



Taken by the
ALIEN ROGUE

FATED MATES OF THE ZAARN

KRISTA LUNA

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BOOK TWO

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OceanofPDF.com

Taken by the Alien Rogue
A Sci Fi Alien Warrior Romance
Fated Mates of the Zaarn Book Two

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CONTENTS

DESCRIPTION

CHAPTER ONE | HAZEL

CHAPTER TWO | KIREL

CHAPTER THREE | HAZEL

CHAPTER FOUR | KIREL

CHAPTER FIVE | HAZEL

CHAPTER SIX | KIREL

CHAPTER SEVEN | HAZEL

CHAPTER EIGHT | KIREL

CHAPTER NINE | HAZEL

CHAPTER TEN | KIREL

CHAPTER ELEVEN | HAZEL

CHAPTER TWELVE | KIREL

CHAPTER THIRTEEN | HAZEL

CHAPTER FOURTEEN | KIREL

CHAPTER FIFTEEN | HAZEL

CHAPTER SIXTEEN | KIREL

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN | HAZEL

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN | KIREL

[CHAPTER NINETEEN | HAZEL](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY | KIREL](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE | HAZEL](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO | KIREL](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE | HAZEL](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR | KIREL](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE | HAZEL](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX | KIREL](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN | HAZEL](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT | KIREL](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE | HAZEL](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY | KIREL](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE | HAZEL](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO | KIREL](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE | HAZEL](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

DESCRIPTION

The charming blue alien says I'm his. It's got to be some kind of line. But how can I resist him... or his wicked tail?

HAZEL

I get lucky when horned blue aliens rescue me straight from cryo. So when I get the chance to use my communications skills to help save other human women, I jump on it.

It's perfect. Except for *him*.

Of all the handsome devils, why did I get stuck alone on a mission with a heartbreaker? Especially one who keeps losing his shirt and carrying me everywhere.

Kirel is all smooth talk and easy charm. He claims I'm his fated mate. But I refuse to be fooled by a handsome face again, no matter how tempting his whole... package.

KIREL

I never met a computer system I couldn't hack or a female I couldn't tempt for a fling. But without a fated mate, all of it was flimsy and fleeting.

Until *her*. My soul's breath. The one destined to be mine forever.

Hay-Zul is the puzzle I can't figure out and the one I'm the most desperate to solve. I ache for her and her lush curves. When we go undercover to find more Hyoo-mon females, we pretend to be fated mates. But it's not fake, and I'll prove it to her.

Then I'll take her as mine.

Taken by the Alien Rogue is a steamy alien romance featuring a dashing alien mercenary who hides his heart behind charm and a curvy heroine who

needs to learn to trust again. Strap in for a fun ride filled with adventure, toe-curling steam, and a heartfelt HEA.

Author's Note: I write fun and spicy stories full of consent and adventure, and I don't wish to cause distress. Please note this story contains the following potential triggers: Fighting Bad Guys, Stun Guns, Strong Language, A Dirty Talking Male, Explicit Intimate Scenes, Horn Steering, P-Stretching Fluids, Size Difference, Tail Play, Heat, and Knotting.

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CHAPTER ONE



Hazel

I BIT MY lower lip and tried not to fidget. The only human with a translator chip had disappeared into the shuttle’s airlock with a promise to return “as soon as possible.” That had been ten minutes ago, which was about five minutes too long.

Cara had been the one to wake me from cryosleep when she’d helped rescue me from some bad aliens a couple of days ago. It hadn’t been clear exactly how comforting it was to have her around... until she wasn’t.

“When’s she coming back?” Mollie asked for the second time. It was rhetorical—she knew I didn’t know any more than she did. The small black woman bounced on her toes, her pretty features twisting into a grimace. “Sorry. I really hate having nothing to do.”

I nodded. Compared to the energetic pilot, I normally had the chill of a yoga teacher. It went hand in hand with being a linguist and a comms

specialist. I'd spent years patiently parsing through reams of data, listening to other people, and taking the time to tease out the patterns in their speech.

As long as their language had *something* I could hook onto. It turned out all my training worked fairly well when applied to human languages.

Alien? Not so much.

Oh, I'm sure I was ahead of where any non-linguist would be after being holed up in a cramped shuttle with three aliens, but it still grated that I hadn't made more progress.

So I shared all of Mollie's frustration when I said, "Don't worry. I get it."

She shot me a quick smile, her big eyes brightening. Built short and wiry, she had boundless energy, and kept the thick curls of her dark hair really short to make it easy to get in and out of helmets. It also showed off the beauty of her expressive face.

A whoosh of air from the opening cockpit door blew a piece of wavy blonde hair into my eyes. I shoved it behind an ear.

The whisper of rustling cloth came from behind me, and I kept myself from turning as the most gorgeous male in the galaxy strode into the shuttle's main cabin.

Kirel was seven-feet tall and built like an Olympic athlete in his prime, wide shoulders tapering to a trim waist and long legs. His tail arced up his back, the triangular tip held close to his shoulder. He moved with a fluid grace, silent as a big cat. But he was no cat alien. No, Kirel was pure demon.

He spun around and crossed his arms across his wide chest as he leaned against the light-blue wall. It was the only color used anywhere in the shuttle. Did the Zaarn love blue because so much of their skin was blue and it was a favorite color? Or did they do it because it made the perfect backdrop for their gorgeously colored skin?

Because it worked. Kirel's face and hands were a rich blue with an iridescent shimmer to it that made them even lovelier. Cara, who had mated a Zaarn called Gravin, had hinted their skin changed to a range of colors underneath their clothes. I hated how I thought of that every single time I saw Kirel. And since we'd been shoved into this cramped shuttle for the past few days, I'd been thinking about it a lot.

Too damned much.

He wore black work pants and heavy boots. His long-sleeved T-shirt

stretched tight, showing off his muscles. Kirel was supposed to be a computer geek, but he was about as far from the human stereotype as you could get.

His midnight-black hair was a true black that threw off blue and purple highlights. Two sets of dark-purple horns framed his face, one curving down around the sides and the other standing upright.

And his face... Kirel's looks blew right past handsome and landed somewhere between masculine beauty and perfection. Sharp, chiseled features, high cheekbones, and a gorgeous mouth all topped by deep-purple eyes. If he'd walked down a street in New York City, he'd have been mobbed by a mix of teen girls and talent scouts ready to cast him as the next Hollywood superstar.

If Earth even has any of that anymore. My lips twisted. Earth had been a mess back when I'd left in 2123—too crowded, too hot, too little food. It was the reason I'd agreed to be frozen like a human popsicle and shipped across the galaxy, ready to be thawed out to start fresh on a new world.

Another Zaarn stalked out of the cockpit and came to a halt next to Mollie. Sul loomed over her, the largest of the aliens I'd seen so far. Handsome in a square-jawed kind of way, he was a lot more easygoing than the quiet Kirel or the grumpy Gravin.

Sul said something, his voice full of amusement, and grinned widely.

Kirel smiled back, and my heart gave a traitorous skip. The damned demon alien was too fine for his own good, and that smile pushed him straight into lady-killer territory. And in my experience, guys that good-looking were always players you couldn't trust. Then Kirel's gaze returned to me, and the smile fell from his face. He laughed and joked with the other males and even Cara, but as soon as I got near him, he clammed up.

A tiny part of me hoped he was different from my last boyfriend, Derek. Kirel had been so quiet and serious around me, and he was supposed to be some kind of computer wiz. Could he be one of those guys who truly didn't know how handsome he was? Could the way he watched me mean something? Something real? I hated the traitorous little skip my heart gave at the thought of such hope.

Maybe once I got my translator chip, I'd ask him. If I ever saw him again.

We'd finally docked with the big Zaarn ship, the *Daredevil*. It looked big enough you could keep away from someone you didn't want to see. As soon

as Cara worked things out with the captain, we'd be off this small shuttle and Kirel wouldn't have to interact with me ever again.

Why did that bother me so much? And why did he make my chest feel weird? I rubbed at the offending spot.

His handheld computer beeped, and he pulled it from his pocket to check the message. Then he opened the inner hatch of the airlock and waved me inside.

"Oh!" Mollie took a half step forward, then froze. "Am I going, too?"

I reached out to loop my arm with hers. "You are now."

We both wore the white cryo onesies we'd woken up in a few days ago and little slipper shoes so lame they barely deserved the name. The thin material stretched tight over my boobs, thighs, and tummy. I was healthy and had passed all the fitness requirements the Ark Program required, but I was a big girl.

The males had offered us some of their clothes, and we'd worn a couple of their shirts like dresses while in flight. But neither of us had wanted to meet a shipful of unknown males *not* fully dressed.

Kirel and Sul pushed into the small room of the airlock after us, and the herby masculine scent of them saturated the air. They were both careful not to touch us, but their presence filled the room until my body vibrated with an awareness of them.

Stop lying to yourself. It's an awareness of Kirel, and you know it.

Irritation ate at me. I didn't want to be so attracted to him, but I couldn't help it. I'd never been the type to go goo-goo-eyed over a movie star as a teen, and my one encounter with a gorgeous guy had been enough to last a lifetime. But something about this guy got under my skin.

The males grabbed their guns from racks mounted on the wall and shoved them into holsters. As a peacekeeper trained in weapons, Cara had given us a mini-lesson. They shot energy bolts and had a stun setting, so you could knock someone out without hurting them. That sounded good. I didn't know much about guns, but ones that were nonlethal seemed a lot better than the kind we'd had on Earth.

Kirel also picked up a matched pair of short sticks about as long as his forearms and slid them into special pockets on the outside of his thighs.

These guys came by all that muscle honestly. No matter what job they had on the *Daredevil*, they were mercenaries and warriors, every one of them

able to fight.

My stomach twisted as worries about the future assaulted me. What job would I have in this new world? Cara could fight alongside the males, and Mollie was a pilot. But me? I was a linguist who'd landed in the middle of a bunch of aliens with translator chips, so I'd have sweet FA to do.

Thankfully, I'd done a second major in communications to have more options. It had gotten me my spot in the ARK Program. All the experts on Earth had said our cryoship would find an empty planet, not a bunch of aliens, so linguistics hadn't been considered necessary for the mission. Doing comms meant I'd had a purpose when *ARK 1* finished its journey. I'd help set up the satellite communication system on the new planet that would allow our new towns to stay in touch and help each other.

I lost all of that the day the big gray aliens called the Grug stole me from my ship.

What did I have now?

Maybe being good at comms would give me a place here, too. I had to hope. Because if Earth had taught me one thing, it was that if those in power didn't find you "useful," you didn't have a good time of it.

The outer hatch opened on a huge, brightly lit shuttle bay. There were other small ships, and Mollie's head swiveled as she tried to take them all in. But I couldn't tear my eyes away from the crowd of Zaarn males waiting at the bottom of the shuttle's ramp.

Holy crap! It had been one thing to think about there being more of the hunky aliens. It was a hell of a different thing to see them.

At first glance, they were all tall, blue, horned. With a bunch of them together, they melded into an imposing mass of muscle. Closer up, defining characteristics became clearer. Although all of their faces were blue, they had distinct facial features. The colors of their hands varied, some blue, some teal, and some purple. There were also differences in their tails. All of the waiting males had blue tail tips, while the three I knew had purple.

I took a step down the ramp, and a hand landed on my shoulder, pulling me to a halt. Mollie's arm slipped from mine.

A frisson of electricity shot through me, so powerful I gave a startled squeak. I knew who it was even before I spun to find Kirel standing right behind me, closer than he'd gotten in days. He'd shifted his grip so I could turn, but his fingers still held my shoulder. Instead of looking at me, he stared

at the waiting males, a silent snarl curling his lips up enough to expose his fangs. His body thrummed with tension.

What the bippity hell? Is he... jealous?

After being so quiet around me for the past few days, why had he gone all caveman now?

Sul had hold of Mollie in a similar way, only his snarl wasn't silent. A low growl vibrated through the air.

Gravin's voice snapped something sharp and angry, and Kirel shook himself out of his daze and looked down at me. He pulled his hand back as if I'd burned him.

And damned if his touch hadn't burned me, leaving me flustered, my shoulder tingling.

"Come on," Cara called out. "Let's go get your translator chips."

"Not a damned moment too soon," I said. The linguist in me was so tired of not being able to understand the Zaarn language. I also hated not knowing what was going on, what life would be like on this ship, or what my place would be in this new world.

But mostly, I wanted to be able to talk to the gorgeous and confusing male standing in front of me.

CHAPTER TWO



Kirel

I HAD TO force myself to let go of Hay-Zul, even after Gravin's sharp reminder that she hadn't given me permission to touch her.

By the Goddess! I hated the wary look in her beautiful blue eyes as she stared at me, the way her lips twisted. Her light hair surrounded her lovely face in a blaze of gold, and a scattering of darker dots colored her pale skin.

I wanted nothing more than to touch them... to touch her. Her lush hips and beautifully full breasts, her rounded stomach—my Hay-Zul was built tempting and strong, and I couldn't wait to explore every inch.

The mating pull drove me, demanding I take her. My forehead tingled with the special awareness of her. The tip of my tail vibrated, my kron ready to start the mating heat. My body didn't care that we couldn't talk to one another, that I couldn't give her my mating vow. My body didn't care that she was Hyoo-mon and didn't feel the mating pull like mine did.

It wanted my fated mate.

The last few days had been excruciating, being so near her, yet unable to speak. Maybe if we'd been able to be alone, we could have attempted some form of communication, but being surrounded by others had made all of our pantomimed conversations awkward.

And all too often, we'd called for Car-Raa to translate, which limited the topics I was willing to cover via an interpreter. "I want you to straddle my face until I make you see stars" wasn't exactly a pickup line that worked unless it could be said directly, preferably by purring it into the female's ear.

Car-Raa called out to Hay-Zul about getting a translator chip, and my fated mate turned from me.

Yes! I couldn't wait to be able to talk to her. That had always been my specialty, talking to females, my quick tongue clever enough to charm. But none of them had ever mattered. Not until Hay-Zul.

Finding my mate but being unable to speak to her had felt like missing a chunk of myself.

I would make up for it. As soon as she could understand me, I would use all my words, all my charm. She would be mine in only a few minutes.

I stayed close behind her as the crew opened an aisle down their middle. Captain Wrin stood at the front, his hard face set into serious lines. As tall as Sul, he carried a little less bulk, but you didn't really notice since he had an impressive aura of command. Even in the normal work pants, long-sleeved shirt, and heavy boots all of us wore, there was something about him that stood out.

A good ten years older, he had seniority on most of the crew without having lost any of his edge. Although we had elders on board who specialized in training the new recruits, the captain of the *Daredevil* needed to be fighting fit. It had been Wrin as long as I'd been a Daredevil.

Gravin waited beside him. My friend wore his typical scowl as all of the males on the ship paid attention to the Hyoo-mon females, including his mate, Car-Raa. She waved us forward, her easy smile full of a warmth that lit her pretty, tan face, framed by straight black hair. A little bit taller than the other humans, she was still shorter than any of the males surrounding her—even without the added height of their upper horns. She had the lean muscle of a fighter who relied on speed instead of raw strength.

She also lacked the alluring curves of my Hay-Zul, the ones that made

my hands itch to touch and stroke.

The shuttle bay might have been the largest room on the *Daredevil*, but you'd never know it by how close everyone stood, creating two solid walls of Zaarn that we walked through.

These males were my brothers in arms. I'd die for them.

But having them so close to Hay-Zul, when the two of us hadn't completed the mating bond, drove me insane.

Sul stalked behind Mol-Lee. His fated mate was the smallest of the humans, short and thin, with dark-brown skin and short dark hair that curled tightly. My friend loomed over her, an aura of menace boiling off his large frame. Brutal when fighting enemies, he was usually an easy-going male when among friends, so he was feeling the same over protectiveness as me. Gravin had gone through it, too, the first time we met Car-Raa.

Knowing all of this did nothing to stop the growl growing in my chest as Raxnor stepped closer to Hay-Zul, a look of fascination covering his blue face. One of our more experienced fighters, he'd lost his typical cool and assessing nature. He reached for a lock of my mate's sunshiny hair, and I knocked his hand away.

His eyes snapped to mine, his expression hardening. Then his gaze slid sideways to where my tail hovered above my shoulder, the kron purple. He dipped his chin in the faintest of nods and dropped his arm, letting us pass.

As possessive as I felt, I also understood their fascination. The entire crew were males who'd been banished from our home world for not finding a fated mate. These Hyoo-mons offered the first glimpse of a happiness none of us ever thought to find.

While none of the Hyoo-mons I'd seen so far were blue, the variations in shades of skin, hair, and eye colors were intriguing. Especially when combined with bodies so like a Zaarn. Sure, they were smaller and lacked a tail and horns, but they had skin and hair instead of scales or feathers. Skin I longed to touch. My hand twitched toward Hay-Zul.

"Let them through," Wrin called out, his deep voice carrying the snap of command.

Everyone fell back half a step. It wasn't enough—until I knotted and completed the mating bond with Hay-Zul, *nothing* would be enough—but it was better.

We made it to the shuttle bay's inner hatch and out into the main corridor

of the *Daredevil*'s lowest deck. Once past the doors to training rooms and engineering, we reached the elevator. The doors slid open, and the three females stepped inside, followed by the three of us who were their fated mates. Space Kitty broke off from exploring the hallway. The bright-pink kreecat darted into the elevator with a mrrr and wound around Cara's calves.

The rest of the crew had followed us into the corridor, and the mass of bodies stirred as someone pushed to the front—Sron, our medic. "Can't get it done without me!" He grinned, his friendly manner coming through, even though he was a battlefield medic as trained in fighting as the rest of us.

As everyone jostled to make room, Sul used his bulk to shield Mol-Lee, where she stood near the wall.

Hay-Zul's arm brushed mine in a lick of warmth that shot through me with awareness, and her sweet scent teased me. My kron began to vibrate, and I had to hold my tail back to keep it from reaching for her. It wouldn't be long now. Translator chips took only a moment to inject.

The elevator moved up only one floor to the crew deck, which held the mess hall, medbay, and all of our personal cabins.

Sron stepped out into the wide main corridor and turned immediately to the right. The medbay was close to the elevator, so we didn't have to move people far in an emergency. He tapped the control panel, and the door whooshed open on a bright-white room with the back sectioned into smaller spaces with medbeds.

"Go ahead and pick a cubicle." Sron waved toward the little rooms at the back, and Car-Raa repeated the instructions for the other two Hyoo-mons.

Sul and I tried to follow our mates into the small spaces, but Car-Raa stopped us both. "A girl likes a bit of privacy during medical things."

"It's just a translator chip... it's nothing."

Her expression firmed, and she stood even straighter as she waved the women inside and let them each shut their door.

Gravin grunted. "There's no arguing with her. She takes her duty as protector seriously."

"As if you'd argue with her anyway," Sul teased.

Gravin cracked an unusual grin. "You're right—I wouldn't." It was good to see. Dependable and a good strategist, Gravin had been a bit surly for as long as I'd known him. He was one of my best friends, and to see him happy now that he had a mate was a joy.

A joy I wanted for myself.

Sron edged past us and approached Hay-Zul's door. Car-Raa called out that they were coming in. A murmur of voices came from inside, and then the door opened again, and Car-Raa and Sron headed for Mol-Lee's cubicle, Gravin and Sul following.

I moved closer, my heart beating with excitement. My mate was only a few feet away, finally able to understand me.

Hay-Zul stepped out of the medbay cubicle. "Are you going to let me past?"

"You can speak."

Her blue eyes narrowed. "I could always speak. You just couldn't understand me."

"You're parsing my words." My lips twitched.

"No, I'm being precise." She gave a one-shouldered shrug. "I'm a linguist. Language is kind of my thing."

I grinned. This kreecat had claws—and smarts. I liked it.

"I can understand you now," I said. Which meant she could understand me, too. I didn't have to wait any longer to give her my mating vow.

The purple tip of my tail buzzed and darted forward, like it had longed to do these past few days. I let it slide up her arm. Her human clothes did little to hide her generous curves from view, but the thin white fabric would protect her from the heat-inducing fluids my tail made when it vibrated for her.

"Hey!" She jerked away, taking a step back. "What do you think you're doing?"

"You are my fated mate." I held my tail upright in the air between us. "My kron activated for you."

Her eyes latched onto the buzzing tip of my tail in fascination, and she bit at her lower lip, her white teeth teasing it to redness. Then her expression hardened, and she gave a quick shake of her head. "So you've got a built-in vibration toy. Good for you. But I don't see what that has to do with me."

I took a step closer and dropped my voice. "Not just good for me. Good for you, too." Without a fated mate, I'd never experienced the heightened pleasure of the mating heat and knot. But the stories all promised the best sex of my life—and hers. "I will be able to bring you to your peak over and over, as many times as you desire."

Her mouth fell open, and bright pink flushed her cheeks. It was fascinating. Even though the skin color of individual Hyoo-mons varied, I'd thought each female only had one tone across her entire body. What other colors could my lovely Hay-Zul turn? And what would I need to do to cause it?

"You can't say things like that! We only just met."

"We met three days, four hours, and twenty-nine minutes ago," I said.

Our shuttle had cleared the asteroid field, and I'd finally been able to leave it hovering in place and go help.

Car-Raa tended to Gravin in the airlock, their spacesuited forms just visible through the open hatch.

Sul crouched over a bright-yellow portable atmospheric bubble on the floor of the main cabin, opening it to free Mol-Lee.

Another of the bags lay on the deck, and an unusual tingling in my rulaa hurried my steps forward. My body seemed to move without clear signals from my busy brain, which had shut up for the first time in years. I crouched and reached for the seal. Excitement thrummed in my veins. *It can't be!*

Even knowing Gravin had found his fated mate among the Hyoo-mons hadn't prepared me for the reality that I might, too. Especially so soon.

The bright-yellow bag parted, revealing wavy hair almost the same color. Startled blue eyes looked at me from a pretty, round face with light skin sprinkled with brown dots. "Hoo rrr yoo?" Her fingers tapped at my spacesuit's helmet, set to opaque so my blue face and horns wouldn't scare her.

The tingling in my forehead intensified. The extra sense organs let Zaarn know when others were around, but this felt like nothing I'd ever sensed before. My kron vibrated against my side, where I'd wrapped my tail around my waist to fit into my spacesuit. I didn't need to see it to know what had happened. The tip of my tail, blue my entire life, had turned purple.

She is my soul's breath! My fated mate!

The thrill of it still echoed through my body as those blue eyes met mine now. "How do you know exactly how long it's been?" Hay-Zul asked.

"How can I ever forget the most important moment of my life?" I'd always thought it would be when I'd been banished from my home world at twenty because I didn't have a fated mate. I'd been wrong. This new, happy memory obliterated that painful experience.

“You are the one gifted to me by the Goddess.” My kron gave another insistent buzz, as if to prove my point, and the vibration traveled down the length of my tail, through my balls, and swelled my cock to aching painfulness.

The mating pull had me. I’d never wanted a female this much before. All the frustration of the past days burst from me. “I will give you my mating vow, and we will go to my cabin and finalize our mating bond with the heat and knot.”

“Sex?” she sputtered. “You mean sex right *now*?”

I grinned, letting my tongue play over my fangs. “The best sex.”

CHAPTER THREE



Hazel

“FUCK ME!” NORMALLY, I tried to keep my cool, but this male got under my skin—way under. His words had me wet and aching. I was more turned on by a couple sentences from him than an hour of foreplay with a human guy—not that there’d been any willing to do foreplay for that long.

Kirel smiled widely, becoming even more handsome as his eyes lit with wicked glee. His tongue played over his fangs, suggesting naughty delights. That look should have been illegal.

“Yes,” he purred, though how the bippity hell you purred a word without any Rs beat me. “That’s exactly what I’m proposing.”

Where had the serious computer geek gone? The one who watched me with careful eyes that made me wonder if there could be something real between us? This male standing in front of me was nothing but smooth charm. Too smooth, like someone who’d worked out his lines by practicing

them on lots of women. And the last time I let a handsome guy sweet talk me into his bed, I found out I was nothing but the “backup bitch.”

Derek’s mocking laughter filled my ears.

No. Not again. *Never* again.

What did this Zaarn “mating” thing even mean? Cara had given me the highlights of how it had worked for her and Gravin, but even she hadn’t been completely sure of the specifics of how the males chose.

From everything Cara had told me and the crowd of Zaarn who’d greeted us, there weren’t any females around but the three of us. Cara was mated, so that left me and Mollie. The big bruiser, Sul, hovered over Mollie 24/7, so it was down to me. Kirel didn’t want *me*. I was simply his only option right now. Like Derek, he’d drop me the moment someone more beautiful came along, someone thinner.

Kirel stepped closer, reaching for me.

“No!” I threw up my hands, palms out. I didn’t know if I wanted to push him away or feel up that magnificent chest, and the confusion irritated. I dodged past him and into the corridor. Even if I didn’t know where I was going, I had to get away. My head ached from having the translator chip put in, and an unusual anger burned in my gut. None of this was like me—I’d always been the mousy go-along girl in my group. But in the past few days, my entire life had been turned upside down. I’d been taken from *ARK 1* against my will and woken to aliens and missing ships and all kinds of shit.

Then this male tried to put the moves on me! He’d even used some kind of line about mates, which is how the Zaarn talked about marriage. Not that marriage was sacrosanct or anything—just look at Mom and Dad.

And to top it off, my traitorous body wanted him! *Bad body!*

I didn’t even know who I was angrier at—him or me. Him for being so tempting, and me for being so tempted, when I knew he offered me nothing long term but heartache.

The gray aliens. This is all their fault. They’re who I should be angry with. Cara had told me all about them, but they were little more than a picture on a computer screen—I hadn’t actually seen one in person. So it was a lot easier to be angry at Mr. Suave, who was right here trying to charm me, just like Derek had when he’d wanted help writing essays.

I kept walking, the light-blue corridor lined with door after door. There were symbols on the control panels that opened them, but I couldn’t read a

thing. Cara had warned me about this—that translator chips only worked on spoken language—but it was still frustrating as hell.

Kirel strode past me, his long legs making easy work of it, and slapped his palm to the wall, his arm barring me from continuing forward. The door slid open on a personal room with more of the light blue walls that were everywhere. There was a patterned quilt on the bed and photographs on the walls, giving the room a lived-in feel. It wasn't very large, which only made the bed stand out more.

“What is this?”

“My cabin.” He grinned. “*Our* cabin. You headed right for it.”

I huffed. “I didn't know it was here.”

He opened his mouth, ready to try another line, but a soft beep from inside the cabin jerked his attention away.

A small shape jumped up from the floor and ran for Kirel, yipping with excitement. It moved so quickly at first I couldn't get a clear look, so I thought it was a lavender puppy. When it finally stilled, its front paws rested on one of Kirel's boots as it looked up at him with glowing purple eyes. Its color wasn't from fur but metal.

“It's a robot!”

Kirel crouched and swept the puppy up into his arms. “He's called Vree. He's named after the mirol pup I had when I left my home world.” A flicker of sadness crossed his face—the first authentic emotion I'd seen from him since he started trying to charm me.

The puppy nuzzled his chin, and Kirel laughed, a warm chuckle that set my tummy fluttering. This was the more genuine sound he made when with friends.

It didn't look exactly like any Earth dog I'd ever seen, but why would it? Just like Space Kitty was larger than most pet cats, Vree was thicker through the shoulders than the one dog I'd ever petted.

Dad had gotten a job one summer working for a billionaire and had taken me along to their estate on a day when the family had been away. They'd had a garden, an actual green space owned privately by only a few people. It had been unheard of in 2114. And there'd been a dog. Regular people didn't have pets anymore. You had to be rich to afford the extra food and the special license. He'd barreled toward us across the grass, barking and wagging a tail of long hair. Sparky had been quivering excitement wrapped in golden fur.

Even though I'd only spent one afternoon with him, I couldn't imagine leaving behind such a pet.

"You had to leave him, the original Vree?" I asked.

"A real mirol pup wouldn't be safe living on a ship. They're not telepathic like a kreecat. You can't tell them there's danger and to get into their crate for safety."

The robot looked up at me. "I'm smarter!"

I gasped. "He talks!"

Kirel's lips twitched, and he gave the head an affectionate pat. "It seemed a good upgrade."

Vree jumped down and ran in circles around our legs. "I'm smart. I'm smart. I'm smart!"

A laugh burst from me. "You programmed him to do that?"

"No. I gave him all the normal behavior of a mirol pup, but I also built in the ability for him to learn and grow on his own."

I gaped at him. "You're trying to make him sentient?" Artificial intelligence—*true* artificial intelligence—had been something humanity had still been striving for when I left Earth in 2123. None of the tech I'd seen since I woke indicated the Zaarn had it either.

"Hopefully, some day." Kirel gazed down at the tiny robot with an affectionate smile. "Vree's getting close."

The puppy slid to a halt, tilting its head to look up at me. "New friend?"

I crouched and patted the little head. I'd expected it to be cold, but instead the smooth metal felt warm and satiny, the color like brushed steel coated with lavender. "Yes, I'm a friend." Then I looked up at Kirel. "Why is he purple?"

"What other color would a mirol pup be?"

Of course. *It's an alien puppy, Morehead.*

"Don't you like purple?" Vree looked up at me.

"I love it," I assured him.

Cara called out, "Hazel?"

I gave Vree one last pat and stood, turning to find Cara and the others in the corridor.

"Come on." She grinned, as full of enthusiasm as ever. She had straight black, warm tan skin, and copper-brown eyes. Her tall, lean-muscled build moved easily as she walked toward me. "Let's get you a room and some

clothes.”

Kirel said, “But I thought—”

Cara’s tone remained upbeat, even as she cut him off. “That Hazel needs some space after being crammed in a shuttle with too many people?”

He shot me a sultry look, promising untold delights, and damn if my thighs didn’t squeeze together.

Then Vree jumped on his boot, bouncing with both his paws, and Kirel’s face lost the calculated smoothness as he paid attention to his pet.

This is a guy I could like and trust.

If only he wasn’t also the player.



The next morning, I stood in the middle of the cabin I shared with Mollie, holding my arms above my head. “God, this is practically medieval!”

Mollie chuckled and kept circling me, wrapping a strip of white fabric around my boobs.

“I can’t believe I’m doing breast binding!” I said.

Yet as much as I complained, I couldn’t deny the relief I felt once the girls got some support. Unlike the other two women, my breasts were a long way from “perky” and felt gravity’s pull way too much for comfort. The *Daredevil* flew just fast enough to provide almost normal gravity, and the cryo technicians on Earth hadn’t let us wear anything under the special onesie.

My bras, and the rest of my belongings, were on *ARK 1*, wherever it was.

Mollie finished her last circuit, and I took the end of the fabric from her and tucked it into the top of the wrap. We’d each had a turn in the attached bathroom’s shower and were making do with whatever we could instead of putting on our cryo onesies ever again.

“Sorry.” Cara frowned where she leaned against the closet door. The room wasn’t that big, and with two beds in it, there wasn’t room for extra furniture like a chair. But it was a lot of space compared to the cramped shuttle we’d shared with four other people over the last few days. “Of the four alien species living in this part of the galaxy, only the Zaarn wear clothes. And everything the males make for themselves is huge.”

“So huge!” Mollie huffed a laugh and held the dark purple fabric of a Zaarn shirt away from her. It fell past her knees, billowing around her small form like a tent. “I feel like a fucking toddler in one of Sul’s shirts.”

“Well, I sure as bippity hell want a real bra,” I said.

“Gravin says female Zaarn wear something.” Cara pulled out her alien tablet and tapped at the screen.

I squinted. It was all in alien symbols. I’d studied them for days and could never get any of them to correspond to what the males said out loud. It was fucking frustrating. “How are you reading that?”

“I’m not... not really.” She gave a half shrug. “I just kind of memorized a few things.” She swiped for a few more seconds, then held it up so Mollie and I could see the screen. On it, a blue and teal-skinned female wore something that looked like a sports bra made with extra straps. How did you even get into that thing?

“Is that what their women look like?” Mollie took the tablet and pulled it close. “They’re like Amazons or something!”

The female on the screen had a muscular build like a female athlete, and I couldn’t help but notice that while she had small breasts, she didn’t have an ounce of other fat on her. *Is this the Zaarn equivalent of a supermodel? Is that what Kirel grew up thinking women should look like?*

I ran a hand over the softness of my tummy, so different from the picture of the alien female. Then I hurried to pull on one of the shirts they’d given us. It might have been huge, but it at least hid everything.

“Are there panties?” I asked.

“Nope.” Cara popped the P. “We found aliens who go commando.” She grinned, probably imagining Gravin naked.

Which made me think about Kirel naked. Dammit. He’d be gorgeous, of course.

“So even if they had women’s clothes on board, they wouldn’t fit,” Molly said.

I nodded. “Or be what we want. Like panties and bras that look comfortable.”

“Yeah,” Cara said. “Clothes are going to be an issue unless we make them.”

“I don’t know how to sew,” Mollie said. “Flight school didn’t leave any time for hobbies.”

“Me either,” I said.

“Same,” Cara added.

None of us said it out loud, but we were all thinking it. Unless you were wealthy, you didn’t have time for anything but school or your job. Those who tested well enough to get into college, like those of us chosen for the ARK Program, did everything as a crash course. I’d taken as many classes a semester as possible to get my degree quickly so I could get out and scramble to find a job, because that always took ages.

“But it doesn’t matter.” Cara cut through the heavy atmosphere with one of her warm smiles. “Because Gravin says there’s a machine that does everything for you. None of the built-in programs will work, but we’ve got the best computer programmer around. Kirel will get it to make anything we want.”

Warmth flushed my body as I imagined describing the underwear I wanted to Kirel.

I should get my own back a bit after all this imagining him naked. Get him to make me some really sexy ones in red or something. If these guys even like red. I glanced at the walls, painted the same light blue as everything on the ship. No, I’ll do blue. They love blue.

Besides, it was one of my best colors, making my pale skin, which would go kind of pasty if I wore the wrong thing, look pretty good.

Mollie bounced on her toes. “Can we make them now?”

“I don’t think there’s a lot of fabric on board right now, but we’ll work something out after breakfast.” Cara’s nose scrunched up. “Sorry I’m the only one with real clothes.”

She wore a pair of blue pants and a shirt like a long-sleeved tee, if said T-shirt sealed up the front. The thing I really envied was her boots. Heavy and black like the ones the males wore, they looked like the kind of thing you could run in. Not that I was much of a runner, and on Earth, I’d preferred stretch loungewear. But this crazy new world we’d found ourselves in made me feel like I should dress like someone who could kick ass, even if no asses would be kicked by me.

I sat down on the edge of my bed to pull on two pairs of socks. They provided as much cushioning as the pitiful slippers I’d worn into cryo, and they had the added benefit of being clean.

Mollie wore the same as we stepped out into the corridor and headed for

the mess hall. The metal decking had a clear coating on it that softened our steps just a little. It made walking around in socks less of an issue.

Sul peeled away from the wall he'd been holding up with his large shoulder and grinned at us, his eyes lighting on Mollie. "Morning."

Kirel was nowhere to be seen. *I knew it. I knew he'd stop chasing me.* Still, a tiny pang went through my gut. As much as I'd expected it, it still hurt that he'd lost interest so quickly.

Cara tapped the control panel, and the door to the mess hall whooshed open on a large room filled with long rectangular tables lined with built-in benches. Various Zaarn males dotted the room, some eating alone, some in small clumps.

Kirel hovered over a table in the back corner, setting down a laden tray. He waved us over, shooting me a seductive grin. "I got you the porridge you like."

He placed a bowl of the sweetened seed mash in front of me. I'd gotten to eat it only once on the shuttle before supplies ran out, and I'd never imagined he'd noticed *and* remembered how much I enjoyed it.

Just like that, my tummy got the flutters all over again.

CHAPTER FOUR



Kirel

BREAKFAST BOTH DRAGGED and went by too quickly. Impatience ate at me because I wanted Hay-Zul to myself. But every moment spent in her presence was a blessing. Especially since Vree had followed me into the mess hall and spent the entire time prancing around on top of the table, making the females laugh.

Once we'd finished eating and were sipping a second round of jormint tea, Space Kitty jumped up and started doing his own bid for attention, and Car-Raa snorted. "Someone's upset he's not the center of attention anymore."

Vree's ears perked up. "I'm better. I can talk to *everyone!*"

"Oh, boy, here we go," Gravin muttered.

Sul let out a guffaw, almost falling backward off the bench, as the two animals wove back and forth between dishes, trying to outdo each other.

Vree yelled, "Look at me!" He hunched down on his front legs and

exploded upward, sending his small purple body into a back flip.

I gasped along with everyone else. “When did you learn to do that?”

“I practiced while you were gone.” His purple eyes glowed brighter, and his tail wagged. “Is it good?”

I reached over and rubbed his head, the warm metal smooth under my fingertips. “It’s great, little buddy.” And it was. Vree was taking more and more initiative to try new things, things that went far beyond any of his initial programming. Such advances had been few and far between in his early years, but there’d been an uptick lately. It seemed the more he learned and grew his own programming, the faster he was able to keep pushing his boundaries.

When I looked up, Hay-Zul was watching me, her face open and unguarded. I gave her my best come-hither grin, and her blue eyes clouded.

Was it only Vree she liked? Did she feel nothing for me? How could she ignore the mating pull? Car-Raa had clearly felt it for Gravin.

My com beeped, and I picked it up. “It’s the captain. He wants a meeting.” I exchanged a look with Gravin and Sul. As soon as we’d gotten in comms range a couple of days ago, we’d sent in our report about everything that had happened after we’d found the Hyoo-mon females. But there was a lot more to talk about.

I stood and gathered the empty breeseed bowls. Typically, I’d eat a meat and vegetable roll for breakfast, but I’d noticed how much Hay-Zul had liked the Sjisji porridge and wanted her to enjoy her first breakfast on the *Daredevil*.

The sweet scent of her hair teased my nose as I leaned close, and my tail buzzed insistently at my back, trying to dart forward. Hay-Zul’s eyes snapped up to where the purple tip rose over my shoulder, her mouth falling open on a silent gasp that had my cock aching. By the Goddess, I couldn’t wait to run my tail all over her body, to find everywhere it made her gasp and squirm with delight.

Sul launched to his feet, clapping me on the back with a meaty hand. “Got a meeting to get to, lover-boy.”

He grabbed the jormint tea cans, and together we crossed the room to dump all the dirty dishes into the receptacle. As soon as we turned, his eyes tracked across the room, latching onto Mol-Lee.

I swatted him on the shoulder. “Lover-boy, my ass. As if you’re any

better.”

He grinned. “You got me there.”

“So tell her how you feel.”

The easy smile fell from his face. “I’m not good with words, not when it matters, not like you.”

I stared at Hay-Zul, who leaned over to talk to Vree as he sat at her feet, his little tail swishing back and forth so hard it was a blur.

No matter what my friend thought, none of my words had worked so far. Just like none of them had worked when I’d tried to find a mate on my home world. But I refused to fail this time.

I’d simply have to try harder.



