



Resisting the Alien Commander

Author: *Erin Hale*

Category: Romance, Fantasy, Science Fiction

Description: Horek

As Commander of the Bohnari guards, my career is the one thing I care about more than anything. Even more than the mating fever afflicting our males that causes us to slowly descend into madness unless we find mates.

When the crown prince of Bohna negotiates with one of the Earth leaders for willing human brides, I have no interest in one. No matter the risk.

Until one of the females triggers my mating fever to burn out of control, and all I desire is Quinn. Except another male wants her as well. I'll have to convince her she's my heart's fire before the madness consumes me.

Quinn

Born and raised in the bottom tier, I know the upper tier will do anything to keep us down. When the President announces that we're the only women eligible for the Bohnari bridal lottery, I'm suspicious. Not that I have any interest in becoming a bride and leaving my mother—and only family left—behind.

Except, somehow, my name is called, along with my best friend's. Once we arrive on Bohna, I manage to catch the attention of one of the younger guards. Too bad it's the Commander who sets my blood on fire. When I learn the truth about the mating fever that affects him, I'm not sure I can trust what Horek feels is real.

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Chapter1

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Quinn

The scent of garbage and shit lingers inside the sanitation facility's break room. It seeps under the door, through the vents, and it's embedded in the clothing of the thirty women gathered around two tables pushed together. The air is filled with nervous anticipation—or, in my case, dread—for the President's special address.

"My stomach's in knots," Olivia says.

"Mine, too," echoes another coworker from the opposite side of the table.

"Considering I have the worst luck, I doubt she'll be announcing my name."

My only fear is the President saying Olivia's name. If she does, then that's one more person I'll lose. I'm not sure I can handle it. There are over three hundred million people in the bottom tier alone. Even if only a fourth of that number is women of child-bearing age, it's just a one in seventy-five million chance she'll be called. That's nearly impossible, right?

"Can you believe some of us will be heading to space in a couple days?" Olivia asks.

Her words cause the knot in my stomach to tighten. For purely selfish reasons, I really, really hope she's not one of them.

From the head of one table, the datapad chirps and the black screen comes to life. We all wait with bated breath. At least I do. Another second passes, and the President appears, the giant blue and gold seal on the wall behind her. She stands at a podium, appearing as put together as always in her tailored beige suit and her short gray hair styled without a strand out of place. Her gaze is fixed on the camera in front of her.

Hushed voices grow and Olivia shushes everyone. I can't glance away from the datapad or the woman on the screen.

"Good evening, my fellow Americans," she says. "This is a day filled with amazing possibility for twenty women. You will leave the bottom tier for something better. Something exciting."

I snort. "How does she know it'll be better?"

Olivia shushes me, too.

"Any of the women whose names are announced tonight can decline the Bohnari's offer," the President continues. "However, understand that by doing so you will invalidate your lottery entry and not be given a second chance. You have until eight tomorrow morning to accept. Any time after that, you will forfeit your place and another name will be announced."

Tomorrow morning? That's barely any time to commit to a life-altering decision like moving to an alien planet and leaving everything behind. Sounds a little suspicious to me. Then again, the women who entered the lottery did so of their own choosing so they must truly want this.

"I will start by reading the first name," the President announces.

Nausea churns in my belly for some weird reason. It's the icky feeling I get when I

know something bad is about to happen.

“Olivia Jean Morrison,” she announces and my heart stops beating for a second.

Olivia grabs my hand and clutches it tightly. I blink back the tears. My best friend is leaving me. Just like everyone else in my life. I can’t—won’t—cry here. Not in front of everyone. I’ll wait until I’m home and can lock myself in my room.

Three more names are read and then the next.

“Devon Marie Jackson.” The woman across from me widens her eyes and her mouth flaps open and closed.

“Lindsey Anabel Taylor.” She and Devon turn to each other with the same shocked expression.

I sit there completely numb. Three people within feet of me—women I see nearly every single day—will be gone in days. Just like that I’ll be alone once again. All except for my mother. This is why I stopped making friends. It hurts too much when they’re taken away. I don’t hear any of the rest of the names being announced. There’s a white noise buzzing in my ears instead.

I blink and focus on my surroundings. Only to find all the women staring at me.

I turn to Olivia. Her eyes are wide and there’s a slightly unhinged look to her as she stares back at me. My gaze takes in everyone a second time. They all continue gaping.

“What? Why are you all looking at me like that?”

Olivia recovers first and clears her throat. “The President called the name of the last

woman chosen.”

So?

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“It was yours,” Devon is the one who answers.

There’s a delay while my brain processes what she said.

“I’m sorry?”

