Despite the alien design, everything seemed familiar, if a little imposing

in scale. She looked up at the high ceilings again. The transport pilots would have cracked their heads at average human height. A hysterical giggle threatened to burst out as she pictured the hulking warriors ducking through doorways all the time. She bit her lip, stifling it.

They continued, and she peered through the large windows set at intervals along the corridor. The panels were huge, flush with the metallic walls to give glimpses of the rooms beyond.

One appeared to be a gym with rows of machines and weights. The next window revealed a salon, alien stylists working on clients who sat in a row of chairs. Her lips twitched. Who knew aliens worried about split ends?

The following window framed an underwater scene. It was an aquarium, and a school of alien fish in rainbow colors fluttered by. She pressed closer, fascinated by the glimpses of this new world. The fish were so pretty.

Up ahead, the rep swept through a towering set of double doors emblazoned with the LMP logo. She hurried to catch up again, not wanting to get left behind on her own.

The interior of the expansive lobby resembled the grand reception hall of an opulent hotel, the kind her mom had cleaned before everything fell apart. Halle's mind was too preoccupied to appreciate the lavish decor, though.

The women milled about in the middle of the space, oohing and ahing over their surroundings. Her heart pounded as her gaze swept around the room before landing on the imposing reception desk, where four matronly attendants stood with serene smiles. Their calm demeanor only racked her anxiety higher. This whole place was meant to be calming... If they'd had to go to such lengths, how bad were these guys they were being given to?

Their rep—Tammi, she remembered it now—called out over the nervous chatter, “Please form an orderly line, ladies, and we’ll get you checked in as soon as possible.”

Tammi's eyes searched the crowd until they landed on Halle, and then she smiled. Her satisfied grin made Halle's stomach clench again. She looked like a cat who had cornered a mouse as she headed over, her blonde curls bouncing with each step. “Halle! There you are.”

Halle tried to return her smile, but her face felt wooden.

“Don't worry about all this,” she said as she drew Halle to the side. “You won't need to check in.”

Relief washed over Halle, making her knees almost buckle. Perhaps her match had changed his mind and was sending her back?

“The advanced payment is nonrefundable,” she blurted out. “If he’s changed his mind, that’s not my issue. I did my part and came up here—”

“No, no,” Tammi interrupted. “It’s nothing like that, I assure you. We’ve never had a warrior back out of a match.”

Halle snorted derisively. She’d just bet they hadn’t. From what she’d heard, this was these guys’ only chance of sticking their dick in a woman who looked anything like them.

“Your match is waiting eagerly to meet you,” Tammi continued smoothly. “Would you like to follow me?”

She wouldn’t like to, but she didn’t have a choice. She’d accepted the money, so this guy, whoever he was, had bought her lock, stock, and barrel.

Nodding weakly, she trailed behind Tammi through some double doors into a smaller room lined with circular windows. Through transparent partitions, Halle glimpsed couples seated together in intimate conversation, and her throat tightened.

“Newly introduced matches,” Tammi said as they walked. “Things seem to be going splendidly so far.”

Halle wondered if Tammi could hear her thundering pulse as they stopped before one of the closed doors. With a flourish, Tammi opened it, announcing, “Your matched mate, Interrogator Kaas V’aant.”

Halle’s breath halted as the room’s hulking occupant turned from gazing out the window. Their eyes locked, and she stifled a gasp.

Scars covered his chest and extended up the side of his throat... Old wounds or some strange natural texture, she couldn’t tell. She gasped, staring wordlessly...

Then everything went black.

*K*aas's heart clenched at the look of utter horror on his mate's face when she saw him. Then her eyelids fluttered before her eyes rolled into the back of her head. Her knees buckled, sending her slender body crumpling toward the hard floor.

With lightning reflexes honed from years of battle, he lunged forward, crossing the space between them in three steps. He was just in time to catch her, scooping her into his arms before she could hit the hard floor.

He held her close, looking down at her. Her head rolled against his muscular chest. She felt so small and fragile cradled against him, her tiny form fitting perfectly against his larger body. New protective instincts surged within him, and he had to resist the urge to clutch her tighter.

"Oh no! Is she alright?" the older female in the LMP uniform gasped, her hands flying to cover her mouth in dismay. "I did think she looked a little peaky on the flight up here."

Kaas tore his gaze away from his mate's delicate features to spear the LMP officer with a piercing look. He vaguely remembered her from when he'd signed up for the program.

"Peaky?" he bit out sharply. "What is peaky?"

His mind raced with possibilities as he analyzed every inch of Halle's appearance for any signs of illness, concern furrowing his brow. Was it some human disease? Was his new mate already unwell? Just the thought made his gut twist.

"I-it means she looked a little pale and tired," the older human female stammered under the heat of his glare.

Kaas grunted, unsatisfied with the vague explanation. It was this human politeness he'd heard so much about. They never said what they meant. No doubt this female was trying to alleviate his discomfort that his mate found him so scary she'd fainted.

But he had no time to waste questioning her further. He needed to get his mate to the medical bay immediately. He suspected she'd found his scars distasteful, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Clutching her tightly to his chest, he turned on his heel and strode purposefully out of the room and across to the exit.

"Sir! Interrogator V'aant, wait!" the older female called out behind him, scrambling to catch up. "You can't remove a candidate from LMP headquarters!"

He ignored her as he crossed the reception hall. All that mattered was ensuring his mate received care as quickly as possible. Suddenly, a broad-shouldered warrior stepped into the doorway, blocking it.

"You cannot pass with the female," he rumbled.

A snarl erupted from Kaas's throat, his lips peeling back from his teeth in a clear threat.

"If you value your life, you will not attempt to stop me," he growled, his muscles coiled tightly as he drew himself up to his full height. "My mate is unwell and requires immediate medical care."

The security officer's gaze flicked down to take in the limp form of the female in Kaas's arms and then back up to meet his blazing glare. Recognition flashed in the other warrior's eyes, and he nodded slightly before stepping aside.

"A sensible choice, my friend," Kaas bit out with a grunt of approval as he strode past unimpeded. *And one that means you get to keep breathing today.*

He kept going, heading toward the main medbay on board. Walking briskly through the sterile white corridors, he stole glances at the unconscious female in his arms. She seemed impossibly delicate with curves that made his mouth water and his hands itch to explore every inch of her soft skin.

He hardened his expression, clenching his jaw. But this was not some willing female who had sought him out, hoping for a mate bond. She was merely after profit and nothing more.

He walked into the medbay, the automatic doors swishing open to reveal a long room lined with curtained bays on either side.

“What seems to be the problem?” A tall warrior with healer’s scars blocked his path. The insignia on his jacket collar identified him as the lead healer aboard.

Kaas didn’t care. He swept past him to place his little mate on the diagnostic bed in the middle of the nearest empty bay. It was set up in the familiar configuration, so control consoles sat on either side, and it was separated from the neighboring bays by heavy curtains that could be drawn for privacy. Everything was sterile and utilitarian, easy to clean after tending to the ill and injured.

“My female is unwell,” Kaas said, already moving to the main control panel to activate a diagnostic scan. “I need to know what ails her.”

“I see,” the healer said, moving to the secondary console to activate it. His jacket indicated he was from the V’Raav clan. “I’ve treated many human females since my arrival here. They are quite fascinating. Was she feeling unwell before this?”

Kaas paused. “I do not know. She has only just arrived from Earth. We have not had a chance to converse.”

“Ah, that would explain it then,” the healer said as the diagnostic bed began its scan.

Fluorescent blue rings of light circled over the little female’s unconscious form, highlighting her pale skin but never quite touching her as they worked to scan her from head to toe. Kaas watched the rings work when he should be looking at the readouts. But all he could think was how fragile and lost she looked, so tiny and out of place.

His heart ached for her, but he quickly shut the feeling down. She didn’t deserve his sympathy. She was like Hunter’s mother; he had to remember that.

Belatedly registering the healer’s words, he looked up. “What do you mean?”

“For all that they look like us,” the healer explained, “and have a certain... attitude, I’ve noticed that human females hide their fear and anxiety. Then it becomes overwhelming and can make them quite ill.”

Kaas considered this, looking back at the petite female on the diagnostic bed. She wore bland, practical clothing that he hated on sight.

“So she fainted...from fear?” he asked to clarify.

The healer nodded, studying the scan results on the secondary console screen. “Yes, it appears so. She was likely overwhelmed by the shock of

leaving her planet and coming aboard. No physical ailment is detected, just spiked adrenaline and hormone levels indicative of severe stress.”

He folded his arms over his chest, reading the same results on his screen without seeing it. She was stressed? Why? She had decided to join the mate program and offer herself to him for a price. What did she have to be stressed about?

“Can you give her something for that?” he asked gruffly. “I would speak with her once she awakens.”

And he’d rather she didn’t faint again.

“Of course,” the healer agreed, preparing a medi-patch.

“Just a mild stimulant and calming agent,” he said as he smoothed it on the inside of her wrist. Within seconds, it turned translucent and disappeared into her skin. “She should come around shortly.”

He watched her face closely, but she didn’t stir, still unconscious.

“What will you do with her now?” the healer asked casually as he disposed of the wrapping the medi-patch had come in and started to prep others.

Kaas kept his gaze fixed on his female, watching the gentle rise and fall of her chest. “I have not yet decided.”

The healer seemed surprised.

“You did not claim her for your mate?”

At Kaas’s hard look, he amended, “Forgive me. It’s not my place to pry.”

Kaas only grunted. He’d wanted a mate, yes. But he’d wanted one like Rohn’s mate, who looked at the prince like he was her entire universe, not one who had agreed to mate the first male to offer the money she wanted.

Yet still, looking down at her, helpless on the bed, he felt an unwanted ache throb in his chest.

Why did she affect him this way? She shouldn’t because he knew what she was. With effort, he tightened his jaw and hardened his heart once more.

The female began to stir, her brow furrowing. Long dark lashes fluttered open to reveal striking blue eyes, glassy and confused. She tried to speak but only managed a soft croak.

Kaas turned to the healer. “Water. She needs water.”

The healer nodded and poured a cup of water from a jug on the nearby trolley. Kaas slid a gentle arm under the female’s shoulders, lifting her so she could sip the cool water.

She gulped it desperately, trickles escaping to slide down her neck. Up

close, he could see that her soft skin was dusted with tiny freckles, her lips full and pink. A strange urge came over him to press his own to them. To find out if they were as soft as they looked...



“EASY NOW,” a deep voice rumbled as Halle gulped the water from the cup held to her lips. She froze, her foggy mind recognizing the gravelly baritone even as her pulse kicked up in alarm. It was *him*—the giant, scarred alien who’d terrified her in the meeting room.

“I...” She frowned but didn’t try and fight her way free of his hold. Even though he’d terrified her before, now it didn’t seem important.

Squinting against the glare of the lights above her, she turned her head to look up at him. He had a strong arm around her to help her sit up so she could drink, and this close, she noticed details she’d missed before... like the varying shades of his scars, silvery white in some places, deeper purple puckering in others, and the flecks of silver that encircled his pale irises. He had beautiful eyes and full, sensual lips. They were the only two hints of softness she could see in him at all.

He held the cup to her lips again, and she drank greedily, her hands clasped around the cup to hold it steady.

“Slow down,” he chided in a soft gravel. “No one’s going to take it from you.”

She nodded and leaned back, her thirst quenched. Then questions crowded into her head, tumbling over each other. Why was he being so gentle when he’d scared her senseless earlier? And where was she?

Craning to look past him, she saw another alien studying a display at the end of her bed. He was as badly scarred as her big alien, but something about him, something about how he held himself, screamed “doctor.”

He looked up and offered a reassuring smile. “Hey, you’re back with us. I’m Kellat, the senior doctor aboard the station.”

Relief rolled through her as her suspicions about him were confirmed.

“What happened?” she asked, her voice husky.

“You fainted,” Kellat replied, “which is not surprising given the stress of interplanetary travel and...other factors.” His gaze flicked briefly to her scarred companion. She tried not to stare at either of them.

Comprehension dawned, kindling heat in her cheeks. Fuck's sake. Far from being the tough, independent woman she'd always prided herself on being, she'd passed out from sheer terror when she saw an alien's scar-ravaged face and body.

Worse, he was her new mate. Some first impression she'd made. Swallowing her embarrassment, she managed a weak smile.

"I'm sorry to cause so much trouble," she began, but Kellat cut her off.

"You're no trouble at all. I've been telling the mate program staff that they can't just bring you ladies up so fast and not give you some time to rest and settle in. How are you feeling now?"

She smiled back. "Much better, thank you," she replied in confusion as the alien holding her practically snatched the little water cup from her hands.

He launched it at what she assumed was a waste bin. The round top opened, and a small vortex of air sucked the cup in, crumpling it into a small ball before it disappeared and the lid snapped shut.

"It was empty," he said at her look.

She ignored him to look at the doctor again—the alien who was being nice instead of growling and glowering. And he wasn't bad looking either. She tried not to stare at either of their scars.

She'd heard of a doctor on Earth who had been badly injured in her twenties and had decided to retrain because of the care she'd received after her accident. So perhaps Kellat had been in an accident and had done that. She eyed the surly alien man next to her. What a pity this one hadn't done the same.

Clearing her throat, she tried again. "I'm sorry if I worried you. I'm usually not so..." she fished for the right word.

"Weak?" the alien next to her supplied flatly, his arms crossed over his broad chest.

She bristled, her hackles rising. Was that what he thought of her? Why had he even bothered signing up to get a human mate if he'd judged her as soon as she arrived? All the literature she'd been given on the program said latharian men were eager to learn about humans and to get to know their mates.

"I was going to say overwhelmed," she bit out. And where did he get off judging her when he was the one who'd terrified her? "Cut me some slack. Would you? This is my first space station. I've never even been off the planet before!"

One dark brow lifted, and a glint entered his eyes. “You knew what you signed up for with the mate program. Perhaps you are not cut out for it if you swoon at the sight of a few scars.”

Fury raged through her veins, blasting away the last of the fog in her brain. Oh, hell no, he did *not* get to say shit like that.

She surged to sit upright and jabbed a finger at his muscular chest.

“Now you listen here, asshole,” she spat, gratified to see him blink in surprise. “I didn’t swoon. I passed the hell out. From shock. Because you scared me out of my wits when you... when you...” He hadn’t actually done anything. “When you turned on me like some rabid pitbull!”

She was being unfair; she knew that, but she was too far down the rabbit hole to turn back now, and besides... who even said swoon these days? She watched the expressions flow over his face as he processed her outburst and waited for what was sure to be a scathing retort.

Instead, his stern mouth twitched.

“Rabid... pitbull?” he repeated slowly. “I believe that is some Terran animal? Are you calling me a dog... are all human females so volatile?”

“Pretty much,” she said bluntly, only answering the last question as she glared at him. He glared back, and the moment stretched as neither of them looked away.

Movement snapped his attention away from her, and she could breathe again. He eyed Kellat as the doctor approached carrying a tray with what looked like two plastic stickers and a thin, long instrument. She looked at the latter warily, but it didn’t seem sharp.

“I hate needles,” she said abruptly.

Kellat’s lips quirked up at the corners. “Then it’s fortunate we don’t use them. Isn’t it?”

He reached for the tray and picked up one of the stickers.

“They’re medi-patches,” he explained. “This is a standard biotic, and the other contains a neuro-translator. It will help you to understand us.”

She looked at the two alien men in surprise.

“But I understand you just fine at the moment?” she said. “Unless I hit my head, and I’m dreaming right now.”

“That’s because we both have translation matrices,” her warrior explained with a growl. “You’ll need a matrix of your own in case you have to deal with someone without one.”

She reached for them, but the warrior took them instead, smoothing the

medicated stickers onto her neck. His touch was unexpectedly gentle, leaving her skin tingling.

“Thank you, um...” She trailed off questioningly. She knew she’d been told his name when they’d met, but she hadn’t heard it over the roaring in her ears.

“Kaas,” he supplied. “Kaas V’aant.”

Kaas. It was strong and simple, fitting for someone of his powerful presence. She nodded slowly, running the shape of it through her mind.

“It’s a nice name,” she admitted softly. Begrudgingly. She didn’t want to admit that she liked anything about him; he was too unsettling for that. Plus, he’d bought her to be his broodmare and have his little alien babies. He wasn’t nice. Not at all.

“Halle,” she added when he looked at her questioningly. “Halle Keare.”

He nodded once and then looked at the doctor. “Is she cleared so we can leave?”

“Of course.” The doctor smiled. “As far as I can see, Halle is in perfect health. But any new symptoms...” He leveled a hard look at Kaas. “I don’t need to tell you to bring her straight back.”

“Of course not,” the big alien growled, scooping her into his arms.

“Hey! I can walk, you know,” she protested, even as her body molded against the hard planes of his chest.

“Perhaps, but I won’t risk you collapsing again.” His tone brooked no argument as he strode from the medical bay.

“Fine. Whatever. Knock yourself out.”

Huffing out a breath, she let him carry her from the medical bay into the stark white corridors beyond. They passed other aliens... other Latharians dressed in formidable dark leather uniforms that contrasted with their pale skin and hair. None were scarred like Kaas and Kellat, though, and she wondered again how they’d been hurt.

The words were on the tip of her tongue as she looked up at him through her lashes, but the grim set of his jaw warned her that prying might not be the best idea.

She settled against him, trying not to notice just how solidly muscled the broad chest he held her against was. And she was *definitely* ignoring the heavy, masculine scent that wound around her. It was like nothing she’d ever smelled before. Alien, but not... unpleasant. Instead, it was primal and masculine, sending her senses reeling. Shit, she had to find out what shower gel he used. She’d make a killing selling it on Earth.

At least, she *hoped* it was shower gel. Given her current lack of

knowledge about the Lathar, she wasn't going to ask. Knowing her luck, she'd probably make a social faux pas and insult him by pointing out his BO.

They reached an elevator bank, one of the doors sliding open just as they arrived for Kaas to walk right in. As they entered, the giant alien adjusted his hold, one muscled arm under her knees while the other wrapped around her back. The new position brought her face dangerously close to the column of his throat. If she moved a little, her lips would graze the skin, the little patch between a set of nasty-looking scars. What had happened to him? He looked like he'd been shredded in a shuttle crash or something.

Oh, for heaven's sake, Halle, get a grip. Just because he smelled good didn't change the fact that he'd terrified her earlier. Or the fact he'd essentially bought her. She needed to stay on guard and not give in to the traitorous feminine instincts that wanted to insist this was something out of one of the alien barbarian romances she loved to read. *Those* alien heroes were rough and growly but with hearts of gold. She wasn't sure if Kaas had a heart, gold or not.

The elevator slowed, and the doors slid open to admit another Latharian warrior. He stepped halfway in before seeing her cradled in Kaas's embrace. Kaas turned his broad shoulders with a menacing growl, using his larger body to block the other male's view of her.

"Out," he barked, still glaring over his shoulder. "Now. Unless you want to cease breathing."

"My apologies, Interrogator," the newcomer muttered, backing out quickly. Halle's cheeks flamed as the doors whispered shut, leaving them alone again.

"That wasn't necessary," she said, unable to meet Kaas's eyes. "He wasn't doing anything wrong."

"He was looking at you," Kaas bit out.

"So? It's not illegal to look at someone here. Is it?"

The big alien rumbled in the center of his chest. It was almost like a purr but sounded much more dangerous and threatening. "You are mine. I won't have other males ogling what's mine."

Anger flared, overriding her embarrassment.

"I am *not* yours," she snapped, glaring at him. "You don't own me just because of some stupid mate program. I belong to myself!"

His face darkened, the gold flecks flashing in his eyes as he looked down at her. "You agreed to be matched. I paid for you, little human. You. Are.

Mine.”

The words doused her temper like ice water. He was right. She lifted her chin. “Okay, but you *still* don’t own me. I’m a person, not property.”

His mouth flattened into a thin line, a muscle pulsing in the corner of his jaw. Before he could argue, the elevator slowed again, and the doors opened. He walked out and carried her down another stark passage without a word.

She focused on memorizing the turns and the route he was taking her. The doctor had said to go back if she had any new symptoms, and she was determined not to need to ask Kaas for his help if she needed to get back to the medical bay.

Stopping before a heavy double door, Kaas entered a code into a panel on the wall. The doors whooshed apart, and he stepped into a spacious chamber dominated by massive windows showing the stars. Couches sat beneath them with doors on the opposite wall. One was open, and she could see the edge of a massive bed through it.

These must be his personal quarters. Her pulse kicked into overdrive. She opened her mouth to protest at being brought here but squeaked in surprise when he dropped her to her feet and then pinned her to the wall, his hands braced on either side of her head.

