



STOLEN  
BY THE  
BARBARIAN

PRIMAL MOON BARBARIANS BOOK THREE

IONA STROM

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# **STOLEN BY THE BARBARIAN**

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**PRIMAL MOON BARBARIANS BOOK 3**

# IONA STROM



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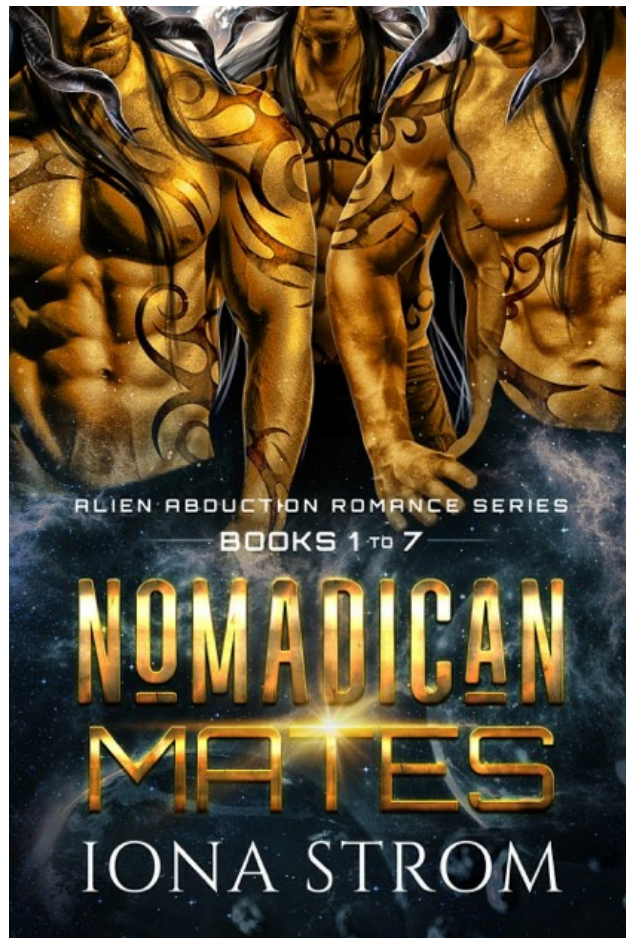
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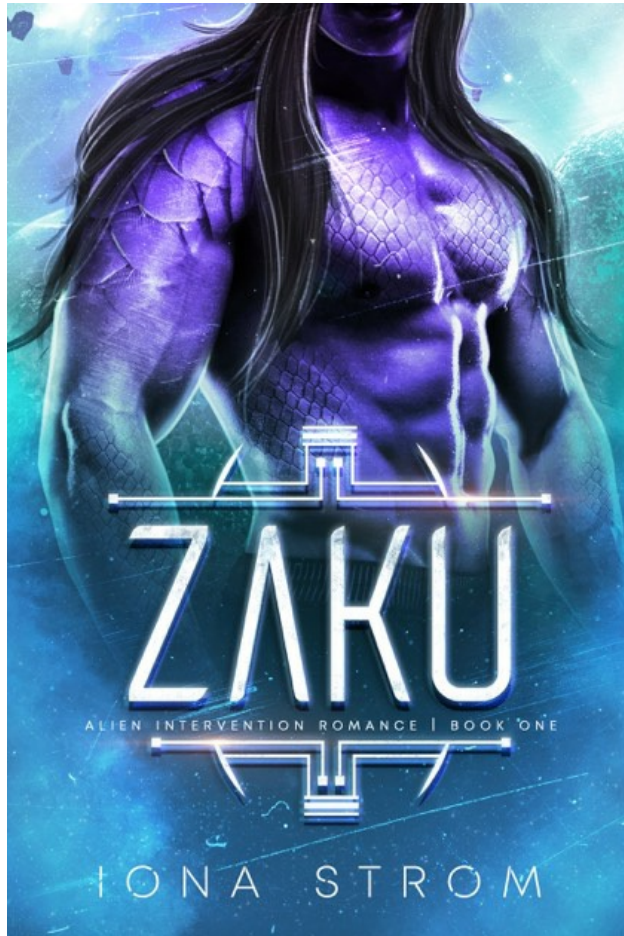
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## ABOUT THE BOOK

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Imprisoned for discovering an unspeakable truth, lies were spread portraying me as a monster. But the only real monsters on Zune lurk in perpetual darkness, having retreated to where the light never touches the ground.

Despite my years as a warrior elite, even I fear what lies in the blackened abyss beyond the sun's rays. Regardless of the dangers, not even the horrors prowling in the shadows will stop me from doing whatever it takes to keep *her* safe.

She is *mine* to protect!

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# PROLOGUE

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## Mordox

*THE PALE-MANED FEMALE IS MINE!* I growl to myself as I catch a rare glimpse of the tiny female amid the others. A soft breeze shifts in my direction and I tilt back my head, my scentiastry glands sifting through the fragrances of the other females to lock onto her delicate scent.

My scales ripple across my shoulders and down my back to settle in a sharp tingle at the base of my spine. The tip of my tail shakes, the urge to mark her as my mate is nearly unbearable. I know not her name, but I don't care. Her semiochemicals tell me that she belongs to me.

I want nothing more than to act on my primal instincts, snatch her up and whisk her away to where I know she will be safe. The ground is not safe here, not until all those creatures are dead.

I hold fast and keep my distance so as not to frighten her, letting the others hover around her like a shield. I must bide my time. Earn their trust. Get close, so I can claim the one who belongs to me. She doesn't know it yet, but she needs my protection.

My gaze flickers between the pale-maned female and the others; their wide eyes are filled with terror, and I freeze. My heart thuds against my ribcage, and I know I must be careful. Not move too fast and add fuel to their fears by rushing in.

The group has already lost one female to the forest. She and the purple-maned one wandered off when they first crashed, but only one returned. I searched the forest for her but lost her scent on the edge of the Zune River.

Now they remain on high alert, and I have to be cautious.

I watch intently from my hiding spot behind the jufta leaves. I push aside the huge foliage, preparing to step out and make my presence known, when the scent of a male floats over on the breeze.

I silently curse and hunker down. When I see who it is through the break in the leaves, I curse again and crouch lower in the jufta shrub so the pirate won't see me.

*Rooke.*

I'd recognize that red-streaked fuck anywhere. An infamous space pirate known for stealing valuable artifacts from planets across the Universe.

I saw him once while on my last clandestine mission to Octari 5. I'd been tasked to disable an Octarian warship bound for Wuvr 6. The Octarians would have decimated the home planet of the Wuvrians with their plasma bombs, and that would have put an end to the trade agreement between Ziaria and Wuvr 6.

It was a self-serving mission from the Ziarian government, but our people had grown dependent on blithium as the primary fuel source for the sky cruisers used for on-planet travel.

Just like now, Rooke had been completely oblivious of my presence then, scouting out his next target.

My pulse quickens as I observe the space pirate edging ever closer to the group of females. He's a threat, and I must act swiftly. My body braces for confrontation. I unshoulder the pack I carry with me whenever I leave my home and reach back to unsheathe my sword, readying to lunge. No doubt he's there to plunder what he can from their vessel's wreckage.

I'm not worried his scent glands will catch my scent. Ever since my confinement collar fell away twenty rotations ago, I've used oil from the husti flower to mask my scent. The acrid oil wrung from the petals works as well as a camo-chemical mist.

The red-maned female ushers my female inside the vessel as soon as Rooke breaks through the foliage surrounding the crash site. My female peeks



around the edge of the opened hatch, her curiosity overriding her fear of the unknown male.

Rooke's hands are up in a show of peace. I shift my weight on the balls of my feet, my hand squeezing the grip of my sword. Then I notice he carries several water skins and food pouches around his belt. I relax my stance and wait to see his next move.

"I won't hurt you," Rooke moves slowly and methodically, so as not to spook them. "I only want to help. I've brought food and water for you. I'll just leave it here and be on my way."

The females back up slowly. The purple-maned one remains out front to protect the spiral-maned female she pushes behind her.

The fool pirate is speaking in Ziarian. If I'm not mistaken, these alien females are human. They can't understand his gibberish without translators, and judging by their shocked and perplexed faces, it's a good bet they aren't wearing any.

How this primitive species is in possession of a Starskip-class spacecraft is a mystery, unless there is someone else in there with them who knows how to fly it. Maybe even the same someone who abducted them.

The Luartick Sector where Earth lies is protected by Yulineon patrollers. Under Universeval Rule, infant planets such as that are nearly impossible to land on, but I've heard the rillium paid for human flesh is enticing enough to make the risk of death worth the reward.

I keep a sharp eye on Rooke with plans to track him and make sure he leaves the area. His intentions may seem genuine, but it's only a matter of time before he shows his true colors. When he does, I'll be here to strike him down.

The spiral-maned female peers around the shoulder of the one protecting her. Rooke locks eyes with her, lifts his nose to catch her scent on the breeze, and freezes, all except for the agitated twitching of his tail. His body releases a spicy perfume and I grin, knowing whatever plans he had for plundering the vessel have changed.

I'm not the only male who's been blindsided with the primal urge to claim a

mate.

He gives the spiral-maned female a little wave and she returns the gesture. After leaving the food and water at the base of a nearby tree, he backs away slowly. I follow, keeping the wind in my face as I track the male through the thick of the forest.

Once I'm sure the space pirate is gone, I will return and keep watch over my female. Make sure Gruxt and the other escaped abominations I have yet to track and kill don't venture this way.

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# CHAPTER ONE

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## Mordox

SILENTLY, I slip through the dense growth of the Zune Forest, inhaling deeply as my scent glands sift through the myriad of scents that fill the air. Now that I've chased the pack of wulks away and the threat to my female's safety has passed, I must return to the crash site and resume my vigil.

The forest around me is lush and alive with vibrant blues and greens. Trees tall enough to touch the sky sway on a fragrant breeze, hot and sultry. Sunlight streams through breaks in the dense canopy, illuminating patches of moss and ferns that carpet the forest floor. Colorful flowers peek out from between the trees, their heads tipped toward the sun as they drink in its rays.

The beauty of the forest is deceiving; it hides the dangers that lurk within.

My heart beats faster as I near the crash site. I can already feel her, as if an invisible thread connects us. Primal instincts surge through me and I can't help the fierce protectiveness I feel toward her. But I must remain cautious—find the perfect time to make my presence known.

A stiff breeze stirs the heavy foliage, carrying with it the unmistakable scent of the altered male, Gruxt. My scent glands pick up the scent immediately, and my entire body tenses. He's out there, moving closer to the crash site—closer to *her*.

"Shite," I hiss under my breath, my scales rippling down my spine in a spiny wave as I sprint toward the new threat. My horns pivot forward, the deadly points aimed outward and ready for a fight. Small branches snap, and leaves stir in the wake of my slashing tail.

Gruxt cannot be allowed near my mate. I track the scent of the altered male, adrenaline coursing through my veins like liquid fire, every step bringing me closer to the confrontation I've been waiting for.

I keep low to the ground, following Gruxt's scent through the thick of the forest. Nostrils flare as I catch a more pungent whiff of the altered male. A vile, acrid odor that sets my fangs on edge. He's closing in on the crash site.

As I push through the dense foliage, more scents hit me: the pale-maned female and her companions. They're moving away from the crash site and toward the underground lab. Panic floods me, drowning out reason. There's another male with them, an unknown presence, and I can't help but fear the worst. What does he want with her? With them?

I need to reach her before she enters the underground lab, to protect her from the creature that remains inside. But first, I must stop Gruxt. I race forward, every muscle in my body aching with the desperate need to reach her.

My heart races as Rooke's scent—a mixture of sweat and determination—follows me through the dense foliage. The male is persistent, but I can't focus on him now. The altered beast is closing in on the females—on my mate. My blood roars in my ears, an alarm within me growing louder.

I force my legs to pump faster, ignoring the sting of branches whipping and slashing against my scales.

My first glimpse of Gruxt sends a chill down my spine. His orange-streaked mane is visible through the thick vegetation, a wild and deadly presence that demands attention. My instincts scream to prepare for battle.

Angled forward, my horns ache for carnage. My scales stand erect across my shoulders and back—a primal display of strength and aggression.

The altered male crashes through the underbrush, his massive frame shaking the ground beneath our feet. Despite the danger, my thoughts drift to my mate—my beautiful, fragile, pale-maned female. I need to protect her, to keep her safe from the nightmare bearing down on her.

I charge forward, every fiber of my being focused on the battle ahead. Rooke follows suit, our united front a testament to our shared goal to save the females who call to our primal urges.

I sprint full speed ahead, my heart pounding in my chest. Every muscle strains as I leap through the air, clashing with the altered male. The world around me fades away and all that matters now is the fight and the overwhelming need to protect what's mine.

My claws dig into Gruxt's back, and for a brief moment, I think I have the upper hand. But then I'm flung away like a mere pest. The world spins around me as I hit the ground, rolling to absorb the impact. I grit my teeth and force myself to stand, launching myself at him once more. This time, my claws find their mark, slashing across his face and leaving deep gashes in their wake.

The altered male is a monstrous sight, twice my size and weight. His orange-streaked mane sticks out in every direction, shaggy and wild around enormous horns. His fangs drip with viscous goo, and his eyes, sinister orange orbs, gleam with a terrible intelligence that sends chills down my spine.

I ignore the searing pain that threatens to consume me.

Enraged, the altered male lashes out, his claws, twice as long as mine, catch me across the chest, tearing through my scales. The searing pain ignites a primal rage within me, a dark, fathomless anger that drowns out everything else.

I circle Gruxt, contemplating my next move. My heart pounds as I keep my eyes locked on him, never allowing my gaze to waver for even a moment. He's a hulking beast of a creature, with armored scales standing erect like triangular knives across the breadth of his shoulders and down his spine to the base of his lashing tail.

His face distorted and twisted, he no longer resembles the Ziarian male he once was.

Gruxt follows my movements just as I hoped. He turns so that the yellow-maned male escorting the females has a chance to strike him from behind. My heart races, knowing that we need to work together if we are to bring this monster down.

The yellow-maned male growls, making his move. He quickly jabs Gruxt in

the side with a wicked-looking dagger, then rolls away to avoid retaliation.

Unnaturally dark blue blood leaks from the wound, staining the vibrant green foliage at his feet. Gruxt tosses back his massive head and roars in outrage, turning to swipe at the yellow-maned male.

Together, we charge the monster before us. The battle is fierce, the air thick with the stench of blood. And amid it all, one thought remains clear in my mind: I will do whatever it takes to save her, even if it costs me my life.

Incensed, Gruxt lunges at me with a guttural snarl. His meaty hand wraps around my throat, squeezing tightly as he lifts me off the ground. My feet dangle helplessly in the air, kicking at nothing as I fight for breath.

I claw at his hand, desperate to pry his fingers from my throat. Can't... breathe. Darkness creeps around the edges of my vision, threatening to consume me. I gasp out choked breaths, knowing the longer I keep him focused on me means more time for my mate to escape.

My vision narrows, my head throbs. Suddenly, the yellow-maned male rushes in, dagger raised high and aimed at Gruxt's uninjured side. But his attack is thwarted as Gruxt's free hand easily slaps him away. He flies through the air, slamming into a tree trunk with a sickening thud.

The force of the yellow-maned male's attack jars me loose from the beast's death strangle, and I crumple to the ground at his feet. I gasp, my chest burning with the desperate need for air. My blurred vision grows dark around the edges, threatening to consume me. But I can't give in to unconsciousness, not now. My mate... she's still in danger.

Gruxt pulls hard at the air. Abruptly, he turns and sprints in the direction of the underground lab. He's caught the scent of the females!

I shove to my feet as the yellow-maned male pushes up from the base of the tree. We exchange pained expressions, his body trembling, likely from the pain, but there's a fire in his eyes that tells me he won't back down.

As we run to catch Gruxt, I can't help but wonder why the yellow-maned male moved the females from the crashed ship to the lab. It makes no sense; it only adds to the danger they're in.

We close in on the altered male and the sunken steps to the lab come into view. I see my mate huddled together with the spiral-maned female, out in the open and vulnerable.

I reach deep, forcing my legs to move faster in hopes I can reach her in time just as Rooke appears out of nowhere, launching himself feet first into the beast's belly. The impact stops Gruxt in his tracks but sends the pirate ricocheting backward. Rooke lands hard, cradling his shin in pain. Gruxt is unfazed, taking off with terrifying speed.

I push harder and every muscle screams in protest, but there's no time for pain. My mate is at risk, and nothing will stop me from reaching her. A growl rises up my throat. My instincts take over, my body moving with a primal urge born of desperation.

We chase after Gruxt, our limbs heavy and uncoordinated. Rooke limps alongside us, his expression one of stubborn determination.

What if we don't make it in time? What if my mate is harmed because of my failure? The thought is unbearable, fueling my resolve to run faster, push harder.

"Fuck!" the yellow-maned male curses, his eyes darting between the underground stairwell and the altered male's rapidly approaching form. "They aren't even inside yet."

"No, you don't!" Rooke lunges, the points of his horns leading the way. The tough-scaled armor of the altered male's back is unscathed, yet the impact slows him down, giving me and the yellow-maned male time to catch up.

As we close in, the altered male whirls around, orange eyes blazing with fury. His tail whips out, narrowly missing Rooke, who ducks just in time. The yellow-maned male isn't so lucky, the scaled appendage knocking him sideways. He crashes into the underbrush, disappearing within the heavy foliage of the forest.

I leap onto the altered male's back, my arm hooking around his thick neck as I cling to him with all my strength. The weight of my body knocks him off-balance, his arms flail wildly as he struggles to regain his footing. I can feel the tremble beneath his thick scales, the labored rhythm of his breaths.



With one final surge of strength, I tighten my grip and haul the altered male backward, forcing him to stumble.

Rooke lunges, his fangs finding purchase in the altered male's calf muscle. The beast roars in fury. My grip on his throat tightens as he thrashes, attempting to shake us off. Rooke hangs on for dear life, his body whipping back and forth with every violent movement.

"Everybody run!" the yellow-maned male cries, having successfully attached a confinement collar around Gruxt's biceps. He activates the key, the colors rapidly cycling until reaching the countdown of flashing red.

With every ounce of strength left in me, I release the altered male from my chokehold and dive-roll to the ground, scrambling for cover behind the massive trunk of a lone clava tree. My heart pounds in my ears, my breaths ragged gasps as adrenaline courses through my veins.

I spot my mate cowering with the other females near the sunken stairwell. The fear in her eyes slices through me like a knife, and I push off the tree and race toward her. I push hard, fighting to bridge the distance between us.

The altered male's roars grow more frenzied, the countdown on the collar drawing to a close. An eternity seems to pass in the span of a heartbeat, even the moon holding its breath as we wait for the inevitable.

The violent eruption of energy is nearly blinding in its intensity. The ground trembles beneath my feet. The roar of the explosion, a cacophony of destruction.

The blast from the confinement collar knocks my mate to the ground. She remains unmoving and panic surges through me. Without thinking, I lunge forward and snatch her up. My feet racing across the ground as if they have a mind of their own, carrying us both deep into the forest.

I stop for a brief moment to assess her injuries and grab my pack I stashed under a shrub. It's a relief to find she's still alive and breathing; however, she's unconscious. I pull free the medical cuff and calibrate it to her slight weight, then clamp it on her forearm.

With the warmth of her tiny frame cradled close to my chest, I long to take a moment and admire the petite beauty in my arms. The clattering of footsteps

reaches my ears, a warning I'm being tracked. Without another thought, I sprint through the forest with my mate in my arms.

My hideout high in the trees is the safest place for her, not the underground lab where the females were being led by the yellow-maned Ziarian. An idiotic move to hide the females where those creatures were bred and one might still remain.

Holding my female close, I take off at a full sprint. I easily fall back on my military training, keeping my strides fast and light so not to be heard. I weave a path through the thick vegetation to confuse and evade my pursuers.

The forest is alive with the sound of chirping birds and buzzing insects. The relentless sun beats down through the trees. Strands of vines and gnarled branches reach out for me, but I'm agile enough to duck and dodge them.

My breath comes in ragged bursts as I run for what feels like hours. My muscles ache and my throat is dry. But I won't stop. Not until I know I've put enough distance between me and Rooke and the spiral-maned female who follows.

I keep close to the raging waters of the Zune River. Make the pirate think he's tracking me. The rainy season will soon be upon us, and the water will mask my female's scent. I'll lure him closer to my hideout, snare him one of my many traps.

The space pirate can't be trusted and there are too many dangers still lurking with what the scientists unleashed into the forest. Only I can keep her safe enough.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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## Zoe

GROGGY AND DISORIENTED, I stir in a soft bed. I open reluctant eyes to unfamiliar surroundings and slowly sit up, rubbing my temples, trying to make sense of where I am.

I touch the white cuff encasing my forearm. It's attached to a crudely crafted, raised armrest stuck to the bed frame, but I don't freak out, remembering Stacy telling us about the medical cuff her new alien boyfriend, Drax, used to heal her. Colorful blinking lights flicker and flash while it softly hums.

Have I been injured?

I'm alone in a room woven out of branches and vines. It's like being inside a giant wicker ball. Sunlight streams in through the cracks in the walls, creating an intricate pattern on the wooden plank floor. In one corner, a small table holds an array of alien devices and what appears to be a computer monitor.

"Wha...?" I mutter, trying to shake the cobwebs off recent memories I can't quite grasp.

I remember being in the crashed ship and Stacy's sudden return after being missing for several days along with an alien like the one who brought us food and water. Drax. He said it wasn't safe for us there anymore and we needed to leave.

We'd been on our way to someplace safer when that giant creature attacked. Tasha had called it Godzilla.

I remember watching the brutal fight. Drax, Rooke, and some other alien with

green hair that I didn't know, had all battled Godzilla.

What happened after? I don't know.

As my senses start to awaken, an intriguing scent wafts through the air. A fragrant and savory combination that reminds me of home. I sniff greedily at the air, my empty stomach twisting in response.

The room around me turns in a dizzying whirl the longer I sit upright. I try to focus on the room, try to recall how I got here, but everything seems to shift like sand beneath my feet.

"Hello?" I call out in a trembling voice. "Anyone here?"

Where are the other girls? Where's Darcy?

Darcy had become a big sister to me, just as the other girls had, but I felt closer to her than with any of the others. Her unwavering kindness made me feel so safe and cared for, always looking out for me with an ever-watchful eye.

Unable to hold my head up a moment longer, I collapse back on the cushion of pillows. Shifting sounds float in from an adjoining room before the shuffling of footsteps draws near.

"Easy now," comes a deep voice, smooth and authoritative.

I turn my head toward the open doorway framed out in twisted vines, my eyes locking onto a massive figure. A turquoise-blue alien stands there, tall and imposing. The one with the green-streaked hair who helped Drax and Rooke fight Godzilla.

He's hugely muscled like a pro-wrestler. Even larger than Drax or Rooke. Sleek, black horns curve along his head like a ram's. Long, glossy black hair sweeps his waist, streaked in the same emerald-green as his deep-set eyes.

He strides toward me, and I shrink away, recalling we crash landed on a prison moon. If he's here on Zune, that means he committed a crime. Though he had helped fight the monster, he's still a stranger.

*And even bigger up close!*

Wearing only pants made from some sort of leather and boots that come to his knees, his massive chest is out on full display. This guy has abs for days, so it's not my fault when my gaze drops to rake over his stomach that could double as a washboard.

I try to scoot back on the bed, but my arm is trapped in the cuff, holding me firmly in place. My fingers dig into the soft fabric when he drops to his haunches next to me. My heart races and every nerve screams at me to yank my arm out of the cuff and flee.

"Are you hungry?" His voice is a low hum that resonates through my bones. Moving with a careful grace, as if to show me he means no harm, he lifts a steaming bowl containing the delicious scent my body hungers for.

I gasp, eyes widening in surprise when a tiny squirrel-like creature suddenly hops up on his shoulder. Smooth, royal blue fur dotted with yellow spots covers the rodent's body. Huge, round golden eyes blink curiously at me as giant, pointed ears perk, swiveling this way and that, picking up sounds beyond my hearing. A fluffy tail swishes behind it as it sniffs the air.

The turquoise alien reaches over to scratch the squirrel under its chin. "This isn't for you, Tris. Your meal is on the table in the other pod."

The tiny squirrel hops down and scurries away. Anyone that's kind to animals deserves to be trusted at least a little in my book. He's just bringing me food and not here to hurt me.

"Was that your pet?" I ask, forcing myself to calm and try to sit up.

"My translator isn't interpreting what a pet is in Ziarian," he says, coming to my aid as I struggle. He sets aside the bowl and adjusts my pillows so I'm propped up. "Tris is my furry companion. I found her as a cub on the forest floor. I couldn't leave her to die, and though I didn't think she'd live, I hand fed her until she could eat on her own."

"That was kind of you," I say as the length of his hair brushes my skin when he leans over me. Surrounded by his intoxicating scent, a mixture of sandalwood and a spice I can't place, I can't help but inhale deeply.

He grunts in response, as if embarrassed by my remark.

I should be terrified of him, but I'm not. His hands are surprisingly gentle as he adjusts my pillows. His bright, emerald gaze warm and gentle as it meets mine.

I have zero experience with men. A rush of emotions courses through me, and I have no idea how to handle my quickening breaths or the tingles of my girly bits at his nearness. Nothing makes sense about me feeling this way.

He offers me the bowl, but my hand shakes so badly, he decides to hold it for me, spoon feeding me as he perches on the side of the bed. He's so close, I can count the darker flecks of green sprinkled in his verdant gaze.

The irises of Ziarians are larger than those of humans, with a luminescent quality that makes them surreal. Up this close, I can't help but stare.

I inappropriately moan around my first spoonful of soup. His eyes widen, locking onto mine. Embarrassment creeps over me, and I duck my head as my face grows hot.

"That's really good soup," I nervously babble. "Did you make it yourself?"

Gawd, I say the most idiotic things when I'm nervous. Of course he made it since there doesn't seem to be anyone else here.

"Yes." He spoons another bit into my mouth. "It's bone broth from a krotin, and the chopped pieces are various root vegetables. It's high in protein and the vegetables contain healing properties."

"The taste reminds me of the chicken soup my grandma made for me when I was sick."

"Grand-maw?" He gives his head a little shake.

"My mother's mother."

"Ah," he says. "Ziarian's call them Maymina. As a young, I couldn't pronounce the word and called her Mayme."

I grin picturing this hulking male as a sweet-faced little boy with mischievous eyes and tiny horns protruding from his head.

"She used to make me a similar soup to this when I was ill," he spoons

another bite into my mouth as he reminisces, "except with different vegetables not found on Zune."

I finish off the bowl of soup, curious but remaining leery of the male despite his help. I have tons of questions, but I don't want to bombard him, afraid I might piss him off.

Then again, how bad of a guy can he be with a pet squirrel and a grandma nicknamed Mayme? I mean, how cute is that?

"Drink?" He offers me a bulging leather pouch.

I sniff the lip of the pouch before tilting it back and drinking deeply of the cool liquid. Colorless and tasteless, it's a tad thicker than the water I'm used to, but it's the same stuff we've been drinking since we crashed here. I settle back against the pillows with my belly full and my head light and fuzzy.

"You need to rest," he says. "You're still healing from your head wound."

"Head wound?" I touch my head but find no bandage.

"The blast from the confinement collar knocked you unconscious when you fell to the ground."

"Oh," I rub my temple, "I don't remember that, but I remember you. You were there, helping fight Godzilla."

"Gawd-zeela?" He wrinkles his nose. "Is that what you call the lab-altered Ziarian? Before he was made into a beast by my government, his name was Gruxt."

"Drax said he used to be one of your kind."

"Drax?" He cocks his head. "You mean Draxyn? Is that the yellow-maned male?"

"Yeah, I guess. Stacy just called him Drax, but he's the one with yellow hair. He's Stacy's new alien boyfriend," I blurt and wish I hadn't when emerald eyes narrow on me.

"Alien, huh?" But then he grins with a little chuckle. "If Ziarian's are the aliens, then what does that make you, lula?"



"What does lula mean?"

He dodges my question with one of his own, "You're human?"

I nod as the conversation turns surreal. I'm talking to an alien. A freaking alien! On another planet or, to be exact, an alien moon where the sun never sets.

"Tell me something." He juts his chin up. "How did a primitive species incapable of space travel manage to fly a Starskip-class vessel to Zune?"

I cringe, a little offended by his question. "We weren't given much choice. Luckily, Stacy knew how to fly the ship belonging to her old master and she saved us from that terrible yellow alien who bought us on the red planet."

I don't know where my bravado is coming from. Normally, I'm super shy and non-confrontational, especially around strangers. And this guy definitely qualifies, but something about him puts me oddly at ease.

Maybe it's my head wound, or the alien squirrel that's suddenly back, perched on his enormous shoulder and nibbling on a bright, green fruit of some kind.

It's weird that I'm not terrified of him. Maybe because he's not given me any reason to be afraid. If he was going to hurt me or kill me, he would have done so already, not made me homemade soup.