“Your name was the last one called,” Lindsey replies.

I heard and understand what she said, but they have to be wrong. There’s no way my name was called because I didn’t enter.

“There has to be some kind of mistake.” I shake my head. “My name should never have been called.”

Before anyone can say anything else, the super bursts through the door.

“Everyone back to work. Now,” he barks.

We all scramble up from the tables, although I’m slower to rise. Shock has me nearly immobile.

“Don’t panic,” Olivia whispers as we walk back to our station. “You can decline, remember?”

That does give me a bit more peace of mind. Except I can’t help but wonder how my name got entered in the first place. Or how many more women’s names were read who didn’t ask to be entered.

The rest of the night passes in a blur. Finally, the shift bell rings and I head to the locker room to get my things so I can go home. Olivia meets me outside. The whole night I've been having a pity party for myself and it's now hitting me that I'm losing my best friend.

"I'm going to miss you," I tell her, trying not to cry.

"I'll miss you, too. But we have all day to hang out together if you're up for it tomorrow?"

It's my one day off that I always spend with my mom, but for these extenuating circumstances, I don't think she'll mind.

"Definitely. I'll come over around nine." I can at least spend a couple hours with my mom first.

Olivia and I part ways with a goodbye hug. She heads south while I go west. The streets are dark and quiet. In this part of the bottom tier, the street lights frequently burn out. Someone is always calling to get them repaired, but often it's a wasted effort. Which makes me wonder why the bottom tier women were the only ones eligible for this co-called bridal program.

Earth has long been divided into upper and bottom tiers, which is essentially those who have everything and those who don't. The upper tier wants to keep us bottom tier folks under their thumb. They give us crumbs, expecting us to lick them up and be grateful for it. None of those rich pricks—the President included—has a single reason to allow us to go someplace things might actually be better. That's the biggest reason why this all seems a bit suspect.

At last, I make it to our building and climb the stairs to the fifth floor apartment I share with my mom. I unlock the door, trying to remain as quiet as possible so I don't

wake her. Except she's already awake and sitting on the sofa in the living room with the single lamp on the sideboard lit.

I should have known she wouldn't be sleeping.

"They called my name in the bride lottery, but I didn't enter it. I swear." I haven't moved from near the doorway since the door closed behind me.

"I know you didn't, love," my mom says. "I entered it for you."

All the air is gone from lungs and I'm having trouble dragging in more. I walk forward but I'm barely aware I'm moving.

"Wh—what? Why would you do that?Howcould you do that?"

My mother pats the cushion next to her and I collapse onto the spot. She swivels toward me and takes my hands in hers. They're warm around my cold ones.

"I did it because I love you," she says.

"But if you loved me, you wouldn't be trying to send me away."

"Oh, baby." She strokes the hair off my forehead, her eyes scanning my face. "I'm not sending you away. I'm letting you go."

A watery laugh spills from my lips the same way the tears do from my eyes. "It's the same thing, mama."

"My sweet, brave Quinn." Her thumb drags across my cheek bringing the wetness with it. "You are everything to me. My not-so-little girl. My heart. My love. It's just you and me now. Except, I'm not always going to be around. When I'm gone, you'll

be alone, and I don't want that for you. I want better for you. I want you to have a family. A husband. Children."

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“But I could have that here,” I argue, my tears falling faster than she can wipe them away. “I don’t need to leave Earth for another planet to find a husband or have kids. There’s millions of men here to choose from.”

She smiles sadly. “They’re all from the bottom tier.”

“We’re from the bottom tier.” Never once has my mother indicated she’s ashamed of where we live.

“That is why you need to go.” She squeezes my hands. “This is your chance to get away from this place. To no longer be a bottomer. You won’t have to work hours and hours at the sanitation facility surrounded by garbage and refuse. You’ll get to have a life that doesn’t include eating protein bars. These Bohnari people have technology, wealth, and all the things you can’t get by staying here.”

“I don’t care about any of that. I care about you.” The only person I have left in this world. How can she not understand that?

“Who will you have when I’m gone?” she asks. “Olivia’s name was called, too, and we both know she’s leaving on that ship in two days. Quinn, you need to be on there with her when the time comes. Ineedyou to be on there. Please, do this for me. Go to Bohna. Marry one of their people. Have children. Most of all, be happy.”

“You can’t guarantee I’ll be happy there. Maybe their men are cruel. Vicious. I could be far worse off on that planet than I am here and I’ll never be able to come back.”

“What if they’re not? What if their men are kind? Loving? You could be missing out

on an amazing life. They have communication capabilities,” she points out. “You may not be able to visit, but that doesn’t necessarily mean you’ll never talk to me again. Besides, you’ll have Olivia there. The two of you will be there for each other.”