“Why do you deny what’s between us, little human?” he growled, bringing his face within inches of hers. “You are mine. *Mine.*”

She froze, trapped by the heat of his body and the intensity of his gaze. This near, she could count each of his dark lashes, see the heavy pounding of his pulse under the skin of his throat. Anticipation charged the air between them, and her breasts rose and fell rapidly, pressing against the hard wall of his chest.

All it would take was the barest tilt of her chin for their mouths to meet—

A tinkling sound filled the air, light and musical but insistent.

Kaas froze for a second, his darkened gaze locked with hers. Then he growled and swore under his breath. She blinked as the muttered words made sense a second after he’d spoken. Although, she wasn’t sure *that* was even physically possible...

“Stay there,” he ordered as he pushed away from her and headed for the door.

Like she was planning on going anywhere... she wasn’t even sure she could walk at the moment. She blew out a breath, leaning her head back against the wall, her hands spread out over the surface behind her as if she

could absorb some of its solidity to shore up her shaky knees.

“Draanthing operations and their schedules,” he grumbled under his breath as he hauled a huge trunk into the room and dragged it to the bottom of the bed.

Halle pushed off the wall and approached warily. He seemed annoyed, but the trunk was beautiful. It looked like wood and was heavily carved.

“What is it?” she asked. She hadn’t seen anything like it before.

He shrugged. “Just some furniture out of storage. Let me show you around.”

She stared wide-eyed at the luxurious quarters, seeing them properly for the first time. Now that she wasn’t pinned to a wall, that was.

Plush carpets cushioned her feet, the walls draped in intricate tapestries and lined with gleaming dark wood furnishings. It was easily three times the size of her previous living space with separate areas for sleeping, food preparation, and relaxing.

Kaas stalked around, gesturing impatiently to the various areas.

“Replenishment unit there, preparation area next to it, the resting area is there,” he said, gesturing through the door to the large bed. He seemed annoyed at having to play tour guide, his gruff demeanor at odds with their lavish surroundings.

He flung open a door and announced, “Refreshment facilities!”

She looked past him at the small space, lined with shelves and empty hangers, and stifled a laugh.

“Ah...” Kaas blinked, an odd look flitting across his stern features. It was the first crack in his stony facade, and she hid her smile. “Wait a moment.”

She followed him to the second door, which he opened to reveal a surprisingly normal-looking bathroom. She looked up at him.

“You’ve never been here before. Have you?”

He scowled, the expression tugging at the vicious scar traversing his cheek. “No. They are new to us. As bonded mates.”

She winced. This man had chosen to join the mate program, seeking a partner, but he didn’t seem to actually *want* one. Or, more likely... he didn’t want *her*. After all, she had fainted the moment she’d laid eyes on him. A good first impression that did *not* make. Not at all.

Desperate to break the awkward tension, she gestured toward the bathroom. “Would it be alright if I showered first? Before...”

The big alien cocked his head, confusion flickering across his harsh

features. “Before?”

“YOU KNOW. BEFORE WE...” She couldn’t finish the sentence, her cheeks flaring scarlet with mortification.

“If you wish to be clean before resting...” He folded his arms across that broad chest, looking down at her. His focus made her want to squirm on the spot. “Then, by all means, use the facilities. I wish for you to feel comfortable here.”

She wanted to sink through the floor, the flush on her cheeks heating up so much she could have cooked eggs on her face.

“I didn’t mean before sleeping,” she mumbled, staring fixedly at the floor. “I meant before... *you know!*”

He was silent so long she finally snuck a glance upward. His hard expression didn’t alter. For all the hideous scars that covered his body, his face was mostly untouched, apart from the vicious scar across his cheek. She wondered what had happened to him and the doctor for them both to be scarred so badly. Had they been in the same accident?

“I know what?” he rumbled.

“You know!” Exasperation mingled with her embarrassment, and she stuck a finger in her ear and wiggled it. Had her new translator thing broken, or was he being deliberately obtuse?

“Given that I am asking the question, I would have thought it obvious that I do not, in fact, *know?*”

“Sex!” she burst out. “You bought me to fuck and make babies, so I assumed you’d want to get on that right away. Can I at least get a sho—”

INSTINCT TOOK OVER, and Kaas surged forward, capturing her lips with his. The kiss was hard and demanding, a conqueror staking his claim.

The taste of her, sweet and foreign, was a shock to his system, sending jolts of need down his spine. He pressed closer and demanded more, not thinking about the bruising force of his embrace. Lost in the sensation, he growled with need in the center of his chest and swept his tongue against the closed seam of her lips, demanding that she open up to him.

Triumph rolled through him when she surrendered, parting her lips with a

tremble that ran through her body that was trapped between him and the hard wall behind. He groaned again, sliding his tongue against hers and claiming her mouth. She was so tiny and delicate yet fit perfectly against him... it was mind-blowing. Heat rolled through him, and his cock punched to full mast, hard and heavy in his pants.

When he finally tore his lips from hers, they were both breathing heavily, the room filled with the sound of their ragged gasps. Her eyes were wide and glimmered with something more, something that dragged another groan from his throat.

“You...” he growled, the words catching in his throat as he fought to get hold of himself. He needed control, or he was going to take her hard and fast up against the wall. And no matter how sweet her surrender, he didn’t think she was ready for that. Not when she’d fainted at the sight of him just an hour ago. “You need to rest. It’s been a long day for you.”

He turned away, not trusting himself to look at her any longer. Her lips were swollen from his kisses, and the darkness in her eyes taunted him. He ached with the need to make her his in every possible way.

“Rest?” Her soft laugh, filled with confusion and disbelief, followed him as he stalked across the room. “You kiss me like that and then tell me to rest? You Latharians have a strange way of saying goodnight.”

His jaw tightened, and he shot her a look over his shoulder. *Draanth’s* sake, did humans have *no* sense of self-preservation? “I’m not saying goodnight, Halle. I’m giving an order.”

“An order?” Her voice rose, her tone as sharp as her glare. “I’m not one of your soldiers. You don’t get to order me around.”

“And I’m not one of your human men to be played with.” He whirled around, his anger flaring to meet hers. Just as bright and hot. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d lost his temper. What was she doing to him? “You’d do well to remember who and what I am.”

“And what’s that? A bully? A brute?” Her eyes flashed in defiance.

He stalked back toward her, each step heavy with purpose to loom over her. To her credit, she didn’t back down at his attempt at intimidation but glared right up at him.

“I am your mate, Halle. Whether you like it or not, that’s what I am.”

A dangerous silence hung in the air between them for a moment.

“Rest,” he ordered as he turned away again, his voice a low growl. “You’ll need your strength.”

“For what?”

He paused at the door. “For what’s to come.”

KAAS STOMPED DOWN THE CORRIDOR, his heavy footsteps clanging against the metal deck plating. The sounds echoed the confusion and irritation that swirled through him.

He couldn’t shake the image of his new mate’s face as he’d left her in his quarters—a mixture of confusion, frustration, and anger. If she hadn’t responded so sweetly to his kisses, he’d think she loathed him. He growled again, glaring at a junior warrior as he passed. The female had been nothing but a contradiction since they met. She’d accepted his claim, so by all rights, she was his. He should just claim her and get it over with. But he couldn’t. Something... he wasn’t sure what... held him back.

This was ridiculous. The mate program was supposed to be straightforward. He’d signed up, been matched, and for some reason paid an astronomical sum for the privilege when no one else had to because his match had insisted on it, and now he had a mate.

He was a *draanthing* idiot.

He reached his destination and paused outside the door to his friend Rohn’s quarters. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes, waiting for the familiar surroundings to steady him before he announced his presence. Rohn, aka Prince Rohn K’Saan, had been recently matched through the mate program, and unlike Kaas, he seemed to have found domestic bliss. Rohn’s mate, Naomi, was perfect for him. She fit into his life, into their world, like a missing puzzle piece.

Kaas hit the panel to announce his presence, and a few seconds later the door slid open with a soft whoosh to reveal a tall warrior with dark, braided hair and features similar to the emperor’s. Which, given Rohn was his Imperial Majesty’s cousin, was not surprising.

“Kaas! You’re a sight for sore eyes.” Rohn smiled. In the background, Kaas glimpsed Naomi playing with her small daughter, the child Rohn had adopted.

“You seem to be thriving in the throes of bonded matehood.”

“And you?” Rohn waved him through the door and into the room. “I heard the news. How’s mated life treating you?”

Kaas’s jaw tightened. “It’s... interesting.”

“Interesting?” Rohn’s eyebrows shot up, and he motioned for Kaas to sit before a roaring fire. It wasn’t real, just a hologram, but a good one. Kaas could even feel the heat it kicked off. “That doesn’t sound like a ringing endorsement.”

“You have no idea,” Kaas grumbled, collapsing onto one of the long, low couches. The room was decorated with soft fabrics and vibrant colors, a stark contrast to the sterile metal of the rest of the station and his quarters. Correction, his and *Halle’s* quarters. By comparison, Rohn and Naomi’s quarters were warm and homey. Inviting. A pang of jealousy rolled through him.

“What’s going on? Talk to me.” Rohn’s voice had taken on a serious note as he offered Kaas a tumbler filled with an amber liquid. He took a quick sniff. It was *kranovian* brandy—the good stuff, by the smell of it.

“I don’t understand why I was matched with her,” he admitted, taking a healthy swallow. The spirit burned down to his stomach, warming him through.

“She is nothing like I expected. She’s strong-willed, demanding, and—” He cut off and took another drink but hadn’t been fast enough. Rohn eyed him.

“And?”

“She fainted at the sight of me,” he admitted grudgingly.

Rohn chuckled, eyeing his scars. “Do you blame her? You’re no oil painting.”

“That’s an understatement,” Kaas replied, raking his hand through his hair. He wasn’t sensitive about his scars. No healer was. They had been earned honestly in his trials.

“Humans do have hangups about scars,” Rohn added. “Just in case you didn’t know.”

“I *draanthing* do now.”

He sighed and leaned against the soft back of the couch. “I... don’t know what to make of her. She doesn’t seem to want a mate, so I don’t know why she signed up.”

He didn’t mention the money. The last thing he wanted to admit to the prince was that he couldn’t get a mate without paying.

“I joined the program to find a mate, not a puzzle.”

“Well... you know what they say about a challenge,” Rohn reminded him as he took a sip from his glass, watching Kaas. “The victory is all the

sweeter.”

“This is different,” he growled. “I look at what you have here with Naomi and her daughter, and I got matched with someone so... so incompatible.”

Rohn’s expression softened. “Give it time. You’ve only just met her. You can’t expect everything to fall into place immediately.”

Kaas glanced at Rohn’s new family playing in the other room. “It seems to have worked for you.”

“I got lucky. Really lucky.” The prince’s voice was low. “But you did too. You just don’t see it yet.”

Kaas barked out a bitter laugh. “Luck doesn’t seem to be on my side with this one.”

“You’ve faced tougher battles. You’ll figure this one out, too.”

Kaas’s lips quirked reluctantly at the corners. “I’ll have to.”

“You know you can always come here if you need a break. Naomi’s cooking will put anyone in a good mood.” Rohn’s grin was infectious.

“Yeah, if you like pizza and chips!” Naomi called out from the other room, proving that even though she’d seemed engrossed in playing with her offspring, she had been listening to them. “I am not a chef!”

Kaas laughed, the sound echoing through the room. He’d spent a few evenings in the company of the prince and his mate and sampled her cooking. “Extra cheese? The human stuff? I will take you up on that.”

Kaas swirled the last remnants of his drink, the liquid reflecting the dim lighting of Rohn’s quarters, and lifted it to his lips to finish it off.

“Guess it’s time I headed back. Thank you for the drink and the conversation,” he said, setting the glass down and standing.

“Yeah, I’m sure your new mate will wonder where you’ve disappeared to, and I have... duties to attend to.” Rohn grinned, a smitten expression on his face as he all but herded Kaas to the door.

“You’ve got yourself a good thing there,” he said suddenly. “Don’t let her slip through your fingers. *Goodnight, Naomi,*” he lifted his voice to call out, receiving a smile and a wave from the tiny female in the other room.

“I won’t. I promise you that.” Rohn’s voice carried a note of fierce determination. “Goodnight, Kaas, and good luck.”

LEAVING THE PRINCE’S QUARTERS, Kaas made his way back to his own, the day’s tensions beginning to catch up with him. Each step felt heavy, echoing

in the hollow corridors of the station. The words of his and Rohn's conversation replayed in his mind, over and over, a reminder of the uncertainty that awaited him.

He hadn't lied to the prince. Halle wasn't what he'd expected. She was a force of nature that pulled him in and left him off-balance. But she was also beautiful, and her touch ignited a fire inside him that he couldn't ignore. It made him burn with a need and longing he hadn't known in ages.

He walked into their bedroom, and his gaze was immediately drawn to the big bed. Halle lay in the middle, already asleep, her form a tiny silhouette against the wide expanse of the covers. A surge of protectiveness and possessiveness roared to life, spreading out from the center of his chest to fill him.

She was his. No matter what, she was *his*.

He moved closer. She lay spread out like a starfish, taking up every inch of space she could. The sight made his lips curve into a small, indulgent smile as his eyes traced her peaceful expression. She was utterly beautiful and seemed softer in sleep.

He drank it all in... the gentle curve of her cheek, the flutter of her dark eyelashes, the way her hair spilled over the pillow like a silken waterfall. The vulnerability of her sleeping form tugged at something deep inside him. He was a warrior, a survivor of countless battles... yet he was tongue-tied and unsure in front of this tiny human female. How had that happened?

He toed off his boots and began to peel away his combat uniform. The sound of fabric shifting seemed to fill the room, and he grimaced, hoping he wouldn't wake her as he slid into the bed next to her.

Lying on his side, he brushed a stray lock of hair from her face, his fingertips tingling with the contact. She stirred slightly, a soft murmur escaping her lips, but didn't wake.

He sighed, the exhaustion of the day catching up with him as he tried to find a comfortable spot on the bed. It was a challenge, given his little mate's choice of sleeping position. He tried to make sure he stayed to his side.

His mind buzzed, thoughts and memories swirling and crashing like waves on a turbulent sea. He rolled over, hyperaware of the soft human beside him, but sleep eluded him, taunting him as it remained just out of reach. His body ached for rest, but his mind refused to cooperate.

He tried to focus on Halle's breathing, letting it become a lifeline, a way to calm the chaos, and finally slid into sleep. Even then, it was a battle.

Before long the nightmares came, vivid and terrifying, filled with blood and violence. He thrashed in his sleep, lost in a world of horror and pain he couldn't escape. He woke with a start, cold sweat on his brow, and his heart pounding. He'd been back on the battlefield, his unit being slaughtered around him—

But now he was in the soft bed, and the only sound in the room was his mate's gentle breathing. He felt something small and delicate on his chest, warm and comforting. He looked down to find Halle's hand resting there as if she sensed his need even in sleep and had reached out to calm him.

He turned his head curiously and found her on her side next to him, her face peaceful. She was still asleep, her breathing even, but her hand remained on his chest, a silent offering of comfort.

Warmth spread through him, easing the tension and quieting his demons. He moved and put a hand over hers on his chest, careful not to wake her, and something shifted deep in the center of his heart... in his soul. Closing his eyes, he relaxed and felt sleep come for him.

This time, it was deep and restful, a peace he hadn't known in many years.

The next morning, Halle's eyes fluttered open, the world blurry and distant. She grumbled in the back of her throat and closed them again, tempted to slide back into the sleep that beckoned her. On a normal day, she'd have been pulled from sleep by the tantalizing aroma of fresh coffee, beckoning her toward a new day. Sadie always knew how to coax her into consciousness, especially on those brutal early mornings when her first job was on the other side of the city, meaning an hour's commute before she could even start.

She buried her head under the plush pillow and inhaled deeply, expecting the familiar scent. Then, her nose wrinkled. Nothing. No coffee, no hint of breakfast. Okay... must be her day off, she reasoned with a sigh of relief, which meant an extra hour snuggled in the warm embrace of the bedcovers before she had to get up and face the day.

Even though it was her day off, it didn't mean she could laze around like one of those holo-celebrity housewives. No, her day off would be filled with chores. She had to clean the apartment and do laundry before looking after Ollie this evening while his mother worked at the local bar.

But... just five more minutes wouldn't hurt, she decided as she snuggled down into the comfort of the bed. Then she froze as that same comfort caught her attention. This was no ordinary coziness. Instead, it was all silken sheets and cloud-like softness, the kind of decadence and luxury she and Sadie had never been able to afford.

She gasped as memories crashed through her like a tidal wave. All the events of yesterday... The Latharian Mate Program, the signing, and coming

up to the station... all hit her in a rush. Shit... and Kaas, the big scarred alien warrior who was now, to all intents and purposes, her husband.

That kiss...

A groan broke from her lips at the memory. It had been the hottest thing she'd ever experienced. Hard and dominant, it had been everything she'd always told herself she only liked between the pages of a book... until he'd kissed her, and she hadn't wanted to just read about it. When his lips had been on hers, she'd not only surrendered instantly, but she'd wanted *more*. Way more.

Sitting upright, she clutched the sheets against her as she looked around. She had been so tired last night that she hadn't paid attention to her surroundings, instead showering and falling into bed, sleep claiming her almost immediately. Now she could see it wasn't a Terran design and was filled with alien yet elegant furniture.

There was also no sign of her big, scary mate.

A pang of disappointment tugged at her, which was surprising. He'd bought her like a broodmare, so she should be relieved he wasn't here. But for some reason, she wasn't. The room felt empty without him. Her eyes were drawn to the empty spot beside her. She frowned, noting the crumpled sheets, and reached out. They were still warm to the touch. Heat spread across her cheeks as the memory of strong arms and the feel of solid muscle against her back filled her mind.

"No way..." She breathed. He didn't even seem to like her. He wouldn't have slept in the same bed and held her close... that had to be a dream, surely?

Her hand lingered on the warm spot, and she leaned closer until her nose was inches from the sheets. His scent, unique and intoxicating, filled her nostrils. Her heart pounded, a jumble of emotions swirling within her. She pulled her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them as she stared at the space beside her. He *had* slept there. He seemed to dislike her, his attitude a mixture of indifference and aggression. But he'd kissed her with a desperation that had gotten under her guard and crept into bed after she was asleep.

Another scent reached her, one so tantalizing, it made her mouth water and her stomach grumble. She slid from the bed and padded across the plush carpet, drawn by the promise of something delicious in the other room.

Walking into the sitting area, she found it empty, but then her gaze landed

on the steaming mug on the coffee table. The dark liquid within looked like coffee, but that was impossible. Did aliens even have coffee? Hope filled her as she sat down. This place might not be so bad if they had decent coffee.

A note lay under the mug. Bold script scrawled darkly on a scrap of paper. She pulled it free. The handwriting was a messy scrawl that was strangely charming. She squinted at it, unable to make out the alien words for a moment. But it was odd. It was almost like her brain recognized the strange letters, and she just needed to squint and look closely to make it out. Within a few seconds, Kaas's message came into focus.

*It's not much, but it will keep you going until I can stock the replenisher.
Back soon, K.*

She reached for the mug, her nose hovering above the steam as she took a deep breath. It was nutty, different, but unmistakably coffee. The first sip was a revelation, a symphony of flavor that danced across her tongue. She groaned, the sound a mixture of pleasure and relief. It was coffee, alien and unique, but still coffee. She closed her eyes, savoring the taste and feeling the caffeine's magic waking her body and mind.

She smiled. Kaas had left her coffee. Alien coffee. Okay, maybe he wasn't so bad after all.

With a contented sigh, she turned her attention to the covered plate, her curiosity piqued. What other surprises had he left for her? Lifting the lid, her breath caught in her throat. In front of her sat the most extravagant chocolate cake she'd ever seen. It was warm with cream swirled on the side and alien fruits sliced neatly next to it, arranged in a fan.

First coffee and now chocolate cake? If he turned up with flowers, she might even think he was trying to apologize for being an ass last night.

Her mouth watered as she grabbed the weird alien spork and dug in. The first bite was a sensory explosion as the rich, velvety chocolate melted in her mouth. The alien fruits added a tart twist to the familiar taste of the chocolate. Confident she was alone, she moaned as she savored every bite.

As she ate, her mind wandered back to Kaas. He was a contradiction, his gruff exterior hiding a tenderness she was only just beginning to glimpse. His note, the breakfast, were gestures that spoke louder than words. The cake was finished all too soon, and she found herself licking her fingers, the taste lingering on her lips. She was awake now, fueled by caffeine and sugar, her mind sharp and alert.

Okay... she needed to get showered and dressed. Then she'd be ready for

the day. For what exactly, she wasn't sure. What did a Latharian warrior's mate *do* all day? She'd have to ask that later. Perhaps she could apply for a job on the station?