"Tirius," he supplies. "The red planet where you were sold. Most of the illicit trading in the Universe occurs there. Smart of your friend to learn how to fly a vessel while held captive."

"Speaking of my friends." I pick at the blanket covering me. "Where is everyone?"

"My guess is the underground lab." He sniffs distastefully with a crinkle of his nose. "Everyone ran for cover as the collar ticked down its explosion. I saw you fall, so I ran over to help."

"Where am I?"

"My hideout." He taps on the little control panel of the cuff encasing my forearm, collects the bowl, and stands. "You're safe here, high up in the trees. I've covered the pods in husti oil so none can track our scents. We're high

enough up, nothing on the ground can reach us, and even if something tries, this area is surrounded with traps."

"Do my friends know where I am?" I worry as a fresh wave of grogginess washes over me.

"Rest, lula," he says in a gentle tone. "The medical cuff will heal you faster if you're asleep."

"No," I fight the lethargy. "The girls will worry about me. I need to let them know I'm all right."

"First you need to heal, lula."

"Lula? My name is Zoe."

"Zoe." His smile is reverent, but he doesn't offer his name in return.

"Who are you?" My eyelids droop, demanding sleep. "What's your name?"

He opens his mouth, then hesitates. "Mordox. My name is Mordox. And this is Tris." He scratches the squirrel under the chin.

"Mordox," I exhale, completely exhausted. "And Tris."

Panic slaps me like a hot whip across the face, yet I'm too tired to respond. *Mordox*. I've heard that name before. Stacy told me he was a dangerous convict just before we left the ship to make a run for the lab.

According to Stacy's boyfriend, Drax, Rooke was supposed to be dangerous too, but all he'd ever done was bring us food and water. He'd never tried to hurt us, only outrageously flirted with Darcy.

My eyes sweep across Mordox standing over me. Scars from where he helped fight Gruxt mar his chest. Blotches of dark blue are scattered across his arms and torso, probably bruises from the fight.

"Why?" I ask. "Why did you help fight the monster?"

"To save you," Mordox smiles. "Rest now, Zoe. You're safe here. Worry not, I will keep watch over you while you rest and heal."

My vision blurs as I fight to keep my eyes open. I didn't know what to believe

anymore. Drax warned us both males couldn't be trusted, that they were dangerous. But Rooke had done nothing harmful and neither had Mordox.

Nothing made any sense. All I know for certain is I need to find the girls. I need to get back to Darcy. Let her know that I'm okay because I know she'll worry.

Darkness creeps in around my periphery as I lose my fight with sleep. No matter how hard I try, my eyelids drop closed.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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## Mordox

ZOE. I roll her name around inside my mind, savoring the sound of it.

She still slumbers, her breathing steady and her body relaxed in a healing repose as the medical cuff does its job. The primal urge to protect her cascades through my veins like a surging river. My heart races at the thought of her in danger, triggering a fierce drive to keep her safe. It's more powerful than anything I have ever experienced.

I know of a Ziarian male's biological need to protect a mate, yet never knew the intensity of it until I found mine. I'd heard other mated males speak of the swell of emotions that follow when a mate is found, but I never imagined it would be like this.

Perched on the terrace outside my treetop hideaway, I slap my tail on the wooden floor with a thump to relieve the sharp tingles at the base of my spine. Just the mere thought of her sends my mating gland into a frenzy, thickening my cock to mark her as mine.

My desire to be sheathed within her, filling her with my scent, is an unrelenting ache. Even my horns are sore and throbbing with the need to uncurl and straighten, the points eager to shift to the back of my head in preparation for the sacred kiss all Ziarian males gift to their chosen mates.

All of that will have to wait until she's healed.

I peer up at the relentless sun stuck high in the sky, glad for the canopy of foliage that shields me from its harsh rays. The end of the cycle is near and

it's time to rest, though darkness will never fall and the sun will never set. On this side of Zune, there is no reprieve from the light of the sun.

I drag in a deep breath. My scent glands sort through the various scents of nature and the ones belonging to potential trouble like the creatures created in the lab. They remain far in the distance, lurking on the dark side of the moon.

The scents of Rooke and his female companion who sprung my trap fade too, as well as Drax's. The threesome now returning in the direction from where they came. Probably back to the lab the fool techy thinks is safe.

If he had seen the vile creatures that emerged from the bowels of that place and what I expect still remains, he would not be leading any females down there in the name of safety. They would be safer surrounded by the criminals at the prison compound.

Zoe longs for her friends, the other females that hovered protectively over her, despite the strength she holds within. It isn't right of me to withhold her from such a reunion, yet the ground is too dangerous a place for her. The lab just as much so.

Drax cannot be trusted to keep my lula safe when he puts his own female in danger. Zoe had called him a boyfriend, the human term translating into the equivalent of a mate. I wondered which of the human females he had claimed.

He's a fool to think, after the abominations created there, the lab could be viewed as a haven. I scoff aloud. And to think, his name is associated with the most brilliant minds on Ziaria.

There is nothing smart about herding a group of females into an underground facility of horrors.

Apparently, the notorious techy hadn't gotten a look at what he'd been hired to download off the General's mainframe, because if he had, he wouldn't have taken his female anywhere near that lab.

It's no coincidence Drax and I were brought here. It was the only way to ensure our silence. He had gotten too close to uncovering the truth, while I had overheard the atrocities they were planning firsthand. We knew too

much, and the corrupt members of our government wanted nothing more than for us to disappear.

I turn my head toward the room where my lula rests, pulling greedily at the air. I can barely tease out her scent from the husti flower oil saturating the vines and branches making up the pods of my treetop hideaway.

Her sweet scent stirs my blood, tingling the gland at the base of my spine. I whip my tail through the air, trying to stave off the urge to run to her side and claim her for my own, and accidentally whack a tree branch with a painful *thunch*.

Tris lets loose a surprised screech from where she's perched on the branch above.

"Sorry, Tris." I pluck a ripe trugger berry from a nearby branch and apologetically hold it out to her. She leaps from the branch, spreading her limbs wide to catch the air on the webbing in between, landing on her favorite spot on my shoulder. With greedy hands, she snatches the trugger berry from my fingertips and immediately starts to nibble.

I reach over to scratch behind her ear, and she purrs in delight. Tris has been my furry companion for the past fifteen rotations, keeping me company in my solitude. I can't help but smile at the sound of contentment that rumbles from her tiny, fuzzy body.

I'm grateful for her company for all this time and even more so that I have found my mate.

I catch another hint of my lula's scent breezing through the open door, feeling the anxious anticipation of finding a compatible female. She is not Ziarian, but I don't care. My Zoe is a rare and unique beauty. One that I will gladly protect with my life.

I yearn to mark her with my scent. Claim her so every male will know with who she belongs, but mating will have to wait until my female is healed. Until she is stronger. Until she accepts me as hers and opens her lush thighs to me in welcome.

I will have to be careful. She is so much smaller than me. My blood tingles as I imagine how tight she'll be when I finally sheathe my aching cock within

her lush little body.

So fragile yet so resilient. My female is tougher than I first gave her credit for.

At first, the lump on her head worried me. No blood came from the wound, which meant an internal hemorrhage. For Ziarian's, that meant pressure was building on her brain, but I know nothing of human anatomy. The medical cuff is my only option to try and heal her. There are no medics on Zune. Not since the guards rapidly evacuated, leaving us all behind. Thankfully, the cuff appeared to be working.

When her sweet voice first called out, I thought I imagined it. Thought I wished so hard for her to wake, the wind whistling through the branches was playing tricks on me. It was a great relief to see her eyes open.

It scares me how delicate her species is. Covered in the softest flesh imaginable, she lacks natural body armor. Her fingers are only tipped with blunt nails. She has no claws, fangs, or horns to protect herself, but I can be her shield. I will stand against anything that tries to harm her.

I should check on her. Make sure she hasn't woken up and is in need of water or food. On silent feet, I creep through the main living pod, drawn to the sleeping pod by an immeasurable desire to be near her.

I pause in the doorway before moving inside to stand next to the bed, my gaze hungrily consuming her sleeping figure. Mesmerizing. Her fragile beauty is what fascinates me the most.

Her lips are parted in her repose, two lush pillows beckoning me to taste her. I force myself to take a step back, not wanting to wake her, but wanting more than anything to press my lips against hers and drink in her sweetness.

We are strangers, yet every cell in my body screams that she is mine. Every part of me yearns to know more about her, to learn her secrets, her thoughts, and her desires. An invisible force draws me to her, uniting us in a deep, unexplainable connection.

Her sweet scent saturates the air, coating my scent glands, engulfing my senses, permeating my being. I inhale as deeply as I can, wishing to stay in this peaceful moment forever. My lula is intoxicating, a drug that fills me



with a warmth I have never felt before.

She stirs in her sleep, and I step away, afraid my presence has disturbed her healing rest. The medical cuff still blinks in multi-colors. Until the lights turn white, she needs to remain asleep.

I creep away and unroll my pallet on the floor where I have slept since bringing her here, making sure to lay where I can see the blinking lights of the medical cuff. With my sword clutched in one hand, if she wakes, she will feel comfort in knowing I am close by to keep her safe.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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## Zoe

"MORDOX," I whisper his name as I wake from a heavy slumber.

His was the last face I saw before sleep pulled me under. Had it been a dream? Was he just a figment of my imagination? Or had the criminal Stacy warned us about really whisked me off to his wicker-ball house in the trees to heal me from an injury?

My eyes flutter open to a faint shuffling sound. Mordox's rugged face comes into view, all hard jawline, tousled hair, and hooded gaze as if freshly roused from sleep.

"Sorry," I breathe. "Did I wake you?"

He scratches his chest, stifling a yawn, and I feel bad for disturbing him.

"No," he lies. "I'm glad to see you're awake and the medical cuff has done its job."

The cuff enclosing my forearm has changed from its riotous show of multicolored lights to a solid, tranquil white. Mordox leans over to release my arm from the cuff, the ends of his hair brush my skin. Instinctively, my hand moves up to test its softness, and I find it as silky as I imagined.

The huge male goes still, and I realize what I've done, quickly withdrawing my hand. "Sorry. I should have asked first."

"You can touch me anytime you wish, lula." Mordox's expression softens as he removes the cuff from my arm.

His emerald gaze sparkles in the filtered light of the room, twinkling with something otherworldly that keeps me rooted to the spot, unable to move away from his presence. I should be terrified, cowering under the blanket or running away as fast as my legs can carry me, but something about him puts me at ease. I know he's a criminal, and yet he has done nothing but help me.

Mordox stands to his full height. He towers over me, and I can't help but feel small and vulnerable next to him, but at the same time, there's a strange sense of safety that comes with his nearness. As if nothing can harm me when I'm with him. That's a heady feeling I take a moment to absorb fully.

I've been in a state of constant fear ever since waking up, naked and chained on the red planet. So scared, I actually peed on myself. Not my most shining moment, but the piss-yellow alien who had bought me and the other girls was more than my feeble bravado could handle.

I rub my freed arm. "You never told me what that means. Lula."

"It's a tiny songbird native to my home world, Ziaria. Delicate and beautiful, but fierce when provoked. Just like you."

My entire body blooms with heat. "I'm not any of those things," I say shyly. "Timid and afraid maybe, but never fierce and definitely not beautiful."

"You don't give yourself enough credit."

"That's what my friend Darcy always says."

"Smart friend," he grins, then mumbles. "Smarter than Drax."

"Now that I'm all healed up, I'd like to return to them. My friends that is."

Mordox studies me a long moment. "You still need time to rest," his words are measured and deliberate. "Time to regain your strength. It's a long way to meet your friends. It won't do if you collapse halfway there."

His words ring true, despite my anxiousness to be reunited with the girls. As I push myself up in the bed, my head feels light and a little swimmy, and I know I'm in no condition to travel.

Not yet at least.

"You must be hungry." Mordox starts for the doorway.

"I need a bathroom more than anything." My bladder is full and tight, ready to burst. He turns to me with a bewildered expression. "You know? To relieve myself? And I wouldn't mind a shower."

The perplexed wrinkle of his brow smooths, and he points to a small doorway on the opposite side of the room. "Through there is a sanitation system."

I rise from the bed and pad over to where he indicates. What I find inside the small, round room isn't what I'm used to. "How does it all work?"

Mordox shows me how to operate the shower, or what he calls a purifier, an upright cylinder that closes like a clamshell. The smooth walls are covered in tiny holes that shoot out a warm mist with the crank of a handle. The podium with the hole in the center is self-explanatory and the pedestaled basin is used the same as a sink except it uses warm mist instead of water, followed by a blast of warm air.

"Take your garment in with you to wash," Mordox points to the purifier. "Then join me in the other room for a meal."

He leaves me to do my business, and I do it quickly since the room lacks a door. Then I close myself inside the purifier fully clothed. I can hear Mordox moving around in the other room, but it feels weird to undress without a door I can shut.

I slip out of the garment the girls and I fashioned from sheets of coarsely woven material we found aboard our crashed vessel, and I crank the handle.

I suck back a harsh gasp as I'm suddenly enveloped in a swirling, warm mist. Dirt, grime, and sweat disappear from my body without the aid of soap or water. My head falls back on weary shoulders. I close my eyes and savor the feeling of the steamy mist cascading over aching muscles.

Fisted in my hand is the dress I've been wearing ever since we crashed. I spread out the material, holding it up so the mist fogs around it, wetting the fabric in fine droplets.

The mist shuts off by itself and is followed by a torrent of warm air that

blasts me in all directions. I close my eyes and wrinkle my nose against the whirlwind.

Once it's done, I shake out my dress, shocked that it's as clean and dry as I am. I pull it on over my head and rake my fingers through my shoulder-length bob, finding it tangle free and silky smooth.

The door clicks open, and I push my way out, greeted with a savory aroma, my mouth watering in appreciation. On bare feet, I pad toward the sound of Mordox in the next room.

His back is to me as he stands over a hotplate set up on a table and stirs something in a large pot. All across his broad shoulders and down his back he is layered in diamond shaped scales like a mythical dragon. A bright, royal blue in contrast with the curtain of glossy black and green-streaked hair falling in a silky sheet down to a tight waist.

I watch him for a moment, admiring the way his thick arms flex with each turn of the handle as he stirs whatever savory concoction is in his pot. The tip of his tail, tufted with the same silky hair that's on his head, curls inches off the floor and absently sways slowly back and forth.

He turns before I can look away, catching me openly ogling his tight ass and muscled thighs encased in snug, leather pants. My eyes flip up to meet a hot, emerald gaze and wolfish grin.

"Did you enjoy the purifier, lula?" Mordox licks the tip of one fang while raking me with a lustful stare.

I've never experienced this much attention from the opposite sex. No one has ever looked at me the way Mordox is, through lusty eyes like I'm a delicious snack begging to be consumed.

I ponder what it would be like to be eaten by the big bad wolf.

Small in stature with not much in the way of curves, I'm barely legal, having turned eighteen only a few months before my abduction. I look more like a child than a woman. Being a virgin, I doubt I even qualify as the latter.

Enveloped in a wave of heat, my heart races as I feel the full force of his gaze upon me. It's both electrifying and intimidating all at once. I entertain cashing

in my V-card with the huge alien. Stacy admitted to having sex with Drax, so I know intimacy with one of these guys is possible.

Every inch of me trembles with curiosity of what it would be like to let Mordox have his way with me. Would it hurt the first time, or would my eyes roll back in my head while my body undulates in pleasurable waves like I've read about in trashy romance novels?

I squirm under the intensity of his stare, my untouched pussy growing wet and swollen for something I'm ignorant of. My cheeks flush as I shift uncomfortably, trying to stave off the sparking electricity emanating between us. I cross my arms over my hardening buds, hoping he doesn't notice them poking through the coarse fabric of my loose garment.

Mordox's head tilts back, nostrils flaring as he pulls hard at the air. He stiffens, his open grin tightening into a knowing smirk.

I squeeze my thighs together under my shapeless garment. Men can't smell a woman's arousal even if she isn't wearing panties, right? It's impossible. Isn't it? Then again, Mordox isn't a man.

I recall Drax sniffing at the air as we ran through the forest. He could scent the other males and Godzilla fast approaching. Judging by the hungry stare shining from Mordox's verdant gaze, it's a good possibility he knows I'm embarrassingly wet.

"What are you making?" I blurt out, breaking away from his intense stare, and moving around the small, circular room. I fake an interest in the many bottles and bowls of colorful foods littering a crudely made table set off to one side.

"Alope stew," he growls.

"Sort of smells like beef stew," I say, steering my dirty thoughts out of the gutter.

I never figured myself attracted to the bad-boy type. I always pictured myself married to the goofy nerd type with glasses. Someone safe and kind with a sense of humor.

Mordox is more than bad. He's an escaped convict living on a prison moon. A

dangerous predator who looks ready to take a bite out of me, yet there's something darkly alluring about him that flips my trigger.

"Sit." Mordox's heavy timbre rumbles through me. "Eat." He sets a steaming bowl on the table and slides over a stool for me to sit.

Glad for the distraction, I take a seat and wonder what has gotten into me. I should be petrified all alone with a dangerous criminal not pondering what his alien cock, forming a thick ridge down his thigh, would feel like rupturing my hymen.

Mordox sets an eating utensil down next to my bowl and moves back to the pot of stew to fill one of his own.

I moan around my first bite of stew, noticing how Mordox's muscles tighten in my periphery. This is a bad habit in need of breaking if I'm going to leave here with my virginity intact. I know all it will take is one simple touch and I'll be his for the taking. The coiled ache in my belly is begging to be eased.

"You said this place is up in a tree?" I squint at the tightly woven vines and branches making up the spherical room, but all I see are leaves and filtered sunlight. "How did you get all this stuff up here?"

"Pulley system attached to a platform," Mordox answers around a bite of food.

"You want to sit at the table?" I scoot over to make room, feeling bad that he's eating standing up.

"You're sitting on the only stool." He bobs his chin at me. "Don't normally welcome visitors."

"I guess not since this is your hideout, what with you being an escaped convict and all." I freeze the second my mouth runs away with itself. "Sorry. That was a rude thing to say."

Mordox grins and I instantly calm. "I didn't exactly escape as much as I was unexpectedly released."

My boldness increases with the gentleness of his tone. "Now I'm even more curious about you."



"What do you want to know, lula? Ask me anything."

I eat a couple more bites of the delicious stew and contemplate which question out of the many banging around inside my skull to ask first. "Stacy said you were dangerous. Is that true?"

"Yes." I jerk from his quick, decisive response. "I served in the Ziarian military as a warrior until I was chosen to become a Lita Contra, a warrior elite, to serve the Ambassador."

"What does that mean?"

"I was specially trained in the art of unconventional warfare," he says, pride lacing his words. "Lita Contras are assigned special missions to protect and serve Ziaria. It is the highest honor for a warrior to be chosen for such an elite group."

"You're a war hero then?" I cock my head at him. "What did you do to get sent here?"

"Discovered something I wasn't supposed to know." Mordox's face drops into a hard mask. "I know every government has its share of corruption, but I was shocked by how pervasive it had become in my own."

Mordox finishes off his bowl of stew with a faraway gaze. I keep quiet while he's lost inside his own head, hoping he will keep talking. This guy is dangerous, but not for the reason I thought. My curiosity is on fire with wanting to know his story.

"Ziaria was on the brink of war with our neighboring planet, Crix. Their warriors outnumber ours five to one," Mordox begins. "I had just returned from a covert mission when I overheard a conversation between Ambassador Kret and General Deose that I simply could not believe."

"A male by the name of Draxon had just been arrested for breaking into the Ambassador's temple and downloading restricted files from the Governor's mainframe. Files that held plans for a remote prison on Zune and the reason for its secrecy, which had nothing to do with mining xedon and everything to do with genetic experiments to alter our own people. To even the odds of winning the war, they hoped to create super warriors. Genetic altering is illegal on Ziaria. A crime punishable by death."

"You're innocent, the same as Drax?"

"If you mean Draxon, then no, not the same as Drax. He's a cyber-terrorist for hire. Nothing that male has done has ever been innocent."

"So you got caught eavesdropping and they sent you here?"

"Yes, and placed me in solitary, away from all the other prisoners, so I couldn't talk," Mordox explains. "Lies of horrific crimes I never committed were fabricated to justify my life sentence."

"How did you get free of the prison?"

"When we first arrived, two groups of ten males were taken, one group at a time, to mine the xedon, but they never returned. The guards told us mining accidents had taken their lives. We'd only been here a few months when lockdown ended and the luminetric barriers disengaged and all the prisoners, except for me, were free to leave their cell pods and gather in the common area for the first meal of the cycle. It was then discovered the guards had abandoned us.

"Without warning, the barrier to my isolation pod disengaged and my confinement collar fell away along with twelve other lifers in Annex 1. I didn't hesitate to make a run for it, getting lost in Zune's thick forests. I used what husti flowers I could find to cover my scent and waited for several cycles, hiding in the trees to see if the guards were coming back. When they didn't, I snuck back into the prison during lockdown to see if I could make sense of why they left in such a hurry."

"What did you find?" I lean forward on the stool, totally engrossed in Mordox's story.

"Nothing in the prison except signs of a rapid evacuation," Mordox says. "It was what I found in the forest that explained it all."

"The underground lab?" I guess.

Mordox nods gravely. "I stumbled on the sunken stairs first, then the broken lift shaft farther away. Both entrances were locked up tight, so I hid and surveilled the area, waiting to see who was coming and going. After thirty cycles, I nearly gave up, thinking it empty, when a small group of scientists

ran out into the forest, boarded a shuttle hidden in an underground bunker, and left Zune. Gruxt followed, or the beast that he had become, ripping his way through the double doors at the sunken steps. He bolted into the forest, but what followed was much worse."

Chills race down my spine. My throat grows tight, and I'm so afraid to ask.

"After Gruxt took off into the forest, creatures straight from nightmares emerged." Mordox's expression grew bleak. Haunted. "I counted nine of them plus Gruxt."

"So twenty prisoners were taken under the guise of mining, and you think they were genetically altered into creatures?"

"I know they were. That was the conversation I overheard. I remember seeing Gruxt on the transport from Ziaria to here. He was the most Ziarian-looking of the genetic alterations. The others look nothing like my kind. The ones I was able to track and kill were more insectoid than male."

"What happened to the other ten? Where are they?"

"I don't know."

"How many have you been able to kill?" Panic rises, knowing we are unprotected in the forest with genetically altered creatures on the loose for days.

"Three are still out there that I know of. I never ventured inside the lab, so it's possible the other ten miners are still inside. Or maybe they're dead. I don't know." Mordox shakes his head. "Gruxt was the easiest of the creatures to track. He ripped apart eight of the lifers before I lost his trail. I don't know what happened to the other four. Maybe they're using husti oil like me to mask their scents, or maybe they're dead. Wherever they are, I can no longer scent them.

"I was able to track most of the creatures to the dark side of the moon. I killed six before three others vanished into the darkness. Then, after your ship crashed, Gruxt emerged from wherever he'd been hiding and was coming for you. The only smart thing Drax did was move you when he did."

"He was taking us to the lab where it's safer."

"The lab is not safe, lula." Mordox. "There are ten miners unaccounted for who could still be inside the lab."

"Or they could be dead," I say, hopeful the girls haven't walked into danger.

"There's no way of knowing until the lab is thoroughly searched."

"You said Drax downloaded the files about what your government was up to. He has to know what went on down there. He and Stacy were holed up inside the lab for a couple of days and say it's safe. Surely, he would have searched it first."

"Drax is a techy not a warrior. Then again, he would never put his mate at risk," Mordox ponders.

"We have to warn Drax and my friends, Mordox," I plead. "They're walking into a dangerous situation. We have to tell them everything you just told me."

"The ground is too dangerous." Mordox set aside his empty bowl and knelt before me. "There are three creatures still out there. I won't risk your safety, lula."

Even with Mordox on his knees, I am eyeball to eyeball with him. The guy has to be at least seven feet tall and four feet wide.

"Why me?" I shake my head, not understanding why I'm the only girl he saved. Why I'm the only girl whose safety he's concerned with. "Why just me?"

Mordox tilts his head in the most endearing way, his verdant gaze glowing bright with unspoken emotion. "Because lula, you are mine to protect."

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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## Mordox

How THIS TINY female talked me into this, I haven't a clue. I stuff more rations into my pack, enough for the two of us for several cycles of travel, along with the medical cuff.

No. I *do* know how she convinced me to leave the safety of my treetop home. As my mate, I can deny her nothing. She is determined to return to her friends, and I know she will never rest until she knows they are safe. I admire her loyalty, but taking the risk that she might set off on her own isn't an option.

"Come here, lula." I wave her over after she dons the foot coverings I fashioned out of leather strips and cloth padding.

She stops before me, sticking one foot out and then the other. "How do they look?"

"Perfect," I say, bending to adjust the ties on her left foot.

She coyly ducks her head, color tinting her pale flesh. My touch lingers, my gaze lingering longer. I drink in the sight of her, memorizing every detail—the pale blue of her eyes, the way her lips curl when she grins, and especially how she stands firm against me, demanding she be reunited with her friends.

"We need to mask your scent." I hold up the bottle of husti flower oil. "Make sure nothing will catch our trail."

She sniffs at the oil I rub between my palms. "Is that why you smell like sandlewood?"

"I don't know what that is." I smooth the oil down her arms.

"Just a type of tree that smells really good."

I grin to myself, pouring more oil in the palm of my hand and applying it to her calf. "You think I smell good?"

Her color heightens brighter, her mouth moves wordlessly as she searches for an answer. "No. I mean, yes."

I look up at her, raising an eyebrow in question while smoothing her opposite calf in oil.

Flustered, she stumbles through an explanation, "There's a spice there too, mixing with the oil's scent."

I smile and stand from where I'm crouched before her. "The spice is all me."

"Well, it's nice." She ducks her head. "I like it."

With a finger under her chin, I tilt back her head. "You don't have to hide from me."

"I'm not hiding," she says shyly, fighting hard to hold my gaze.

"Fierce little thing," I smirk. "Not even seasoned warriors can look me in the eye this long without averting their gaze."

"You said I had nothing to fear from you, so why should I look away?"

"You don't and you shouldn't." I wink, causing her to flush further, then clip a wide, silver band around her wrist that matches the one I always wear. "Wear this always."

"Why? What is it?" Zoe studies the band, spinning it around on her thin wrist.

"A reflector band that disrupts biometric and heat signature scanners," I say, attaching my sword to my belt and shouldering the pack. "In case the remaining lifers have gone back to collect any tech from the prison like I did, I don't want them to be able to track us. Ready to go?"

"Yep." Zoe stands straighter.

I know she's afraid of the journey ahead, especially after I told her what awaits us on the ground. Yet she's resolute about reaching her friends to warn them what creatures might still remain inside the lab.

Zoe said Drax and his female had spent several cycles there before gathering the others from the crashed ship. If something were still down there, it seems likely they would have already found it. So I'm trying to remain hopeful the lab is safe and Drax hasn't led those females to their deaths.

Zoe follows me out onto the terrace and gasps, her face ashen with fear. "When you said treetop hideaway, I didn't think you meant at the very top of the tree. We must be a hundred feet in the air."

"My translator doesn't understand that unit of measurement."

"Doesn't matter." She takes a tiny step toward the edge and looks over. "We're really freaking high up."

"The lift is safe," I say, stepping onto the platform. "See. It holds me just fine."

Zoe nods but doesn't look convinced.

I curl my fingers at her. "Come on, lula."

"Promise, you won't let me fall?"

"I would never let you fall." I hold my hand out for her to take. "You have my word as a Lita Contra."

She takes a large shuddering breath, her throat working through a hard swallow. I can feel the fear emanating from her as she hesitates before finally grabbing my hand, trembling like a leaf in a violent storm, gathering her courage to join me.

The platform sways a little and she shakes harder. I'm about to call off our journey when she wraps her arms around my waist, clinging to me with all her might. Her body quakes against mine, her knuckles white with tension.

Her voice quavers yet remains firm. "I'm ready," she declares with a newfound bravery.



Zoe buries her face in my chest, her warmth radiating through my body as she holds tightly to me. I work the pulley system, lowering us to the ground, slow and steady to savor this moment. My heart warms as her trusting embrace tightens around me, my scales rippling with a fierce need to keep her safe.

As we reach the ground, Zoe blows out a relieved breath and eases away. I immediately miss the feel of her body perfectly melded against mine.

"Thanks, Mordox," she says softly, her voice now steady. "Sorry I was all clingy. I couldn't have done that without you."

"You're stronger than you think." I reach out, tipping her chin up with my fingertip. "But feel free to cling to me anytime you wish."

Zoe's eyes lock with mine, a deep flush darkens her pale cheeks, and the urge to protect her at all costs amplifies. My muscles tense as my body hums in response to her presence, and I know I will do whatever is necessary to shield her from danger.

I whack the tip of my tail on the ground to stave off the tingles at the base of my spine. The urge to mark her as mine intensifies the longer our gazes linger.

I close the distance between us, dipping my face to the hollow of her throat to better breathe in her delicate fragrance. She shudders in my arms as my lips trail up and along her jaw to settle over her parted lips.