I open my mouth to protest once again, but she lays a finger over my lips.

“Go to bed and sleep on it. Think about what I said and decide in the morning. But, please, Quinn, say you’ll go.”

Unable to do anything more than nod, I slip off the couch and make my way to the room we share. I slowly undress and change into my nightshirt. After I brush my teeth, I braid my hair and crawl into bed. Alone. For far too long, I stare up at the ceiling waiting for my mom to come in, but by the time my eyes drift shut, she’s still not beside me.

Chapter2

Horek

The sound of voices travels down the hall of the barracks. This is my domain. My kingdom. The one and only place I wish to rule. At my approach, the three young guards in the galley go silent.

“Why aren’t you out on patrol?” I come to a stop directly in their personal space. All three flinch.

“Sorry, Commander. We were just leaving,” the nearest to me says and they scatter.

“More like distracted,” I mutter to the empty room.

Ever since Alik negotiated an agreement with the President of a land on Earth called

America, all anyone talks about are the arriving brides. The guards are losing focus, and with tensions mounting between the rebel forces outside of Preska, that is the last thing we need.

I make one more round outside the barracks before heading toward the palace for a debriefing with Alik. I walk the streets keeping my focus on my surroundings. Nothing appears to be amiss, but there's been a heaviness in the air lately that tells me something is coming soon. Something that isn't just the arrival of the humans. Guards and citizens alike stride through Preska. My heart aches at the few females, all of them elders. Like the Queen and my mother.

"Greetings, Commander," one of the tavern owners says as I pass.

I nod in return. A moment later, I reach the lift at the base of the mountain and take it up to the landing outside the palace entrance. The guards at the door straighten at my arrival. I make my way toward the Prince's wing. As commander of his armed forces, it's my responsibility to make sure all the residents of Preska, as well as the palace, are safe. New security measures are being put in place with the imminent arrival of the twenty human females.

I stride down the wide corridor lined with windows and can't help but glance out over our city. From this high up I can see across the entire length of it and beyond into the rainforest. The lush teal leaves of the trees never fail to take my breath away. Their beauty is unsurpassed anywhere. But that beauty hides danger. Between the rebels who call it home and the creatures who wander the land, there are few places within that are safe.

Several hallways and stairs later, I enter the throne room. Despite being born to the King and Queen of Bohna, my cousin doesn't stand on formality. This is his least favorite place to be in the entire palace, but it's where his father conducted all his business so it's where Alik conducts his. Including receiving my dear aunt, who

frequently reminds him of his duties. Duties like finding a mate and helping repopulate our people with his progeny.

Poor bastard.

“The guards are distracted.” I do without any unnecessary pleasantries.

My cousin turns from the window and keeps his hands clasped behind his back. At his feet is his Phinneke pup, Beck.

“Clearly you are too lenient with them that they would dare take a single moment’s musings from their duty.” He raises one imperious brow.

“Their duty is to keep the city safe. Especially with the arrival of the humans.” I glare. “The rebels have been far too quiet lately. The silence doesn’t bode well. Under normal circumstances, my guards do well enough. But you and I both know these are anything but ordinary circumstances.”

“Well enough is high praise coming from you,” Alik says with a sly grin that slowly falls. “You are right though. These circumstances are anything but ordinary. Any day now, the females are scheduled to arrive from Earth. They will need time to acclimate. Extra patrols will need to be set up around the dwelling where they’ll live until they find their mates.”

“I’ve already arranged for that to be taken care of, Sire.”

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Alik's lips quirk. He knows I'm annoyed with him when I use his title. "Of course you have. My mistake."

"Have you picked one out for yourself, yet?" I already know his answer, but can't help needling him further.

He glares. "You know I have no desire to find a mate."

"So you will just let the fever take you and condemn me to a life of misery as your heir?" There is nothing worse I can think of than becoming the crown prince. The thought alone is enough to cause me to lose sleep.

"I'm managing it," Alik says.

This time it is me who raises my brow. "Don't think I haven't noticed how much kanet powder you've been inhaling lately. Your mating fever is getting worse. How long do you think you'll last before it consumes you?"

"The humans should arrive in the next day or two. The last communication we had from their ship stated they were just entering the galaxy. It won't be much longer now," he says, completely disregarding my question.

I internally sigh and let him change the subject. "I'll make sure everything is ready for their arrival and let the guards know to be prepared."

He nods a dismissal and I turn on my heel and exit the room. Once again, I make my way through the palace, passing multiple patrolling guards. Staff move about,

preparing for the evening meal. Alik's mother invites a new group of citizens to the palace every week for a meal and entertainment. It saddens her though to see how few females remain, all of them well beyond the age of child-bearing. It's the reason the human females are coming.