She shrugged and walked through to the bathroom. For saying it was on an alien space station, the bathroom was surprisingly normal, almost Terran-like, although much more luxurious than any she'd ever used. She hadn't paid attention to it last night; she'd been so tired, so it was like she was seeing it all new this morning. One thing she did remember from last night was the water. Hot water. Oodles and oodles of it. Hurriedly, she stripped off the T-shirt and panties she'd slept in and stepped into the shower.

The water hit her skin, and she gasped. The cascade of liquid heat melted away the stress and uncertainty. She tilted her head back, letting the water wash over her, the pressure strong and steady like a massage for her soul.

The water heater was often broken and unreliable in her apartment with Sadie. Cold showers were a routine part of life, a constant reminder of their struggles. She reached for the toiletries and suddenly noticed the new bottles that lined the shelf. They hadn't been there when she'd showered last night.

They were different and unfamiliar, the bottles odd shapes. Curious, she picked them up one by one, snapping open the lids to sniff at the contents. The scents were delicious, woody, and masculine, an olfactory feast that made her bite her lip as she recognized them. They were the same scents Kaas wore.

A strange mix of pleasure and longing filled her, but she frowned. Something was missing, an element that was uniquely Kaas... a part of him that a bottled scent couldn't capture.

Shaking her head, she dismissed the thought and reached for the one she thought was shampoo. It had to be better than the sickly sweet floral stuff the Latharian Mate Program had given her. She wasn't a girly girl, never had been, and she craved something more distinct and in keeping with who she was.

A short while later, she stepped out of the shower, her skin tingling and her body invigorated. She cleaned her teeth, letting the mundane act ground her, then dressed quickly, blessing whoever had put together the LMP care package under her breath. The clothes were simple and functional, which she appreciated as she pulled them on. The joggers and simple T-shirt weren't so different from what she and Sadie wore at home on their days off.

Her eyes widened. "Shit! Sadie!"

She hadn't called her sister since yesterday. Sadie would be going out of her mind with worry by now.

Rubbing at her still-wet hair with a small towel, she grabbed her comms device, her fingers punching in Sadie's comm number. The call connected, and her sister's face appeared on the screen, her eyes filled with worry. Halle's heart ached at the sight of her, a pang of homesickness hitting her hard.

"Halle!" Sadie's voice was a balm, warm and familiar. "Thank god! Are you okay? How's... How's everything?"

Halle chuckled, making sure to keep her voice light and happy. "I'm good, Sadie. Better than good. You won't believe the shower here!"

Sadie's eyes narrowed, a knowing grin tugging at her lips. "A shower, eh? That's what you're calling him?"

Halle's face went scarlet, and she gasped. "*Sadie Jane!* That's not what I meant, and you know it! Get your damn mind out of the gutter!"

Her sister's laughter filled the room like she was actually there with Halle. "Oh, I know. I know. Just making sure you're still my sister and not some alien clone."

A smile spread across her face. "Trust me, if an alien clone had replaced me, she'd be way less crabby than I am. Now tell me, how's my favorite little man? Is Ollie okay?"

The dark shadow of concern returned to Sadie's eyes, but she quickly masked it with a smile. "He's good, Halle. Thanks to the money you sent, we've been able to pay Doctor Crane. They've confirmed that Ollie's treatment will start in a few days."

Halle's chest swelled with a mixture of joy and relief. Selling herself to an alien warrior was worth it if her nephew got better. The world around her seemed to brighten, the unfamiliar surroundings losing their intimidating edge.

"That's wonderful news," she said, her voice cracking. "That's... really, it's the best news."

"I know, Halle. And it's all thanks to you." Sadie's voice trembled with emotion, and Halle saw the tears shimmering in her sister's eyes. "I can never thank you enough."

"No thanks necessary. We're family," Halle said firmly. "We stick together, no matter what."

Sadie's smile returned, but it was tinged with curiosity. "So... tell me

more about him. Your new mate. Is he as scary as the rumors say Latharian warriors are?”

Halle laughed, the question catching her off guard. “Scary? Kaas? No, he’s more like a big teddy bear.”

“A teddy bear with fangs and a tail?” Sadie teased.

“Well, the rumors lied there. They don’t have fangs or a tail. But he left me coffee and breakfast this morning.”

Sadie’s eyebrows shot up. “Breakfast? Really? What did he make?”

“Chocolate cake,” Halle said, unable to stop a little smugness in her voice. “And alien coffee. I could get used to this whole ‘married to an alien warrior’ thing.”

“What? As long as he doesn’t make you eat any weird alien bugs or something.” Sadie grinned evilly. Halle hated bugs with a passion.

“Don’t even joke about that!” Halle shuddered. “I’d have to draw the line there.”

Their laughter trailed off, and Sadie’s expression turned serious. “But really, Halle. Are you okay? Is he treating you well?”

“He’s... he’s complicated,” Halle admitted, looking down at her hands. “But he’s not cruel or anything. I think... This is just as new to him as it is to me. We have to find a new normal. That’s all.”

Sadie reached out and touched the screen as if trying to reach her sister across the distance between them. “Just be careful, Halle. I love you.”

“I love you too,” Halle said, her voice soft. “And don’t worry about me. I’ve got everything under control.”

“I’m sure you have,” Sadie snorted. “I’m surprised you’ve not already rearranged everything up there and organised the station to within an inch of its life.”

Halle’s laughter rang out again, the sound light and free. “Oh, you know me so well.”

“That I do!”

“I’m sorry, but Kaas is calling for me,” Halle said, glancing over her shoulder as if Kaas had come into the room, and lied through her teeth. “We’re going out on a station tour today.”

Sadie’s eyes widened. “A tour? That sounds like fun! You’ll have to tell me all about it later.”

“I will. Take care of Ollie for me, okay?”

“Always. Love you, Halle.”

“Love you too, Sadie-bug.”

With a final wave, Halle ended the call, her heart aching, longing for her sister and nephew. She sat on the bed and looked around, feeling lost. Biting her lip, she fought back tears. She was alone, on an alien space station, with a big, scary Latharian warrior as her mate...



SHE HAD NEVER SEEN SO many aliens in one place.

Halle’s eyes almost popped out of her head as she followed Kaas through the civilian area of the base. She’d had no idea there were so many types of aliens, some very different from humanity, but they all seemed crowded onto the promenade in front of the restaurants.

Hurrying to keep up, she looked at the broad shoulders and muscular back of the alien man in front of her. Her mate. She had no idea where Kaas had been all morning or what a Latharian interrogator did, but she assumed it included the alien version of a dingy basement and someone tied to a chair under a single light or something. Just before lunch, he’d finally appeared in the doorway and announced he was taking her out. Desperate to stop staring at the same four walls, she’d followed without a word.

He ushered her through the doors of an elegant restaurant, and she caught her breath... it was beautiful. The ceiling arched high above them, illuminated by soft lights that reminded her of the stars twinkling in the night sky when she and Sadie had snuck up onto the rooftop of the building they’d lived as kids. The pollution was too much in Evergreen to see them anymore, and she missed them.

The walls were decorated with paintings and beautiful sculptures of alien creatures in poses of either grace or menace, depending on whether they seemed to be predators or prey. Small tables were scattered around the room, surrounded by soft seating. A quiet melody played in the background—a haunting tune that tugged at something deep within her, like she would recognize it if she listened hard enough.

“This way, *kelarris*,” Kaas murmured as he guided her to a table. She jumped a little as his hand landed on the small of her back. His fingers brushed her skin, sending a shiver of sensation down her spine.

The diners seated at the tables were a mix of Lathar and other aliens. The

other Lathar weren't like Kaas or the Lathar she'd seen so far. They weren't wearing leather uniforms; she'd say they were civilians, if she had to guess. Most people in the room avoided looking at them, but she felt their interest.

A few alien women eyed Kaas with interest, their gazes lingering on his imposing form. Jealousy hit her out of the blue, hot and sharp, and she had to bite back the urge to snarl at them, baring her teeth in warning. Where the fuck had *that* come from?

But the interest Kaas received from the women in the room wasn't what got her attention... it was how the other Lathar acted around him.

They were scared. Utterly terrified.

They froze as he passed, their eyes widening as if he were a harbinger of doom. A server, who had turned to greet them, stopped as he saw Kaas. His lips parted to speak, but no words emerged.

"A table for two, please. And can we have the menu?" Kaas asked. His voice was a low rumble filled with a casual authority that brooked no argument.

The server nodded, his face pale as he led them to a table in the corner and then hurried away.

Halle glanced up at Kaas as he seated her, studying him from under her lashes. She could see why they were nervous; he wore danger like a mantle, barely restrained violence clinging to him like a second skin.

"What is it?" he asked as he took his seat opposite her.

Reaching across the table, he captured her hand in his, the stroke of his thumb making her skin tingle.

"The way they act around you," she leaned in to whisper, her gaze flicking from their joined hands to the diners around them. She was surprised at the gentle touch but didn't let it show on her face. He'd bought her; if he wanted to hold her hand in public, who was she to stop him? "They're terrified of you."

Was it because of his scars? But that didn't make sense... "Why are they scared of you and not Kellat?"

He and the doctor were both scarred the same, but from the little she'd seen, people didn't react to Kellat like they did to Kaas.

"Kellat is a healer," he replied, his expression unreadable and his voice hard. "I am not. He brings life. I take it away."

Sighing, he ran a big hand through his hair and looked at her again.

"I'm not a gentle man, Halle. I'm a warrior, an interrogator. They know

what I'm capable of and what I've done in pursuit of my duties. Their fear is a perfectly logical reaction."

The server returned, his hands trembling as he handed the menu to Kaas.

Giving it a cursory glance, Kaas rattled off an order. Any other time, she would have argued, but one look at the tables around them told her she would have had no clue *what* to order.

She studied him, working through what he'd said in her mind. "So what are you, like the bogeyman of the Lathar? That's why they all look like they want to run and hide under their beds?"

His eyes flicked away momentarily, a flash of something raw and vulnerable in their depths.

"Something like that," he admitted, the corners of his full lips quirking and hijacking her attention for a second. Heat rolled through her at the memory of those lips on hers, his body hard and heavy against hers as he'd pinned her to the wall to kiss the breath out of her.

"Especially the younger ones. They've heard the stories, and their caregivers probably scared them trall-less as younglings by threatening that I'd sweep them up unless they behaved."

Their conversation was interrupted by their food arriving. The server's hands shook so much that the plates clattered on the tray. She tried to smile at him and put him at ease, but that made things worse. He went so pale she thought he would pass out, and then he fled from the table as quickly as he could.

"How odd," she murmured, looking after him, but then her attention was caught by the feast laid out in front of them.

"This looks wonderful," she said with a smile as Kaas lifted the covers off all the dishes, placing them in a neat pile at the side of the table. "Oddly colored but wonderful."

"What's this?" she asked, gesturing to the nearest dish, which looked like rainbow-colored rice.

Kaas's lips quirked into a half-smile, his eyes still holding that dark storm. "It's a traditional Latharian meal. I thought you'd like to try something new."

Halle picked up her fork, her curiosity piqued but still overshadowed by the question that burned inside her. She tasted a bite, savoring the explosion of flavors, and then looked at Kaas.

"How did you know what I would like?" she asked. "From the menu, I

mean?”

Kaas’s expression tightened, his hand still wrapped around hers. “It’s my job to know things.”

Then his gaze narrowed on something across the room. She turned to follow his line of sight and caught a glimpse of another Lathar warrior, impressive and well-built but carrying an air of arrogance that was obvious even from this distance.

“Please excuse me. I see an acquaintance I need to speak with.” Kaas’s voice was low, the words almost growled.

“Who is he?” Halle asked in curiosity.

“We’ll discuss it later.” With a gentle squeeze of her hand, he rose. “Wait here. Don’t leave the table.”

She couldn’t look away as he stalked across the room, mesmerized by the lethality and power in his movements. She *loved* bad boys in her books and holo series, and now she had one of her own. It was scary and hot all at the same time.

A crowd had risen from their table, getting ready to depart, but they scattered as soon as they saw him coming, giving her a perfect view of his tight ass in his leather pants.

The scrape of a chair beside her pulled her attention back to her surroundings, and she looked up to find a Latharian man beside her table. He wasn’t wearing leather like Kaas but some alien business suit, and he seemed softer around the edges. His physique was not packed with muscle like Kaas’s.

He smiled broadly, his eyes filled with interest as they swept over her.

“You seem to be dining alone,” he said, his voice smooth and deep with none of Kaas’s growl. “Mind if I join you?”

“*I*’m not alone. I’m here with someone,” she replied, keeping her voice polite yet distant. Human women weren’t allowed out of the controlled LMP area without an escort, so if she was out here, she was with someone.

He chuckled and sat down without her permission. “Well, he’s clearly keeping you waiting. Allow me to keep you company.”

“I’m fine on my own.” She dropped the smile this time, wondering if all Lathar were so obtuse. “He won’t be long.”

“He really shouldn’t be leaving you alone at all.” His smile remained in place, but she didn’t like the cold, calculating look in his dark eyes. “Some other male might swoop in and claim you from under his nose.”

“Human women aren’t like that,” she said flatly.

“Oh?” Her unwanted companion sat forward, his gaze latched on to her face as he leaned his elbows on the table. “Tell me, what *are* human women like?”

Halle’s discomfort grew, her fingers fidgeting with her napkin. His forwardness and the look in his eyes unnerved her. She caught herself looking at the exit. It was far too close, and Kaas was too far away.

“If you register with the Latharian Mate Program, they run familiarization classes for Latharian men to understand human women. Now, excuse me, but I really should go and find my mate,” she said, pushing her chair back and standing.

Before she could escape, the Lathar’s hand shot out, and his fingers closed around her arm. His eyes held a predatory gleam, and his smile twisted

into something less friendly.

“Don’t make this unpleasant,” he said, his voice a silky threat. “I just want to talk.”

Her heart hammered against her ribs, and she tried to pull away from his grasp. “Let go of me!” she demanded, her voice sharp.

His grip tightened painfully. “But I’m not done ye—”

A vicious snarl, feral and filled with rage, echoed through the room.

“Get your hands off my mate,” Kaas growled, shoving himself between them.

The other Latharian released Halle to square off against Kaas. Both were intimidating, but the newcomer was smaller in stature, and his hard look had nothing on the aura of lethality that clung to Kaas like a second skin.

“No harm done,” the other male said lightly, though his stance was wary. “Just making conversation.”

“I could smell your lust from across the room.” Kaas snarled. “You will not go near what is mine again.”

Her heart pounded, her skin burning from where the Lathar had grabbed her arm. She would have bruises there tomorrow.

Tension crackled in the air between the two alien men as they stared each other down, and she stepped back. She didn’t want to be in the firing line if this came to blows. With the size of the pair of them, she’d be squashed for sure.

“Yours?” The Lathar sneered. “I don’t see a bonding collar on your little human.” His gaze raked over Halle, and her skin crawled.

Kaas moved faster than she could see. One second, he was in front of her, and in the next, he had the other guy slammed up against the wall, a forearm crushing his windpipe.

The Lathar choked, clawing uselessly at Kaas’s arm as he dangled, his toes barely brushing the floor. Kaas shoved his scarred face into other aliens, his massive frame dwarfing his opponent’s as he kept him effortlessly pinned.

“If you so much as look at her again.” Kaas snarled, his deep voice a promise of violence. “I’ll rip your eyes out and make you eat them.”

The other male growled in reply and tried to shove Kaas away. She stepped back as the two men wrestled, the other Latharian breaking free long enough to swing at Kaas.

The big Latharian warrior spun, his lips peeled back as he launched

himself at the other male, a fist connecting with his jaw in a brutal strike that sent the smaller Lathar crashing into a nearby table. Dishes and glasses shattered across the floor.

Patrons scattered out of the way with alarmed shouts as the two males traded furious blows. Neither gave quarter as they grappled and struck. The Lathar punched Kaas in the gut, doubling him over with a pained grunt. In retaliation, Kaas seized the male by the back of his neck and slammed his head down as he drove a knee up into his stomach. The Lathar gasped as the air was forced from his lungs.

She winced as Kaas threw the suited Latharian into a nearby table. The sound of splintering wood and shattering glass filled the air. He pulled back, his chest heaving and his eyes blazing. His opponent lay on the floor, his face bloodied and body limp.

Kaas stood over the defeated lathar, his teeth still bared. "If you ever go near my mate again, I *will* kill you. Now get the *draanth* out of my sight."

The Latharian stumbled to his feet, his face pale. He didn't speak or look back. Instead, he hurried away with hunched shoulders as though he couldn't leave the restaurant quickly enough.

Kaas turned to Halle, his eyes searching her face. "Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head. "I'm okay."

He stepped closer, gently grasping her wrist and turning it to inspect where the other Lathar had grabbed her. His jaw tightened, seeing the red marks left behind.

"He put his hands on you," he ground out. "I'll kill him."

"It's okay," she said in a soft murmur, smoothing her hands over his chest. His skin was hot to the touch under her palms. "I'm okay. Honestly."

"You are mine now," he growled, his face tightening with lethal intent. "I will destroy any who try to harm you."

The vow sent a shiver down her spine. Somehow, she knew he meant every word. His fierce claim should have frightened her, but instead, a warm, fuzzy feeling spread out from the center of her chest.

He pulled her closer, his large hands closing around her arms and his face inches from hers. The scent of him, leather and musk and something distinctly alien, filled her senses, making her head spin.

"What am I going to do with you?" he murmured, his rough growl sending a shiver down her spine.

She couldn't answer. Couldn't even think. Her world had narrowed to this

moment, to the heat of his body where she pressed against him and the wildness in his eyes as he looked at her like she was the only woman in existence.

Then he kissed her.

It wasn't gentle. It wasn't soft. It was raw and demanding, a collision of need and desire that stole her breath and shattered her thoughts. His mouth was on hers, insistent and fierce as he demanded access... his tongue probing, tasting, conquering. Her body responded with a hunger she'd never known, a craving that threatened to consume her from the inside out.

She gasped, the sound lost under his lips as she gave in to the storm of sensation that swept over her. The feel of his lips against hers and the pressure of his larger, harder body was overwhelming, a tidal wave that pulled her under and left her gasping for air.

His hands were everywhere, one tangling in her hair and the other sliding down her back to cup her ass. She arched into him as a desperate need pulsed through her.

She wanted more. She wanted everything.

His hands moved down her back, pulling her closer, his body a solid wall of heat and strength. The kiss deepened, grew more urgent, more torrid.

Hungrier.

He broke the kiss, his breathing ragged and his eyes dark with longing as he looked down at her. Her lips were swollen, shivers running through her as she leaned against him. The restaurant, with its exotic ambiance and terrified onlookers, had faded into the background, and she shivered. She wouldn't have been able to break the kiss if he hadn't. She'd been at his mercy...

"Let's go home," he whispered, his voice husky and his gaze never leaving hers.

SHE NODDED, allowing him to lead her from the restaurant. His hand was warm and strong around hers as they made their way through the myriad of corridors in the station back to their quarters. It was good he knew where they were going. She didn't. Rattled by the kiss and the awareness that stretched between them, she wouldn't have been able to retrace their steps even if someone had paid her.

As they walked, she watched him from under her lashes. The way he'd moved, the raw power he'd shown in that fight... It was a side of him she

hadn't seen before, hadn't even been able to *guess* at, and it both fascinated and frightened her.

But more than that, she was struck by his protectiveness. The expression in his eyes and the darkness there had said it was more than because he'd claimed her as his mate. It seemed like an instinct, a primal *need*... to what? To keep her safe? Why would he do that? Why would he feel the need to do that? They'd only met yesterday. He couldn't have feelings for her already. Could he?

Finally, she recognized their corridor, their quarters halfway down the stretch of pale walls. The door slid open with a soft hiss, and she stepped inside, her thoughts still in chaos.

He followed her inside, the door closing behind them and leaving them alone in the dimly lit room. She felt him behind her, his breath warm on her neck. Then he turned her to face him, his hands gentle as his eyes searched hers.

"Are you sure you're alright?" he asked, his voice laced with concern.

She nodded. "It was... I... I mean, I've seen street fights before." From a distance, and she'd always gotten out of the way as quickly as possible. "But that was something else. I thought you were going to kill him."

He grunted, looking down at her. "I would have. He deserved it. He scared you."

She shuddered, and he tilted his head, watching her. "Latharian culture is brutal, little one. But I will always keep you safe. Come..."

Taking her hand, he led her through into the bedroom and around the bed. Reaching into a small drawer on the bedside table, he pulled out a delicate bracelet.

Her eyes widened. It was silver, its surface gleaming with an otherworldly luminescence. The design was unmistakably Latharian, with intricate symbols woven together to form a familiar pattern. Her eyes shot to the leather jacket he wore. The same pattern was worked into the shoulders and around the collar.