"I won't let anything harm you. I'll keep you safe always," I breathe my vow against the softness of her mouth.

"Mordox," she moans my name, her fingers tangling in my hair.

I swallow her soft sigh, deepening the kiss as I lose myself in her taste. The sound of her soft gasps and the feel of her body pressed against mine fuel my desire to mark her with my scent. My tail slashes at the air, yet my mating gland will not relent. Annoying tingles turn to sharp pinpricks of ardor, and I know I must soon make her mine or go insane with need. My cock thickens, pearly beads leaking from the engorged tip in anticipation.

But I can't give in to my primal instincts yet. Not until I know she is safe.

With great reluctance, I ease away so my mouth hovers over hers in a breathless caress. I brush a soft kiss across her lips, savoring the sweet taste of her for a moment longer before I take a step back and fight for control.

Tris's screech breaks the peacefulness of the moment, and Zoe leaps into my arms.

"It's only Tris," I reassure her. "She's mad I left the house."

"That's an awfully loud sound to come from such a small creature."

"I know. She can be really annoying sometimes," I grin, tempted to keep hold of Zoe, but reluctantly set her on her feet. My hands cling to her waist a moment longer than necessary before she takes a step back, never looking away from me as I let my hands drop, releasing her.

"Where is she?" Zoe turns her eyes up to the forest's canopy.

"Up there somewhere, hiding in the trees."

"Wow. You can't even see your pod house from down here."

"I've had twenty rotations to perfect the camouflage." I dismantle the pulley system and hide the platform in the heavy foliage. Then I cast my gaze skyward and make a clicking noise, holding up my palm as a landing pad for my plurshy companion to land.

Tris is a soundless blur of blue and yellow; spreading her limbs to extend the webbing, she floats down to land with a soft thump. She wraps tiny, clawed fingers around my thumb.

"I'm glad Tris wants to join us. She can hear long distances away. If something is sneaking around, she'll hear it before I can scent it."

"She's so cute." Zoe's face instantly brightens with wonder as she studies the wide-eyed plurshy in my hand. "Can I hold her?"

"Sure. Hold out your hand like this." I demonstrate. "See if she'll come to you. Don't be too disappointed if she won't, she doesn't trust..."

My words die in my mouth as Tris leaps out of my hand and into Zoe's.

"Looks like you've made a new friend." I smirk.

"Two friends," Zoe corrects me with a blinding smile.

"Come on," I say, completely taken with the little human. I hold out my hand for her to take and lead her through the forest while she cuddles Tris against her cheek. "Be careful and step where I step. The area around my hideaway is littered with traps."

"Okay, Mordox." My female holds tightly to my hand, so innocent and trusting, my protective instincts are like shockwaves zipping across every nerve ending, rippling my scales.

The trees around us loom tall and menacing in the sultry heat, casting a greenish glow over everything despite the orange rays of the relentless sun. The air is thick with the scent of moss and damp ground, and the rumble of the rushing waters from the Zune River can be heard nearby.

I listen intently to my surroundings, fearful of any sign of the lab creatures roaming the forest. The three I have yet to kill have taken to the dark side of Zune, but they are known to wander into the light, hunting the native creatures for their next meal.

The ground isn't safe enough for my mate. Not until those things are dead. I prefer her high up in the trees where they can't climb and safe behind my traps. She won't stand a chance against the abominations created by my government.

It's likely her friends are in danger, and I know there is no talking her out of going to warn them. I salute her loyalty even though I would prefer she let me shelter her high up in my treetop abode and keep her safe.

We've only just met, but I can't fathom losing her. I'm drawn to her in a way that defies explanation.

As we clear my traps, I can feel her tension mounting. She's scared, and I can't blame her. The lab creatures are vicious and unpredictable.

I pick up the pace, but she soon falls behind. She can't keep up with my lengthy strides, and we have a long journey ahead of us. I don't want to be on the ground and vulnerable any longer than necessary. If I were solo, I could run nonstop and reach the underground lab in two cycles, but my mate needs to rest, and she can't run as fast as me.

I stop and turn to her. "It would be faster if I carry you."

"Oh." Zoe's cast her eyes downward then peers up at me through the tangle of her lashes. "Sorry I'm so slow."

"You're not slow, lula. My legs are just longer than yours." I try and ease the hurt I see clouding her gaze. "Besides, I need eyes in the back of my head with those lab creatures on the loose."

I adjust the pack on my shoulders and bend my knees for her to wrap her arms and legs around my front. "You'll be doing me a huge favor by keeping an eye out for something coming at us from behind."

Zoe brightens. "Okay, Mordox. Tris and I will watch your six."

I don't know what she means, but as soon as slim arms wrap around my neck and shapely legs around my waist, I can think of nothing else except her hot core pressing against me through the thin layer of material separating us. My knees nearly buckle at the feel of her pert breasts and soft curves plastered to my front.

My hands grip her thighs as I take off at a sprint, the length of my erection pressing and pinching with every stride. I ignore it. Now is not the time for such things. I must focus on the journey ahead, on keeping Zoe safe.

Trees whip past at a blinding rate as I dodge and weave through the heavy vegetation. I run parallel to the Zune River, where the forest isn't as thick. Once we're halfway to the lab, I turn toward the immense clava tree marking the entrance to the sunken steps. Our path of travel changes to the interior of the forest. I pull my sword from where it's attached to my belt and begin to hack through the thick flora, clearing us a path.

"What are rotations?" Zoe's sweet voice floats into my ear. Her breath a hot wash across my throat where her head peers over my shoulder. "You said it took you twenty of them to perfect the camouflage of your treehouse."

"The time it takes Ziaria to rotate around the sun."

"We call that a year on Earth," she quietly comments, and I want so badly to close my eyes and savor the warmth of her breath bathing my throat. "Is the rainbow planet hanging in the sky Ziaria?"

"Yes. My home world."

"You've been here for twenty years?"

"A little longer than that. I've been free of my confinement collar for twenty."

"You said that before. How does the collar work exactly? Is that the thing Drax used to blow up Godz... I mean Grutz?"

"Yes. Every prisoner was fitted with a collar and assigned a cell pod when we first arrived. The cell pods are equipped with sensors that correspond with the assigned prisoner's collar. If they aren't inside their pods before lockdown at the end of each cycle, the sensors will initiate a short countdown to their demise," I explain as I run. "There's no escape from the prison compound. You have to be inside your cell pod."

"Lockdown?"

"All the prisoners except for ones like me who were put into solitary, are allowed outside of their cell pods for a short duration. At the end of the cycle, everyone must return to their assigned pods to keep their collars from initializing a countdown to detonation."

"Jesus. That's not scary or anything," she snorts. "To think, I was terrified of the metal collar the alien who bought me on the red planet snapped around my neck. It only had a lock, no explosive devices involved."

"You were brave enough to have escaped."

"No. That was all Stacy. I peed myself and couldn't stop shaking. I don't have a brave bone in my whole body."

"You're wrong," I say, giving her thigh a squeeze. "You're being brave right now, going to warn your friends about the lab."

"Only because I have you." She squeezes me tighter. "My knees would be knocking if you weren't here to protect me."

"You can always count on me to keep you safe, lula."

I swell with pride knowing my mate trusts me to protect her. Struck by that knowledge, a surge of adrenaline fuels me to run faster.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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## Zoe

MORDOX HAS BEEN RUNNING for what feels like hours. I seem to be the only one who is exhausted; well, maybe Tris too. She's been curled up in a fluffy little blue-and-yellow-polka-dotted ball in the crook of my neck for a while now. Her little body emitting a low, melodic hum like a cat's purr. She's the sweetest little thing I've ever seen in my life with her big eyes and round, fuzzy face.

I stretch out my arms and arch my back, trying to find some relief from the body aches of straining to hang on to Mordox. My feet are locked at the ankles around his tight waist and my arms are draped around his neck, but not so tight that I choke him.

He hasn't slowed his pace since we got started, dodging around trees and leaping over logs with ease. If anything, he's increased his speed, hacking away at small branches and foliage with a scary-ass machete-looking blade to clear a path. Surprisingly, his breathing remains even and steady despite the physical exertion.

Mordox is amazing. Strong, fast, and agile, his huge, muscular body moves with grace and precision, even in the thick forest. But his ruggedly handsome face isn't what draws me to him. It's his empathy and compassion.

Even though he says I'm his to protect, he didn't have to come to my rescue and heal me with his medical cuff. I mean, he doesn't even know me.

And when he implied that I would only slow us down, which I totally would have, he smoothed over my wounded pride by making me feel useful instead

of a hinderance. Maybe there is a potential threat that could sneak up behind us, but I doubt it given his keen sense of smell.

As for little Tris, he could have just let her die on the forest floor, but he hadn't. He'd nursed her back to health and cared for her.

If we were back on Earth, Mordox would be serious boyfriend material. Not that I've ever had a boyfriend before, but if I were making a checklist of qualities I would want in a guy, Mordox would be the gold standard.

As Mordox runs, I marvel at the beauty of the forest around us. I didn't see any of the scenery when he carried me back to his wicker-ball treehouse after I was injured. And my only other Zune outing was when Drax rushed us to the underground lab, but I was too scared to marvel over my surroundings.

Safe in Mordox's arms, I can relax enough to admire the thick, vibrant foliage. The alien trees are mostly in shades of green and blue, sprinkled with colorful berries or tiny buds, nothing like what grows on Earth. Bright, orange sunlight filters through the dense canopy, dappling shadows on the ground. The air here is crisper and cleaner than anything I've ever smelled.

Mordox cuts a hard left and runs along the bank of a raging river. Now that I've seen the white-water rapids, I understand how Stacy fell in and couldn't swim back to shore. She said Drax jumped in and saved her, caring for her until she was well enough to travel.

"We stop here to eat." Mordox sniffs at the air as he so often does, slows to a jog, and eventually stops at a large, flat rock near the river's edge.

My legs cramp and wobble as he sets me on my feet. I take a step back, but his strong hands remain firmly around my waist. He doesn't let go right away, and I'm hyper-aware of the warmth of his body.

His emerald gaze lingers on me before he steps away and unshoulders the pack, pulling out various pouches and handing the last one to me. "Dried alope and nuts for us. Blit fruit and berries for Tris."

I suck back a gasp although I'm not surprised by his kindness. "You are the sweetest man ever, Mordox! You packed rations for Tris too."

Mordox goes stone still. The tight weave of turquoise scales covering his face



flushes a deep blue. Had I made the big, horned alien blush?

*Adorable.*

He rubs at the ear where his translator is plugged. "A man is the male of your species, but I'm not a man, lula. I'm a Ziarian male."

"You're right, duh." I tuck my hair behind my ear and open the pouch for Tris, who wastes no time reaching inside to pluck out a small, round globe that looks like a grape. She hops down off my shoulder to sit on the flat rock, nibbling the fruit she holds between tiny, clawed fingers.

"I just love her," I gush. "She's the cutest thing I've ever seen. How did you come up with the name Tris?"

"Named after my sister who died at birth." Mordox takes a seat on the rock, turning up the water skin before handing it to me. "When I found her, she was newly born. Lying helpless in the dirt, her frailty reminded me of the younger sister I never knew."

"I'm so sorry for your loss." I blink back the sudden press of tears. "That sounds so lame, but no words really seem appropriate enough."

"Thanks." Mordox pats the spot next to him, handing me the pouch of dried alope. "Come sit. Eat."

I settle on the rock, finding the surface warm from the relentless sun. Tris sits between us, happily eating her giant grape.

"Not that it wasn't sad, but I never knew my sister. I just remember how distraught my mother was, and when I saw Tris lying helpless and vulnerable, for some reason, it brought back that moment." Mordox lifts his chin at me. "What about you? Any siblings?"

"Not that I know of. I never knew my biological parents. I bounced around in foster care, so the girls, especially Darcy, feel like the sisters I always dreamed of having."

"What is this foster care where you bounced?"

The wording of his question curls my lips into a grin. "Well, I don't know the story of why my parents didn't want me, but foster care is where kids who

don't have families are housed with people willing to take care of them until they're adopted. Some nice. Some not so nice."

The look he lands on me is a mixture of horror and confusion. "Why would anyone, let alone your parents, not want you?"

I drop my gaze, unable to hold Mordox's intense stare. "I was never fortunate enough to have been adopted." As has become his habit, he tilts my chin up with the pad of one finger. Overwhelmed with emotion, I pull away.

"It makes sense why you are so resilient. Never having a family is what has made you so strong."

"You're wrong about me, Mordox. I'm not strong. I'm scared all the time."

"Fear is a strength not a weakness, lula."

"How you figure that?" I pop a piece of jerky meat into my mouth and chew.

"Fear can be tapped into as a source of power, lula. It can make you work harder and smarter. It heightens your senses and fuels your body with adrenaline to make you stronger. I'm afraid of what might remain in that lab. Afraid of what might be following us from the dark side of the moon. Do I look weak to you?"

"Not hardly!" I look around. "You mean me watching your back is a thing and not you just trying to make me feel better for slowing our progress?"

"You're not slow, just not as fast as me." Mordox offers a small smile. "And yes, I need you watching my back. I lost the scents of the remaining lifers and the three lab creatures. It concerns me as to why."

My heart swells with affection. He tries so hard to spare my feelings, but at the same time, a shiver races down my spine. "I'll keep a sharp eye out. Make sure nothing sneaks up on us. How much farther?"

"We're a quarter of the way there. If we keep going without stopping to sleep, we will reach the lab in another cycle and a half."

"I vote for keeping going if you're sure you're up for it. All this talk about creatures lurking is giving me the heebies." I shiver. "I've always wanted a sister; now I have four, and I don't want anything to happen to them. When

we get back to Earth, I hope to remain close with them."

Mordox doesn't say anything but shifts on the rock as if suddenly uncomfortable with the conversation.

"What?" My heart sinks. "What are you not telling me?"

"I don't want to upset you, but your home world is under Universeval Rule and guarded by Yulineon patrols. Even if you had a long-range spacecraft available to you, you'd be lucky to get anywhere near Earth without getting caught."

I shake my head, trying to absorb everything he just said. "What does all that mean? Why can't we just fly home?"

"If you're caught by a Yulineon patroller, they have orders to kill you on sight."

"But I'm a human. It's my home."

"Earth lies within the Luartick Sector, along with many other infant galaxies. The patrollers are there to safeguard the planets from more advanced species wanting to take advantage."

"Human." I raise my hand and shrug. "Not an advanced species. Just a girl with a desire to return home. Why would they want to kill me?"

"The entities making up Universeval Rule believe humans are not ready for what lies beyond their world." Mordox holds up a hand in surrender. "And I mean no offense, but humans are viewed as a primitive species in comparison to other beings of the known Universe. Laws were created to remove potential threats to infant life as well as to advanced life. If a human were to return with knowledge of life on other worlds," Mordox grimly shakes his head, "and with as volatile as your species is, they won't risk the possibility of you blowing yourselves up. Planetary destruction would have catastrophic effects on nearby solar systems."

I stare at him, feeling the weight of his words settle in my chest. Going home doesn't sound like an option anymore. Stunned into silence, my mind races with thoughts of never being able to return home. Of never seeing Earth again.

"I'm sorry, lula." Mordox gathers my hand in his, giving me an empathetic squeeze. "I know what it feels like to know you can never go home. Convicted of crimes I never committed, I can never return to Ziaria. Not without being hunted by the very warriors I once served with."

I return his squeeze and shift my watery gaze to the enormous planet looming low and heavy in the pale, verdant sky. Rainbow clouds swirl around its surface, making it look like a giant, iridescent marble. "If we can't go home, then where will we go?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

I haven't felt this lost since DCS came and took me from my first foster family and placed me in a group home with a whole bunch of other kids. I was so young, I didn't understand what was happening or why. All I remember was being terrified and clinging to a raggedy, stuffed bunny as if my life depended on it as I was taken away from the only world I knew.

I was so scared and confused, not knowing what was going to happen to me. Much the same as when I woke up chained and naked on the scary, red planet. Now I'm here, stranded on an alien moon with no way home. Lost again.

Mordox takes a deep breath before answering. "I don't know. I've been stuck on Zune for so long, I never thought leaving was an option. For now, we continue on our journey to the lab, find your friends, and decide from there."

I nod numbly. "Okay. Sounds like a plan."

We finish our meal of dried alope and nuts and refill the water skin. Tris leaps onto my shoulder, making herself at home in the crook on my neck. I tilt my head, nuzzling her, and she immediately starts her rhythmic humming.

Abandoned on the forest floor, she was lucky to have been found and adopted by Mordox. Luckier than I ever was. We're a motley trio of lost souls. Outcasts, unable to return home, well except for Tris, since Zune is where she was born, but she's estranged from her family all the same.

I resume my place wrapped around Mordox's front. This time I hold him tighter, my arms wrap around his neck, clinging to him like I had my raggedy bunny.

Mordox is as lost to his world as I am mine. Neither of us can go home, and

that realization only strengthens the strange connection I feel growing between us. We're both adrift with no place where we belong.

Grateful for Mordox, with my body wrapped around his, he exudes a sense of comfort and safety. He's fast becoming a steady presence in my life much like the girls have.

As we make our way deeper into the forest, I can't help but feel a sense of unease. The trees are thicker here, casting long shadows on the ground. The only sounds are the rustling of leaves and the occasional chirping of a bird. It's almost too quiet. Eerie and haunting.

Despite my melancholy, I keep a sharp eye on the receding forest for any creatures that might be following.

We've been traveling for a while when a flash of black catches my eye. I squint at the foliage, straining to see what's moving within the breaks in the thick vegetation.

"Mordox, I think I might see something behind us," I utter, still not certain I trust my eyes. I've been staring so hard at the forest around us, my vision is starting to blur.

Mordox's body tenses. He tilts back his head and pulls hard at the air then he turns to look behind us. I can sense his unease, and it only makes me feel more anxious.

"Are you picking up a scent?" I ask, worried about what might be lurking in the shadows.

Mordox sniffs the air again. "Yes, just a hint. It's a lab creature following us," he replies, his voice low and ominous.

Suddenly, Tris screeches and leaps off my shoulder for the safety of the trees. My blood turns to ice, my heart hammering inside my ribcage.

"We're still another full cycle and then some from the lab." Mordox accelerates his pace, running faster and faster. The foliage and trees around us become a blur, smacking against us as we pass by. "Hang on, lula. I'm going to try and put some distance between us and the creature."

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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## Mordox

I CAN BARELY scent the creature trailing us. The insectoid abomination following us is smarter than I've given it credit for. It's found a way to mask its scent and was able to get too close. I underestimated my enemy.

Thankfully, Zoe spotted it when she did. I push myself harder; I must outrun it and reach the sunken steps of the lab before it catches up to us. My horns shift forward, the deadly points aiming out as my natural instincts ready me for a fight. Adrenaline ripples through me in fevered waves, raising my scales down my back and across my shoulders.

"Ouch," Zoe sucks back a gasp and pokes at the hard edges of my scales across my shoulders. "Wow. These things are like metal plating."

"Sorry." I duck low under a jutting tree branch, never slowing my pace. "Natural armor. Can you still see the creature?"

"Only glimpses. You seem to be putting some distance between us and it."

"Good. Keep your eyes open and let me know the second you see anything."

"I will."

There's no safe place on the ground, not with those things out here. Every fiber of my being screams for me to get my female someplace secure, but it's too late to return to my home high in the trees. The lab is my only hope.

I could easily use my claws to scale to the top of a tree, but it would only be a temporary escape from the creature which cannot climb. As tenacious as I've

found these abominations to be, it would simply wait us out below, and stuck in a tree with no way down is not an option.

With the creature tight on my heels, the irony of our only option isn't lost on me, seeking refuge in the very labyrinth of horrors where the altered Ziarian was created.

I force my legs to pump harder, determination surging through my veins as adrenaline rockets through me. My muscles burn to slow, yet I keep pushing onward with the need to get Zoe to safety.

"Mordox!" Zoe cries out, her warning comes too late.

The creature hurtles through the air, its massive form crashing into me with a force that sends me toppling to the ground. Instinctively, I curl my body around Zoe, protecting her delicate form as I roll across the forest floor before springing to my feet.

I shed the heavy pack from my back, letting it fall to the ground. Spindly legs extend toward us, their unnatural length and spiny appendages making the creature's intentions clear as its gaping maw snaps a mouthful of serrated teeth.

Monstrous claws snap as the creature lunges, snagging on Zoe's loose garment, ripping a piece from the hem. I push her behind me, using my body as a shield.

"I'll keep it busy, Zoe!" The creature is so close, I can feel its hot breath on my face as I lock eyes with it. "Find a place to hide."

I wait for her small footsteps to scamper away before lunging forward, thrusting my worn-out sword at the creature's abdomen. The dull blade merely glances off its tough hide of shimmering scales.

The points of my horns could penetrate that hide, but I know better than to lead an attack with my head. Those claws could easily decapitate me. The creature snarls, rearing back on hind legs to snap giant claws at me, forcing me back a few steps to avoid being ripped apart.

It's hard to believe this thing with its undulating body and ten, bright green, bulging eyes was once a Ziarian male. A true testament to the lengths the



Ziarian government was willing to go create their super warriors.

The creature lunges forward again, and I barely dodge its snapping claws. I can't keep this up for long. My sword is useless against this thing, dull from hacking a path through the forest.

The creature's relentless swipes tear through the air. I sidestep another lethal strike, my pulse quickening as I envision Zoe's delicate face and her radiant smile. Her safety is the force that drives me, adding extra weight to each blow I deliver.

My blade pummels more than cuts, metal clashing against near impenetrable flesh, over and over until the creature stumbles back, weakened by my relentless confrontation.

I wield my blade, slicing and thrusting, until the creature starts to back away. With a final snarl, it turns, a strip of Zoe's garment still stuck on the tip of one claw flashes bright white against an inky body as it disappears into the forest.

"Come on." I turn to where Zoe is hunkering down under a nifit shrub, snatching up the pack. "Let's get out of here before it changes its mind and comes back."

I catch Zoe as she leaps into my arms. Slim arms and shapely legs wrap around me in a tremulous hug, and I take off running faster than I've ever run in my life. Knowing Zoe is in danger, I can easily keep up this pace until we reach the lab.



THE ENORMOUS CLAVA tree marking the location of the sunken steps is within reach. I've been sprinting for a full cycle, having reached the lab in record time. Zoe hasn't complained once about us not stopping to eat, drink, or rest. Neither has she loosened her tight hold on me.

Her fear has given her the strength to endure as I race us to safety.

"Mordox!" Zoe's panicked scream ripples across my scales. "Behind you!"

I swing my head around to find a second creature I hadn't scented is there.

This one has long pinchers in place of the large front claws the other one had.

"The lab is just through these trees," I say, judging the distance to the clava tree. "We're almost there."

"It's gaining!"

A long pincher sweeps out to brush me off my feet. My momentum sends us flying. I turn in the air, the pack taking the brunt of the fall. I feel a hard crunch and know the supplies stuffed inside have sustained damage.

Zoe rolls off me as we hit the ground, and I push her toward a large tree trunk. "Hide!"

Sword up and at the ready, I put myself between the creature and the tree trunk Zoe hides behind. Ten bulbous eyes glint in the dim light, and I wonder at the male that has become this *thing*. Its scaled, segmented body is covered in a slick, oily sheen. Its pinchers twitch, snapping and clacking together in anticipation.

It's bigger than the first one, and its carapace is a deep purple color instead of the inky black. Razor-sharp teeth gnash my way. Its bulbous gaze blazing with an otherworldly fervor.

Impatient for the battle to commence, I lunge first, striking the creature across the face with my blade. It releases an ear-piercing screech, quickly retaliating with a merciless attack of pinchers and teeth. I dodge each blow with a well-timed counterattack, slicing off one of its many arms. That only fuels its rage.

The creature charges me, and I dive to the side, rolling to avoid its deadly swipe. Only I'm not fast enough.

Pinchers catch and rip through my scales, leaving a searing trail of pain along my side. Despite the agony, I fight on. Protecting Zoe is as vital as the breath punching from my lungs.

On a bellowing roar, I move in for the kill, throwing every ounce of strength into a final thrust, driving my blade deep into the creature's flesh. The creature staggers, its spindly legs giving way beneath the weight of its own demise.

I release a triumphant roar before my own legs give out, and I collapse to the ground with a groan of pain.

Zoe rushes to my side, her voice trembling with fear as she kneels beside me. "Mordox! Are you all right?"

Deep gashes across my chest and abdomen burn like hot coals. "Just a scratch," I utter. "Get the medical cuff." I point to my pack, now torn and crushed.

Zoe drags over the heavy load, digging through the disheveled contents until she pulls free an obviously cracked medical cuff and attempts to secure it around my forearm as I fight for consciousness. Tears stream down her cheeks as she struggles to keep the medical cuff in place.

"Leave me." I tug my arm from her grip. "Go, before the first creature returns."

"I'm not leaving you, Mordox." Zoe tries again to close the cuff around my forearm. "If I can get this thing to close, it'll heal you like it did me."

"No. It's no use." My pain grows unbearable, darkness closes in around me, but I can't let myself slip away just yet. Not until Zoe is safe. "Lab is not far. Go to your friends."

She springs up from the ground. "Don't give up on me Mordox. You're going to make it. I'll help you."

"No help, lula. Forget me. Get yourself someplace safe."

"That's crazy talk, Mordox. No way am I leaving you here." Zoe frantically looks around, grabs my wrists, and tries to drag me. She can't budge me even an inch. "I'll help you stand. You can lean on me, and we'll reach the lab together."

Zoe needs to be with her friends and not left alone in the forest. Even with what little I know about her, I know she has a stubborn streak that won't be dissuaded. I force myself to my feet, swaying from the force of my injuries.

She ducks under my arm, draping it across her shoulders as we take a wobbly step in the direction of the sunken steps, but I don't lean on her as she wants,

knowing my considerable weight will crush her. I push through my wavy vision, keeping my eye on the clava tree, the natural landmark for the lab.

My horns droop and my tail drags the ground behind me. I'm done, my energy spent, but for her sake, I will try and get close enough to see the sunken steps before I collapse. I must or risk losing consciousness and leaving her on her own.

I stumble on shaky legs but trudge onward. Pain radiates from my wounds, each step a struggle against the darkness that threatens to take me.

We reach the clava tree and I spot the sunken steps in the distance.

"You're almost there." I give her a little shove in the direction of safety just as my legs give out and I collapse onto the ground, my lungs heaving for air.

Zoe reaches for me, her soft hand cradling my face as she peers down at me, concern and fear clouding her gentle stare. Pain claws at my body as I try to rise and fail. It's no use, and I collapse back on the ground.

"Go," I croak.

"Stay here." Zoe stands and clucks her tongue. "That was a stupid thing to say. Just stay awake, Mordox. I'll be right back with help."

Tris returns as Zoe runs off toward the sunken steps, my plurshy companion sniffing at the blood coating my chest and abdomen. She huddles close, her little body vibrating out her comforting song.

If Tris is here, that means the danger has passed. She is smart enough to hide in the forest's canopy whenever those creatures are near. So I shut my eyes and give myself over to the darkness.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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## Zoe

I RACE to the sunken steps in a panic and skid to a halt. A small spacecraft is parked off to one side. Weird panels have been erected from the top as if to catch the sunlight. This is as good a sign as any they're here.

Practically leaping down the steps, I duck through the giant hole ripped out of the double doors only to run into a locked door with no handle or knob. My heart thuds inside my chest as I meet the barrier, knowing Mordox desperately needs help. The vibrancy of his turquoise scales has begun to fade to a ghastly white, making the severity of his condition crystal clear.

Fear shoots through me knowing his life hangs in the balance, and without the use of a medical cuff, there is a chance he could slip away.

He might have stolen me away from my friends, but he'd brought me back after healing me and keeping me safe. It's my turn to return the favor.

"Darcy!" I yell, frantically pounding the cold metal with both fists. "Romy! Tasha! Drax! Is anyone here?"

I press my ear to the door, straining to hear any signs of life beyond the barrier, but I'm met with only silence, my heavy breaths echoing unnaturally in the void.

Despite the ship's presence, the stillness is so profound, I worry we came all this way for nothing. What if Mordox is right about the unaccounted for miners? What if they were made into creatures and are still inside the lab? What if Drax and the girls ran into them and they fled, or what if the

creatures killed everyone?"

"Hello?" I pound harder against my rampant thoughts, my fist turning an angry red.

Red-hot panic sears my throat, burning me from the inside out. I try to swallow it back, but the feeling only intensifies as I lay eyes on a cold, lifeless keypad embedded in the wall. I tap on the keys marked with weird symbols, but nothing happens. The screen remains dark, and the door remains locked.

Sweat beads on my forehead the longer I stand here in vain. I have to go back and check on Mordox. My stomach drops knowing I failed him as I race back to where I left him lying prone on the ground.

"Mordox!" I drop to my knees next to his unconscious body. His eyes are shut tight and his brow is furrowed in pain. But he's alive!

Caught up in my despair, I didn't see Tris curled up next to him until now. She's purring up a storm as if to comfort Mordox in his anguished repose.