The Hyoo-mon females came with us as we entered the lift to go up to the top level of the ship. The captain’s office and ready room were each located right beside the bridge. We headed for the second of those. It was a cramped space, dominated by a long stainless steel table with lightly padded chairs arranged around it. As with all furniture on the ship, everything was bolted to the floor so nothing would go flying under hard maneuvers. The light blue walls were broken up by windows into the bridge on one long wall and a view of space on the opposite.

Since we were flying at a slow speed while the engineers repaired the port thruster, both views were boring. Only the pilot was on the bridge, with comms, weapons, and the engineering stations empty right now. Similarly, since the region we were in was mostly empty space, nothing but scattered, distant stars showed outside.

“Good.” Captain Wrin strode into the room from the door to the bridge and took a seat at the head of the table. His expression remained serious as he took a moment to look around and meet everyone’s eye. “I called you all here because we need to discuss what finding Hyoo-mons means for us.”

“Us?” Hay-Zul asked.

“The Zaarn sent to Roam,” I said. “The males banished from our home world at twenty if we don’t have a fated mate.”

“I don’t get it.” She frowned. “Why are you banished?”

“Our species gives birth to two males for every female born. In ancient times, any male who didn’t find a mate in his village was sent out to Roam. They’d walk the entire continent, searching. Half never found their soul’s breath, but those who did were happy for the rest of their lives.” What I didn’t say was that an ache had filled my chest, a longing I’d been forced to live with every day of these past years, assuming it would haunt all my days. Until Hay-Zul.

Mol-Lee leaned forward and planted a fingertip on the tabletop. “And these males sent to Roam, you’re all on this ship?”

Sul laughed. “Hell, no! There are thousands of us!”

“The Daredevils are one of the largest Zaarn mercenary units working the seven sectors,” Gravin said. “But even we can’t take on everyone.”

“And if they’re fated mates, then we can have kits?” Wrin asked.

“May the Goddess make it so.” Gravin placed a hand on Car-Raa’s thigh.

One of her hands covered his. “We’re going to see what happens naturally for now, and if it doesn’t...” She gave a one-shoulder shrug. “We’ll ask the medical types to look into it once we’ve found *ARK 1*.”

“Kits?” Mol-Lee said. “Does he mean what I think he means?”

Everyone started talking at once, and Vree nudged my calf with his nose, as if seeking assurance. I leaned over and patted his head. “It’s okay.”

Or it would be. As soon as my fated mate accepted me.

Car-Raa’s raised voice cut through the various conversations. “You’re forgetting something!”

Everyone fell silent and turned to her.

“None of this will happen unless we find *ARK 1* and the women who are on it.”

“If they’re even on the ship.” Gravin scowled. “The Grug could have scattered them across the seven sectors for all we know.”

“Yeah.” Car-Raa nodded. “They can just ship the cryopods around and not bother waking anyone until they’re ready to do... whatever it is they’re going to do with them.”

“They were selling you as an exotic pet,” Gravin said, his voice a growl.

“Just like they did with the Sjisji,” I explained for Hay-Zul and the other Hyoo-mons. “The bird aliens were the last new species found, about a hundred years ago. They’re not warriors, so the Grug didn’t even give the Sjisji the minimal respect they gave the Zaarn and the Tula. All three species

banded together and fought to get ourselves declared sentient.”

Hay-Zul squinted. “So these Grug are the government?”

“Frek no,” Sul said. “But they’re a big hive-mind, all super smart and shit. They’ve got a stranglehold on trade in the seven sectors.”

“Seven sectors sounds big.” Mol-Lee fidgeted in her seat. “How are we going to find *ARK 1*? The ship must still be in its dormant mode. It was supposed to wake me first if it found a planet.” The small Hyoo-mon was their ship’s main pilot.

“If I can get close enough, I have a way to wake up the ship’s computers,” Hay-Zul said.

“No.” The word punched its way out of me. The thought of her anywhere near the Grug froze my blood. “I’ll be the one to go.” She narrowed her eyes at me, but I turned to Wrin. “I’ll tag along with the team going to Pranch. It’s got the closest Grug installation. While they work their job, and I’ll hack the Grug computers.”

Pranch was a desert planet the Grug used for their various factories. The Grug manufactured a specific medicine to keep their Tula asteroid miners healthy. That medicine, it turned out, treated a specific lung disease the Sjisji tended to fall prey to. Instead of selling it to the bird aliens, the Grug had been squeezing them for extra trade concessions. People were sick. We were going to help. For a fee, of course—we needed to eat—but we were hoping to steal enough of the medicine that the Sjisji wouldn’t need to cave to the Grug’s demands immediately.

The captain frowned. “We’ve never infiltrated a Grug installation before. Are you certain?”

He wasn’t wrong. I’d done lots of jobs hacking Grug warehouses or their cargo ships, like when we’d rescued Hay-Zul and Mol-Lee. But those were all smaller and simpler. A full installation housed actual Grug and had lots of increased security.

“Frek, yeah.” Excitement skittered through me as I interlaced my fingers and stretched, pushing my palms forward. “I’ve wanted to get my hands on one of their main computers for ages.” No one knew the full extent of the gray aliens’ telepathy or how much they relied on it now that they were spread across the seven sectors instead of being located on their original planet. Which no one else knew the location of, either. The first to perfect spaceship technology, the Grug were always one step ahead of the rest of us.

It was time to do something about that, and finally getting access to all of their data had been a dream of mine.

“I’ll hitch a ride with Raxnor and Tark,” I said. “And if my mission goes sideways, they can provide backup.” Both were good fighters. I’d rather have Gravin and Sul watch my back, but there was no way I wanted to take either of my friends away from their fated mates.

It would be painful enough to leave Hay-Zul behind, even if it was for her safety

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CHAPTER FIVE



Hazel

I STOMPED AFTER Kirel as he left the ready room. Okay, I didn't stomp—I was still wearing socks—but I walked with purpose. "I'm going with you."

There were thousands of other human women out there somewhere. I'd gotten lucky and woken to a rescue. But hearing Cara talk about how the Grug had yanked her out of cryosleep only to sell her to some lizard dude... No. All the no. I was the only one able to help ensure that didn't happen to anyone else. So I was going to do it, dammit.

"No, you're not."

"I'm the only person here capable of waking *ARK 1*'s computers from a distance." Cara could fight, Mollie could pilot. This was what I could do, and I was damn well going to do it.

"Tell me how, and I'll do it." He pulled out his tablet, and his fingers hovered over the screen as if ready to take notes.

“It’s not that simple.” I threw my hands up. “If it was simple, they wouldn’t need a comms tech with a four-year degree to work through it.”

He slid his tablet back into his pants with a nonchalant shrug. “Then I’ll figure it out.”

Ugh! This guy! Everyone said he was great with computers, but come on!

“If you think I’m going to sit here eating bonbons, you—”

Kirel cut through my words with easy precision, his tone way too charming. “What are bonbons?”

“What? Why do you want to know that?”

“If they’re something you enjoy, I’ll get them for you.” His voice dropped to a suggestive register. “I am, after all, here for your every pleasure.”

My thighs clenched together as my traitorous body reacted to the promise in his words. Bad body!

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I never had one.”

“I thought you were a linguist? How could you use a word you didn’t understand?”

Damned if I was going to admit to him that my family had never had the money for expensive chocolates. “Because it’s an idiom, which is only one letter away from idiot in English. You should look it up.” I made my voice syrupy sweet. “*If* you can get your fancy computer to figure it out for you.”

“Oh, I can figure out *anything*. Don’t you worry.” He grinned, flashing his fangs, and my body gave another pulse of want.

God, he’s too fucking handsome by far. You need to focus, Morehead!

I gave myself an internal shake. “Back to the point. I’m going on this mission. I’m the only one who knows the protocol for waking the *ARK 1*’s computers via comms. The ship’s computers will generate a random code and expect the correct answer. Plus, the voice giving that answer has to match one of the ones it has on record. You need me.”

His expression lost all its easy charm, showing the serious side he’d worn during those first days when we couldn’t talk. *Which is the real him? The suave seducer or this, the computer expert trusted to be put in charge of missions?*

I liked this Kirel a hell of a lot more.

He pursed his lips. Then he gave a little nod. “Fine. You’re with me.”

Raxnor and Tark will take another shuttle. It'll give us more coverage of the area and an extra escape route if we need it."

His eyes narrowed as they raked me from head to toe.

I deflated a little inside. This was the critical look guys always got before they told me a white lie meant to cover up what they really thought—that I wasn't thin enough.

"Pranch is a desert planet. We've got to get you some real clothes."

Oh! A bubble of relief broke over me. He'd been critical of my clothes, not me! Time to deploy my sexy undies idea. "I know just the thing," I said.



I leaned back into the conference room and said, "Clothes time!"

Mollie and Cara came running.

While Gravin and Sul kept talking to the captain, Kirel led the three of us to a small room attached to ship's stores. Most of it was taken up by a big box of a machine, its metal casing hiding how the insides worked. "This is the clothes fabricator."

We all started speaking at once. Mollie talked a mile a minute, asking question after question about how it worked. Cara wanted to know what fabrics they had. I asked about sizing and fit.

"Hold on a minute!" He threw his hands up, palms forward, and patted at the air. Kirel's expression lost a little of his slick composure. He backed a bit farther into the small space and picked up a wand attached to the machine by a long cord. "Okay, one at a time, I'm going to scan you. This will get the sizes right."

Mollie darted forward, almost vibrating with energy.

Kirel had her stand on a mark on the floor, feet shoulder width apart, and arms held out a little from her body. She remained still while he circled her, waving the wand all around until the machine gave a loud beep. Cara went next.

And then me.

Even with the two other women hovering by the door, the universe shrank to Kirel slowly circling me, focused intently on my body. Every touch of his eyes licked my skin with warmth, and it felt like he had x-ray vision,

stripping away my loose clothes until I felt naked.

“What is this?” he murmured, his fingers skimming over the fabric of my breast bindings where they crossed my back.

“It’s support.”

He came back around to my front. “Support?”

I cupped the bottom of my boobs and hefted them a little. “I need something to help with these.”

A wicked gleam entered his eyes, and I almost expected him to say something cheesy like, *I’ll hold them for you*, but he didn’t.

Instead, he waved the wand over me some more until the machine beeped, then pulled out his tablet and started scrolling. In seconds, he had one of the things Zaarn women wore on the screen. “How about this?”

“Is there any way it could be less complicated?” I said. It looked more like fetish gear with all the straps instead of a bra I could wear every day. How did you even get one of those on? I waved the other women forward. “Come help.”

The three of us huddled close, everyone talking and pointing as Kirel made changes to the image on the screen. It was silly and fun, with each of us trying to outdo the other by using all the wacky names for boobs.

“Gotta contain the funbags!” Cara said.

Mollie grinned. “Can’t have the pointer sisters on the loose.”

I said, “An over-the-shoulder boulder holder for my love melons!”

We broke out laughing, and Kirel joined in, even if he wore a befuddled look half the time as his translator chip failed to keep up.

We chortled and groaned our way past some of the other phrases. Then I settled on “bewbs” with an exaggerated pronunciation, Mollie called them “the girls,” and Cara held her ground, saying “naughty pillows” time after time, never keeping a straight face.

After we made it past the funny names, we got going on the bra design itself. Soon we were all pointing at the screen as ideas poured from us in a continuous stream. Kirel fought to keep up with all of our suggestions for several minutes, then held up his hands. “Halt! I give in! I need to do this with only one person.”

“Hazel.” Mollie shot me a mischievous grin.

“Yep, I vote for Hazel, too,” Cara said.

We all agreed that for now, we’d be happy with work pants made out of

the canvas-like material, long-sleeve T-shirts like the men wore, and some boy-shorts panties. Kirel punched in the orders, and the machine whirred to life.

“It’s going to take a bit,” Kirel said. “I’ll send you a message when things are ready.”

The other two women left with quick waves. “Have fun discussing bras!” Mollie sang as she hurried from the room.

“You owe me!” I yelled after them.

“Sure thing,” Cara called back, her voice filled with laughter.

As Kirel’s expression turned charming once again, I reminded myself I was doing this for all the human women on *ARK 1*. They could wake up rescued *and* with proper undergarments.

It’s time to tease him with the sexy undies.

But as he grinned knowingly, his tongue playing over his fangs, I wasn’t so sure which of us I’d be teasing. “What is it you want? Tell me so I can make it yours.”

I jerked my gaze back to the tablet and hastily talked him through a finalized design, trying to keep the conversation—and my mind—on track.

“Some of them can be practical, like we already designed. But others should be more... alluring.”

“Alluring,” he purred and grinned. “I *love* alluring. Tell me how.”

I dragged a finger down the front of one breast in a diagonal, making a V. “It should show a lot more skin, here at the top.” I ran it back up the other one, his hot eyes tracking my every move with an intensity that made me shiver.

“And the panties too. Those boy shorts are okay, but for sexy ones...”

Kirel swayed forward, as if pulled by my words.

I drew an outline of a bikini bottom on my front, my fingers ending right over my clit, which throbbed, begging for attention.

His lips parted as he panted, his eyes latched onto my hand.

I spun around and traced a diagonal line over my butt cheek. “Same thing here. They should be cut high to show more skin.”

Kirel growled, the sound shivering through me and raising the hair on the back of my neck.

I drew the moment out, reaching back to outline the other side of the sexy panties.

His voice came out hoarse when he said, “And the strips of fabric connecting the front and back?” His fingers brushed the side of my hip.

“As small as possible.” I turned to face him, my body flushed with awareness.

He made me question who I was really teasing, me or him, as those clever fingers of his slid across the screen, making changes as quickly as I could voice them.

God, he’s good with his hands. I snapped out of my daze and gave myself a mental shake. *Bad brain!*

“The fabric should be comfortable... soft,” I said.

“Soft.” Kirel leaned closer, the herby masculine scent of him filling the air. He was so tall and muscled, his body had this *presence*. Even though we weren’t touching, every part of me could feel him near, my body tingling to life, and something tugged within my chest.

“I know just the thing. Silar silk is the only thing worthy to touch your... more intimate places.” He gave me another of his wicked grins, and I leaned forward before catching myself.

“That should do it.” I cleared my throat and forced myself to take a step back from the far too tempting male. I needed to keep some distance. Which was ironic, because one thought lingered as I made my way back down the corridor.

I’m going to be stuck in a shuttle alone with him... for days.

CHAPTER SIX



Kirel

“LUCKY BASTARD.” SUL rammed his shoulder into mine as we walked down the corridor away from the mess hall. “Should have known you’d sweet talk your female into being alone with you.” I’d discussed my upcoming mission with my best friends over dinner. They might not have been going with me, but they made sure to send me on my way with two earfuls of advice.

Gravin snorted—the equivalent of a laugh from anyone else. “Yes, well, there is one part of that sentence you’re missing in your approach, Sul. The part where he *talks* to his mate.”

The big male grumbled, “As if you were any better with Car-Raa.”

“That was different, and you know it. We couldn’t talk—we didn’t have working translators.” A grin split Gravin’s normally serious face. “It didn’t slow us down that much.”

My friend was so happy now that he'd mated. It was good to see.
And it made me envious as frek.

"Don't call me lucky yet." I elbowed Sul in the ribs. "Hay-Zul isn't exactly melting into my arms." Echoes of the pain of the years leading up to my banishment rang through me. Since I hadn't found a mate in my city by eighteen, I'd been put into the quick-meet lottery with all the other unmatched males. I'd smiled and talked and done my damndest, but it had still devolved into endless rooms full of females, with one after the other turning from me, finding me not enough.

And now Hay-Zul didn't want me either, even though my rulaa sensed how special she was, even though my kron had turned purple and vibrated for her.

I saw that same pain reflected in Sul's eyes. The big bruiser always kept things fun and frivolous, plastering on a smile and yelling for another round of drinks. Until Mol-Lee. Now he looked stunned and wary, and he kept tiptoeing around her, not saying a thing.

Gravin came to a stop in front of his cabin door without opening it. "What you two need to do is to learn how to kizz. The Hyoo-mon females love it."

"Kizz?" I pulled out my comp and ran a search but got zero hits. "What's kizz?"

"Something special they do with their mouths. Going to go do it now." And with one last smug grin, he opened the door to his cabin and ducked inside.

"He's the one you should be calling a lucky bastard," I said to Sul.

"Oh, I do," the big male grumbled. He clapped me on the shoulder so hard my body swayed. "But you are, too. Just wait. You're going to come back from this mission all happy and together, and I'll have no one to talk to anymore."

Vree came trotting down the corridor from where he'd walked Hay-Zul and Mol-Lee to their room. He gave an excited bark and circled Sul's legs. "Me! You can talk to me! I can talk to *anyone*." He made the last word especially loud, and an angry yowl came from inside Gravin's cabin.

Sul laughed and leaned over to pat Vree's head. "You got it. You can be my new drinking buddy."

Vree cocked his head like he did when he thought something over. "I

don't drink." Then his tail started to wag, and he projected his voice so it carried. "But I can talk to you while you drink. I'll be the *best* buddy."

We continued down the hall, left Sul at his door, and walked to mine. Once inside my cabin, I leaned over to unfasten my boots, letting them clunk to the floor. "You shouldn't rile up the krecat so much."

"I'm the ship pet, not him." His ears drooped, and a new emotion filled his voice—envy. It was a breakthrough in his sentience, but also it held a note of pain I'd never wanted him to feel.

I lay on the bed and patted my stomach, and Vree bounded up to settle into place. "*I'm* supposed to be the special one," he said as I rubbed the smooth warm metal of his purple head.

Hay-Zul's beautiful face filled my mind, her eyes wary instead of full of love.

"I know exactly how you feel."



My mate walked across the open deck of the shuttle bay flanked by the other two Hyoo-mon females. All looked good in the new clothes I'd programmed for them yesterday, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from Hay-Zul.

The black pants clung to her thighs, outlining their alluring curves, and the long-sleeved shirt fit her well instead of tenting around her and hiding her body. I could finally understand her desire for the Hyoo-mon bra she'd insisted upon. It held her large breasts up so they jutted forward in the most distracting fashion. No female Zaarn had ones that size, not even when nursing a kit. I had to force my eyes up to her face.

I'd chosen a dark blue for her shirt. It not only matched the color of my face and hands, it also made her pretty eyes an even darker blue.

"You look beautiful," I said.

Pink colored her cheeks in a fascinating bloom of color.

"You two going to be okay on your own?" Car-Raa asked, peering around me to see into the open airlock of the *Arrow*.

A smaller shuttle than the one we'd used to bring the Hyoo-mons back from Ushum, this was one of our faster ships with almost no room for cargo

or passengers. We needed that speed it to get to Pranch in only a few days. Raxnor and Tark had already left the evening before in one of our slower cargo shuttles, since delivering a shipment of ore was their cover for visiting the factory planet. I'd have to come up with a different reason for us.

"We'll be fine," I said.

"Not alone!" Vree came running, his little tail whipping back and forth in a blur. "I'm going, too!" He darted around all three females, yipping excitedly. It was always fascinating to see when he acted more like the mirol pup I'd originally designed him to be and when he wanted to speak using the Zaarn language. Strong emotions often made him more dog-like.

Gravin followed Vree. He grunted when he saw me and hooked a thumb over his shoulder, pointing back at the shuttle. "You sure your autopilot program will work on the *Arrow*?"

"I'm sure."

He scowled. "It's not the same model of ship as the *Saber*."

"They use the same software." All of our ships did. Frek, all of our tech period used the same base code. The Grug had been the first species to develop regular spaceflight, and they'd dominated all of our technology ever since. They'd been selling the best comps, the best ships, the best everything for over a hundred years.

We might have won the war to be declared sentient, but the Grug had found another way to control everyone.

Sul emerged from the airlock. "The weapons systems are up to date."

"Thanks, both of you." I meant it. Even Gravin's overbearing nature came from a place of concern. "We'll be okay. And we've got Raxnor and Tark for backup."

"You better be." Gravin stepped close and spoke quietly so the females wouldn't hear. "Because if anything happens to Hay-Zul, I won't be able to stop Car-Raa from hurting you."

My hand fell to the fighting sticks strapped to my waist. "I'd lay down my life for my soul's breath."

"Know you would." Sul clapped my shoulder. "But don't. We want you both back. Then you can tell me all about how you charmed your mate, so I can do the same with mine."

The females finished hugging each other goodbye.

"Come on!" Vree clamped his jaws around the handle of the bag Hay-

Zul had dropped to the ground. He started dragging it toward the shuttle, backing up the entire way.

Hay-Zul laughed. “Okay, I’m coming!”

I let them enter the airlock first, then followed into the small room finished in plain metal. The outer hatch closed, and my mate’s sweet scent teased my nose for those few seconds we were locked together in the tiny space.

I wanted to bury my face in her golden hair and breathe her in, and my tail rose in an insistent buzz. Before I could stop it, it slid forward and wrapped around her thigh, right above her knee. It wanted—or really, *I* wanted—to slide higher. But I gritted my teeth and held it there, enjoying touching her.

Hay-Zul gave a little gasp, her muscles quivering, and when the inner hatch slid open, she lingered for a few seconds before stepping forward.

The *Arrow* had only a thin wall separating the cockpit from the main cabin, which took up most of the available space. A door hid the small bathing room at the back of the craft, but everything else, including the galley, was built into the walls, ready to be unfolded only when needed. It made the light blue walls a trace work of shapes ready to pop out when activated.

Vree kept backing up until he bumped into the wall. His tail swatted the control panel, and the cupboard door next to him swung open, missing him by only a couple of inches. He’d done it on purpose, showing off how well he knew the shuttle’s layout, which I’d uploaded into his processor this morning. Trotting around the bag, he shoved it into the cabinet with his purple forehead and closed the door. “Stowed and ready!”

“Thanks, little bud.” I grinned at him, then turned to Hay-Zul. “Would you rather be in the cockpit or back here for takeoff?”

“Cockpit!” She gave me a real smile, one that made my heart skip.

I gave her my most winning smile and sketched a bow, adding a flourish of my hand, waving her to go first. “After you.”

Her smile dimmed a little. Had I not been charming enough? I would try harder.

Anything to win my mate.

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CHAPTER SEVEN



Hazel

EVERY TIME I got a glimpse of Kirel talking to other people or Vree, I forgot for a moment that he was a player. Then he lathered on the charm again. I guess I should have thanked him for the reminder.

But as soon as we were seated in the small cockpit, he became all business, poring over the various displays in front of him. His face took on a focused look, one I liked.

The side of the shuttle bay wall sank into the floor, and we lifted to fly forward into the airlock. It was a tight fit, but Kirel made it look easy. His hands flew back and forth across the controls with a quick dexterity that made me wonder what else they were good at.

The outer hatch opened, and we shot out into space, the quick shuttle spinning up and around the much larger *Daredevil* to head in a new direction. *To think that it's home now.* I craned my neck for one last look back at the

matte-gray warship holding everyone I now knew in the universe. Or almost everyone.

Kirel focused on flying, and with nothing to look at outside but the tiny dots of distant stars, I found myself watching him.

Symbols flashed across the screens as he worked them, still annoyingly unreadable. It was high time I did something about that.

“I’d like to learn to read the displays.” I gestured to them. “Your language, is it alphabetical or logographic?”

He stared at me, tipping his head to the side. “I’m not sure my translator got that.”

“Logographic is where it uses one symbol to stand for an entire word or sound. Alphabetical is where lots of little symbols, called letters, are used in different combinations to make words.”

“Ah. Zaarn is alphabetical.”

“Really?” I glanced at the displays again, which had lots of isolated symbols. “It doesn’t look like it.”

“This isn’t the Zaarn language,” he said. “This is trade standard.”

“Your ships aren’t in your own language?”

“We don’t manufacture ships. The Grug do.”

“And your tablet? I’m pretty sure it used the same symbols as the ones here.” I pointed to the shuttle’s controls.

“It does. All tech is made by the Grug, and everything’s set to trade standard.”

My brain whirled. “So let me get this straight. There are four species. You each speak your own language out loud because translator chips take care of making sure you understand each other. But you all read and type in a language that’s not yours and doesn’t relate to your spoken language in any way?” That explained why I’d had so much trouble trying to get their spoken words to line up with the symbols—they didn’t.

He nodded. “We don’t even really learn to write Zaarn in school anymore since it’s never used. Everyone just uses trade standard.”

“Huh.” I sat back, trying to understand what that would do to someone’s comprehension of language. “Is trade standard the written version of the Grug language?”

“Maybe.” He shrugged. “They never really said. All I know is that it was the one used for all of the early spaceships and computers. And when people

tried to change them over to their local languages and systems of measurement, lots of mistakes started to happen in repairs and things. After a bunch of accidents, everyone agreed to keep all tech in the one language for safety reasons. It also means that spare parts work for everything across the seven sectors.”

“That does sound good.” But the disconnect between what they spoke and what they read... was it undermining their native language, or was it like learning any second language as a child—something easily done?

I leaned as far forward as the safety straps allowed, studying the displays in front of him. Everything on there had to pertain to flying a ship, so if I could just get a handle on a word or two to start...

Warm breath brushed my ear, setting my whole body tingling.

I startled and jerked away. I’d practically draped myself over his lap without realizing it, so focused on the screen and the puzzle of a new language. “Sorry.”

“You never have to apologize for getting close to me, my soul’s breath.”

My breath hitched. The words were whispered, almost guttural, and they sounded so sincere they made my heart ache with their beauty.

He dug a tablet out of his pants and tapped at the screen. Then he handed it to me. A single symbol filled the middle of the screen. “Touch it.”

When I did, the tablet said, “See.”

“What’s this?” I looked up at him.

“It’s the program used to teach children to read standard trade.”

Another symbol showed, and I tapped it. “Touch,” the tablet said.

A spurt of happiness went through me. “This is amazing! Thank you.”

He grinned, a genuine grin, and my heart skipped. “Keep it. That way you can practice whenever you want.”

“Oh, but it’s yours.” I tried to hand it back. If there was one thing Kirel loved, it was his tablet.

He pulled another out of the pocket on his other thigh. “Don’t worry. It’s a backup. I always carry more than one.”

Vree trotted in from the main cabin. “Everything’s where it’s supposed to be.”

Kirel smiled down at him. “Thanks for checking for me.”

The puppy jumped up onto his lap and lay down, resting his head on his front paws. The lights in his eyes dimmed.

“What’s he doing?” I whispered.

“Research shows that dreams are important for conscious beings, so I created a dream state for him.” He ran a hand down Vree’s back and got a tail wag.

“What does he dream of?”

“I’m not sure. I didn’t program the actual material. Instead, I set it to sample from experiences he’s had and to blend them together in new ways.” Kirel’s gaze grew knowing, and he shot me a devilish grin, hitting me with the full wattage of his charm. “I know what I dream of, my sweet mate. All the delicious noises I’ll wring from your body as I make you writhe in pleasure.”

My thighs clenched at the promise in his voice, and I jerked my gaze back to my tablet. *Bad body!*



Spending an entire day in close quarters with Kirel became excruciating. Every time Vree hopped down, Kirel would jump up and get me a can of jormint tea or make me lunch or dinner.

He reconfigured the walls of the main cabin to pull down a table and chairs. He showed me how the Zaarn used an eating knife to not only cut up the strips of steak but also to spear them like a one-pronged fork to bring them to my mouth.

Kirel was everywhere, hovering and charming and so *damned* willing.

My body pulsed, wanting everything his wicked smile promised.

He folded the other furniture up into the wall so he could lower two cots covered with comfy gel mattresses and light-blue sheets. The cabin was so narrow that having both of them down left only a foot of space between. We’d be practically sleeping together.

I climbed onto my bed and pulled the thin sheet up over me. Then I wiggled out of my work pants, keeping on my shirt, bra, and panties. Thank god the new undies were comfortable enough to sleep in, the fabric satiny smooth. I’d packed all the new clothes Kirel had made for me, but hadn’t realized until a few minutes ago that we’d forgotten to ask him to make us anything to sleep in. What I’d been using for the past few nights was actually

one of Kirel's shirts, and it felt far too weird to put it on under these circumstances.

He did his nightly routine of slowly taking off his boots and then peeling his shirt up over his head. It unsealed in the front, but the damned male clearly knew the glorious things the move did to his muscles, so he did this mini striptease every time. And he slept in his canvas work pants, so he sure as shit could sleep in the far more comfortable shirt! But no, he had to take it off.

And I couldn't tear my eyes away. Cara was right. They did change color. The blue of his face and shoulders shaded to teal in the middle of his chest, darkening toward purple right at the waist of his pants. He was colored as beautifully as a peacock, and just as proud, strutting around, flexing all those muscles. And what muscles! I swear his abs had abs.

With a tap of the controls, the lights in the cabin went low. By the time my eyes adjusted, I glanced over to find him watching me, so close I could reach out and touch him if I wanted. He must have seen me looking, because his tail gave a loud buzz and rose into the air.

My clit gave a needy throb, imagining that triangular tip pressed to it, vibrating me to a much-needed orgasm.

I stifled a groan and rolled onto my other side.

It was going to be a long night.



I spent the next two days studying the trade language. Kirel even rigged my new tablet to allow me to write the word in English for every new symbol showed to me. The tablet stored each as I went. That way I was creating a little trade standard-to-English dictionary. He'd even started work on a program that would do the translation.

Even if I become fluent enough to read trade standard, I didn't expect the other human women to. All of us would need this if we were going to get around in this new world we found ourselves in.

Every time I took a break, Vree wanted to play.

I stole one of Kirel's shirts and twisted it into a rope, then tied it up into a toy. A desire to play fetch lay buried in Vree's programming, and I stood in

the doorway to the cockpit and threw the fabric knot down the length of the main cabin.

Vree dashed after it, yipping. His little head whipped back and forth as he tried to figure out exactly where it would fall.

Kirel laughed. “This is good for him. He’s constantly upgrading his body-eye coordination, just like we do when we build muscle memory.”

I glanced back to find him standing behind me, so close I could feel his body heat warming my back, my butt. I shivered with awareness.

Vree ran up and dropped the knot at my feet, and I crouched down to get it, silently thanking the little robot for breaking the tension.

But my reprieve didn’t last long. It never did around Kirel, the handsome devil. He entertained me all during dinner, telling me the story of the con they’d pulled off a week ago. Cara and the males had tricked their way into a mob lair to copy the English language from Cara’s cryopod computer. It had ended in fights and guns and a flying rescue made possible by Kirel’s autopilot program.

It had also been such a good story, and he’d told it so well, I found myself transfixed, leaning ever closer the longer he went on. By the time he finished, my heart was pounding and I was so far over the table I’d almost crawled into his lap.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I *seriously* needed some alone time to take care of things.

Dinner done, Vree trotted into the cockpit to sleep on his bed, which acted as a charging station. We’d just stowed the table and chairs and lowered the beds when an alarm blared. Kirel hurried to the cockpit.

I followed. “What is it?”

He toggled off the annoying sound. “The proximity alarm. Nothing to be worried about. There are a few stray meteoroids in this part of space, and it’s a little more than the autopilot can handle on its own.”

Vree had leaped up and now stood wagging his tail. “I was ready to help!”

“I know you were, bud,” Kirel said. “I’m going to stay up here until we clear this area, so you go ahead and get recharged.”

The puppy curled up on the folded blanket that lined his charging pad and lay down with his head on his front paws. “Night!” He gave one last wag of his tail before the purple glow of his eyes dimmed.

Kirel looked at me. “You go ahead and get some sleep, too.”

“Okay!” I blurted, hurrying to close the door on the two of them. This was my chance!

I’d turned the lights in the main cabin down to the lowest setting, shucked my pants, and climbed into bed.

Taking care of business by myself was nothing new—I’d been flying solo since Derek. But doing so without my vibrator was a problem. I’d even used up part of my tiny and precious weight allotment on *ARK 1* to bring my favorite toy and extra rechargeable batteries. Who the fuck knew where that was now, lost in space with all the other women.

The door to the cockpit remained closed, but I still pulled the sheet up over me, so even if Kirel came in, he wouldn’t see anything.

God, his smirk! The way he got that knowing glint in his eye and let his tongue play over his fangs. My clit tingled, and I slipped my hand inside my panties, suddenly thinking of how the Zaarn went commando.

Ugh! I did *not* need to think of Kirel’s cock being only one layer of cloth away!

Or maybe I did. Maybe this was the one place I could let myself finally think of what my body wanted. Him.

How big would he be? My peacock of an alien sure strutted like he was hot stuff, and unlike human guys, I got the feeling Kirel could back it up with the goods.

So... huge. It had to be huge.

I bit my lip as my fingers slid down each side of my clit, teasing.

What color was it? Blue like his hands? Teal like his chest? Or purple like his horns and eyes, those beautiful eyes? Purple like the tiny bit of skin that showed when his pants slid down a little?

A bolt of lust shot through me as my fingers fluttered over my clit, and I gasped. I kept going, hoping this would be the time it would work. It felt good, and imagining Kirel added an extra bit of zing.

But no matter how fast I moved or how hard I tried, without a vibrator, my orgasm stayed just out of reach.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Kirel

THE HEADY SCENT of my mate's arousal perfumed the air, pulling me out of the pilot's seat and forward until my entire body strained against the door. I turned my head and pressed it as close as my lower horn would allow.

My rulaa tingled with an awareness that Hay-Zul was near. My tail rose, buzzing hard enough to drown out all other sounds, and I grabbed it from the air to quiet it. Her soft gasp rang through the quiet of the shuttle, and I thanked the Goddess for my keen hearing. I had to suppress a groan at the thought of her touching herself, and my cock throbbed and swelled.

I palmed the hard length through the fabric of my pants, and the vibrations of my kron made my hips jerk forward as a bolt of desire shot through me. I'd never felt this before. My tail had remained inactive until I met Hay-Zul. Yet another delight my fated mate brought me.

Listening to my mate pleasure herself was the sweetest torture

imaginable. *She's thinking of me. She has to be thinking of me.* I could bear no other thought.

More gasps and the soft rustle of fabric that meant movement. What was she doing exactly? How did she like to be touched? The temptation to tear open the door made my hand twitch.

No. She was my soul's breath. I would only watch with her permission. Her *knowing* I watched would only make it hotter.

More noises from her made my cock jump against my hand, and I moved my kron up to the sensitive tip. I gritted my teeth as my balls tightened. Hearing my mate reach her peak would make me come in my pants like a teen, but I didn't care.

Pleasure shot through me in waves, and I fought to keep from panting and covering up the sound of her.

Then the main cabin fell quiet for several long seconds. Instead of a joyful release, Hay-Zul let out a frustrated huff.

My tail stilled as my hand fell away. My cock did not immediately deflate, but all desire for orgasm left me. I listened at the door for several more minutes, but all remained silent.

I plopped down into the pilot's chair, my mind racing. Why didn't she come? Was it just this one time? Or did she always have trouble? She obviously felt desire, so what could I do to help?

I pulled out my comp and started a search. Humans might not be in the database, but information about females from Zaarn, Sjisji, and Tula were. I had been with each—had satisfied each—yet there was always something new to learn.

I would know it all, so that by the time my Hay-Zul allowed me to touch her, I would make her body sing.



She did it again the next evening, and I thought I would go mad as her alluring scent and soft gasps filled my entire world.

The door between us was such a flimsy thing. Even if she had locked it, I would be able to break it down.

But the very fact that she had so definitively shut it between us kept me

from flinging it open.

Though I pressed so close to it that it felt like my rock-hard cock could punch a hole through the metal. I ached for her, my kron buzzing so hard the vibrations traveled down my tail, tightening my balls.

Thank the Goddess Vree had once again retreated to his charging station. I shuddered to think of how to explain what I was going through to my pet.

The soft breathy gasps stopped again, just as they had the previous night.

In my mind, the door opened on Hay-Zul standing bare before me. She spread her arms wide and said, “Kirel. I need you.”

Yes. This is how it would be. My hand rose toward the control panel.

My mate’s voice came through the door. Instead of sweet entreaty, it was a frustrated mutter. “Damn you, Kirel.”

My hand dropped, and I pressed my forehead to the cool metal, the tingling awareness of her still coursing through me. I would get no welcome, not tonight.

Patience was the first thing taught to every hunter. Even though I’d grown up in the city, I’d spent summers with my grandparents in the mountains. Grandfather had taught me to track, and Grandmother had taught me to shoot. Both of them had taught patience.

I rarely needed those skills in my computer work, where everything happened at blazing speeds. But now I’d make use of them.

This wouldn’t be a repeat of the speed-mating pool I’d endured on my home world—it couldn’t. My kron had activated for her. I wasn’t a failure this time.

“Patience,” I breathed. “I will charm you, my Hay-Zul. And pleasure you fully. You will be mine.”



The next afternoon, the approach to Pranch went fairly smoothly. The planet hung in front of us like a huge blue ball, with numerous dots whizzing all around. As the main factory planet in this sector, Pranch got a lot of traffic. There was a constant influx of raw materials, and an equally steady stream of cargo ships taking off, full of manufactured goods.

“I thought you said it was a desert planet.” Hay-Zul squinted at the

viewscreen.

“It is!” Vree hopped up onto her lap to stand, his head pointed forward so he could look out, too. He lifted a paw to point toward the planet. “See! No oceans.”

“Then why is it blue?”

He wiggled with excitement. Vree loved anything he saw as helping, so I let him tell my mate everything he could.

“It’s the sand!”

“Interesting.” She patted his back, and his little tail wagged harder. “I expected a golden beige or maybe red.”

“Different metals in the sand make different colors.” He paused for a moment, tapping into the *Arrow’s* larger database, his eyes flickering brighter. “It’s something called cobalt. I can find out more!”

“That’s okay.” She laughed. “I wouldn’t understand it even if you told me. Science was never my thing.”

“I can be good at everything!” Vree said, pride filling his high voice. “I just have to ask the other computers.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, little bud. There’s a difference between reading data and knowing how to use it.”

He barked once, then settled. “I’m still smarter than a kreecat.”

Hay-Zul looked over and met my eyes, her lips pressed together to keep from laughing. “He’s not going to let that go, huh?”

“I guess not.” I smiled back.

The control console buzzed with an incoming call from a Tula official at air space control. “State your business.”

“Pleasure,” I said, using my most charming tone.

“People don’t come to Pranch for pleasure,” the female lizard said.

“Ah, but see, my fated mate isn’t most people. Now that she’s made it off Zaar, she wants to visit every planet in the sector.”

Silence greeted me. It was a novel concept. Every few females left my home world, but that would also provide the perfect disguise for Hay-Zul as well as a reason for us being here.

I added the finishing touch. “And I promised her we’d visit Wollar’s.” The pleasure house had a reputation for having some of the best toys in the sector. And it happened to share a wall with the Grug central computer hub.

“Fine. You’re cleared for Platform 9.”

“Thank you.” I accepted the flight path given and started our descent. Raxnor and Tark were halfway around the planet at Platform 3, but that couldn’t be helped. The factory making the medical supplies was nowhere near the computers I needed to hack.

The first shudder went through the *Arrow* as we entered the atmosphere, and I gripped the yoke more firmly. The sky outside lightened from black to deep blue. The ground swelled below us, changing from indistinct sameness to rippling swaths of blue sand broken around the equator by the straight lines of rectangular buildings.

The howl of atmosphere surrounded the shuttle as we sliced through the air, coming in on a steep descent. I was a decent pilot, but it still took all my concentration to keep us in the narrow path allotted to us. Ships dotted the sky all around us, like seeds blown from a xurr flower.