"This will show others that you are mine," he said, his voice a low rumble as he slipped it around her wrist. "They will see this, and no one will approach you again."

"It's beautiful. Thank you," she breathed as she turned her wrist, looking at the bracelet.

"I do have some questions."

“About the bracelet?”

She shook her head. “No. I understand what it is, and I’m grateful that you’ve given it to me.” Even though it was disastrously close to a symbol of ownership, she didn’t ever want another Lathar to look at her like the one in the restaurant had.

“Then what?” He loomed over her, but she didn’t think he was trying to be intimidating. Instead, he looked concerned.

“What do I do?” she asked.

“Do?” Kaas’s brow furrowed, his confusion plain. Then he shrugged. “Do female things?” he offered, the words coming out more as a question than an answer.

A smile twitched at the corner of her mouth. The innocence of his statement was both infuriating and endearing.

“What exactly are *female* things?” she asked lightly, her voice dripping with mock innocence.

He opened his mouth and then closed it again, clearly struggling.

“Well, what do females do to...” He gestured at her appearance.

Her eyebrow shot up. “To what exactly?” she challenged, leaning closer.

“To look so good!” he burst out, his voice exasperated.

His gaze roamed over her face. “Females always look... you look... You *are* beautiful. Surely, you need time and things to achieve that. I—”

His words hung in the air, and something inside her shifted. He thought she was beautiful. More than that, he thought she was beautiful in a T-shirt and joggers, with no makeup. Her heart didn’t just melt; it surrendered on the spot.

She reached out to touch the bracelet, but then she realized he was looking around the room, his eyes taking in what wasn’t there.

“You have no luggage,” he said.

“No,” she said, the memory of being whisked away without a chance to pack or say goodbye to her family hitting her like a punch to the gut. “Because *someone* insisted I was brought up right from the signing office. I didn’t get a chance to go home and pack a bag or say goodbye to my family.”

He winced.

“I will make this right,” he vowed, his voice thick with determination, and walked out, leaving her standing there.

“Well, okay then, good chat,” she said to the empty room.

She looked down at the bracelet again. He’d said she was his and thought

she was beautiful without makeup.
Maybe he *was* a keeper...

Left alone in their quarters, Halle wandered through the living area, glancing at the strange Latharian decorations, the sleek lines of the furniture, and the alien technology surrounding her. Everything was so different, so unfamiliar but also familiar at the same time. Like humans, the Lathar had two arms, two legs, and a head, so a seat or a table could only take so many configurations.

A pang of homesickness gripped her, and she reached for her communication device, tempted to call Sadie again. But she paused with it in her hand. She'd already called once this morning. If she called again, her sister would know something was wrong.

She sighed and put the device down to pick up her reader instead. The latest romance novel by her favorite author was waiting for her. She had been eagerly anticipating it, so she settled into a plush chair and opened it up, prepared to lose herself in the tale of love and passion. But even though the words were there, and the story unfolded before her eyes, something was off. Her mind kept drifting and recasting Kaas as the hero, superimposing his face, his voice... his touch onto the fictional character.

She shook her head, frustrated, and tried to focus, but it was no good. The images kept intruding. The way Kaas had looked at her, the raw power he had displayed, the gentleness with which he had given her the bracelet—it all played out in her mind, refusing to let go.

“Ugh!” she hissed. She'd just reread the same page.

Dropping her head back against the couch, she closed her eyes. The fictional romance and its hero paled compared to Kaas, her scarred alien

warrior. The reader slipped from her, clattering onto the table, and she buried her face in her hands in frustration. Couldn't she get a moment's peace from the handsome asshole?

The door chimes made her jump, and she looked up. She wasn't expecting anyone. Hell, she didn't even *know* anyone on the station, and Kaas was still off doing whatever he was doing. Even so, he wouldn't ring the chimes... he'd walk right in like he had at lunch. So who could it be?

She made her way to the door, her palms sweating as she reached for the control panel. The door slid open with a soft hiss to reveal a petite blonde woman standing in the hallway, pushing a small child in a buggy.

"Hi, can I help you?" Halle asked, her voice hesitant. From the looks of it, the woman was human and in the station's LMP area, so...

The blonde smiled, her eyes sparkling with warmth. "Hey! You must be Halle. I'm Naomi. Kaas's friend Rohn is my mate, and this is Maddy. I know what it's like to be new aboard the station, so I thought you might like to join us for a trip to the park."

Halle blinked. "A park? On a space station? Is that even possible?"

"I know it sounds strange." Naomi smiled. "But trust me. It's a wonderful place. It's a little oasis in the middle of all this technology and metal. You'll love it."

Halle's heart leaped at the thought. The idea of a park, of greenery and open space, was like a lifeline. She'd been cooped up in the same space for hours, her mind spinning and her emotions a tangled mess. The thought of going out, of seeing something new, was irresistible.

"I'd love to," she said quickly. "I'm bored out of my mind."

Naomi's smile widened, her eyes crinkling with pleasure. "I thought you might be. Come on. Let's go. Maddy's been itching to play, and I could use the company."

"Awesome."

She followed Naomi down the corridor, her mind still trying to wrap itself around the idea of a park on a space station. The walls were sleek and metallic, the lights soft and artificial, everything a reminder of how far she was from home. But Naomi's presence was reassuring, a new friend in a place where she had none.

"So how long have you been aboard? How are you finding it so far?" Naomi asked, her voice laced with curiosity as she glanced at Halle.

"Not long, just a day, actually," she admitted. "Everything's so new; it's a

bit overwhelming.”

Naomi’s smile widened as she gently squeezed Halle’s arm. “Oh, you’re just at the start of your adventure aboard! It’s exciting! And gets easier. I promise.”

Halle’s eyebrows shot up. So far, it had been frustrating and pretty terrifying, with random asides to bone-melting kisses. “Exciting? How so?”

Naomi laughed, the sound light and melodic.

“Where do I begin? Life on the station is filled with surprises. And Latharian men...” She trailed off, her eyes distant.

“Latharian men?” Halle prompted, intrigued by the direction the conversation was taking. The more she could learn about Kaas and the other aliens, the better.

Naomi’s face lit up. “Yes, you wouldn’t believe such hardened warriors are actually really romantic. Would you? I never expected that when I first met Rohn... my mate. They have this three-day courtship thing, you see. It’s filled with surprises, gestures, gifts, and shared experiences that will leave you breathless.” She playfully nudged Halle. “You’ll see soon enough.”

Halle’s eyes widened, her interest captured now. “A three-day courtship? What’s that like?”

Naomi’s laughter filled the corridor again, and she began to share, recounting her romance with Rohn. How she’d made him pizza and chips, and how Rohn had taken her and Maddy swimming in the most beautiful swimming pool. The story was punctuated with gestures and vivid descriptions, and Halle found herself drawn into Naomi’s world.

“And then,” Naomi said, pausing for dramatic effect, “when they’ve bonded with their mates, the men get mating marks on their wrists. It’s like a symbol, a declaration to the world that they’ve found the one they want to spend their life with. They look like these. See?” She pulled back her sleeve to show Halle an intricately engraved bracelet around her wrist. “Rohn had copies of his marks made and engraved onto this for me.”

Halle nibbled on her lip as thoughts of Kaas infiltrated her mind. She’d already agreed to Kaas’s claim, so would she get a courtship as well?

The hallways of the Lathar base twisted and turned like a complex labyrinth, but Naomi navigated them with a confidence that spoke of experience.

“We tend to congregate in certain areas,” Naomi explained, guiding Halle through the labyrinthine corridors with practiced ease. “It’s not that the rest

of the station is off-limits, but... well, a lot of Lathar out there haven't seen women who look like them for a long time. And some..." She shuddered, a shadow passing across her face. "Aren't above kidnap. So we stay where it's safe unless we're with our mates."

Halle's stomach twisted at the thought, a chill running down her spine. Her mind raced back to the incident at lunch.

"We were having lunch earlier," she said. "Kaas went to talk to someone he knew, and this Lathar guy just approached me, leering like he had every right to interrupt. He tried to convince me to go with him, even grabbed me."

She paused, swallowing hard, the image of Kaas's enraged face flashing before her eyes. "But Kaas... he just snapped. I've never seen anything like it. He grabbed the guy... nearly beat him to a pulp," she said, her words tumbling out in a rush. "His face, Naomi, I thought he might kill him."

Naomi reached out to give her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"It's not unusual for them to react like that," she said gently. "These warriors have been without women for so long, and Latharian culture is brutal. These men, these warriors, are highly possessive. They see us as theirs, and they'll do anything to protect what's theirs."

Halle shivered, a mixture of fear and excitement tingling down her spine. Kaas's reaction, his willingness to fight for her... was something she'd never experienced before.

"But don't worry," Naomi continued, her voice soothing. "We look out for each other here. We support each other, and help each other get used to things. You're not alone."

They reached the park, and the doors slid open. Halle's breath caught in her throat, her eyes wide with astonishment. Majestic trees reached toward the dome above them, their leaves rustling gently in the slight breeze. Flowers bloomed in a riot of colors—from delicate pastels to vibrant hues. Lush, green grass carpeted the ground as though inviting her to run across it in bare feet while a winding pathway led them through the park. Benches were tucked into cozy nooks surrounded by blooming shrubs and offering private retreats for lovers or solitary wanderers. It was unlike anything she'd ever seen.

She turned to Naomi. "This is incredible," she whispered. "I didn't know something like this was even possible here."

Naomi smiled. "I thought the same thing when I first saw it. It's a little piece of heaven. Isn't it?"

“I... I can’t believe it,” she stammered, her voice thick with emotion. “Where I come from, we don’t have anything like this. I’ve never seen so much green in one place.”

Naomi’s eyes narrowed, her gaze thoughtful as she studied Halle’s reaction. “You come from a lower-class area in the city. Right?”

Surprise filled her. “How did you know?”

Naomi shrugged, but her expression was kind. “A lot of the mate candidates come from lower-income areas. They see the mate program as a way of bettering their lot, of escaping... *down there.*”

Halle’s heart ached at the truth in Naomi’s words. She knew all about the struggles and hardships of life in a lower-class neighborhood. And it was all too common a story. For her, the LMP was a means to an end, a way to save Ollie, but she could see why others were driven to sign up.

They strolled further into the park, and the greenery parted to reveal an astonishing sight. A herd of delicate deer-like creatures roamed freely on the grass, their movements graceful as they grazed. They looked so peaceful, so otherworldly, with their long, slender necks and large, expressive eyes.

“What are those?” Halle asked, her voice filled with wonder.

“They’re *illaric*,” Naomi answered. “They’re gentle creatures.”

“They’re so beautiful,” she murmured.

“Come on,” Naomi urged, pushing the stroller toward the animals. “They’re very friendly.”

“They are? We can say hello?” she asked, hope filling her. The *illaric* looked up at their approach, their large, dark eyes filled with curiosity rather than fear.

“They’re not native to Lathar space, but they were brought here to add to the park’s natural environment,” Naomi explained, her voice low to not startle the animals. “They’re friendly, and Maddy loves to feed them.”

As if on cue, the small child let out an excited coo and clapped her hands, reaching into the bag Naomi held out for a handful of something that looked like grain.

Halle hesitated for a moment, a brief flicker of doubt crossing her mind, but she quickly banished it. She’d always loved animals, so she couldn’t resist and reached forward to bury her fingers into the soft blue fur on the nearest *illaric*’s neck. They were beautiful, their fur soft hues of blue and cream, their bodies slender and elegant.

Maddy tossed the grain, and they moved closer, their graceful legs

moving in a dance-like manner. Her lips curved into a smile, and she took a handful of grain from the bag.

“Here,” Naomi said, guiding her hand, “just hold it out like this. They’ll come to you.”

Her heart pounded, a thrill of anticipation running through her. She held out her hand, the grain resting in her palm, with her eyes locked on the nearest *illaric*. The creature’s eyes met hers, its gaze intelligent and probing, and it stepped closer, its nostrils flaring as it sniffed the grain.

She held her breath as it nibbled the grain from her palm, its touch gentle and warm. Her breath caught in her throat, and tears prickled her eyes.

“You like them?” Naomi asked, her voice soft.

She nodded, unable to find her voice for a moment. She remembered going to a zoo with her mom as a kid and feeding the animals, but that was long ago.

“They’re so beautiful,” she murmured again, feeling stupid for not being able to find the words for how she felt, but Naomi just reached out and gave her arm a gentle squeeze that said she understood.

The *illaric* finished off the grain and started to wander off. Halle watched them as they began grazing a short way away, but then her attention was caught by a Latharian warrior strolling down a nearby path. Although stalked would be a better description. Silver-haired and commanding, his piercing eyes and confident air radiated power, captivating Halle’s gaze.

“Who’s that?” she asked, her voice hushed and her eyes fixed on the striking Latharian.

Naomi followed her gaze and chuckled. “That’s Kaarigan K’Saan. He’s the emperor’s cousin, like Rohn, but from a different branch of the family.”

Halle turned to Naomi, her eyebrows raised, teasing light in her eyes. “Wait, if your mate’s a prince, does that make you a princess?”

Naomi laughed. “Technically, yes, it does. But don’t go calling me Princess Naomi or anything. I’ll never live it down with the others.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it... *Your Highness*,” Halle said with a grin.

Naomi swatted playfully at her, her laughter ringing through the air. “Oh, you’ll fit right in here. I can tell.”

They kept walking through the park in companionable silence. Maddy seemed content to ride in her buggy, blinking sleepily and playing with the tag on her silky blanket.

Halle slid a glance sideways at Naomi.

“So... you must know Kaas then, if your mate and Kaas are friends...” she said, her voice trailing off to leave a questioning pause.

Naomi shot her a look, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Don’t think I don’t see what you’re doing.” She grinned. “You’re trying to pry information out of me about Kaas.”

Halle blushed. “Can you blame me? I need as much information as I can get. He’s a closed book... doesn’t talk about himself at all.”

Naomi’s smile softened. “To be honest, I don’t know that much about Kaas either. Other than he’s dangerous. Rohn and Kaas haven’t been friends long, only since he helped Rohn rescue Maddy when she was kidnapped.”

Halle gasped in horror, her eyes wide. “Someone kidnapped Maddy?”

Naomi nodded, her face pale. “Yes. It was a terrifying time.” Her eyes, filled with gratitude, met Halle’s. “Kaas was part of the rescue team to get her back. Without him...”

“But who would do such a thing? Aliens?” Halle asked. “Well, *other* aliens, I mean. Not the Lathar.”

“Oh no, Lathar were involved,” Naomi said. “But it was mostly my ex. I signed up with the LMP to escape him. He was violent and controlling. When he threatened Maddy, I had to get away from him, to find a safe place where he couldn’t find us. But he followed us... and yeah, that’s how Kaas and Rohn became friends.”

“Oh my god, that’s awful.” Halle couldn’t think of a worse thing than a child being kidnapped. Thank goodness Ollie was safe back on Earth. “I’m glad you got her back, and everything turned out okay.”

“Thank you. So am I.”

“You said Kaas was dangerous?” Halle asked, searching Naomi’s face for clues. “What do you mean, dangerous? Like, ‘stay away from sharp objects’ dangerous, or ‘might eat you’ dangerous?”

Naomi’s lips quirked into a small smile before her expression softened. “Not the eating part... well, unless you’re lucky.” She flashed a quick grin.

“He’s an interrogator, and there aren’t many of them in the empire. He’s intense, very serious about his duty, and he possesses skills that make him both respected and feared. But,” she continued, her tone softer, “I’ve also seen how he looks when he talks about you. I’d say he’s already smitten and trying hard to deny it.”

Halle bit her lip but didn’t comment on that. Naomi was entitled to her opinion on Kaas.

“So what about his scars?” she asked suddenly. “Do you know how he got them? They look like they tell a story.”

Naomi’s brows furrowed, her head tilting slightly.

“I don’t. Normally, only healers have such scars. But it looks like he’s tried to remove some of them, which is very unusual. Healers usually show their scars off. They’re like a badge of honor to prove how high up the medical food chain they are.”

She blinked in surprise as goosebumps rose along her arms.

“So if he’s not a healer... then where did he get them?”

Someone kill him now and put him out of his misery.

Kaas kept a neutral expression on his face as he walked at the back of the group of warriors heading down the corridor. Lynara Varaant, the new academy commandant, led them, her voice pleasant to listen to as she outlined the reason she'd brought them all together today. They were to be the first instructors of the new academy programs, and as such, she wanted to include them in what seemed to be every aspect of the academy's planning.

He just hoped she wouldn't sit them down later and ask their opinion on decor or color schemes.

While he was proud to be part of such a noble endeavor—the empire had long since needed an alternative to the archaic weapons hall training system—he wished this wasn't *now*, when he had a mate to woo.

His thoughts flashed back to the events at the restaurant earlier, and his fists curled at his sides, his knuckles popping white. The smell of exotic spices still lingered in his nostrils, mingling with the acrid tang of his anger.

How had the empire degraded so severely that an asshole like that, one of the new wave of “business” Lathar who had flocked to the station like cockroaches, felt he had the right to approach a warrior's female? Worse, dared to touch her!

It had taken everything he had. Every ounce of discipline and self-control not to rip the offending *draanthic's* spine right from his body. It had been a dark and primal urge, a need to both protect his mate and prove that she was *his*... But he'd reined it in and only slapped the Lathar around a little bit.

Because Halle had been watching him.

Halle. His mate.

The one who had fainted at the first sight of him. He didn't need to prove to her he was, in fact, the monster she'd initially thought him.

He gritted his teeth as he walked, automatically keeping up with the rest of the group even though he wasn't listening.

Halle was a mystery to him still. That was to be expected, though. For all that humanity was descended from the Lathar originally, they *were* still human. A separate and distinct race. So her human emotions and expressions were foreign to him, her culture and expectations entirely different. Yet he found her strangely captivating. She feared him, yet she had taken his money, and accepted his claim.

In doing so, she'd become his. And even though she feared him, he wouldn't let her go. He wasn't that good a male. He'd paid for her; she'd accepted his claim, which meant she was his—end of story.

But still... he didn't want her to see the monster he was. He didn't usually care to hide his true self, but he would for her. He didn't want to see fear in her eyes when he touched or held her. His eyes narrowed. He wasn't sure if that was for her, so she was more at ease, or him being a coward and not wanting to face the truth of her reaction.

What if she saw the monster he could be? What if she witnessed the ferocity, the lethal intensity that lurked beneath the surface? Would she turn from him then? Reject him? Fear him?

He shook his head, his jaw set in determination. Not happening. He refused to lose her.

"Still with us, Interrogator V'aant?" Lynara's amused voice broke through Kaas's reverie and snapped him back to the present.

He looked up to find the group, a mixture of high-ranking and experienced warriors from across the empire, had stopped and were all looking at him. The group's combined presence was a force to be reckoned with, a gathering of the most seasoned and elite Latharian warriors.

"My apologies," he said. "I was lost in thought."

"I believe you are newly mated, so that's understandable. Lack of sleep often makes the mind wander," Lynara remarked, her eyes twinkling with amusement. Though she seemed human and delicate, she was ruthlessly Latharian, her every word and gesture radiating an unmistakable authority.

A ripple of soft amusement rolled through the group, but none of the males dared comment on his mating openly, which was sensible. What he

would tolerate from Lynara, who was his great-gods knew how many-great grandfather's sister, would leave a warrior bleeding his last on the deck at their feet, Kaas's blade buried in his throat.

He offered a small, polite smile.

"Of course, Commandant," he replied, the very model of courtesy. He was careful not to challenge her in front of such a distinguished assembly, especially one she had taken a leadership role over. That would be... he searched his mind for one of the human phrases Rohn was so fond of... a dick move.

"Okay, gentlemen, let's move on and look at the proposed entrance hall for the new academy," Lynara said, looking around the group. They were gathered in one of the great corridors, just off an entrance to the biodome that contained the park. "The emperor has kindly given us his permission to use the port wall of the park, which will give a wonderful view of the planet below in the evening."

Kaas's mind briefly flicked back to Halle. He wondered what she was doing, but then he refocused on Lynara's words as the group walked through the door into the park. He had to be present, to perform his duty, and not let his personal life cloud his judgment.

The park was a breathtaking technological marvel, a harmonious blend of the natural and the artificial. Containing plants and species from many of the Latharian worlds, it was a slice of home for the warriors stationed on the base and a tantalizing taste of the myriad worlds of the Latharian empire for humans.

"Obviously, we would not be taking up the entire park," Lynara said at the front of the group. "That would be unfair to the other citizens of the station, but we do have permission to use it for noncombative physical training and some lectures. To that end, we'll add sports courses, tracks, and an open-air theatre. Okay, if we stop around here, this should do nicely."