"Hey, little girl," I pet her head with a trembling hand. "You came back. Are you okay? Did those giant bug things scare you as much as they did me?"

The faint voices in the distance must be my imagination. It's just wishful thinking, I know it is. But as they grow louder and more distinct, I know they have to be real.

I rush out of the foliage to find Darcy leading a group of four Ziarian males. I recognize Drax and Rooke, but the other two, I don't know them.

Darcy stops dead in her tracks, blinking hard as if she can't believe her eyes.

"Darcy!" I cry out, thrilled and relieved beyond words to see her, but my desperation to save Mordox overrides my reunion. "I need your help."

Darcy races toward me with Rooke in hot pursuit, a fierce determination blazing in her dark eyes. She skids to a stop before me, her hands trembling as she brings them up to cup my face. Her intense gaze doesn't so much as waver as she takes me in.

"Are you okay?" Darcy hugs me gently before easing away. "Let's get you

inside. Oh my god, Zoe, we've been so worried about you.”

“No. Not me.” I tug out of her hold. “It's Mordox. He needs help.”

“Mordox?” Rooke stiffens, lifting his nose to the air and I know he's trying to catch Mordox's scent.

His scales raise across his shoulders and down his back. His horns tilt forward as he prepares for battle.

“He saved my life,” I defend, not liking how this is going. “Now I need to save his. Please, Darcy. Help me.”

“Zoe, Mordox took you captive. He stole you right out from under my nose. You can't be serious right now.” Darcy takes me by the elbow and starts to steer me toward the sunken steps as if I'm a child. “Did you hit your head or something? You're not thinking straight.”

“No, Darcy. I didn't hit my head.” I jerk my arm out of her hold, anger rising within me as I back away. As much as I appreciate Darcy taking me under her wing, I'm not completely helpless, and I'm not stupid. “My thinking is perfectly clear. If you won't help Mordox, then I'll disappear into the forest and do what I can for him. I need a medical cuff. The one he has is broken.”

“What do we do?” Darcy turns to Rooke for an answer.

“He helped you once!” I yell at Rooke and then Drax, who steps up to Rooke's side. “He helped you kill that monster. When I was hurt, he healed me and kept me safe. Protected me when those creatures from the darkness attacked.” The hot press of tears gives way, rolling down my cheeks unchecked. I must make them understand if I'm to save my male! “Mordox is not who you think he is. Please, Darcy. He needs help.”

“Okay, Zoe.” Darcy puts her palms up in surrender. “Where is he?”

“I'm not telling. Not until those males promise not to hurt Mordox.”

“Zoe,” Drax's reasonable tone only fuels my anger. “Mordox is a killer.”

“Promise me, or I'll run into the forest, and you'll never see me again,” I bellow. “Promise me he will not be harmed!”



Drax turns to the two males behind him and then to Rooke. Each one reluctantly nods their heads in agreement.

Drax clears his throat. "No one will hurt Mordox. You have my word."

I release the breath I'm holding and point behind me. "He's this way."

I lead them to where Mordox lies unconscious. Crouching next to him, my heart pounds as I check to make sure he's still breathing.

"The medical cuff we have is broken. He needs a working one, fast," I stress.

"What did this to him?" Darcy sucks back gasps.

"Two of those insect creatures attacked us," I say and point in the direction where we came. "Mordox killed one back there. The other one ran off."

"After we get them inside, we'll come back out and have a look," Drax says dropping into a crouch next to Mordox and motioning for the three other males to do the same. "He's huge. It'll take all four of us to lift and carry his heavy ass."

Tris leaps onto my shoulder as the four Ziarian's lift Mordox from the ground as one. My stomach clinches at seeing his powerful body limp and lifeless in their arms. He grunts in pain but doesn't wake, and that worries me the most.

A blue puddle is left on the ground where he laid. He's lost a lot of blood. The thought of losing him forever terrifies me. He's become important to me in such a short amount of time. If he doesn't survive, I know I'll never get over it.

"You can't take that wild creature inside the lab," Drax says, nodding his chin at Tris who cowers under my hair, using it like a curtain to hide behind.

"Have you seen what came out of that lab? What might still be inside? And I'm not talking about Gruxt," I hiss, holding my hands up like lobster claws. "I'm talking about those giant insect creatures with the huge front pinchers like the ones Mordox just fought. Like the one he killed."

"Gruxt?" Darcy wrinkles her nose at me while taking an interest in Tris on my shoulder.

"The green-haired Godzilla," I answer her.

"What is it that might still be inside the lab?" the male with blue-streaked hair sweeps me from head to toe with an alarmed gaze as we make our way toward the sunken steps, then looks back at Drax. "You think she's talking about that thing we saw on the dark side? The thing with the scrap of white material stuck in its claw that most likely came from her garment?"

"It did come from my dress." I pick at my tattered hem. "Mordox fought that one off about a day ago while we were running to get here."

"How do you know what came out of the lab, Zoe?" Darcy asks, carefully smoothing her fingertips over Tris's fuzzy head. The tiny plurshy stays where she's at, huddled in the crook of my neck, but doesn't recoil away from Darcy's touch.

"Mordox told me about the twenty miners who were experimented on in the lab. He said he saw Gruxt and nine insectoid creatures come out. He killed the seventh one about a day's run from here, but there are two more on the loose and ten miners unaccounted for," I warn. "That's why he took me to his hideout, to protect me from those creatures while I healed."

"I've searched the lab, Zoe, there's nothing living down there except us," Drax assures me. "I can account for nine of the miners. They're dead and inside a holding room behind six inches of transparent shielding."

"Wait!" the male with blue-streaked hair exclaims. "When were you planning to tell us there're dead bodies down there?"

"They're contained, Slye." Rooke rolls bright, ruby eyes. "Drax showed me where they are. It's fine. Don't be a cunt."

"Contained inside a clear tomb down there with us!" the one named Slye bellows. "How is that in any way fine?"

"Well, that still leaves one," I say, ignoring Slye. Dead is not dangerous, so I'm not worried about them. "Where's he? Alive, hiding somewhere inside the lab?"

"She's right, Drax," the male with purple-streaked hair pipes up. "If Mordox speaks the truth, that leaves one. And what about the other lifers? Where are

they?"

"I've found several remains of males throughout the forest but not all of them," Rooke says.

"Mordox said Gruxt killed eight of the twelve lifers before he lost their trails," I provide, as we reach the top of the sunken steps. "You sure you looked everywhere, Drax?"

"I'm sure," Drax promises. "I wouldn't leave Stacy down there if I wasn't sure it was safe."

The conversation takes a long pause as we make our way inside the lab. I'm apprehensive about going inside because of the unaccounted-for insect creature Mordox thinks could still be within, but these males and the girls have been down here a while.

Wouldn't they have seen something by now?

Drax uses a weird, boxy device to swipe over the keypad I thought was dead. It blinks once, and the door I pounded on earlier sweeps open. After a trip down some winding steps, through many doors and endless narrow hallways, it feels like we'll never reach an end when Drax scans another keypad, sweeping open a door to a much wider corridor.

"You guys back already? Holy shitballs!" I hear Tasha gasp as soon as we step through. "Is that Mordox?"

"Is Zoe with them?" Romy's heavily German-accented English is pitched high with hope. I push up on tiptoes, straining around the mountain of males carrying Mordox ahead of me, but they're blocking my view.

"Drax, what's going on?" I hear Stacy. Her tone is thick with concern.

"I'm here!" I sound off, trying to peer around the males.

Darcy curls an arm around my shoulders, and we skirt the procession of males carrying Mordox. The girls are all gathered outside an open doorway, their eyes wide with worry until they see me.

"Zoe! Oh my god," Stacy comes barreling toward me, snatching me up in a hug tight enough to squeeze the breath from my lungs. Tris lets loose a little

squeak of surprise. "Oh! What's that? It looks like a mogwai from that old movie *Gremlins*."

"Her name is Tris and she's a plurshy," I say, thrilled to finally see my friends again. "I'm so happy you all are okay. I was so worried."

"You were worried?" Tasha limps over on a curved pipe she's using as a cane to join us. "We thought Mordox had done something horrible to you."

"Did he hurt you?" Romy asks, pulling me in for a long hug.

"No." I vehemently shake my head, irritated how everyone thinks so badly of him. "He healed me, fed me his Mayme's chicken soup, and kept me safe."

They all exchange looks as if I've lost my mind. With an aggravated huff, I catch up to the group of males carrying Mordox to the end of the hall and into a room tricked out with narrow beds, boxy medical-looking machines, and a counter littered with laboratory paraphernalia.

They dump Mordox onto one of the beds, attach a medical cuff to his forearm, then secure it to the bed's armrest.

"Go easy on him, guys!" I shout, pushing my way through the crowd to stand at his bedside. "He's badly injured. Jesus!"

My outburst raises lots of eyebrows, but I don't care. The girls are like sisters to me, but right now, I'm pissed at how Mordox is being mistreated.

Rooke lifts Mordox's free arm and studies the band around his wrist before removing it. "Makes sense now why we couldn't locate them on the scanner." He nods to the identical band circling my wrist. "They're wearing energy signature disruptors."

I cross my arms and tuck the band close to my body, feeling the need to hide it. I'm in a room filled with Mordox's enemies. Maybe enemy is too harsh a word, but people who don't trust him, and I need to change their minds.

"Look, everybody. Mordox isn't who you think he is," I begin, wanting so badly for all of them to see Mordox through my eyes. "He was once a Lita Comtra. One that overheard something that got him sent here. He's innocent!"

"She can't seriously be defending him," Tasha utters under her breath.

"Certainly sounds like it," Romy whispers.

"Zoe," Darcy begins in a low, condescending tone that rakes over my *fucking* nerves. "Sweetie. Mordox stole you right out from under our noses. He can't be trusted."

"I love you like a sister, Darcy, and you too, Romy and Tasha, but if you all don't stop treating me like I'm a baby, I swear I'll... I'll... I don't know what I'll do, but none of you will like it," I grit out, growing more and more flustered and pissed off.

"I don't mean to sound like that, I'm just relieved you're back and in one piece." Darcy cups my shoulders. "We just want to protect you."

"I don't need protecting," I say, jutting up my chin. "I can protect myself, and when Mordox is healed, he will look after me."

"Mordox is a killer not a protector," Drax interjects moving to stand with Stacy.

"He was a war hero!" I shout at Drax, causing Tris to leap off my shoulder and hide under Mordox's arm. "A Lita Comtra to be exact."

"Who went on a killing spree and killed a bunch of innocent people," Drax responds with a lift of his brow.

"He told me about you, Drax." I cross my arms and straighten my spine, ready to defend my male. "He said you were a cyber-terrorist for hire. Do you deny it?"

Drax's yellow eyes narrow on me, his mouth pressing into a grim line.

"He said you got caught downloading some restricted files, and those files were about this place." I gesture around.

"I got caught *attempting* to download restricted files from the Governor's mainframe," Drax clarifies with a nasty snarl. "I wasn't successful. What I did has nothing to do with Mordox."

"Oh, yes it does," I snap. "The reason he was arrested and sent to Zune wasn't because he killed a bunch of people. It was because he overheard a conversation about the real reason this remote prison was constructed and

what all of you were brought here for, and it wasn't mining. It was for experimentation to create super warriors to even the odds so your planet wouldn't lose a pending war with the Crix."

The room grows eerily quiet. All eyes are on me, and I try not to squirm under the weight of so much scrutiny.

After a long moment of intense quiet, the male with the purple-streaked hair clears his throat. "What she's saying does check out with the personnel files we found on Mordox."

"Still doesn't mean he didn't kill all those people, Bruke." Drax turns an incredulous eye on the one named Bruke.

"Did you not listen to what I just said, Drax?" I seethe. "Mordox discovered the truth about what was happening here, and to make sure he didn't tell anyone, they lied about crimes he never committed and shipped him here. That's why they kept him in solitary, not because he was a dangerous killer, but so he wouldn't tell anyone what he knew."

I sling my hand at the space pirate with the red-streaked hair. "You obviously trust Rooke now when you said he was dangerous, or he wouldn't be down here with us. Why can't you give Mordox a chance?"

"Because Mordox is a mass murderer," Rooke scoffs.

"Well, you did kill that one male," Bruke says with pursed lips.

"In self-defense, and it was an accident." Rooke plants his hands on his hips. "I hadn't meant to pull the trigger."

"Isn't this a prison moon?" I point out the obvious. "And all of you are here because you committed a crime of some kind? Everyone except for Mordox."

"I'm just saying, maybe we should give the male a chance." Bruke tips his head at Mordox. "If we have to fight those creatures or even the lifers still on the loose, having a Lita Comtra on our side would be advantageous."

Drax shakes his head, still not convinced.

"Mordox saved my life," I say, letting the weight of the statement hang heavy in the air. "More than once. I wouldn't be here right now if it wasn't for him."

"I don't know, Zoe—"

"Well, I do know, Drax. I didn't survive being moved from one foster family after another without becoming a good judge of character. I know he's innocent!" I defend. "The files you were hired to hack from the General's computer—"

"Mainframe," Drax corrects.

"Whatever." I cut my hand through the air. "Mordox said the shit you hacked was the plans for this lab and what it was going to be used for."

"You said the download was unsuccessful," Bruke says to Drax. "Any chance they were captured in the ether? They could still be retrievable."

Drax shifts his stance, peering down at the floor in thought. "Maybe. I would need a computer with a processor that can access the universal network. The ones we have access to down here are only local hard drives. I can't access off-world networks."

"What about the one you have at the prison?" Bruke asks.

"It has a core processor that can connect with the universal network," Drax says. "That is, if it's still there, and that's a big if since I left the fucking privacy door unlocked to my cell pod when I left with Stacy."

"The door is locked." All eyes swing to Rooke. "I made sure to lock it after I pilfered all the useful items. I left the computer because I couldn't get past your biometric password."

"We need to plan a trip to the prison and get that computer," Bruke suggests. "Might explain more about what kind of creatures we're going to have to deal with that are still out there."

"First, we need to bring back the body of the insectoid creature Mordox killed," Drax adds.

"Why in the fuck would we be bringing that shite back to where we sleep?" Slye recoils.

"So we can study it," Rooke says. "Figure out its weaknesses so we know how to kill the others."

"Let's not forget the lifers still at large," Slye interjects. "We have no weapons to speak of to defend ourselves."

"We need to be more concerned about the lab creatures. If they came this close to the lab, they aren't wholly nocturnal as we first thought," Rooke says. "The one we saw on the dark side, the one that took a chunk out of Zoe's dress, followed Mordox."

"He couldn't scent them until they were right up on us," I tell them and shiver. "The one he killed was covered in an oily substance. I'm not sure if that's important or not. It just looked weird and scary."

"Those things tracked Mordox and Zoe even though they're saturated in husti oil." Rooke peers down at an unconscious Mordox. "We should take the shuttle to retrieve the body. It'll be safer to travel by air than on the ground, but we'll need to rig some kind of harness to haul it back here."

"We have a lot of work to do," Drax says. "Best we get started."

"You have something that belongs to Mordox," I say to Rooke as he starts to leave the room and thrust out my hand. "I'll be taking the wristband back."

Rooke stares at me for a long time. For a moment, I don't think he's going to relent, then he reaches into his pocket and returns the band as Darcy sidles up to him. My eyes toggle between the two who are obviously a couple.

The males file out into the hall, chatting among themselves as they make plans to retrieve the creature and their trip to the prison to get Drax's computer while the girls remain behind. Drax and Rooke stay close to the door, their gazes not straying far from Stacy and Darcy.

"Come on, Zoe." Darcy smiles and takes my hand. "I'll bet you're hungry. Probably want a shower too."

"I'm staying with Mordox until he wakes up." I squeeze her hand then let mine drop. "Me and Tris. So, if I can have some fresh berries and fruit for her and rations and water for me, I'll be all set."

"Honey, Mordox is dangerous." Darcy tries to usher me out, but I dig in my heels.



"I'll be even more dangerous than him if you don't let me stay with my male."

"Your male?" Darcy eyes go wide.

"Yes. *Mine!*" I don't know when I became so possessive of Mordox, but I am, and I'm ready to fight to stay with him until he's back on his feet. "There is no way in hell I'm leaving him here alone."

The girls crowd around me. I back up until my butt hits the edge of Mordox's bed and gather his much larger hand in mine. I hold onto him with both hands, afraid they might try and force me to leave.

"Who are you and what have you done with Zoe?" Romy grins but there's an underlying seriousness about her tone.

"That must be some good dick," Tasha mumbles, my face heating up over her comment.

Stacy swats at Tasha. "Oh my god, shush."

"That's easy for you to say," Tasha huffs. "You're getting boned on a regular basis. Meanwhile, your mate is cock blocking me at every opportunity."

"Drax doesn't completely trust Slye yet," Stacy whispers. "He's only trying to look out for you. He feels it's his responsibility to keep us all safe."

"Well, Drax doesn't need to keep me safe," I firmly state. "I have Mordox."

"Zoe, I can see you like him, but what do you really know about him?" Stacy narrows concerned eyes on me.

"About as much as you knew about Drax before you decided to trust him," I volley back.

"Fair." Stacy shrugs.

"How can you cave so easily?" Darcy chides Stacy.

"Oh come on, Darcy," I butt in. "It's obvious you're with Rooke. How long was it before you started trusting him?"

"Not long," Tasha puffs. "They were an item before they ever got back here."

"Fine." Darcy releases an exasperated breath. "You win, but this doesn't mean I'm okay with you being in here with a dangerous criminal. I'm still going to worry about you and check on you often."

"Agreed. I can live with that."

The girls all hug me goodbye with a promise to return with the food and water I requested for me and Tris. As they leave the room, I can't help but feel comforted by their support despite their reservations. I'm so lucky to have found them.

When the door closes behind them, I take a deep breath and look down at Mordox. He may be dangerous, but he isn't to me, and he's also mine, and I'm determined to make sure he's safe until he wakes up.

I jerk as the lock clunks into place. I hadn't expected to become a prisoner. My heart sinks, but I swallow down the hurt, knowing it's Mordox they don't trust, not me.

Still, my vision wavers from the hot press of tears. "Looks like it's just us. Me, you, and Tris. One happy little family."

I gulp, realizing what I just voiced. I smooth Mordox's hair from his face, taking note of all the blood and dirt caked on his body. I scan the room for something to use to clean him up. There's what Mordox had called a sanitating system on the far side of the room.

Tris leaps down from where she was perched on the top of the cabinet, returning to her favorite place on my shoulder.

"Looks like there's a sponge bath in Mordox's near future," I tell her, leaning my head to the side, smoothing my cheek against her soft fur. "From the waist up only." I gulp, not sure if I'm ready to see what he's got going on below the waist. "We'll wait until the girls come back with what they promised for privacy's sake."

Tris hops down and sniffs Mordox. Her mournful coo is enough to flood my eyes with tears.

"He'll be okay, Tris," I hope. "Mordox is too strong to die."

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## CHAPTER NINE

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## Mordox

*"ZOE!" I shout, panic lacing my voice as I fight to protect her from the nightmarish creatures that swarm around us. Our breaths come out in ragged gasps, the humid air suffocating us, while the shadows of the forest seem to close in, threatening to swallow us whole.*

*"Stay close!" I urge, my own terror fueling my desperate need to keep my female safe.*

*The adrenaline surging through my veins gives me the strength I need to battle the monstrous creations spilling from the sunken steps of the lab. Their seemingly endless numbers fill the space around us like a writhing sea of claws and teeth.*

*Zoe clings to me, her trembling body only intensifies my protectiveness. My horns straighten, deadly points thrust outward, poised and ready for battle, as is the natural armor of my scales standing erect to deflect the blows I know are coming.*

*Zoe's shriek echoes in my ears as one creature and then another lunges at us. I swing my blade in a wide arc, bracing for impact—*

*I jerk awake, the nightmare giving way to reality, and my senses slowly returning. My body feels refreshed yet exhausted, aching from laying in the same position for however long it took for me to heal. My arm remains inside the medical cuff attached to an unfamiliar bed, and I wonder where she is.*

*A shiver of dread ripples down my spine as flashes from the fights with the*

lab creatures come back in a rapid succession of screenshots. Beasts with serrated teeth and snapping claws sharp enough to shred flesh from bone were on me before I realized how close they had gotten, their eyes burning with bloodlust. My heart pounds out a wild rhythm, knowing I must protect my female.

I rapidly blink open tired eyes, trying to clear the fog of my lingering nightmare, and peer around, taking in the dimly lit room. Sparsely furnished with boxy equipment that beeps and whirs, blinks lights in the steady rhythm of medical equipment. A countertop cluttered with vials of various colors and shapes lines one wall. The air is heavy with the scent of disinfectant, setting my scales on edge, causing them to ripple uneasily.

The underground lab!

"Zoe?" I rasp out her name in the quiet. Had I lost her in the forest? The thought sends a chill down my spine. Amid my sterile surroundings, I hunt for a glimpse of her pale mane or the warmth of her blue eyes.

"Right over here," comes her soft reply. Relief floods my senses, but it does nothing to quell the knowledge that danger still may be lurking inside.

"How did we get here?"

"Darcy, Drax, and the other males helped us," Zoe explains, coming to stand next to my bed. Her fingers gently stroke the scales covering my shoulder. "They carried you inside the lab to the medical bay and healed you with a medical cuff. Tris is here, too."

"Thank you." Grateful for her help as much as I am for Zoe caring for Tris.

"Of course," Zoe murmurs, leaning down to press a soft kiss to my forehead. "I wouldn't leave you behind, Mordox. Not ever."

My chest warms with her words. I reach up to cup her silky cheek, marveling at the warmth of her flesh beneath my cool touch. She covers my hand with hers and leans into my touch, nuzzling my palm. As my gaze locks with hers, I'm struck by a fierce protectiveness and surging desire to claim her as mine.

"I'll bet you're hungry and thirsty," Zoe says, moving away too soon, and I feel the loss of her presence all too keenly.

I check the lights on the medical cuff. They're a steady white, letting me know I'm fully healed. I sit up slowly, looking down at my body where new flesh covers the gouges left in the wake of the creature's slashing claws.

Tris hops onto the end of my bed. I hold out my palm and she doesn't hesitate to accept my invitation.

"Were you a good girl for Zoe?" I scratch her under the chin triggering her to vibrate out her special song for when she feels happy and safe.

"Of course she was." Zoe returns with Tris's near empty ration pouch of fresh fruit, a water skin, and dried alope rations for me.

"Tris will run out of food soon," I say, noticing my pack, torn and dirty, propped up against the wall.

"I'll make sure she doesn't," Zoe states, her voice low and commanding. "I'll tell someone to go out and fetch her more."

I raise an eyebrow and drink deeply from the water skin and note the underlying hostility in her tone. "They don't want me here."

"They aren't happy about it," Zoe grits out. "We're locked inside the medical bay until they can decide whether or not you can be trusted."

I scan the room until my gaze stops on the closed door. "Is that the only door?"

"Yes."

"You're sure it's locked?"

"Positive, why?"

"Because more of those creatures could still be down here."

"Drax said he found nine dead bodies in a sealed room. I told him about the ones you've killed and the one that got away, also the third one that's still out there, somewhere, on the loose," Zoe tells me. "The last time Darcy came to visit, she said Drax and Rooke found and brought back the one you killed on the way here. They've been studying it, looking for weaknesses for when they go after the others."

I quickly do the math in my head. "That still leaves one unaccounted for."

"Yes, it does, and that's what I told them. Drax swears he searched every room down here and found nothing."

"I won't be convinced of that until I search this place for myself. I'm not taking any chances with your safety."

"We might be in here for a while." Zoe grimaces. "Drax is proving the hardest to convince of your innocence. He seems the most stubborn out of the four Ziarians."

"Four?" I nearly choke on the dried alope I'm chewing.

"Drax, Rooke, Slye, and Bruke."

"I know of Slye. He's Rooke's second, the space pirate's trusted right-hand male, but I don't know Bruke."

"Darcy said he's a tech nerd like Drax. They hacked into your personal file and admitted everything I told them about you checks out, but they still aren't convinced you're innocent."

"If they're so distrustful of me, then why am I not lying dead in the forest?"

"Because I threatened to run away if they didn't help you. I made the males all promise not to hurt you."

"So fierce, lula." Her bravery sends a shiver of pride through me. This tiny female is a treasure. One to be protected at any cost, even if it means giving my life to ensure her safety. I set aside the pouch of dried alope and reach down to scoop her up with one arm, settling her on my lap in a single, possessive sweep.

Zoe gasps, her palms pressed flat against the heavy pads of my pectorals. "Feels like you've gotten your strength back."

I chuckle, then grow serious when it occurs to me. "Have you only had the rations we packed to eat?" I growl. "Has no one brought you fresh food to eat?"

"They have," she giggles, patting the scales on my chest and stilling my

breath in my lungs. "It's the middle of the night. At least, I think it is. It's hard to tell with no clocks. Darcy and the other girls bring me food and refill the water skin three times a day. They've invited me to the galley, but I refuse to leave you here alone."

I close my eyes and savor the feel of her wrapped in my arms. "Thank you for watching over me while I healed."

"Just returning the favor," she says wrapping her arms around my middle.

Perched on my lap, she's so light and small, reminding me all over again how fragile her little human body is. How easily she can be hurt or killed. I hug her to me, wanting to shield her from all harm. Despite the strength I know she possesses within, I want to be her armor against any potential threats on this primitive moon.

The connection I feel for her surges, an anchor in the storm of my rampant thoughts. I cannot allow anything to happen to her. I shudder, pushing aside the unthinkable. I've been alone for so long, I can't imagine returning to the emptiness of my home high in the trees without her.

"Are you all right, Mordox?"

"Fine," I lie, not wanting to burden her with my fears. "Just tired."

"I should let you rest." Zoe tries to push out of my arms, but I hold her tight.

"Rest here with me." I scoot over and onto my side, curling my body around hers. With her back resting against my front, I pull her tightly to me. Tris hops up my body, settling on her usual spot above my head on the pillow.

A tenderness lingers in the air as I hold onto her, a respite from the turmoil of uncertainty and danger surrounding us. Overwhelmed by a surge to defend her, my instincts scream at me to keep her safe.

The contentment settling deep within my bones turns hot the longer her sweet body is pressed against mine. The seams of my pants strain as my cock thickens with the promise of pleasure soon to come. My horns ache as the deadly points shift toward the back of my head, readying me for the sacred kiss all Ziarian males gift their chosen mates.



My hand glides down Zoe's body, easing the hem of her garment higher up her thigh. Tracing her soft curves with my fingertips, she shivers against me.

"What are you doing, Mordox?" Zoe stiffens but presses the curve of her bottom into my engorged member.

"Preparing to gift you with the sacred kiss a male gives his female. One I should have given you the first time I scented your arousal."

Zoe sucks back a gasp. "That's not possible. Men can't smell a woman's arousal."

"I'm not a man, lula." With my claws retracted, I slip my hand between her thighs, cupping her slick mound.

"Mordox..." her breathy moan ignites my blood.

"Open for me, lula." My fingers press against her core. "Let me inside. Allow me to pleasure you."

Zoe places her hand over mine. "I've never done anything like this before. No one has ever touched me..." Her words dissolve on a little groan when I find and caress her pebbled nub hidden within the sodden petals of her fragrant sex.

It pleases me beyond words to know she is untouched. "I shall be the first and last to bring you to release."

"I'm not sure, Mordox," Zoe arches against me despite what falls from her parted lips, "if I'm ready for this. For you."

"I will stop whenever you say." Her thighs part, but only a little. Just enough for my fingertip to part her succulent folds and glide through her slick arousal.

She sucks in a strangled cry but doesn't stop me, only keeps her hand over mine as I caress the entrance to her heated core, swirling around her little bud before dipping the tip of my finger between her nether lips. She spreads her thighs a bit more, making room for my hand, and my finger presses inside the tightest heat I've ever known.

I inwardly curse as my mind is lost in a fog of lust so consuming, I forget to

go slow and start to pump inside her welcoming slit. Zoe's breaths turn erratic, her hand clutches mine but not to disengage, to hold me in place.

She wants more, and who am I to deny my female her pleasure?

"Find your pleasure, lula," I whisper against her ear as I press deeper, faster. "Find your release."

Her inner walls clench around my finger, her body quaking as her cries of pleasure fill the air. I draw her closer, reveling in the feel of her orgasm as it grips me tight.

I slip a second finger inside, stretching her tight sheath, and pushing her closer and closer to the edge of a second rapture. She is lovelier than I've ever seen her before, in the dim light of the medic bay with her thighs splayed wide, and her head tossed back on my shoulder as she forgets herself.

My thumb strums her swollen bud while the girth of my fingers moves within her sodden channel. I read her body, setting the perfect rhythm that sends her flying. Her sheath contracts around me a second time, squeezing and releasing as she milks my fingers the way I long for her to milk the seed from my cock.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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## Zoe

I PANT IN SHORT, shallow gasps as waves of pleasure begin to ebb, leaving me spent and trembling. Slowly, my body comes back to me as I drift down from the heights of an ecstasy not produced by my own hand.