I still haven't figured out why Alik is so against having a mate. Every visit we've made to Tavikh since their warriors discovered their human fated mates, my cousin hasn't been able to hide his envy. At least, not from me. I hope he realizes his mistake before it's too late.

As for me, I truly have no interest in a female. Human or otherwise. I do not have the countenance that females enjoy anyway. My work as commander takes up all of my time leaving none left over to give to any bride. My mother made it clear that females will demand too much of me. I don't have the patience for games females play. I am devoted to my career, and that is how it will stay.

I walk through the gated entrance of the palace grounds and take one of the lifts down to the city center. A large building was converted into a dormitory of sorts for the arriving females. Each will have their own private quarters with a bedroom and small seating area, along with their own personal bathing facility. A cook has been assigned to the kitchen and will prep all of the females' meals. A main dining area has been set up for them to eat together and socialize if they choose.

I nod at the guard stationed at the front entrance and step into the open entryway. Stairs climb up one wall with a landing on each floor. The sun shines in through the windows that comprise one entire side of the building. There's the perfect view of the palace from where I stand. I make my way through the entire facility; checking locks and windows, as well as running a test on the security system. Not that any problems should arise, but I won't take any chances on the safety of the humans. They are our only hope our people have for not going extinct.

Despite all the advancements our race has, our scientists are no closer to finding a cure for the disease that rendered us unable to give birth to females. Nor have they been able to synthesize the properties of the kanet plant that keeps our mating fever at bay. It's why we still trade and barter with the Tavikhi people. They are a primitive race with nothing to offer us except the very thing that keeps us alive.

Once I've gone through every floor and every suite, securing it all, I head back to the barracks. Muted conversation has me pausing to listen.

"I heard the females all come from the poor house." A young guards' voice carries from the communal gathering room.

"Someone else said they've never eaten real food," another adds. "They feed them protein bars for rations."

I step beyond the doorway and into the room. Immediate silence greets me as several pairs of eyes land on me.

"These females are leaving their homes for you. For your future children. For our people. Yet you speak of them this way? As though they are beneath you or don't have feelings? You should be thanking them. If it weren't for the human females coming here to bind themselves to some of you, we will die out. Don't ever let me hear another disparaging word pass your lips or you'll answer to not only the prince, but to me."

None of the guards will meet my gaze and shame burns through each of them. I sense the emotion they can't hide. For several beats I stare and make my displeasure further known. While I have no interest in a mate for myself, I won't have any of the females disrespected. Between Vornak's mate Johnna and the ones I have met on Tavikh who are mated to the Tavikhi warriors, it is clear they are a soft and tender species. Although even with the softness they possess a core of steel.

Every human female I have met has a fierceness that is unmatched when defending their mate. They have the kind of strength the Bohnari need to prosper and flourish. Finally I release the visual hold I have on the guards and return to patrolling. We need to make sure nothing will go wrong when the females arrive.

Chapter3

Quinn

I'm not sure which one of us has the tightest grip on the other's hand, but Olivia and I stand at the top of the ramp, ready to take our first steps onto an alien planet.

"Just keep breathing," she says, although I think it's as much for her own benefit as it is mine.

I do as she says, counting each inhalation and exhalation all while trying to calm my racing heart. For the millionth time, tears threaten to fall, but I blink them back. I don't want to make a bad impression and turn off any potential men. It would make this entire trip for naught.

"Are you ready?" Olivia asks.

I glance over at her. "Not even a little bit." When is anybody ready to meet a bunch of aliens with the hope of falling in love?

Devon and Lindsey stand on her other side. At least I'm not alone in my nervousness. The other two women look like they might throw up any second.

"We can do this," Devon says, her voice surprisingly calm and steady despite her outward appearance. There's a confidence in her stance I'm not sure I could fake, but I'll try.

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I can do this. I have to do this. There's no turning back now. Especially since it's our turn. The ramp is wide enough for all four of us to descend side by side. The metal thuds against the soles of my shoes and our shadows grow long from the sun at our backs. The view we had of the city from above doesn't do it justice.

Everything is so much bigger, and the nausea in my stomach churns. I feel like I'm back in the bottom tier looking up at all the places where I'd never be allowed and didn't belong. Olivia squeezes my hand.

"This isn't Earth," she reminds me.

As if I could forget.

At last, we reach the bottom of the ramp where the rest of the women congregate. A contingent of sculpted copper aliens with teal hair and horns of various lengths—clearly soldiers or guards of some kind—stand at attention. Each one is just as gorgeous as the next. But two men, in particular, draw my gaze.