The group of warriors came to a halt. Unlike civilians, there was no milling about or chatter between them. They didn't fidget, instead just standing there waiting as Lynara crouched down and set up a portable holo-emitter.

"There we go..."

She stepped back, and murmurs of appreciation filled the air as the holo-structure took form in front of them. Kaas's eyes widened slightly as he took in the intricate design, a structure reminiscent of the empress's entrance to the

palace on Lathar Prime.

It was impressive, a monument to power and prestige. Kaas's lips quirked. For all that the emperor had made a big thing about ceding control of the academy to Lynara, he was certainly making sure to stamp his mark on it. Everyone knew the empress's palace entrance was Daaynal's favorite.

"Open discussion, gentlemen," Lynara said, facing them again. "I want to hear your thoughts on everything we've discussed today."

He turned his attention back to the presentation as the others began to speak, forcing himself to focus until a soft tingle against his wrist pulled his attention away again. He looked down. That notification was new, only added earlier, and designed not to be audible, just a mere whisper of sensation to get his attention.

He looked down to check his wrist comp. Halle was nearby, the signal from the bracelet he'd given her earlier strong. His body quickened at the knowledge she was so close. He hadn't told her the bracelet allowed him to track her location, and he didn't plan on it.

It was an assurance of her safety and that he would always be able to find her, something he needed after the incident at the restaurant. That *draanthic* could easily have snatched her, and even though that Lathar wasn't imperial, Halle still wouldn't have been able to do anything to stop him.

Kaas glanced at the display on his wrist comp, tapping out a command to locate her position. He would go to her as soon as Lynara finished the presentation.

"The emperor plans to have a double-columned entrance here," Lynara said, drawing his focus back to her words. The holo-structure shifted, showing massive double doors that would open onto the academy campus, dominating the skyline and eclipsing the trees behind.

"What about clearing the site?" one of the other's asked, glaring at the landscape where the campus entrance and the outer quads were to be. "How long will it take to get all this... stuff out?"

Kaas was no horticulturalist, but he'd once spent some downtime setting up a biodome like this, albeit on a much smaller scale. The trees were each planted in hexagonal pods, able to be moved for construction without disturbing their root systems. The topsoil around them would be stripped away; the trees relocated in the same configuration once finished. The park wildlife would adapt.

Speaking of wildlife, he looked around, wondering what species they'd

chosen as humanity's introduction to the animal life of the Latharian worlds. His gaze passed over the shade of the trees, and he froze.

There, hidden in the dappled shadows, were *illaric*. Vivid memories flashed through his mind. *Fangs and claws. Blood splashed across the rocks.*

Fear rolled down his spine like icy water. They couldn't be so careless. Could they? *Illaric* were a primary guise used by the *Rz'keni*, a fact they hadn't discovered until a pack had ripped through a sentinel unit over fifteen years ago. Warriors who were used to battling *Krin* hadn't stood a chance against the hidden *Rz'keni*.

"Madam Commandant," Kaas called out, keeping his voice carefully neutral. "Do you know if the wildlife here has undergone DNA sequencing?"

Lynara frowned at him over her shoulder. "No, I don't believe so. Why should they? There are only *illaric* and avians in here, nothing dangerous."

"*Draanth...*" Kaas swore under his breath, glancing upward. Through the glass ceiling, Earth's moon was starting to shine down into the dome's interior. Moonlight, any moonlight, triggered the change and brought the hidden predators out to hunt.

Screams split the air as the *illaric* shifted into their true *Rz'keni* forms. Monstrous creatures with fangs and talons burst from the gentle creatures they'd posed as.

He should have joined the warriors with him in a defensive formation, but only one thought dominated his mind.

Halle.

She was out there, alone and unaware of the danger.

He had to get to her. *Now.*

He broke from the group of warriors with a roar to sprint across the park. Chaos erupted around him as civilians fled in terror, but he didn't stop. Halle's safety was all that mattered.

Tree limbs and bushes whipped against him, leaving thin blood trails across his skin. He ran faster than he ever had in his life, his lungs and muscles burning from exertion. The bracelet tracker pulsed against his wrist, guiding him unerringly toward her location.

There...

He spotted her near a rock outcropping, fending off a hulking *Rz'keni* with a branch as she protected Rohn's mate and child, who were sheltering behind her. Halle swung viciously, striking the creature's gnarled head. It roared, enraged, and swiped back with lethal talons dripping blood from the

victims it had already claimed.

He hurtled into the fray with a savage cry, slamming a shoulder into the beast's side to shove it away from his mate before twisting to drive his blade into its chest. But the beast dodged the blow with unnatural speed and lashed out with its armored tail, sending him crashing into a tree.

Wood splintered from the impact. He rolled to his feet, his teeth bared in a vicious snarl. With eyes on the predator in front of him, he circled warily, keeping himself between it and the small group of females.

He twisted his wrist, activating his comms. "Kaas to security. I have two females and a child pinned in the north sector of the park. Assistance required urgently."

The creature lunged at him, its hungry gaze fixed on the small group behind him. Kaas feinted left but then sliced right, carving a deep gouge across the beast's shoulder. It shrieked, its forked tongue lashing as it turned on him.

They exchanged blows, his training and experience pitted against the creature's brute strength. He ducked and wove, blade slashing in quick strikes, trying to weaken the larger predator. But the *Rz'keni* absorbed each slash and cut, its rage growing.

It lunged, jaws gaping wide, and clamped down on his shoulder with razor-sharp teeth. He roared in pain, swinging his knife in a short, vicious arc to stab it hilt-deep in the creature's eye.

Howling, it released his mangled shoulder and reared back. He lunged forward, switching his remaining blade to his good hand to attack again. He stabbed repeatedly, his combat dagger finding the sweet spot between ribs again and again until the creature crashed to the ground with a sickening thud.

He staggered back, blood running in rivers down his arm as he watched the beast shudder its last and then lie motionless in the dirt at his feet.

Finally, he looked up to meet her horrified eyes.

It didn't matter that she'd seen him butcher a monster or that horror and fear shone in her eyes as she looked at him.

She was safe. That was all that mattered.

He dropped his blade on the *Rz'keni* and stalked toward her as security teams flooded the area.

"What the *draanth* did you think you were doing?" he raged, yanking away the stick she'd been using to defend herself and the other females from

the predator and throwing it aside. He hauled her into his arms, checking her for injuries in short, hard movements.

It was the wrong time of year for the predators' breeding season when their bite would infect their victims with their proto-young to be gestated in the soft spaces of their bodies, but that didn't mean its bite couldn't be fatal on its own.

"You could have been killed!" He snarled at her, terrified over what could have happened. "Going up against it with a... a *stick!* *Rz'keni* are lethal! Do you hear me?"

He shook her, hard hands around her upper arms, trying to shake some sense into her. She was soft and delicate, not a hardened warrior... she would have had no chance against the *Rz'keni*. He'd seen battle-hardened troops ripped apart by them in scenes that would never leave his nightmares. He couldn't have her take the starring role in those dreams. It would destroy him.

Her eyes were wide and dark, her skin pale. He flinched as he felt something brush against his chest and looked down. He blinked in surprise. She was smoothing her small hands over his chest. The soft touch hijacked his attention, and he yanked his head up to look at her properly.

Was she... trying to *soothe* him?

She *was*. Rather than being terrified at his outburst of rage, at seeing him tear apart an apex predator right in front of her, she was trying to soothe *him*.

"What are you doing, female?" he rasped, all the anger gone from his voice, leaving just a deep rumble. Deeper than even he'd heard it before.

"You're hurt, Kaas," she said, pressing closer, her hands smoothing up to flutter against his skin near his shoulder. He was still bleeding but sluggishly now. "We need to get you to the doctor."

He barely glanced at his shoulder. "No healers. You can clean it up in our quarters. Come, female."

*K*aas pulled Halle along the stark metal corridor, his hand clamped around her wrist like a shackle. The walls and flooring blurred, sterile grey and gleaming under the overhead lights. His long strides ate up the distance, half-dragging her as she struggled to keep up. She hurried along, not complaining. Worry gnawed at her gut, twisting her stomach. Not worry for herself but for the big alien warrior. His shoulder oozed blood from the gashes the creature's claws had left, but for some reason, she was irrationally relieved that it was red, like hers.

The power and rage he'd unleashed to protect her, Naomi, and Maddy took her breath away. She'd thought they would die right there in the park. That... whatever had erupted out of the alien deer had been like something out of her worst nightmares, just without tentacles. She was so glad it hadn't been tentacles... that would have just finished her off. She'd thought that was it as she stood there, trying to fend it off with a stick. She just knew they were about to die right there and then.

But then he was there, arriving like an avenging god to deal death with the two daggers he never seemed to take off, not even to shower.

They passed others in the corridors, and Kaas bared his teeth if any dared look her way, a vicious snarl rumbling from his chest. The other warriors instantly dropped their gazes.

She watched him from beneath her lashes, intrigued by his ferocity. He'd been possessive before, warning other men off, but this went beyond that. Before, it had been a warning, but now she really *did* believe he was about to rip them apart just for the crime of looking at her. After the games human

men played, just wanting no-strings-attached fun... or simply ghosting her when she refused to play their games, his fierce possessiveness was a seductive change.

They reached their quarters, and he pulled her through into the bedroom.

“Where’s your first aid kit?” she asked.

Kaas pointed toward the bathroom.

“In there. The cabinet behind the mirror.”

“On it.”

She stepped into the huge bathroom and looked at the mirror above the vanity.

“Errr... Kaas?” she called out in confusion. “The mirror is part of the wall?”

“*Humans*. It’s built into the wall,” Kaas called out from the bedroom. “Use your thumbprint to open it.”

She blinked, approaching the mirror. It looked like a section of the wall, but who was she to argue about alien technology?

“How?”

She heard the faintest edge of irritation in his voice. “Just press your thumb against the side of it. Anywhere on the edge.”

She stepped closer and did as instructed, pressing her thumb against the glass. She gasped as it lit up with blue light before the whole section dropped back an inch into the wall and slid to the side. Her eyes widened as she was presented with an array of what she hoped were alien medical supplies. At least bandages and dressings were easy to identify. She grabbed everything she could reach and carried it all back to dump on the bed.

Kaas lowered his solid frame to the mattress with a groan and unfastened his ruined jacket slowly, his movements careful. The shredded leather fell to the floor with a wet slap, exposing his bare torso, crisscrossed with ropes of silvery scar tissue.

Halle’s eyes traced over the rigid muscles of his chest and arms. Apart from the gnarled scars, he was handsome, with chiseled features and intense pale blue-grey eyes. His body was powerfully built, honed by a lifetime of battle.

She tore her gaze away, her cheeks heating at her body’s response even in this dire situation, and focused on readying the bandages with shaking hands. Adrenaline was still coursing through her system. They had come so close to death... would have died if not for Kaas arriving like an avenging angel to

protect them.

She approached, a small bowl filled with sterile cleaner and a dressing in her hand to clean the wounds on his shoulder. She winced as she looked at them. The *Rz'keni* had torn through skin and muscle, almost down to the bone, and the gashes oozed crimson blood, the color vivid against his skin.

The sight of the raw wounds made her stomach churn, bile rising in her throat. She choked it down and began gingerly cleaning away the blood, revealing the extent of the damage.

"I'm so sorry. I'll try to be gentle." She winced, keeping her touch light. "We should take you to see Kellat. These are nasty."

Kaas grunted, the cords of his neck standing out from the pain, but otherwise, he barely flinched. The beast had nearly torn his arm off, so the pain must be immense. She was surprised he could even move it.

"How are you doing that?" she asked. "This has to be hurting you. I'd be a complete mess if I hadn't already passed out at the sight of my own blood."

He lifted his head, meeting her gaze directly. He raised his good hand, motioning wordlessly to the mesh of scar tissue marking his skin.

"I have a high pain threshold," he rasped in a low voice. It was tighter than usual, the only outward sign of pain.

She winced in sympathy, her chest aching at what he must have gone through to get those scars.

"You never told me about them," she said lightly. "It must have been awful. I'm so sorry."

Surprise flashed across his rugged face as he looked up at her. Then his eyes warmed, his voice gentling. "Are you...*worried* about me, little mate?"

The endearment sent a flush spreading over Halle's cheeks. "No... Yes. Maybe," she hedged, focusing intently on cleaning the last oozing gash and ignoring the flush of heat flaring over her cheeks.

He reached out with his good hand and picked up a small device in the jumble of stuff she'd dropped on the bed. He pressed it into her palm. "Turn it on and run it over the wounds," he directed.

As soon as her hand closed around it, it started to vibrate and she jumped.

"Oh! What is it?" she asked, reaching out to carefully trace over his wounds. Her eyes widened as, under the faint, turquoise glow, the torn flesh began knitting itself back together from the bottom up.

"It's a field healer," he explained. "A smaller version of the same technology in the beds in the healer's bay here on the station."

“That’s awesome. It’s like it’s knitting it from the bottom upward.”

He nodded. “Essentially it is. It’s reconstructing at the cellular level. As it gets higher in the wound, it will pull the edges in and knit them together.”

“Holy shit, it is!” she breathed, watching in fascination as the device did just as he described. Extra beams of light shot out to the edges of the wounds and dragged them toward each other. Within minutes, the gashes had sealed, leaving fresh pink scars.

“That is so cool... did they use one of these when you were in the accident?” she asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

“I wasn’t in an accident.”

“So, how did you get all these scars? In battle?”

He sighed, running a hand over his face. “No, not in battle.”

She paused, unsure if she should continue to press for more information.

“Then how?” she asked gently, her curiosity getting the better of her.

His expression hardened. “You wouldn’t understand.”

She bit her lip. Human culture was very different from Latharian. Unless they were born into money or high society, humans had to work hard for the necessities to survive, but that didn’t mean they had to fight in intergalactic wars or face creatures like the monster in the park.

He watched her, his expression unreadable. “Did you think I was injured in battle?”

She paused and then pursed her lips as she glanced at his older scars. “I’m not an expert, but these look like they’re all the same age, and I don’t think you’re *that* bad a warrior. If you were, you wouldn’t still be alive.”

“Glad to know my mate has such confidence in my abilities.” He grinned, watching her like a hawk.

She shivered, feeling like prey, but in the best way.

“And you are correct. They are not from battle. I have never been wounded in combat to such an extent. These scars are from my trials years ago.”

It was the first real thing he’d told her, so she concentrated on healing the last of the wounds that curled over his shoulder, hoping he would continue.

“Trials?”

“I am healed, and we are done talking,” he said firmly, taking the device from her hand.

When he suddenly pulled her into his lap, Halle squeaked in surprise. She braced one hand against his chest, mindful of his freshly healed wounds.

“Kaas, you’ll reopen the gashes!”

Ignoring her protest, he wrapped one muscular arm around her waist. His hand spanned nearly the width of her back, the touch possessive. Heat washed through her as her body molded to the hard planes of his chest and thighs. This close, his clean, masculine scent enveloped her senses, the steady beat of his heart pounding against her palm.

“Are you always this bossy?”

“Absolutely.” He grinned, and his other hand came up, brushing a few strands of hair back from her face with unexpected tenderness.

“Soothe me more, little mate,” he ordered in a low rasp, lifting her easily so she straddled him as he lay back on the bed. “Tend to my... well-being.”

Her breathing hitched sharply as the hard bar of his cock pressed against her core. His arousal was unmistakable even with the layers of their clothing between them. She bit her lip as a bolt of need and heat washed through her veins, and she realized just how *big* he was.

“That will never fit,” she gasped, her hands spread out on the broad expanse of his heavily muscled chest.

She wasn’t innocent; she’d had lovers before, but not anyone as large as Kaas, and her pussy clenched at the idea. What would it be like to have him press inside her, parting and stretching her around him?

“It will if I do my job right.” He grinned wickedly at her, his hands clamping down over her hips as he rocked his against her.

Her eyes almost rolled back in her head at the sudden pleasure.

“Yeah, *kelarris*,” he murmured. “That’s all for you, and you’re going to be a good girl and take it all. Aren’t you?”

She bit back a moan as his dirty talk sent another wave of arousal sweeping through her. Without thinking, she rubbed against him, seeking more pleasure from the contact.

He responded to her touch by pressing his hips harder against her, the eagerness in his movements driving her wild. Her breath caught as she felt the hardness of his body pressed against her. She trembled as a wave of pleasure cascaded through her veins, and shuddered in delight. She wanted him inside her, wanted to feel all of him, to feel him claiming her completely.

He turned them suddenly, manhandling her with an ease that thrilled her. Then he loomed over her, one knee pressed between her legs, parting them as he pinned her to the bed. He eyed her clothing, a hard look in his eyes.

“I can’t wait. I’ll get you new clothes,” he growled.

And with that, he started to rip them from her, the fabric tearing easily beneath his huge, powerful hands. She squeaked in surprise and tried to cover herself, but his grip was too strong as he tore the LMP T-shirt and joggers from her, followed swiftly by her underwear.

She might have been embarrassed, but instead it felt strangely liberating and sexy as he stripped away her clothing piece by piece.

The heat in his eyes burned brightly as she lay there, exposed before him. His gaze devoured her curves hungrily as he pulled back and stripped out of the rest of his clothes. Her eyes widened at the sight of him, fully revealed to her, and a swell of desire threatened to rob her of breath.

Returning to her, he reached out and cupped her breast in a big, rough-skinned hand. Fondling her, he stroked and caressed before gently rubbing his thumb over her sensitive nipple. She bit her lip, watching the expressions on his face as he learned her body. When he pinched her nipple, she moaned, her head dropping back against the sheets as the wave of pleasure shot straight down between her legs, making her clit throb with need.

He continued to caress her as he lowered himself onto her, their bodies pressing together from chest to toe. The hard planes of his body against her softer curves was a torture all its own, and she couldn't help but arch up against him, seeking more contact. More of his skin on hers.

She gasped as his mouth met hers, the sound lost under a hard, devouring kiss that left her dizzy with need and desire. His hands roamed over every inch of her exposed skin, leaving trails of fire in their wake. He stroked lower, teasing her belly and making her abs clench as he held her legs open with a hard knee. She watched his face, the utter determination and need turning his hard features into granite. She felt like a sacrifice spread out before him, helpless and at his mercy.

He looked up, catching her gaze as he reached her pussy lips. He teased her, stroking the crease where her leg met her body before moving on to the outer lips. He used feather-light touches that had her arching up against him, ready to beg for him to touch her where she needed... where she ached the most.

Her breath escaped her in a stuttering moan as he put her out of her misery and parted her pussy lips to stroke her clit. She whimpered and arched up as he explored further, stroking and teasing until she was on the brink of orgasm. Reaching up, she gripped the bedclothes above her head, only to find her wrists captured, strong fingers like manacles around her skin.

He increased the pressure, as if working out what she liked, but then his fingers found the entrance to her body and pushed inside. She bit her lip, biting back the moan that grew within her as he moved his hand, scissoring his fingers as he thrust and pulled back to stretch and prepare her for him.

“*Draanth*,” he murmured. “You’re so tiny and tight.”

She didn’t have the words to answer him, not when he added the pressure of his thumb rubbing against her clit as he fucked her with his fingers.

“That’s it,” he praised her as he pushed harder, faster. “Give it to me. I want it all.”

His words pushed her over the edge, and she shattered apart under him. She gasped as wave after wave of sensation crashed over her. He released her hands, and she used them to grip his as he thrust deeper still, pushing her higher... until she went limp, completely spent from pleasure.

When he leaned in for a kiss, she could taste herself on his lips and murmured softly in the back of her throat.

He moved over her, parting her thighs further with his knee, and then she felt the head of his cock pressing insistently at the entrance to her body.

Holding her gaze, he pushed inside her, parting and stretching her around the broad head of his cock. He pushed more, working his hips back and forth as he filled every inch of her with his impressive length.

The feeling of him inside her brought an instant gasp, and his low chuckle rumbled through her body, making her quiver. His fingernails dug into her skin as he filled her, the sensation and pleasure almost too much to bear.

He moved slowly, pushing his cock into her until it could go no farther, and held still. She bit back her whimper. Her pussy ached and throbbed around him, stretched to the limit. She daredn’t move, just in case.

But then the need became too much. The itch to move filled her until she couldn’t restrain it and rocked her hips. He hissed, his lips pulled back from his teeth as his features hardened. His cock jerked and pulsed within her.

“Do that again, little mate, and I’ll fuck you until you’re ruined for any other male,” he promised. “I’ll make you scream my name until you are hoarse and you have forgotten all other males but me.”

She nodded up at him, her eyes wide. His threats were unnecessary. She’d already forgotten any man but him, memories of her previous lovers gone and scattered beyond recovery.

He pinned her hands above her head again and started to move.

“You’re so tight. It feels incredible,” he whispered huskily in her ear,

growling as he moved, pressing his hips against hers each time he thrust into her.