Mordox had done something I've never allowed anyone else to do. Something I never felt comfortable enough or had enough trust in another to allow. It was both strange and wonderful.

Mordox slides to the foot of the bed. His fingers linger on my skin, tracing the curves and valleys of my body with a tenderness I've never known. His horns, normally curved along the side of his head, now curl around to the back, the deadly tips pointing inward along his nape. His spicy scent is now strong, more intense, saturating the air. It burrows into my nasal cavities until all I can smell is him.

His lusty grin turns mischievous, his hands moving around to cup my buttocks. Before I realize his intent, he drags me to the foot of the bed and drapes my knees over his massive shoulders. The heavy scales layering his shoulders and down his back are velvety against the delicate flesh behind my knees.

"What are you doing?" I gasp. My thighs are splayed wide, with his face mere inches away from my pussy. If I wasn't still floating from the high of the best orgasms of my life, I would die from embarrassment.

"Preparing to gift you with a sacred kiss." He inhales deeply of my most intimate flesh and groans. "Absolutely delectable."

"Sacred kiss?" I breathe out. I have a vague notion of his intent, but never having experienced oral sex before, I don't know what to expect.

Spread wide before him, I'm a meal waiting to be devoured. My pussy is wet from my recent orgasms and growing wetter the longer his hungry gaze bores into me.

My position could not be more vulnerable, and though I'm trembling, it's a result of anticipation rather than fear. The heat of his breath washes over my fevered flesh. The twin jewels of his bright gaze sparkle with the promise of more sinful bliss.

"I'm not sure I know what that is," I suck back a gasp and undulate when the tip of his finger glides through my folds.

"Do you trust me to show you?"

I look down my body to an erotic view of a beastly male nestled between my slim, pale thighs. My dress is pushed to my waist and my pussy is out on full display. My thighs are spread unapologetically wide, desperate for more of what he can give me.

"Yes," I moan with a blinding urgency to have him touch me again. I trust Mordox. Trust that he won't hurt me. His tail curls around my calf as if to hold me in place, the furred tip tickling my ankle.

The flick of Mordox's tongue across my clit scatters all reasonable thought. On impulse, I reach down and grab him by the horns, not to push him away, but to hold him in place, my urgent need spiraling to reach that blissful plane once more.

Mordox looks up my body from between my thighs, a feral grin crossing his face. With erotic curiosity, I watch as he unfurls the length of his tongue to bathe my clit in warm, wet heat. The sensation is utterly indescribable. His tongue is rough and velvety at the same time, tracing lazy circles around my clit before pulling my swollen bud into the heat of his mouth to gently suckle.

Shockwaves zing through my body, my back arching off the bed when his tongue suddenly delves deep within me. His hands grip my backside, keeping me close as he laps my inner walls, his tongue, like silk, caresses me in all the right places. Then his fingers ease inside my slick channel, pressing against

my inner walls, filling and stretching me while he owns my clit with his tongue.

Tension builds within me, sparks ignite in my core, gathering and growing more and more in an unhurried heat until Mordox dives in, devouring me with an intensity that curls my toes. Feet planted, I lift my hips in silent offering, my back arching off the bed.

Never did I dream a mouth could feel like this. Mordox's tongue is like a magical wand that brings forth sensations of pleasure I never knew were possible. He licks, suckles, and nips at my most sensitive spots until I'm nearly delirious.

The sensations are all-consuming, leaving me hovering in a place where pleasure and pain mix until I can no longer tell the difference. My orgasm crashes over me like a tidal wave, my body trembles as I writhe, helpless and desperate, against Mordox's mouth. His hands hold me firmly in place as I ride the waves of pleasure until I'm boneless and spent.

"Sacred kiss, huh?" I lick dry lips, still twitching from the zings of the aftermath.

"A special gift a male gives to a chosen female." Mordox crawls up my body to settle between my gaping thighs.

"You've said that before. What makes me so special?"

Mordox's eyes brighten, sparkling like emeralds reflecting fire as he gazes down at me. "Everything. From the first moment my eyes found you, your ethereal beauty held me captive. So timid and shy, yet your soul holds the strength of a dozen warriors. You're unique. Everything about you is special to me."

His lips brush against mine with reverence as he speaks, his deep voice vibrating through me like an electric current. I melt into him, feeling safe and cherished for the first time in my life. Wanted and cared for, encased in the strength of his arms.

"How can you be so sure? We barely know each other," I say, wanting to extinguish any doubts about the connection I feel between us.

"Yet I know much about you, lula. You're loyal to the people who matter to you the most. You met the dangers of the forest head-on to make sure your friends were safe."

"With your help," I add.

"You watched over me when I couldn't defend myself and cared for Tris when neither of us are your responsibility."

"Because you're my family," I blurt out exactly how I feel. "I've been shuffled around from house to house. Never having a permanent home, only given a temporary illusion of stability that was ripped away from me time and time again."

"I'm not going anywhere, lula. Even if we are able to leave Zune and make a home elsewhere, I will always be with you."

I ponder his words, reliving his singular determination to protect me from Gruxt then stealing me away to ensure my safety from the uncertainty of the lab. He kept me safe and healed me, then fought to protect me, twice, from the insectoid creatures with his life. In that short time, he's proven to be the only stable force in my life. An unwavering protector willing to lay down his life for mine.

"I know," I say with unshakable certainty. "I believe that you will."

"Will you accept me as your mate?" Mordox poses the most important question of my life. "Allow me to claim you as mine for always?"

*For always*, I repeat inside my mind, absorbing the implications.

"Sounds like you're asking me to marry you."

Mordox tilts his head in that endearing way of his when the translator plugged into his ear can't quite understand the meaning of human words.

"Marriage on Earth is between two people who want to spend the rest of their lives together," I explain, purposely leaving out the love bit.

The warm and fuzzies I have in the pit of my stomach are more like butterflies telling of a crush, though it doesn't explain the swell of emotions filling my heart. It seems too soon to profess love even if what I'm feeling

implies otherwise.

If I said those three little words to him, will he say them back? What if he doesn't? What if Ziarians don't fall in love? What if they only claim a mate and that is their way of professing love? Do I say the words and possibly ruin this moment? Ruin the blossoming bond I feel growing stronger between us? Or grab onto the lifeline of stability he's extending?

Mordox grins down at me. "Yes."

"Yes?" I scrunch my brow at him.

"Yes. By asking you to be my mate, I'm asking you to marry me. To spend the rest of our lives together."

My lips part, so many *what ifs* remain unanswered. We're both perched on the edge of an unsettled situation, floating in limbo, neither of us welcome back to our respective home worlds. Orphans in an unrelenting Universe.

No longer on Earth, nothing out here applies. As I look at things with an all-new perspective, it becomes apparent that my home isn't a place, it's a person.

And that person is Mordox.

"Yes," I blurt and close the distance with a searing kiss of my unmistakable surrender.

His large hands frame my face as he returns my kiss with a fierce passion to match my own. I cling to him, feeling the heat of our desire mingle and ignite something new and powerful between us.

Mordox eases out of the kiss to carefully divest me of my dress. My hands cover my nakedness, unused to being exposed to the gaze of the opposite sex. He was just between my thighs, his mouth and tongue becoming intimately familiar with my pussy, but the rush of air against my skin elicits shyness. Clothed in nothing leaves me vulnerable and exposed in a way I'm not used to.

The heat of Mordox's gaze meets mine, softening with understanding yet blazing with unrealized passion. "We can stop, if you're not ready."

"I'm ready." I tremble from inexperience but also the desire to experience the



pleasure of being with him for the first time. Nerves and excitement tingle through my body.

I reach out and trace my finger along his lips, wanting to memorize every curve and angle of his alien face. He leans into my touch, eyes closed as if savoring the feel of me against him.

"I'm ready," I repeat with more conviction this time, pushing away any doubts or lingering fears that might be standing between us.

"We'll go slow. In case you change your mind."

"I won't, but thanks for being so considerate."

All thought scatters as Mordox's lips trail fiery kisses down my throat and lower still, until his mouth engulfs my small breast, then the other. My fingers tangle in his hair to wrap around the base of each horn as I arch my back in a silent plea for more.

Mordox sucks and licks my hard peaks, teasing me with careful nips of his fangs until I'm writhing beneath him. His hands never stop touching and roaming, exploring every curve and contour of my body. Every hungry touch sends shockwaves of pleasure through me that build to a breathless intensity.

Mordox looks up at me from where he circles his tongue around my pebbled peak with a barely restrained desire. Each swirl of his tongue, every talented touch, pushes me closer and closer to the edge until my pussy aches, weeping for the hot ridge pressing into my thigh.

"You're sure?" Mordox reaches down to unfasten his pants. The warmth of his words spoken across my neck sends shivers down my spine.

"I'm sure," I moan softly, undulating beneath him so he knows I'm serious.  
"Claim me as yours."

Mordox raises his horned head to meet my gaze. His verdant eyes brighter with passion and a softness that beckons me. As he releases his erection, I glance down, curious as to what I've gotten myself into, or more like what's getting ready to get into me.

And, holy shit, he's amazing. Beautiful and *large*. My pussy clenches with

need and I gulp, worried about how all of that is going to fit inside my untried flesh.

Not that I've really seen any cocks in person, but Mordox's is so alien, it turns me on even more. His member is covered in a fine, intricate pattern of deep royal-blue scales. Ridges run along its length like a spine, tapering to a larger base that seems to swell the longer I gawk at it.

The dull point of the bulbous tip glistens with a viscous fluid, pearly and creamy. A mesmerizing sight, both intimidating and enticing to behold. The sack cinched up tight to his body is heavy, full and ripe with what spills from the end of his cock in lazy beads.

His spicy scent grows stronger, enveloping me, intoxicating my senses until I am consumed by the heady musk. It fills my nostrils and seeps into every fiber of my being, and I lose myself in its irresistible pull. Every breath I take is infused with his scent, until all I smell is him. All I feel is him.

A sharp gasp escapes my lips as the swollen head of his pulsing cock bumps against my entrance, jostling me from the hypnotic trance he cast over me. This is the moment that will forever change me. Not just because of the obvious, but because I'm about to be claimed. An alien male's chosen mate.

Though I do worry about the pain of my first time, I'm eager to become his.

He eases the tip into me and holds there, giving me time to adjust to this new experience. His thumb finds my clit and all reasonable thought is extinguished under his expert touch, sending me spiraling into a pleasurable oblivion as he pushes deeper inside me.

The exhilarating sensation of my body expanding to accommodate his enormous cock borders on discomfort.

Mordox continues to inch his way farther into my tight channel, all the while distracting away any ache with the skillful strum of my clit until he hits the barrier of my virginity. He pauses there and my body tightens, bracing for the pain I've heard will come.

But it never does. Mordox holds himself still, his fingers expertly stroking my flesh stretched around his girth and coaxing my swollen nub toward another blissful release.

Only then does Mordox carefully thrust through my hymen. The pinch of pain fleeting and overshadowed by the gravity of my orgasm. My body arches and my hips thrust as we find the perfect rhythm.

His eyes never leave mine as he claims me, the pleasure of his gentle thrusts kindles a fire in my belly until the ache for release builds to an unbearable level.

I come undone as he buries himself deep. His hot spill fills me as I find my pleasure, my inner walls contracting tightly around him as I take everything he has to offer.

My eyes flutter open, taking in the primal scene before me. Gone is my tender lover, in his place is a savage beast. His lips curl into a feral snarl, razor-sharp fangs glinting in the dim light. Scales ripple along his muscular shoulders and down his arms as he spills inside me.

He's an intoxicating sight to behold. It's a heady feeling to know it's me that makes him this crazy.

I gasp as the base of his cock swells, stretching me more.

The throbbing fullness at his base has swelled into a hard knot, nestled deep inside me; the exquisite pressure sends waves of pleasure coursing through me. He grinds against me, pushing me to the brink of ecstasy until I shatter. Blinded and consumed with indescribable sensations, I can only surrender to the intense pleasure coursing through me. My muscles clench around his cock, my pulsating walls milking it until his knot deflates.

Mordox collapses over me, his forehead rests against mine. Our lips meet in a tender kiss as he slowly withdraws from my spasming core. The sudden absence of his cock leaves me empty now that our bodies are no longer joined. I can't help but wonder how soon we can do this again.

Mordox leaves me only long enough to lift my dress from where it landed on the floor in his haste to get me naked. I take it from him and pull it on over my head as he fastens his pants.

Is it weird that he took my virginity with his boots on?

"Rest now, lula," Mordox whispers against my hair, curling his body around

mine protectively. His turquoise tail wraps gently around my legs, the tuft of fur at its end lovingly brushing my calf. The air is saturated with the perfume of our mating, a heady spice that amplifies the intimacy of our connection.

I lean back against his strong chest, feeling the rhythmic rise and fall of his breath. His glossy black hair streaked with green, cascades over my shoulder, forming a silky curtain between us and the world outside.

A twinge of disappointment that we never spoke of love stains my happiness. Maybe that will come later. Develop over time with the strong feelings I have for him. I push down my disappointment and live in the moment.

My eyelids grow heavy as Tris hops back onto the bed and curls her little body in the crook of my elbow. I drift off to sleep, cradled in Mordox's arms, reveling in the bond we just forged.

In this moment, on this alien moon, with Tris cuddled against me, we are more than just individuals from different worlds—we are a family.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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## Zoe

I WAKE to Mordox stiffening behind me. The soft sound of the door sweeping open has my eyelids lifting to Tasha's knowing smile.

"I would ask how you slept, but your post-orgasmic O-face says you weren't in here sleeping." Tasha limps inside followed by Darcy, Stacy, and Romy who carries a tray of food. "We brought breakfast."

Embarrassment floods me, hot and prickly like a thousand stinging nettles. My cheeks are on fire, flushing a bright red that I'm sure matches Tasha's fiery head of hair.

Mordox and I push up to sitting positions. Thankfully we redressed after our romantic interlude. I can't imagine the mortification if we were both naked before our uninvited guests. I'm tempted to turn and hide my face in the mountains of his muscular chest, but I don't. I clear my throat, giving Tasha a tight smile. "We were asleep. You just woke us up."

"My bad," Tasha smirks. "I would apologize but I'm so jelly right now, I simply can't make myself do it."

"Don't give Zoe a hard time, Tasha, just because you're grumpy," Stacy fusses.

"That's easy for you to say," the redhead leans on the curved pole she's been using as a cane. "Unlike some of us, you're getting laid on a regular basis. Maybe I wouldn't be so grumpy if you'd control your cockblocking boyfriend."

"Slye only wants one thing." Romy rolls her eyes and sets the tray of food on the counter.

"He and I have that in common," Tasha remarks tightly then turns a heated glare on Drax as he fills the doorway. "Speaking of the cockblocker."

"Good to see you're fully healed, Mordox." Drax saunters in, meeting Tasha's glare with an exasperated expression. The other three males wait just outside the door, and from one heartbeat to the next, our intimate love nest becomes way too crowded.

"Something you want, techy?" Mordox tucks me into his side protectively.

"You were right." Drax hands Mordox a tablet. "There's a hidden door inside the storage room next door with more entrapment areas leading to even more rooms."

Mordox takes the tablet and studies the map displayed. His scales ripple across his shoulders and down his back. "So there's a chance the last miner, or the creature he has become, is still down here with us?"

Fear skitters down my spine. The safety I once felt vanishing in an instant.

"Yes." Drax crosses his arms over the girth of his chest, the yellow-eyed male looking defensive.

"We need to find and destroy it." Mordox hops off the bed disturbing a snoozing Tris.

The tiny plurshy lets loose a squeak and climbs onto my shoulder, not liking the interruption of so many people any more than me.

"There's no we where you're concerned." Drax puts up a hand. "It hasn't yet been decided if you can be trusted."

"Then why show me this?" Mordox hands Drax back the tablet.

The tension inside the room grows thick enough to cut as silence stretches between the two glaring males. Drax's jaw ticks while Mordox's tail slashes at the air. Bad signs things are about to go south.

Tris leaps off my shoulder as I hop off the bed and plant myself between

Drax and Mordox, climbing to the top of the wall cabinets where she feels safest. "Mordox is my mate. I trust him and so should all of you."

My announcement causes an eruption of surprised murmurs and disbelief from the girls.

"I thought they'd just made out," I hear Stacy whisper. "I didn't think they went all the way."

"He claimed her?" Darcy hisses low. "No way that happened."

Romy curses in German under her breath, but Tasha is the only one on my side. The only one of my friends without a negative thing to say.

"You all know I'm a full-grown woman, right?" I whirl around, done with being viewed as a child. "Look. I know I'm shy and timid and I come across as younger than I actually am, but I'm eighteen."

"Barely legal," Romy grumbles.

"We're just concerned about you, Zoe." Darcy tries to smooth my ruffled feathers. "That's all."

"Our little girl is all grown up," Tasha playfully gushes. "She was stolen from us a child and returned to us a woman."

"Funny, Tasha," I huff, feeling my face flush before returning my attention to the yellow-eyed Ziarian. "Listen, Drax. I've always been a good judge of character. It's my superpower, so believe me when I tell you that Mordox is innocent. He's guilty of nothing except being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"We need his fighting skills, Drax," Bruke says from the hall.

"What happens if he turns on us?" Slye tosses out.

"If we do meet up with one of those things we brought back from the forest, we have a better chance of not dying with a Lita Comtra at our backs," Rooke says, entering the room to stand next to Drax.

"I didn't slaughter all those people like they claimed. I discovered something I shouldn't have, the same as you. You think you were going to do your time



here and you would be returned to Ziaria?" Mordox barks out a harsh laugh. "None of us were ever going home. We were subjects in a science experiment. One that was meant to make us into super warriors to fight the war with the Crix. Ziaria is outnumbered. The only way to win without more warriors is to weaponize the ones you have."

"And we were expendable." Rooke curses under his breath. "Disposable males meant for the trial and error of illegal genetic alterations until they got it right."

"There are hundreds of other prisoners on Ziaria that could have been chosen to come here, Drax. Ever ask yourself why you?" When Drax remains silent, Mordox continues. "Let me enlighten you. My guess is you weren't aware of what you were hired to download, otherwise you would have been killed outright or put in solitary the same as me. But the one who hired you, what happened to him?"

Drax clenches his fists. "I don't know."

"Maybe you should find out." Mordox crosses his arms, taking on a defensive stance. "Maybe you should try and access those files. Find out everything you can about this place and the government officials behind it."

Mordox's words hang in the air. Rooke is on Mordox's side, but it appears the males are divided when it comes to trusting him.

"You have a choice, Drax. You can trust me to help you hunt down and kill the lab creature hiding somewhere in the lab as well as the ones on the dark side of Zune, or you can keep a highly trained Lita Comtra locked up while you and your friends try and take them on," Mordox says with a sweep of his hand toward the door where Slye and Bruke hover. "This moon will never be safe enough for the females until those things are all dead. My guess is, none of you have any warrior training whatsoever, so unless you have a plasma gun or a laser blaster I'm not aware of, you're going to need my help."

"I vote to let the Lita Comtra help us," Bruke says from the doorway. "None of us are innocent, Drax, but we've found trust in each other."

"We were so sure he was going to kill Zoe, but he didn't," Rooke adds. "You, of all people, can't fault him for acting on his primal instincts when Zoe is his

chosen mate. Look at the fuckery you pulled bringing Stacy back to the prison compound chock-full of dangerous criminals."

"She was safe enough locked inside my cell pod," Drax defends.

"He's right." Rooke takes Mordox's side. "Annex 1 still houses a few murders and rapist."

Drax releases a long, steady breath, cutting a sharp eye at Rooke.

"If you really thought me dangerous, you would have never allowed these females inside this room with me." Mordox snakes an arm around my waist and pulls me close. "Most of all your mate, Stacy."

I feel a spark of electricity course through me, and I can't help but peer up at Mordox's stern expression. His hard features softening as he glances down at me then back up to Drax. I know I'm right to trust him. My gut is never wrong.

"Well, what's it going to be?" Mordox pointedly looks at each male. "Do we work together or not?"

"I vote we let Mordox help us," Rooke says.

"Me too," Bruke agrees. "We have to trust each other if we're going to beat those things. Plus, there are still lifers at large that must be dealt with."

"Slye?" Rooke turns to his second in command. "What do you say?"

The male with blue-streaked hair looks down at his booted feet before meeting Rooke's ruby gaze. "Who are we to judge? Everyone thinks you're a killer too. I was there and know your truth. With all we've discovered about Zune, Mordox could very well be innocent, jailed for discovering something he shouldn't have. Besides, Mordox has experience killing these things and we don't. Even after dragging Mordox's most recent kill down here, there were no weakness to be found in its tough exoskeleton."

"All right," Drax says, looking over all the males. "It's settled. You're free, Mordox, but I still don't trust you."

"You're not alone, Mordox," Rooke barks out a laugh. "Drax still doesn't wholly trust me either. Welcome aboard. I'm Rooke."

"I know who you are." Mordox bobs his chin at the grinning space pirate. "I saw you on Octari 5 searching for your next prize."

Rooke stills, then tosses his head back with raucous laughter. "Fucking bleeker cunts! You do get around."

"You have no idea," Mordox smirks.

"Now that we're all friends, let's get started on a plan to find and kill these remaining creatures," Rooke sobers. "I don't enjoy the thought of my Darcy being in danger."

"The females need to be kept in the safest part of the lab while we search," Mordox states. "Drax, you got a full schematic of this underground maze?"

Drax nods, and the males all gather around the tablet making plans to search the hidden sections of the lab. With Mordox's fate determined, I can finally relax. I join the girls on the opposite side of the room.

"Sorry for treating you like a kid," Darcy looks at me sheepishly. "I've just always thought of you as a little sister. I've been overly protective of you because of that, but you're grown and can make your own decisions."

"Don't apologize, Darcy." I grin, pulling her into a hug. "I'm so grateful to have you as my big sister."

"Hey! What about me? We're sisters from another mister too." Tasha taps me on the shoulder, and I'm suddenly being passed around for hugs.

"And me," Romy chimes in with her heavily accented English that makes me smile harder. "Don't forget about your German sister."

"And me too." Stacy is the last pair of arms to hug me tight.

"So you and Mordox, huh?" Darcy asks glancing over at where he stands with the other males.

"Yeah, Mordox," I admit, my cheeks flushing hot. "So you and Rooke, huh?"

"Not really that big of a surprise considering how flirtatious he was from the very beginning." Darcy casually shrugs.

"True." I shrug back.

"Funny how the most timid out of all of us picks the most dangerous male to mate," Stacy jokes, causing all the girls to chuckle.

"What can I say, he's my person," I admit, squirming out from under the weight of their attention by turning to Tasha. "So, you and Slye, huh?"

"I wish," the redhead says with a saucy toss of her hair. "Drax has trust issues and won't leave us alone long enough to even get to first base."

"He's just trying to protect you." None of us are surprised when Stacy comes to Drax's defense. "He feels responsible for all of us."

"I appreciate his protection," Tasha lays her palm over her heart, "but I just want to get laid with no strings attached, and Slye is hot."

"What if there's no such thing as *no strings attached* with these guys?" Stacy hikes her thumb over her shoulder at the gathered males.

Tasha narrows accusing eyes on Stacy. "It's not Drax cockblocking me, it's you."

Stacy opens her mouth but snaps it closed.

"It is!" Tasha shouts, gaining the attention of the males across the room.

Stacy glances over at the guys, giving them a nothing-to-see-here wave, before whispering, "What if there are unknown consequences to randomly sexing up one of these guys, Tasha?"

"Then those are my consequences to deal with, *Mom*," Tasha snips.

"If the male doesn't claim you as a mate, then what?" I sort of agree with Stacy.

"What if there is no such thing as casual sex? Earth rules don't apply out here," Stacy adds another logical point. "I just want to give you time to think before boldly jumping in the sack."

"Schauen Sie, bevor Sie springen," Romy nods.

"English, Roms," Tasha says. "What does that mean?"

"It means look before you leap," Romy translates. "I agree with Stacy."

"We all know you're attracted to Slye, it's not like you've been hiding it, but what if you're one-night stand turns into a claiming?" Darcy jumps on board with the rest of us. "Ask yourself if you want to be stuck with him forever."

"You girls are serious buzzkills. You know that?" Tasha shifts her weight, leaning heavily on her curved pole.

I peer down at her injured ankle. "Why don't you use a medical cuff to heal your ankle? You've been limping around since the crash."

"I know, and I'm tired of being in pain all the time," Tasha says. "But I don't trust that alien tech shit with my body."

"Mordox used one on me to heal my head injury."

"And you ended up married to him," Tasha cheekily points out. "Maybe he brainwashed you just to get into your pants."

"Funny, ha ha," I say with a wry twist of my lips. "Nice cane by the way."

"Thanks. Me and Romy found it inside the storage room where they found the hidden door," she shivers. "Creeps me out knowing we were in there poking around."

"Me too." Romy rubs her arms. "There's no telling what they'll find there."

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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## Mordox

"PROMISE ME YOU'LL BE CAREFUL," Zoe whispers, her clear, blue eyes clouding with concern.

"Of course, lula." I stand taller, hating to be the cause of her worry but warmed to be the center of it. "You and the other females will be safe in here until we return."

"All right," she says softly, gifting me a little smile that tugs at my heart.

She lifts up on tiptoes and places a chaste kiss on my lips. I long to pull her fully into my arms, press her soft body against mine, and deepen the kiss, but now is not the time. I can't become distracted with lustful yearnings. Zoe's safety must come first.

I rub Tris on the head before scratching under her chin, happy to see her perched on Zoe's shoulder. It feels good to know my furry companion has Zoe to look after her.

Once we track down and eliminate the creature I believe to be somewhere inside, we can focus on ridding the forest of the remaining unwanted predators, including any of the lifers who might pose a threat.

I step out of the room followed by Rooke and Drax, who closes the door behind us, sealing the females inside the safety of the room.

"You sure this is the safest place?" Rooke's tail twitches nervously behind him.

"I'm sure," Drax says, double checking the lock. "My Stacy is in there too. She has a comm in case they need to contact us and a grygore device to operate the keypad and unlock the door if they need to get out. I would never leave my female unless I was certain she's safe."

Yet the techy had kept his female down here with the possibility of a lab creature on the loose. He hadn't been aware of the danger though, so I kept that shite to myself. No need to start off by souring what little trust hangs precariously between me and Drax.

Despite the wary gazes of the other males, I couldn't care less what they thought of me as long as they didn't try and lock me up again. Drax's judgment about the safety of the lab had been less than perfect. I was right to steal Zoe away in order to protect her.

We make our way out of the many entrapment areas and down the main corridor to a closed door next to the medic bay where Zoe and I were kept while I healed. Drax uses his handmade grygore device to unscramble the lock. Beyond the door is another entrapment hall.

We quickly travel the length of the long hall to the door at the end and unscramble the lock. It opens up into a storage room. The walls are lined with shelves stacked high with laboratory supplies.

I peer over Drax's shoulder and study the schematic. The secret door inside the storage room isn't immediately visible, hidden by a rack purposely moved into place to hide it.

With the pirate's help, we lift the rack, carrying it to the side.

"Makes me wonder if there's another way in," Drax ponders aloud, his claw-tipped finger moving the map of the lab around on the tablet.

"I've only ever found the two entrances. The one at the sunken steps and the other with the broken lift."

"Me too." Drax continues to search the map.

I peer over his shoulder. "Doesn't look there's a way out of the unexplored part of the lab. The last people to leave purposely hid the door."



"What do they have in there that needs hiding?" Rooke hikes a thumb at the hidden door we revealed.

"Can't be much worse than the creatures we've already seen," Bruke scoffs.

"Let's hope not." Slye palms the small dagger he's armed with.

Drax scans the faces of the males crammed inside the storage room. "Everybody ready to find out?"

"As if we have a choice," Bruke says, looking at his dagger then at my sword they'd found in the forest and returned to me. "Is it too late to ask if you've got another one of those, Mordox?"

"Yes. I was fortunate enough to have found this left behind by the guards," I say. "I'll take the lead."

"Not about to argue with that logic." Slye steps back as Drax hovers his grygore device over the keypad lock.

"Trained warrior with a better weapon?" Bruke shrugs. "Have at it."

Drax nods at me then swipes the grygore device over the keypad. The door sweeps open on a silent swoosh. The air inside the entrapment area is stagnant, old, as if closed off for a long time.

I lead the way down the narrow hall to the next locked door. It doesn't open like the rest. Drax uses his claw to pop the panel from the wall. Inside, he pulls out a nest of wires and works his magic to open the way inside the abandoned darkened lab.

I take a step into the void, dim lights flicker on with my movements. My scales ripple with unease as I venture deeper inside the cavernous space.

"Any chance you can turn up the lights?" I ask Drax.

The males follow as the dim lights grow brighter at the techy's manipulation of a small wall panel near the door.

An eerie silence hangs heavy, the only sound our cautious footsteps echoing off the metal floor littered with discarded equipment left behind in the scientist's haste.

"Stay close. Watch each other's backs," I murmur to my fellow Ziarians, my instincts sharpening as we move deeper into the room.