In an instant, a huge ore hauler lifting from the surface filled the viewscreen, so close it blocked out all light.

Hay-Zul sucked in a startled breath, and my heart tripped.

“Don’t worry.” I lied, “We’re fine.” Or at least the *Arrow* was—the ore hauler had been the one to veer out of its lane. Orange warnings flashed across my displays as air space control trumpeted out a warning to the rogue freighter, along with a series of fines. I wasn’t supposed to veer out of the way because that would only put my shuttle on a collision course with yet another ship. But I tensed my muscles, ready to dodge if needed. I didn’t care how many codes it would violate or how many fines I’d rack up. Keeping my mate safe took priority.

The other pilot jerked the wallowing behemoth back into alignment at the last second, the scratched metal plates of the other ship’s hull sliding by the viewscreen seemingly close enough to touch. Too close.

Once the orange warnings blinked to caution yellow, I glanced over to find Hay-Zul clutching Vree, her knuckles white. Her face had paled too, making the dots on her cheeks and nose stand out in sharp even more than usual. What interesting color changes. Hyoo-mon skin looked so simple compared to that of a Zaarn, but I kept discovering the most delightful little tells in the way hers altered color.

My little friend nuzzled at her chin. “It’s okay now. The big ship’s moving away.” He’d accessed the *Arrow*’s radar system in order to comfort her. It was a fascinating advancement that went far past my original

programming. Yet more proof of how much he'd grown and developed real emotions.

I kept a close eye on everything the rest of the way down. The near miss made me wonder. What would happen if I sold my autopilot program to others? Keeping it for the Daredevils would mean we had an advantage over everyone else, most especially the Grug. We could even share it with the other banished males who made up the Zaarn network. It was a lose collection of those of us sent to Roam. We had no true home, no place to fall back on or call for aid, so we helped each other as much as we could.

On the other hand, selling my autopilot program would make us a lot of money, *legal* money. It would mean no more hacking into rich Tula accounts or Sjisji royalty when we needed a desperate influx of creds for a job. Though I enjoyed the hacking, not going to lie—it kept me on my toes and my skills topnotch.

Since being banished, nothing had felt truly important in my life. Oh sure, I cared for my brothers in arms and Vree. But I had a mate now, and the possibility of a real future stretched ahead, full of glorious promise.

I simply had to get her to want me as much as I longed for her.

CHAPTER NINE



Hazel

I THOUGHT ALMOST being pancaked on the side of a huge metal ship would be the most shocking thing about my day.

I was wrong.

As soon as Kirel settled the shuttle onto the small docking pad, he turned off the engine and said, “We need to get you into your disguise.”

What the bippity hell? “Disguise?”

Vree gave an excited yip and jumped down to race around my feet. “I wear disguises, too!”

His enthusiasm pulled me out of my shock and made me laugh. “Okay. Let me stand.”

The view outside was bleakly industrial. Row after row of ships stood, with automated carts rolling down the lanes between them, piled high with crates.

A huge gray wall of a building blocked any view of the landscape beyond. All four sides of this area were fenced in by big factories.

Kirel stood and did another of those bow thingies with the hand flourish, as if I were some kind of princess or something. “After you.”

I snorted and marched into the main cabin. “So what’s this disguise, then?”

From everything Cara had told me about the different types of aliens, there weren’t any who looked very human. For the con they’d run on the mobsters, she’d worn a full body cloak that had covered her from head to toe.

“Am I going to be one of those monks, like Cara?”

“It would be hard to explain why a monk of the Holy Order of the Sun Goddess would visit a pleasure house, so no.”

“Wait... did you say pleasure house?” Like with sex workers? Was he going to... get *serviced* or something? A flare of jealousy tugged at something in my chest. *Whoa. Where did that come from? I’m not letting him get to me, so I’m not supposed to be jealous about him. Right?*

“This pleasure house shares a wall with the rooms housing the Grug computer core.” He walked over to the wall and opened one of the larger cabinets. “We’ll use it to get access without being seen.”

Oh.

He started pulling things out: a pair of black pants almost exactly like the ones I wore except for a hole in the top of the butt; a couple of cans of something that looked like spray paint; a wig of inky black hair with two pairs of horns built in; and finally, a tail, long and blue and tipped with a triangle.

“Wait. I’m going to be Zaarn? I thought the females never left your planet?” I’d heard him talking to the person who’d given us clearance to land, but I thought it had been just talk. I never imagined we’d actually have to fake being mates in front of other people. *What exactly will we need to do? Will he kiss me?* A tingle of interest zipped through my traitorous body.

“It’s rare, but sometimes mated pairs vacation on other worlds. That’s what we’ll pretend to be—a mated pair.” His eyes grew heated. “Only it’s not pretend. You are my soul’s breath.”

I brushed that aside. He kept saying it, but did he really mean it? “And you just had all this stuff lying around?”

“The tail is a standard prosthetic for those who’ve lost theirs in an

accident. We have them in medbay in case.” He pointed to the wig. “The horns did need to be specially made, but Zol—he’s our undercover ops expert—always keeps a couple of pairs handy, just in case.”

He handed me the pants and a small container. “Change and put these in your eyes, and we’ll get started. We should hurry.”

In the tiny bathroom, I kicked off my boots and tried to wiggle out of my pants, almost braining myself on the edge of the sink. I gave up and stepped inside the shower stall, the most open space in the entire room. The new pants fit well. Kirel must have made them for me like he’d made my other clothes.

I opened the small container to find two purple contacts swimming in liquid. Ugh. I’d never practiced this before, so it took me a few tries. It was hard to force my eye to remain open while I tried to shove something into it. But the contacts were comfortable, and I didn’t feel a thing once they were in.

When I emerged, he held up the tail. “Let’s get this on you.” He reached around to unfasten the velcro-like closure at the top of the back of my pants. His fingers were warm as they placed the belt with the tail around my waist, sliding it into place under my waistband.

My skin tingled, and my heart started to race. His scent, all male and herbs, filled my nose. He smelled so good I wanted to lean forward and nuzzle into his chest.

Kirel settled the tail into place and refastened the back of my pants. When he let go and stepped back, the tail fell behind me, the end resting on the floor. It was so light, I barely felt the tug on the belt strapped to me.

He picked up a little cylinder, like a tube of lipstick with buttons on it. Showing me what he was doing, he pushed one of the buttons, and the tail rose up into the air more like the Zaarn held theirs.

Grabbing the tail from the air, he said, “We need to fix this.” With a few blasts from one of the spray cans, the previously blue tail tip turned purple.

“What does the color mean?” I asked.

Those intense eyes speared straight through me as he gave me one of his seductive smiles. “It is the visible sign that we are mates. It means our krons changed for each other.” His started to buzz, slipping around his body to caress my hip for a few seconds before he pulled it back.

The vibration shivered through me, leaving me flushed and bothered. I took a step back. “I don’t have a kron. I don’t have this... fated mates thing.”

His smile faded, and something—hurt?—flashed through his eyes. Instead of answering, he turned to grab a different can. “Close your eyes.”

What was that? When he wasn’t acting all smooth, these flashes of vulnerability tugged at my heart. I held still while he sprayed my face and neck, then my hands, turning the skin a rich blue.

Finally, he had me coil my hair up onto my head so he could slide the wig in place. Much like the tail, the horns were made out of something surprisingly light, and once he’d clipped the wig to my hair, I could turn my head without the whole thing moving around like I’d worried it would.

I darted into the bathroom, thrilled with the change I saw in the mirror. This was the best Halloween costume ever! I really looked Zaarn with the hair and horns, the blue skin and purple eyes, and the tail! I fiddled with the lipstick tube and made the tail swish from side to side behind me, giggling. *How cool!* I changed into a paint-free shirt, this one a deep red that contrasted nicely with my new blue skin.

When I returned to the main cabin, Kirel gestured for me to turn.

I held my hands out and did a little spin. “How do I look?”

Vree yipped and said, “Perfect!”

Kirel grinned, all of his charm back in place. “Beautiful. But then you are always beautiful.”

“Yeah, yeah. But really—is this going to fool anyone?”

“The Grug barely notice how any of the rest of us look, as far as we can tell. And most of the Tula and Sjisji you meet will have never seen a female Zaarn in person.” For all the surety of his words, his tone held a note of uncertainty.

“I hear a ‘but,’” I said.

“But any Zaarn we meet will know you’re not actually Zaarn.”

“’Cause I’m too heavy.” I remembered the sleek, toned female from the tablet screen overlaid with Derek’s voice as he’d dumped me.

Kirel frowned. “No, because you’re too short.” Then he gave me a seductive smile. “Also, your breasts are very large. No male could help but notice.”

“So you’re agreeing I’m too large.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’m saying you’re delectable, and any male will want you. Who told you otherwise?”

“Men.” It was so hard to admit I stared at my boots and avoided saying

Derek's name out loud.

Kirel's fingers lifted my chin, gentle yet insistent. When I finally looked at him, he wore a serious expression and said, "They were fools unworthy of your time or regard."

Tears prickled my eyes. It was the same thing I told myself. Sure, I carried a few extra pounds, but I was healthy, and my body was a good body, letting me live my life the way I wanted. But hearing someone else say it still felt good.

And hearing *him* say it... well, that was even better. Because with no façade of charm coating his words, I believed him.

"Okay, one more thing," he said. "No one else's translator chips can understand Een-glush, so you can't talk to anyone without blowing your disguise."

I snorted. "Little wifey stays quiet. Got it."

"My translator does not understand this word, Why-fee. Is it close to your word, wife, as in female life mate?" His purple eyes sharpened, and he stepped closer. "Are you admitting you are my fated mate?"

I held up my hands. "Cool your jets, hotshot. It's an expression. And I was referring to our disguises."

Another flash of hurt vulnerability crossed his face, tugging at my heart. Then he slapped on a charming smile, his tongue curling devilishly around his fangs. "I am happy to be your fake mate. It will be good practice for when it is true."

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "Let's stay focused on the mission. I'll keep quiet and let you do the talking."

His lips twitched. "Once you finish creating your Een-glush to trade standard dictionary, I can write a program that will allow your comp to speak anything you type into it, but for now..." He shrugged.

"What if I need to shout a warning or something?" I said. "There's got to be something I can say."

"How about 'my love'?" He grinned.

I snorted. "That doesn't exactly convey warning."

"How about 'freaking asshole?' That should do the trick."

"Say it again."

He slowed the words and drew them out, enunciating each syllable in a way the translator chip wouldn't alter so I heard the original sounds in the

Zaarn language. “Frek-king grov-lach.”

It took me only two tries, and he said, “Perfect! You even mimicked my accent.”

I smiled back. “Told you I was good with languages.”

“I learned the new words, too!” Vree said. “Frekking asshole!”

A bark of laughter escaped me. His high sweet voice saying the swear the funniest thing I’d heard in a while.

Kirel snorted and said, “You can forget that one, little buddy. It’s not for you.”

“Okay!”

Kirel put the makeup cans, some protein bars, and a couple of bottles of water in a small pack he slung onto his back, then he crouched in front of Vree. “Are you ready, bud? It’s time to go to sleep now.”

Vree gave a bark of protest, his little tail hanging limp. “I hate going to sleep.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. When you wake up, you’ll get to have an adventure.”

“I like adventures!” His ears perked up. “Okay, do it.”

Kirel picked up Vree and cradled him in one arm while the other hand tapped out a rhythm on the puppy’s purple tummy. A hatch slid open, and Kirel pulled out a black block about the size of my palm and a couple of inches thick. Vree’s eyes went dark, and Kirel laid the still little body on the floor.

“Is he okay?” It was a dumb question—I didn’t think Kirel would do anything to hurt his robot pet—but I still worried.

“He’s fine. Everything that makes him Vree is in here.” Kirel held up the block and grinned. “Remember how I said the Grug make all our tech and therefore things are fairly standardized across the seven sectors? This data core fits lots of other things. It comes in really handy. You’ll see.” He slid it into a pocket on his thigh and stood.

Kirel grabbed his fighting sticks and shoved them into the belt around his waist. His hands lingered over the guns but left them hanging in their racks. “Blasters aren’t allowed on Pranch, even ones set to stun. The factories handle a lot of volatile compounds, and the Grug take no chances since they hire a lot of Tula, and the lizards anger easily.”

When the outer hatch of the airlock slid open, a gust of hot, dry air blew

over my face and bright white sunlight poured in. I squinted and raised a hand to shield my eyes, hitting one of my fake horns. A quick adjustment, and I got my hand into the right place, but what if I'd made the mistake in front of others?

This was going to be harder than I thought.

As we hurried past ship after ship, the sun baked my head, the black hair of the wig sucking up heat. The ground had been artificially hardened and sealed into a kind of blue concrete made of the local sand, but puffs of blue dust still rose with every step. There weren't many people around considering how many ships we passed, and everyone hurried, as eager to get out of the sun as I felt.

Kirel pulled me to the side, and one of those driverless carts whipped past, laden with crates. It must have had an electric engine, because I hadn't heard anything.

"Thanks," I said.

"Of course."

We had to dodge out of the way of two more of the carts, Kirel always hearing them before I did, and then we reached the place where two of the big buildings met. Instead of a corner made of solid walls, an archway stood, leading to a pedestrian avenue covered by a tent far overhead. Here were all the people who'd been missing.

I gulped, glad for my disguise. Even though I'd known no one here would be human, that was still a shit ton different than looking out over a crowd of aliens. Tula walked past, huge upright dark-green lizards with snouts full of teeth. They were naked except for the harnesses crisscrossing their golden chests, and fat, muscular tails hung down behind them. Thin, delicate-looking bird aliens were everywhere, covered in light-yellow feathers. The Sjisji also walked upright, though they had long wings covering their backs. Here and there, a pair of dark-purple horns rose above the crowd—another Zaarn—but there weren't many of those.

The crowd parted in front of me, a huge gray alien blocking the way and forcing everyone else to go around. A bald head and two arms topped its pyramidal base. A Grug, one of the aliens who'd taken me from *ARK 1* to sell me off like an exotic pet. I bared my teeth, then closed my lips before anyone realized I didn't have fangs. *Note to self: get a set of fake vampire fangs before doing this again.*

Doorways lined the avenue on both sides. The first places were barely more than holes in the wall, selling the equivalent of street food. The savory scent of grilled meat mixed with the sweet tang of fruit, and my mouth watered. Kirel led me to stall after stall, having me taste a variety of items.

Finally, I asked, “What are we doing? Acting like tourists?”

“In part.” He leaned over, his breath hot on my ear. “I’m also trying to find Chak-lit. You said you liked it.”

Oh! He’d remembered that quick comment I’d made days ago?

“How about this?” He held a tiny hourglass covered in pink and orange dots to my lips.

I bit down, breaking the thin skin, and a rush of fruity sweetness flooded my mouth, tasting of pineapple and melon. I moaned as I chewed. “Oh, that’s so good!”

“It’s lopperry. Is it like chocolate?” He looked so eager.

“No, but it’s delicious.”

He turned back to the bird alien running the stall and haggled for a container of the treats, which he stored in the small pack he carried. “For later.”

As the avenue continued on, the venues got bigger and turned into proper shops and places I assumed were bars.

Then a Sjisji wearing a golden costume caught my eye. She—I’d read that all of the plain yellow bird aliens were female—danced in front of a doorway, her wings rising and falling in time with the music thumping from within. She was beautiful and graceful, her movements quick and light in a way no human could match. Others must have liked it as well, because a lot of Tula and Sjisji entered whatever that place was.

But Kirel led me across the street to a different door, this one guarded by a Zaarn.

What the bippity hell is he wearing?

My eyes almost bugged out of my skull. He had on a pair of dark-purple leather short-shorts topped with straps crisscrossing his impressive chest. His skin gleamed teal and blue and purple—so much skin.

I was still trying to chart all the different colors when Kirel growled and body blocked me, almost shoving his chest in my face.

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CHAPTER TEN



Kirel

MY MATE SHOULD not be looking at another male like that, her eyes darting about, full of wonder. *She'll blow our cover.*

But I lied to myself. That was not the real reason I was upset. A possessive rage roared through my chest as Hay-Zul eyed the other male, who wore the outfit of a Zaarn bodyguard.

If we were bonded, she would have no desire for anyone but me, and the other male would know this. She already looked too different from most Zaarn, built short and sporting such lush curves. Acting different on top of it...

And that extended to me, too. If we were a bonded pair, I would not feel such possessive jealousy. I would know she was mine. Or at least that's what Gravin had told me.

I forced down my growl and turned to the other male. "We're newly

bonded.” Hopefully, that would be a good enough excuse.

His eyes narrowed, and when I stepped aside, they zeroed in on Hay-Zul, full of questions and doubts.

Tension tightened my muscles as my heart sped up, my body preparing for a fight. I resisted the urge to drop my hands to my fighting sticks. A fight would blow our cover and ruin the entire operation.

No. We needed to sell our fake mating better.

I scooped her into my arms, lifting her off her feet. Her full breasts pressed against my chest, sending a bolt of desire through me. My kron started to buzz, my tail sliding around to stroke over her ass. “My soul’s breath,” I panted, my voice filled with longing.

It wasn’t an act.

My rulaa tingled at her nearness, and I could no longer resist. I leaned forward and pressed our foreheads together. A moan of ecstasy ripped from my throat, and my cock leaped to aching fullness. No one had ever touched my rulaa. It was exquisite!

I cracked open my eyes to find Hay-Zul’s eyes wide, her pupils dilated. It was a good response, but it wasn’t enough. *She doesn’t have rulaa.*

As if I’d needed the reminder that she didn’t recognize me as her fated mate.

I whispered low so only she could hear. “Act like you feel pleasure. Touching foreheads is special for Zaarn.”

Hay-Zul squirmed against me, her lovely thighs rubbing over my cock with delightful pressure. Her pupils were dark and dilated in the center of her purple eyes, and her lips parted into a pretty pout that made me wonder again what this kizz thing might be. She began to pant, producing some of the same soft noises she made when she touched herself.

The sounds raced straight to my cock, which jumped, straining for more contact, more *her*.

I rocked my forehead from side to side against hers, going as far as our horns would allow, the tingle racing through my entire body. Hay-Zul wiggled again, and my hips jerked forward. All the pent-up frustration of the past few days tightened my balls, and it felt as if I could come in my pants in the middle of a crowd.

And not even care, not when I finally held my soul’s breath in my arms. Loosening my hold and letting her slowly slide down my body was one

of the hardest things I'd ever had to do in my life. The heady scent of Hay-Zul's arousal only made it harder. But I smiled as I set her back on her feet. *She feels it, too. The mating pull.*

I simply needed to get her to admit it.

Turning back to the male guarding the door, I twisted my fingers together in the sign of the Zaarn network.

He pressed his lips together and repeated the gesture, and some of the tension left my shoulders. Whether our act had fooled him or not, he would not expose us. Zaarn sent to Roam lost all ties to family and friends on our home world the moment they were banished. Not everyone found a new home like I had on the *Daredevil*, but many of us still tried to help each other, forming a network that spanned the seven sectors. We created safe houses, stored caches of supplies, and did other things to help a fellow Zaarn in need.

This male was in the network. That was the other reason I'd picked this pleasure house. It not only shared a wall with the Grug computer core, it also had a contact I could call on if need be. I used that now to get us in.

"As you can see, we're newly mated, and my soul's breath would like to try something... different." I smirked. It was a good cover. The newly mated wanting to try a touch of the alien to add some spiciness. "We'd like a Tula room with a bed pit. One on the *west* wall." I put a little extra emphasis on the word, cocking my eyebrow. I'd hacked into all of the building records for the pleasure house, finding the one room I needed.

He frowned but said, "That's room eleven."

"Yes."

As I led Hay-Zul past, the other Zaarn hissed under his breath, "I don't know what you're up to, and I don't want to know. But try not to screw this up for me."

I met his eyes, seeing the lingering pain of banishment, of having no true home. I had carried a similar ache for years. My friends among the Daredevils had eased it, but it hadn't gone away until the moment I met my mate.

If I could do nothing else, I could give him hope. My eyes flicked to Hay-Zul, and I moved my tail forward so the purple tip hung in clear view. "This is no lie. She is my fated mate. And if we are successful today, there will be mates for more of us sent to Roam."

The harsh lines of his face dissolved into shock. "Then I'll help. If you

need me.” His fingers shook as he sent his personal comp code to my comp.

“Thank you, my brother.” I squeezed his shoulder for a moment, then led Hay-Zul into the pleasure house.



Darkness surrounded us as soon as we stepped inside. When combined with the loud percussive music loved by the Tula, the effect was a little claustrophobic. I didn't like feeling as if I couldn't see and hear danger approaching, and there were so many people around they overwhelmed my rulaa. The special sense organ normally would have gone completely numb as soon as we entered the crowds of the entertainment district, but the tingling sense of Hay-Zul's presence let me know she was near.

My eyes adjusted to the lower light level. The herby smell of sjuweed smoke hung in the air, always a popular narcotic with the lizard aliens. We were in a room dotted with small tables, each with a drink and drug dispenser built into their center. Many had Sjisji and Tula pleasure workers seated at them, waiting for customers, but a few were vacant. I pulled Hay-Zul over to one of those to signal that we didn't require “company” for our visit.

Once seated on the backless stools the Tula preferred, I pulled up the menu on the table's built-in display. I leaned over to Hay-Zul's ear. “We should order something to blend in. What kind of thing do you like? Something to drink? Something to smoke?” All of the medical scanners indicated almost everything safe for a Zaarn would be fine for Hyoo-mons. I'd just need to pick things that weren't too strong so we could complete our mission.

She turned to speak directly in my ear, her hot breath making me shiver. “A drink, I guess, if you have alcohol.”

“My translator indicates an entire class of compounds for that word. Could you be specific?”

“The one you get when you ferment fruit.”

“Ethanol. Yes, we have drinks with that.”

I punched in an order and used my comp to authorize payment, using a different fake account than the one I'd used to pay the docking fees. If things went wrong, I didn't want the Grug tracing us back to the *Arrow*, so that we

could still use the shuttle to get away.

The hatch in the center of the table opened, and two cans rose up through the central column of the table, condensation beading on their silver sides.

When I handed Hay-Zul her can, she took a tentative sip. Then she broke into a smile. “I like it! It’s kind of like a hard App-pull cider but a different fruit.”

I ignored the word I didn’t know and focused on the fact that I’d chosen something that pleased her. A grin stretched my cheeks. “It’s galfruit. A favorite of mine.”

She nodded and took another sip.

I activated the table’s display again and looked at the room menus. Cancelling all the options that came with various configurations of pleasure workers, I got to the part that only had rooms. The menu didn’t list the rooms by number, instead showing their special features.

Hay-Zul watched what I was doing. She gasped when I tapped on a listing, and a picture of the room filled the screen. Her hand hooked onto my shoulder for support as she leaned forward. “Is that a swing?” Her voice squeaked out a high note. “A sex swing?”

“Yes.” I hissed the word between clenched teeth. This was the first time she’d ever initiated touching me, and my skin burned with an awareness of her, my cock leaping to life.

Her wide eyes met mine. “Is that something you like?”

“They’re usually used by Sjisji, who weigh only a fraction of what a Zaarn or Tula does. It keeps them from getting crushed.” The bird aliens were so fragile compared to a Zaarn that being with one of them was never satisfying—you could never let yourself go. I would have no such trouble with my mate, who was strong and solid and beautiful.

“Oh.” Her mouth made the sweetest circle as she breathed out the word, and my keen hearing detected a note of longing, even with the pounding music.

“My dear mate,” I grinned, slow and seductive, “I would be more than happy to fulfill any fantasy you might have, use any toy you might want.”

Her pupils dilated when I said that last bit. Interesting. My Hay-Zul liked toys. I let my tongue play over my fangs, even as my tail vibrated hard enough to thrum through my whole body.

A meaty green hand thumped onto her shoulder, and I sprang to my feet,

knocking it away.

A Tula stood there, backed by a group of the lizard aliens, his golden eyes darkened by drug-dilated pupils. The leather harnesses crisscrossing his chest carried the golden pens that marked him as Tula Syndicate, the most powerful mobsters in the seven sectors. The reek of sjuweed hung heavy around him. The herb from the Sjisji home world acted as a mild euphoric for the bird aliens and the Zaarn, but it had a much bigger effect on the Tula. He flared his throat pouch until it swelled into a yellow balloon.

The thing the lizards always forgot was that their threat display didn't really work on other species. If anything, that pouch was a weakness, easily punctured. My hands dropped to my fighting sticks. They weren't sharpened, but one good jab with the end of one of these could still punch a hole in a pouch.

"Keep your filthy paws off my mate," I growled. It wasn't even acting. As soon as he'd dared to touch her, a possessive anger had flared hot in my chest.

"Thought you were the talent, waiting for a threesome." He spread his hands wide and leered at Hay-Zul. "Here I am, the best third you'll ever have. If fact, I bet you'll leave this horned bastard the moment you try Tula co—"

His groin slit began to open, and I thwacked the meat of his thigh with one of my sticks while the other pressed into his throat pouch. "Don't," I rasped. "If you want to keep that pitiful excuse for a cock, then don't."

The other Tula lumbered forward, and Hay-Zul stood, trapped between the floor-mounted table and all of them. She edged closer to me and laid a hand on my forearm, rising on her tiptoes to whisper, "Don't blow our cover. Remember why we're here."

But the possessiveness filling me was exactly what a Zaarn would feel if someone touched his mate. If anything, this would maintain our cover. I opened my mouth to argue, then snapped it shut. She was right. My behavior might convince other Zaarn, but the other people in the room were all Sjisji and Tula.

"You're lucky my mate is kinder than I am," I said. "We're customers, same as you. Find other play partners."

"Honest mistake." His throat pouch deflated, and his words were conciliatory, but his eyes remained latched onto my mate in a way that made my tail lash behind me. "Can't blame me for wondering what Zaarn cunt

tastes like, though. It's not as if—erkkk!”

I jammed the end of a fighting stick into his throat, stopping his vile words. The other one rose to slam into his temple in a diagonal strike that hit so hard it vibrated up my arm.

The inner membranes on his eyes snapped shut, making them a cloudy white. He dropped to the floor with a thunk that was satisfyingly louder than the music. It also put him in the way of the two Tula immediately behind him.

The ones on each side rushed me.

“Get up on the table!” I yelled to Hay-Zul. It was the only safe spot in the immediate area.

I met the first Tula with a block that knocked his fist down away from my face. Then I spun, catching the second with a blow to his shoulder. On any other species, it would have been enough to disable the arm, but Tula were tough. My only advantage was the extra reach my foot-long fighting sticks gave.

And the fact that I was a trained Zaarn warrior. My lips pulled back from my teeth in a growl as the final two lizards joined the fight, making it four to one.

Frek the odds.

I'd take on an army to protect my soul's breath.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Hazel

I FLATTENED MY palms to the glass tabletop and lifted a knee to crawl onto it, my heart leaping against my ribs. *Did he really just do that? Did Kirel really just knock a guy unconscious for saying something risqué to me?*

He had.

I should probably be horrified at the easy violence of it, and yet... a part of me was thrilled. All those Hollywood movies of guys standing up to defend a girl's honor had always seemed like fairytales—wonderful and dreamy and nothing that would ever happen in real life. At least not to me.

Until now. Until *him*.

Maybe there was something real in how he felt about me. Maybe it wasn't all smooth-guy charm just to get into my pants for a quick conquest.

In a split second, Kirel had gone from tense stillness to a whirling dervish of flashing strikes. By the time I got to my feet, the four remaining

lizards had surrounded him as much as they could. Only the table and the dude passed out on the floor got in their way.

Kirel was amazing, spinning and lashing out at each Tula as they got close. But the lizards didn't only have fists—they swung their tails like big clubs, too. Kirel had to leap constantly to keep from being knocked off his feet.

And while he was in the air, one of the others could land a punch he couldn't dodge. Two of the lizards attacked him from one side, and his leap over a tail swipe was a thing of raw power and beauty. Kirel's arms lashed out in blurs that deflected their punches.

But one of the others came at him from behind, landing a blow to his kidneys that made me wince.

The fourth Tula snuck around the edge of the table in front of me, also looking for a way to attack Kirel from his blind side.

Oh, hell no!

I wasn't a physical person and hadn't fought a day in my life, but I couldn't just stand here. Crouching, I reached for a can. When I stood back up, I used both hands to slam in down on the lizard's head. Jolts of pain cramped my fingers, and I expected the dude to drop.

But nope. Fucking hard headed, these guys—literally.

He spun around, his neck thingy flaring outward like a yellow balloon, then deflating. *Kirel hit that one guy in the neck. It must be a vulnerable spot!*

The Tula's taloned hand reached for me, and I kicked out. My legs had always been the strongest part of my body, and the heavy Zaarn boots I wore gave my foot some nice heft.

My reinforced toes punched into his neck.

The lizard let out a gargled squawk and stumbled backward, his hands clutching at his throat.

Kirel's stick thumped into another one's temple in a vicious blow that made the lizard's body do a half spin before hitting the ground.

It was finally two to one, and I'd lay all my bets on Kirel. *Computer geek, my ass.* The male moved like fury made flesh.

He leaped over another tail swipe, his expression one of feral glee. His lips pulled back in something that was half grin, half snarl, and one-hundred percent sexy.

One of the lizards made a move toward me, and Kirel moved to

intercept, leaving himself open. He took a punch to the side from the other one, grunting in pain. But he didn't waver.

Kirel put his body between me and danger, not caring what it cost him.

And all of the sudden, I knew I'd been wrong about him. Kirel was gorgeous and sure of himself, but he also cared about others. He cared about *me*, my wellbeing. *He's not like Derek at all.*

The Zaarn from the door shoved through the crowd and bellowed, "Break it up!" He slapped a hand onto the shoulder of one of the remaining Tula and yanked him around and away from Kirel.

The other lizard bared a snout-full of teeth and said, "Should have known you'd side with your own."

The Zaarn snorted and pointed to all the downed Tula. "Looks to me like I'm saving *your* frekking ass. Now break it off."

Kirel backed up until his butt hit the table, still staying between me and the rest of the lizards.

Everyone in the room watched us, their alien eyes avid. The lizards all looked angry, and I couldn't tell what the bird aliens were thinking. Their beaks didn't show emotion in any way I could discern—I'd never realized how much I relied on smiles and frowns and a hundred little variations on lip movements before. Still, nothing about the mood of the room gave me the warm and fuzzies.

I'd never been so happy to wear a costume in my life. This was so not the place to have anyone discover I was a human.

"You, get out of here," the Zaarn bouncer yelled at us. Then he stepped close and whispered something to Kirel.

Kirel shoved his fighting sticks back into their holsters and spun around. Before I knew what was happening, he wrapped his arms around my thighs and threw me over his shoulder.

Air whooshed out of me.

He took off at a run, heading for the back of the room.

I braced my hands on his back as we dashed down a corridor. His arm wrapped around me with gentle strength, keeping me in place.

Sjisji in costumes stood on each side of the hall, their big eyes staring, their wings lifted in agitation.

I had to force down the need to talk, to call out and ask what we were doing. I trusted Kirel. If he took us this way, it was for a reason.

He slammed into something with a metallic clang, not slowing even a little. Hot air whooshed over me as he ran outside. The gray wall of the building receded quickly as he picked up speed, his feet digging into blue sand. The wind wiped away the tracks almost as quickly as he made them.

But it wouldn't do us any good.

Shouts came from behind, dots boiling out of the back of the club.

"We've got a lead, but they're following! We stand out like sore thumbs!"

"My thumbs are fine."

"That's not what that means." Argh! I didn't have time to explain the idiom. "We're too visible. We'll never lose them like this." I had on a red shirt, and Kirel's was a deep gold. It would have been perfect for a desert back on Earth, but not this blue alien one.

Kirel slide to a halt and set me on the ground. "If you wanted me to take my shirt off, you only had to ask." He grinned, hot and wicked, and stripped the pack from his back before ripping his shirt off over his head and shoving it inside.

Before I could sputter a response, he strapped the pack onto my back and picked me up in a bridal carry, cradling me to his chest so his wide back hid all of my red-covered torso from view.

He took off running again, his feet pounding across the blue sand. From behind, we'd be nothing but a blue dot against blue sand.

I peeked over his shoulder. He'd picked up a lot of distance, and heat haze smeared the lizards following us into blurs. They'd be having the same problem.

I settled back, my hands pressed to his firm chest to try to keep from bouncing a ton. His skin was hot and smooth, and I had to force myself not to caress him.

Faint hints of pink lightened a darkening sky, and soon we were out in the desert.

"Where... are... we... going?" I gasped out each word in between the jolts of his footfalls.

"A bolt hole." He glanced at me for a second. "Are you okay like this?"

Sure, I could run on my own, but I knew I'd never match the speed he ran at. "I'm fine."

"Not much longer now."

He kept running, the slipping sand making him fight for each footfall.

God, he was in amazing shape! I would have collapsed about twenty feet from the backdoor at this speed, but he just motored on like a guy out for a morning jog instead of someone running with the weight of another person.

The feel of his powerful body against mine moving with such strength and ease did something to my girly bits. My palms pressed to the firm muscles of his chest, holding me in place, but also taking in the solid reality of him on some primal level. *Good male*, my body screamed at me. *Strong male*.

Ugh, at this rate, I'd lose all ability to use language and start grunting and finger painting basic symbols instead of speaking and writing in complete sentences.

His arms tightened around me, and my pussy clenched. *Bad body!* It didn't listen.

When he finally slid to a halt, Kirel didn't even breathe hard as he let me slide down his rock-hard body. "I think we lost them."

If anything, *I* was the one panting, and it had nothing to do with exertion. Being this close to him, touching him, had me tingling *everywhere*.

"Are you truly okay?" His eyes raked over my body, leaving licks of fire everywhere they touched. His expression held concern, and he pursed his lips, which made his killer cheekbones stand out even more. Yep, Hollywood sure lost out on a fortune not being able to cast this guy. He would have played every sexy elf or alien in every fantasy or sci-fi movie and TV show, and fans still wouldn't have gotten enough of looking at him.

"I'm fine." My stomach felt a bit bruised from being thrown over his shoulder, but I wasn't going to complain, not after what he'd just done to save us. I reached up to check that my wig and horns were still in place. The tail remained behind me, hovering about a foot away from my back. I patted at my pocket, relieved to feel the hard lump that meant I hadn't lost the little lipstick controller.

Kirel took back his shirt and pack, pulling them both on. He took out his tablet and tapped away at it, his clever fingers a blur.

I imagined those fingers on me, and my thighs clenched. We were in the middle of the desert without any real supplies, and we'd blown our mission. This so wasn't the time to be distracted! *Bad brain!*

"It's this way." He pointed ahead and to the left.

I followed the line of his finger to... a dark smudge on the horizon.

“What is it?”

“A cave of some kind.” He started working on his tablet again. “I’m hacking into the satellites and wiping all recordings of where we went, but we want to get undercover before full night falls. The desert cools off, and our heat signatures will be impossible to hide if they send anyone looking for us using infrared goggles.”

I trudged along, taking two or three steps for every one of his long-legged strides. He slowed to match me without saying a word.

The sky continued to darken, the orange glow at the horizon turning purple as stars winked into view overhead. The wind blowing across the desert cooled from hot to warm, and I finally noticed a pleasant earthy mineral smell.

The faint remnants of dusk barely outlined the dark rocks when we got close. I couldn’t even tell what color they were.

Kirel used his comp to lead us to a hole half buried behind a boulder. “We’ll have to crawl for a few feet at first, but supposedly, it opens up inside.”

“How did you find this?” I crouched in front of the opening.

“The Zaarn sent to Roam no longer have a planet or anyone official we can depend upon if we get into trouble.” Hurt laced his voice, and I hated hearing it. “So we set up a network to help each other no matter where we might be. The door guard at the pleasure house told me about this place and sent the location to my comp.”

He edged forward, his leg bumping mine. “I’ll go first to make sure it’s safe.”

I shuffled aside as he got down on hands and knees, a slightly darker form against the dark sand. He disappeared into the blackness of the opening.

The rustle of sand and moving clothes echoed back to me, then after a minute, he called out, “It’s okay. You can come.”

I wish, a little voice whispered, all of the frustration of the last few days centering between my thighs in a needy rush. I bit my lip to keep from giggling. The words probably didn’t carry the extra meaning in his language. Did the Zaarn have double entendres? I wasn’t going to ask. Kirel didn’t need any extra ammunition for his sexy advances. He did quite well on his own, thank you very much.

Especially since I emerged from the end of the tunnel to find him sitting

in such a small space it would be hard not to touch.

His tablet lit the sharp lines of his face, showing off his gorgeous grin.

My pussy gave another excited clench.

It was going to be a long night.

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CHAPTER TWELVE



Kirel

I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND why the Zaarn door guard had called this a good hiding spot. The cavern—and I was being generous even referring to it as such—was barely large enough for me to lie down in.

The deep blue rock of the walls and ceiling glistened with flecks of embedded mica, the surface a little rough. Grains of sand came loose with every touch. More sand covered the ground in the same blue. But this didn't seem big enough to be an official safe location recorded with the network, so what was I missing?

A faint sound, like the echoing trickle of water, teased my ears.

I froze, turning my head, trying to find... There!

The back wall looked solid from this angle, but when I shuffled sideways, what had appeared to be a tiny crack opened up into another passageway. I had to stoop to stand, but Hay-Zul didn't have that issue when

I pulled her to her feet. “Come on.”

I held my comp in front for light as I headed down the narrow tunnel, my mate following. We rounded a bend, and a large cavern opened up in front of us, the temperature dropping to a comfortable warmth.

“Oh.” Hay-Zul stepped up beside me, her hand covering her mouth, which had fallen open. Her wide eyes gazed in wonder.

I turned off the light on my comp so she could take in the full effect. Crystal stalactites hung from the ceiling, and veins of similar crystal snaked across the blue rock walls, gleaming like inset rivers of diamond. The floor sloped down to a pool filled with luminescent pale-blue water. The light shimmered off of all the crystal, reflected repeatedly by the stalactites until it bathed the entire room in an ethereal glow.

“It’s so beautiful. What is it?”

“It’s a special bioluminescent organism found on Zaar. It comes from the caves of Julon, and people make a pilgrimage to bathe in the waters.”

“So it’s safe?”

“Yes.”

She gave a small frown. “I thought Pranch was a dead world?”

“It was when the Grug found it, but now that people live here, some microorganisms are starting to grow.” I walked over to a natural shelf set into the wall and started sorting through the supplies left there. “A Zaarn brought this here purposefully to see if he could recreate a small slice of our home world he missed.”

“Well, he certainly did a great job.”

She drank a can of water, while I downed three. Running in a desert was thirsty work.

I dug the makeup wipes from my pack back, and she removed the paint from her face and hands. Then she reached up to remove the wig and horns, running her fingers through her golden hair.

I unfastened my boots and stood, unsealing my shirt.

“What are you doing?” Hay-Zul’s voice rose to a squeak as I tossed it aside and reached for the front seam of my pants.

“I just ran for miles through the blistering heat of the desert. I’m going to get cleaned up.”