Her arousal grew, spiraling higher and tighter. She moaned and dug her nails into the sheets as he moved faster and harder with each stroke.

Then the pleasure was too much to bear, and she reached the edge of ecstasy. She screamed his name as she came, her pussy clenching around his cock buried deep inside her. Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over her, threatening to drown her in its depths.

He swore and shoved in harder, faster, until he tumbled over the edge to join her. Throwing back his head, a deep, guttural moan escaped his throat as his cock jerked and pulsed, bathing her inner walls with his white-hot seed. If she'd been in her right mind, rather than wallowing in utter bliss, she'd have been embarrassed by the rush of wet heat that escaped around his cock to flood her legs and the sheet beneath.

He collapsed on top of her, big body trembling. They lay there for a moment, her fingers idly playing with his hair as her heart pounded against his chest.

He rolled over and pulled her with him. She pouted as he slid from her, leaving her feeling suddenly empty, but he pulled her to nestle on his chest and wrapped strong arms around her.

“Shhh, little mate,” he rumbled. “Sleep now. Rest.”

She would have argued, but her eyelids fluttered shut. She felt too lethargic to move, and sleep beckoned. Safe and content in Kaas's arms, she let it take her down into the darkness.

*K*aas woke slowly, his senses coming alive one by one. First was the soft warmth pressed against him and then came the sweet floral scent as he inhaled deeply. He kept his eyes closed for a moment, breathing in her fragrance and relishing the feel of her soft, warm body tucked against his. This was how he wanted to wake every morning, with his beautiful mate safe in his arms. He shifted, his arms tightening around her to keep her in place, and opened his eyes to look down at her.

Halle.

His female.

His mate.

Contentment flowed through him at the sight of her still peacefully sleeping, her soft skin pale in contrast to his battle-scarred hide. She was beautiful in that alien way only a human woman could be, all smooth curves and angles that were foreign and fascinating to him. She looked so peaceful, her dark hair flowing over his chest and a slight smile curling her soft, pink lips. Contentment swelled in his chest, and unable to resist, he leaned in to brush his lips over hers in a feather-light caress.

Mine, the primal male inside growled. And she was, finally, his. No one would part them now that he'd claimed her. She was bound to him. He would never allow it.

A twinge of concern filled him as he looked at her. She was so small and fragile compared to his large warrior's frame. Even though that aroused him, he had to be careful with her. The differences between their species required adjustments so he didn't hurt her.

Her eyelids fluttered at the touch, and he was transfixed as she opened her eyes to focus on him sleepily. He tightened his arms to pull her closer and kissed her again, deeper this time, twining his tongue with hers. Triumph rolled through him as she surrendered with a feminine moan that sent fire surging through his blood.

“Good morning, *kelarris*,” he broke the kiss to murmur, delighted to find his little mate sleepy but responsive to his touch.

Reaching out, he trailed a tender fingertip along her cheek. He’d spend all night charting the differences between her delicate, soft skin and his, rougher and battle-toughened. It was something he would never tire of exploring.

She gave a tired stretch, her soft skin sliding against his.

“Mmm...morning,” she mumbled back, a hint of pink touching her cheeks at the intimate contact.

He couldn’t resist another kiss after that, his body raging at him as he claimed her lips again. She responded eagerly, winding her arms around his neck, and he growled approvingly. Having his mate accept him so willingly made his blood heat.

With a low curse, he forced himself to pull away, trailing one final kiss over her full lips. “As much as I want nothing more than to stay here with you, I’m afraid I must leave soon for training.”

She pouted, the soft expression of disappointment on her face almost enough to have him say *draanth it* and neglect his duty to stay in bed with her all day.

“Do you have to go?” she asked softly, trailing her fingers down his biceps in what he was sure was an unconsciously seductive motion. Until he looked into her eyes and saw the wicked little smile there. Realization hit him. The little human minx was trying to tempt him.

He gritted his teeth at the pleasurable sensation even as his body hardened with need and desire.

“Yes,” he grunted. “I am already late. But tonight...” He nipped softly at her ear, encouraged when she shivered. “Tonight, you are all mine, little mate.”

Pushing from the bed, he headed into the washroom facilities. A few minutes later, he walked back through, buckling his leather combat pants. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Halle pause as she straightened the linens on the bed, her gaze fixed on him for a moment. Then she ducked her head, a pretty blush flaring her cheeks.

His lips quirked, a surge of masculine satisfaction rolling through him. He turned slightly as he reached for his weapons belt, flexing his abs and giving her an unobstructed view of his body. The fact that his little mate appreciated his warrior physique pleased the primal male inside, so he moved slowly, flexing his muscles to entice her as he pulled his uniform jacket on.

Her blush deepened, and she straightened the linens like she wasn't paying attention to him. The problem was that she had tidied the same linens three times already.

Arching an eyebrow, he moved toward her.

“See something you like, my mate?” He chuckled.

Her blush turned scarlet, but she lifted her chin in challenge. “Maybe. Is that a problem?”

“Not at all.” Unable to resist touching her, he slid his hands around her waist and tugged her closer. Feeling her slight frame against him eased something deep inside. “I want you to look. I want you to desire me as I do you.”

Her breath caught, pupils dilating at his possessive tone. Triumph surged within him again. Having his mate respond so strongly to him satisfied the primal urges of his nature.

With reluctance, he released her and stepped back. “But I should leave. I'll be late for training. Tonight, though...”

She wet her lips. “Would you like some coffee before you go? I was going to make some.”

He considered the offer. He wasn't fond of the bitter liquid preferred by humans, but this was the first time she'd offered an act of service to him. He would choke the damn stuff down if he had to.

“If you wish.”

She gifted him a warm smile he instantly wanted to see again and grabbed his hand to lead him out of the bedroom. He sat on a stool and watched her bustle around the small food preparation area, humming as she fetched mugs and measured out coffee.

This easy mood between them was new but more than welcome. Having his mate see to his needs stirred his protective instincts even as her obvious happiness kindled warmth within his chest. She glanced over her shoulder, gifting him with a shy smile when she caught him watching her.

He smiled back. He was the luckiest male alive. His little mate was utterly lovely, and the way she watched him from beneath her lashes as she

prepared their drinks had him using every ounce of discipline he had to stay where he was and not boost her up onto the counter and make her his breakfast.

“I didn’t think I would be able to get decent coffee up here, but this stuff is amazing,” she said, carrying the mugs to the counter and sitting across from him. He watched as she took a careful sip of the steaming liquid and sighed in appreciation. “This is just what I needed this morning. Aren’t you going to try it?”

He eyed the dark brew dubiously. “Latharians do not share human tastes regarding food and drink.”

But he still lifted his mug and sipped cautiously at the hot, bitter liquid. Then he smiled, hiding his grimace at the taste. “I could... get used to it.”

Oblivious to his struggle, Halle smiled happily.

“So, you guys train in the morning. What does that entail?” she asked.

Kaas hesitated, reluctant to share details of the violent, bloody exercises that prepared him for battle and interrogation. Such things would likely disturb his little mate.

“All warriors are required to complete daily training... *diraanesh*,” he explained. “It’s to condition the mind and body for battle. We assemble in the training halls and either train alone or in small groups. If we are attached to a clan, training is determined and led by the clan’s training or weapons master.”

At her interested look, he described the training halls themselves and then explained how trainees were sorted into pairs and groups based on size and skill level. He didn’t mention the ferocity of their sparring or the potential for injury. She didn’t need to know that.

She listened with bright interest, prodding him now and then for more details. He chose his words with care, concealing the harsher realities of a warrior’s life... his life... to avoid causing her distress.

Throughout their conversation, his awareness of her never faded. The way she licked drops of coffee from her lips, leaving them moist and pink, teased his imagination with thoughts of other things her lips and agile little tongue might do. Heat stirred his blood as fantasy warred with duty.

Reluctantly, he pushed back his mug and rose. “As much as I’ve enjoyed spending this time with you, *kelarris*, I must leave for training now.”

Disappointment filled her expression, and she bit her lip. “I wish you didn’t have to go so soon.”

Unable to resist, he moved around the counter to tug her into his arms for a fierce kiss. When he lifted his head, her lips were swollen and her eyes dazed.

“Later, little mate,” he rasped.

With effort, he released her and strode from their quarters before he gave in to temptation. He had training. There would be time to seduce his beautiful mate later...



HALLE'S MIND WHIRLED, her lips still tingling with Kaas's kisses as she stared at the door he'd left for training through. She still couldn't believe that the big, scary warrior had turned into the alien equivalent of a sex god. Her cheeks heated. The things he'd done to her last night... had her do to him. She was sore in places she hadn't realized existed. And she'd do it all again.

She bit her lower lip. His scent still lingered in the air, like the promise of more to come, and she found herself smiling like a love-struck teenager. She shook her head, amused at her silliness.

She was a grown woman; she'd had sex before. Admittedly, it hadn't been *great* sex, but it was still sex. She had no reason to be mooning around, staring at doors as she waited for him to come back.

She moved around the little kitchen, feeling like a child again with the size of the room and the furniture. At least she didn't need a stool to put the coffee on. That would have just added insult to injury. Picking up the coffee mugs, she took them over to the sink.

She chuckled as she held one up to the light, studying the peculiar yet beautiful Latharian design over the side. The mug was an odd, higgledy-piggledy design that made her think they were falling over every time she put one down. But mugs were mugs. They held coffee all the same, even if they looked odd. Odd, but somehow right all at the same time.

“Who'd have thought coffee mugs could look so... alien,” she muttered to herself, still buzzing with happiness.

But wasn't that how everything felt? Perfectly alien, yet perfectly right. Like the kiss, like Kaas, like the wild whirlwind of emotions that had swept through her since he had tumbled her into bed last night and showed her just how right her big Latharian warrior was for her.

She hummed to herself as she washed the mugs, and her mind wandered back to their not-so-smooth beginning. She still couldn't believe she'd fainted when she met him or how her heart had raced with terror at the sight of his scars. She'd been sure the LMP had let a monster buy her.

But Kaas wasn't a monster. He was a warrior, and every mark on his body told a story—one he wasn't ready to tell her yet. But he hadn't judged her as she'd judged him. He hadn't teased her or scoffed at her fears. Instead, he'd scooped her up and carried her to the medical bay, more concerned for her than insulted by her reaction to him.

Another pot of coffee found its way onto the machine. Kaas might have been content with his barely touched mug, but she certainly wasn't. Oh no, she needed her caffeine kick in the morning. The smell began to fill the room, and she inhaled deeply. It was alien coffee, but she picked up notes similar to vanilla and cocoa, scents familiar and comforting in the alien surroundings.

With the coffee situation now sorted, she moved into the bedroom and stopped dead when she saw the chaotic mess of the bed. She'd tried to straighten it earlier, but with Kaas getting dressed, she'd been a little distracted. Who wouldn't be with the way he was built? Especially now she knew exactly what he could do with that big, powerful body.

She tutted under her breath and set about fixing the sheets. Her fingers touched the cool, silver material and she paused, the sensation catching her off guard. She hadn't noticed last night because she'd been...busy, but they felt like silk, soft and luxurious, unlike anything she'd felt before.

Heat filled her cheeks at the memories of the way those sheets had felt against her skin as she had been tangled in Kaas's arms. A shiver ran down her spine, the sense-memory so vivid she could almost feel him beside her again.

She finished straightening the bed, but then the sound of the coffee machine announced that her drink was ready and she made her way back to the kitchen to pour herself another mug.

Cradling the oddly shaped mug in her hands, she leaned back against the countertop and closed her eyes, savoring the scent. She'd never asked Kaas what it was made of. Perhaps there were alien coffee plants out there? She froze, her lips pursed to blow the steam off the top of the mug. What if it was made of alien bugs or something?

"Nope, nope, nope," she muttered. "Don't want to know. Coffee is coffee."

The sudden chime at the door made her jump and snapped her out of her reverie. Putting her mug down, she padded across the main room, the lush sensation of the expensive carpet beneath her bare feet almost caressing her with each step. It was like walking on a cloud, a tactile reminder of the luxury she now found herself in and a far cry from the sad little apartment she'd shared with her sister.

She had to get Sadie up here. There was no way she could bear for her sister and little Ollie to continue living in Evergreen when she was in the lap of luxury. She would ask Kaas if there were any apartments Sadie could rent up here.

She waved her hand over the plate by the door, and it opened automatically, revealing a bot waiting outside. It blinked at her with its odd mechanical eyes. She'd seen them before, yesterday when she'd been out with Naomi. Apparently, they had been adapted from much larger military robots and made cuter so as not to scare the humans aboard the station. She had to admit it had worked. They were cute as fuck.

"Delivery for Ms. Halle?" it announced chirpily.

"Um, yes, that's me," she said, confused. Since when did she receive packages? Especially up here on an alien space station.

With a nod, the bot handed over a neatly wrapped parcel, the size of it almost making its spindly little arms bow. "Compliments of Interrogator V'aant. Enjoy your day!"

"Errr, thank you," she said, staring at the package as the door slid closed behind the retreating bot. Kaas had sent her something? Why?

She carried it over to the breakfast bar and turned it over in her hands. She didn't get presents much, so this was new and exciting. She felt like a little kid again.

The package was heavier on one side and felt squishy on the other. Anticipation built as she tore into the wrapping, and she gasped as fabric and bottles spilled out. Her eyes widened as she sorted them out and found new dresses in her favorite colors, a pair of delicate shoes, and an assortment of toiletries. Each item was exactly what she would have picked for herself.

She blinked, eyes burning with tears as she realized Kaas had sent everything she needed for a couple of days. She found a note in the package.

Until I can take you shopping properly. K.

She bit her lip as the reality of what Kaas had done hit her, and she covered her mouth with her hand. He'd been out shopping for her. Not only

had he saved her, Naomi, and Maddy from that hideous beast yesterday, risking his own life and getting injured, but he'd also found time to do this for her. Her big, grumpy, wonderful warrior.

Warmth filled her from head to toe. When did she get so lucky?

A laugh bubbled up, mixed with the tears, as she picked up one of the dresses, holding it against herself and twirling in front of the mirror. It was beautiful, and she couldn't wait to wear it.

With a contented sigh, she headed into the bedroom. She needed to shower and change, and then she could figure out where Kaas was and see if she could join him for lunch or something.

She didn't spend long in the shower. Quickly drying off, she slipped into one of the new dresses, admiring the way it hugged her curves. It made her feel beautiful as it swished around her ankles.

A smile played on her lips. She couldn't wait to see Kaas's reaction when he saw her. She loved the way his eyes darkened with desire and how he pulled her close and held her. Like he'd never let her go.

She was still admiring herself in the mirror, a playful smile on her lips as she twirled in her new dress when her comms device buzzed. She fumbled for the device from the bedside cabinet, her heart still caught in the lingering haze of happiness as she flipped it over to check the ID code.

Sadie.

Her smile broadened as she answered, ready to catch her sister up on everything that had happened.

"Halle? Halle, is that you?" Sadie's voice crackled over the communicator, tight with panic.

"Yeah, Sadie, it's me. What's wrong?" Halle asked, her good mood disappearing in a heartbeat. Her sister's face, pale and tear-streaked, filled the small screen, and Halle's heart stuttered in her chest.

She looked terrified.

"It's Ollie, Halle," she said quickly, her words tumbling over themselves. "The doctor, Doctor Crane... he's demanding another hundred thousand credits. I don't know what to do. I can't get that sort of money together, and he's threatening to send the bailiffs around. He says that Ollie's treatment has left proprietary genetic technology in his body, and they need to... recover their costs."

"What?" Halle's voice was a strangled whisper as Sadie's words hit her like a punch to the gut—the room spinning around her. "No, Sadie, you can't

let them in. Don't let them anywhere near Ollie."

"But what can we do, Halle? We don't have the money, and Doctor Crane says the technology in Ollie's body is worth more than we could ever pay. He says if we don't pay up, he'll have no choice but to... to..."

She heard the unspoken words and the horror in her sister's voice. It was the same as the horror that rolled through her veins. "Recover costs" was a euphemism. The doctor intended to harvest and sell Ollie's organs—an act that would kill him.

"I'll call you right back, Sadie. Just don't let them in. Keep Ollie safe. I'll fix this. Somehow, I'll fix this," she said, her voice firm. "Just hold on. Okay?"

She ended the call, her mind in chaos. The room closed around her, the walls pressing down. She stumbled to the couch, her legs giving way beneath her as she collapsed, tears she couldn't show Sadie streaming down her face.

Shit. How had it come to this? How had they reached a point where her nephew's life was being held ransom, and a *doctor* could demand his organs in payment for treatment that had barely kept him alive?

She closed her eyes, her thoughts full of Ollie. His smile, his laughter... the way he'd look up at her with those big, trusting eyes. He was just a child, innocent and full of life.

She couldn't let this happen. She couldn't let him die.

Her mind raced, thoughts tumbling over one another as she tried to figure out what to do. She had no money, no resources. But she had Kaas.

Her fingers shook as she punched Kaas's ID number into her comms device, panic rising in her throat like bile.

The call connected, and Kaas's growling voice broke through her thoughts. "Halle, what's the matter? I'm training right now."

His tone was tight, not angry, but not exactly approachable. Her words dried up in her throat. No way could she tell him the truth.

"I'm sorry to bother you. I know you're busy," she stammered, tears blurring her vision. "I just... I need to ask you something."

A pause followed, the silence thick and heavy. "What is it?"

"Can I... can I get a job on the station?" The words tumbled out of her mouth before she could stop them. It wasn't an unreasonable request, she reasoned. She was used to working, and she had nothing to do. No one could blame her for wanting to fill her days while Kaas was on duty.

"What?" he snapped, his voice thunderous. "A job? No, you will *not* get a

job, Halle. I provide for you. That should be all you need.”

“But Kaas, I just thought—”

“You just thought what?” he roared, rage deepening his voice. “That you could defy me? That you could go behind my back and work like some common laborer? By all the gods, Halle, sometimes I wonder why the LMP saddled me with a female who worships money above all else.”

The words were a slap in the face, and her head snapped back as if he’d struck her. Was that what he thought of her? Tears welled in her eyes, and her heart broke as she realized how far apart they were, how little he understood her.

“Kaas, please, just listen—” she begged, prepared to tell him everything, but he cut her off mid-sentence.

“No, Halle, you will listen. We will talk about this when I get back later. But know this. I will not tolerate disobedience, and I will not tolerate betrayal.”

Then he cut the call, leaving her standing there, the communicator slipping from her numb fingers and clattering to the floor.

She blinked.

She was alone, utterly and completely alone. Her big, grumpy warrior, the man who’d saved and cared for her, wouldn’t even listen to her.

The communicator buzzed again and she scooped it up off the floor, hoping beyond hope that it was Kaas calling back. But it wasn’t her mate. It was Sadie, her face pale and terrified, her eyes wide with horror.

She wasn’t looking at Halle, though. Instead, she looked off-camera. Then she lunged forward, out of sight.

“No! You can’t take him!” she screamed. “You can’t take him!”

Halle’s blood ran cold, her mind blank as she realized what was happening. The bailiffs were there. They had Ollie. Her worst nightmare had come true.

“No, Sadie, no!” she cried, her voice cracking as she moved to grab her purse and threw in things on autopilot. “I’m coming, Sadie. I’m coming right now.”

She ended the call and raced for the front door of the quarters.

She had to get to Earth.

She had to save Ollie.

*K*aas stormed across the training hall, his face a mask of barely contained fury. Anger radiated from him, a force he couldn't stop. He'd known Halle was materialistic and greedy, but their conversation had pushed him over the edge.

Other warriors, those who knew him only by his fearsome reputation, usually gave him a wide berth. Things had changed lately, though, especially with his friendship with Rohn. Today was no exception. They were training with Raanic and Vaarn, two of the empire's most seasoned warriors, each with a head full of braids. Neither were mated, but both had entered the LMP, the program that had matched him with Halle.

He stalked into the training circle, blades in his hands, and beckoned to Raanic.

"Come on then. Let's see what you've got," he growled.

Raanic circled him, his sword at the ready and a smirk quirking his lips.

"Well, you have a face like a slapped ass," he quipped. "What's up? Trouble in paradise?"

"Mind your own *draanthing* business." He snarled back, launching a vicious attack.

His every move was sharp and aggressive as he took his anger out in the circle. He clashed swords with Raanic, his blows hard and brutal.

"Whoa! What's got into you?" Raanic stumbled backward, blocking Kaas's relentless attacks hastily. "Did you forget this is just training, or are you seriously trying to take my head off?"

Kaas just grunted. He wasn't in the mood to discuss his troubles. He

didn't know either of the two warriors well and only tolerated them because of Rohn.