Tables line the walls, most with equipment and experiments left half completed on their sleek surfaces. Glass beakers and test tubes filled with mysterious liquids sit forgotten on shelves, while monitors that once flashed with life now sit black and lifeless.

The tension thickens as we search only to find nothing. I half expected a creature to lunge at us the moment the door opened. All this creeping around is way worse than facing an enemy head-on.

Zoe's worried expression haunts me, fueling my determination to find the creature I can't account for. I don't have long to wait. My search is over the moment Bruke calls out.

"Over here." The purple-maned male gestures to a darkened corner on the far side of the lab. "Look." He points to a massive tube dominating the corner of the room as we all gather around.

Drax clicks on a small light, shining it at the tube. Our group shifts uneasily; faces drain of color as we collectively hiss out whispered curses.

Inside, suspended in a viscous, clear liquid, is a creature unlike anything I've ever seen. Covered in dark blue scales, a swatch of gray-streaked, black mane grows out the top of its misshapen head.

Horns, tail, and claws, traits of a Ziarian male, are still present only not in an overly enlarged version like Gruxt. This thing looks to be a few feet taller than the average male but deformed, with exaggerated scales that are more plated armor than anything we are sporting.

As I study the limply floating form, I wonder what other modifications have been done to this unfortunate soul. My heart hammers in my chest, my scales rippling uneasily along my back. How close had we all been to finding our way to the lab and the genetic alterations of the scientists? And what caused them to all leave Zune and their work behind with such haste?

"Is it dead?" Slye asks, leaning in for a closer look.

"How can it not be?" Drax mutters, cautiously approaching the tube. "I found

one of these specimen tubes in another part of the lab when Stacy and I first found our way down here. The tube was shattered on one side. Whatever was inside was long gone."

"I wonder if it was Gruxt," I say, studying the floating specimen. "Like Gruxt, this thing appears more Ziarian than insectoid."

"Have you seen anything like this in the forest, Mordox?" Bruke asks.

"No. Only the creature Gruxt became and the insectoid variety you've already seen. Nothing like this."

"It's hard to believe that used to be one of us." Bruke swallows hard, staring at the creature's misshapen features. Its face twisted and malformed, barely resembling something sentient.

"Now that we can account for all twenty of the miners, let's finish exploring." Drax looks down at the tablet, then moves to the closed door on the opposite side of the room. "There's another hall just through here with more rooms. Maybe we'll find something useful."

"Let's hurry and get it over with." The tip of Rooke's tail flicks in agitation. "This place gives me the creeps."

"Corethian cunts!" Bruke suddenly leaps away, startling us.

We jump back from the specimen tube. I fall into a fighting stance. "What is it?" I swing around, my weapon up and at the ready.

"It moved!" Bruke points at the creature. "I saw its fingers twitch."

"That's your imagination, you stupid fuck!" Slye stalks away, rolling his shoulders. His scales ripple down his back as he shakes off the sudden fright.

"No it wasn't, prick!" Bruke keeps his gaze locked on the creature floating inside the thick liquid. "I know what I saw. Drax said he found a shattered tube, so whatever was in there had broken its way out."

"This thing has been submerged in that goo for years," Rooke reasons. "There's no way it's still alive. No way."

I want to agree with Rooke's logic, but the experiments performed on our

people far surpassed anything I could have imagined. At this point, I would believe anything is possible.

"We need those files from the General's mainframe." I turn to Drax. "Our planned trip to the prison needs to happen soon. We need to know everything the scientists did here." I point to the specimen. "We can't discount what Bruke thinks he saw. If that creature is alive inside there and it gets out, the females will be in serious danger. Three of us couldn't stop the creature Gruxt had become. It took the explosion from a confinement collar to stop him."

"And that thing looks worse than Gruxt," Drax nods.

"What do we do with it in the meantime?" Slye wanders back, slinging his hand at the creature.

"Too bad we aren't closer to the prison," Rooke suggests. "We could put it inside a cell pod and behind a luminetric barrier."

"Any chance you two can rig one of those up?" Slye shares an expectant look between Drax and Bruke.

"Not without a transductor and a maginitizer," Bruke answers.

"Where can we get those?" I ask.

"The prison compound." Drax raises glossy brows at Bruke.

"We can dismantle what we need from one of the cell pod's entrances and set it up down here," Bruke adds.

"I'm not staying in this underground tomb as long as that creature is down here." Slye stabs his finger toward the creature. "And neither should the females. We all need to find a safer place until we know more about what went on down here and if that thing is dead or alive."

"Or at least until we have better weapons." Rooke smirks holding his small dagger aloft. "This alope sticker is a joke."

"I agree with the pirate," I say, looking at the other males. "We need to secure the creature and take the females someplace safer."

"As soon as lockdown commences, we can fly the shuttle to the compound

and remove a luminetric barrier from around one of the doors," Rooke says.

"It's not as simple as all that," Drax explains. "An active luminetric barrier can't be dismantled. It'd have to be done while it's off."

"Which is the real trick," Bruke scoffs. "If the prisoners are free to roam, then what? There's more of them than of us. Sneaking in isn't an option."

"And they're going to be pissed Rooke used a key to only disengage mine and Bruke's collars and left them all behind," Slye chimes in. "They'll overtake us and steal the shuttle. We can't go in unless they're in lockdown."

"Then obtaining the parts needed for a luminetric barrier is out of the question." Drax peers down at the tablet in his hand. "Maybe the rooms down the hall will yield something we can use to contain the specimen tube."

"Two males should remain here and keep watch on the creature," I order, "while the rest of us quickly explore the remaining rooms."

"You still have that comm I gave you earlier?" Drax asks Rooke.

Rooke pats one of his many cargo pockets. "I got it."

"You and Bruke stand guard—"

"With this!" Rooke abruptly interrupts Drax, holding up his small blade. "I don't fucking think so, techy."

"Neither one of us are armed well enough to take on that thing if it wakes up." Bruke's gaze is wide with alarm.

"Well, we can't just fucking leave it here unguarded." Slye cuts his hand at Bruke. "You swore you saw it move."

"Then you hang out here with it, Slye," Bruke snaps. "Be my guest!"

"You're the one that saw it move!" Slye fires back.

"Enough!" I shout. "Arguing with each other gets us nowhere and we're wasting time."

"Then what do you suggest, Lita Comtra?" Bruke rounds on me. The fear reflected in his purple gaze is the only reason my fist hasn't connected with

his face.

"Unless two males want to volunteer, then we pick two at random." I nod to the tablet in the techy's hands. "Drax, does that tablet have access to an arbitrary picker?"

"Yes."

"Then put all our names in and have it generate two," I say.

Drax taps on the smooth screen, waits a moment, then announces, "Slye and Bruke are our two lucky winners."

The two males curse up a storm but eventually accept the task of guarding the creature. I hand Slye my sword, trading his alope sticker for it. "It's dull from hacking my way through the forest, but it's better than what you've got."

Slye hesitates before accepting my sword hilt first as if he isn't sure he trusts the trade I offer.

Rooke gives Bruke his comm and claps both males on the shoulders. "If that thing so much as twitches, alert us and we'll come running back."

"You fucking know we will," Bruke barks.

I secure the door to the lab we came through, making sure it's locked. Just in case Bruke did see the thing move, I would lessen the danger to the females.

Drax recalibrated the keypad with his device. A short, narrow corridor is revealed, the closed door at the end making it yet another entrapment area. With so many precautions in place to safeguard against escape, it defies logic how every creature created by the scientists broke free.

Rooke and I follow Drax down the corridor. After a short pause for the techy to recalibrate the keypad, we enter a wide hall with several rooms lining either side.

The first few rooms are sleeping quarters for the scientists. We explore each one but find nothing useful beyond garments and bedding. The next is a storage room full of laboratory equipment, but it's what we find in the last room that makes my heart race.

A trove of advanced technology left to gather dust. Imagers, heat signature scanners, portable energy shields, comms, and stunners. As we leave the hidden part of the lab, our arms laden with our newfound arsenal, I can't help but feel a flicker of hope. Once all the lab created creatures are dead and the lifers caught and returned to their cell pods, Zune will finally be safe enough for my lula.

"You won't believe what we found!" Rooke is first inside the lab, but before any celebrating our good fortune can commence, the creature's body suddenly convulses, its twisted form jerking to life. Panic surges through me, my heart pounding in my chest.

"Watch out!" I drop all of what I carry except two stunners.

The creature thrashes violently against the tube's confines. The liquid surrounding it churning with the force of its movements.

"We have to kill it!" Drax shouts, his eyes wide with horror. "We can't let it escape!"

"It doesn't look like it can get free of the tube," Slye speaks too soon; a crack forming from the top of the tube to the bottom. Dread grips me around the throat as I watch the crack rapidly spread, a loud hissing sound following it.

"We can't let it leave this room!" I order, my thoughts consumed by the safety of Zoe and the other females.

Drax runs to double check the exit, making sure the door is locked down tight and not a moment too soon. The thin crack gives way with the thrashing of the creature inside, breaking open and spilling its contents onto the floor. Thick liquid oozes out in heavy splats across the floor, carrying with it a sickly-sweet scent that assaults my scentiary glands.

We all leap back, what weapons we have up and ready to fight, as the creature falls from its prison with a wet thud. Its body still for a moment before its limbs start twitching, its tail flicking back and forth.

Without warning, it erupts from the floor and charges us, its claws and teeth bared. I fire the two stunners in my hands. Electricity streams from the weapons, covering the creature in a bright blue light. Its body shakes and twitches, its movements slowing.

Rooke adds his stunner fire to mine, the creature bowing under the assault until our stunners run out of power. It rears its disfigured head, releasing a scale-raising roar that echoes through the lab.

The creature shakes off the effects of our stunners, turns, and rushes the door. Its movements jerky and uncoordinated as it hits the metal slab, leaving behind a considerable dent.

The five of us move as one, wielding what few weapons we have between us, jabbing and slashing in a vain attempt to subdue the beast. Our stabs and blows deflect off its tough armored scales. Its unnatural movements are erratic, making it difficult to anticipate its next move.

It extends claws as long as daggers, slashing at us, pushing us back, before turning its attention to the door once more. With only a few swipes of its lethal blades, a hole is torn large enough for the creature to squeeze through.

Gone in an instant, we follow the creature down the many halls and through ripped entrapment doors. Our footsteps echo off the walls as we race after it, following its trail of destruction. We are not far behind, passing by the hall leading to where the females wait. Instead of turning, it continues on through a room with many monitors until it tears its way into the broken lift, the platform sitting cockeyed inside the shaft. With little effort, the creature scales the shaft, disappearing into the forest.



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## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

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## Zoe

I STARTLE. The hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention in sheer terror. All of us girls huddle together, my skin crawling with fear from the primal roar of something unearthly. Sounds of chaos penetrate the many doors and halls blocking our room from the main corridor. The screeching of metal being ripped apart echoes through the air.

Tris leaps out of Stacy's hands to climb my arm and hide under my short hair. Her furry little body trembling and shaking as little noises of distress mingle with her panting breaths.

"What the fuck is all that?" Darcy leaps up from the bed where we huddle together.

"*Scheisse!*" Romy softly curses. "Nothing good."

"Mordox was right," I say. "The missing miner is still here, turned into a creature, and they found it."

"We're behind three solid metal doors and two entrapments halls," Tasha says, scooting closer to me. "How is it we can hear what's going on through all that?"

"You saw what they did to Gruxt." I wrap my arms around my middle to keep from shivering. "It's sounds like they found another one like him."

"Check the door, Darcy, and make sure it's good and locked," Tasha demands in a panic.

"We can't hide in here while the guys are out there fighting off whatever is making all that noise." Darcy motions to the keypad adjacent to the door. "Stacy, bring that grygore device thingy Drax gave you and unlock the door. We need to go help them."

"No way." Stacy crosses the room with a stern shake of her head. "Drax made sure we were in the most remote part of the lab. We're safe here."

"How can you just leave Drax out there? Those guys are barely armed." Darcy bangs a fist on the door panel. "My Rooke has little more than a prison shank to defend himself."

Her frustration and fear reflect my own. I know Mordox can take care of himself, but I've also seen him gravely injured and know he would die to keep me safe. I don't want that to happen.

"We all saw the fight with Gruxt. What can we do except get in the way?" Stacy argues back. "You don't think I'm freaking out right now? My Drax is out there too."

"At least use the damn comm and see if they're okay," Darcy pleads.

"I vote for calling them on the comm," I speak up, my worry compounding for Mordox.

Stacy nods and activates the comm, but Drax doesn't respond. My heart races, banging against the cage of my ribs as I think of Mordox out there, fighting another nightmarish creature.

Suddenly, the crashing and screeching sounds grow louder and closer before fading off into the distance. After a while of us holding a collective breath, we hear what sounds like an army tramping through the corridors with a thunderous roar.

"We can't stay in here," Darcy whispers as she and Stacy slowly back away from the door. "We need to know what's going on out there."

With trembling fingers, Stacy attempts to contact Drax again, but there's still no response. There's only static on the other end. A cold sliver of dread snakes down my spine, but I refuse to entertain the notion that Mordox is either badly hurt or worse.

"There's a logical explanation for why they're not answering," I rush out. "Maybe Drax dropped the comm or it was damaged somehow."

"Yeah," Stacy chimes in. "Or they're too busy fighting the creature they found to answer."

"I like Zoe's scenario better." Darcy rubs at the gooseflesh pebbling her arms. "Maybe Drax dropped the thing and they're chasing the creature they found out of the lab. I mean, it is five against one."

"Yeah, but we all saw the fight against Gruxt. I would've thought three huge Ziarian males could have taken him down. If Drax wouldn't have had that confinement collar, one of them could have died." Tasha reminds us all of what we don't want to consider.

Without warning, the door slides open. We all leap up from the bed to huddle together in the far corner of the room. Tris lets out a little screech of her own, tucking herself under my hair.

Drax is first through the door. Stacy breaks away from our group, flinging herself into his arms. He effortlessly catches her up, enveloping her in a strong embrace.

Mordox is next, a little noise of relief mixed with excitement erupts from my throat as I race to meet him halfway. Tris leaps onto his head, wrapping her little clawed fingers around one of his horns. I throw my arms around his tight waist and bury my face in the hard planes of his stomach.

Mordox wraps me in strong arms, holding me close and tight against him. His spicy scent envelopes me, calming my nerves, melting away my anxiety until all that's left is the sense of safety I always feel when I'm with him.

"Thank God you're okay! What happened?" My words muffle against his abs. "We were so scared with all the noise."

"We found the last miner, or the creature he had become, inside a specimen tube," Mordox says. "We turned on the power in that room and think that's what woke it up. It got loose and ran into the forest before we could kill it."

"It's not safe down here." Mordox turns to Drax. "You saw how easy it was for that thing to tear its way out. We need to get the females out of here."

Rooke rushes in next, ruby eyes immediately searching the room for Darcy as he speaks, "We should leave in the shuttle. It's short-ranged, but it has enough power to get us to Kyler 4 or one of its moons."

"There's nothing on Kyler 4, pirate." Drax's brow scrunches into deep furrow. "It's barely habitable."

Rooke pulls Darcy into a relieved embrace. "It's safer for my mate than here," he says, cupping her face before capturing her lips in a tender kiss. To see my friend so obviously happy in love warms my heart.

"We don't have to stay there forever," Rooke goes on to say. "We can rapidly recharge the shuttle with the power in the energy shields we found and make short flights to various planets until we find one to settle on."

"What of the prisoners still collared?" Bruke asks from the door, his purple eyes seeking out Romy. Slye pushes past him to stand with Tasha. "Don't they deserve the same chance at freedom as us? Some of them in Annex 2 have more than done their time, the same as me and Drax."

"We should leave them the key collar Drax found on our way off this rock," Rooke says. "Maybe leave it in the common area during lockdown."

"So they can be stuck here to fight the lab creatures still on the loose?" Mordox scowls. "They have no weapons and no idea what they're up against."

"Maybe Bruke and I can figure out how to turn the stunners into something more lethal," Drax suggests. "Leave them something to fight back with."

"They'll be trapped on Zune with no way home," Slye points out, Tasha leaning heavily on his arm.

"None of us are going home, Slye," Rooke reminds the males. "It's no longer safe for any of us on Ziaria. Not with what our government had planned for us here. We were never meant to return home, and even if we did try to go back, they would kill us for knowing too much."

"Rooke's right," Mordox says, hugging me tighter. "Besides, we can't take the females to Ziaria. Humans are considered an inferior species. Yulineon patrollers would be alerted, and the females would be killed."

"If we can retrieve the computer you have from your hideout, maybe I can pull the files from the ether and expose the officials responsible," Drax theorizes. "A transport ship would be sent to gather the remaining prisoners and return them to Ziaria."

"Are we seriously talking about taking on the Ziarian government?" Bruke scoffs. "You realize the depth of the corruption we would face."

"There aren't enough decent people left in charge of our world to care about saving a group of castoff criminals," Rooke affirms. "We need to think about the females. Take them someplace safe."

"For now, we leave the key to the collars like Rooke suggested," Drax decides. "Bruke and I will try and modify the stunners, but we use the scanners we found to hunt down and kill the creatures from the air."

"As much as I hate to admit it, I agree with Bruke." Mordox's throat works through a hard swallow. "The five of us are no match for the corruption of the Ziarian government. If we kill the lab creatures before we leave, at least the remaining prisoners can safely live on Zune. If we find ourselves in a position to return to Zune with a large enough ship, we can transport the ones who want to leave someplace else."

When the chatter dies down and all remains quiet, Drax peers around the room. "Then it's settled?"

"We have a lot to do, best we get to it," Mordox says. "The longer we remain here, the likelihood of the lab creature returning increases."

"And the females are safer in the air than on the ground," Rooke adds.

"We should pair off. Rooke and Slye, return to the hidden lab and collect the tech we dropped," Mordox orders. "Drax and Bruke, stay here and guard the females. I'm going to the galley to collect all the rations we'll need for the journey to Kyler 4."

"No." I hold tightly to Mordox's hand as he releases me. "You need someone to watch your six."

"Drax and Bruke are our only hope of modifying the stunners, and Drax is the only one who knows how to retrieve those files from the ether," he grins

down at me. "They need to stay here where it's the safest."

"Then I'll go with you," I say, standing taller. "You can't carry everything yourself."

"I will not risk your safety." I open my mouth to argue, but Mordox interrupts. He reaches up and lifts a clinging Tris from his horn and places her in my hands. "No arguing. I need you to watch after Tris."

"Promise me you'll be careful." I know what I want to say to him, but the words stick in my throat. Instead, I raise up on tiptoes and press my lips to his, pouring all the love I have into the kiss.

"I promise," he whispers against my lips, and then he's gone, disappearing out the door with a purposeful stride.

I watch him go; my heart heavy with worry. Tris trembles in my hands. I peer down into her large, luminous eyes. "He'll be fine," I assure the tiny plurshy. "He'll be back. Mordox is our family. He won't abandon us, and he always keeps his promises."

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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## Mordox

"ARE YOU SURE IT WILL FLY?" I eye the overpacked shuttle warily.

"Positive," the space pirate assures me. "Now, if everyone will get on board, we have lab creatures to hunt and a computer to retrieve."

Everyone boards the shuttle, five males and five females, squeezing into seats meant for six. Luckily the females are small and don't take up much room. I pull Zoe onto my lap, her eyes sparkling with excitement. I've always admired her spirit, even in the face of danger.

Rooke takes the helm, expertly flipping switches and adjusting controls as he brings the craft to life. The ship silently lifts off the ground, clearing the dense canopy of the forest, and leaving the danger of what roams on the ground behind.

Drax and Bruke set to work in the cramped confines of the shuttle. Scanners are engaged to look for any sign of the lab creatures on the ground before the techies begin their modifications of the stunners. With any luck, they will be able to amplify the electric shock into something deadly.

For the first time since my mating gland triggered me to claim my chosen mate, I can finally take a full breath, knowing my lula is safe for now. As we soar over the treetops, my gaze rests on her fragile beauty. She looks out the window of the shuttle, her gaze filled with wonder as she takes in the forest far below.

"Zune is so pretty from up here," Zoe sighs softly. "Too bad there are so

many dangers. I wouldn't mind living here even if the sun never sets."

I tuck a lock of her mane behind the delicate shell of her ear so I can better see her face. "I could live anywhere as long as you are there."

Zoe turns watery eyes up to meet mine. Her expression filled with such warmth, it squeezes my heart. "Same here... anywhere, as long as I have you."

"I'm going to need some clear directions to your hideout, Mordox, once we get closer to the grouping of xooinda trees." Rooke glances back from the helm with a wry expression. "You remember them. The ones close to where I nearly died in one of your traps."

"The traps weren't meant for you, space pirate. They were meant to keep the lifers and the lab creatures from getting too close. Not my fault you insisted on tracking a Lita Comtra while you were injured."

"Didn't know you were a warrior elite at the time, prick," Rooke volleys back, a hint of amusement coloring his words. "We were trying to get Zoe back after you stole her from us."

"Zoe was perfectly safe with me," I reply, gently squeezing Zoe's thigh.

"Wait," Zoe peers up at me, a little furrow creasing her brow. "What trap was Rooke caught in?"

"And Darcy." Darcy holds up her hand and turns around in her seat to face us. "Don't forget me. It was more my fault than Mordox's though. I insisted on going after you when Mordox stole you right out from under my nose," she tells Zoe. "Rooke was hurt from fighting Gruxt and refused to let me go after you alone. After tracking you for days on end, I saw a flash of green and ran ahead, that's when we stepped right into one of Mordox's traps. It was ugly."

"No one's ever told me this," Zoe sucks back a breath. "Why not?"

"When you came back safe, I didn't think to mention it," Darcy shrugs. "I was too busy worrying over your newfound relationship with your abductor."

"But you knew, Mordox." Zoe's gaze searches mine. "Why didn't you tell me

my best friend was so close by?"

I've been in the heat of many fierce battles, faced down the toughest males in the Universe, and never have I squirmed as much as now beneath this tiny female's quizzical gaze. "You were in a healing sleep while the medical cuff healed your head wound."

"You could have told me when I woke up."

"They were gone by then," I reply simply, afraid she will be angry with me.

"Mordox," Zoe raises an accusing brow at me. "You knew they were looking for me and didn't tell me."

"If was for your safety I kept silent," I defend. "I am sorry for keeping you from your friends, but I don't regret keeping you as far away from that lab as possible. We all saw what remained inside. All of you could have been killed at any time had that creature woken up."

Drax pauses in his work on the stunner in his hands to peer around at all the faces crammed inside the confines of the shuttle. "We didn't know it was there. For that, I'm sorry. Like you, Mordox, I was doing what I thought best for my mate. At the time, the underground lab seemed to be the safest shelter for Stacy and her friends."

"It's not Drax's fault." Stacy leans forward, draping her arms over the back of our seat. "I tricked Drax and took off running into the forest. I wanted to get back to the girls because I wasn't sure I could trust him. Then we fell into the lift shaft and were stuck down there until we found our way out through the sunken steps. We explored what we thought was every room and found nothing."

"Sounds like we've all made mistakes with the best intentions," Rooke utters from the front of the small craft then points. "There's the xoinda trees. Where to now, Mordox?"

"To the left, then skirt around that nyru tree. My pods are in the top branches of the tallest hylen."

Rooke lowers the shuttle, skirting around the top branches. "Seriously? Where? All I see are leaves and branches."

"Trust me, it's there." I lift Zoe off my lap and place her in the seat.

"Is it cloaked?" Drax leans in close to the clear shielding covering the front.

"No, just hidden within the foliage." Crouched low, I wait next to the hatch.

"Take us down just a bit lower and I'll jump out."

"Remind me to ask you if I ever need anything camouflaged," Slye barks out a laugh.

"Jump out?" Zoe gasps. "You can't just jump out of a plane with no parachute, Mordox."

I rub the translator plugged into my ear. "I don't know what those things are, but I'll be fine. Rooke, stay close. I'll toss up a rope, tie it to the shuttle's frame, and I can climb back up."

The hatch of the shuttle opens. Sultry air rushes inside, thick with humidity. The scent of ripe fruit, sweet flowers, and fresh foliage fills the interior of the shuttle.

I catch a glimpse of the terrace jutting out from the main pod and leap out. The sensation of free falling grabs my breath. I spread my arms wide, my tail jutting straight out from my body to help me navigate through the air. My heart pounds with excitement as the wind rushes around me and the terrace below rushes up to greet me.

My boots land with a hard thud on the wooden planks. I drop into a crouch and scan the surrounding area. The shuttle hovering above is an attention getter. I wouldn't be surprised if my traps were to catch one or more of the lab creatures with it here.

My hylen tree stands tall, its branches swaying gently in the warm breeze. For a brief moment, I pause to remember the feel of my home high in trees. Somehow, I know I will never see this place again, and for some strange reason, that makes me sad. After twenty rotations holed up here, hidden away and alone, I will miss my makeshift abode.

I hurry inside, grab an empty pack and fill it with the computer Drax needs and a few other bits of tech I think might be useful. I turn to leave but the bed catches my eye. I smile, my chest expanding as I recall the first time my lula

opened her eyes and spoke to me. The spark that ignited between us has grown brighter with each passing cycle.

I step closer and my heart warms as the memories of her brief stay flood me. Curious how something which happened only a few cycles ago could feel like the passage of a lifetime.

Zoe and I have a lifetime ahead of us that doesn't include Zune, so I had better get on with it. I grab an extra coil of rope and step back onto the terrace. I peer up through the trees and the shuttle Rooke flies is where I left it, hovering low with the belly skimming the treetops.

I wave up to the ship and the hatch opens, Slye leaning out and ready to catch the rope I toss up to him. Once he ties it to the shuttle's frame, I haul myself up until I reach the hatch, where Slye grabs my arm to help me back inside.

"Promise you'll never do that again," Zoe sucks back a breath.

"I can only promise to try." I hand Drax the pack and pull the rope up behind me. "There's no telling what adventures await us."

As I turn to close the hatch, Tris leaps off Zoe's shoulder and down to the treetops below.

"No, Tris! Come back," Zoe shouts.

The plurshy disappears into the foliage before I can tell where she's gone.

"Mordox, we can't leave her here!" Zoe's tears are as fresh as the tropical rains but bitter with sorrow.

I tell Rooke to circle around the tree. With my fist wrapped in the rope, I lean out of the shuttle to try and spot my furry companion. The leaves blur as we move in a steady arc as I search for any sign of Tris. As we make our third pass, I call out for her, but she's nowhere to be seen.

Everyone in the shuttle is patient as I search the treetops in vain. After a time, and with a heavy heart, I close the hatch and take my seat with Zoe in my lap.

"Tris is native to Zune, lula," I say the words even though I'm gutted I will never see Tris again. "Maybe it's for the best she stay here."

"How can you say that? You raised her from a baby," Zoe wails.

"Maybe she knows we're leaving and wants to stay here in the trees. Zune is Tris's home, Zoe." I can't decide if I'm trying to convince Zoe or myself. "Maybe it's for the best."

The males sit in solemn silence, offering mournful gazes, while the females utter soft words of consolation to my weeping mate.

"The scanners are set to search for the lab creatures," Drax quietly announces. "We've combined three stunners into one. The electric charge should stop the heart of anything it hits."

"With any luck," Bruke adds.

"Then let's go find those creatures," I say through the crushing weight of loss pressing against my heart. "We need to make Zune safe from the mess the Ziarian government left behind."

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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## Zoe

MY CHIN QUIVERS as I try hard to be brave. Mordox is right. Tris is native to Zune. This weird moon is her home, and who am I to take her away from it? I imagine she would feel lost, the same as I did when I was snatched away from my first foster home. Even though my heart will miss her forever, I don't want her to feel like I did.

Still, my hope-filled heart keeps my eyes glued out the little window for any sign that Tris might be following us. It's absurd to think she could move through the trees as fast as the shuttle is flying, but I can't stop myself from searching for a glimpse of her.

"If you love something, set it free," I quietly murmur.

Mordox stirs, whispering against my hair, "What was that?"

"Just mumbling to myself, hoping Tris stays safe out there on her own."

"Tris is smart, she'll be fine." Mordox tightens his hold where I'm cradled on his lap. His fingers stroke my hair as he presses a gentle kiss to my forehead. The loss of Tris is still heavy in the air, but Mordox's sweet gesture brings me some solace.

"There's one!" I jump at Bruke's shout as we near the dark side of Zune. "See it on the scanner? It's just up ahead, Rooke."

"Give me the stunner, Drax." Slye moves to the hatch and thrusts out his hand, his azure gaze burning with resolve.



Mordox springs into action, lifting me off his lap and setting me on the seat. He gives me a quick kiss and moves in to help, securing the rope around Slye's waist as he opens the hatch.

"I've got you, Slye." With the rope still tied to the shuttle's frame, Mordox wraps the slack around his forearm and braces himself to hold onto Slye as he leans out of the shuttle's hatch to search for the creature below.

"I see it!" Slye points. "Take us lower, Rooke."

The shuttle rapidly descends. With Mordox and Slye out of their seats, Tasha scoots closer to me. She gives me a tight smile as we clasp hands. I cling to the edge of my seat with the other, my knuckles white with my grip.