She spun around as I stripped off my pants, but not before catching a glimpse, her eyes lingering for a moment before she caught herself.

I smirked. My sweet mate was far more interested than she wanted to admit.

The sandy floor continued to slope gently as I walked into the water, which was just cool enough to be refreshing.

When it reached my shoulders, I said. "I'm covered now." The microorganisms that made the water glow also turned it milky and opaque. "I won't turn around until you tell me to."

"You want me to..."

"Come on, Hay-Zul." I waved my arms back and forth, loving the sensation of the fluid running over my skin. "It feels wonderful."

A few moments of silence, then the rustle of cloth.

I smiled. She really would love this, and I wanted her to enjoy it.

Then she splashed into the water behind me, and I realized I was only a few feet from a naked Hay-Zul. My cock sprang to full attention, my tail rising from the water with an eager buzz. I ground my teeth together, needing all the discipline of my warrior training to remain still. *She wants me, but she always backs away. I need to tempt her more, make her come to me. Then I'll have her.*

"Okay, I'm covered, too."

I turned to find her standing several feet away, the height difference bringing the water to her shoulders where it had hit me mid-chest. Her pale skin and golden hair glowed in the blue-white light, as if she were a star given female form. The tiny dots covering her nose and cheeks brushed across the tops of her shoulders, trailing down her chest. I longed to follow them, to see if she had them everywhere, to learn the new constellations they made on every part of her.

She ducked under, surfacing to slick back her water-darkened hair, the movement making her breasts rise until the tops broke the surface, teasing with a hint of nipple.

I groaned, and her startled eyes flew to me.

"You are beautiful, my sweet mate. The most beautiful thing in the universe."

Her lips pressed into a thin line. She didn't believe me. How to make her believe me?

I ducked under, scrubbing at my face and hair while submerged. When I rose, I walked past her, more and more of my body becoming visible with

each step. My tail darted toward her, and my hand snapped out to grab it before it could touch her and start the mating heat. I realized what my greedy body could not. *She'll never trust me if I put her into heat without her consent.*

She gave another of those adorable squeaks and turned once the water reached my hips, and surety filled me. Yes, I would tempt her and bring her to me.

Then I would make her mine.



I grabbed a pair of clean pants from the supplies and pulled them on. Then I crouched by the water and washed first Hay-Zul's clothes and my own. After wringing them out, I took them back to the tunnel that opened onto the desert and hung them on protrusions on the rocky wall where the hot air would dry them quickly.

Then I returned to my mate. She still stood in the middle of the water, peering at the shore. "Thanks, but what am I going to wear?"

I plucked one of the shirts from the supplies, turned my back, and held it behind me.

Water splashed, and I imagined her walking toward me, exposing her lovely body with every step. My cock strained the front of my pants. It was torture, the most maddening torture, and yet I cherished every single moment spent in her presence.

She took the shirt from me, and cloth rustled. "I'm decent."

"Aren't you always decent?" I turned to face her. "You're a good person."

The shirt draped over her, showing her pretty legs. But it wasn't one of mine, and an irrational possessiveness made my hands twitch with the desire to tear it from her body.

"What? Of course I'm a good person." She smoothed her wet hair back from her face, her breasts moving in that fascinating way again, swaying beneath the fabric. "In this instance, it means I'm dressed."

"I don't see what clothing has to do with it. You should be just as good of a person naked as clothed." I gave her a sultry smile, my tongue teasing

my fangs. “In fact, I imagine you’re very good when you’re naked.”

She snorted and squatted to rummage through our pack, pulling out the ration bars.

I grabbed a thin bedroll and spread it out across the only dry section of ground. It didn’t provide a lot of padding, but it would keep us off the sand. “Here.”

The cramped space had one advantage. My mate sat close. The sweet smell of her skin soon perfumed the air, and my kron began to vibrate even as my tail wrapped across her back. I longed to touch her, pull her more fully to me, so I let my tail do what I could not.

I ate three of the protein bars, one after the other. My body begged for the calories, and who knew what the morning would bring? It was better to be prepared.

Hay-Zul finished her dinner by the time I’d wolfed down the final piece of mine, and I pulled out the container of lopberries, delighting in how much she enjoyed their sweet flavor. I might not have found Chak-lit for her yet, but I could give her these.

I ate a few myself, but insisted she finish them off.

Once she’d swallowed her last bite, she sighed. “What are we going to do about the mission?”

“We’ll finish it in the morning.” I opened a small package I’d taken from the supplies and pulled out a piece of fabric the exact blue of Pranch. But instead of a flat color, it had been printed with a pattern that made it look just like sand.

Her eyes widened as she ran a hand over it. “It looks rough, like sand, but it’s soft.”

“It’ll keep us warm tonight and hide us tomorrow.” I grinned. “With this, we can walk right up to the computer core’s outer wall and find an access port. It’ll be even less detectable than cutting through the wall like we would have needed to do at the pleasure house.”

Hay-Zul blew out a breath, and her shoulders dropped as her body leaned a little farther backward. “Good. I was worried.”

“Don’t worry.” I folded the bag up into a makeshift pillow and eased her back onto it. “Rest, and I’ll make everything right in the morning. I promise.”

I lay down beside her. She curled up against my arm and leg, and I froze my body to perfect stillness. Even though my cock ached with her nearness, I

didn't want to break this magical moment.

The very first time I slept with my mate touching me.



I woke to the same blue glow and gentle trickle of water. What had woken me?

Then it came, the quietest of sighs, the slight rustle of cloth.

Hay-Zul stirred restlessly beside me.

Her eyes remained closed even as her mouth fell open on a soft gasp. One of her hands pressed tight between her thighs, and her body quivered. The heady scent of her arousal saturated the air until I felt like I could taste her on my tongue.

My cock jerked in my pants, straining against the fabric, and my tail rose into the air, the end buzzing with the desire to start the mating heat.

My mate didn't seem to be awake, but her body clearly strained toward the orgasm she'd failed to reach for the last few nights.

Frek! I wanted to pull her hand away, to feast on her with my tongue until pleasure racked her body and she screamed my name.

She jolted awake, her startled eyes meeting mine. "Wha—what's happening?"

"I'd say it's more a matter of what's *not* happening."

Her hand jerked away from her core, and she smoothed it over her now dry hair. Her cheeks flushed. "I don't know what you mean."

"By the Goddess, Hay-Zul, I can't take it any longer." The words tore from my throat in a guttural growl. "Tell me how I can help."

"Help with what?"

"Help you find your glorious completion."

Her eyes went wide, and her mouth dropped open as all the color drained from her face. "You knew?" It emerged as a squeak.

"Did you think I wouldn't hear you? Or smell the sweet scent of your arousal?"

She made a strangled sound.

If she couldn't talk about it, I would. "You haven't been able to orgasm. Tell me why, and I'll fix it."

“I’m not broken!” Her eyes flashed.

“I never said you were.” Frek! I kept saying it wrong. I took a deep breath and tried again, ignoring the insistent pulse of my cock. “I just want to help. I want you to be happy, to be satisfied.”

“Why?”

“You’re my mate. It will give me pleasure to give you pleasure.”

She bit at her lip, her teeth worrying the flesh to bright redness. Such a fascinating and heady color. I held back a moan.

“I…” Hay-Zul cleared her throat and tried again, blushing furiously. “I need a toy to orgasm. One that vibrates.”

I grinned, my tongue toying with my fangs. Digging into my bag, I pulled out the purple spray can and coated the end of my tail. The waterproof paint wouldn’t let any of the heat-inducing fluids through. I could pleasure Hay-Zul without starting the mating heat and knot. It wouldn’t be the bonding I wanted, but it would be *something*.

And if it made her want me even more? My grin turned feral.

The special paint dried quickly, and I said, “You can touch it now. I’ve sealed it for you.”

“So that was like a spray-on Kon Dom?”

“My translator doesn’t have that word.”

“It’s a thin membrane you wrap around an erection to trap the semen to prevent pregnancy.”

“Something like that. This keeps the heat-inducing fluids contained so that a couple can enjoy themselves when they don’t have time for the knot.” It was one of the main uses of the paint back on my home world.

“Not?”

She was getting off course, that clever mind of hers thinking too much again. My mate needed to live inside her beautiful, lush body instead. I held up the vibrating tip of my tail, letting the buzz fill the cavern. “Do you want this or not?”

Her pupils dilated, and her mouth fell open. She licked at her lips, and I groaned. Gravin had hinted that humans did special things with their mouths, and frek, I wanted to know what they were.

“Yes,” she said, her voice soft and breathy.

“Put it exactly where you want it.” I relaxed my iron control over my tail and let it glide through the air toward her. Then I dropped my voice to a

seductive purr. “Use me, Hay-Zul. Use me for your pleasure.”

She licked at her lips, her pupils dilating. Then she gave a sharp nod. “Okay, but I want to see you, too.” Her hand fluttered toward my thighs. “You do things, too.”

“Things?” I teased. “Isn’t that a little vague? I thought you were a linguist?”

“Yes, yes.” She huffed out a breath. “I want you to touch yourself.”

Her words sent a jolt of desire through me, and my hips jerked.

A slow smile spread across Hay-Zul’s face as she saw the effect she had on me. She dropped her voice to a whisper, and said, “I want to see if that cock’s as magnificent as you make it out to be, with all your P cock strutting.”

The translator didn’t know what kind of cock a P cock was, but I didn’t care. She’d called my cock magnificent!

Her hands went to the bottom hem of her shirt, and she shot me a pointed look and raised an eyebrow.

I opened the front of my pants, the sound of the seal ripping loud in the small space and one of the most erotic noises I’d ever heard. My heart kicked with expectation. My erection sprang free. I groaned at the look on my mate’s face as her eyes devoured me. “Frek, Hay-Zul. If you keep looking at me like that, I’m not sure I can keep my hands off you.”

“It’s... it’s purple,” she breathed. “And *big*.” She turned red again and bit at her lip. How I loved all these color changes.

I stroked a hand down my length, the swirled ridges lining the surface adding a delicious texture that pleased females well. I squeezed around the base, where the lines intensified right over the area that would swell to form my knot. The knot I’d never felt—never thought to feel when it seemed I’d never have a fated mate—but couldn’t wait to share with her.

For now, I’d be happy with this glorious glimpse of her.

She pulled the shirt up to her waist, but the Pant-ees I’d made still covered her sex. They were the same blue color as my hands, and even now, I could imagine cupping her, fingering her...

I groaned as my cock jumped, a shiver of desire rushing through me and tightening my balls.

“Frek, Hay-Zul. The look in your eyes is going to kill me. Do you know how much I want you right now?” I gestured to my cock, which stood at full

attention. “Can you see what you do to me?”

Her breathing grew louder as she pushed down that last scrap of fabric, finally baring herself to me. A triangle of golden curls covered the top of her sex, but below, glistening skin beckoned, flushed rosy with need. She looked like a goddess bathed in the magical light of the cavern.

My kron buzzed louder than ever, my tail darting toward her. I barely yanked it to a stop so that it hovered only inches from her delectable skin. “Put me where you want me, my Hay-Zul. Show me exactly what you like.”

Her hand wrapped around the tip of my tail, and a rush of pleasure shot through me at the touch. Then my beautiful mate pressed the flat triangle of my kron over the very top of her sex.

It buzzed hard, the soft leathery wings vibrating against her skin and over a firm nub.

Her whole body jerked as if she’d been given an electrical charge, her feet rising into the air. Hay-Zul’s eyes snapped shut, and her head fell back, her mouth opening on a silent scream.

I fisted my cock, my hips jerking, pumping into my hand like I wanted to plunge into her.

Waves of pleasure rolled through me, and my balls drew up. I hung at the cusp of release, until her eyes opened to watch me.

That was all it took.

“Hay-Zul!” I yelled as a roar of pleasure shot out of my cock, spurting in thick ropes of come.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Hazel

KIREL COMING WITH my name on his lips had to be the hottest thing I'd ever seen. I'd thought it was him in the water, the light-blue glow making his iridescent skin gleam. That had been good, great even. But this? This was *scorching*.

Maybe that was why my body still hummed with excitement even though I'd just orgasmed.

Or maybe it was because I still pressed his vibrating tail tip to my clit.

A giddy huff of laughter escaped me as I finally made my fingers let go. God, that thing was A. Maze. Ing. Stronger than the best vibrator I'd ever had yet also warm and slightly pliable, so it molded to my body instead of sitting there like a hard lump of plastic. And the way the wings had fluttered against me—what would they feel like inside? My pussy clenched.

He really does come with a built-in sex toy. The best sex toy.

Kirel grinned at me, his face becoming heart-stoppingly handsome. And for the first time, I let myself revel in it. The way he'd defended me back at the pleasure house proved it once and for all. The layer of charm didn't hide a rotten core. He wasn't Derek. I could trust Kirel.

He ran one of the wipes over himself, and that thing must have been advanced tech if it could mop up the copious amounts of fluid. God, his dick! I pressed my palms to my cheeks, feeling the heated burn of my blush. All those teasing glimpses I'd gotten hadn't prepared me for the reality of it. His cock was next-level big, long and thick. It didn't have the flared ridge of a head. Instead, these raised lines ran all over the surface, like a ribbed condom dialed up to ten, made for her pleasure.

My pleasure.

My pussy gave another excited clench.

"Oh, frek, Hay-Zul. I can still smell you." Those purple eyes latched onto me. "You need more, don't you? Tell me you need more. Tell me I can taste you."

I gasped, a jolt of desire shooting through me. Here I was, the linguist, the comms expert, unable to talk. All I could do was nod.

In a flash, Kirel stripped my panties from my legs, the mass of his body settling between my thighs. His eyes latched onto my core, and my thighs tried to clench shut, but the width of his shoulders held me open to his gaze.

His fingers teased over my folds, spreading my lips wide, and he groaned. "Frek, you're so wet for me, so beautiful. Your cunt is perfect."

I shivered.

He flicked the tip of his tongue over my clit, and my hips rose. Kirel gave a wicked chuckle. "And this... I like this. What is it called?"

"Clitoris."

"That's a mouthful." His tongue flicked again, and I gasped. "What other words?"

"Clit," I panted. "I call it my clit."

"That's better." He nipped at my inner thigh, his fangs scraping across my skin in an added flash of sensation.

Then his tongue fluttered over my clit in a blur of movement that made my entire body tingle. My hands groped the air, grabbing at his upper horns, and this time his laugh vibrated through my sensitive nub.

"Oh, god." I couldn't breathe, it was so good. No guy had ever gone

down on me like this, like he loved it. You couldn't fake this kind of enthusiasm.

He pulled back just enough to say, "You taste divine." Then he dipped lower, his tongue swirling around my entrance.

I pulled at his horns, tugging him closer, telling him I wanted him in me, even if I couldn't say it out loud.

"Greedy," he murmured in a dark chuckle, the air puffing across my sensitized skin. "I love it."

His tongue plunged into me, and his tail arced through the air to tap against my stomach. It slid down, coming ever closer to where I wanted it.

Right as it buzzed over my clit, Kirel thrust his tongue even deeper.

My heart sped, my breath coming in pants, and all I could smell was caramel, sweet and rich and too good to question.

He lapped at my pussy with wet, smacking noises. They were so dirty, so delicious my toes curled. Then his tail vibrated even harder, the leathery wings dancing over my skin. Tingling warmth built to explode outward, until I shouted. My back bowed, my hips pressing up into him as wave after wave of bliss tore through me.

I floated back down to the ground, and my hands released their death grip on his upper horns. I lay dazed, staring at the stalactites of silver crystal gleaming on the ceiling overhead, looking like icicles lit from within.

Kirel surged upward, scooping me into his arms and turning so he lay on the ground and I sprawled across the firm heat of his body. He pulled the thin sheet of fabric up over my bare bottom, then spread his hand over one butt cheek, holding me in place. "That's better, isn't it? That's my sweet Hay-Zul, coming for me like a good mate."

He murmured more to me, the rumble of his voice felt in my chest as much as heard. The meaning of the words slowly faded as I slipped into the first blissful sleep I'd had in ages.



The ding of an alarm brought me awake, the confusion of waking in a strange place fading as I felt Kirel shift underneath me. My cheeks flushed as the memory of everything we'd done hit me all at once. Him cranking his

massive dick to completion, his mouth on me, his dirty talk, his tail... God, that wicked tail!

His eyes immediately sought mine. "Good morning, my sweet mate."
"Morning."

His smile stretched wide enough to brighten the room, and he leaned down toward me.

In a flash, I realized that even with everything we'd done the night before, we hadn't kissed yet. I tipped my head back, anticipation puckering my lips.

And he pressed his forehead to mine.

What?

His eyes closed, and his lips parted on a soft moan. He clearly looked as if it gave him pleasure. I'd seen Cara and Gravin press foreheads like this—I just hadn't known why.

When he went to pull away, I grabbed onto one of his lower horns and pulled him back to me. "My turn."

As I leaned closer, he watched me so intently, my heart skipped. I pressed my lips to his for stretched seconds, then began to move. His mouth opened on a gasp, and I flicked my tongue out. Kirel growled, and his arms banded around me. In a flash, he'd rolled us over, pressing his weight onto me, the firm length of his erection grinding against my thigh.

It wasn't smooth or suave or practiced.

That clever tongue of his slid over mine as he ate at my mouth. He kissed me like a man starved.

I clutched at his lower horns, holding on as my entire body strained upward to meet his.

The alarm beeped again, and Kirel tore from me with a groan. "This is the kizz thing Gravin told me about, isn't it?"

"You talked about this?" Maybe that was why he'd been so good at it.

"No details, just the word." He reached out to drag his thumb over my lower lip. "But I don't blame him for not saying more. Words could not do it justice. Unless you would like to tell me how *you* would describe it, my dear linguist." His eyes took on a seductive gleam.

My mouth fell open, and he pushed the tip of his thumb inside. Instead of answering with words, I sucked on it, teasing with my tongue.

"So wet, so hot." He groaned, his vibrating tail snaking around his body

to slide up my side, heading for my breasts.

His tablet let out an even louder bleep.

“Frek!” Kirel leaned over to pick it up. “We need to move. They sent out a patrol early this morning. The satellite I hacked shows they just cleared this area. We should go while we can.”

“Right.” I rolled up to my knees and pulled the shirt down to cover my butt, the movement making my bladder give an insistent twinge. I glanced around the small cave, hoping for a nook or something I hadn’t noticed the evening before. “Where are my clothes, and where can I use the bathroom?”

“Outside.” He pulled on his boots. “I’ll get your clothes.”

I found my panties and pulled them on, then finished getting dressed as soon as he returned. Leaving off the wig and horns for now, I followed him into the smaller cave.

“I’ll go first just to make sure it’s clear. I’ll leave my comp here to give you some light.”

As soon as he yelled it was safe, I crawled after him. The blue sand of the tunnel floor felt abrasive under my hands. Bright light glared ahead, and I squinted as I got to the entrance, the temperature climbing noticeably. The cave had remained consistently warm, insulated by rock and sand.

Kirel stood several feet away, his back turned to me, peeing against the rock. How I envied the ease with which he did it! I walked in the other direction until the curve of the wall partially hid me from view and squatted. It felt weird for my ass to just be hanging out there for anyone to see. I’d never had to do any like this before. Camping had been something only done in movies by the time I left Earth, since the tiny strips of remaining forest were either owned by the mega-rich or tightly protected by the government.

Thankfully, I’d brought one of the wipes and could clean up. When I came back around, I waved with it. “What do I do with this?” It seemed wrong to just throw it down.

“It’s biodegradable.” He crouched and dug a hole in the sand, his large hands making quick work of it.

I dropped it in, he covered it up, and we went back inside to eat breakfast and put my costume on.

When we were ready, I paused for a moment before leaving the inner cavern. The glow of the pool reflected through the stalactites and gleamed off the ribbons of crystal woven through the walls. It was a beautiful and magical

place, this little slice of Kirel's home world.

Kirel caught me looking and smiled, wide and genuine, making my stomach flutter.

This cavern—and all of last night—had turned into the most romantic interlude I'd ever experienced.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Kirel

GLEE LIFTED MY heart all the way back across the desert. I carried Hay-Zul on my back, her legs wrapped around my waist, my hands cradling her lush thighs. My tail wrapped diagonally up her back, holding her to me.

Her arms stretched up and forward, holding the fabric over our heads so we couldn't be spotted from above. I'd confirmed my hack of the satellites remained in place, but it didn't hurt to be careful.

She leaned forward, her chin resting on my shoulder, the touch of her soft skin on mine enticing. The fabric didn't cover our fronts. In case anyone was outside, I'd once again removed my shirt, so the teal and blue of my chest and arms could provide better camouflage against the sand.

The rippling blue dunes flattened as we approached the factories, the dark walls making a hard line across the horizon.

The air burned hot and dry as I sucked it into my lungs, my heart

thumping in time with my footfalls as I ran. Zaarn were built for strength and stamina, and all the sparring I did with the other Daredevils kept me in shape.

My mate hadn't wanted me to carry her again, but I'd argued that we needed the speed. It wasn't a complete lie, but I'd also wanted to touch her for longer, to feel her pressed against me. Last night had been glorious, yet I still ached with the need to knot and claim her, to seal our mating bond.

As the wall of the Grug buildings rose before us, I slowed to a jog, then a walk. In moments, my breathing slowed as well, and the hiss of wind over sand made a constant backdrop to the soft sounds of Hay-Zul's breaths.

The blue sand didn't reflect sunshine up at me as a lighter color would, so I could see fairly well, even through the heat haze. But it sucked in all the warmth of the sun, radiating it until I felt like I moved through an oven, baked from above and below. It would only get hotter as the day progressed. I hated the thought of my mate caught out in the worst of it.

"Do you want me to walk?" Hay-Zul breathed into my ear.

"No. It's easier to keep the fabric over us like this. If your arms are okay."

"I can do it," she said, determination filling her voice.

But now that I had slowed, I could feel the faint tremors running through her muscles. Holding something up overhead for long periods of time was taxing. I squeezed her thighs. "Grip me tighter with your legs so I can take the cloth. I need to move my arms to a different position." It was a lie—I would carry my sweet mate until my arms fell from my body—but it was one that kept her dignity intact, so I didn't regret it.

She did so, her thighs clamping onto me with delicious pressure. *Will her legs hold me so tightly when I'm buried in her sweet cunt?* I longed to find out.

I lifted my hands and took the fabric from her, and her arms wrapped around my neck, her hands sliding across my skin. My tail hugged tighter across her back, holding her more firmly to me.

By the time we reached the wall, her legs had begun to tremble as well. She sighed with relief when I crouched to let her slide down my back.

I made the fabric form a tent around us, held up by my upper horns, and pulled the small pack from her back. We both drank a can of water, and my parched throat rejoiced at the wetness, even though the liquid was warm. I shrugged into my shirt, even though I'd miss the appreciative glances she

gave me.

But the mission called. I pulled out my comp and studied the blueprints I'd hacked for the building. The Grug had hid their computer core in what looked like a regular factory, just one of the multitude stretching in a belt across the equator of the planet.

"This way." I pointed right and stood, using my arms to hold the fabric up around us.

My rulaa tingled, a different feeling than that of my mate beside me.

Frek!

I clapped a hand over her mouth and crouched, pulling her down with me as I threw my back against the wall.

From a distance, we'd look like a pile of sand. But up close? My free hand dropped to a fighting stick and my muscles tensed as the sound of a door opening cut through the air, followed by the metallic clang of it slamming shut.

The crunch of footsteps on sand grew closer. A guttural voice muttered, a Tula. The words grew more and more distinct. "Extra patrols, my tail! You don't see the Grug out here having to walk the desert."

Hay-Zul shivered by my side, the whites of her eyes showing all around her purple contacts. My tail wrapped around her, stroking down her arm in an attempt to comfort.

The crunching steps continued on, the mutters fading into the distance.

"How did you hear them before they opened the door?" she whispered.

"I sensed them." I touched my forehead. "With my rulaa."

"A useful skill."

"Yes. But I doubt we'll get so lucky again. This just proves they're still doing extra patrols. We need to hurry." Damned mobsters. I'd made them lose face. They weren't going to let this go.

Another twenty feet along, we came across a grated opening set about two feet off the ground.

"This is it." I crouched.

Hay-Zul held the fabric in place around us while I pulled out a knife and unfastened the grate. A rectangular duct stretched into the distance, lined with metal walls. It fell dark only a few feet in from the desert's sunlit glare.

"Uhh, I know I'm smaller than a Zaarn, but I'm not *that* small."

I activated a signal on my comms and grinned up at her. "No. But Vree

is.”

“Vree? How?”

A faint noise echoed down the duct, and I held a finger to my lips. In a few more minutes, a small cleaning drone rolled into view. It was little more than a box on wheels and had only the most basic programming.

I scooped it out of the opening and flipped it onto its back, its gears whining in protest as its wheels spun and spun. Digging in the tip of my knife, I swung open the access panel in its belly and popped out its computer core.

“That looks just like Vree’s!”

“It’s the benefit of having everything standardized.” I pulled Vree’s core from my pants pocket and slotted it into place. All four wheels whirred for a second then stopped. “You okay in there, buddy?” I asked.

“Okay,” Vree said, his voice high and tinny. These things had only the most basic speakers since they did little more than beep to let people know there were near. “It’s not as good as my real body.”

“I know, but it’s a great disguise.” I closed the panel and set Vree on his feet inside the duct. “Time for your adventure.”

“Whee!” He spun in a circle, then darted down the duct, moving faster than the cleaning bot usually did.

I typed a message into my comp, “*Slow down when you get near the Grug.*”

“*I know that.*”

I snorted.

I kept up a whispered commentary so Hay-Zul would know what we were doing. “The Grug keep their main computer system isolated from the planetary network. The only way to get to any of the data is to get physically close enough to force a connection.”

“And Vree can do that?”

I smirked. “I may have added a few modifications and upgrades to his programming over the years.”

“Why do I have the feeling this isn’t the first time he’s done something like this?” Her lips twitched.

“Because it isn’t. Infiltration is actually what I originally designed him for. His first body was a plain drone like this one. They’re everywhere, and no one notices them. But the more I worked with him to make him smarter,

the more personality he developed. When I told him about the original Vree I'd been forced to leave behind on Zaar, he decided he wanted to be a mirol pup." I shrugged. "So I made him a custom body."

"That's so sweet."

By the Goddess, I loved the way my mate looked at me right now, her eyes full of approval.

My comp gave a soft chime, the volume turned down to the lowest setting, and a message popped up. "*I'm in.*"

I turned on my connection to his camera and set it to fill the top of the screen, leaving the messaging system open at the bottom. Hay-Zul leaned on my shoulder, watching with me.

Vree rolled across composite floor toward a computer bank. The gray hide of a Grug swept across the screen, blown up to monumental proportions by Vree's small size.

Hay-Zul sucked in a shocked breath, and even my heart kicked up a notch.

Vree slid to a halt and waited, just like a real cleaning bot would. Once the Grug had passed, he continued rolling forward.

He came to the wall of servers and spun ninety degrees so he could move along them.

"*Roll as slowly as possible, little buddy,*" I sent. Then I went to work. Changing the entire screen over to one of my hacking programs, I sent probe after probe through Vree and into the computer data cores he moved past. None of the initial ones got through, but I hadn't expected them to.

Then one showed a tiny crack, a place I could insert code. My fingers flew, typing almost as quickly as I could think, changing my program on the fly, adapting it based on the responses I got.

My heart hammered in my chest, anticipation making my blood thrum. This was always the best—and scariest—part of any hacking job, the point where you'd either make it through or get caught. It relied on being able to stay one step ahead of the computers. They processed data much more quickly than any living being could, but they did it by rote, without any creativity of thought.

That was *my* super power—the ability to try the unexpected, to pivot to a new direction based on instinct.

It had been years since I'd last been challenged like this.

Faster and faster the back and forth went, the computer trying to catch me, while I dodged and weaved, flinging out bits of code to stymie its defenses.

My lips pulled back from my teeth.

Hay-Zul caught my tension, remaining silent even as her muscles vibrated with stress.

Close. I was so close!

Another flurry of exchanges, then I sent my last command, one set to drill straight into the heart of the Grug hard drive.

I held my breath.

Then data flowed down my comp screen, too fast to track, and a rush of elation whipped through me. “We’re in!”

Hay-Zul flung her arms around me with an excited squeak, and I hugged her back for a moment before sending Vree a message, “*The download has started. Are you in a safe place?*”

“*No. I’m in the middle of a Grug computer hub.*”

I snorted. He was probably being literal instead of being a smartass, but still. “*Are you as safe as you can be under the circumstances?*”

“*I think so. I—*”

The message screen went blank, and the data stopped flowing. My heart skipped as I turned on Vree’s camera feed. It was black.

In the blast furnace of the desert heat, the cold of empty space shivered down my spine.

Vree!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Hazel

KIREL'S FIRM MUSCLES hardened into rocks as the picture on his tablet went black.

I bit my lip to keep quiet while he worked, his fingers blurring as they moved over the screen.

But as the seconds ticked by with no change, I couldn't help blurting, "What happened? Where's Vree?"

"I don't know." So much pain laced his words that they made my heart ache. How could I have ever have thought this male cold and uncaring of others? Kirel loved a little robot dog more than Derek had ever loved anyone in his entire life.

Kirel tried something else, but the top half of the tablet remained dark. "Vree might have cut the signal himself, if he thought he was about to get caught."

He didn't need to say it this would be the best-case scenario, because the only other reason for Vree's silence was the worst—the Grug had him.

Which meant all hope of me sending a signal to *ARK 1* had been lost as well. I cared about Vree, of course I did, but I also knew a thousand women were out there somewhere, with no one but us to help.

“What does this mean for my part of the mission?”

“I don't know. If Vree reestablishes contact, I should still be able to hack a channel in their comms channel for you to send out the signal to your ship.” He shot me a grimace, his lips pressed into a thin line. “If Vree doesn't...”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked.

He shook his head. “There's not even anything *I* can do but wait and see if he makes contact or returns.” Even having said that, Kirel kept working at the tablet, refusing to give up.

After a few more minutes, his head snapped up, and he hissed between his teeth, “Hold still. Someone's coming.”

We remained crouched side by side, his upper horns forming the peak of our makeshift tent. Since we faced the wall, it meant we had our backs turned toward the person patrolling. Not facing the approaching threat made it *way* worse. The skin between my shoulder blades crawled. My heart banged in my chest, and my fingers barely worked when he shoved his tablet into my hands so he could pull out his fighting sticks.

Footsteps crunched behind us, sounding too damned close, right when a tiny whirr echoed down the vent.

I held my breath. Was that Vree? Oh, god, if he came out and spoke right now, we'd be caught for sure!

Don't see us, don't see us, don't see us. I chanted it over and over in my mind until the words began to smear together into nonsense—donseeus.

The footsteps stopped, and I glanced at Kirel. He brought a finger to my lips, asking for quiet.

Another noise echoed down the vent, the metal walls amplifying it as it went so that it screeched like a shout across my nerves.

My heart leaped into my throat. Oh, god! We needed to muffle the sound, but Kirel couldn't move without disturbing the fabric. I crouched within the tent his larger body made. If I were careful...

Another noise from the duct had me moving. I rose on my knees and leaned forward, shoving my torso over the hole. The noise stopped,

completely blocked, and I fought down a giggle. *Big boobs for the win!*

The footsteps finally started up again, and not a moment too soon, because something inside the vent poked me.

I hissed between my teeth as a hard shape rammed into the top of my stomach again. Groping backward, I grabbed onto Kirel's leg and squeezed, then nodded my head forward a couple of times, hoping he'd get the hint since I couldn't make eye contact from this angle.

He must have done something with his tablet because the thing—which I hoped like hell was Vree—stopped running into me.

By the time Kirel leaned close to whisper, "We're alone," my lower back ached from the strain of holding the awkward position. But I didn't move immediately. "Is it Vree in the duct?"

"I don't know. I haven't heard from him."

"But something poked me, and when I squeezed your leg it stopped."

"Hold very still." Kirel's large body shifted behind me, and I could *feel* him, a presence like pressure all up and down my back. "I'm going to move you out of the way as quickly as I can."

"Don't you think if it was something that could hurt me, it would have done so already?"

"You are my soul's breath. I refuse to take any chances." His words held a ragged note of sincerity. One strong arm wrapped around my waist and another slid under my kneeling shins, forcing me up onto my toes and knees. His deep voice whispered in my ear, "One, two."

In a flash, he lifted me up and back, then spun in a tight pivot that put his side in front of the vent.

The cloth slipped, letting in a blinding glare of sunlight that made me squint.

I craned my neck toward the vent, blinking furiously. Was it Vree?

"It's about time," a tinny voice said. "I hurried back to you and then couldn't get through."

"Sorry, buddy. We had unwelcome company out here." Kirel set me down and reached up to fix the fabric. "What happened?"

"It was horrible!" Vree whirled in a circle. "This big Grug almost squashed me flat. Then the computer I'd connected to started receiving an encrypted signal, and it activated a second set of security programs. I had to shut down everything but basic functions to keep from getting caught."

“Good job.” Kirel gave Vree a pat on the top of his chassis.

“What does that mean for signaling *ARK 1*?” I asked.

“I’m sorry.” Kirel shook his head, working at his tablet as data scrolled down the screen. “We won’t be able to, but the good news is Vree downloaded a lot of information. There might be something in here.”

“I tried!” Vree rolled as close to me as the side of the vent allowed, his little voice plaintive. “I really did!”

“I know you did, Vree.” I fought to keep the disappointment from my voice.

“We need to get out of here now,” Kirel said. “Ready to go to sleep, buddy?”

“No.” Vree spun in a circle, his little gears whirring. Then he finally slowed to a stop. “But okay.”

Kirel picked him up and reversed the earlier procedure, removing Vree’s data core and inserting the original one. He set the dormant bot a few feet inside the vent, replaced the grate, and flung a handful of sand at it, so some made it through the openings to scatter across the duct’s floor. “I wiped the bot’s memory of ever having seen us and set it to wake up in ten minutes. It will ‘clean up’ the problem and report the job done. That’ll give us plenty of time to get away and keep the Grug from realizing we were ever here.”

“But what about the lizards from the pleasure house?”

He checked his tablet and offered me a smug grin. “They didn’t report it to the Grug, and if they haven’t done so by now, they’re not going to. This is a Grug planet, and the Tula Syndicate tends to take care of problems in house so they can keep operating without scrutiny.”

“There’s no police?”

“Po-leeze?”

“Law enforcement, paid by the government.”

He shook his head. “No, nothing like that. The Grug might step in if things got bad enough to affect business, but otherwise...” He shrugged.

Wow. This place was like the Wild West, with everyone in charge of their patch of ground and a whole lot of “might makes right.”

“Let’s move.” He crouched and turned his back to me so I could climb on.

I snorted. Here I was on an alien planet for the first time, and instead of walking its surface, I was being carried everywhere. But it made sense—he

had to be at least three times as fast as me, with stamina I could never match.

Kirel's firm muscles flexed against my stomach and chest as I leaned close and wrapped my legs around his waist. The herby masculine scent of him cut through the mineral smell of the desert.

Who am I kidding? This is the best! I barely stopped myself from nuzzling the back of his neck.

He stood and handed me the front edge of the fabric, and I stretched my arms up and forward, happy to help in any way I could.

Once he curled his hands under my thighs, he took off at an easy lope, heading in the opposite direction from the exit we'd used before.

The long plain wall of the Grug computer building slid by, seemingly endless. Then we turned a corner and ran past another collection of doors, the smell of cooking meat and the faint thump of bass indicating another of the entertainment districts.

I expected him to stop so we could sneak back in via a club or bar, but he kept going, his long legs pumping, his breath smooth and even.

So much stamina! My legs clenched tighter around him at the thought of what else that stamina would be good for. God, last night had been amazing. He'd certainly backed up all his swagger.

But I was still the only woman available to him right now. Was any of this about *me*? Or was I simply his only option? I now trusted he wouldn't be cruel, like Derek, but that very kindness would only make me fall harder for Kirel.

Which meant it would hurt a million times worse when he moved on.

Enjoy it while you've got it, girlfriend, but don't fall for him.

So much easier said than done. It might already be too late.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Kirel

JUST BECAUSE THE Tula Syndicate hadn't reported our fight to the Grug, didn't mean they weren't watching the landing field, ready to grab us as soon as we showed ourselves. The mobsters didn't like losing face.

And while I could pass as just another Zaarn, Hay-Zul, even in her disguise, was far too conspicuous. I had to protect her.

I slowed as I approached a door in the back of the next factory.

Everything in me screamed at the loss of contact as I crouched and let my mate slide from my back. Primal instinct made my hands ache to cradle her to me, to snatch her up and run and run.

That wouldn't work here. I had to use my smarts to protect her.

My fingers flew across my comp. How much easier a regular hack job was! This factory made ship engines, but that didn't require the extra layers of security the Grug put on their computer hub.

In only a couple of minutes, the door snicked open, a line of darkness appearing along its edge. I'd set the cameras in the hall and on the back of the building to looping for the next fifteen minutes. Now I just needed one more thing... There! Perfect.

The hum of a motor grew louder as a robocart approached from inside.

"There we are." I smirked at Hay-Zul, my tongue playing over my fangs. The fabric slid off us as I stood and opened the door.

The heat of the desert soared as the full blast of sunlight hit me. I worried about my sweet mate wearing the black-haired wig with her skin painted a deep blue that sucked up all the sun's heat. As a Zaarn, I was used to it, but I didn't know how well humans handled such extremes.

My eyes adjusted to the increased brightness quickly. As I'd ordered, the hacked robotcart stood in the hallway, already filled with crates. I swung open the top of a yellow one and peered inside. "Empty. Just like it's supposed to be." It had taken an extra bit of hacking to get the cart to pick up an empty crate instead of the full one on its manifest, but it hadn't been that hard. Not for me.

I turned and reached for Hay-Zul. "In you go."

"What?" Her eyes widened.

Right. I'd been busy thinking of how to protect while I ran, but I hadn't actually told her the plan yet. "The mobsters might be looking for us at the landing field, and you, my sweet mate, are absolutely unforgettable." My fingers brushed her forehead.

She sucked in a sharp breath, her lips parting, and I longed to taste them again, to do this kizz thing over and over until she dripped with need.

You'll only be able to do that if you focus and keep her safe! a snarky voice snapped.

I put a hand on the lip of the crate. "So I'm going to hide you in here and order the cart to deliver you straight to the *Arrow*."

"What about you?"

"Don't worry about me. But if I don't make it back by nightfall, use the shuttle's comms to call Raxnor and Tark." My fellow Daredevils would see her safe—I'd given them special instructions in case anything happened to me.

She stepped forward and threw her arms around me. "I don't want to leave you."

“I don’t like it either.” I tilted her chin up and claimed her mouth, unable to deny myself one last taste. A moan tore from my chest as she opened for me, and I plunged my tongue inside, greedy for her. My tail gave an insistent buzz, and I pressed it to her back, both to quiet it and to feel her more fully.

Even with the clock ticking away in my mind, it took every last bit of my self-control to break away. “You have to go. The hack on the security cameras won’t hold for much longer.”

Her eyes were wide as she gazed up at me, and I regretted the purple contacts that kept me from seeing their true color. “Okay.”