"Raanic," Rohn said, his voice a low rumble of warning. "Lay off him. He's newly mated, and until either of you have managed to get a match you know *draanth*. Now, Vaarn, you're up against Raanic."

He jerked his thumb at the training circle as Kaas stalked out of it. "Unless you're both flapping lips to get out of training?"

Their honor challenged, both warriors practically leaped into the circle and faced off against each other. The clash of blade against blade filled the air as Kaas stood beside Rohn outside the circle.

Rohn leaned in, his voice low. "What's going on? Was that Halle?"

He folded his arms, the movement a subconscious attempt to keep the rage surging through his veins concealed from those around him. Obviously, it wasn't working.

He nodded sharply. "She wants to get a job."

Rohn blinked in surprise. "A job? Here? But what would she do?"

"B'Kaar's mate was given a job here," he argued. "And M'rln's daughter."

"Yeah, but Risyn's mate has *ke'lath*, so she's practically a B'Kaar herself," Rohn argued back. "And M'rln's daughter was originally an AI."

Kaas glared at him. He didn't care that Rohn was a prince; he never had. "Your point?"

"They both had skills needed on the station. Like your aunt... they gave her the academy role because of her skillset and experience. Didn't they?"

"The sister of my ancestor," he corrected grumpily. "Not my aunt."

Rohn chuckled. "As the humans say... *tomaytoes, tomartoes*. So why does she want a job?"

Kaas paused and then ground out. "For money, I assume. She seems excessively obsessed with it."

"Hmm." Rohn didn't look at him, watching the two warriors sparring in front of them. "Any idea why? Naomi said she was wearing LMP-issued clothing, so it's not like she's spending it on herself."

He ground his teeth, unwilling to admit that he didn't know the answer. He had no idea what Halle had done with the credits he'd paid her, but Rohn was right. Halle didn't act or dress like a wealthy female. Nor did she have the same attitude as Hunter's mother. Unease began to eat at him, and he frowned. He was missing something about this situation, something

important.

He lifted his wrist and tapped a command on his bracer comp. He would locate Halle and go and find out what was going on.

<<*Invalid presence location*>>

“That can’t be right,” he muttered and re-entered the query. Then he looked at Rohn. “Are you having trouble with your uplink to the station systems?”

Rohn checked quickly and then shook his head. “No. Mine’s steady as a rock. Why? What’s wrong?”

Worry threaded through Kaas’s veins. “I can’t locate Halle.”

Rohn didn’t ask how. He knew Kaas had given Halle a locator bracelet. After Maddy had been kidnapped it had become standard among the mated males to give such a thing to their mates and any younglings. They were all well aware how many desperate males were out there. Not that anyone had told the LMP or the humans that’s what they were doing. What they didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them.

“Could she have taken it off to shower?” Vaarn asked as the two other warriors rejoined them, proving they had been listening in. Impressive, given they’d been trying to kill each other at the same time, but he wouldn’t have expected anything less from two of the empire’s best warriors.

Kaas shot him a look, but given that Vaarn was the artisan they’d had make the tracker bracelets, he didn’t snarl at the male. “No, I doubt it. I’m not even getting a ping from the bracelet itself.”

He didn’t want to think why.

“Well,” Rohn announced, “no sense in wondering. Your quarters are only a short detour from mine. Let’s check, just in case. She’s probably sleeping or in the shower or something.”

“When we find her safely there,” Vaarn said, his expression as grumpy as ever. “I’ll check the settings on the bracelet.”

Before Kaas knew it, he found himself with an entourage on the way back to his quarters.

“There’s no need for you all to do this,” he said as the three warriors followed him through the station corridors to his quarters, their boots thundering against the metallic floor.

The doors hissed open as they approached, revealing an empty living area.

“Halle?” he called out as he strode through the rooms one by one, but she

didn't answer. The suite was empty.

He stopped in the middle of the living space, silent as he looked around. Everything was as neat as he'd left it this morning, apart from the breakfast bar, which had the remnants of the package he'd had delivered to Halle this morning and a single mug. He stalked over and wrapped his hand around it. It was still warm, which meant she hadn't been gone long.

"Maybe she's out shopping with the other human women?" Raanic suggested, his tone carefully casual as he glanced around the room. He whistled in a low tone. "Snazzy quarters when you have a mate."

"She could be at the spa," Vaarn grumbled, a scowl on his face as he looked around. "I heard Earth females waste a lot of time there."

"Not now, Vaarn," Kaas snapped, his eyes scanning the room as something nagged at the back of his mind. That's when he noticed it. Halle's purse, the tiny bag she'd brought from Earth, was gone.

Rohn sensed the change in Kaas's demeanor. "What is it?"

"Her bag's gone," Kaas muttered, striding to the console in the main living area. "Computer, give me Halle's movements in the quarters since my departure this morning."

The computer's neutral voice replied, "Halle V'aant cleaned beverage containers and then prepared a hot beverage, identification code alpha-seven-seven-four, after your departure. She took delivery of a package and then had a shower. Shortly afterward, she received a call from Earth—"

"What? What call from Earth?" he demanded. "Give me all communications received and sent with Halle's ID code. Authorization code ZR6-42W9."

The warriors exchanged concerned glances, their comments silenced by the sudden tension in the room.

"Processing request," the computer replied.

"Maybe she's planning a surprise party for you," Raanic said, trying to lighten the mood. "Earth women do that. Right? They jump out of cakes wearing nothing but ribbons."

Kaas shot him a look. "Where did you get *that* idea?"

Raanic shrugged. "I've been watching the human entertainment channels. There's a lot of... interesting information there."

The computer's voice cut through their conversation. "Call received from Earth, ID code NX7-13F2."

"Identify ID code NX7-13F2," he ordered.

Silence fell for a few moments as the computer processed his request. “Code identified as belonging to Sadie Keare.”

“Keare?” Rohn frowned. “Halle’s sister?”

“Your mate has a sister?”

“Apparently,” Kaas murmured. He couldn’t remember if she’d said anything about a sister. “Computer, play message.”

“Playing message...”

A female voice filled the air, one that seemed familiar to him yet totally new all at the same time.

“Halle? Halle, is that you?”

“Yeah, Sadie, it’s me. What’s wrong?”

“It’s Ollie, Halle. The doctor, Doctor Crane... he’s demanding another hundred thousand credits. I don’t know what to do. I can’t get that sort of money together, and he’s threatening to send the bailiffs around. He says that Ollie’s treatment has left proprietary genetic technology in his body, and they need to... recover their costs.”

“What? No, Sadie, you can’t let them in. Don’t let them anywhere near Ollie.”

“But what can we do, Halle? We don’t have the money, and Doctor Crane says that the technology in Ollie’s body is worth more than we could ever pay. He says that if we don’t pay up, he’ll have no choice but to... to...”

There was a pause. Kaas closed his eyes, feeling sick. It didn’t take a genius to read between the lines. Halle and her sister were being blackmailed, and he’d missed it. Halle hadn’t wanted all those credits for herself. She’d been paying for medical treatment for a member of her family. He’d completely misjudged her.

Then Halle spoke again.

“I’ll call you right back, Sadie. Just don’t let them in. Keep Ollie safe. I’ll fix this. Somehow, I’ll fix this. Just hold on, okay?”

“End of message,” the computer said. “The next message is between Halle V’aant and Kaas V’aant. Would you like me to play it?”

“No,” Kaas growled. He didn’t need to ever hear that conversation again. “Are there any more messages?”

“One message remaining between Halle V’aant and ID code NX7-13F2. Would you like me to—”

“Yes,” he snapped. “Play message!”

Sadie’s voice filled the air, screaming. *“No! You can’t take him! You*

can't take him!"

"No, Sadie, no!" Halle cried. "I'm coming, Sadie. I'm coming right now."

"End of message," the computer said again. "No more messages remaining. Would you like me to replay from the beginning?"

"No," he said, his hands gripping the edge of the desk so tightly the metal had started to buckle. He looked up at Vaarn.

"If her bracelet is on Earth, can you track it?"

Vaarn nodded, his expression grim as always. "You get me down to the surface, and I'll find it."



HALLE'S HEART hammered as she burst through the door of Doctor Crane's office. Sadie wasn't answering her comm, and when Halle had gotten to their apartment, the door had been open, the place empty...

Mrs. Crane, the doctor's wife, looked up from the reception desk, her eyes widening for a split second as she saw Halle, but then she masked the expression.

"Where are they?" Halle demanded as she stormed across the room. The older woman met her furious gaze levelly, but the sugary-sweet smile did nothing to hide the utter lack of feeling in her eyes.

"Excuse me?" Mrs. Crane asked innocently, straightening her cardigan. It was pastel yellow today.

"Sadie and Ollie!" Halle had no idea how she managed to keep her voice level and not yank the damn woman right over the desk. Make her tell Halle where her family was. "Where have you taken them?"

Mrs. Crane's saccharine smile didn't falter. "Have you come to pay the balance on Ollie's account?"

"What balance? What happened to the five hundred thousand credits you were already paid?" Halle demanded.

She balled her hands into tight fists at her sides as the room closed in around her. Her mind raced with all the awful things that could be happening *right now*, and a bead of sweat trickled down her temple.

Mrs. Crane's smile didn't budge an inch, cold calculation in her eyes.

"I'm afraid there were some unforeseen... complications in your

nephew's treatment, my dear," she cooed, her voice reeking of false concern. "Which necessitated much more work on Doctor Crane's part. The bill is to cover his extra time working on Oliver's treatment."

"Tell me where they are!" Halle's voice cracked.

Mrs. Crane sighed, irritation banishing her false smile, but before she could answer, the door chimes jangled behind Halle, and her smile was back in full force.

"Gatlin, be a love," she said, looking somewhere behind Halle. "And take Ms. Keare to Doctor Crane in treatment room four, please."

A hulking figure appeared at Halle's elbow, and she slid a glance sideways. A huge man in nurse's scrubs stood next to her. With his hair shaved down to the scalp and a build more suited to an underground fight club, he certainly wasn't how she expected a nurse to look.

"Miss, this way, please." Gatlin's voice was curt and emotionless. He led her out of the reception office and to the corridor beyond, gesturing toward an elevator at the end of the hall. The door opened, and they stepped inside, Gatlin punching in an access code on the keypad.

She studied him from under her lashes. He creeped her out, so she avoided looking at him and focused on the elevator instead. Bright white walls gleamed under the harsh fluorescent lights, and an almost overpowering smell of bleach and cleaning fluids assaulted her nostrils.

Taking deep breaths, she tried to calm herself down. Okay, this was not bad. They were taking her to Ollie. She'd been convinced Doctor Crane intended to harvest Ollie's organs, but maybe Sadie had misinterpreted what she'd heard. Why would Mrs. Crane send her to the treatment room if that was the case? She could have just denied any knowledge of the situation and had Gatlin throw Halle out.

The lift came to an abrupt halt, and the door slid open. The next second, the air filled with a blood-curdling scream that she instantly recognized.

"Sadie!" She gasped, breaking away from Gatlin.

Her heart pounded as she raced down the sterile hallway, desperation fueling her every step. Gatlin's heavy steps thundered in the corridor behind her, but she barely registered them; all that mattered was reaching Sadie and Ollie.

She skidded to a halt in front of the door marked Treatment Room 4, shoving the door open to stumble into the room.

Her brain couldn't make sense of the scene in front of her for a moment,

and then it slammed into place, making bile rise in her throat.

Ollie lay strapped to a table, his little body limp and lifeless. Frantic and wild-eyed, Sadie was trying to free him as a huge male nurse attempted to pull her away. Though he towered over Sadie, she snarled and screamed, fighting tooth and nail to stay with Ollie.

Halle's gaze fell upon a sinister-looking machine in the corner of the room—an organ reclamation unit. Sadie had been right. Doctor Crane intended to harvest Ollie's organs.

Her attention snapped back to her sister, and she leaped into action.

“Get your hands off her!” she roared, lunging at the nurse. Grabbing a metal tray, she struck him with every ounce of strength she possessed. Swearing, he backed up, his brawny arms out to protect his head as Halle drove him back.

Adrenaline surged through her veins, and she dropped the tray to ram a metal trolley into the nurses.

“Hurry!” she screamed at Sadie over her shoulder.

“Even if you succeed, you'll never get out of the building,” came Doctor Crane's cold voice as he entered the room.

He seemed unfazed by the chaos erupting around him or the fact that both the nurses were bleeding from minor cuts. Instead, he sat near a counter on the other side of the room.

“Why are you doing this?” Halle demanded. “He's just a little boy!”

“Exactly,” replied Doctor Crane, not looking away from his computer screen. His expression was bored. “Do you know how much an undamaged lymphatic drainage system can go for? Or a liver? And that's before we even start on corneas and other subsidiary organs.”

Halle stared at him in horror. “You're a monster,” she hissed.

“Monster?” He scoffed. “No, I'm a businessman working on supply and demand.”

Gatlin lunged for Ollie again, and she ripped the fire extinguisher from the nearby wall to fend him off. The standoff between them continued, each side unwilling to give ground.

“You'll never get away with this!” She snarled at Crane.

He laughed, the chilling sound echoing through the room. “Oh, I already have. For years, actually. A week's volunteering work with the vaccination drives, and Evergreen supplies me with all the raw materials I need...”

She gasped. Crane was doing something to the vaccines that made kids

sick, and then when they landed in his clinic...

“Take me instead!” Sadie cried out, desperation in her voice. “Leave my son alone!”

Doctor Crane glanced over his shoulder at her, his eyes filled with disdain.

“You? You’re too old to be worth anything. Just get rid of them,” he ordered the nurses, dismissing their lives as if they were nothing.

Halle’s mind raced, searching for a way out. A bargaining chip. Then it hit her...

“What about a Latharian translation matrix? And recent Latharian inoculations?”

“Halle! *No!*” Sadie gasped, grabbing her arm.

Crane turned on his stool to look at her, his eyes alight with interest. He stopped the two nurses with a wave of his hand.

“Now, that is something I’d love to examine. Their medical technology is absolutely leagues ahead of ours.”

“Let them go, and you can have me,” she said, her heart pounding. “I was on Devan Station until a few hours ago. I’m worth more than Ollie five times over.”

Crane nodded, his gaze calculating. He motioned for Gatlin and the other nurse to step back and give them room. Knowing they didn’t have much time, she slipped the bracelet Kaas had given her off her wrist and pressed it into Sadie’s hand. She didn’t want the evil doctor anywhere near it.

“Find Kaas V’aant,” she said, looking into Sadie’s tear-filled eyes. “Tell him I’m sorry. Now... *run!*”

Sadie hesitated for a moment. Then she grabbed Ollie off the bed and fled. Halle watched the door they’d disappeared through as the two nurses closed in on her. Their hands were hard and cruel as they restrained her, forcing her onto the table with a roughness she knew would leave bruises.

Not that it mattered now. They wouldn’t even get time to form.

Tears streamed down her face as she was strapped down. She ignored the doctor as he moved around her and only flinched slightly at the needle as it punctured the skin of her neck. Within a few seconds, her body went heavy, and then she couldn’t feel anything, her eyelids fluttering closed. A paralyzing agent. No doubt to keep her immobile as she was loaded into the machine behind them and taken apart for her organs.

“You let the mother and the boy go?” The sound of Mrs. Crane’s voice

made her skin crawl. The other woman knew exactly what was going on here, and she was a part of it.

“Indeed,” Crane replied. “This one is far more valuable. See here? She still has active particles in her blood from whatever those aliens gave her. If I can isolate them in the samples... this is big, Veronica. This is big. *Huge.*”

“What about the rest of her?”

“Oh, yeah. Let’s see what we have here.” She heard a click and then a hum. Halle couldn’t feel anything or open her eyes, but her imagination filled in the scanner as it moved over her body.

“Brain, not worth much... we could list that for a curio collector. There’s always some weirdo out there who wants a human brain, after we remove this translation matrix, of course.... It’s quite fascinating how it’s integrated with the tissue and neurons. We have corneas and trachea, but her lymph system isn’t too bad. I might be able to find a buyer for that. Heart, lungs—”

Halle tuned his voice out as he listed her organs. Rather than think about what was happening, she focused on her memories of Kaas. Misery welled. She would never see him again. Never...

Realization hit, and her breath hitched in her throat.

She loved him. She loved Kaas V’aant. But she would never get to tell him that.

“Wait,” Crane’s sharp voice filtered through her thoughts. “Shit, scan the abdomen again...”

She heard a clatter, like a stool had gone over, and then Crane’s excited voice sounded again.

“Fucking hell! She’s pregnant. With an alien baby!”

The blood chilled in her veins. What? Her world narrowed down into two agonizing thoughts. She was pregnant? Carrying Kaas’s baby?

“Fire up the unit,” Crane ordered, his voice giddy with excitement. “This is the jackpot, Veronica. We’re about to make a fortune!”

A scream rose in Halle’s throat as she tried to fight against the paralysis. Tried to do anything she could to save her baby.

But it was too late. Blackness overwhelmed her, and she knew no more.

*K*aas's boots hit the ground with a thud, his senses instantly assaulted by the acrid stench of the human city. Decayed structures loomed like specters, the sky choked by industrial fog as he looked around. They'd landed in the middle of what looked like it had once been a green space but now was just dirt. Broken play equipment clustered in one corner of the square, as though crowded together for protection.

"*Draanth it*, Raanic, couldn't you get us any closer?" he spat out, gripping his weapon.

Raanic shook his head, his expression unreadable as he looked around. "The structures here are packed too tightly for landing. This was the closest space I could find without crushing a building."

Kaas grumbled in the back of his throat but nodded. They had a peace treaty with the humans, so crushing buildings and potentially people was definitely out of the question.

He rubbed a hand over his stomach, his guts still churning from the combat drop. Raanic's piloting skills had left him questioning the solidity of his internal organs somewhere in the upper atmosphere. "Since when did you get starfighter training?"

"Doesn't matter," Raanic said, scanning their surroundings. "What matters is our shuttle sitting there like a fat *givoni* in the open."

Rohn chuckled without humor, his eyes narrowing as they swept over the humans who peered at them from the shadowed doorways. "You think these humans would know the first thing about flying a Lathar ship? Look at them... they can't even maintain their buildings."

Kaas couldn't argue with that. The crumbling infrastructure screamed neglect, and the people...their eyes lacked any sense of hope like life itself had been drained from them. "Yeah, our ship's the least of their concerns."

Raanic grumbled, obviously not entirely convinced, but he moved out with the rest of them. Kaas led his team through the narrow streets, their leather-clad forms out of place. But not one person stepped forward to challenge them.

"Naomi says a lot of the human mates come from places like this," Rohn muttered with barely concealed disgust. "How can they let prized females live this way?"

"Because humans don't value females like we do," Raanic said in a hard voice. "They don't deserve them."

Kaas's comp vibrated against his wrist, the screen blinking with coordinates. Halle was near. Very near. He would tear this city apart to find her, and gods help anyone who stood in his way.

"We're close," he announced and sped up his pace. "We need to move fast. We get in, retrieve Halle, and get the hell out."

Preferably before anyone realized they'd landed on the planet without the proper authorizations.

The warriors around him nodded, their expressions hard. Warmth spread through his chest. He hadn't been part of a unit for years. Not since—

A small female carrying a child barreled around the corner. Rather than take one look and flee the opposite way, as others had done, she headed right for them. His wrist comp buzzed insistently, and he knew before he spotted her wrist that she was wearing Halle's bracelet.

Sadie. Halle's sister.

"Oh god, please! Are you Kaas?" she begged, tears streaming down her face as her gaze locked on to him. He barely had a chance to nod before words tumbled out of her mouth in a frantic cascade. "You have to help. He has Halle, and he—oh my god, they're going to kill her. Take her organs."

The female's words fueled the fire that raged within him.

"Take me to her. Now," he demanded, his order a low growl of menace.

Vaarn stepped toward Sadie, holding out his arms. The rest of them looked at him in surprise. The grumpy warrior rarely touched anyone voluntarily.

"I've got the youngling," he said, taking the small child from her. "No harm will come to him. Go."

Sadie nodded, her face pale and her eyes haunted. Then she turned, her feet churning the dust on the cracked pavement as she led them through the labyrinth of crumbling buildings.

Kaas's muscles were coiled as tightly as springs, but he was forced to slow down to her pace. Like Halle, she was tiny, and they needed to be faster. His female was in danger, and by the gods, he'd unleash a storm of violence this planet had never known to protect her.

Raanic and Rohn flanked him, Vaarn behind them, silent wraiths as they ran. Their faces were hard, their expressions focused. It was unasked for, but these warriors were his brothers in arms, and right now, every one of them was an instrument of wrath.

They turned a corner, and Sadie slowed, indicating a building opposite.

"It's here. Fifth floor. Treatment room four. She... she sacrificed herself for me and Ollie. Please." Sadie looked up at him, her expression pleading. "Please, save my sister."