The shuttle drops closer to the ground. Slye stretches out his arm, holding tightly to the modified stunner, and takes aim. The electric blast looks like a web of lightning radiating out from Slye's weapon. The sheer intensity of it crackles the air.

The creature cries out with a wild howl, thrown back by the force of the blast. The shuttle quickly pulls up, and we watch as the insect-like creature falls to the ground.

It twitches, limbs jerking as its body lays still. I hold my breath, hoping Slye killed it. That the stunner Drax and Bruke modified is going to work to eradicate the dangerous lab creatures loose in the forest for Tris's sake.

Mordox pulls up on the rope, hauling Slye back inside the shuttle. We all remain still for a few moments, our breaths held tightly until Drax finally announces, "It worked! The creature is dead."

"How can you be sure, techy?" Rooke glances back from his place at the helm.

"The creature's vitals flat-lined on the scanner. See!" Drax reaches over the seat to show Rooke the tablet device he holds in his hands.

We all release a collective breath before erupting into cheers of celebration. Our revelry is short-lived. There are two insect things left out there to hunt down and kill, plus the creature that recently tore its way out of the lab.

Slye and Mordox remain at the hatch, waiting for the next creature sighting as Bruke and Drax keep their eyes glued to the scanners they hold in their hands. Rooke flies us deeper into the dark side where the creatures are suspected to live.

From one second to the next, day turns to night. Where the relenting sun once blazed a bright orange is now an inky expanse of velvety black, the darkness enveloping us until only a sliver of light remains on the horizon. Stars twinkle like a zillion diamonds scattered across the sky.

Tasha leans in close, her hand still clasping mine. "That was some crazy shit," she whispers, her voice husky with excitement.

I nod, my heart still racing from the adrenaline rush. "Yes, it was." I glance over at Mordox, who sits stoically at the hatch, his eyes scanning the forest below through one of the small, round windows dotting the sides of the shuttle.

He's every inch a fierce warrior. We may be two very different people, from completely different worlds, but it doesn't matter that he has horns and a tail, or even fangs and claws. I'm drawn to him in an inexplicable way that quickens my pulse and sets my blood on fire.

It's more than just physical attraction. There's an undeniable connection between us, a bond that's been growing stronger with every passing moment. He's my rock, my tether in a lifetime lived with uncertainty. The one person I know who I trust will never abandon me. It feels like a betrayal of my friendships with the girls, especially Darcy, but I can't help how I feel.

Darcy glances over her shoulder at me from her seat up front with Rooke as if she knows my thoughts. A wave of guilt washes over me. Without any thought for her own safety, she had chased after me when Mordox stole me away. I never thanked her for that.

"My scanner's picking up two more creatures," Drax shouts.

Mordox and Slye exchange a quick glance before rushing to open the hatch. Weapon at the ready, Slye leans out of the craft as Mordox holds tight to the rope around him. I catch sight of the two insect-like creatures on the ground, their sharp, pincer-like arms glinting in the shuttle's lights. Rooke aims at

them. One has a scrap of my dress still stuck in its claw. I shiver recalling how close that thing had gotten to me before Mordox chased it away.

The shuttle descends closer to the ground. I hold onto Tasha's hand tightly, my heart pounding with anticipation. Slye takes aim and fires two quick blasts, hitting both creatures. One screeches in pain as the electric blast slams into its body.

The other falls to the ground, momentarily stunned. Its body jerks and contorts as the force of the stunner weapon ripples through it.

Slye hits them with another blast each. The creatures roar as their bodies convulse from the electric current coursing through them. With a final shudder, they go still and silent.

"You got them, Slye!" Drax roared triumphantly.

Mordox quickly hauls Slye back into the shuttle and shuts the hatch. Slye wears a satisfied grin on his face, but we all know the thing that tore its way out of the lab is still out there somewhere.

"One more to go," Rooke utters. "Keep your eyes on those scanners, males."

As we continue our search for the last creature, I can feel my eyelids growing heavy. We've been searching the dark side of Zune for what feels like days. Everyone keeps their places, Mordox and Slye ready at the hatch, while Tasha remains seated next to me.

Her head lolls in sleep and gently lands on my shoulder. Her deep, even breaths a lullaby that soon works its magic.



I WAKE to a hand landing over mine. My eyes open and I squint against the bright sun streaming inside the shuttle and to Mordox's rugged features. His expression softens as it always does when he looks at me.

"I fell asleep," I say, stretching my arms above my head. "Did you all find the last creature?"

"No," Mordox says grimly. "We searched all cycle until we were forced to land so Rooke could recharge the shuttle's solarcells. We won't have to wait eight hours for them to charge. Rooke is using the portable energy shields we found in the lab to rapidly recharge them, then we'll continue the search. Once we find and kill it, we're stopping at the prison compound to leave the key, and then it's off to Kyler 4."

"Was Drax able to find the files about the experiments using your computer?" I stifle a yawn behind my hand. "Maybe find a weakness?"

"No. Not yet."

"Where are we now?" I ask, peering around.

"Hidden on the edge of the forest near the Zune River and overlooking the valley." Mordox holds out his hand and helps me from my seat.

"Any sign of Tris?" My lips press into a thin line as I hold my breath.

"No. Not yet." Mordox leads me out of the shuttle where everyone is hanging out nearby, passing ration packs and refilling water cylinders. "Come eat something. It won't be long before we head out again."

"All right, but I'm not that hungry. Maybe some water though." My heart is in my stomach, stanching my appetite. I can't stop worrying about Tris, wondering where she is and if she's okay.

"I'm worried about her too," Mordox says as we join the others.

I don't need to ask who. Of course he's concerned for her. I'm certain there's a hole in his heart that's larger than mine.

Darcy hands me a water cylinder. "You hungry?"

Guilt chokes me, and I embrace her tightly.

"What's that for?" Darcy giggles and hugs me back. "You okay, Zoe?"

"Just wanted you to know how much I appreciate what you did. I know a thank you is long overdue." I ease away, blinking hard through the welling of emotion. "Forgive me for being so standoffish when we found each other again. I was so worried about Mordox, my head was all messed up with

thoughts of losing him. You risked your life to come after me and I was bitch to you. To everyone."

"Don't you dare apologize, Zoe." Darcy grabs me by the shoulders and leans down to look me in the eye. "When I thought Rooke was gonna die, I was beside myself. I totally understand."

"We all understand," Stacy says, as all the girls gather around me. Her arm goes around my shoulders.

"It's what sisters do." Tasha smiles and squeezes my hand. "We forgive each other when we're being bitchy."

Romy playfully swats at Tasha. "Like we have been doing with Tasha. She's been cranky ever since we moved into the lab, but we still love her."

"Thanks, Roms." Tasha smirks.

"In all seriousness," Romy begins, "there's nothing to forgive. You're back safe with us, even though I don't totally agree with how Mordox went about keeping you that way."

"He knew the lab wasn't safe and didn't want me there," I defend.

"We understand all that now," Darcy says. "And even though he's the biggest and scariest guy in the bunch, he's growing on me."

The others nod in agreement, their expressions filled with compassion and understanding. Even though we've only been together a short time, I feel like I'm surrounded by the love of sisters.

I take a deep breath and wipe a few tears off with the back of my hand. "Thank you all."

"Enough with the water works, let's get some food in you." Darcy starts to lead me over to the patch of blue grass where the girls had been sitting but Mordox intercepts me.

"Want to help me collect some nuts from a hutta bush?" Mordox curls an arm around my waist. "Might be a good idea to add as much food as we can to what rations we have."

"Oh, sure." I melt into him.

"She needs to eat something," Darcy protests as Mordox leads me in the opposite direction.

"I'm not that hungry, Darcy, and Mordox is right," I say. "We should collect as much food as we can before we leave."

We walk for a little while, following the rushing of the Zune River. Just inside the tree line, I glance back and see that the forest has swallowed us. The shuttle and the others are nowhere to be seen.

"So where's this nut shrub anyway?" I start to grow concerned.

"I lied." I squeak with surprise as Mordox swings me into his arms and lays over me on the ground covered with a bed of soft moss. "I just wanted a moment of privacy before we leave Zune. All of us will be crammed inside that shuttle for a while, hopping from one moon or planet to another until we find a safe enough place to settle. That could take many cycles, and I can't wait that long to feel my body sheathed within yours."

"So you stole me away from my friends just to get me alone?" I circle my arms around his neck as the deadly points of his horns shift toward the back of his head. I smooth my hands along the smooth shells. "That's so cool how you can do that."

Mordox shudders, his gaze hoods, and his breath hitches.

"You like that, huh?" My grin is lopsided with the knowledge that I've discovered something that sparks his desire.

"Only when you do it," his voice is low and husky as he tilts his head into my touch.

"What else do you like?" I smooth my hands across the breadth of his shoulders, rippling his scales. Our first time together, I was consumed by so many novel sensations, I didn't reciprocate any, but I'm ready to learn.

Mordox groans and captures my hands. "Exploring will have to wait. We have to hurry before the shuttle is ready to launch."

"I'm good with a quickie," I grin, raising my head to press my lips against his.

The end of his tail snakes around my ankle as he deepens the kiss. Our tongues dance together, exploring each other's mouths with an intensity that leaves me breathless. Nestled between my thighs, Mordox's body pins me to the ground. The heat of his passion igniting mine as he tugs my dress to my waist.

His tail pulls my leg farther to the side and when he releases his erection with quick fingers on fasteners, I know this is all about fucking. No tender claiming like before, and I'm good with that. My body aches for him as much as his does for mine.

He pulls back slightly, lining the head of his massive erection up with my weeping slit, and looks down at me with a raw hunger.

"I can't wait to feel you." His whispered words rumble through me.

My hands grip his shoulders as I thrust my hips up, inviting him to take me. He enters with one powerful thrust and I gasp, the sensation of being completely filled so intense it takes my breath away.

Mordox rocks against me in a frantic rhythm, pushing us both closer to the edge. Our bodies slick with sweat as our breathing grows ragged. With each purposeful thrust, I'm driven higher until the world around me fades away and all I care about is the building in the center of my being. The promise of a pleasure that is sure to consume us both.

Mordox swivels his hips, burying himself deep, and plunging me into a torrent of euphoria. His knot swells and erupts in scorching pulses as he climaxes with me.

Mordox collapses above me onto his bent arms with a satisfied grunt. I cling to him, my body still tingling from the aftershocks.

We lay there for several moments afterward, our bodies still joined as we catch our breath. Mordox eventually eases out of me and stands, reaching out a hand to help me to my feet. He pulls me into his arms for a soft kiss before leading us back toward the shuttle.

With my hand clasped in his, we start to walk back toward the shuttle. I can't help but to feel grateful for this stolen moment between us amid all of the chaos that surrounds us. Although this is likely just a brief interlude before

more challenges await us on our journey ahead, I'm glad we had this time together, even if it was only a few stolen moments.

The branch above us shakes as we walk under the tree's canopy. I look up to see a familiar, fuzzy face.

"Tris!" I cry, delighted to see her. "Mordox, she came back. She came back."

I hold up my palm and she leaps from the branch, her limbs spread wide to extend the webbing between. She floats on the air, her landing light. I cuddle her close, tears spilling down my cheeks.

"If you love something, set it free," I utter. "If it comes back, it's yours. If not, it was never meant to be."

"Maybe that's what I should have done with you." Mordox grins and scratches Tris under the chin. "Set you free to rejoin your friends."

"I would have returned."

Mordox raises a curious brow. "So does that mean you love me?"

"Isn't that the question I should be asking you since you're the one talking about setting me free?"

He leans in close, brushing his lips with mine. "Yes, it is. And my answer is yes. I love you, Zoe."

My heart swells with joy and I can't help the fresh wave of tears. "I love you too, Mordox."

He kisses me again and I feel it all the way to my toes. Pulling back, he takes my hand in his and we make our way back to the shuttle, Tris riding on my shoulder. My little family complete once more.



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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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## Mordox

As ZOE and I emerge from our quick romp in the forest, Rooke eyes me with a mixture of relief and impatience. "I was just about to send out a search party," he says pointedly.

"I'm surprised you didn't steal this opportunity to get your mate alone," I reply, savoring the lingering taste of my female on my bottom lip as I run my tongue along it.

"Who says I didn't?" Rooke smirks.

"Lockdown has begun," Drax announces, gaining everyone's attention. "Let's get moving. We can't afford to linger. There's still a lot of ground to search if we're to find the lab creature."

"Do you think Tris really wants to go with us?" Zoe asks softly, brushing a strand of hair from her eyes. "Maybe she just came back to say goodbye."

"There's only one way to know for sure." I help Zoe into the shuttle, strapping her into her seat with Tris riding her shoulder. "Once everyone is inside, we'll leave the hatch open as we launch. If she wants to stay on Zune, we'll give her the chance to jump out."

"I hope she wants to go with us." Zoe's hopeful grin squeezes my heart. "She's part of our family. I would hate to have to leave her behind."

"Me too." I squeeze her hand and move away from the hatch so everyone can board.

Once everyone is inside and strapped in, I crouch on the floor of the shuttle with Slye at the open hatch. He palms the modified stunner and stares out into the forest, his gaze so intense I can almost feel its heat.

"Should I be worried about the glint in your eye?" I ask, half-jokingly.

"You should always be worried about the glint in my eye," Slye replies with a wry grin.

I chuckle and shake my head, turning my attention to Zoe. My mate sits stiffly in her seat anxiously waiting to see what Tris will decide. The plurshy I raised from a half-dead whelp is curled into the crook of Zoe's neck, purring contentedly.

"I think she wants to stay with us," Zoe says, as Rooke lifts us off the ground.

I hold my breath for the span of several heartbeats, watching Tris for any signs of hesitation. But then she stretches and yawns, before settling back down on Zoe's shoulder. Zoe beams at me, relief and happiness written all over her face.

"I'm so glad she's decided to come with us," she says, stroking Tris's yellow spotted fur. "I would have been so sad without her."

"So would I." Seated on the far side of the shuttle, I ache to hold Zoe in my arms and kiss the worry etching her pretty face. "I'm glad we'll all be together."

I pull the hatch closed as the shuttle ascends higher into the sky. A large, boxy ship enters the atmosphere. Its metallic exterior gleams in the sunlight as it rapidly descends toward the prison compound, its landing kicking up a small cloud of dust around the landing ports, forming a halo around the ship.

"That's a Thrushian Star Chaser," Rooke points out, hovering the shuttle as he squints at the vessel in the distance.

"Definitely looks like it," Drax replies, baffled. "But what would a Thrushian cargo vessel be doing on Zune?"

"Maybe they're here to collect something... or someone," I suggest, though I'm just as puzzled as everyone else.

"Whatever it is, we need to find out why it's here," Bruke says firmly. "Drax, let's see what readings our lifeform scanners pick up."

The two techies tap on their scanners then study the images displayed on the smooth screens with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

"I'm only reading one life form." Bruke taps on the screen. "A Kaul male."

Rooke swings around to look back at Bruke from the helm. The females gasp and the males curse as the shuttle suddenly tilts before rightening.

"Eyes front, pirate!" Drax shouts. "Pay attention to flying the shuttle."

My horns lift and my scales bristle. "Why is a Kaul flying a Thrushian vessel?"

"It's Qhix!" Rooke hisses. "Has to be. He's the only Kaul I know who is savvy enough to pilfer a vessel right out from under the Thrushian's noses."

"Thrushian tech is nearly impossible to steal, Rooke, much less an entire spacecraft," Drax scoffs. "I was barely lucky enough to have found a back door into the Thrushian's space fleet designs."

"Impossible unless you're a Star Maverick," Rooke states, then glances back at Drax with a pinched brow. "Wait! You said you couldn't hack their mainframe when I asked you for the schematics on that escape pod that landed here all those cycles ago. All you gave me was a standard layout of the Thrushian Pleasure Cruiser from where it jettisoned."

Rooke's reply sends a sense of dread creeping up my spine. Star Mavericks are space pirates known for their ruthlessness and cunning. If one of them is here on Zune, then it can only mean trouble.

"We need to stay alert," I warn, wishing my dull-bladed sword was a laser blaster. "This Star Maverick won't hesitate to kill us if he thinks we're a threat."

"What we need to do is stay alert to lying techies who withhold information," Rooke growls. "And here you accused all of us of being untrustworthy."

"At the time, I was afraid you were going to repair the shuttle and leave us all behind, pirate," Drax fires back.

"Oh, you mean like we plan to do to the remaining prisoners?" Bruke grumbles.

"They can't be trusted around the females, and we don't have a craft large enough to transport them all." Drax's scales lift in a show of aggression.

"It's wrong that we were all brought here for what our government intended, but they're still criminals and the males in Annex 1 are dangerous, murderers and rapist." My scales ripple in a primal instinct to protect my mate. "Many in Annex 2 have already completed their sentences and then some, like Drax and Bruke. It wouldn't be right to leave them behind."

"I agree," Drax says. "Even though I don't trust them around my mate, or any of the other females for that matter. Who are we to decide who is innocent and who is not?"

"That Thrushian cargo vessel is large enough to haul the remaining prisoners," Slye points out. "If we can take it from the Kaul, we could get everyone off Zune. What about the lifers still at large?"

"I believe they're all dead," Rooke says exactly what I suspect. "On my many treks through the forest, I've found no evidence of the living, only come across their remains, bodies torn to pieces. Once I saw Gruxt and the lab-creatures, I understand why their wounds were so severe.

"When we were searching for Zoe and Mordox, we covered more than half of Zune with no sign of any other Ziarans."

"At least we can save the prisoners still confined to the compound," Slye replies firmly.

"When did we go from criminals to rescuers?" Rooke smirks.

"Twenty rotations is a long time to be locked up with your own demons," Drax grumbles. "Let's say we pull off this heist. How are we going to keep the females separated from the prisoners?"

"We keep them contained in the cargo hold until we reach a suitable world, then we set them free," Bruke says. "Maybe the space port on Elysis. We can cut them loose and let them find their own way, then we find a safe world far outside Universeval Rule to settle. That cargo ship is a long-range craft. We

can forgo a stop on Kyler 4 since we won't have to planet hop to get anywhere."

The shuttle grows quiet as everyone is lost in thought, each of us considering our options, whether or not to chance an encounter with the Kaul and release the prisoners. Rooke and Slye aside, space pirates have no honor and Star Mavericks are even worse. They live by their own codes. Loyal only to each other.

"Can you fly a Thrushian cargo ship, Rooke?" Darcy casts ruminating eyes on her mate.

"Pfft, I can fly anything, Darcy." Rooke lifts his mate's hand to his lips.

Mumbles about cocky space pirates rumble through the shuttle.

"All you doubting cunts can fuck right off," Rooke tosses over his shoulder.

"Language, Rooke," Darcy chides and turns in her seat to face us all. "Just my two cents, but it wouldn't be right to leave all those guys here. What if some are innocent like you all?"

"I assure you, most are not," Bruke says softly.

"But some could be," Zoe speaks up, looking over at me with adoring eyes. "It wouldn't be right to leave them if there's another option."

"You all said you would come back for them once you found a transport large enough and you have," Stacy points out.

"I vote we help them," Tasha adds.

"Me too." Romy nods definitively.

"The Star Maverick is on the move," Drax reports gravely. "He's headed inside the prison compound."

"Can you take us closer but not close enough to endanger the females?" I raise up on my knees to look out the front viewport. "I want to follow him inside and see what he's up to."

"I'm going with you," Drax states flatly.

"You're trained in the art of reconnaissance?" I scowl doubtfully.

"Seriously?" Drax sneers back. "I can sneak into anything and not get caught."

"Except the Ambassador's complex."

"Hilarious, Bruke." Drax cuts the purple-maned male a nasty glare.

"Just saying." Bruke presses his lips together as he fights back a grin.

"As I was saying," Drax draws out the last word, "I'm going in with you. You'll need a scanner and someone to watch your back."

"So, we're doing it?" Slye asks the group. "We're going to steal the Kaul's Thrushian vessel and take the prisoners with us?"

"Not until after lockdown," Drax reminds us. "There's no shutting down the luminetric barriers without exploding every head in the compound. The confinement collars will sense any tampering and trigger the failsafe of a prison break."

"That will give me time to take a look at the controls on that vessel," Rooke ponders aloud. "Could be biometric so whatever you do, don't kill the Kaul."

"Biometric?" Darcy wrinkles her brow. "What does that mean?"

"It means the spacecraft controls are tied to the living tissue of the pilot. Most space pirates equip their vessels with this feature. Discourages mutiny when no one but the commander can operate the ship," Rooke explains. "The energy signature of whoever is in command will be linked to the ship's navigation systems too. We won't be able to fly it if Qhix is dead."

"That's some kind of failsafe," Tasha huffs.

"We won't directly engage," Drax assures everyone. "Will we, Mordox?"

"Hadn't planned on it, techy," I snap. "Didn't plan on a rookie recon tagging along either."

"Enough with the male posturing," Romy exhales loudly. Seated next to Bruke, she has been unusually quiet since we left the lab.

"Then it's decided." Slye slaps his hands together, the sharp sound loud inside the small shuttle. "We're stealing his ship."

Rooke steers us toward the compound while keeping a safe distance to avoid detection. After some careful maneuvering, he lands us deep within the dense forest surrounding the compound, nearest to the sole entrance.

"I'll lead the way so you can track the Kaul," I tell Drax. "And I'll need a comm."

"And this stunner." Bruke hands me the device. "We still have a few left that weren't modified. The electric pulse will knock him out so you can take him alive."

I pocket the stunner and coil the rope I used as a safety for Slye, attaching it to my belt. "Rooke. If there's any sign of the lab creature anywhere in the vicinity while we're away, lift off. The safest place for the females is in the air."

"It's like you read my mind, Mordox." Rooke half-turns in his seat, arm slung over the back. "Don't either of you worry. I will look after Zoe and Stacy as if they were my own mate."

"Stay inside the shuttle with Tris, lula." My gaze shifts to lock with Zoe's as Slye opens the hatch for Drax and I to exit.

With an anguished cry, she quickly unstraps from her seat. Tasha and Stacy scoot aside to let her pass, and she flings herself into my arms. Tris squeaks at the sudden movement, then settles down on Zoe's shoulder.

"Promise to be careful." Her voice trembles as her arms wrap tightly around my neck.

"I promise," I whisper into her ear, burying my face in her soft, cropped hair. With a gentle kiss to her lips, I reluctantly pull away, scratch Tris under the chin, and take the comm Bruke hands me.

After Drax kisses his mate with his own vow to return, I follow him out of the shuttle.

"See you soon," Zoe's sweet voice follows me.



I glance back and our eyes meet for a brief moment. My heart swells with all the love I have for her, and I know I must keep my promise to return to her in one piece.

Taking a deep breath, I ready myself for the mission ahead. The Star Maverick won't go down without a fight. Our best bet to extract him without injury is to stun him before he ever sees us coming.

The air is sultry, heavy with the humidity of the last cycle's rain as we keep low to the ground and quickly cover the distance through the forest on light feet. With our backs against the wall of the compound, I signal to Drax for an update on the Kaul's movements as we creep up to the entrance.

Drax takes up a position behind me, the tablet in his hand scanning the interior. "The Kaul is on the far side of the common area, inside the storage room," he whispers.

"Let's do this," I keep my voice low, curious as to what the Kaul thinks he'll find inside an already pillaged storage room.

I pull the stunner from my pocket and place my hand over the panel. The door scans my palm then soundlessly slides open. There's no need for a lock as the confinement collars promise there will be no successful escapes.

We sweep inside, skirting tables and chairs littered throughout the common area where the prisoners usually take their meals. The familiar scent of the prison hits me like a wave. A sour mix of fear and despair forever ingrained in my memory. The air is always cool from the conditioners. The only sound is the soft hum from the luminetric barriers keeping the prisoners contained inside their assigned cellpods.

My eyes dart down each wing as we pass Annex 1 and 2, jutting off from the central common area. The long corridors are empty, glowing with the wavy distortion of solidified light that keeps the prisoners contained. All sound and vision are muted and distorted through the barrier, making it easy for us to sneak inside without notice.

We quickly make our way down the hall lined with the guards' quarters. As we near the storage room at the end, we hug the wall, adrenaline coursing through my veins in anticipation for what lies ahead.

We wait and listen as the Kaul rummages through what little has already been picked over. I know there is nothing inside of interest, because I was the taker of the most valuable items.

Drax flashes me the lifeform scanner, showing the Kaul in the far back of the room. Stunner up and at the ready, I peer around the doorframe. The Kaul's back is to me. He's my height and girth with flesh of a glossy, silvery-blue. In contrast, a shock of white mane hangs down his back in a thick braid to his waist.

Covering one heavily muscled arm is an intricate design called a corium. In his species' distant past, back before their females became fierce warriors in their own right and no longer in need of protection, the need for males to transform into a raging beast called a sivot was lost as well as the ability for the corium to shift and coalesce into a sheet of armor that could be deployed as a shield.

Nevertheless, this male is a formidable opponent. One I would enjoy taking on if we weren't expected to bring him back alive.

I move into the doorway, raising the stunner, but before I can fire, the Kaul spins around, his hand flying to the plasma gun at his side. In that split second, images of Zoe flash through my mind. I made her a promise that I intend to keep, and I know I can't afford to miss.

I take aim and pull the trigger. The stunner sends an electric blast towards the Kaul. He manages to dodge the first shot, but I fire again, this time hitting him square in the chest. He falls to the ground with a thud, his plasma gun clattering away.

Drax rushes inside and checks the Kaul's pulse. "He's alive," he confirms.

"Good," I breathe a sigh of relief and retrieve the Kaul's plasma gun from the floor, then pull the comm from my pocket and hail Bruke. "We got him."

"We'll move the shuttle and meet you at the entrance," Bruke replies on the other end.

"See you there." I end the hail and quickly bind the Kaul's hands and feet with the rope, hoisting him over my shoulder. As we make our way back through the prison, Drax's scanner lights up.

"We've got company," he grits out at the same time my comm pings. "And not of the normal Ziarian variety."

"Where?"

"Headed right for us!"

With one hand securing the Kaul, I dig the comm out of my pocket with the other. "You reading the creature, Bruke?"

"Yes! We're in the air and racing toward you." Bruke's voice trembles with urgency as he answers me then shouts at Slye. "Hit it with the stunner, Slye!"

Drax and I sprint toward the exit, barely catching a glimpse of the shuttle descending and Slye unleashing a powerful surge from his modified stunner to take down the creature.

Its armored body convulses for a moment before crumpling to the ground in a lifeless heap. Dark blue scales ripple along its shoulders and back before twitching back into place. Its grey-streaked mane splayed out around its head, covering its twisted features.

The cheers inside the shuttle abruptly cease as the creature shrugs off the blast and hurtles towards them. Rooke, preparing to land, propels the shuttle into a sudden ascent.

The creature lunges, digging its claws into the hull. The shuttle soars higher into the air with the creature latched on. Rooke maneuvers wildly, attempting to dislodge it to no avail.

The females' screams reach our ears and I'm seized with the same terror that gripped me when Gruxt charged toward my mate. I drop the Kaul I'm carrying to the ground, and he lands with a bone-jarring thud.

"Tell Rooke to fly lower so I can get a better shot," I order Drax, handing him the comm.

Drax does as I say, and the shuttle descends. The creature rears back its free hand readying to breach the hull. I must take action before it tears the shuttle apart and Zoe along with it.

"Aim true, Mordox," Drax utters as I point the plasma gun at the vile threat.

"My mate is on that shuttle."

"So is mine," I reply, pulling the trigger.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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## Zoe

THE LAB CREATURE comes out of nowhere. One second, Bruke is tracking Mordox and Drax, along with the Kaul they captured on his scanner and the next, he's unleashing a string of curse words worthy of a seasoned sailor.

"You reading the creature, Bruke?" Mordox's voice suddenly fills the shuttle through the comm.

My heart pounds as I feverishly scour the ground below through the small side window, desperately seeking out Mordox. *Where could he be?* I gasp in labored breaths. He must still be within the compound walls.

"Yes! We're in the air and racing toward you." The fear in Bruke's voice is unsettling. "Hit it with the stunner, Slye!"

Slye slings open the shuttle's hatch and leans out as far as he dares without the safety rope and aims the modified stunner at the fast-approaching creature.

The girls and I gape in horror at the monstrous abomination sprinting toward the shuttle as Rooke descends. It runs on two powerful legs like Gruxt, but the resemblance ends there. Razor-sharp claws, spanning two feet in length, glint in the bright orange sun. Black and grey-streaked hair sprouts from the top of its monstrous head, flagging behind it as it gains ground. Its features, twisted and deformed, are unrecognizable as the Ziarian it once was.

A violent crackle erupts from the stunner as Slye squeezes the trigger. The blast is like a lightning bolt, surging through the air and striking the creature

with deadly force. It convulses and shrieks in agony. With one final jolt, the thing crumples to the ground. As the electric shock subsides, it lay motionless.

A unified roar of relief erupts within the shuttle. I slap my hand to my chest, feeling my heart rabbiting inside the cage of my ribs as Rooke lowers us to the ground and readies for landing.