My hands spanned her waist as I lifted her up into the crate.

Hay-Zul sat, stretching her legs out before her, and leaned back on her elbows, ready to lie down.

“Here.” I handed her Vree’s data core. Even if I didn’t make it, the data we’d collected might still help her find her people. “Take Vree with you.”

Our fingers brushed, sending a surge of electricity through me as my forehead tingled.

Then I lowered the lid, hiding her from view, and stepped back to close the door. I tapped at my comp, sending the robocart on its way.

My mate would be safe.

Now I needed to ensure I made it back to her.



Holding the camouflage fabric over my head, I jogged on, heading for the far end of the factory and the next entertainment district. This one stood diagonally across the landing field from the one Hay-Zul and I had entered, giving me as much distance from those particular Tula as possible.

It probably didn’t matter. From everything I’d read, they had a hard time distinguishing Zaarn males as specific individuals unless we had some major distinctive characteristics, such as facial scars.

When I reached the corner of the factory building, I slowed and peeked around the corner. The coast was clear. I pulled out my comp and studied the feeds. I didn’t want to cut through another Tula Syndicate business just in case, so that left out the pleasure house. Ahh, there. A Sjisji dance club.

I sent the signal to open the back door, slipped the fabric off, and shoved

it into my pack to hide that I had desert-camouflage gear. Keeping my steps smooth and unhurried, I sauntered around the corner, through the door, and into the club's back hallway. Cool darkness enveloped me after the scorching sun of outside, and I slowed even further for the few seconds it took my eyes to adjust.

Deep bass music pounded through the main room of Mixi's Emporium, topped by the high, sweet notes of flutes. A Sjisji danced on the raised platform in the center of the room, her delicate form lit by several spotlights. Red cloth covered her from shoulders to calves, leaving only her wings free of fabric. Sjisji typically went naked but for their feathers, so for them, putting on clothing and slowly taking it off was the height of kink.

The Tula appreciated it, too, and filled the stools of several of the small circular tables dotting the room.

The dancer spun and whirled, her movements lovely and graceful. In the past, I would have stopped and enjoyed, but nothing could compare to the beauty of my Hay-Zul.

The Sjisji working the door gave me a startled look from her large, observant eyes. "I don't remember seeing you go in."

I had no idea how long she'd been at her post, so I offered my most charming smile, then let it turn into a leer. "I've been in there for a while." Hopefully, she'd think I'd done a lot of masturbating in the bathing room. Sjisji dancers were just that—dancers prized for their grace—they might choose to take a lover, but they didn't do pleasure work. They did, however, build self-cleaning and very private stalls into their facilities.

She rustled her feathers in agitation and gestured me on. "Quit blocking the door."

I gave her another smile and stepped out onto the pedestrian avenue.

Pretending to shop, I stopped at a couple of stalls as I went. Then something actually caught my eye—a necklace with a crystal pendant on a thin silver chain. It was the same stone as that from the cavern, shaped just like the stalactites that had reflected the pool's light so magically above us as I touched my soul's breath for the first time. The chain was long enough that the stone would rest between Hay-Zul's glorious breasts, right over her heart.

I haggled with the Sjisji running the stall, because it was expected, but paid using yet another hacked account. In a week, some mobsters were going to receive a few surprising bills, but everything I'd spent so far was pocket

change to them. Besides, I only targeted the ones who did questionable things like running underground fight clubs that exploited the desperate.

A Tula stall right by the entrance sold marinated krinar steak strips grilled on skewers, and I bought two, shoving the spicy meat into my mouth as quickly as I could chew. They were delicious, and my body craved both calories and protein after all the running I'd been doing.

A Grug blocked the exit to the landing field, and for a moment, my heart skipped. But it ignored me, just as it ignored that it blocked the way for everyone.

I pulled out my comp and checked on the robocart's progress. It had already made it about a third of the way across the landing field and had stopped to deliver one of the other crates. Hay-Zul's was still on the top front, undisturbed. I couldn't stop the cart from doing its job without raising too many red flags, but I'd made some minor alterations to the robocart's programming. It wouldn't move her crate from the top of the stack, no matter how many deliveries it made on the way to the *Arrow*.

The Grug finally glided forward, and I strode out from under the awning and back into the bright glare of Pranch's sun. With no further obstructions in front of me, one thought spurred me forward, hurrying my steps.

Hay-Zul.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Hazel

BEING THROWN OVER Kirel's hard shoulder seemed better and better the longer I rode in the crate. Oh, the ride was smooth, but having no idea where I was made it feel excruciating. That and being alone. I missed Kirel's clever mind and cool competence, his strong body able to face every challenge.

And I missed *him*.

The cart slowed to a stop yet again. The first time, I'd gotten excited, assuming I'd reached the *Arrow*. But nope.

The high whine of some kind of mechanism rang through the air, followed by clacks and thumps. Voices approached, and my heart raced, expecting the lid above me to be thrown open while someone shouted *Aha!*

I clutched Vree to my chest, wishing he were here in his body.

A deep voice rasped, sounding like one of the lizards, "Bloody Grug, bleeding us dry."

“Not like we have a choice,” another person said.

“Yeah, yeah, but we need to—”

A door slammed closed with a metallic clang, cutting off the voices, right when I’d been wondering what they needed to do.

Things in this new world were sure strange, and the Grug seemed to be at the heart of it. Like the way there didn’t seem to be any real government. Instead, the Grug kept everyone in line by controlling trade. And the weird thing with the languages. I didn’t get it—how did the translators work on spoken language, but not written? It didn’t make any sense. Computers were doing the translating, and they worked via machine code, so it should be possible for them to do written words as well. I just...

The cart started up again, jarring me back to my surroundings. I slapped a hand to the crate’s side to keep from bumping my head. Not that it hurt. It turned out the fake horns hit first, protecting me just like the real ones did for the Zaarn. But I didn’t know how much damage the light-weight things could take, unlike the firm solidity of Kirel’s.

I remembered clutching his horns as he ate me out, and my clit pulsed. A nervous and excited giggle threatened to escape, so I shoved a knuckle into my mouth and bit down as my shoulders shook. I’d really yanked on his horns hard. Thank god he had the neck muscles to go with the rest of his impressive build.

The cart slowed again. This time the voices were higher in pitch, bird aliens.

“I can’t believe we have to go through another school session with the chicks needing to share comps.”

“Next year we’ll get enough,” a bright voice answered.

“That’s what we keep saying.”

“We’ll get there.”

“Maybe,” the first voice mumbled.

It seemed like everyone had trouble with the Grug. Was there really no way to break their monopoly on technology production?

When the cart stopped the next time, my crate rose into the air with a sudden swoop that made me squeak with surprise. Thank god no one was around to hear that.

The crate plonked onto a hard surface with a loud clank that made my teeth snap together. Then the sound of a hatch sliding closed cut off all other

sounds.

I should be in the *Arrow's* airlock. But I waited, just to see if there were any sounds or anything that indicated someone was out there. Which, the more I thought about it, the more ridiculous it seemed. *If they're on to me, then they already know I'm in here and they've had the crate delivered to a place they control. I'm not protecting myself by staying huddled in here.*

Decision made, I swung the lid open and stood as quickly as I could. My head pivoted almost a full 360 as I tried to look everywhere at once, but no one else was in the airlock.

“Thank god.”

My hands dropped to my sides, my shoulders sagging in relief. I climbed out of the crate and opened the inner hatch. Then I dragged the crate into the main cabin so Kirel could get through the airlock easily.

All I had to do now was wait.

I'd always thought I was a patient person. What a lie! Every second without Kirel ticked by with painful slowness.



I busied myself by drinking two cans of water and eating one of the sandwich wraps stored in the galley. It tasted divine after all the protein bars. I set more of each out, imagining Kirel busting through the door, determined to take off, and me fussing over him to eat and drink something after being out in that heat.

But he didn't show.

After ten minutes, I couldn't take being alone anymore and decided to do something about it.

Vree's puppy body lay where Kirel left it. I sat down on the floor and flipped it over, letting Vree's back settle along the crease between my legs. The small hatch opened effortlessly, obviously kept in the very best of repair.

I'd seen Kirel remove and replace this type of hard drive multiple times today, and all of my years of linguistic studies had given me an eye for detail. The accent mark on a single letter could change the entire meaning of a word, a sentence, a book.

After turning the solid black block over in my hands a few times, I found

the exact pattern of small depressions I'd noticed before. Lining them up the right way, I slid the data core into place with a satisfying—if almost inaudible—snick.

“Hello!” The end of Vree's tail started to whip back and forth across my tummy.

“Hi!”

When I closed the hatch, he wiggled back and forth and rolled over to stand on my lap, spinning until he could jump up and put his paws on my shoulders. His cool nose warmed as he nuzzled my chin. Then he pulled back to spin in a circle on top of my lap, his little feet moving quickly to keep him steady. “Where's Kirel?”

“He's not back yet.”

“I'll message him!”

Hope spurted through me. “You can do that?”

“Of course. I'm smart. Smarter than a kreecat.”

A bark of laughter escaped me. He really wasn't going to let that go anytime soon.

“Message Kirel,” I said.

Vree fell still for a few seconds. “He's not answering.”

That couldn't be good. “Can you tell where he is?”

“He's in a ship.” His voice sounded puzzled. “It's not a Zaarn ship.”

My heart skipped. “Another ship! What? Where is it?” Had someone grabbed him? Were they taking him off planet?

“It's docked a couple of ships over from ours.” His head tilted, his ears swiveling.

I let out an explosive breath. “Okay. We have to do something. But what?” I wasn't supposed to be seen by anyone. “Can you call Raxnor and Tark?”

“I can. But they're hours away.”

“If Kirel needs help now, they'll never get here in time.” I sighed and tugged at a horn. “I wish I had a better disguise. I can't go out there as a human, and it turns out even as a Zaarn I stand out, since almost no females leave their planet.”

“You should have more disguises like me! I have lots.”

“Wish I did, little bud.”

“You can! We can!” He twirled in a circle, barking excitedly.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Kirel

THE *ARROW STOOD* only three berths away, and I hastened my steps, eager to check on Hay-Zul. A quick chime from my comp a few minutes ago let me know her crate had been delivered by the robocart, so my mate should be safe inside. But “should be” wasn’t the same as knowing, as feeling her once more in my arms.

A spear of sunlight flashed off a reflective surface straight into my eyes. I threw up a hand, but too slowly, my vision blinded.

My rulaa tingled with a split-second of warning. A heavy weight slammed into my ribs, shoving me sideways and back as meaty arms wrapped around my torso. I dug my heels in, my work boots finding purchase on the resin-hardened sand. Then another weight joined the first, pushing me back and trapping one arm.

By the time my eyes cleared, the two Tula had maneuvered me halfway

up the ramp of a cargo hauler. I swung with my free hand, punching the side of the first lizard's head. But the angle was horrible, and he just growled. Another Tula piled on, and the three of them pushed me along. I struggled against every step, but frek if it did anything. A single one of them outweighed me—three felt like trying to move a shuttle.

All of us were silent but for grunts and loud breathing. These were the mobsters from the pleasure house, and they didn't want the Grugs' attention anymore than I did. My hacking skills were excellent, but if the Grug dug into the false files I'd created for the *Arrow*, they'd find discrepancies. They'd impound the shuttle, with Hay-Zul trapped on board. I'd never let the gray aliens get their hands on her ever again, no matter what happened to me.

The heaving mass of us came to a stop in the middle of the mostly empty cargo hold. Work lights beamed from overhead, and a few random crates had been shoved back against the scuffed metal walls, leaving a clear space in the middle of the deck. The air was as hot as outside—they'd had the bay doors open for a while, waiting for me.

Tula ringed me, all wearing the golden pins of the Tula Syndicate on the bandoleers crossing their chests.

"Where's your pretty mate?" a male called out, the one who'd dared to grab Hay-Zul at the pleasure house.

"Somewhere you can't touch her, you worthless frek!"

"That's too bad." The leader stepped into view, his yellow throat sack swollen to its largest size. "Without her to keep us busy, I guess we'll have to amuse ourselves with you."

"What? Still pissed off I knocked you out in front of everyone?" I sneered, curling my lip away from my fangs. "This is just what I'd expect from a weak frek like you, to send your crew to gang up on me instead of fighting me yourself."

"Oh, I plan to fight you." He pulled out a wickedly long knife and nodded to the Tula holding me.

They dropped their grips and stepped away.

My hands went to my fighting sticks, pulling them free. My right foot slid forward, moving me into a better stance. I didn't actually trust him to keep his word. As soon as I won—and I refused to believe in any other outcome—his goons would swarm me. I needed to keep him busy for as long as possible to give Raxnor and Tark time to get to Hay-Zul.

But I didn't want the Tula boss to realize I knew he lied, so I gave a lazy smirk as if I didn't have a care in the world. Then I gestured with my right hand, waving the lizard forward.

He growled, his throat pouch expanding as his golden eyes glared at me. Then it deflated in a rush, and he leaped forward.

I held still, only twisting out of the way at the last second. He moved past so close his elbow brushed my shirt.

Two more passes of me avoiding his strikes had him steaming. "I thought you wanted to fight me, Zaarn!" His roar echoed in the large space, and the rest of the Tula shifted as if ready to pounce, restless and feeding off his anger.

Frek! Tula hotheadedness meant I wasn't going to be able to keep this up for nearly as long as I'd hoped.

I met his next diagonal strike with a block, the force of the blow ringing up my forearm as I thwacked his ribs with my other stick.

The Tula hissed, his inner eyelids snapping shut for a moment in pain. Then he spun, the thick heft of his tail slicing through the air toward my calves.

I leaped straight up, tucking my knees for the split second I hung in the air. As I came back down, I put all my body weight behind a chop down on his shoulder. My stick hit with a crack.

The lizard roared, his teeth snapping together as he bit at the air. His arm hung lifelessly by his side, as if it had gone numb. I couldn't trust that—he might have been faking to lure me in. But that wasn't as important as the fact that his other hand still held the knife.

The sound of our harsh breaths filled the air, and sweat slicked my skin as my heart raced. My body was quickly reaching the end of its endurance, all that running through the desert finally taking its toll.

He stepped close, punching forward with the tip of the knife.

I blocked, chopping his knife hand down and away.

His injured arm clubbed me in the side, cracking me across the ribs he'd hit the day before.

My breath froze in my lungs, and I couldn't move for a shocked second as pain blared. *Frek! I knew the frekker was faking it!*

Enough of this. I wouldn't be any good to Hay-Zul if I got too injured to fight by the time the rest of them jumped me.

The Tula gave a satisfied grunt as his goons cheered him on. He held his mouth open in the equivalent of a smile, showing off an impressive set of teeth. He lunged, the knife slashing upward, ready to gut me.

I'd blocked the last few times, getting him used to thinking that's what I'd always do. This time, I twisted sideways, so close the tip caught on my shirt with a loud rip as the lizard's momentum carried him forward. The second he passed me, I turned back and brought both sticks up to crack into his head from either side.

He went down like a shot.

And the room erupted into chaos as all the other lizards leaped toward me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Hazel

KIREL DISAPPEARED UNDER a wave of green as a small army of Tula piled on top of him.

“Faster!” I yelled.

The robocart’s wheels whined as we sped up the ramp and into the cargo hold. It was the cart Kirel had already hacked. That hack had allowed Vree to call it back to the *Arrow* once it had dropped off all its other deliveries. Only my empty crate had remained. I crouched inside it now, peering out the front crack of the lid as I shouted instructions to Vree.

His little dog body lay still in my arms, all his processing power used to control the robocart wirelessly.

He’d told me he knew *how* to drive it, but he didn’t have any specific programming for *what* to do in completely new situations.

That’s where I came in. “Grab the top two Tula using the forward arms!”

Four multi-jointed mechanical arms extended from the cart, two on each side. They were super strong, able to pick up heavy crates with ease.

Vree's body twitched on my lap, and the cart's forward arms plucked two of the Tula off Kirel as if the lizards weighed nothing.

"Transfer them to the other arms!"

The pincer hands of the back arms grabbed the two lizards, freeing the robocart's front arms.

"Now use the front ones to grab two more of the Tula!"

Vree's tail shivered, and the arms jerked forward, hauling two more of the mobsters off Kirel, leaving only two.

We must have looked like a circus act—a robocart with all four arms extended, a thrashing six-foot tall lizard held in each.

I threw back the lid of the crate and pulled out a blaster, checking it was still on the lowest setting. I shot one of the Tula, but they kept moving.

Damn, I thought this thing was supposed to stun them. Maybe I hadn't done it right. I shot again, and the lizard went limp.

Turning, I took out the one held by the other front arm. I was a crap shot, but having an immobile target sure as shit helped.

"Drop the front two Tula and get the rest off of Kirel!"

But by the time the cart rolled forward to do that, he'd already incapacitated one, so Vree scooped up the last lizard right as Kirel's fist thumped into their temple.

All of the Tula were down.

I stunned the rest of the ones held by the cart and stood right as Kirel got to his feet. I half-climbed, half-fell out of the crate but kept moving forward until he met me at the edge of the robocart's cargo bed and swept me up into his arms.

He was battered and bruised, his clothing torn.

And he'd never looked more handsome.

I couldn't stop myself from pressing a kiss to his mouth. Then I tipped my head forward until we pressed foreheads like he liked. The extra foot of height the cart gave me something I could get used to.

Kirel's purple eyes shown with approval. "My mate! You saved me!"

"I helped!" Vree's high voice came from inside the crate.

I laughed as I let go of Kirel and spun to pick up the pup. "You were amazing!"

His little tag wagged so fast it was a blur as I passed him to Kirel. Vree let out a few excited yips, nuzzling Kirel's chin.

After a few moments, Kirel glanced around the cargo hold, where lizard bodies lay knocked unconscious. "You were both amazing."

I finally took a good look too and whooped. "Shit, yeah!" I wasn't a physical person and would never have been able to help if I had to fight with my body. But this had been cool as hell!

"Now let's get out of here." He tucked Vree under his arm and pulled out his comp, only to frown at the cracked screen. "I can't control the cart."

"I can!" Vree said, his high voice full of pride and excitement.

"Retract the arms and send it back on its way," Kirel said. "Hopefully, we'll be off planet before anyone thinks to check its logs."

The mechanical arms folded into the sides of the cart bed, and panels slid closed, hiding them from view. Then it rolled back down the ramp, us hurrying after.

Kirel must have been in pain, but he kept up a quick pace until we got to the safety of the *Arrow's* airlock.

While it cycled, he gathered me close. "The Goddess truly blessed me the day she brought you into my life." Then the inner hatch opened, and he offered me a wry smile. "I hate to let you go, but we need to get out of here."

"Go." I pushed him toward the main cabin and the cockpit. "You can make it up to me when we're safe."

He shot me one of his heated looks, his tongue curling around his fangs with wicked promise. "I am yours to command, my soul's breath. As soon as you like, I will make you writhe in pleasure."



The next few hours were tense. Even though we got permission to depart Pranch, we had to wait for our assigned departure lane to clear.

He had to stay in the cockpit, so I forced Kirel to eat and drink, bringing him a continuous supply of food. He gulped down three cans of water, one after the other, then decimated our remaining supply of sandwich wraps. We'd have nothing but ration bars for the trip back to the *Daredevil*, but I didn't mind. He clearly needed to eat and eat well after everything he'd been

through.

Once we finally made it off Pranch and cleared the atmosphere, Kirel looked up from the shuttle's controls and said, "I'm going to wait until we're farther away from all the heavy traffic around the planet to start my autopilot program. Why don't you go ahead and get cleaned up?" He gave me a naughty smile. "The shower stall here is too small for two, anyhow."

It was a relief to get clean, to scrub away the blue paint and be myself again. And to smell better. Sweating my ass off in an alien desert was not an optimal level of personal hygiene. Thank god for that pool in the cave.

I stood on tiptoe to peer into the tiny mirror mounted high above the sink, back to being a blue-eyed blonde with pale skin. Actually, the blue skin paint had done me some favors. I hated to think about how badly I would have sunburned in that first mad dash across the desert.

And it certainly has other uses, too.

I bit my lip, remembering how the vibrations of Kirel's tail had been *perfect*.

Skipping underwear, I pulled on one of Kirel's shirts, rolling up the sleeves. It fell to mid-thigh, the soft fabric clinging to my curves. He'd certainly liked the look in the cave.

Back in the cockpit, Vree jumped to his feet in the copilot's seat. "Hazel! Hazel! Hazel!" He spun in a circle, his tail wagging. "I told Kirel what we did all over again!"

I laughed and rubbed the warm, smooth metal of his lavender forehead. "You were fantastic!"

"I'm the best pet anyone could have!"

"You sure are, little bud." Kirel tapped at the *Arrow's* controls and stood. His eyes met mine, full of heat and promise. "My turn to get cleaned up."

"I'll watch things!" Vree called out.

While Kirel took a shower, I closed the door to the cockpit and got the main cabin ready. I lowered both beds like we'd done for the whole trip out, then closed one of them.

I might not believe he truly meant forever, but I definitely wanted everything I could have right now with Kirel.

He stepped out of the tiny bathroom wearing the alien equivalent of gray sweatpants, and my mind stuttered to a halt. The noticeable bulge grew the longer I stared, and finally a dark chuckle drew my eyes upward to meet his.

“I would have you look at me with such hunger for the rest of our lives, my sweet mate.”

He took a step forward, and I *felt* him somehow, in my chest, even though we didn't touch.

His fingers brushed my forehead. “For I know a matching hunger burns within me for you.”

“You're hurt.” My hand fluttered over a bruise on his side that darkened his blue skin to purple. It was only one of many visible now he had his shirt off.

“I've had worse, and Zaarn heal quickly.” He stepped closer, his body only an inch away. “Trust me when I say I will feel nothing but pleasure from your touch.”

His tail began to buzz, and my clit throbbed, already imagining the sensation. But... “What about the makeup? For your tail?”

His face lost its charming smile. “You do not want the mating heat and knot?”

“I need more time to understand what it all means.” *And if you really mean it.* “But I want to be with you, Kirel.”

His pupils dilated. “I love it when you say my name.”

“So can we?”

“Yes.” He opened a cabinet and pulled out one of the cans. With a couple of blasts of paint, he coated the end of his tail in a purple that matched its color.

Then he pounced, stripping the shirt from me. “As much as I love seeing you in my clothing, I'd rather see you naked.” His hands roamed up and down my back as he pulled me flush to his hard body.

I nuzzled his chest, licking at the faint saltiness of his clean skin, the smell of herbs and Kirel filling my nose.

“Hay-Zul,” he groaned. “My soul's breath.” He scooped me up and deposited me on the edge of the bed.

Kirel's warm hands slid up my sides, teasing my breasts. Another groan, and he kneeled before me, his hot mouth licking up the slope of my breast, his fangs tracing lines of fire as they went. “What do you call these alluring dots that decorate your skin?”

“What?”

He tapped the tip of his tongue on one of the freckles near my nipple,

then grinned up at me.

“Oh, that’s a freckle.”

“Mmm. I want to find them all. I want to lick every single one of your Frey-cals.” His lips slid over to another freckle.

I squirmed, lost in sensation, and grabbed onto one of his curved horns, attempting to pull him to my nipple. Instead, he gave me a sultry smirk and licked at the freckles on my other breast, laving everywhere but the peak with the wet heat of his mouth.

“Kirel,” I whined. “Please.”

“You had only to ask.” His mouth opened over my nipple in one long suck that sent a bolt of electricity straight to my clit.

I sucked in a sharp breath when his mouth let go with a pop only to be replaced by the vibrating tip of his tail. He licked and sucked on my other nipple while his tail teased the first, and I clutched at his horn, holding on as I drowned in delicious sensation.

Kirel’s strong hands pushed on my knees, spreading my thighs. His tail switched to the other breast as he licked his way down my stomach, teasing me with his fangs as he went. I let go of his lower horn and shivered, closer than I’d ever been without clitoral stimulation.

He spread my lips wide, one long finger sliding inside. “You’re already so wet for me, my sweet mate. So good.” His clever tongue flicked out, teasing either side of my clit and making me gasp.

I grabbed onto his upper horns and bucked my hips up, straining for more.

“You’re so greedy for me, my mate. I love it.” He gave another lick, barely touching my sensitive nub. “What would you like, my Hay-Zul? Shall I eat this pretty cunt? Or would you like me to tail frek you while I lick your clit?”

Oh, god. This male and his wicked tongue!

I tugged on his horns, too turned on for words. But he held back, his hot eyes glittering at me. The smooth bastard was going to make me say it.

“Yes,” I choked out.

“Yes to which?”

“All of it.”

He shot me a grin that was such pure distilled sex my inner muscles clenched. Then the time for teasing was done. His mouth covered me, his

tongue diving into my pussy and curling to stroke my g-spot.

His tail kept playing with my breasts instead of sliding lower. I hung on the edge of orgasm, everything wonderful but not quite enough. Kirel lapped at my pussy, making the most obscene wet smacking sounds. I was so turned on, my skin felt stretched tight and sensitized everywhere. So when his tail slid down my stomach, my heart pounded, my breath catching.

His tongue plunged inside, stroking over my g-spot right when his tail covered my clit in a blur of vibrations. Fire shot through me, lifting my hips as my mouth fell open on a silent scream.

My body still hummed when Kirel slid his tongue free, only to replace it with the tip of his tail.

“Oh!” I moaned.

The vibrations grew stronger as it thrust inside, and the soft suede wings of the triangle fluttered *everywhere*.

Those clever eyes watched me closely. “I love seeing you like this, so hungry for every part of me. My tongue and fingers have had you, and now I’m going to tail frek you. Then and only then will I fill you with my cock. Tell me you want that, my sweet mate. Tell me you want my cock.” He thrust his vibrating tail deeper.

“Yesss.” The words emerged as a hiss from between clenched teeth as another wave of pleasure racked my body.

Kirel’s tongue flickered over my clit, moving quick and light and perfect. The warm tingling built and built until I yanked him to me, crying out as another orgasm flared through me.

I was almost sobbing as he climbed my body, so overcome with sensation.

His look grew concerned, even as his huge erection pressed into my leg. He’d lost his pants somewhere along the way. “Are you okay? Should we stop?”

“Don’t you fucking dare.” I reached for him, wanting skin on skin and him deep inside me. Needing it. I’d never been this way with anyone, but then, no one had ever worked so hard to bring me such pleasure before, either.

Kirel pressed his forehead to mine and moaned, his dick jumping against my thigh. Then his mouth was on mine, the taste of me still on his tongue.

I reached down to run my thumb over his purple head, gathering some of

the liquid there. Then I brought it up to my mouth and smeared it over my lips. Salt and sweet and caramel burst across my tongue, and I kissed him again, combining our tastes into one heady flavor.

He rose above me, all muscle, a god carved from teal and blue and purple. My peacock alien. His hands slid to the back of my knees and held me wide. "You are so beautiful spread open like this." The tip of his dick pressed at my entrance, already feeling huge, and I clasped his biceps. "Frek, Hay-Zul. You feel so perfect, clutching at my cock, so hungry for it."

"Yes." It seemed to be the only word I could say. Thank god it drilled straight to the core of everything I wanted. I wiggled my hips, taking more of him. "Yesss."

Kirel groaned, his eyes closing for a moment. Then they snapped open, focused on where our bodies met. He slid forward, stretching me wide, so impossibly wide!

He panted, his chest heaving. "You're so tight. So glorious."

I nodded, lifting my heels to dig them into his firm ass.

He slid farther in, and I pulled with all the strength of my legs until he hit deep, deep inside.

"Ahhh!"

"Frek, Hay-Zul, you're perfect! Your perfect cunt was made just for me."

"Yesss." I tightened my muscles around him, enjoying the way he filled me as no one ever had.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Kirel

“HAY-ZUL,” I SAID her name like a prayer as the wet heat of her cunt clamped tight around my cock. “You feel so good. Can you feel what you do to me?” I pulled out partway, only to plunge right back into her. The need to be buried deep within her felt too overwhelming to refute. “Can you feel how frekking hard you make me, my sweet mate?”

She gasped, her beautiful mouth falling open in a perfect O, her cheeks flushed that fascinating red color.

I wanted her like this always, impaled on my cock, looking totally frekked.

Though I needed her to shatter around me first before I could truly know what she looked like when fully satiated. So I’d have a better idea of how she’d appear when I finally knotted her and we mate bonded.

Hay-Zul doesn’t want that, a snide voice whispered. She doesn’t want

you, not as a fated mate.

I shoved it down. *She will. I'll make sure of it.* With all of my charm, all of my wit, and every bit of pleasure my body could wring from hers.

Deeper I thrust, and each time the heat of her swallowed my cock, a flash of desire went through me greater than anything I'd ever felt. With my kron sealed, this wasn't even the mating heat. How much more exquisite could the sex get?

She was already perfect.

"Your sweet cunt, Hay-Zul. Frek it was made for me. Made for my cock." I groaned as her inner walls tightened. "It's mine. Say this cunt is mine."

She bit her lip and nodded, her eyes half-lidded with desire.

I bottomed out as deep in her as I could go and paused. "That's not good enough. I need you to tell me." I slid my tail over the tips of her breasts, then teased, drawing it down her stomach toward the place she liked best. "Tell me, my sweet mate."

"It's yours," she gasped. "My Puz-zee is yours."

Puz-zee? I liked this word. I would try to use it since it was what she preferred.

I ground against her, rocking deep into her over and over, my body applying pressure to her sensitive nub. "This Puz-zee is mine. Only mine."

"It's yours," she sobbed, her hands clutching at my arms as she writhed below me, her body begging for more sensation.

I could deny her nothing.

My balls tightened as the desire to thrust overwhelmed me. I pounded into her, my heart racing in sync with my movements. The lower my tail slid, the more her face flushed, the more her mouth fell open. Watching her take pleasure was intoxicating.

"I love this, love making you come," I groaned. The vibrations from my kron were now so strong they shivered the length of my tail, through my balls, and all the way to my cock.

I pressed the tip of my tail over her clit, and Hay-Zul screamed, her head falling back, her back arching up off the bed. The heady scent of her arousal filled my mouth, my nose. Her Puz-zee fluttered around me, milking me.

My hips snapped forward, burying me deep as I roared, "Hay-Zul!" Pleasure poured through me in a hot wave of desire, shooting from my cock

and filling her.

I collapsed onto her for a few precious moments, my body still shivering with aftershocks. Then I turned over onto my back, slipping from her sweet depths in a way I wouldn't if I'd been able to knot her.

Hay-Zul rolled and settled against my side, her head on my shoulder. I curled my arm around her, my fingers tracing across the soft skin of her hip until she hummed with happiness. More of the little dots covered her here, her Frey-cals. I would need to kiss them later.

"That was amazing." She pressed a kizz to my chest, her lips soft and warm.

"It's only the beginning," I said, determined to woo her with pleasure.



First thing in the morning, I downloaded all of the data Vree had pulled from the Grug computers and got to work sorting it, looking for anything that could help us find the other Hyoo-mon females and their ship.

Hay-Zul stayed in the cockpit with me, working on her dictionary. She'd look up every so often, letting her eyes focus on the star field outside for a moment. Then she'd glance over at me. "Anything?"

"Not yet. Sorry." I hated to see the disappointment on her face.

Vree must have sensed it, as well, because he jumped up and put his front paws on her knee. "I'll help, too!" He gave an excited bark, then trotted over to me.

I opened my arms so he could leap onto my lap. Then I used my comp to send a section of the data to him. "Search for any mention of unusual technology." The Grug labeled the Hyoo-mons as "exotic pets" instead of recognizing them as sentient. So I was already poring over listing after listing of krecats, dreadwolves, and leelu birds, trying to find anything there. The Kri-Oh-Jen-Icks pods the Hyoo-mon females had come in were like nothing else known in the seven sectors. Their ship would be just as strange. It was our best lead.

"Got it." Vree lay down, his purple eyes glowing brighter as he started to churn through data faster even than I could. He still didn't have the discernment I could bring to bear to decide what was truly important, but he

was learning, and the search parameters I gave him should flag wide enough he wouldn't miss anything.

It took a couple more hours, but I finally found an interesting item. "I've got something."

"Really?" Excitement filled Hay-Zul's voice, and she leaned forward as I put the information on cockpit's main display.

Vree shook his head, swiveling his ears upright. "What is it? What?"

"There was an exotic pet of unknown designation on Sturd Station a week ago."

"That name doesn't mean anything to me."

"It wouldn't. It's little more than a hollowed-out asteroid set spinning to create artificial gravity. The Grug use it as a way station in an area of the sector that's fairly devoid of planets." I looked up at her, a thrill running through me. "It's also where Zol, a friend of mine, went to look for parts for the *Daredevil*. So when he gets back to the ship, he should be able to tell us more."

"Oh." Her shoulders slumped, but when she saw me looking, she offered me a wavering smile. "That's great! I just hoped for something... more. Something about *ARK 1*."

"Don't worry," I said. "There's still a lot more data to go through. I'll find something."

Please, Goddess, don't let my words have been a lie. Because no matter how much I longed to please my mate, I knew that having a lot of data wasn't the same as having the *right* data.



As the *Arrow* made its way back to the *Daredevil*, we enjoyed each other many times over the coming days, and I tried not to let it bother me that Hay-Zul still didn't want the mating knot.

We finished one such session and lay together, her cheek resting directly over my heart, her hair spread across my chest.

"Humans don't mate?" I asked, playing with a lock of her golden hair.

"Not like you do," she said. "We're not 'fated.'" She put special emphasis on the word, as if it still meant something strange.

“Then how do you do it?”

“People date and fall in love. One of them asks if the other wants to Mare-ee.” She gave a little shrug. “Then they sometimes do.”

My translator didn’t understand the word. I needed to know more. “What is Mare-ee?”

“It’s a ceremony in front of other people to declare they’ve chosen each other.”

Ah, like our mating celebration. That I understood. “And once they Mare-ee, it’s for life?”

“It’s supposed to be, but lots of times it ends in divorce.”

The translator said this meant “to cut, to sever.” That seemed rather bloodthirsty for what I knew of Hyoo-mons. “You cut each other with knives?”

“What?” A huff of laughter burst from her, and she looked up at me. “No knives—at least not usually.” Then the humor left her face. “Though I guess there are metaphorical knives. My parents sure tore into each other when they divorced.”

“I am sorry.” I stroked her back, offering what comfort I could.

She sighed. “I was seventeen when it happened. They both got pretty nasty and tried to use me against the other one in court. I refused, and they both got angry with me. By the time it was all over, I wasn’t close to either of them.”

I couldn’t offer any type of family advice. My parents had loved me but had also never gotten over the disappointment of my banishment. But they also remained dedicated to one another, as any bonded pair would. “Zaarn don’t Mare-ee, so we also do *not* divorce. Once we bond with our fated mate, it’s for life.”

She settled again with her cheek pressed to my chest without saying anything, either good or bad. My sweet mate still did not believe.

I must find a way to convince her.

“I had my own troubles.” I took a deep breath before I could continue. This wasn’t anything I’d ever admitted to anyone, even my best friends. “For my entire childhood, my family always told me I would be one of the lucky males who would find a mate. They never allowed any talk of me being sent to Roam. So when I turned eighteen without finding my soul’s breath, I felt like a failure who’d let them down. I spent the next two years in the speed-

meeting pool, introducing myself to female after female. The longer I went without anyone choosing me, the more desperate I felt. I was determined that if I could only be better—more charming, more witty, just *more*—I’d find the one. The one who’d accept me.” I’d had plenty of offers of fun, but nothing meaningful. I’d even taken a few of them, trying to fill the emptiness of rejection with a quick moment of release. It had never truly satisfied.

“Oh, Kirel!” Hay-Zul pressed a palm to my chest to lift up and look at me.

“But it didn’t happen. I met every single unmated heterosexual female of the right age on my *entire* planet, thousands upon thousands of them. And not a single one of them wanted me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Hazel

THE HOLLOW ACHE in Kirel's voice brought a well of tears to my eyes, and I blinked rapidly as his handsome face went all wavery.

Unlike Derek, who'd used charm to hide how selfish he was, all Kirel's smooth polish had been a defense mechanism to cover over this pain.

I brushed my hand across his chest. "How did your family react?"

"My last speed-meeting took place on the other side of the continent. As soon as I stepped off the shuttle alone, they knew it hadn't worked." He gazed into the distance, seeing something past but not forgotten—*never* forgotten. "My mother started crying, and my father wouldn't meet my eyes."

I swallowed down a sob. This wasn't about me—this was about Kirel, and somehow I just knew he needed to let all this out.

His lips curled into a sad smile, one I'd never seen before, but very real. "Vree—the original dog Vree—was the only one truly happy to see me."

“And you couldn’t bring him with you?” I continued to stroke his chest, unable to stop the comforting gesture.

He shook his head. “He wouldn’t have understood being made to live on a ship without trees and grass and sky. Mirol aren’t as adaptable as krecats, and they’re not telepathic either, so you can’t tell them to get in their crate if the ship has to do emergency maneuvers.” He snorted in amusement. “As much as this new Vree likes to complain about Space Kitty, a krecat is one of the only animals well suited to life on a ship.”

“I’m glad you made Vree. He’s wonderful.”

Kirel grinned. “He is pretty special. He may end up being the first true artificial intelligence—at least here in the seven sectors.”

“If anyone can do it, you can. As a linguist, I can tell you his speech is becoming more fluid the longer we talk. It’s already a step more complex than when I first met him. It might not be noticeable to others, but I can see it.”

“Really? How?”

“Vree speaks in longer sentences and has had a slight uptick in his vocabulary. He no longer uses the simplest words.”

Kirel’s arm tightened around me as he pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Thank you for telling me.”

Silence fell, but not an easy one—at least not for me. He’d told me something so private, and I still hid everything.

“I…” I stared at where my fingers touched the teal of his chest. “I had something happen to me, too, that has to do with mating.”

“Your parents and the severing.”

I shook my head, my cheek rubbing against his skin. “No, something else. Something more. During my last year of college, I was dating this guy. He was really good-looking and popular, and when he invited me to this special party at a fancy restaurant, I thought it really meant something.”

My voice went wooden as I continued on, but it was the only way I could get through it as that night filled my mind all over again.

When I got to the party, the room was full of people. I had to elbow my way through the crowd, my steps unsteady. I’d splurged and bought a new pair of three-inch heels because Derek always complained none of my shoes were sexy enough, but I wasn’t very good at walking in them.

Finally, I caught a glimpse of familiar blond curls. Only, no—that

couldn't be Derek, because the man had his arm wrapped around another woman.

But his friends Bradley and Tony were standing on either side, so...

"Derek?"

He spun around, pulling the woman with him.

It was Sabrina, who was as tall and thin and glamorous as her name. A long fall of red hair cascaded around her delicate shoulders, her pale skin gleamed with a dewy look I'd never been able to match. "Why's she here?"

"You said you couldn't come to this the first time I asked you," Derek said. "Remember, baby?"

"Oh, shit, dude. You didn't cancel the backup bitch!" Bradley crowed, his eyes glittering with mean delight.

Tony burst into booming laughter, and Derek snickered.

My lips felt numb, but I managed to say, "Backup? What does he mean 'backup'?"