He nodded, exchanging a glance with Vaarn, who had the tiny child still safely in his arms. No further words were necessary. Vaarn would protect the female and her child while the rest of them stormed the building.

They stalked toward the building Sadie indicated. A small sign over a side door said "Crane Medical."

He kicked the door in.

Ignoring the elevator, which was human-sized and wouldn't take one, let alone three of them, they thundered up the stairs, their boots thudding a rapid tattoo of impending doom for those who had taken his female.

They reached the fifth floor, and Raanic kicked open the door to the treatment room, the violent action satisfying a fraction of Kaas's fury.

Two human males lunged at them, one brandishing a scalpel. Rohn grabbed him by the wrist with a snort, crushing bone and metal alike as the male's screams filled the air. Raanic was equally quick, his palm striking the other male's temple with a thud. Both collapsed, unconscious or worse. Kaas didn't care. They were irrelevant.

His focus was all on finding his female as he surged past them, scanning the room for Halle.

He found her, and his blood iced over. She lay on a surgical table at the other side of the room with a masked man leaning over her. A supernova of fury ignited in his soul, exploding through his body. This human was hurting his female.

His vision tunneled, the rest of the room fading into irrelevance. All that mattered was the figure before him—the one whose life was now a ticking clock, measured in a handful of heartbeats.

“Step. Away. From her.” Kaas’s voice wasn’t loud, but it carried a threat that would make the bravest souls question their life choices.

The male looked up, blinking in surprise when he saw Kaas standing there as though he hadn’t heard them crash into the room. Kaas seized him by the throat and lifted him off his feet. A woman screamed, but he ignored it, shoving his face into his prey’s.

His fingers tightened around the man’s throat. “What have you done to her?”

The human’s eyes were wide, his face purpling as words spilled out of his mouth. “I—money—organs—”

Red mist clouded Kaas’s vision as his fingers tightened, the muscles in his hand aching to snap the male’s neck right there and then. The human’s feet dangled above the floor, his gasps turning into rasps as he grabbed at Kaas’s hand, scrabbling to try and get some air.

“I can save her,” he choked out as his eyes bulged. “Let me—”

Kaas tightened his grip, silencing the male abruptly. Rage flared, white hot, and he slammed the human down onto the medical table beside Halle’s, surgical instruments scattering over the floor in a metallic clatter.

The air crackled with tension, every muscle in Kaas’s body straining, primed for violence.

An elderly female cowering in the corner of the room screamed, “I’ve called the police! You’re going to—”

“*Police?*” His words were a snarl of contempt. His gaze bored into the human male’s. “Your *laws* can’t save you now. Nothing can.”

He turned his head to look at Halle. She was connected to a web of tubes and monitors, her skin ashen, but his experience told him the readouts were steady even though this monster had cut into her. Kaas reached down and picked up a scalpel from the floor. Its cold steel seemed to hum in his hand as he brought it up to where the human could see it, tilting the blade back and forth so it caught the light.

“You were going to harvest her organs,” he said, his voice devoid of emotion. “That’s the kind of monster you are.”

The human’s face was a mask of terror, his eyes darting from the scalpel to Kaas. “I’ll do anything. Please—”

“A Latharian interrogator has unique methods of extracting information,” Kaas said, looking at the scalpel and then locking eyes with him.

“Pain is an art form for us. We can keep a subject alive and conscious far longer than your human physiology would deem possible.” His free hand shot out to grip him by the jaw, forcing him to look directly into Kaas’s eyes. “We can take you apart, piece by piece. Each cut an agony you’ll wish you could escape.”

The human trembled, his breaths shallow pants. Kaas leaned in. “You’ll beg for the sweet release of death, but it won’t come. Not until I decide you’ve suffered enough. Do you understand me?”

His grip tightened around the scalpel. Time seemed to slow, each second stretching long and thin, a taut wire about to snap. He moved, ready to slice this pathetic creature’s throat and sever his connection to this life, but something stopped him. He looked at Halle again, her delicate form vulnerable on that surgical table, her life almost stolen by this monster.

Death was too easy a release, especially for what this monster had done.

“Prince Rohn, Warrior Raanic. *Witness*,” he ordered. “As the emperor’s interrogator, I am arresting this human male for the crime of mate-snatching, endangerment of a fertile female, and attempted murder of a fertile female. He will face imperial justice for his crimes.”

“Witnessed,” the two warriors replied, and then Rohn added. “Imperial justice will be served. I have notified the station, and a team has been dispatched to take him into custody. And his female, who appears to be complicit in his crimes, will be investigated also.”

“Wait... what? No!” The human male started to struggle as Rohn and Raanic approached.

Kaas shoved the male toward them and turned to Halle, looking over what the doctor had done with an experienced eye. His gut clenched. He’d all but butchered Kaas’s precious mate. She would require extensive reconstructive surgery.

Reaching for the scalpel, he spoke over his shoulder in a hard voice.

“Rohn, order a medical evacuation team. And one of you stays with that piece of *trall*. If my mate dies, I’m going to take him apart, piece by piece.”



HALLE'S EYES FLUTTERED OPEN, her lids heavy with a contentment that seeped through her muscles, as if she'd been submerged in warm, soothing water.

She let her gaze wander across the sterile ceiling tiles, each identical and gleaming under the too-bright overhead lights. She recognized them. She was in the medical bay on Devan Station, a fact borne out when she breathed. There it was, the weirdly antiseptic smell laced with the herbal scent she'd only ever smelled in a Latharian medical facility.

Why was she here?

Then, the memories crashed through her. Doctor Crane's triumphant exclamation, the numbness that had crept through her body, freezing her in helpless terror. And the baby—god, the baby. She was pregnant?

With a gasp, she shot upright, her hands flying to her lower abdomen. Her fingers met silky fabric over smooth, unblemished skin. No bandages. No wounds. She patted across her stomach just to be sure nothing, however small, was hidden there.

Movement caught her eye. She lifted her gaze and found Kaas seated opposite, and his eyes locked on to hers. Her heart skipped a beat. His expression was as cold and unreachable as the first day they'd met.

"Why did you conceal the truth from me?" His voice cut through the room like a sharpened blade.

"The truth?" she repeated in surprise. Did he know about the baby? Did he even want a baby... With her, at any rate. He'd made his feelings quite clear when they'd last spoken. Argued.

His expression softened a little. "Why didn't you tell me you needed funds because that *draanthic* was blackmailing you over your sister-son's medical treatment?"

"Sister-son..." She scrambled to translate Latharian into Earth terms. "You mean my nephew, Ollie?"

He nodded, the subtle movement doing nothing to soften his stern expression.

"I..." She paused. "I didn't want to bother you with it. It was my problem to deal with."

A grunt escaped him. "You didn't need to ask for money for that. Ollie's treatment would have been taken care of by the empire."

She blinked. "They would have? Can they still?"

He shook his head, his gaze never wavering. "No."

Hope died, and she leaned back against the pillows, deflated. Then she sat up again.

“Wait... why not?” It didn’t seem fair that they would have before and now wouldn’t. She was missing something.

Kaas levered himself out of his chair and rose, walking toward her. All her attention was hijacked by the way he moved. Such a big man shouldn’t be that graceful, but it fascinated her.

“Because, my beautiful and stubborn little mate,” he said, taking her hand, “you asked the wrong questions right from the start.”

Tears filled her eyes, and she bit back her scream of frustration.

“If I’ve done something wrong, that’s on me. It’s not Ollie’s fault,” she insisted, lifting his hand to kiss the back of his knuckles.

“Please, Kaas,” she pleaded. “Can’t you do anything? Make them change their minds?”

His fingers caressed a loose strand of her hair, tucking it behind her ear with practiced ease. The simple touch was grounding, pulling her in, and she leaned toward him, a moth to a flame. “There is no need to,” he said gently. “Because Ollie has already been healed. It was a simple fix. That *draanthic* had messed with his genetic coding, but I was able to reverse the changes and fix the damage easily enough.”

“You?” She blinked up at him as everything made sense. “Your scars... they’re not from an accident. Are they?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I was once a healer. Which is fortunate for you, little mate, given the condition I found you in.”

She caught her breath as his big hand smoothed over her belly. He knew. He had to know. She lifted her gaze to meet his. He’d saved her from Doctor Crane. She winced.

“How bad was it?” she barely whispered, her voice fragile. “Did you... the baby?”

He smiled. “You and our son are doing just fine.”

The words struck her like a torrent, washing away layers of dread. “Our son?”

“Yes, our son.” He nodded, and she searched his expression as uncertainty gnawed at her.

“Are you disappointed?” she asked warily.

He frowned down at her. “Why on Lathar would I be disappointed?”

She bit her lip. “Because it’s not a girl. The Lathar have no women. You

need daughters. It said so on all the LMP orientation stuff.”

He barked out a laugh and leaned in. Sliding a hand into her hair, he claimed her lips in a swift kiss that left her breathless. His eyes were warm when he pulled back to look down at her.

“Human females have no sense,” he mused, his thumb stroking the side of her neck, each touch igniting tiny, delicious sparks. “The woman I love carries my child, a healthy son. Disappointment is definitely not what I am feeling.”

“You... love me?” She couldn’t keep the astonishment from her voice. Warmth radiated from her chest, enveloping her like a long-lost blanket as she gazed up at him. His eyes, usually a guarded vault, were now open and unguarded.

He nodded. “I do. I have loved you since you fell for my charms when we first met.”

She snorted at his romanticized version. “You mean when I fainted.”

His eyes widened in mock surprise. “You did? So that wasn’t an elaborate scheme by a human female to land in my arms?”

His gentle teasing made her smile. He shifted positions to join her on the bed, his movements fluid, a well-rehearsed dance. Lifting her effortlessly, he settled her onto his lap with the ease of a practiced warrior turned tender lover.

“Nope. I definitely fainted... that time,” she added, laying her head against his shoulder. She felt safe and cared for in a way she couldn’t remember ever being cared for before. Maybe when she was small before her mother started to drink.

“That time?” He chuckled. “Does that mean there will be a next time?”

She tilted her head up to look at him with a frown. “Why wouldn’t there be?”

His gaze flickered, but he recovered quickly. “Well, all the human media I’ve consumed indicates that when a male declares his emotions and isn’t met with a similar confession—” He shrugged, his muscles flexing under her touch. “It often ends poorly. But that’s irrelevant. I am not human, and I am not letting you go.”

She smiled to herself as she read between the lines. He loved her and wanted her to say it back, but he was hiding behind bluster and cultural differences rather than saying it.

“Good,” she said, her voice a soft echo in the room.

He stared back at her. “Good? *Draanth* it, female! Do you love me or not?”

The moment stretched between them, charged like the air before a storm. His eyes, vibrant and intense, were a shade she’d never find on Earth. They held a question, a plea, and impatient demand.

“I love you, Kaas,” she whispered, smoothing her fingertips over his jaw. “I will always love you.”

The tension broke like a wire, and his mouth descended onto hers. She tasted his relief and a fierce possessiveness that thrilled her to her core. When he deepened the kiss, it was as if he was laying claim to her soul and promising her his in return in a kiss that spoke of forever and beyond.

She smiled against his lips, her hands sliding over his where they lay on her abdomen, over their baby.

She was exactly where she was meant to be.

EPILOGUE 1

“Did the prince decide to slack off from training today?” Raanic grumbled as he and Kaas made their way through the corridors of Devan Station after a heavy training session.

Kaas frowned, his jacket slung over his shoulder. The station wasn't hot, the environmental controls ensured temperatures were kept at a pleasant constant, but as they were headed to the LMP sector to meet with his mate, he was vain enough to ensure she got a good look at his body when they did. He liked the way she looked at him when his chest was bare. The way her eyes darkened and her lips parted. He knew it was unfair of him to low-key torment her in such a way, but he couldn't help himself. Her reaction fed the male animal inside and made him want to drag her off to their quarters so he could claim her all over again.

“Lathar to Kaas,” Raanic's deep voice broke through his thoughts, and he found the other warrior watching him with amusement. “Back with me?”

Kaas grunted. He was newly mated, so Raanic could go *draanth* himself. Sideways.

“So... Rohn?” the other warrior asked. “Slacking off? Vaarn's off playing with his little inventions, but what about our glorious prince?”

Kaas shook his head as they moved to the side for a patrol of security officers. “Halle said Maddy and Naomi haven't been feeling well over the last few days. It could be that he's looking after them.”

Raanic's expression sharpened in concern. “They're ill? Will they be okay? Humans are so fragile. Aren't they?” he added, as though belatedly realizing that Kaas was, in fact, a trained healer. Even though he didn't

practice in a healer's hall or a medical bay, he would be training a new generation of healers, Lathar and non-Lathar alike, through the new Academy.

He slid Raanic a sideways glance. Somehow, after rescuing Halle and her family from the surface, the temporary training group he'd found himself in with Rohn, Raanic, and Vaarn had become more long term. After so long operating on his own, it was... pleasant. It had certainly increased his fitness level. Or that might have been his nocturnal activities. He hadn't been getting much sleep lately, ensuring all his new mate's... needs were met. Last night he'd kept her awake until she'd begged him for sleep just before dawn.

"No, they're more robust than we give them credit for," he replied.

He wasn't lying to ease Raanic's fears. When he'd healed Halle and Oliver, he'd been able to study them, his healer's brain automatically analytical even as his emotional side had been highly engaged given his patients were so dear to him.

Humans might be much smaller than the Lathar and without the myriad of genetic alterations that his people took for granted, but they were, essentially, mini-Lathar mixed with something else. Some trace of what had to be the original hominids of the planet. They were small, robust, and, as he had found out with Halle and her family, tenacious as *liiraas*. Once they got an idea into their heads, they did *not* give up.

"They'll be fine, believe me," he said as he and Raanic entered the main promenade in the LMP sector. It had been modeled after a small town on Earth to stop the females from being homesick and enable them to settle in. It was like being transported down to the surface in the blink of an eye.

He needn't have bothered speaking. The place was filled with mates, some with young children, and the occasional mate candidate. Raanic lost all interest in their conversation, his eyes bright and focused as they latched on to the diminutive females, his manner almost predatory.

Kaas wasn't concerned. The single warriors allowed around the unmatched females were few and far between, and they all knew to be on their best behavior. The beating they'd get if they upset a female wasn't the deterrent. It was the fact that they would be barred from the LMP area or possibly even struck from the program entirely. It was an effective threat. No warrior would dare risk expulsion from the program.

"Earth to Raanic," Kaas said with a chuckle, expecting the big warrior to flip him off. Instead, the raw expression on Raanic's face as he turned made

Kaas freeze.

“What? What is it?” Instantly, he was on alert, looking around. Had Raanic seen a threat he had missed? Like the *Rz’keni* hidden among the *illaric* deer?

“My uncle is Izaean,” the admission was abrupt. Blunt.

Kaas turned back to the other warrior. There was no threat to the females. The concern was within Raanic himself.

“And?” Kaas asked, his eyebrow raised slightly. He hadn’t known about Raanic’s family, but his worries weren’t surprising. There was still a lot of prejudice in the empire toward the Izaean, like Blood Rage was catching rather than a genetic mutation.

“Well...” Raanic’s expression was tortured. “Will that cause issues with me getting a mate? The Izaean aren’t allowed to sign up for the program. Will I get thrown off it because of my uncle? I lied when they asked if I had any relatives with the Blood Rage.”

The entreaty was so open and raw that Kaas’s answer was kinder and less blunt than it would normally be. He reached out to clasp Raanic’s shoulder in reassurance.

“You didn’t display the mutation when you were tested,” he said as they walked down the fake main street. He hadn’t done the test himself so he *was* making an assumption, but if Raanic *had* displayed the Izaean mutation or its markers, he would have been shipped off to Parac’Norr quicker than he could say the word. “But if you are still worried. I will run your DNA through expanded tests, just to be sure.”

“I would appreciate that,” the warrior replied. “Thank you. You are a true friend.”

“Not a problem.” Kaas smiled as they continued walking.

He’d never been to a small town on Earth, but it looked so realistic that if he didn’t know they were on a station, even he might have been fooled. But as he looked around, he realized a lot of that was down to the females. They all looked carefree and happy as they bustled around in little groups, decorating the buildings for some human festival.

Then the crowds parted, and Kaas lost all interest in the warrior who accompanied him. His mate, Halle, stood at the end of the street under some small wooden construction, little more than a bunch of legs holding a roof. She was halfway up a ladder, wrapping foliage around the supports.

His heart warmed at the sight of her, especially when she half-turned and

started to climb down. Her pregnancy was still in the early days, but he was sure he could see an extra rounding of her stomach already. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility. Apparently, every human female reacted differently to carrying a Latharian child, and it also depended on which gender the child was. Initial research indicated that they carried male children for a shorter duration than female children, and Halle was carrying his son.

"Go to her." Raanic chuckled, casting a jealous glance at the mating marks around Kaas's wrists. They'd appeared during the surgery he'd performed to save her life after what that *draanthic* human doctor had done to her.

"Better do it before she falls," Raanic commented, just as Halle leaned down, precariously balancing on the ladder as she reached for more decorations. "Because I don't want to listen to your bitching if she so much as breaks a nail."

Kaas raced forward, his heart in his throat. She was the light of his life and the reason he drew breath. If she were hurt, he would never forgive himself.

"What are you doing, female?" he demanded as he scooped her off the ladder and right into his arms, nestling her safe and sound against his chest. "You could have fallen and hurt yourself and the baby."

She smiled, the look in her eyes warm as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "How could that possibly happen with you here to protect me? My very own knight in combat leathers looking out for me and the baby."

Her gentle teasing made him smile, and he realized he never wanted to be anywhere else but here, with her in his arms. After a lifetime of searching for his place in the galaxy, in the empire, he'd finally found home.

And it was a person, not a place.

It was his mate. His Halle.

Bending his neck, he brushed his lips over hers to murmur, "You'd better believe it, my mate. I am yours... always and forever."

EPILOGUE 2

Human females were everywhere. Well, everywhere in the LMP section of the base, anyway.

Vaarn growled under his breath as he walked through the crowded corridors, heading for his workshop. His new workshop. Since it had gotten out that he'd been the creator of the bracelet that had allowed Kaas V'aant to track down his mate on Earth, Vaarn had been inundated with work *and* given a new workshop.

The first he liked. It was validation that his inventions weren't the waste of time both the engineer's hall and his father had labeled them. That even though he'd been forced to train as a warrior rather than an engineer, his creations still had value. Were *useful*.

The second, the workshop, was beyond his wildest dreams. He'd had to tinker with his inventions in the corner of barracks or cramped personal quarters for many years. Although the latter had afforded him a little more room, the need to pack everything away immediately if he was reassigned had limited the size of his creations. He'd become a master at miniaturization because of it, but now he relished the opportunity to create on a larger scale.

But... he turned the corner, and his jaw tightened when he spotted the familiar form of a human female waiting outside for him... he wished they'd put him somewhere that wasn't so easily accessible.

"Lady Sadie," he said formally as he approached.

Sadie was the sister of his friend Kaas's mate—the female Vaarn and his training group had helped rescue from an Earth healer who had been intent on selling off her organs. The fact that it had happened and how easily the

delicate little female standing in front of him could also have become a victim made his blood ice over.

“Vaarn!” Sadie turned, treating him to a bright smile. It faded a little when he didn’t smile back, and she held out a basket warily. “I made these for you.”

He looked at the basket with human cakes inside. His stomach rumbled a little, but he ignored it, looking at her face again.

“Why?”

She looked down, and her knuckles went white on the basket handle. “I-I wanted to thank you for the bracelets you made for Ollie and me.”

“You are welcome.” He nodded. For some reason, Sadie had not registered with the mate program yet, which meant she wasn’t eligible for a tracking bracelet. So he’d made her and her child one each—a private commission.

“Was there anything else?” he asked, one eyebrow raised. “If not, I have work to do.”

She shook her head, paling at his hard tone. “No, nothing. Sorry to have bothered you.”

He grunted as he swept past her into his workshop. As soon as the door closed, he leaned against it, his head thudding back into the metal as he groaned.

He felt a complete and utter *draanthic* for speaking to her that way, but she hadn’t registered for the mate program yet. The instant she did, she would be matched; he just knew it. If he let himself get close to her, allowed her soft smiles and charm to worm their way past his defenses, and she were given to another...

He wouldn’t survive it.

Thank you so much for reading **Alien Crusader’s Mate!**

I hope you loved reading Kaas and Halle’s story.

The next book in the Latharian Mate series will be Alien Inventor’s Mate!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mina Carter is a *New York Times* & *USA Today* bestselling author of romance in many genres. She lives in the UK with her husband, daughter, a tank of a Staffordshire Bull Terrier, and a bossy cat.

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