What we thought was dead leaps up from the ground with a vicious lunge at us. Rooke yanks us back into the sky. The sudden shift in direction sucks the air from my lungs, forcing me down into my seat. I instinctively reach up to shield Tris with my hand, her tiny body quaking in terror.

We aren't fast enough, and the creature rams its claws into the hull. Slye slams the hatch closed as Rooke flies us ever higher.

"Brace yourselves," is all Rooke shouts before taking us on a roller coaster ride to try and shake off the creature.

Our screams become one, a chorus of terror as Rooke takes us on a dizzying ride through the sky. We cling to each other, the seat straps holding us in place while poor Slye, crouching at the hatch, goes weightless before being body slammed onto the shuttle floor.

Drax shouts through the comm for Rooke to descend. With the creature still hanging on, we plummet like a stone, hurtling toward the ground as it rushes up to greet us with the promise of death.

We're blinded by a flash of bright light. The shuttle lists hard to one side before leveling off.

"Corithian cunts!" Rooke shouts, bringing us down in a smooth landing next to the Kaul's spacecraft. "Mordox just blasted the creature into a million pieces with a plasma gun."

"The Kaul must have been armed!" Bruke whoops in celebration while the girls and I sit in stunned silence, wide-eyed just trying to catch our breaths. I hold Tris in both hands, the tiny plurshy shaking and curled into a tight ball. Then we notice Slye isn't moving from his place on the floor.

Tasha is first to unstrap from her seat, scooting around Stacy to crouch at his

side. The rest of us follow suit, releasing our straps and standing in front of our seats. We're packed in tight, straining forward to see the unconscious male on the floor.

"Slye!" Tasha gives his shoulder a shake. "Slye. Oh my god, please wake up."

Without warning, the shuttle's hatch flies open, and I peer through the crush of people to lay eyes on the person I need most in the world. Mordox's face is a mask of concern as he searches the interior of the shuttle for me. His bright, emerald gaze locks with mine and I blink through the hot press of tears. I want so much to rush to him. To feel his arms around me, but I'm stuck behind a shuttle full of people.

"Are you hurt, lula?" Mordox asks. I shake my head, biting down on my trembling lower lip. He sags in relief. "What about Tris?"

"She's okay." I hold up our plurshy friend still cupped in my hands so he can see her above the crowd. "Are you? Were you hurt capturing the Kaul?"

"No." He slowly shakes his head, his emerald gaze devouring the sight of me, piercing me to my very soul with a hunger I've never felt before. The warm embrace of his gaze melts away my fears leaving me bare before him. Being seen so intimately, felt so deeply, by someone's eyes alone makes my heart beat faster and my skin tingle with anticipation.

This is the first time in my life I've ever experienced such intense love and adoration from someone's gaze, and it overwhelms me in the best way possible, but our reunion will have to wait. "Mordox, we have to help Slye."

My male is so consumed with concern for me that he doesn't even notice the injured male lying on the floor of the hatch. Mordox looks down at the unconscious male, carefully lifting him in his arms and laying him on the ground. Tasha follows, taking wobbly steps to remain at Slye's side.

Mordox kneels over him, placing two fingers over the male's throat. "His pulse is strong, but he needs a medical cuff."

"Already on it," Bruke hollers out, rummaging in the far back of the shuttle through all the bags stuffed with what we could carry with us from the lab.

We all spill out of the shuttle, making way for Bruke and the medical bag.



Tasha limps towards me, her movements hindered by her injury. I wrap an arm around her waist to offer some comfort. Her gaze is fixated on Slye, worry evident in every line of her face.

Mordox secures the cuff Bruke hands him onto Slye's forearm and rapidly taps on the little buttons until they flash in a riot of blinking lights. Bruke tends to Slye's head wound, cleaning away the trickle of blood leaking from the back of his head and applying a pressure dressing.

"The Thrushian vessel should have a decent medic bay." Rooke's face twists in worry for his friend.

"Let's hurry and get Slye inside the Kaul's craft," Mordox says, his voice calm but urgent. "We need to grab the Kaul and everything we packed inside the shuttle."

"I've got the Kaul." Bruke jogs over to where the Kaul lays in a heap on the ground near the compound's entrance.

We offer to help unload the shuttle, but Drax and Mordox are not having it, insisting we stand by while they do the heavy lifting. Whoever said chivalry was dead had never met a Ziarian male.

The girls crowd around me, taking turns petting Tris who had calmed enough to settle on my shoulder. She delighted in their affection, purring loudly as they cooed and praised her beauty.

Drax and Mordox start to unload the shuttle while Rooke heaves Slye into his arms and starts toward the Kaul's spacecraft parked on the outskirts of the compound followed by Darcy and a worried Tasha.

It loomed before us, its massive boxy frame casting a shadow over the landscape. A silvery-grey, the hull appeared to be smooth and seamless, as if it was made from one continuous piece of metal.

The sight of it is surreal, reminiscent of the time Stacy maneuvered us through the crafts docked out in space after we escaped the red planet in her former owner's vessel. Weeks have passed since I woke up naked and chained to a wall on the red planet, but the reality of everything that's happened since still shocks me.

My eyes land on Mordox as he helps Drax unload the shuttle and I instantly calm. He is my home, along with Tris, and my four sisters. My found family among the stars.

"I'm going to get started unscrambling the lock on the hatch to lower the ramp so we can board." Drax heaves four massive bags, each the size of a duffel over to the spacecraft. Stacy follows close behind, insisting she can manage a bulging sack filled with all manner of alien tech paraphernalia. Bruke joins them, casually dropping the colossal Kaul at Drax's feet from his shoulder with ease.

"I'll never get used to the sight of aliens," Romy shudders at the sight of the Kaul.

I don't blame her. He radiates danger, even more than the males we're used to. Bare chested and heavily muscled like the Ziarian's, except he has no horns and no tail. Instead of scales, he's covered in glossy blue skin that shines like polished metal with bone structure to rival any male model on Earth. His eyes are closed in his unnatural repose, and I wonder at the color. Even more striking is the snow-white hair falling to his waist, plaited in a single, thick braid.

Mordox's gaze catches mine, and he immediately strides over. Romy moves away to join the others at the spacecraft and pulls me into his arms. "I was so scared when the creature attacked the shuttle," he whispers into my hair. "I couldn't bear the thought of losing you."

I hug him back so tightly; I think my bones will break. In his arms, I'm safe, protected, and happy. An overwhelming joy surges through me, it's almost too much to contain.

"I know. When I heard you on the comm, I searched the ground from the window. It made me sick to my stomach when I couldn't find you, but you're okay and so am I. We're all okay," I babble through my happy tears. "Even Tris is okay."

His hard body is warm against mine. The spicy scent that is uniquely him wraps around me like a blanket.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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## Mordox

"GOT IT!" Drax's announcement shatters our stolen moment of serenity as the vessel's hatch pops open with a hiss and the ramp lowers.

"Not so fast, techy." I whirl around with Zoe still tight in my arms. "The craft needs to be searched before anybody goes aboard."

Already with a lifeform scanner in hand, Bruke says, "I've got nothing on the scanner."

"That doesn't mean the ship is empty," I warn. "We can't take any chances if there's another Kaul onboard, maybe hiding from our scanner with a disruptor band."

Rooke nods in agreement. "Mordox is right. We should do a thorough search of the interior."

"I'll do it," I volunteer, guiding Zoe over to stand with Darcy. "You'll be safer out here, lula"

"Why does it seem like I'm always telling you to be careful?" Her lips downturn in a worried frown.

"Don't worry about me," I grin feeling the bulk of the plasma gun I carry in my pocket. "I've done countless sweeps for the enemy during my many rotations as a Lita Comtra."

Tasha and Romy gather around Zoe, their expressions mirroring the same worry as hers. Even Tris, perched on Zoe's shoulder, seems to sense the

tension in the air as her spotted fur stands on end.

I brush a kiss across the pout of Zoe's lips and scratch Tris under the chin before leaving her in the company of her friends. Despite the firm lift of her chin, she looks so small and vulnerable among them, and I want nothing more than to pull her into the safety of my arms. But the ship needs searched and I don't trust anyone else here to do it.

The males surround the females. Drax and Bruke with their scanners out, survey the surroundings for any threats while Rooke keeps one eye on Slye and the other on the Kaul known as Qhix, a stunner pointed at his chest.

With my plasma gun leading the way, I walk up the ramp and into the spacecraft. The interior is dimly lit, with a soft glow emanating from the walls. The floor beneath my boots is smooth and polished, reflecting the light. The air carries a faint metallic scent, a testament to the advanced Thrushian technology that surrounds me, and a lingering hint of the Kaul.

As I move farther into the craft, my scales bristle, rippling down my back and across my shoulders. Every muscle in my body is tense and poised for action, even my tail is stiff and twitchy. My horns shifting forward in anticipation of a fight.

I cautiously make my way down a narrow corridor and onto the bridge, my eyes scanning every inch of the control room for any signs of movement. Silence hangs heavy in the air, broken only by the soft hum of machinery and the faint echo of my footsteps. I pull hard of the air yet my scentiastry glands don't detect anything beyond what I've already scented.

A control console dominates the center of the room with an intricate web of buttons, switches, and dials covering the surface with two chairs for the pilot and navigator mounted to the floor behind it.

The walls are lined with holographic screens, displaying various data and star maps, their vibrant colors dancing across every surface. My focus isn't on the advanced tech but the male-size wall compartments large enough for hiding.

I open and check each one only to find them empty except for the inner workings of the spacecraft. With the bridge cleared, I move to the back where a door leads to the crew quarters.

I pause and listen intently before proceeding. The ship seems to hold its breath, as if it too is aware of the gravity of the situation. I adjust the grip on my plasma gun, ready to blast anything that moves.

The first room I enter is a sleeping chamber. I do a quick search, checking inside every cabinet and compartment large enough to hold a male and find it empty.

I continue down the corridor and do the same to next two sleeping chambers and on to a galley. Functional with no frills, it holds only the essentials of a working spacecraft.

Disappointed there's not much in the way of food except a large supply of rations and cylinders of water. I'd been hoping for a meal replicator or a praksis filled with fresh meat held in stasis. Thrushians were known for their fondness of the finer things, but a cargo vessel is a far cry from a luxury cruiser.

The final sleeping quarters I search has obviously been occupied by the Kaul. His lingering scent is stronger here. After clearing the room of potential threats, I pause to heft the sack of tellic I find sitting on the bedside table in the palm of my hand. Whatever adventures this Star Maverick has seen have made him a very rich Kaul.

There's enough tellic in this sack to hyper-jump across the Universe several times over. The worlds where we can choose to settle are limitless. We can travel well outside the reach of Universeval Rule and keep the females safe from any roving Yulineon patrollers with orders to eliminate any off-world humans they find.

Scattered about the room are several chests. What I find inside more than makes up for my disappointment of the galley. There are enough weapons stashed inside to fight a war. I tuck a particularly intense laser blaster into my waistband.

Back out into the hall, I make my way to the last door finding the medic bay Slye so desperately needs. Equipped with the latest medical tech and supplies, the room is a relief to see after my search for potential threats. I quickly take note of the various diagnostic machines, and life support scanners before I head down the lift to the cargo hold in the belly of the

spacecraft.

Inside is a boxy hauler that runs on spiked, metal tracks in an otherwise empty hold. The conveyance is attached to the floor with heavy clamps. All this empty makes me wonder again what it was the Kaul was searching for inside the prison compound's storage room. What would have been inside to attract the attention of a Star Maverick rich with enough tellic to barter for most anything?

At the control podium, I trigger the exterior cargo door to extend. As it touches the ground, I'm hit with a wave of sultry heat courtesy of the bright orange sun followed by rich scents of Zune's flora.

I stroll down the ramp and into the cross hairs of Rooke's stunner. Palms up I smile into the expectant faces of the males and females I left waiting outside. "You can drop your weapon, space pirate. It's all clear and you won't believe what I found."

Zoe sprints toward me, launching herself into my arms. "I'm so glad you're okay."

I scoop her up, enveloping her in a fierce hug. Her curves melt into me as her arms and legs wrap around my neck and middle like a provuian constrictor. There's no place in the Universe I'd rather be than entwined in my mate's loving embrace.

Tris lets out a little squeak and leaps onto my head. Her miniature talons curling into my mane as she hangs on to me.

"There's a nano barrier inside the cargo hold we can use to keep the prisoners contained," I tell the males. When engaged, nanite particles will solidify to form a transparent wall. "The medic bay is well equipped to monitor Slye's vitals. Follow me and I'll show you where it is."

Rooke carries Slye up the cargo ramp and onto the lift where we ascend to the upper level, down the hall and into the medic bay. The pirate gets his second in command settled while I take the others on a tour of our newly acquired spacecraft.

Drax and Bruke drag the unconscious Kaul between them, leaving him tied up and lying in the hall with Bruke standing over his body with a stunner.

Without a doubt, even the slightest of movement from Qhix and Bruke will fire on him again.

"Take a look at the Kaul's weapons cache." I flip open the trunks filled with plasma guns and laser blasters.

Drax whistles low helping himself to a plasma gun. "There's enough fire power in here to outfit a fleet of Lita Comtras."

"Makes me wonder who he stole it from," I say.

"Who cares, now it all belongs to us." Drax picks through one of the trunks and pulls out a set of dilium metalliod shackles. "These are perfect to make sure the Star Maverick can't get free of his bonds. Dilium metalliod is indestructible. I'm going to go shackle him to the helm. We'll need him close by so we can use his biometric signature to fly this thing."

Drax exits the room with a purpose, dragging Qhix to the bridge and restraining him to the helm with the shackles while the females scatter, eagerly exploring every inch of the ship.

A flurry of activity ensues as Rooke, Drax, Bruke and myself haul in and unpack the many bags we brought with us from the lab. Before we know it, lockdown ends, and the luminetric barriers inside the prison dissolve, freeing the prisoners for another cycle of limited freedom.

While Rooke stands watch outside the sleeping quarters where the females are safely housed, Bruke, Drax, and I gather the prisoners as they file outside. All of us armed in case anyone gets any funny ideas about trying to steal our ship.

"Any who wish to travel to the space port on Elysis to begin a new life can make the journey in the hold," Drax presents the group with two options, and holds up the key to the confinement collars. "Or you can remain on Zune. Either choice, you'll be released from your confinement collars and given your freedom."

The prisoners shuffle forward, their eyes wide with anticipation as they approach the front of the line where Drax uses the key to unlock and free them of their collars.



This is the moment they've been waiting for, the chance to finally taste freedom after twenty rotations of confinement. Some can't contain their excitement and break into a run, eager to be among the first to board the Thrushian cargo hold and begin their journey to Elysis.

But not all are so quick to leave Zune behind. A handful choose to stay, content with their current surroundings. We respect their decision and share rations as well as a medical cuff, and other provisions before bidding them farewell.

With the nano barrier engaged, the prisoners choosing to leave are contained inside the cargo hold. They happily share rations and water cylinders while discussing their plans for when they arrive at the space port on Elysis.

"Time to go." I join Rooke and Drax standing on the end of the ramp.

"Had Truyn just hung on for a little longer, he would have finally tasted the freedom he longed for." Rooke gazes into the distance at a handful of graves.

"We both tried to save him from himself, but his mind was too far gone." Drax claps the space pirate on the back in a show of shared sorrow.

Having spent my cycles in solitary and then unexpectedly freed of my confinement collar after the guards deserted us, I didn't know Truyn, just as I was unfamiliar with most of my fellow inmates. Unlike me, these males had spent time with each other, formed bonds and friendships.

As my time on Zune draws to a close, I reflect on the unexpected experiences I've had here. I never would have imagined forming friendships with the males at my side, finding a mate, or adopting a furry companion. But now, as I prepare to leave this moon, I realize I am leaving with more than what I had when I arrived.

I follow Drax and Rooke up the ramp and onto the bridge where my lula awaits. Zoe greets me with a tender kiss before we claim our launch seats along the back wall with the others.

"Are you ready to go in search of a new home?" I gently squeeze Zoe's hand, savoring the warmth that radiates from her touch.

"You are my home, Mordox." Zoe beams at me, and I swear my lula's smile

could illuminate the entire Universe. I am filled with a sense of contentment and love that only she can evoke. In her presence, I feel whole and complete, like nothing else matters except for the two of us.

“And you are mine.”

Rooke takes a seat at the console, the Kaul shackled to the helm at his feet. Bruke takes the other, assuming the role of navigator while the space pirate's second in command, Slye recovers in the medic bay.

A buzz of excitement fills the air as Rooke scans Qhix's palm, the ship reading his biometric signature. The engines ignite in a soft vibration before powerful thrusters launch us off the surface of Zune and into the vast expanse of space toward our first stop, Elysis to deliver the males in the cargo hold eager to enjoy their newfound freedom.

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# EPILOGUE

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## Zoe

TIME SEEMS to speed by as we built a home on Crao. The planet on the far reaches of the known Universe bore many similarities to Earth with blue skies and crystal-clear lakes yet, there are stark differences. The trees have vibrant purple leaves and the lakes glow with a soft green light. The air is different too, infused with a sweet scent that reminds me of wildflowers.

The wildlife on Crao is unlike anything I've ever seen, creatures with iridescent scales and wings that shimmered in various hues. It feels like we are living in a dream, far removed from the chaos and danger we experienced on Zune.

On this ethereal planet, our group of five Ziarian males and five human girls have chosen to build a new life together. We spread out along the serene banks of a stunning lake, building simple homes with thatched roofs.

The mated couples like me and Mordox share a dwelling as well as Romy and Tasha. The single males, Bruke and Slye each have their own house.

Slye had fully recovered from his injury. We all figured once Drax had stopped cockblocking the flirtatious couple, they would have hooked up. But to everyone's surprise, Tasha has lost interest in bedding the blue-haired male though they remain friendly toward each other.

It's rained for the last few days, chasing us all indoors. But today, the sun is shining, and we are planning a group picnic on the lake's edge.

Tris hops onto my shoulder as I gather the basket with all the delicious treats

we've prepared. Outside our home, the trees sway gently in the breeze, their purple leaves rustling harmoniously. Our plucky companion always sticks close to us, unsure of her surroundings.

Mordox, ever the protective mate, walks by my side, his sharp eyes scanning the surroundings for any sign of danger. Our bond has only grown stronger since leaving Zune, and I find solace in his presence.

As we make our way to the designated picnic spot, Romy and Tasha are already there, lounging on a blanket and chatting animatedly. Romy's purple hair, now fading to a dark blonde from lack of L'Oreal's Power Violet 48, shimmers golden tones in the sunlight. She catches sight of us and waves us over, her smile infectious.

Mordox unfurls an expansive blanket we found on the Thrushian vessel that brought us here, and we plop down on a plush patch of grass next to the giggling girls. Rooke and Darcy saunter over, their steps confident and carefree, while Drax and Stacy amble behind. Bruke and Slye eventually make their way to our circle, filling the air with witty jabs and good-natured teasing.

The males take charge of setting up a small fire pit nearby, preparing to grill some fresh fish caught from the lake while we girls lounge and chat.

"I still can't believe we're living on another planet," Darcy says lying on her back and gazing up into the cloudless sky. "We're like interstellar pioneers."

"I know, right," I laugh, reaching up to scratch Tris behind her ear. "Not that I'm complaining, but I do miss the food. Nothing here compares to a good Earth burger."

"I miss my family and friends," Tasha sighs longingly. "Now that everything has calmed down and we're not constantly worried about being killed by scary lab creatures, my thoughts are consumed with the people I'll never see again."

"Is that why you've changed your mind about Slye?" Stacy whispers so the males cooking nearby don't hear. "Drax is no longer standing in your way if he's who you want to share your bed with."

"No." Tasha sits up from where she's lounged and pushes bright red hair from

her face. "At least, I don't think so. Ever since we left Zune something's been off with me. I know I sat at Slye's bedside while he healed, but my initial attraction has burned out. You know when you have a crush, but then you meet someone else who captivates your heart? You still like the crush, but no longer see him in a romantic light?"

"Your heart hasn't been captivated by Bruke, has it?" Romy eyes her warily.

"Good lord, no, Roms." Tasha swats at her friend. "He's all yours."

Our group falls silent, each of us with mates wondering who Tasha is pining after.

Tasha rolls her eyes and groans. "Before any of you start asking, I promise I haven't fallen for any of the guys, mated or not. I don't know what's wrong with me. Maybe I'm just sad because I'm the only one here who doesn't have a fated mate."

"Bruke is not my fated mate," Romy utters.

"Bitch please," Tasha good-naturedly scoffs. "Any time you get within a foot of the guy, his pheromones go haywire."

My heart breaks for her and I'm flooded with guilt over my good fortune with finding my perfect mate in Mordox. It isn't fair that I should be so happy while she's obviously lonely.

I'm first to wrap my arms around Tasha before she's enveloped in a flurry of hugs and reassurances, with each of us promising that everything will be okay.

"We still have the Thrushian spacecraft at our disposal, and an entire Universe full of males just waiting to meet a gorgeous redheaded human," Stacy reminds her. "We aren't permanently stuck on Crao. I'll bet Rooke would fly us to any planet we want."

"Yeah," Darcy says brightly. "There's tons of planets out there. I'll bet there's one that's populated and safe for us to visit."

"Like going on vacation." Stacy nods.

"I'm sure you're right," Tasha smiles and stands. "Thanks for the pep talk

girls, I feel better all ready."

"Where you going?" Stacy asks as Tasha starts to walk away.

"Oh, I forgot I left something on the ship." She turns back to us as she walks.  
"I'll be right back."

"Okay, but be careful around that Qhix guy," Stacy calls back.

"He's still knocked out from Bruke's recent stunning when they stopped him from destroying the hauler in the cargo hold. Besides, he's trapped behind a transparent wall." Tasha gives us a thumbs up and winks as she hurries off. We fall silent, watching the males cooking nearby.

"*Scheisse!*" Romy suddenly curses a few minutes after Tasha disappears into the Thrushian craft. "You don't think she's fallen for the Kaul, do you?"

Alarmed expressions dart between us as Tasha's blood-curdling scream tears through the peaceful atmosphere. The males abandon their cooking and rush toward the Thrushian spacecraft, sprinting at full speed as the ramp closes and the engines roar to life.

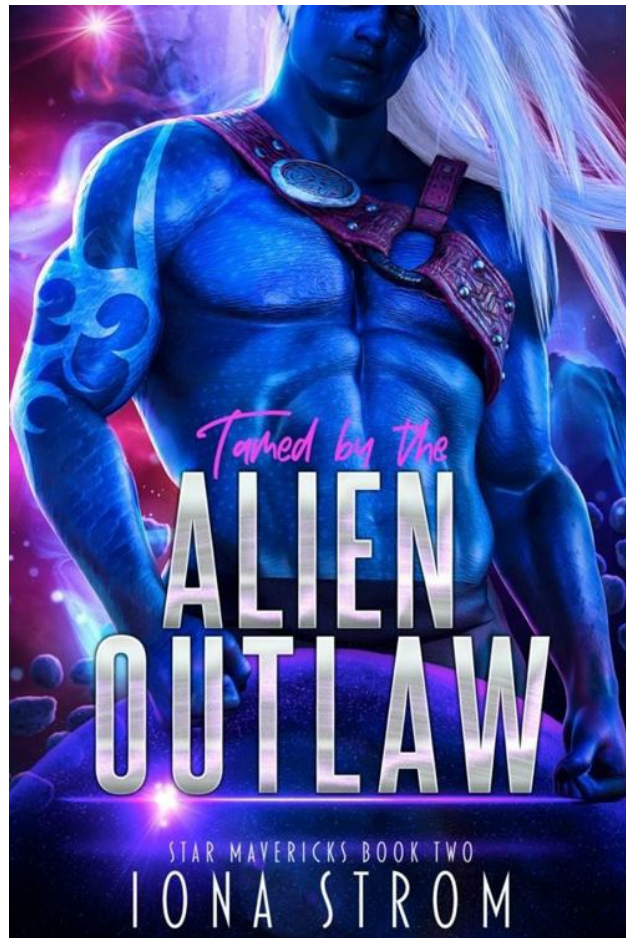
Thrusters ignite, blowing the males off their feet. The spacecraft rockets into the sky, stealing Tasha away from us.

**Don't despair for Tasha's well-being! Her story is told in  
*Tamed by the Alien Outlaw (Star Mavericks Book 2)***

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**SNEAK PEEK!**

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[AMAZON!](#)

My trip to Zune is meant as only a quick stop on my way to Natari 5 where bigger treasures await my plundering. The prison moon is where I know for



certain I can obtain a medical cuff to replace the one I gifted Navik and his pregnant mate Cora.

Returning to the scene of one of my many thefts, I didn't plan on staying long. Didn't plan on many things like being captured by escaped Ziarian prisoners or the human female who breathed life into my beast.

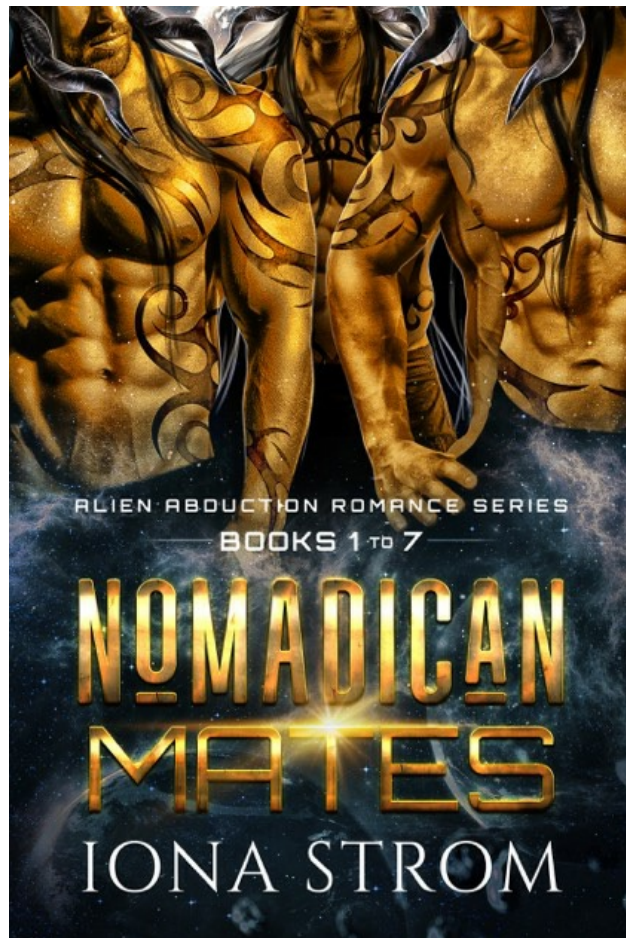
My body surges and swells with new life. My hands curl into fists. Claws extend, long and sharp as daggers. I lick the tip of one fang and grin. I won't be locked up much longer. Thanks to *her*.

**Author Note:** *Star Mavericks* series is similar to a reverse harem or why choose romance with an alpha male who can morph into a beast. You've been warned.

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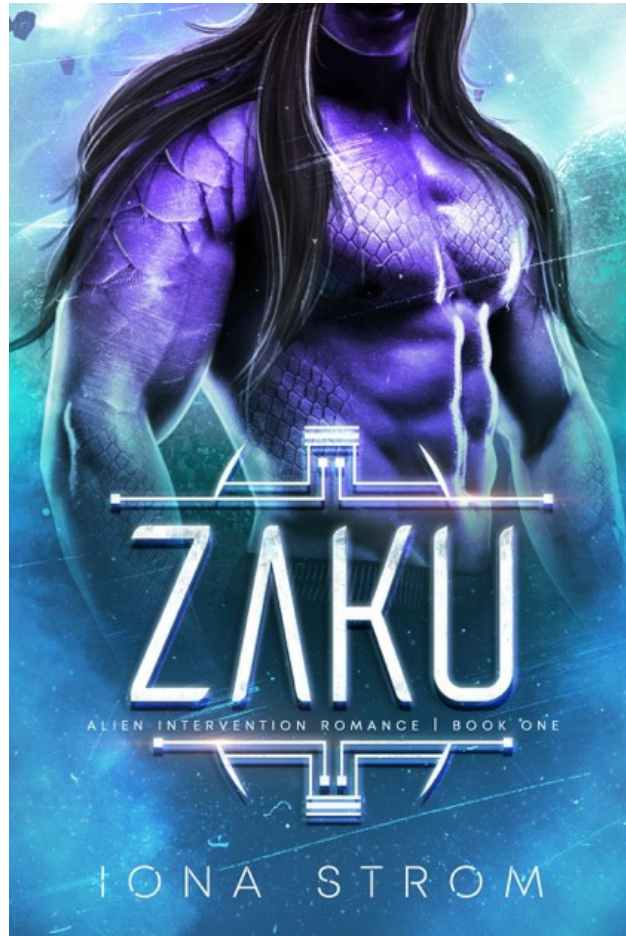
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**Iona Strom** writes for readers who love hot and endearing romances featuring exotic alien males who fall hard for their human mates.

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