"She doesn't know?" Sabrina's eyes went wide, and she clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Let's take this somewhere private." Derek dropped the arm circling Sabrina and reached for me with that same hand.

I took an unsteady step backward, my ankle starting to turn, and I yanked it back to center. "Why?" My voice barely cracked. "Seems everyone knew but me, so there's nothing actually 'private' about any of this. Unless you need me to remind you of what the word means."

His lips pressed together in a thin line. Derek was about to flunk out of his MBA program and would have done so by now without my help. Somehow, I doubted he'd told his friends that.

"I thought we were dating," I said. God, I hoped no one else could hear the waver in my voice.

"We're dating." Sabrina slipped her arm through Derek's and leaned one flawlessly contoured cheek against his shoulder. The two of them looked perfect together, like models in a commercial.

All those times Derek had cancelled plans, saying he had to work on a project? Yeah, they'd actually been times he'd been with her instead.

"Come on, Hazel. You're a smart girl. You get how this works." Derek grinned, handsome and charming. "I let you have a piece of this"—he waved his hand up and down his body—"so you got what you wanted."

The voice in my head wailed, *I thought we were in love!* Thank god I clamped my lips shut before that slipped out.

Their laughter followed me all the way back across the room, echoing still to this day as I looked up at the gorgeous alien staring at me, anger snapping in his eyes.

Kirel's lips pulled back from his teeth, showing his fangs, and his voice emerged as a growl. "He was an idiot who didn't deserve to breathe the same air as you, and if I could, I would rip his lying tongue from his mouth."

Wow. I wasn't usually into violence, but the thought of Kirel unleashing on Derek was exciting.

And funny. I slapped a hand over my mouth, trying to hold in my laugh, but it burst free. "Oh, god!" I wheezed. "He wouldn't stand a chance! All you'd need to do it look at him like that, and he'd pee himself."

"His fear piss wouldn't deter me." Kirel smirked. "I'd still hit him. For daring to hurt you."

"That's all it would take. One punch, and he'd be out like a light." I squeezed the firm thickness of Kirel's biceps. "You're built like a god, you know."

His muscle flexed under my fingers, and he gave me his wicked smile, his tongue curling around his fangs with promise.

And this time I saw it without the distorting filter of Derek. This time I saw it for what it was—a look of wanton joy from my delightfully charming yet earnest Kirel. "A god, huh?"

"Yep." I popped the p and slid all the way on top of him until I straddled his hips. Then I slipped lower. "I think it's time for a little worship."

His fingers tangled in my hair as I lost myself in the salt and sweet caramel of his taste, in the moans of his pleasure.



When we finally got within comms range of the *Daredevil*, Gravin came on the line with surprising news. "The ship's port thruster is fixed, but we can't come to meet you. We have to go and get Zol first."

"Zol? Why?" Kirel's brow pinched. "He's got a shuttle."

"Not anymore, he doesn't," Sul said, his voice filled with glee.

“It’s more than that!” Cara’s excited voice cut in. “Zol found another human!”

Mollie added, “She’s named Frankie, and she’s his fated mate!”

My mouth fell open in surprise as I exchanged a look with Kirel. “The exotic pet you found.”

“It really was a Hyoo-mon!”

Gravin demanded answers, so Kirel, Vree, and I spent the next few minutes filling them in on everything we’d done.

“I’m sorry we didn’t find *ARK 1* yet,” Kirel said. “But this proves there’s useful data in what we did get. We just need to keep working.”

“I’m helping!” Vree said.

“You sure are, bud.” Kirel gave the pup’s head a pat.

“By the time we get back, I should have a basic dictionary ready for the written version of trade standard,” I said. “Us humans will finally be able to use all the displays and computer tablets.”

“Thank god!” Mollie said. “It’ll make learning how to fly these ships so much easier!”

Cara said, “Yeah. It’s such a pain in the ass to have to ask Gravin what everything means all the time.”

“I didn’t realize it was such a burden to speak to me,” Gravin grumbled, but with a note of... humor?

The sound of a meaty clap echoed from the speakers, and Sul crowed, “Did you just make a joke, boss?”

“Don’t call me boss,” Gravin said, but there was no true heat to it.

We signed off a few minutes after that, both of us smiling.

Maybe I should be thanking the Grug instead of cursing them for taking me off ARK 1. I couldn’t imagine ending up anywhere else in the universe with such a good group of people who were already my friends.

I glanced over at Kirel. He’d dived back into the data, his eyes darting back and forth, his clever fingers a blur as they flew across the screen. He’d been working so hard the past few days, and I knew a lot of it was because he wanted to make me happy.

Pressure built in my chest, the special feeling I had around him growing with every second.

I needed to stop worrying about falling for him—I’d already started falling.

Now the real question was, could I let go?
Could I let myself fall all the way?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Kirel

EXCITEMENT RACED THROUGH me as I examined the code for the third time. *It can't be!*

But it was.

“I found it!”

Vree bounced from my lap and yipped, his tail wagging so hard his whole body shook.

Hay-Zul gave a happy shriek from the main cabin and raced through the door into the cockpit. “You found *ARK 1*? Where is it?”

“Not *ARK 1*,” I said. “But I found out why I haven’t been able to find *ARK 1*.”

She scrunched up her nose. “I don’t follow.”

“All of the data Vree and I have been looking at—” I waved a hand toward the shuttle’s computer

“That’s me. I’m helping!” Vree said.

“—it’s low-level stuff. The regular administrative records Pranch needs to run smoothly. But none of it is the juicy stuff, the real secrets.”

Vree ears and tail drooped. “I didn’t get the juicy stuff.”

“You got everything there was to get, little buddy. This isn’t on you.” I leaned over to give his back a reassuring pat, then straightened to look at Hay-Zul. “The reason none of the higher-level information is here is because the Grug don’t trust it to their computers.”

She shook her head and plopped down in the copilot’s chair, picking Vree up and cuddling him to her chest. “Still not following.”

“The Grug are a telepathic hive-mind. No one knows exactly how it all works. They’re really careful to keep us from finding out anything. But it’s clear that they can communicate immediately only over a short range. They must still send telepathic signals across the seven sectors, but it takes time, and no one’s sure of their range or exactly how they do it.”

“Okay.”

“Well, I think I found part of the answer. A log to send a vital piece of information to node three. That’s the central processing hub for this entire sector. But it must be more than just a computer, because the information got sent, but it wasn’t sent as a regular data signal.”

“So... it got sent telepathically?”

“Yes! Don’t you see? This is why, no matter how much we hack their systems, we can never find out anything truly important about the Grug. They don’t trust it to their regular computers. They only send it telepathically!”

“How does that help us?”

“They have to store it somewhere. There’s no way they can hold it all in their brains, so I think they store it in these hubs. There’s supposed to be one in every sector, but they’re always hidden somewhere in empty space away from any planetary system. But they weren’t careful enough this time. There’s a location stamp for hub three.” I grinned, anticipation licking along my nerves. Sliding from my seat, I fell to my knees in front of Hay-Zul and clasped her hand in mine. “I can break in and hack it directly. I can find your ship.”

Vree yipped and jumped down to spin in a circle. “I did it! I did it!”

Hay-Zul laughed and pressed her forehead to mine, making my rulaa tingle with delight. Her smile beamed at me with all the warmth of the sun.

I crushed her to me, taking her mouth with mine, pouring all my hunger and need into the kizz.

I would prove myself worthy to my mate, and she would finally agree to be mine.



After calling the *Daredevil* to update everyone on what I'd discovered, I changed our course until we headed for Grug node three. The *Daredevil* had just picked up Zol and Fran-Key in an escape capsule and were on their way to our new rendezvous point.

"Don't you dare go in without backup," Captain Wrin ordered.

"I won't." It wasn't a lie. Going in without any help would only put my mate in danger. Nothing was worth that.

The *Arrow's* previous route had taken us surprisingly close to the node. We'd simply never realized it, because the Grug had hidden it inside a dense pocket of interstellar dust that wreaked havoc with scanners.

"We're not going to be able to see much of anything in there," I said. "But the good news is the Grug won't be able to either."

Hay-Zul gazed out the viewscreen, her expression filled with awe as the display colored the dust in front of us so we could see it. It looked like a dark-red cloud shot through with streaks of gold and silver.

"What are those?" Her finger traced one of the gold streaks.

"It's a vein of positively ionized particles."

"And the silver?"

"Negative ones. We want to avoid either. Both are highly reactive and good at chewing up sensors."

I found an area free of either, sent the *Daredevil* our coordinates, and pulled us just inside the dust cloud so any Grug ships that came close wouldn't see us.

A red haze completely covered the viewscreen when I shut down the engines.

"So we wait?" she asked.

"The *Daredevil* will get here tomorrow, and we can use the wait to improve our odds. The closer we get to the center of the cloud where the hub

is, the more likely we are to be spotted by the Grug. They probably use their telepathy to keep from running into each other in this soup.” I grinned over at her. “Come on. Let’s do some scouting.”

I led her into the main cabin, Vree following. After opening one of the cupboards, I pulled out a stealth drone. It looked like a baby asteroid, the circular body a little oblong. Pits and craters decorated its matte-black surface, adding to its irregularity. The only sign it was something manufactured was the largest crater on the back, which was actually an engine port. It would glow when the engine was on.

“What’s that?” Hay-Zul asked.

“It’s my secret body!” Vree answered, running in circles around my ankles. “I’m going outside!”

I gave my mate my most devilish smile. “Ready to spy on some Grug?”

“Hell yeah!” She grinned back.



An agonizing few hours crept by before Vree finally called us. He’d dropped tiny signal relays as he flew an indirect route toward the center of the cloud. The numerous strands of ionized particles made a straight path impossible. Every time he deployed one, a little pale green dot winked into being on the shuttle’s main display. The relays each had a tiny battery that allowed them to send a signal for a short distance—just far enough to reach the next relay. Instead of punching a long-distance signal through the dust in a blaze of power easily spotted, Vree could call us using the relays without being found out.

“I’m close,” he said. “There’s something big in front of me.”

“Don’t get too close,” I said. “Just make an orbit and take video of whatever’s there. Then come back.” Sure, the stealth drone looked like just another meteoroid, but I still hated the thought of my little friend alone in enemy territory.

“I’ll get good video, the best video!” Excitement rang in his voice.

How much had his new self-programming developed? Could his growing emotions overcome the core self-preservation routines I’d installed all those years ago? “If you think you’re about to be spotted, power down

your engine and wait until it's clear. It's more important for you to get back here in one piece than to get back here fast."

Hay-Zul said, "Please stay safe, Vree."

"I will! I'm smart! Smarter—"

"Than a kreecat, I know," she said with a laugh in her voice. "No kreecat could do what you're doing. You're the best."

"You really are, little buddy," I said. "So be careful and come back to us."

"I'll be back soon!"

The connection cut, and I leaned back with a sigh.

"How safe is this for him to do? Really?" Hay-Zul looked over at me, her eyes serious.

"It's one of the things I designed him for," I said. "But he's changed a lot. He's smarter, but he's also..." Unable to describe it, I waved a hand toward the shuttle's control panel where Vree's voice had just come from.

"Impulsive? Looking for approval?" She nodded. "He wants to impress you."

I nodded. "He's getting more of a personality. It's exciting in terms of computer programming. I may truly have made a breakthrough. But Vree's more than some experiment."

She leaned over and placed her hand on my forearm. "He really is a friend."

"He is." I picked her hand up and squeezed it. Then we both watched the screen as more light-green dots appeared, forming a loop around the center of the cloud. I couldn't see anything more than that outline, but I didn't have to. Vree's call had confirmed that we'd found the Grug hub.

I've got you now, you gray bastards. So many secrets and answers waited inside—far more than finding the Hyoo-mon ship, though that was still my priority.

We continued to hold hands as light after light flicked on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Hazel

IT WAS LATE, past the time we'd normally have gone to sleep.

Vree had gone dark a couple of hours ago, and we had no way to know what was going on.

Kirel had refused to leave the cockpit the whole time, his worry for his little friend etched into the tense lines of his body. I'd brought him jormint tea and ration bars, which he'd inhaled, his eyes never leaving the displays.

I'd drunk some of the mildly stimulating tea, but my stomach had been in too many knots to eat anything. Work on the dictionary was the only thing that helped me pass the time, though the pattern I was seeing in the trade standard language grew ever more disturbing.

"What's the symbol for 'love' in trade standard?" I asked.

Kirel's eyes flicked toward me, then back to the screen. "I don't know." He pulled out his tablet and tapped at it. "Interesting. There isn't one. Sorry."

“Don’t be. That’s helpful.” I made a note. Kirel had created a program that let me write in English using my finger as the stylus. The tablet stored each note as a picture for now. It would take me finalizing the dictionary to allow the program to actually make sense of the words I wrote, but this was far better than trying to keep everything in my head.

Right now, most of my notes were things like this—missing words. Trade standard didn’t have many emotions or intangible concepts, especially positive ones. No love, no joy. No loyalty, no friendship. I bit my lip as I flipped through screen after screen of all the words I couldn’t find. Did the Grug not have these ideas?

Or were they purposefully suppressing them by making sure no one could write them?

Holy 1984. That’s some seriously messed up mind-control.

Words helped us understand and process the universe around us. If something had no word, then people had no way to express the idea to others. No one on Earth had ever successfully used Orwell’s idea of controlling language to control people, but that didn’t mean the Grug weren’t doing it here.

And it went hand in hand with my other idea—their computer systems should be able to translate text just as easily as they did spoken language. So why force trade standard on everyone unless you were trying to control them somehow? Kirel said almost no one learned to read and write the Zaarn language anymore. How many generations of that would it take to remove concepts from people’s vocabulary, people’s thoughts?

If I can make a dictionary for English and Kirel can turn it into a translation program, then we could do it for all the languages—Zaarn, Sjisji, and Tula.

No more need for trade standard. No more Grug control.

Anticipation zipped through me at the thought of sticking it to the gray bastards who ignored human sentience. *Think I’m nothing more than an “exotic pet”? Well, this “pet” is going to show you some new tricks.*

Kirel jerked, his arm snapping forward to toggle one of the display screens.

“What is it?”

A lump of rock swam into view, a wonderfully familiar lump of rock.

“Vree’s back!” Kirel shot out of his seat, his long legs carrying him out

of the cockpit before I'd even stood.

He hovered in front of the airlock's inner hatch, his fingers poised at the control pad. Right when I reached him, he tapped, and the door slid open.

"Vree!" Kirel fell to his knees beside his little friend, who rested on the airlock floor. His clever fingers made quick work of opening the access panel and pulling Vree's data core from inside.

I hurried across the main cabin and picked up Vree's regular body.

When I handed it to Kirel, he slotted the drive into place. Before Kirel even had the access panel closed, Vree's tail started to wag.

"I did it! I did it!" The puppy bot flipped over onto his feet and danced in a circle.

"You sure did, buddy." Kirel pulled out the stealth drone's extra hard drive, stood, and gestured toward the cockpit. "Let's see what you got."

I gave Vree a pat on the head. "We were worried about you."

"I was smart." His high-pitched voice quivered with excitement as he followed me into the cockpit. "A big Grug ship came really close, so I got quiet and hid. When it finally went away, I stayed quiet all the way back, just in case."

Kirel hooked a cable onto the extra drive and started working the screens. When I sat down, Vree jumped into my lap, facing forward so he could watch as well. A picture of the dust cloud filled the screen.

"Going to fast forward for a bit."

The view zipped through space, which jolts every time Vree stopped to deploy a comms relay. Finally, something big and dark blinked into existence. Kirel ran the video back a bit and restarted it at normal speed.

At first, everything was the red of the dust cloud. Then the haze slowly darkened until a structure came into view, a long cylinder, slightly thicker in the middle. Small craters pocked the dark gray surface. It looked like a huge version of Vree's stealth-drone body.

"What is that?" I asked.

"It's a Grug space station. They hollow out asteroids and set them spinning around their long axis to generate gravity inside."

He sped the video up again, and the camera passed down the length of the asteroid to the other end, which had a rectangular slab of metal embedded in the tip. A ship emerged from the mist, its gray metal sides passing close by. It looked bigger than a shuttle but smaller than the *Daredevil*, and it had a

rounded shape with no obvious weapons ports—a cargo ship.

“That was the ship that almost hit me!” Vree said.

The view held in place as the stealth drone came to a stop. The rectangle slid open, showing a ship airlock, and the Grug ship slid forward. The scale of the asteroid finally snapped into view for me—that rectangle of metal was larger than a ship, which meant the asteroid was huge, far bigger than any ship.

Vree said, “This is where I held still.”

True to his words, nothing happened on screen, and Kirel skipped the video ahead until the ship airlock opened again, and the Grug ship flew out. It passed close again, looming on the screen until all that showed was the metal hull. Then it disappeared from view.

After another period of stillness, the stealth drone began to move again, continuing its loop around the space station before starting home.

Kirel froze the view as the camera passed over a section of the asteroid’s rocky surface. He zoomed in, and a perfectly circular hole appeared in the midst of the irregular craters. “Gotcha!”

“What is it?”

“It’s an emergency escape hatch put in by the Tula miners who hollowed out the asteroid. If it’s like the other Grug space stations, it’ll lead to tunnels the gray aliens don’t use.” Kirel looked over at me, his smile wide and beaming and so genuine it made my heart skip. “We just found our way in!”

Vree yipped and bounced in excitement, and anticipation zipped through my body as I found myself grinning back.

We’re going to do it! We’re going to find ARK 1!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Kirel

THANK THE GODDESS, the dust cloud was as big as a gas giant and easily able to hide any number of ships. The next morning, the *Daredevil* moved into position about a quarter of the way around the gas cloud, directly opposite from the position of the Grug space station's docking port. It seemed the least likely place for one of the gray alien ships to fly through, and therefore, the safest place for the large warship to wait. The dust cloud might have made the Grug blind to what we were doing, but it also made us blind to them, and the last thing we needed was to be found before we got what we wanted.

A ping came over comms, and Gravin said, "We're floating off your airlock. Extend the docking tube."

Hay-Zul squinted at the display screen, her nose scrunched up. "I don't see anything."

“You won’t. They’re in the *Dart*, our only stealth shuttle.” It had been a bear to make but worth it. We’d taken the smallest, sleekest shuttle the Grug made and replaced the metal hull plates with hardened composite that didn’t register on scanners. Then we’d painted the entire thing in completely non-reflective dark-gray paint. Lastly, our engineers had created an engine-exhaust baffle that recycled the heat and light output into more energy for the engine. They were working on creating larger ones that would let our bigger ships use less fuel, but for now, the prototype worked like a charm.

Only a few seconds after the docking tube clamped onto the other ship, the *Arrow*’s outer airlock hatch opened. I used the manual override to open the inner hatch as well.

“Thank frek,” Sul said as his large space-suited form stepped into the main cabin. The matte-gray fabric covered him from neck to boots, and a clear bubble helmet surrounded his head and horns. “It was pretty tight in there.”

“You were only in the *Dart* for a half hour.”

“Yeah, yeah. You try being jammed into a one-person ship with three other people and a kreecat and see how you like it.”

He stepped aside, and Mol-Lee stood behind him, wearing a small version of his suit.

Gravin and Car-Raa followed, also already suited.

“When did you make Hyoo-mon sized suits?” I asked.

“Car-Raa insisted,” Gravin said, his deep voice serious. “And I agreed.”

When we first met Car-Raa, the only thing we’d had that fit her was an emergency Sjisji suit. Its lack of boot thrusters had almost killed her.

Gravin shoved another space suit into my hands. “This one’s for Hay-Zul.”

I stowed it in the locker beside mine.

An impatient yowl made Car-Raa hurry to the corner to set down a pet crate. It was airtight, pressurized, and insulated in case a ship lost atmosphere. She activated magnets so it would stick to the floor before opening the door. “Yes, well. You didn’t have to come. You could have stayed on the *Daredevil*.”

Space Kitty sashayed from inside, his bright-pink tail whipping back and forth, though he hadn’t extended his stinger.

While everyone took off their helmets, Hay-Zul made a tsking noise to

call the krecat over and rubbed his forehead right between his little horns.

Vree ran through the room, dodging between people's legs. "I went outside in my *special* body. I got the video we needed." He slid to a halt with his side pressed to Hay-Zul's leg. "*Other* pets can't do that!"

I fought down a laugh. My little friend was certainly developing quite the personality. Interacting regularly with my mate seemed to be hastening the process. The jealousy of the krecat indicated a big step toward sentience.

Space Kitty's tail whipped harder, and Car-Raa snorted. "I'm not saying that. It's rude."

"Now we really want to hear it!" Mol-Lee walked over to wrap Hay-Zul in a hug. Car-Raa joined them and whispered something.

The females broke into laughter, heads thrown back, arms still around each other. It was such a beautiful sound it froze every male in the room for long seconds. The pain of banishment, of thinking we'd walk this life alone, had shaped us over these past years. Finding our fated mates was a miracle.

"Can we focus?" Gravin said, but his tone lacked its normal sternness as he looked lovingly at his mate.

She smiled back, and you could feel the mate bond that tied them together for life, the bond I wanted with Hay-Zul.

With everyone packed into the main cabin, there was barely enough space to unfold chairs from the wall, but we finally got settled. Everyone in a spacesuit took off their helmets and stowed them under their seats. Car-Raa and Gravin sat next to each other on one side of the room with Hay-Zul and me directly across from them. That split Sul and Mol-Lee up, and his long legs stretched across the narrow aisle as if his body silently reached for her.

"What's the plan?" Gravin asked. Even though everyone on the *Daredevil* besides the captain had equal stature, we tended to fall into roles based on our strengths, and Gravin's was strategizing missions.

Sul grinned and caught my eye, mouthing "boss."

I pulled out my comp and displayed the emergency hatch I'd found on the side of the asteroid. "We can use this to access the original mining tunnels."

"Yes!" Sul fist pumped. "Zol used tunnels like those to get to an escape pod when he fled Sturd Station."

"It's what gave me the idea to look for the hatch," I said.

Gravin scowled at the comp when it passed to him. "That worked

because Zol used an escape pod already disconnected from Grug sensors by the Zaarn network. We're not going to have anything like that here. No Zaarn has ever set foot on this hub station."

"True, so it's a good thing we've got an excellent hacker to take care of things." I hooked a thumb toward my chest.

"Humble as always," Sul said.

I smirked. "I was being humble. I could have said the best hacker in the seven sectors." As far as I knew, it was true, and it didn't hurt for Hay-Zul to hear it.

"Who's going in with you?" Gravin asked.

"Me," Sul said. "I'm his backup."

"And me," Hay-Zul said.

I spun to face her. "No!" Ever fiber in my being screamed at me to protect her.

My mate held up her hand. "All of the reasons for why I had to go to Pranch still apply. If there's a way to contact *ARK 1* on that station, I'm the only one who can do it."

"This isn't Pranch. We'd visited the factory planet. We knew what to expect. This Grug station will be much more dangerous, too dangerous. We have no idea what's in there."

"But they aren't expecting us," Car-Raa said. "The Grug hid this place so well they're not expecting *anyone*."

Gravin gave a slow nod. "The Grug like to think the rest of us are stupid compared to them. They probably can't imagine we'd ever find this hub. We can exploit that."

"Frek, yeah!" Sul said.

Hay-Zul looked at me, her chin lifted, determination filling her eyes. "I can do this."

"I know you can," I said.

My mate was smart and capable—our mission on Pranch had proven as much. Yet the primal possessiveness filling me didn't want her anywhere near danger.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Hazel

KIREL AND GRAVIN flew the *Arrow* and *Dart* respectively to a point halfway into the dust cloud, and we connected the shuttles via docking tube again.

Mollie and Cara had stayed on the *Arrow* to help me figure out how to get into the spacesuit. I'd had a little bit of training in human ones before leaving Earth, but these Zaarn ones were less bulky and easier to move in.

"Pee first," Cara said. "That's the most important thing I learned in all my space training to be a peacekeeper. Always pee before you put on a spacesuit. Even if it has built-in plumbing, you don't want to go there if you don't have to, and these don't have built-in plumbing."

When I returned from the tiny bathroom, I shucked off my work pants and stepped into the spacesuit bottoms. Cara helped me yank the heavy material up over my generous thighs on one side, while Mollie did the other.

We finally got it over my panty-covered ass.

“Why didn’t you tell me Zaarn don’t know how to kiss?” I asked as I stomped my feet more firmly into the boots.

“They don’t?” Mollie’s big eyes bounced between the two of us.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “They’re fast learners.”

Cara snorted. “Hell yeah, they are.”

“So there’s been kissing.” Mollie grinned and wiggled her eyebrows. “Spill.”

Heat flushed my cheeks as I shoved my arm into the sleeve she held up.

Cara laughed. “I know that look. There’s been a hell of a lot more than kissing.” Then her expression became serious. “You two are mates?”

“Kirel says so. But we haven’t done the whole—” I waved a hand. “—mated thing yet.”

“I thought you might be, but I wasn’t sure,” Cara said. “Gravin’s great, but he’s not exactly talkative. And the mating thing is so normal for these guys that they don’t seem to realize how strange it is for us.”

I stared into her eyes and asked the most important thing. “But it’s real, right? What they feel?”

She didn’t hesitate. “It is.”

One of the last twists of tension uncoiled in my tummy. *I can trust Kirel.* It was such a relief.

When I got the top half of the suit the rest of the way on, Cara showed me how to close the front. Then Mollie walked me through how to make sure my helmet sealed.

They stepped back as much as possible and let me walk around, getting used to the suit. Now that I had it on, it was fairly easy to move in.

“Sure beats being shoved into a giant trash bag,” Mollie said, her tone wry.

A bark of laughter escaped me. “God, I’d almost forgotten that.” When the Zaarn had rescued us from the Grug, they’d used these emergency atmosphere bags to move us from one ship to the other. We hadn’t been able to see out of them or move by ourselves or anything. I’d been okay with it because I wasn’t good in space anyway, but feeling that helpless hadn’t set as well with the crack pilot.

Kirel came out of the cockpit, already in his spacesuit. The matte-gray material clung to his tall, muscled form, and he shot me the wickedest grin

when he caught me looking, his eyes heating as they raked over me.

“Get a room, you two,” Mollie said, bouncing on her toes.

I shot her the finger, and Mollie’s laughter rang in my helmet as Cara pulled her into the airlock and over to the smaller stealth shuttle.

“Five minutes or Gravin will get tetchy.”

Then Kirel had his helmet off, and his clever fingers made quick work of removing mine. He scooped me up into his arms, holding me effortlessly.

I reached for his lower horns, pulling his forehead to mine.

His eyes closed as a soft moan escaped him.

“What does this feel like?” I whispered. “Like a kiss?”

He rolled his head from side to side as far as his horns would allow, then pulled back. “Not like a kizz. More like the feeling that swells in my cock when it grows to hardness.”

Wow, his forehead really was an erogenous zone. A spurt of jealousy rolled through me. “So this happens anytime someone touches you here?”

“What? No.” He looked horrified. “No one but you has ever touched my rulaa, not since I was a child. And my rulaa only react like this with you, my fated mate.”

There it was again, the idea that this was special, that *I* was special. It didn’t feel quite so crazy anymore. I brushed my fingers over his brow, stroking toward his temple and the base of his horns.

He growled, his arms tightening around me. “If you keep that up, we’ll never leave this shuttle.”

I grabbed his horn again and tugged. “Then kiss me and put your helmet back on so I can resist the temptation.”

I expected him to attack my mouth, to claim it with a possessive fury. He hadn’t wanted me to go into danger, but I was.

Instead, his lips brushed over mine in the sweetest caress, teasing until I rose on my toes, trying to get closer, to get more.

Kirel pulled away with a devilish grin. “We’ll continue after.”

My thighs clenched at the promise in his voice. Oh, this male! He knew exactly what I needed.

Then his expression went serious. “Promise me you’ll be careful. I know finding your ship and the other females is important to you. It’s important to all of us. But it’s not worth losing you.”

I nodded. “You promise the same.”

“I’ll be as careful as I can.”

What the hell did that mean?

Gravin’s growly voice came from the speakers set into the necks of our suits. “Where the frek are you two?”

“Coming!” I called out, reaching for my helmet.

“I’ll make you come,” Kirel said.

Gravin huffed. “We can all hear you.”

I burst out in giggles, Cara and Mollie’s high laughter echoing mine. Sul’s deeper guffaws were loud enough to reverberate through the airlock.

Kirel double checked my helmet seal and waved me toward the other ship.

The docking tube let us out directly inside the stealth shuttle, which was too small to have an airlock. There wasn’t a separate cockpit, only a narrow strip of room running from the door to a bathroom on the back wall to the single pilot’s seat in front. Instead of the normal Zaarn light blue, the walls and everything inside were charcoal gray. Our spacesuits almost blended in.

Space Kitty’s box sat at the back, and Vree lay on top of it in a cleaning bot body Kirel had taken from one of the *Arrow*’s cabinets. Gravin sat in front of the controls, and everyone else stood. We jammed in with the rest of them, Kirel guided my hand to a hanging strap, and the outer hatch slid closed.

“Here we go.” Gravin grabbed the yoke and started us off. Mollie hung over his shoulder, watching everything he did.

The kick of the engine made me sway backward, but Kirel’s large body cradled me from behind, steady as a rock.

The viewscreen showed only red dust at first, then a streak of silver, which Gravin maneuvered easily around.

Other than those occasional detours, it was really hard to tell we were moving much.

Then a loud yowl rang through the cabin.

“Stop!” Cara cried out, her voice almost a sob. “Gravin, you have to stop!”

He slammed his hand over something on the controls, and inertia yanked us all forward as the ship came to an abrupt halt.

I still had hold of the strap, but my feet left the deck, my stomach feeling like it wanted to fly out the front of my body. Only Kirel’s strong arm banded

around my waist kept me from going with it.

“Back up, back up, back up,” Cara chanted. Her tan face had blanched to a sickly paleness, and a sheen of sweat coated her skin.

Gravin growled and flipped the ship up and around in a dizzying rush.

My stomach lurched in protest. “What happens if I throw up in this thing?”

“Don’t,” Kirel said.

I swallowed repeatedly as our flight smoothed out to normal.

Gravin brought us to a gentler stop, leaped from his seat, and pushed over to Cara. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Space Kitty.” She’d regained some of her color and could stand upright. Cara shoved her way back through us to get to her pet’s crate.

There wasn’t really room, but we all shuffled around and did whatever we had to so she could pass.

She crouched in front of it, her hand plastered to the transparent door.

“Are you okay?”

Space Kitty must have answered, because she whispered, “Don’t worry. You won’t have to.”

Then she stood and turned to the rest of us. “That place hurt him, inside his head. I could feel it. It hurt me, too. I don’t think either of us can go there.”

“The telepathic bond,” Gravin said, his brows drawing together into a scowl.

Cara nodded. “It has to be. And whatever’s there, in that place, it uses the same”—her hand grasped at the air as if trying to catch something elusive—“frequency or mental wavelength.”

He grunted and sat down. “Hold on.”

In ten minutes, we reached the *Arrow*, and Kirel used his comp to tell the other shuttle to extend the docking tube.

We shuffled around some more until Sul could pick up Vree’s stealth drone. Then Cara released Space Kitty’s crate from the deck and carried him through to the larger shuttle.

Gravin paused at the outer hatch and looked at Kirel. “You still need a backup pilot.”

“He’s got one.” Mol-Lee turned to Kirel. “You’ve still got your auto-pilot program, right?”

He nodded.

“I’ve already memorized all of the instrumentation used on your shuttles. I’ve passed all the simulators already.”

“What?” I gasped. “I haven’t finished my dictionary yet.”

The small pilot gave a quick shrug of her shoulders. “You know me. Can’t sit still. I’ve been memorizing the controls since the day I woke up from cryo.” She turned back to me, her brown eyes sincere. “I’ll be the backup pilot. And your autopilot program can help if need be.”

“The gas cloud’s full of dangerous ionized regions,” Kirel said. “It won’t be easy flying.”

She smiled, her entire expression full of joy. “The best flying never is.”

“That’s settled,” Gravin said. “I’ll use this heading to bring the *Arrow* as close as possible to the hub, but if something happens...”

“We’re on our own.” Kirel nodded. “I understand. You have to keep your mate safe, and the *Arrow* isn’t stealthed.”

“No,” Gravin growled. “I was going to say I’d fly in with boot thrusters to get you, so you better not make me.”

Sul straightened from setting Vree down and clapped a hand on Gravin’s shoulder. “We won’t. Now go take care of Car-Raa.”

Gravin gave a sharp nod and hurried down the docking tube.

The hatch slid closed, and Kirel took the pilot’s chair.

Now that there was room, Sul lowered seats from the wall, but Mollie waved him away when he tried to press her into one. “I’m officially the backup pilot now. I want to watch.” She took up position behind Kirel and grabbed a hanging strap.

Sul nodded but sat as close to her as possible, his big body tensed as if preparing to catch her.

I sat down and strapped in just in time, because Kirel took off, flying quickly.

None of us said anything, but the mood had changed from excitement to something less positive.

It’s just a hiccup. Things are still going to go well, I told myself.

Too bad I’d kept my nose buried in books instead of being a cheerleader. I didn’t sound very convincing.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Kirel

FREKKING FREK, WHAT a setback! I'd hoped the kreecat and its silent telepathic bond to Car-Raa would help us scout.

Instead, we'd lost two of our team. Gravin was one of the best males to have at your back in any fight, and Car-Raa had proven quick and resourceful on our last mission, too.

No, I'm thinking about this all wrong. I need to turn our reduced numbers into a good thing. I need to use it.

"Change of plans," I said as I whipped the *Dart* around another flow of ionized material. "Hay-Zul and I are going in alone."

"What the frek!" Sul shouted. "No way."

"Hear me out!" I yelled over him. "We don't know what we're going into here. And fewer people means less chance of getting caught."

"I'm not staying on the ship."

“Okay. But you and Mol-Lee are going to stay in the mining tunnels while Hay-Zul and I go into the main part of the station. If all goes well, we won’t need you. But if we get caught, you’re our backup.”

Sul muttered a string of words punctuated by several “freks.”

“You can’t save us if you’re caught with us.” I glanced over my shoulder at my friend.

“Yeah, yeah, smart guy.” He jabbed a gloved finger at me. “I’d still rather watch your back.”

“You will be. I have a plan.” I turned to face the front, even though my autopilot program had things under control. We should reach the station soon, and I didn’t want to miss any chance to study it.

The mist didn’t really clear, it instead slowly grew less red and more gray until we broke through some threshold of haze and the asteroid appeared, filling the viewscreen. I changed course, heading down its length instead of getting closer to the rocky surface. The next few minutes would tell us if all our attempts at making a stealth craft had succeeded. The Grug made almost all of our technology, but that didn’t mean the Grug didn’t hold some things back just for themselves.

I linked into the tiny signal relays Vree had placed and sent a low-power message back to the other shuttle. *We’re here. I don’t think they’ve seen us.*

Keep it that way.

I snorted. Gravin hadn’t signed off on his message, but the terse words sure as frek weren’t Car-Raa’s.

Gray rock slid by, pockmarked and ragged. I would have missed the recessed circular port for the emergency hatch if Vree hadn’t found it the day before.

I matched the spin of the asteroid and ordered the autopilot to hold position so the *Dart* would continue to hover above this point.

I slid from the pilot’s chair and waved Mol-Lee into it. She asked a couple of quick questions to clarify how to turn the autopilot off and resume manual control, and I walked her through the procedure. She picked it up the first time.

“Everybody got their helmets on?” I asked. Once I’d received the affirmatives, I evacuated all air in the cabin and opened the outer hatch. I stood in the doorway for a moment, my eyes meeting Hay-Zul’s worried blue ones. “It’s okay. Hacking is what I do best.”

Then I leaped across empty space, flying toward the crater containing the hatch. A few feet away, I flipped and toggled my boot thrusters so that by the time I touched the surface, I was barely moving. There wasn't enough metal in the rock for magnets to cling to, and the asteroid's spin kept trying to throw me off, so I had to use my thrusters to stay in place.

I pressed my comp to the control pad set beside the circular port and launched one of my best hacking programs. Nothing happened. Frek! The controls were ancient—this asteroid had clearly been mined decades ago—and the mining tunnels weren't used by the Grug. Maybe the old system had failed?

I pocketed my comp and got out my multitool. The cover on the panel released with a jolt, and I pocketed it as well. The circuitry underneath looked intact, but without power. I pulled a set of wires from a battery pack and touched the ends to two metal contacts. You weren't supposed to jumpstart a system like this, and you certainly wouldn't find the instructions in any manual. But then, I could write a series of my own manuals with all the forbidden things I'd discovered over the years. "Come on, come on, you old piece of frek."

"Problem?" Sul asked.

The panel lit, and I smirked. "Not anymore." I taped the battery leads into place to keep the door working, then tapped for it to open. This was a likely time for the Grug to detect us, and my heart kicked up a notch. If they did, I wanted to us to be able to take off as fast as possible.

With a twist, I planted my boots on the lip of the crater and launched myself back toward the *Dart*. "Coming in hot."

Sul's big form stepped away from the shuttle's hatch.

I used my thrusters to adjust course, flipping until my boots aimed right for the opening. A blast of thrusters slowed me, but not quite enough. Big hands grabbed me as I flew inside, yanking me to a halt.

I grunted, then muttered a thanks.

Sul grinned widely and unhooked his boots from an anchor. "Anytime you want me to teach you how it's really done, you only have to ask."

I mouthed "frek off" at him, and he laughed.

"Are you okay?" Hay-Zul sweet voice cracked on a note of worry as she hurried over to me.

"I'm fine." I squeezed her shoulder and asked, "Anything from the

Grug?”

“Not that I can see!” Mol-Lee called out.

We waited ten more minutes, then Sul shot a grapple line across, burying its drilled tip into the rock of the asteroid. He secured this end to an anchor on the edge of the doorway and hooked a series of rappel devices to it so their handholds were in easy reach. Everyone gathered their gear. I tucked Vree’s cleaning-bot body under one arm and grabbed one of the rappel devices.

The open hatch on the side of the asteroid glowed faintly—some kind of light source remained on inside. Anticipation sparked through me. *This is going to be the hack of a lifetime.* I’d be famous—or infamous, depending on how you looked at it. Either way, it would be one for the history books.

“Let’s go find your ship.” I gave Hay-Zul a dazzling smile.

I leaped.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Hazel

KIREL DISAPPEARED FOR a second time, jumping out into space as if it was no big deal.

I hovered in the outer hatch of the *Dart*. The asteroid hung in front of me, huge as a mountain. But in between? In between, there was *nothing*, not even air.

A panicked breath caught in my throat. I'd never been one of the people who'd trained for the real space stuff. If *ARK 1* had made it to a new planet, I wouldn't have been woken until a lot of infrastructure was in place. I never expected to need to do anything other than walk from the medbay to a shuttle and be flown down to the planet.

I'd certainly never expected to need to jump into the void of space.

Maybe they should shove me into a big trash bag again. That had been scary, but I hadn't needed to do anything.

“Are you alright?” Sul asked. “I can carry you over with me.”

“Hay-Zul.” Kirel waved at me from the port in the asteroid, a dark-gray form outlined by light. “I’m right here. I’ll catch you.”

And he would. He totally would. Kirel might have been charming and suave, but he was also honest and dependable. *I trust him.*

It felt so freeing to be able to do that! A giddy lightness filled my chest, like a crushing weight had been lifted and I could breathe for the first time since Derek. I reached for the handles on the slider thing and jumped. I jumped toward my purpose of saving the other women. I jumped toward my future.

I jumped toward Kirel.

Movies made me expect some kind of zipping noise and air whooshing past, but the only sounds were my breathing and Kirel saying, “You’re doing great.”

Gray rock rushed toward me, blotting out everything else. My heart pounded as the circle of light and Kirel grew until he became normal sized. I crashed into him with an oof of expelled breath, and his arms wrapped around me to keep me from hitting the metal wall of the small square airlock.

Then I was laughing. “I did it! I did it!” I felt like Vree, like I could twirl in a circle. It was more than the jump—it was trusting this male and having that trust rewarded.

Kirel smiled down at me. “You did.”

Then Mollie sailed through the opening, legs tucked up so her boots hit the metal wall of the chamber and absorbed the impact. She let go of the grips and leaped easily aside. The pilot might have been small, but she was seriously athletic, with a wiry strength I admired.

Sul came last, moving with an easy grace that belied his large size.

Mollie gave an impressed whistle when he did this complex flip at the end, using his boot thrusters to bring him to a perfect stop. “That’s some serious moves, Sul.”

He gave an embarrassed grin, looking bashful at her praise, and it was Kirel who said, “Sul’s our expert at low-gee ops and spacesuited maneuvers. There’s no one on the *Daredevil* better.”

Sul shot him a thankful look. Then his eyes flicked back to Mollie to see if she’d noticed Kirel’s praise.

She smiled at him. “You’ll have to teach me some.”

He nodded, all of his bluster gone when it came to her. It was so flipping adorable!

Sul spun around and closed the outer hatch while Kirel worked on the control panel for the one on the opposite wall of the airlock. Once he had it open, he crouched and turned over the cleaning bot to slide Vree's data core inside.

The little wheels spun. "I'm here!" Vree's high-pitched voice came over my helmet speakers. Kirel had disconnected the cleaning bot's external speakers and instead given Vree a comms system like the rest of us.

Kirel set him on his wheels, and Vree scooted forward. "Where are we?"

"We're in the Grug station."

"It doesn't look like a space station."

Vree wasn't wrong. Rough rock walls made a tunnel in front of us that curved, offering only a limited view ahead. A narrow strip of lights ran along one wall, stapled in place. It looked seriously low tech.

"This is the really old part the Grug don't use."

"How did they make this?" I ask. "The smooth part of the floor doesn't seem wide enough for them." The gray aliens on Pranch had been built like pyramids.

"They hired Tula to do it," Kirel said. "Grug don't do any of their own labor."

We headed down the tunnel, which never remained straight enough to provide much visibility. Soon it branched.

Kirel pulled out his comp. "The mapping program I made says the center of the asteroid is that way." He pointed to the left branch, and we started forward again.

This weird pressure built in my head the farther we went. None of the others said anything about it, but they were all used to spacesuits. I gave an internal shrug and kept going. I refused to look like the chubby chick who couldn't take a little physical activity, especially since I was in pretty good shape.

More and more tunnels intersected, sometimes two or three at once. Kirel kept us going until we finally came to a ladder. The metal rungs had been pounded directly into the rock wall and disappeared into a roughly circular dark hole overhead.

"Finally," Mollie said.

Sul grunted. "This place is a frekking maze."

Kirel nodded. "That's where you and Mol-Lee come in. You're going to map as much of these tunnels as you can while Hay-Zul and I go for the computers."

The big male started to protest, but Kirel spoke quickly, "I'm not sidelining you. This is crucial. These tunnels are our best means of escape. What if we get cut off and can't get back to this exit? You'll find us a new one."

"I'm here to watch your back," Sul said.

"You will be." Kirel held out his hand. "Now hand over your comp so I can give you the mapping program."

Sul grumbled but did it.

When Kirel gave it back, he squatted and spread a net on the ground. "You ready, little buddy?"

"Ready!" Vree rolled forward, and Kirel scooped Vree up and used straps on the netting to secure him to his back.

Kirel stood and met my eyes. "You can stay, too, you know."

"No way." I shook my head, which felt heavy and full. "You still need me to signal *ARK 1*. I'm seeing this through."

Not gonna lie. I might have been doing this to prove something to myself as well as to help the human women still on *ARK 1*, but I sure didn't hate the look of approval he gave me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Kirel

I WENT UP the ladder first, climbing into the dark. After about ten feet, I couldn't see a thing. "Give us some light, little bud."

Vree turned on the cleaning bot's headlamp, flooding the chimney with light.

The rungs continued for another ten feet, ending at the bottom of a trapdoor. I hurried up to it. After looping my elbow through a rung, I pulled out my comp and pressed it to the door.

"What is it?" Hay-Zul hung from the ladder just below my feet.

"Checking to see if it can hear anything." The display remained clear, and my forehead didn't tingle with the sensation of anyone but my mate. "It looks good. I'm going to open the hatch. Then I'll send Vree through."

"Okay."

"Whee! I get to first!"

“You sure do, little bud. You’ve got a really important job. I need you to go up there and make sure there aren’t any Grug or anyone else who can see us.”

“I can do it!”

“I know you can.” I stowed my comp and grabbed the latch. “Now, turn off your light.”

We plunged into darkness, and I twisted the latch until it clicked. I pushed at the trapdoor, but it didn’t budge. With a grunt, I shoved harder, and it popped open with the crunching noise of an old seal breaking.

It echoed down the chimney, and I winced, hoping it hadn’t been as loud on the other side.

A line of light shone overhead, and I cursed my upper horns because I couldn’t put an eye to the crack without opening it much wider. But the rulaa those horns protected still told me we were alone, and I trusted them.

“I’m lifting you up now, Vree.” I held the hatch open with the top of my helmet and pulled the netting around to free Vree. My heart pounded as I surged upward, pushing him out onto the floor before ducking as quickly as I could.

I pulled out my comp and pulled up Vree’s forward camera. He spun in a circle, panning across the entire room. Shelves full of crates lined the walls. No Grug. “We’re good. It’s a storage room. Sul, you and Mol-Lee go ahead and start mapping. Hay-Zul, we’ll go up.”

“You got it,” Sul said.

Mollie added, “Be careful, you two.”

“We will,” Hay-Zul answered.

I pushed the trapdoor up and climbed out onto a smooth rock floor. Most of the rooms in these stations had been made from the gray rock of the asteroid itself. Only here in the used part, a lot more care had been taken, so the floor and walls were smooth and polished.

Holding the door up with one hand, I reached down to help Hay-Zul climb up. When I set it back down into the floor, it almost disappeared from view, leaving only a narrow crack.

Hay-Zul’s blue eyes were big, her pupils dilated as she looked all around.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said quickly. “Where to now?”

“Vree’s going to help with that.” I pointed to the small hatch in the bottom of the door. “You ready?”

“Ready!” He rolled forward.

I held my breath. Here was the next hurdle. Did the cleaning bots here use the generic signal codes or did they have special ones? If the second, we were frekked.

But the panel slid aside as Vree approached, and he disappeared.

I got out my comp and waved Hay-Zul over. My tail buzzed against my side, where I’d wrapped it around me to get into my suit. My body didn’t understand taking my mate into danger, especially since she wasn’t yet fully mine. It wanted to rip off our clothes, to start the mating heat and knot so I could bond her to me forever.

I pulled her close, needing to touch her.



Vree rolled down an empty hallway past a series of closed doors. I had him enter one, but it held more crates.

“It looks like I was right. This building is storage, just like it is on the other Grug stations,” I said to Hay-Zul. Thank frek the gray aliens were proving to be somewhat predictable. “Let’s go.”

Vree sped down the corridor in front of us, and we hurried after.

I wanted to get to somewhere we could look outside into the big hollowed-out cavern that made up most of the inside of the asteroid. A sun-tube would run down its very center, lighting the city spread around its inner walls.

Where a regular station would have shops and warehouses, a computer hub had to be filled with computers. We wouldn’t need to go far to find one to hook into.

Vree didn’t hesitate as he approached the front door, just kept right on going. Hay-Zul gasped when it looked like he’d crash, but the small panel at the bottom slid open just in time.

I glanced at my comp as we closed the distance. As expected, Vree rolled down an avenue with open “sky” overhead. A couple of robocarts loaded with crates moved past, but it was free of Grug.

Once we got to the door, I showed the screen to Hay-Zul. She shivered and pressed a hand to the side of her helmet. “That’s a lot of empty space. Something about this place is seriously creepy.”

“I agree. Let’s get what we want and get out of here.” I studied the view some more. “There.” I pointed to a central building that looked like three warehouses merged into one. “That’s where we’ll try next.”

She nodded.

I sent out a signal, searching for security camera feeds so I could loop them. But I got nothing. Frekking odd. *I guess if you build a secret space station no one’s ever supposed to find, you don’t waste resources on things like security cameras.*

Outside felt downright eerie. I’d never been on any ship or station without lots of people around. The effort it took to light, heat, and provide an atmosphere meant living space was always at a premium. Hay-Zul was right. Why was a place this big so empty? Where were all the Grug?

Don’t second guess the Goddess. I grabbed Hay-Zul’s hand. “Ready to run?”

Her beautiful blue eyes met mine, full of determination. “Ready.”

We bolted out the door and down the street, dodging around one of the robocarts, which didn’t even register us.

It all felt so easy. The Grug clearly didn’t expect anyone to come here and had relied too heavily on hiding the station instead of securing it. My mate had been right.

Ahead of us, Vree entered the first door of the target building. “No Grug,” he said over comms.

I let go of Hay-Zul to pull slightly ahead, my longer legs carrying me to the door quickly. By the time she reached me, I’d hacked the lock with my comp and swung it open for her.

Inside the two-story room, towering vertical cylinders rose overhead, made from a silver metal that gleamed like stainless steel. Large pipes led from each, joining together into a wide conduit that punched through the room’s inner wall.

A cleaning bot ran in a circle around one of the bases, then moved to another. It took me a second to realize it wasn’t Vree playing—it was one of the station’s regular bots.

“What kind of computer stuff is all of this?” Hay-Zul asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t know. It’s not like anything I’ve ever seen or heard of.” I waved my comp around, trying for a signal. “I’m not picking up any computer activity, either. None of it makes any sense.”

“I found another door,” Vree called out. “Over here.” He rolled out from behind a cylinder and spun in a circle to get our attention.

We wove through the tall tanks to join him by the same wall the big tube disappeared through.

“Seems like that’s the place to be if all these tanks feed into it,” Hay-Zul said.

Vree went first again and reported all clear.

I opened the door to a huge room, easily the size of a warehouse. Only there were no crates or shelves. Or computers.

Something massive filled almost all of the room. A large blob covered in thick gray hide scored with cracks. Its sides undulated slightly.

“Is that thing *alive*?”

After a few seconds of silence, I tore my gaze from it to glance at Hay-Zul. Her eyes were glassy, her lips moving even though no sound came over comms.

“Hay-Zul?” My heart thudded in my ears, the cold shock of adrenaline flooding my blood. “My soul’s breath?”

My mate didn’t answer me—didn’t even seem to hear me.

Then Hay-Zul fell to her knees and let out an agonized scream.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Hazel

“HAY-ZUL!” KIREL’S PANICKED cry barely cut through the noise filling my head until it felt like my brain would burst and dribble out my ears.

“Please,” I sobbed. “Please less.”

It didn’t get any better.

Another onslaught of information threatened to swamp me, pounding into my mind. I pictured the symbol for “less” in trade standard, a simple V shape. Over and over, I shoved that shape at the thing invading my brain, until with a pop of lessening pain, the presence eased a little.

Vree’s robot body kept bumping into my leg, and his little voice called my name, “Hazel, Hazel, Hazel.”

“I’m getting you out of here.” Kirel picked me up. “This isn’t the computer we need.”

“No, wait! This *is* what we need,” I cried out. “It’s connected to their

computer system, but it's not a computer. This is why they send everything top secret via telepathy. Because the thing they're sending it to also uses telepathy." The knowledge squeezed into my mind, trying to shove an encyclopedia's worth of information into every second. "It's a Grug."

"A Grug?" Kirel's expression was horrified as he looked out over the huge mass of gray that filled an entire building. It didn't even have eyes or ears. Its mouth made no sound, plugged with a wide tube that fed it in a continuous stream. Another tube on the other side carried away the waste.

"It's a brain. A huge brain with nothing but a rudimentary digestive track. They made it this way, forced it to be this." It didn't feel happy or sad or... anything. Was this the truth of why trade standard didn't have certain words? The Grug didn't feel them? Or did they control this being just like they controlled the language?

Not the point, Morehead, I reminded myself. Remember why you're here.

I gripped the sides of my helmet, my eyes squeezed shut, and forced my mind to picture one trade standard symbol at a time. The gray aliens didn't have a word for human—or at least not one I knew. So over and over I repeated the best question I could think of: *Where very strange ship?*

Finally, a new picture formed in my head. *ARK 1*, a huge brick of a ship, floated in the middle of space. It no longer gleamed silver as it had in all the Ark Program promotional videos from before it left Earth all those years ago, but it was still magnificent, this glimpse of humanity's highest achievement.

"Yes! That's it!"

Somewhere far away in a thing called my body, Kirel's arms tightened around me.

But I had to keep focused on the Grug mind, that overwhelming mind. This time I repeated two new symbols over and over: *Comms connect.*

It felt like it took forever, but an answering beep echoed through my head, one I'd never thought to hear again. The very human three-note tone used by all the computer systems on *ARK 1*.

"Advanced protocol delta," I said/thought. "Authorization three-three-seven-nine-foxtrot-alpha, comms specialist Hazel Morehead." It took more than the words. The ship's computers had voice-print maps for all the officers. Would the Grug mind transfer my voice? It could interface with computers as well as use telepathy—it had pushed that information into my

head.

“Double-tango-one,” *ARK 1*’s emotionless computer voice said.

Yes! It had recognized me. Now came the real test. The computer had a huge list of possible questions it could ask, and it chose one at random. I needed to give the correct answer, or it would shut me out for twenty-four hours. And in this case, that meant I’d lose all chance of contacting the ship. No way the Grug would let us hang here for a day.

Think, think, think! Double-tango-one. It was so hard with the Grug mind pressing on mine, squashing me flat. I sucked in a breath and forced myself to focus, all my years of hard study and willpower coming into play.

Double meant the ship had chosen protocol string two. Tango meant T. And one meant the first answer on that list. I mouthed my way through the mnemonic we’d all used to memorize so many strings of data, finally getting to the right section. “Ring through stage eight,” I said/thought. The words were nonsense, but they needed to be the *right* nonsense.

“Advanced protocol delta initiated,” *ARK 1* answered.

“I did it!” I forced the words out of my mouth, trying to reconnect with my body. “*ARK 1* answered. It’s turned on the homing beacon.”

Vree yelled, “Whee!”

Kirel’s grinning face came into view as I blinked my eyes open.

I smiled and sank more fully into his arms as a wave of relief washed over me.

But my relaxation let down too many walls. The Grug mind flooded my brain, squeezing out all of my Hazel-ness in a blinding wave of pain.

CHAPTER THIRTY



Kirel

THE LIGHT WINKED out of my Hay-Zul's eyes, and it felt like the universe had hollowed my heart from my chest.

I reached for her left wrist, checking her stats, and her suit display said she was fine, "*pulse and respiration normal.*"

I bared my teeth. This was all about as far from frekking normal as you could get.

"Kirel!" Sul's voice came over comms. He'd opened up the emergency channel. "We need to get out of here!"

"Go, Vree," I said.

His bot body sped for the door, moving far faster than one of the regular cleaning bots could.

I took off after him, cradling my mate to my chest. "What is it? Did the Grug find you?"

“Not sure what they are,” Mol-Lee said. “They’re gray, but they’ve got legs.”

Legs? What the frek? “Sul?”

“Kinda busy.”

“We’re headed back to the ladder you used,” Mol-Lee said.

I grunted and saved my own breath for running.

Vree shot out the bottom of the tank room’s door and into the street, and I slammed open the door and took off after him. The other building wasn’t far, but every second that ticked by felt like torture, with Hay-Zul still glassy-eyed and unresponsive in my arms.

Vree hurried into the storage building, calling out, “It’s still clear!”

I pounded in after him, not stopping until I stood beside the trapdoor.

My entire body protested on a molecular level when I had to set my mate down. But I couldn’t keep holding her if I wanted to save her.

“Vree, here!”

He whirred up to me, and I flipped him over and popped out his data core. This was no time to be worrying about saving the cleaning bot, no matter how many upgrades I’d made to it. Once I had my friend stored in a pocket, I pulled my blaster and fired a solid stream of red bolts at the bot until I fried its systems and curls of smoke rose from the chassis. No sense leaving the Grug with easy clues about what all my hacking could do.

Then I threw open the trapdoor and heaved Hay-Zul over my shoulder. “I’m sorry, my soul’s breath.”

I opened the emergency comms again. “We’re coming down.”

“We’re waiting!” Mol-Lee called back.

I clambered down the ladder as quickly as possible with only one hand.

Sul and Mol-Lee stood side by side, facing away from the direction of the exit, each holding a blaster at the ready.

“Did you do your big hack?” Sul asked.

Frek! The hack I’d always thought was so important meant nothing to me now, not compared to my Hay-Zul.

“No. It wasn’t a computer. It—”

Gray, leather-hided aliens marched around the curve of the tunnel ten feet away. They had the bald head and three-fingered arms of a Grug, but their torsos were about as thick as a Tula’s and they walked on two legs.

Shock rippled through me. For over a hundred years, the Grug had told

us they only had the one type/shape/whatever. And in less than an hour, I'd seen two more types, each very different from the norm. "What the frekking frek are those?"

"Surprise!" Sul yelled, firing off a round of stun bolts.

"Oh, I've got a surprise for you, too." I'd taken some video of the Grug hub mind, if only to prove what we'd found to everyone.

"Help me hold them off while the females run for the shuttle!"

"Problem," I said. "Something's happened to Hay-Zul."

Pain must have laced my voice, because Mol-Lee gasped and Sul said, "Then all of you run. I'll hold them off."

"We're not leaving you!" Mol-Lee yelled right as I said, "Frekk, no!"

I ran down the tunnel until it curved, blocking everyone from view. Leaning over, I set Hay-Zul down with her back propped up against the wall. "I'll be back for you. I promise."

Then I leaped up and dashed back to stand behind Mol-Lee, who was short enough that I could shoot over her.

A pile of stunned bodies covered the floor of the tunnel, proving that these Grug were definitely not as resilient as the pyramidal ones. But more kept coming, and this kind could climb over obstructions. It was weird, too, the way they just kept marching forward without any thought for themselves. And the way they were silent. The Grug I knew were never silent, their loud voices booming over everyone else's.

"We're never going to beat them like this, especially not if they get blasters," I said.

A shot of red winged off my biceps in a jolt of pain.

"You just had to go and say it," Sul snarked. "Now they've got blasters."

I ducked, taking Mol-Lee down into a crouch with me as another blaster shot rang out. They only seemed to have one gun so far, but it was only a matter of time before they got more.

We needed a new strategy. If we'd been able to stun more of them, we could have blocked the tunnel, but now—

I looked up. *Yes! Frekk, yes!*

"Back up a few feet!" I yelled. "I have an idea!"

Sul kept shooting, his aim perfect, even as he backed down the tunnel. Mol-Lee was almost as good. They kept stunning whichever Grug got the gun before they could get off a shot. *Quite the warrior Sul's got for himself.*

Then thoughts of my own brave mate came to me. The way she'd struggled against a mind as big as a building and won... at least for a while.

No! You can't help her if you don't stay in the moment and figure this out.

"Sul, you keep holding them off." I tapped Mol-Lee's shoulder and pointed up. "Fire into the rock at the bottom of the ladder chimney. It will be weak."

I followed suit, setting my blaster to the highest power and sending shot after shot into the gray rock.

Sul yelled, his big body jerking with a hit. But I knew my friend—it would take more than one blaster bolt to bring him down.

A tremble under my feet. It was working!

Another cry from Sul as he threw himself in front of Mol-Lee, taking the blaster bolt aimed at her chest.

She and I shot at the same place, and the ceiling groaned.

Then a rumbling crash dropped a wall of rock between us and the weird walking Grug. Dust billowed into a thick haze. My helmet kept it from my nose, but it didn't help visibility any.

Mol-Lee stood right in front of me, her blaster still held at the ready.

I slid sideways, crouched, and reached out, feeling for Sul. Once my hand found his upper arm, I squeezed. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," he growled, but he let me help him sit up, which meant he was hurt but didn't want to admit it. Because of Mol-Lee?

"Can you walk?"

"Yes."

I let it go, then. If he could walk, he was well enough there was no reason for me to make him lose face in front of his mate.

More of the dust settled, showing off the jumbled pile of rock blocking the tunnel. But even as I watched, it shivered, being disturbed from the other side.

"Let's get out of here." I stood and hurried back to Hay-Zul. Picking her up, I cradled her to my chest, which ached all over again at seeing her like this.

It was the sweetest of pains to hold her again.

And to have her not recognize me.



The *Arrow* escorted us all the way back to where the *Daredevil* waited, hiding just inside the border of the dust cloud. I took the stealth shuttle through the airlock first, and Captain Wrin and both medics met us as I carried my mate across the shuttle bay.

Mol-Lee followed, one of Sul's arms slung over her shoulder as she helped to keep him upright.

Sron, the head medic, took one look at Hay-Zul's glazed expression and said, "Medbay, now."

I didn't even break stride, just kept hurrying toward the elevator.

The other medic headed for Sul.

I heard the *Arrow* land right as the doors slid shut, and part of my mind relaxed, knowing Gravin and Car-Raa were also safely back.

But that was the last moment of relief I had. The next few hours were endless. Nothing Sron tried brought Hay-Zul out of her daze.

Gravin bullied me away from her side long enough to take a shower and put on clean clothes. He also brought me Vree's mirol pup body, and I woke up my little friend.

"We did it!" He gave a yip of excitement. Then his tail drooped. "Oh, Hazel. How is she?" It was funny—I just realized he said her name just like the humans did, without a Zaarn accent. He truly cared for her.

And I loved her. Not like I'd loved her the moment we met and I knew she was my fated mate. I loved her intelligence and her willingness to help others. I loved the way she played and talked to Vree, treating him like a real being. This love was deeper, richer, now that I knew my soul's breath.

And right now, it was far more painful.

"I don't know, little buddy." He crawled onto my lap in the middle of medbay, and I held him close. "I don't know."

We stayed by her bed. Sron had given her something that finally closed her eyes, so she looked like she slept and could wake at any moment. Her golden hair spread across the pillow like the corona of a sun, and she looked heartbreakingly beautiful.

Sul and Mol-Lee came by, along with Car-Raa and Gravin, but no one said anything. After a while, they filed past me, offering kind words and

touches of support. Then Space Kitty ran back into the room, jumped up on the bed, and laid down in the middle of Hay-Zul's chest. He started to purr.

"Hey!" Vree jumped up to stand on my lap. "She's *my* human! If anyone gets to snuggle her, it's me!"

Car-Raa leaned back through the doorway and met my eyes. "Space Kitty says he's going to help."

"Come on, little buddy," I said to Vree. "You're keeping me company right now, and Space Kitty isn't hurting Hay-Zul."

He settled onto my legs with a grumble but nuzzled into my hand.

I leaned my head against the wall, but my eyes never left my mate as I squeezed her hand in mine.

Come back to me, my love, my soul's breath. I've lived enough empty years without you. I don't think I can stand another one.

Come back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Hazel

I WAS TINY, so very tiny, little better than an insect. How did someone—something—such as me ever think I was equal to the might of the Grug?

Squashed flat, boxed in, compressed to a dot. If a metaphor existed for “tiny,” then that metaphor was me.

But I know the word “metaphor.” I know the concept. It’s a rather complex one, too, using a word or phrase as an analogy to make understanding deeper.

I grasped at this revelation, digging for more, digging for *me*.

Words flooded my being, chaotic and alive.

English, my native language, was a beautiful hodgepodge of Germanic roots forever changed by the French of the Norman Invasion and the infusion of Latin and Greek during the Renaissance. Add on a few hundred years of borrowing words from every other language on Earth like a magpie collecting

all the shinies, and you came up with a glorious mess of a language with more exceptions than rules.

It made the Grug trade standard language look pitiful and colorless.

You have power, I told the lingering pressure, *but you don't have depth*.

The cage around my mind expanded, not all the way but a little.

The second it did, a rumbling motor of a sound vibrated through me. I sensed it had been there for a while, but I hadn't been allowed to feel it before.

"Me help!" A new voice called to me, one high and bright. *"Me Space Kitty!"*

Space Kitty! I clutched at a memory of pink, of vitality, of laughter.

Of affection and love.

I had that with another pet. Vree! With his purple puppy body and his glowing purple eyes so like...

Kirel.

His gorgeous face filled my entire being: smiling with devastating charm, lost in ecstasy, serious. His large strong body, protecting me, carrying me, bringing me joy. He'd been my constant since waking in this strange new world, the rock I could lean on.

He was smart and witty and kind. His charm came from a place of wanting love, and I did.

I love him. I love him so damned much!

The warmth of his smile filled the universe, and I reached for him with everything I had. I fought through the lancing pain, the horrible pressure. I fought for me, for him, for us.

Kirel!

I shouted his name in defiance, daring the presence to try to take it away from me again.

Kirel!

A crack of light flooded the darkness I'd been locked in.

Kirel!

The world popped into being around me, a tidal wave of light, sound, and touch, all at once. It overwhelmed my senses, threatening to take me under again.

But other sensations anchored me to my body. A hand held mine, and a connection tugged deep inside my chest. Also, a purring warmth hummed

through my torso, even as the bright voice faded from my mind. “*Me done.*”

Blazing white stung my eyes, and I blinked repeatedly as a blur of pink stood from my chest, then disappeared from view, taking the purr with it.

My hand clenched, and strong fingers squeezed back as a new shape blocked the lights overhead.

“Hay-Zul?” Kirel’s deep voice said my name with all the special emphasis he always gave it, the Z prominently pronounced instead of glided over. I loved it.

I loved him. My mouth opened, the words ready to flow... and all that emerged was a pained squeak.

All I could do was cling to his hand as he touched his forehead to mine, his purple eyes welling with emotion. He pressed a quick kiss to my lips and said, “It’s okay. You don’t have to speak. It’s enough that you came back to me.”

“And me!” Vree’s high voice came from beside me, but I couldn’t turn my head.

Kirel chuckled and disappeared from view for a second, reappearing with Vree tucked under his arm. He set the pup on the bed, and Vree clambered up to push his satiny nose against my cheek, his tail whipping back and forth in a purple blur. “I missed you.”

“We both did,” Kirel husked.

I looked up at my new family, love filling me to overflowing until I had to let it out somehow. I mouthed, *I love you.*

No translation device in the universe could read lips, but I repeated it again and again.

I love you.



I fell asleep soon after that and spent much of the next few days barely able to keep my eyes open. But every time I did, Kirel was there, waiting for me. I had the headache to end all headaches, a deep throb of agony pain meds barely touched. But it meant I was alive, and it lessened a little each day.

Everybody checked in on me, Cara and Mollie dropping by to fix my hair and help me into the comfy lounge top and pants Kirel had made me in a

pretty blue. They kept up a running chatter about everything going on and even brought Frankie to meet me. About my height, she had the thin build of someone who'd grown up riding the edge of hunger. She had brown hair lighter than Cara's or Mollie's, skin a darker shade of tan than Cara's, and the touch of a southern accent. Frankie told me everything she'd been through, waking up all alone in Grug captivity. She was tough and smart, and I'd never been so glad to have been found by Cara and the Zaarn warriors before having to go through anything like it.

She also had a kreecat, a black one named Beans. I expected Vree to get jealous, but things had changed while I was knocked out, because he liked the other pets now. "Space Kitty helped you. We're friends!" He rubbed Space Kitty's cheek with his.

Medic Sron tutted over me, running test after test, but seemed to think things were going well, even though I still didn't have full control of my body. As the headache finally faded, I ran through everything I'd learned about the Grug, trying to sort the mass of information into some kind of sense.

When I could sit up, Kirel brought me my meals, using his eating knife to slice tender steak into bite-sized morsels. The Zaarn had made forks for us humans, but his clever hands speared the chunks and brought them to my mouth without even the tiniest of nicks. The steak melted on my tongue in a burst of salt and meaty goodness. The salad greens a crisp accompaniment. He even found more fruit for me to enjoy.

In another day, I had enough control of my hands to use a tablet again. I still couldn't talk, but could work on my dictionary and write notes.

I was physically fine. Whatever the Grug hub mind had done to me had only affected my brain. As far as I could tell, it had used my intense study of its language to infiltrate my mind. Sron assured me there wasn't any physical damage, more a psychic one. He likened it to an inflamed, overused muscle. If allowed to fully rest and recover, I should regain all my faculties. It just happened that speech would be last. Oh, the irony—a comms officer unable to speak!

Kirel worked out a basic translation program for my dictionary, and soon I could type basic sentences the tablet would speak out loud. As much as it was a relief to be able to communicate again, the voice was far too lifeless and flat for the most important thing I needed to say—that I loved him.

Finally, I made my first solo trek to the medbay bathroom and returned to stand by the bed I'd spent far too much time in.

Kirel walked through the door, his steps hurrying when he saw me upright. "Are you okay?"

I picked up the tablet and typed. "I'm fine," it said in a monotone voice. "I want to go home."

"Back to your cabin?" he said.

"No." I typed in my answer and met his eyes as I pressed the icon to play it. "To our cabin."

For the first time since I'd been hurt, a devilish smile lit his face. He picked me up and spun us until the plain medbay walls turned into a white blur and my breath stuttered in a silent laugh.

Refusing to set me down, Kirel carried me to the elevator. When the doors whooshed open, the other Zaarn inside took one look at us and got out, whether this was their stop or not. Kirel laughed and kissed me as the elevator moved, and excitement fluttered in my tummy.

Vree ran up and down the crew quarters hallway, dragging a piece of rope while Space Kitty chased after him. The robot pup zigzagged in a dizzying pattern, then shot past Kirel's feet.

Kirel laughed as he dodged the racing feline. "It's been really good for Vree. His movements used to be very regular, mathematical, and predictable. Playing with the kreecat has introduced more randomization and chaos."

"It makes him more alive," I made my tablet say.

"Exactly."

I no longer had any doubts. My brilliant Kirel had done the impossible—he'd created artificial intelligence.

My arms tightened around his neck as he carried me effortlessly down the hall. He stopped in front of a door and tapped at the control panel. It opened on the small room he'd shown me only a few weeks ago, but how much I had changed since then! Now I could appreciate it for this glimpse into who he was.

A quilt covered the blue sheets on the bed. Instead of squares, long strips of colored fabric traveled the width of its top. They varied in height, some several inches, some barely an inch. It created a riot of color that almost seemed to ripple, beautiful and alive, just like him.

Photographs hung on the light-blue walls, alien landscapes full of purple

and deep-blue foliage, green lakes, and light gray mountains. I knew this was Zaar, his lost home world. It was achingly beautiful.

All those blue bushes would give him another excuse to take off his shirt and run naked, just like he did in the desert. I grinned, picturing it now.

Kirel pulled back the quilt and set me down on the bed. He removed my slippers and his boots, then smiled. “There’s something I want you to see.” He tapped his tablet, and the lights went out.

As my eyes adjusted, tiny golden dots appeared on the ceiling like stars in the sky.

The mattress dipped beside me as Kirel sat, and he pulled me backward until we lay down side by side. “Do you see it?”

I stared at the constellation overhead. Was it from his home world? No. It was eerily familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it. The desert sky of Pranch? Again, no. I brought his hand to my cheek so he could feel me shake my head.

“It’s your Frey-cals.” His fingers brushed over my nose, my cheeks, tracing the dots of my freckles from memory.

Oh! No one had ever done anything like this for me! The time it must have taken! The attention paid to me, to my face, as if he found me precious.

Love welled in my chest, tightening my throat and filling my eyes with tears until the map of my skin Kirel had made blurred into gold fairy lights.

The cabin’s light came back on, at the lowest setting, and Kirel hovered over me. “Don’t cry, my soul’s breath. Please don’t cry.”

I couldn’t explain happy tears, so I tugged on his horns, pulling him to me even as I strained upward to meet him. That first kiss was wet and salty and warm, and his lips moved across mine with a reverent gentleness.

When he pulled back, his purple eyes searched my face, full of a vulnerability he rarely let show. “I know you don’t want to mate bond with me yet. And that’s okay.” He took a deep breath, his fingers brushing my forehead. “I love you, Hay-Zul. You are the one gifted to me by the Goddess. And I will wait however long you want, because I am yours. Forever.”

Elation bubbled through me until I thought I would explode. *He loves me!*

I cupped his cheeks, my fingers stretching up to rub his sensitive temples. Then I rose to press my forehead to his for a moment, before losing myself in his hungry kiss.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



Kirel

MY SOUL'S BREATH kizzed me, clinging to me as if her life depended upon this connection. And it truly felt as if I would die without her.

Hay-Zul tore her mouth from mine, and her lips began to move, repeating the same set of words she'd been telling me for days. But they were in her Hyoo-mon language, and I still didn't understand.

"I'm sorry, my sweet mate," I said. "Perhaps your comp could—"

She shook her head vehemently as she mouthed a word that turned into the slightest rasp. "No."

Her blue eyes widened, and her hand flew to her throat as she murmured a few more things under her breath.

Then my Hay-Zul smiled like the sun cresting the horizon to light my entire life. Her lips parted on the faintest of whispers, but it was the most glorious sound in the universe. "I love you."

Joy slammed into me, knocking away every lingering shadow of worry and doubt I'd carried since being banished. *My soul's breath loves me!*

My forehead tingled as I pressed it to hers, her beautiful blue eyes shining at me as a smile plumped her cheeks, stretching her Frey-cals into a fascinatingly new pattern. I longed to memorize them like this, my Hay-Zul happy, and add them to the ceiling as well, a second constellation by which to guide my life.

I kizzed her again, unable to resist the sweet siren call of her lips, even though my cock begged for her. My kron buzzed hard enough to vibrate my entire body, the mating pull rising up to overwhelm me.

I needed to say the mating vow while I still could.

"My sweet Hay-Zul, will you mate me? Will you join your soul to mine until we are one?"

"What is this?" She whispered, her voice a little stronger. "It sounds so formal."

"This is my mating vow to you. You will be mine, and I will be yours." I brushed my fingers over her forehead. "If you accept me and the mating knot, we will be bound *forever*. You are the only one I will ever truly join with, body, heart, and soul."

Her lower lip trembled. Then she threw her arms around me. "Yes! A million times, yes! I want every bit of forever with you."

"You have made me the happiest of males." I squeezed her to me. "I've longed to bond with you since the moment I first saw you."

She pulled back to look at me, her eyes full of wonder. "I still don't get that. You didn't know me!"

"I knew everything I needed to. I knew the Goddess gifted you to me so that I would no longer walk this life alone." I pressed my forehead to hers, the tingling of my rulaa exquisite. "I know more, now. I know that I love you for everything you are—your intelligence, your clever use of words, and your dear heart, which welcomed Vree with such loving affection."

"Oh, Kirel. You're the one with the gifted tongue." Tears sheened her eyes. "I didn't trust it at first, but that was because of my past, not you. Don't ever change. You can tell me you love me every day for the rest of our lives, and I'll believe it every time. Because I love you, and I trust you."

Her words broke the last of my restraint. The mating pull overwhelmed me, and I couldn't hold back my tail any longer. It whipped through the air to

slide up her cloth-covered back. No coating it in paint this time—when it touched her bare skin, it would start the mating heat.

My fingers made quick work of unsealing her soft top. I kissed my way down her neck, licking the hollow of her collarbone and scraping her with my fangs just enough to make her gasp. The silar silk of the bra I'd made for her felt rough compared to the satin of her skin, and I unhooked the back with impatient hands. I used my fangs to peel it from her lush breasts, then pulled back, my kron hovering over a nipple.

“Are you ready for the mating heat, my sweet mate?”

She bit at her lower lip and nodded, the alluring smell of her skin teasing my nose.

I slid the triangular tip of my tail over her nipple, feeling it harden even as she gasped. My kron vibrated harder than ever as the mating heat hit both of us in a wave of desire.

Hay-Zul's hips rose from the bed, and she cried out, high and sweet.

My cock jumped at the sound, throbbing and insistent as I ground it against the bed. It demanded to be buried in her wet heat, to knot her and make her mine forever.

When she could open her eyes again, she whispered, “I've never come without clitoral stimulation before. That was amazing.” Then she wiggled her hips, her body searching for more sensation. “But I need, I need...” Her cheeks flushed.

“You need my knot,” I said. “And you'll get it once I've pleased you fully.”

“Kirel.” Her needy tone begged, but the mating heat was a special delight only fated mates enjoyed, and I planned on exploring those delights fully.

I slid down her plump stomach, licking the soft skin and making her squirm. Her lounge pants slid effortlessly from her hips, exposing her lovely, solid thighs. I buried my face between them, my horns pushing them wide. The musk of her arousal filled my nose, my mouth, and I groaned. “You're so wet for me, so ready. Such a good mate.”

Hay-Zul's hands grabbed my upper horns, pulling me to her.

I went willingly, licking through her wetness as the salt and tang of her bust across my tongue. My tail slid over to vibrate against her other nipple. I groaned and lapped at her clit, making her jerk even harder on my horns.

“Oh! Oh, Kirel!” she screamed, head tipped back, thighs trembling.

I chuckled, letting the vibrations of it continue to tease her sensitive nub. My cock strained and jerked, the base tingling, ready to swell with my knot. I’d never felt the mating heat stoke my desire before, and the rush of pleasure was heady.

My mate panted, her fast breaths making my heart race with anticipation. I flicked my tongue down to her entrance, and her taste had grown richer from her orgasm.

“Yes,” she hissed, tugging on my horns. “More.”

“Don’t worry, my sweet mate. I will give you everything you need.” I grinned, scraping at her inner thigh with my fangs as my tail slid down her stomach, the buzz of its eager vibrations filling the air. “Are you hungry for me? Does this needy Puz-zee want more of my tongue?”

She nodded, biting at her lip, and whined high in her throat. She used her grip on my horns to pull her hips up to me.

My tongue plunged into her depths, working in and out of her as I lapped up her juices.

“More,” she breathed. “More, more, more.”

Everything, my soul’s breath. I will give you everything.

I thrust my tongue into her, searching for that spot she enjoyed most. My tail stopped its teasing and pressed over her clit, the wings fluttering wildly.

“Kirel!” My name was a prayer, a curse, a cry to the heavens, as my sweet mate shattered around my tongue. I held her at her peak, my tongue and tail working her until she sobbed, shaking, unable to catch her breath.

I finally slid free, licking her wetness from my face as I crawled up her body.

Hay-Zul’s hand let go of my horns to clasp at my shoulders. Her beautiful blue eyes opening to implore me. “More, Kirel. I’m so empty. I need more.”

“I know, my soul’s breath. Soon I will fill you with my cock, my knot. Soon you will have everything you need.” My tail teased at her entrance, my kron still buzzing. “I need to prepare you fully, to coat that sweet Puz-zee with my fluids so you can take my knot.”

She nodded, her knees falling farther open.

My tail plunged inside her, vibrating hard, fluttering the soft wings of the tip to fill her with sensation. I worked it in and out of her as she moaned,

shivering with pleasure.

“That’s it, my sweet mate. Take your joy from my tail.” I pulled the length of it tight to her body so that the vibrations of the end traveled over the part touching her clitoris.

She gasped and cried below me, her inner muscles clenching around my tail as I added a few more strokes, spreading more of the fluids within her.

It added to the heat, the need, and my hips jerked forward, my cock straining against the fabric of my work pants in a pressure I could no longer stand.

I reached back to rip open the back of my pants before undoing the front. Hovering over her, I peeled the annoying fabric from me, my tail slipping from her.

Her eager hands pulled me down to her, and I went willingly, a groan tearing from my chest as I touched my soul’s breath skin to skin. Her lush body cradled mine, soft and inviting, and I’d never wanted anyone more, never imagined wanting anyone this much. The need for her burned through me. It was far more than the greedy throb of my cock. My very soul longed to merge with hers.

Poised here on the precipice of our bonding, all my clever words failed me. In the face of her beauty, knowing she would finally truly be mine, I could only feel.

I captured her mouth with mine, my tongue tangling with hers in a delicious slide. Then I was up, over her, the tip of my erection pressed to her entrance.

Hay-Zul pulled me to her, her hands on my shoulders and her heels digging into the back of my thighs.

I slid in fully, the wet heat of my sweet mate surrounding me in the most exquisite pleasure I had ever known.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Hazel

I THOUGHT I'D known what pleasure was after our previous times together. I'd been wrong, so very, very wrong. Everything paled compared to the Zaarn mating heat.

Kirel had given me one orgasm after another, some of them without a single thing touching my clit. It felt as if my body had gotten a sex upgrade, going from barely able to come to multiorgasmic in one fell swoop.

Actually, it had already felt like that the previous times with him, but this time...

God, that tail really is the ultimate sex toy! One I get to enjoy for life.

But it was more than the tail. It was him. All of him. My fated mate. My love.

My Kirel.

He slid into me and paused, buried deep. His huge and magnificent cock

felt absolutely amazing. The pressure, the fullness—I wiggled below him, delighting in the feeling. The firm weight of him pressed to my breasts, my stomach. It satisfied something primal inside me to have him on top of me like this. The sheer size of him made me feel dainty and cherished.

Kirel looked down at me, his face serious, his eyes full of love. His lips parted, but no words emerged, that silver tongue finally shocked to stillness.

As was mine. All my love of language failed me in the face of this joining, this oneness.

We remained locked in this timeless moment, as close as two people could get, and the feeling in my chest grew tighter.

Then my body took over once again, still needing something more. My inner muscles tightened, and he groaned, pressing even deeper for a second before pulling out to thrust forward again.

“Yes.” The movement shook words free from inside of me. “More.”

He slid a hand under my butt, tilting my hips. And he hit that special spot inside of me with every plunge, sending wave after wave of tingles washing over me until my heart raced and I gasped for breath.

And it still wasn’t enough.

I nuzzled his chest, pressing kisses to his hot skin, loving the taste of salt and male and Kirel.

My voice failed me again, and I could only mouth “more” against his skin over and over in a silent plea.

My heels slid up the backs of his thighs, my legs straining to pull him deeper, even though he already hit as deeply as possible, his length sparking pleasure with every thrust.

He gave a loud groan, and his tail buzzed loudly, standing straight up from his back like a plucked string. Then it dove down, sliding between our stomachs to flutter against my mound.

I gasped in anticipation, and the smell of sex mixed with Kirel’s musk filled my nose.

He thrust deep right as his tail covered my clit. The building tingles burst outward from my core in a tidal wave of pleasure that went on and on. Kirel groaned, his hips snapping forward, and an extra layer of sensation filled me with the most amazing pressure. I came again in a sharp burst of pleasure, my muscles fluttering around this new presence. This! This was what my body had craved, a feeling of satiation suffusing my limbs and making me limp

with delight.

Kirel collapsed on top of me, breathing hard, and I lifted my arms to curl my fingers in the hair on the back of his head, my legs still wrapped around him.

Right before his weight got to be too much, he levered himself up onto one hand, the other still tucked under my butt. That one pressed hard, and he rolled us until I was on top.

I wiggled, and the pressure pulled at my entrance. “What is that?”

“It’s my knot.” Kirel’s deep voice rumbled through my chest as his hand pushed me more tightly to him.

My thighs dropped wide to keep us close, and I lay my head on his shoulder so I could see his face. My body felt good—tired but good. But more than the knot was different.

“I feel strange.” I rubbed at the spot between my breasts. “Here.”

“It’s the mating bond.” His purple eyes sparkled as he offered me a satisfied smile.

“Haven’t we always been fated mates?”

“Yes. But it takes the first knot to finalize it. When we first met, it was the pull, drawing us together. And now it will solidify into the bond.” He pressed my hand to his chest. “I will feel you here always.”

This male! I melted, finally letting myself enjoy all his sweet talk because I trusted him. He didn’t lie.

“This feeling in your chest? It is the vow my soul writes to yours every day, whether I say it aloud or not. Every time I see you, every time I scent you, every time I touch you, know I am thinking this.” His fingers brushed over my forehead in a soft caress. “You are mine, and I am yours. Forever.”

Tears prickled my eyes as his words resonated inside of me. Somehow I knew I should say them, too. “You are mine, and I am yours. Forever.”

His heart-stopping smile made my pulse jump. “I love you, my Hay-Zul.”

“I love you, too.”

He cradled me close, his knot filling me and locking us together.

Sleep tugged at me, pulling me under. When my eyes fluttered closed, Kirel’s dear face filled my dreams.



“But I’m bored!” a high-pitched voice shouted, only somewhat muffled by the door. “I already stayed away all night, and I want to see Hazel!”

A deep rumble answered Vree, who let out a loud, “Fine!”

“Frek me, I don’t know how much more personality I want him to get,” Kirel said, his voice brimming with amusement.

“You might need to make him a friend.” I grinned up at Kirel, my cheek still pressed to his shoulder. “One who talks back.”

His face took on a thoughtful expression as he gazed into the distance.

I gave an experimental wiggle. His cock slid free, the knot finally released. My muscles clenched. I should have been sore after everything we’d done and having him inside me all night. But I felt fine.

Kirel’s hand tightened on my butt and he rolled us over, sliding down far enough to kiss me. His lips were gentle as they teased over mine, reverent, and he broke away only to press our foreheads together. “My soul’s breath. You are finally mine. Forever.”

“Forever,” I echoed, remembering all the pleasure of the night before, the immense satisfaction of the knot. “It sure beats a human wedding.”

He pulled back. “What is this Wed-eeng?”

“A ceremony. It’s actually kind of boring, compared.” By 2123, no one on Earth could afford a big wedding like you saw in the movies, anyway.

“I’ll give you a ceremony, I promise.” He got a gleam in his eyes and kissed me again.

Then his comp beeped and kept beeping, no matter how much we tried to ignore it.

Kirel rolled over, one long arm scrabbling for his pants on the floor. When he finally pulled out his comp, he grunted. “The captain wants us in a meeting. We’ve got a half hour to clean up and eat.”

I rolled up to sitting and slid from the bed. “I guess we better find out if the *Daredevil*’s shower stalls are big enough for two.” I gave him a wink and took off for the bathroom as quickly as my wobbly legs would allow.

He came off the bed in a rush and scooped me up into his arms.

“I *can* walk, you know.”

“But *should* you?” he asked with a wicked grin.

I swatted him on the shoulder and laughed as he carried me the rest of the way.



“Now that you’re up and talking, I want to hear more about these new Grug.” Captain Wrin speared me with a sharp gaze from the head of the conference table. “The others have already told me about the new warrior form.”

“Wait, warrior form?” What the bippity hell?

Mollie said, “That’s what we’re calling the bipedal ones.”

“Yeah,” Sul said. “They frekking made those things to fight.”

“Thank the Goddess they’re not very good at it yet.” Kirel smirked.

Sul slapped the table and laughed. “Sure aren’t compared to us!” Then he gave Mollie an admiring look.

“What can you tell us about the Grug hub?” the captain asked.

“Each hub is one of these super-brain Grugs. They’re strong enough to talk to each other telepathically.”

“That explains how they transfer intel across the seven sectors faster than anyone else can,” Gravin growled.

I bit my lower lip. How to explain? “The Grug shoved a bunch of knowledge into my mind, but it’s all jumbled together. I only get pieces.”

Cara leaned forward. “What do they want with humans?”

“I...” I squeezed my eyes shut, reaching for an answer. “When it touched my mind, it was surprised. It didn’t expect something so ‘lesser’ to be able to talk to it.” I opened my eyes. “They really did think of us as pets, as animals. I’m not sure what they think now.”

“We better figure it out,” the captain said, his tone stern. “Comms picked up an unusual ping on the frequency you gave us.”

“From *ARK 1*?” Cara asked, her hand gripping Gravin’s forearm.

“Maybe,” Kirel answered from beside me, his eyes glued to his comp as he manipulated the data.

“What do you mean, maybe?” Mollie said. “It either is or it isn’t.”

Sul shifted restlessly in his seat beside her. One of his hands lifted as if he wanted to touch her, then dropped back to the tabletop.

Cara turned to me. “You’re the comms expert. Can’t you tell?”

I glanced at Kirel’s tablet. Yet for all my work on the trade standard dictionary, the symbols moved past way too quickly for me to read. “Can you play it for us?”

He nodded, and a staticky hiss filled the room. A tone sounded followed by something that might be words in English.

Mollie’s eyes lit up. “That’s it! It’s got to be! That sounds like English!”

Cara just raised an eyebrow at me.

“It might be.” I spread my hands wide. “Or we could be letting what we *want* to hear color what’s really there. The signal’s too distorted to tell for sure.” And the history of linguistics was littered with false positives just like this, where someone expected a certain meaning and went looking to prove their theory instead of searching for the real answer.

“The one thing we can say is it’s coming in on the special frequency *ARK 1* uses, and as far as I know, none of the aliens here use it.”

Kirel nodded. “That’s right. We don’t.”

“Then it’s the Hyoo-mon ship!” Sul slapped the surface of the table with a loud pop.

“I agree,” Gravin said. “I think we should assume it’s your ship.”

The captain gave a slow nod. “So where’s it coming from?”

“Hang on a minute.” Kirel held up a finger. “I’m using the *Daredevil*’s computer to try to...” He fell silent and started tapping away, not even seeming to realize he hadn’t finished his sentence.

This was the Kirel I remembered from those first few days when we couldn’t speak, the serious male determined to do a good job. He’d given me glimpses of this dedication while we worked together over the past couple of weeks, but it had always been cloaked with charm. I liked that he let me see it fully now. He’d always have his charm, but I wanted this side of him, too. I wanted all of him.

“There!” He sat upright, killer smile in place. “I cleaned it up and used an algorithm to strengthen the signal as much as possible.”

The sound played again without as much static. “—*crustch*—delta-charlie—*crustch*—repeat—authori—*crustch*—victor—”

My heart leaped against my ribs. “That’s it! That’s *ARK 1*!”

“Are you sure?” Cara asked.

“Yes! That’s the outgoing signal asking for my final confirmation

codes!” I said. “I’m sure!”

Mollie jumped up with a scream of joy, and Cara and I followed suit. The pilot ran around the table, and the three of us jumbled together in a three-way hug full of bouncing and laughter and tears.

“We’ll have to comm Frankie and let her know,” Cara said.

The other woman had gone with her mate, Zol, to retrieve the shuttle he’d left behind when he rescued her.

“I’ll do it,” Mollie said.

We finally broke up and went back to our seats.

The males watched us, Kirel and Sul grinning while Gravin’s lips twitched. Only Captain Wrin remained somber in the face of our joy.

He cleared his throat. “So where is this Hyoo-mon ship?”

Kirel picked up his comp. “Not sure. The signal’s bounced from one comms buoy to the next, hitting some of them multiple times over. We’re going to have to move around and do some triangulations.”

“But we’ll find it, right?” I asked.

“Frek yeah, we will.” He beamed at me.

“Work out a way to get one of these readings from sector five. We’ve got a job to do there.” The captain stood, his eyes already watching the bridge through the observation window as he strode for that door. “Dismissed.”

Everyone else exited into the hallway.

Vree ran up to us, stopping right in front of Kirel. “Can we show her now? Can we show her my surprise?” His tail wagged so hard it made a little purple blur.

“Sure we can, little buddy.”

I gave Cara and Mollie a little wave as they headed for the elevator, then Vree led the way down the other end of the hall. The main door to the bridge stood at the end, but the pup stopped a few feet short by a hatch in the wall.

I shot Kirel some side eye as he flipped the lever holding the thin metal door shut. It swung outward to expose a three-foot square opening. Inside was a vertical shaft leading upward, with metal rungs set into the far wall.

“Not another ladder!” I mock groaned. Say what you will about being in space, between all the adventures and marathon bouts of sex, I’d certainly stay in shape. I’d be big and beautiful and healthy and loved.

“It’s worth it!” Vree bounced up and down on his front paws. “You’ll see!”

“Okay.” I reached out and climbed, trusting my males.

After about ten feet, the ladder brought me up into a small circular room with a single chair.

Kirel entered right after me and put Vree down on the metal floor. Then he sat in the chair and pulled me onto his lap.

“Do it! Do it!” Vree bounced in front of the rounded metal wall.

I couldn’t help but laugh at his excitement.

Kirel pulled out his tablet and tapped at the screen.

The wall in front of Vree slid up, exposing a large window looking out into space. We sat in a bubble right on the nose of the ship, so nothing obscured the view. A blue and teal nebula filled the sky in front of us, dusted with a sprinkling of stars of all sizes and luminosities.

“It’s colored just like a peacock!” Just like Kirel. “Thank you for showing it to me.”

“I found it!” Vree jumped up to set his front paws on Kirel’s knee, pushing his little face into my hand. “I found this place!”

I rubbed the soft satin of his head. “That’s amazing!”

“He really did,” Kirel said. “I had him study the *Daredevil*’s specs in case he ever needed a place to hide or recharge in an emergency, and he found this. It was originally designed as an extra lookout in case the viewscreens on the bridge were damaged in a fight.”

“Everyone forgot about it until me!” Vree hopped down and ran over to press his nose to the glass.

I leaned back against the solid strength of Kirel, admiring the beauty of the nebula and the males who’d wanted to share it with me. When I’d left Earth, I’d expected space to be a rustic planet full of mud and maybe some weird bugs. Instead I got this. The truest love I could ever have found. “It really is breathtaking.”

“You’re breathtaking,” Kirel murmured in my ear, his deep voice full of wicked promise.

My thighs clenched, my body wanting him again already. *Well, this is our honeymoon. I’m allowed to indulge.* “I’m going to ask you to prove that when we’re alone again.”

Kirel tipped my head back until I looked at him, his gorgeous purple eyes full of love. “My soul’s breath, I will be more than happy to prove it to you every day for the rest of your life.” He pressed a kiss to my lips, hot and

demanding, pulling back for a second to add to his promise. “You are mine, and I am yours. Forever.”



Thanks for reading *Taken by the Alien Rogue*. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I loved writing it. Want more Hazel and Kirel? I have a free bonus for you. Keep reading to find out more!

Curious to see how Sul finally loosens up around Mollie? Want to know how sexy their spacewalk lessons can get? [Grab your copy of *Wanted by the Alien Rogue*, book three of the Fated Mates of the Zaarn, now!](#)

Enjoy a sneak peek of *Wanted by the Alien Rogue*:

I strained upward, every muscle in my body stretched to the limit as I tried to reach the control switch located near the top of the cockpit’s viewscreen.

I’d always been short, but landing in an alien civilization built for people seven-feet tall made the height difference glaring. All of the normal flight controls were located on the displays in front of the pilot’s seat, but not the special switch that would dump a malfunctioning engine before it could explode and destroy the entire ship. Nope, that had been put somewhere it couldn’t be accidentally activated. It made sense from a safety standpoint.

It was still really fucking annoying.

“I’ve got it!” A deep voice boomed from behind me.

Years of high-stress pilot training kept me from jolting and face planting into the instrument console, but it was a close thing.

A huge purple hand reached over my head and—

“No!” I yelled, and fortunately, the hand stopped. I twisted to find Sul behind me.

He wore a sheepish expression. “Sorry, I thought you wanted it flipped.”

“I didn’t mean to yell. It’s just that switch is the emergency engine jettison. I didn’t want to activate it—I wanted to see if I could reach it while strapped into the pilot’s chair.”

A grin split his blue face, transforming his brutally handsome features into instant friendliness. His fangs flashed. It should have been scary, but it stole my breath a little every time he did it.

And Sul smiled a *lot*.

All of the Zaarn were seven-foot tall and well-built. Yet Sul still managed to be bigger. He was a walking wall of muscle, with thick shoulders and pecs. I swear his biceps were bigger than my thighs.

Sure, I was short and tiny and barely had boobs, but come on. The dude was a hulk. A blue and purple hulk with a tail and two sets of horns, one set sticking up while another curved down around the sides of his head.

“If you need to reach it, I’ll do it for you.” He plonked his huge body onto the copilot’s seat and lifted his arm to prove he could reach the switch, even from the other chair. “I’ll sit right here for every trip.”

I tapped at the armrests, my fingers drumming an anxious beat. His offer was really sweet, but... “Sorry, that won’t work,” I said. “In an emergency, a pilot needs to be able to make snap decisions. You often have less than a second to save your ship. By the time I told you to jettison the engine and you reached out to do it, it could be too late. This is something I need to be able to do myself.”

If I want to remain a pilot in this new world. I gave an amused huff. Of course, I wanted to be a pilot. Ever since I was a little girl, I’d never imagined anything else. Flying was *everything*. I’d spent years studying harder than anyone to make it into the right college, then more years fighting to prove I was just as tough as a pilot needed to be. Everyone had treated being a girl, being short, and being black like three strikes against me before I’d even gotten started.

I’d proved them all wrong. And I’d figure out this as well.

Sul’s size made him sit higher and more forward in the copilot’s chair—his was the body shape these seats were meant to accommodate.

“You’re right, though.” I wiggled a little as the excitement of a new idea zipped through me. “I do need help.”

He leaned toward me, his huge body taller even when seating. “Anything.”

After spending so many years being talked down to because of my small size, I’d *never* have admitted this to a guy on Earth. All my insecurity about being short rose to the front, but I didn’t have any choice if I wanted to be a

pilot, so I squashed it down. On Earth, I would have found a way to do this myself. Here, I needed help.

“Is there a way to change the position of these chairs? To raise them? And maybe move them closer to the console?” I could reach the controls in front of me, but not as easily as I’d like.

“I’ll check for you, Mol-Lee.” He said my name carefully, drawing out each syllable as if tasting them on his tongue.

Sul slid from his seat and dropped to his hands and knees on the floor, so large his head was level with my thighs. Up close, ridges decorated the length of his dark-purple horns, and light glinted on the blue and purple highlights in his hair. It was a pure black, inky and dark as space, the strands very straight and soft-looking.

He crawled closer, coming around the front of my chair. Without much space to move in, his shoulder pressed into my knee. His head dipped down. “Spread your legs.”

“What?” I yelped, my heart racing.

He grinned up at me.

These two are getting ready to “dance.” Grab your copy now so you don’t miss a thing!

WANTED BY THE ALIEN ROGUE

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FATED MATES OF THE VAROOL

Read on for a sneak peek of book one, *Possessed by the Alien King*.

CHAPTER ONE

Deirdre

TODAY WAS SUPPOSED to be the happiest day of my life.

What a freaking joke.

I guess it could be worse. I could hate the man I was about to marry, but to do that, I'd have to know him. While the peace treaty stipulated "a personage of the royal line," the Varool hadn't given us the groom's name. With my luck, it would be an eighth cousin twice removed who lived on their worst ship.

Except the Varool had no "worst ship." As far as our military could tell, all of the aliens' high-tech warships were in pristine condition. It was part of why I was in this mess.

The narrow viewport chilled my skin as I pressed my forehead to it, craning my neck for a better view of the planet below. Storms swirled across the surface of Sagittarian One in brilliant streaks of white cloud. Every patch of clear sky showed a surface painted in swaths of green, blue, and brown. The achingly beautiful world was supposed to give humanity a much-needed second chance.

Instead, it motivated us to make a horrible mistake.

If only Dad had found another way. If only the virus had been stable. If only...

I slapped the metal bulkhead and pushed away from the viewport, the sting of my palm nothing compared to the aching tightness in my chest. Wishing wouldn't wake me from the nightmare the past few months had plunged me into.

I stuffed my tablet in between the clothes in my bag and sealed the whole thing tight before dropping it beside the door. Amazing to think my entire life could be reduced down to this. Then again, no one in the fleet had the luxury of much beyond necessities. We existed on a strict recycling regimen everyone adhered to—even the daughter of the admiral.

At least I wouldn't miss this tiny room with its scuffed plastic and metal walls. I'd only been on Chandra Station for a few months—the fleet's science ship, the *Copernicus*, still felt like home, even though the events of today meant I'd never live there again.

"Deirdre!" My mother bustled into my room, a frown creasing her light-brown face. Her hair stuck out in all directions in a fuzzy mess of brown. Mom had given up on taming her curls when Dad died and the survival of every human in the universe fell upon her. Her dress uniform, on the other hand, looked perfect. The heavy, dark-blue fabric held the lines of its formal cut with crisp precision. "Why aren't you ready yet?"

"Ready?" I reached up to touch my hair. The curls felt springy and crisp, a nice coat of gel holding them in place. They were as good as they got, and doing my hair was as good as *I* got. If hubby dearest didn't like it? Tough.

"I programmed a special outfit. Didn't you see it?" Mom crossed the room in two steps and tapped at the panel on the white plastic wall. A high whine cut across the pervasive hum of the air circulators. She jabbed the release icon again, muttering, "Stupid system. Why won't you work?" It was a typical refrain, repeated multiple times a day by everyone in the human fleet. Dwindling supplies and deteriorating equipment forced us to prioritize critical repairs.

Yet her voice held an unusual note of panic, and her movements were stiff and jerky. My normally unflappable mother would willingly put herself in danger for others, but she hated that I was the one doing so this time. She'd tried to talk me out of the marriage a couple of days ago, even though I was the only young woman the Varool considered equivalent to "nobility."

"Here, let me." Digging my fingernails into the top left crack of the delivery panel, I yanked down and forward at the same time as I activated the release icon. The whine pitched higher as I pulled. *Come on, come on.* This shit was the last thing I needed today.

The door swung open with a pop, sending me hopping backward to keep my balance.

A rack slid out, holding two garments. The pale-orange jumpsuit would cling to my body, doubling as an emergency spacesuit. The wispy over-tunic of diaphanous white would add a layer of formality and flowing femininity.

I grimaced. Long orange-brown stripes decorated the tunic, meant to match the skin patterns of the Varool. I'd look ridiculous.

Mom hovered, when she probably needed to be in a dozen other places, taking care of any number of countless problems. It turned out having half your population die put quite a strain on running a successful civilization.

I winced, shoving down the rising wave of remorse threatening to swamp me. Today was too important to mess up—I needed to focus.

“Get changed. They're going to be here soon. And we need everything to be perfect.” Mom's tablet beeped, and she frowned down at the screen.

“Go on. You have plenty of other things to do.” I shooed her out of the room and fell back against the door. *Perfect? This is about as far from freaking perfect as you can get.* A nervous bubble of laughter tried to break free. I stuck a knuckle in my mouth and bit down, afraid if I started, I'd never stop.

Once steady, I slipped out of my bright-white jumpsuit, wishing I were in the lab, working on the latest data about the virus' mutations. Really, I'd rather be anywhere else doing anything else. Even the scut work of my fake job sounded really freaking good about now. There had to be a sewer line that needed unclogging somewhere—there always was.

I slid into the orange jumpsuit and sealed it tight all the way to my neck. Then came the dreaded over-tunic. We didn't know what the stripes meant to the aliens. Were they random? Did they denote rank or family group? With my luck, the pattern printed here would be a grave insult or something. I didn't see the point of wearing it. No clothing existed in the universe that would fool anyone into thinking I was a varoolian woman. Even though I was a decent height, they'd been taller, more heavily muscled, and certainly not as curvy as I was.

Now they were dead.

Guilt burned acid in my stomach, but I straightened my shoulders. It didn't matter how much I hated what was about to happen. I'd do it. I had to. Father and I had made a horrible mistake, and it was up to me to put it right. I owed it to the rest of humanity.

And I even owed it to the Varool.

The fabric slid over my skin, clinging like an embrace I didn't want. Shivers wracked my body as I tried to imagine what the night would bring. Would the Varool really demand that we consummate the marriage immediately?

Freaking barbarians, the lot of them. It didn't matter if they had better technology. They were brutes with their big hard bodies and their lack of shirts and... and...

My hands fisted in the delicate fabric.

... and I'm going to marry one of them today.

I couldn't help fiddling with the gauzy tunic as we waited in the space station's main receiving room. The stripes startled me each time I caught sight of them. With the way they lay over the lighter jumpsuit, I really did look a little like a Varool.

"Stop fidgeting," Mom said out of the side of her mouth. She pressed a finger to her ear. "Colonel Roberts says it makes you look suspicious."

I shot a glare at the surveillance camera. As the colonel in charge of security, Tandy Roberts might have been my age, but she bossed me around as if she were far older. She'd been a thorn in my side ever since the Varool declared I was to be the first bride, certain I'd screw up and let slip that I was a virologist.

The elevator doors slid open, and men boiled out, every single one of them tall and broad. The way the high-tech black fabric of their uniforms clung to their muscular thighs and chests was almost indecent. Each was a walking lesson in Varool anatomy, which turned out to be very similar to human. Like Sagittarian One below us, both of our home planets had been seeded with the same early sparks of life. Separated by parsecs, the three solar systems were relatively close when compared to the breadth of the galaxy.

Every human shifted uneasily as the hulking guards spread across the room, blasters and knives strapped to their hips. One of them grabbed Travis' upper arm and dragged him forward. The guard barked something harsh in his own tongue, pointing at Travis' beard.

Four men moved forward from the back, naked from the waist up. These must be the royals. The Varool believed in showing their “true selves” during important negotiations. And their true selves revealed a *lot* of skin—all of it stretched tight over bulging muscles. They also wore long swords belted over their hips like warriors from ancient times come to life.

The largest of them took Travis’ arm and turned to my mother, his deep-green eyes glaring. “You said all of your men were dead. Now you have lied about this, too?” His English was excellent, and his accent had the crisp bite of perfect enunciation.

But the rest of him... God! He was an enormous brute of a man, all muscle and strength. His shoulders were easily twice as wide as mine, and my head barely reached his shoulder. He looked like he could bench press a shuttle. The orange-brown stripes decorating his torso and arms only highlighted his muscles. Short, straight black hair did nothing to soften features made of a series of sharp angles that were too hard for beauty.

He was gorgeous.

And about to out Travis in a horribly public way.

Anger flushed hot through my body, and I darted forward to peel the man’s fingers from Travis’ arm. A jolt shivered through me—his skin was so hot! It was like trying to bend solid steel. I got nowhere. Less than nowhere—I hurt my hand. “Let go of him!”

“Explain!” the large Varool snapped.

I searched Travis’ face, praying my fellow scientist would forgive me. He gave a tiny nod, even as his light-brown face scrunched in a grimace.

I looked up at the brute. “He’s... he’s a transman.”

“Transman?” His brow furrowed. “The translator chip lacks this word.”

“He wasn’t born a man but became one later.”

The brute released Travis. “I apologize, we had transmen too.” He leaned forward, looming over me.

At above average height, I wasn’t used to being loomed over. My heart ticked up a notch.

“You cannot, however, blame me for assuming human duplicity,” he said, his voice as cold as the void. “Not when your actions killed every woman and transman of my people.”

I wanted to shout that it hadn’t been planned. The virus was only supposed to make the Varool sick so they’d think they were biologically

incompatible with Sagittarian One. The mutation was unprecedented and inexplicable. Also, hadn't humanity paid enough by losing everyone born with XY chromosomes?

I opened my mouth, but guilt crashed over me, churning my stomach. The Varool was right. Humans had made the virus, humans had released the virus, and humans had lied when the Varool asked if we knew why their women were ill.

The lie had delayed the search for a cure.

Both species had paid—and paid dearly.

Today was supposed to be the first step in repairing the damage, a step only I could take. I owed it to everyone to do my best to make this work.

The retort died on my tongue.

Mom used the lull as an opportunity to step forward. “I am... Admiral Hutchins.” After all these months, she still hesitated to claim Dad's title, even though she'd been his vice admiral for ten years. “Welcome to Chandra Station.”

The brute thumped a fist to his chest. “I am King Storr, Third of this line and protector of the Varool.”

This was their king? A jolt of anxiety shot through me, setting my heart racing. *Oh, god, I won't have to marry him, will I?* The treaty agreement stipulated a “high-born” bride and groom. Without human royalty, I was the closest thing we had.

I also owed a far greater debt that this sacrifice would barely begin to pay.

One of the other aliens stepped forward. Younger and slimmer—though he still looked like a bodybuilder compared to most humans—he had a much friendlier face. “I am Prince Lun. I am the groom.”

A breath rushed from me in relief. *Maybe it won't be so bad after all.* Lun looked nice—pleasant even—especially when compared to the glaring king.

Mom waved a hand toward me. “This is my daughter, Deirdre Hutchins, your bride.”

I offered Lun a smile, which he returned.

“No.” A harsh voice shattered the moment. It was the brute, the king. “Deirdre Hutchins is mine.”

The dawning sun of my hope died, snuffed out before it ever burned

bright.

CHAPTER TWO

Storr

MY VOICE ECHOED through the cramped room, freezing all of the humans into place. Much like the docking tube we had been forced to use, the human space station was primitive and poorly made. It was little more than a large ring rotating around a central axis. They did not even have true artificial gravity.

My nostrils flared, filled with the stench of inadequate air filtration. How had such a technologically inferior species done such damage to the Varool? If they had not utilized forbidden biological sciences, we would have bested them easily.

It grated, and the anger filled my voice.

Grol shifted, a scowl lengthening his square face. My head of war didn't trust the humans, even for this peace accord. And why should he? The duplicitous aliens had already proved willing to stoop to the lowest level to get what they wanted.

The memory of my ship's Healing Hall flashed through my mind—every bed and spare cot filled with one of my people. Each fought her final battle against an implacable enemy. They had been proud warriors—I had hated how the human virus rampaging through their bodies made them cry out in distress.

The silence afterward had been far worse.

Anger boiled in my veins, and the muscles of my back tightened, locking the plates of my spine together into its strongest form. It would thwart any honorless enemy who attempted to attack from behind. The added stability it gave my torso also made each strike of my fists more powerful.

If only there were a worthy opponent present. The admiral who gave the order to release the virus was dead. The humans claimed all of the scientists who created the virus were men who died. Humans cannot be trusted. If I

ever discovered that one of these women were responsible, my justice would be swift—and personal.

It was difficult to imagine any species surpassing the Folri for most-hated enemy. Yet for all the horror the Folri had caused the Varool, destroying our home world paled in comparison to the death of our women. Planetless, we still had a future. The humans had left us with a twisted echo of a future that barely deserved the appellation.

I shoved away my anger. It would do little good here. Today, I would lead my people into the new chapter of their lives, one that rewove a thread of hope through our tapestry of despair.

Lun turned to shoot me a puzzled look. My heart pinched in my chest. My brother looked so much like Mother. He had her bright-green eyes and joyful disposition, while I took after our father, a huge block of a man, all hard angles and thick muscle.

Those eyes now asked a million questions. Yet he voiced not a one of them, unwilling to show our enemies any sign of division or weakness.

Pride swelled my chest. He was a good prince and an even better brother. It was a blade to my heart to disappoint him. He had been excited to be the Varool to marry and seal the official peace treaty. I would need to tell him it was not a lack in him that led to my declaration.

A scent cut through the stink of the station. Light and sweet and foreign, it teased at my nostrils, setting my pulse thrumming. Shock jolted through me anew as my zural heart began to beat for the first time in my life. The secondary organ offered the additional circulatory support needed to maintain the hurvon, the larger mating erection.

I had searched for this scent amongst our women for years, to no avail. When they all died, I thought my ability to mate had died with them.

Now it wafted from the human woman—my enemy.

My teeth ground together. *It cannot be!*

Yet it was.

This human was my fated mate.

Deirdre Hutchins was the daughter of the man who had killed every Varool woman and doomed my people to a future of interbreeding with inferiors. Their evil virus still lingered on the planet below, set to kill again if given the chance. The only solution any of our scientists had found was to hope our offspring had hybrid vigor.

At least her father's own weapon turned around and killed him and all of the other human males. My lips pulled back from my teeth. The Divine Mother had been swift with her justice, though why she then chose to offer me such a mate was a mystery.

Deirdre Hutchins was tall for a human, yet far shorter than I was used to. Her hips and breasts protruded from her body in unnatural curves—at least when compared to varoolian women. Her skin was the same unmarked light-brown so many of them had, with brown hair that coiled strangely instead of hanging straight.

At least her mouth was shaped the same as ours, and her nose was wider but not too jarring. It was her eyes that were the most alien, their color yet another shade of brown. Why could she not have been one of the few to have green eyes? Yes, human green eyes were a pale and weak substitute compared to the rich depths of a Varool's, but it would look better than the color of dirt!

The worst of it, however, was the clothing she wore.

Anger burned hot in my blood. I flicked my fingers at her. "What is this? You pretend to be Varool? What is next? Skin dyes? Tattoos?" Our stripes were hereditary, not something to be mocked or mimicked. Such tricks would fail to fool any of my people. Yet should I expect anything else from such a duplicitous species?

A spark of anger flashed in those muddy eyes. Perhaps they were not quite as plain as I first thought. "This—" She plucked at her over layer. "—was supposed to be in honor of you and your people. But I'm sure you're going to take affront at every little thing, just as your ambassador always does."

"Deirdre—" Admiral Hutchins said.

My voice boomed over them both. "Did."

"What?" the younger Hutchins said.

"The correct tense of the verb is 'did.' The ambassador you speak of so dismissively is dead by your father's hand."

"Oh." Her shoulders slumped, and color leached from her face. Interesting. I had been told humans could turn redder, but I did not realize they could also lose color.

She seemed an odd mix of attack and conciliation. Would her reactions be similarly complex in bed? I imagined her underneath me, part softness,

part fire.

My cock hardened, my zural heart thudding faster, a new disturbing presence in my chest. Her scent wrapped around me, scrambling sensible thought.

No! I will not succumb.

I held my breath, forcing my circulatory system to slow. The mating frenzy, once begun, would be difficult to control. I had duties to attend to. The human would be mine before this day was done.

That would have to be soon enough.

The new admiral led all of those gathered to a different room on the station. Its walls were a uniform gray plastic, its floor un-softened by carpets. A rectangular table stood surrounded by chairs, the fabric on the seats worn shiny and smooth. There was not even a window to provide a view of the planet that had brought both our species to ruin. Did they really hold important governmental functions in such a nondescript room?

The admiral sat toward the middle of one of the long sides and gestured that I should take a seat across from her.

I bared my teeth but complied. It was a compromise that allowed neither party to hold the powerful position of the table's head. So be it.

Lun took the chair next to me, still silent.

Deirdre Hutchins sat at her mother's side, in easy view and only a couple of arm lengths away. Her smell overrode every other, and my nostrils flared wide, setting my zural heart speeding. I ground my teeth.

Lun's head whipped around, his eyes narrowing as he studied my chest. He had heard. I refused to look down, to acknowledge the new pounding of my zural heart and the visible pulse it created in the very center of my chest.

It should have beat for a woman of my people, not the daughter of my enemy. I glared at her.

Her eyes narrowed, and she glared back.

"King Storr, we need to finalize the documentation," Admiral Hutchins said.

Yash stepped forward to stand behind my right shoulder. As the new lord

of ambassadorship, he had taken over such duties upon his predecessor's death. He offered me a screen. The thin piece of clear plastic lit up, displaying all the pertinent forms.

I sat it on the table and signed my glyph on the requisite spot, then slid it over to the admiral.

The older woman slipped on a pair of goggles that must be the human's alternative to a translator chip. She stared down at the screen, a frown marking her light-brown face.

"Is there a problem?" I asked. Impatience ate at me. The sooner I could consummate this marriage, the sooner the zural heart would calm.

"I can't read it," she said. "My translation program doesn't recognize the language."

Gah! Could such petty disputes not be ignored?

"It is High Varoolian, the language of binding contracts."

Yash pulled out another screen and tapped at it, his long fingers flashing across its surface. "I have sent you an updated translation program."

A high bell tone sounded from the admiral's person, and she said, "Yes. It's working." She read for a few minutes and pressed her thumb to the screen. "Now ours."

One of her women sat a clunky tablet in front of her, and the admiral used a finger to sign. She offered it to her daughter. Deirdre Hutchins stared at me for long moments, her expression blank and impossible to read.

She shivered as if waking, signed, and slid the tablet over to me.

I picked it up. It was heavy, and its screen only displayed on one side. Primitive. Yash leaned over my shoulder to point to a specific flat line toward the bottom of the form. He had coached me a few days ago on the procedure, and I pressed a finger to the surface to write my glyph.

Medics stepped forward, one for each of us. A sting pinched my bicep, and Deirdre Hutchins winced as the injector pressed into her throat. It was done—we could now successfully breed.

"Well. That's all taken care of," the admiral said, standing and rubbing her hands together. "King Storr, I'd like to invite you and all of your people to a celebration. We've arranged a party in the main atrium."

They expected me to celebrate this mockery of a mating?

"No. No party." I shoved to my feet, anger tightening my muscles. "We consummate now."

Grab it now to find out what happens next!
[Hint: It's going to be steamy!]

[POSSESSED BY THE ALIEN KING](#)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A book is a glorious thing to labor over, and it's so much easier when done in good company. Thank you to all the lovely authors who've offered such wonderful advice and encouragement. Special thanks go to my beta readers: Diane Wolf, Ana Becker, and Mokkelke Tanja.

A huge thank you to all my amazing readers and reviewers! None of this would be possible without you! A special shout out to my ARC team. You rock!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

One of my earliest memories is of watching Star Trek and wanting to kiss Mr. Spock. Soon after, I saw the original Star Wars movie and fell in love with the charming scoundrel Han Solo.

I've been a scifi geek ever since. While I wait for a hot alien to whisk me away on his spaceship, I write fun and sexy stories full of growly alien warriors and smart, capable women. There's steamy romance, action and adventure, and plenty of HEAs.

If you'd like to get bonus stories and stay up to date on what I'm writing, sign up for my newsletter. I have a reader group on Facebook where we can chat. I'm also on Instagram and Tiktok. You can follow me at Amazon, Bookbub, or Goodreads. Find the links on my Linktree.

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