It's the one who stands slightly to the side and behind the other I keep focusing on. There's an intensity to him that's magnetic. I can't turn away. All I can do is take in his raw masculinity. I'm so distracted by him, I almost miss what the guy in the front is saying.

"Welcome to Bohna and our capital city of Preska," the man says. "My name is Alik. I'm the leader of the Bohnari people. We are glad to have you here."

It's pretty obvious now that he is the one in charge. He holds himself like someone

who expects people to bow to him.

“I’m sure after the long flight you all would like to get settled in your new home,” Alik continues. “Commander Horek will lead you to your dwelling and the guards will bring your belongings. Rest for the evening and tomorrow night there will be a celebration in honor of your arrival. You are welcome to explore the city as you wish, but please do not go beyond the border walls. If there is anything you require during your stay to feel more comfortable, please don’t hesitate to ask one of the guards. They will ensure you get whatever it is you need.”

Alik turns to the man at his side and speaks to him in a tone too low for me to hear. Then he walks away without another glance at any of us. The powerful man who remains—Horek—scans the area. I get the impression nothing escapes his gaze.

“Follow me.” He rasps out in a deep bass that ripples through me and makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. He tacks on a belated, “Please.”

Something tells me he doesn’t say that word often, if ever.

“Here we go.” I nudge Olivia’s hip with my hand.

We follow Horek through the copper-hued streets with the guards flanking us. Other Bohnari as well as a few other types of aliens varying in shape and size—as well as number of appendages—out on the streets stare as we pass by. They make me feel like a sideshow at the circus or some exotic animal at a zoo who’s being paraded in front of them for their entertainment. Well, the feeling’s mutual. Another thing I note is the disparate number of women compared to men. Of course, the whole reason we’re on Bohna is because their race is dying out, so it makes sense.

“Does anyone else feel like we’re lambs being led to slaughter?” Devon asks, her head swiveling side to side and her gaze scanning our surroundings.

“I didn’t before you said something, so thanks for that,” Lindsey snarks.

“Sorry.” Devon winces. “I just can’t stand all the gawking. It’s freaking me out a little.”

I have to agree with her. Back on Earth, we did everything we could to avoid scrutiny. Those of us on the bottom tier did anyway. While she and Lindsey continue their light bickering, I study the back of Horek. He moves with a fluid grace I wouldn’t expect from someone his size. He’s massive with a tight black sleeveless shirt that complements his burnished copper skin and teal hair that brushes the tops of his shoulders. Small horns are just visible through the strands.

“You’re staring,” Olivia whispers close to my ear.

I jerk and whip my head in her direction. She tips her chin up, gesturing toward the object of my perusal. My cheeks grow hot. “I’m not staring. I’m...”

“Staring.”

I huff. “Fine, maybe I was. But only because I’ve never seen a soldier with long hair before.”

Olivia chuckles. “Is that the lie you’re telling yourself?”

Yes. “It’s just a lot to take in.”

Olivia breathes out. “Yeah.”

My gaze shifts back to Horek. His hand rests on the blaster at his hip and there’s a tension in him that wasn’t present a moment ago.

Finally, we come to a large dormitory. One that's architecture is industrial in design at its foundation, but mixed with oblong shapes and tons of windows. It gleams with a newness I've never experienced. Everything in the bottom tier is dingy and marked with age. Concrete is lined with spiderwebbed cracks that make it appear as if the structure could fall any second. This building looks like it could withstand any type of natural disaster, whether it be an earthquake or hurricane.

The biggest surprise is all the natural landscaping. I can't remember the last time I saw more than a single random tree. The streets here are lined with them and they surround the dormitory along with flowering bushes and shrubs.

Horek enters the building and two guards hold the doors open so we don't have to. I slowly turn and walk, tipping my head back to take in the open air atrium. There's no ceiling until the roof. Sunlight shines in through the wall of windows illuminating all the cozy couches and chairs that are scattered throughout. A fireplace is built into one of the walls. Various potted trees stand tall within the main area as well.

"Is that a palace?" Someone asks in slightly louder than a whisper.

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Everyone turns and stares. Sure enough, halfway up the mountain is what definitely looks like a palace. My gaze locks with Olivia's. She appears as stunned as I feel.

"There are five suites on each floor," Horek interrupts our study of it all. "Each has its own bedroom, sitting area, and bathing room. There is a library on the third floor and through those doors is a large dining area where you are free to take your meals. There is a cook on site at all times in the kitchen to prepare food whenever you wish."

At the thought of food, my stomach grumbles. I'd been too nervous to eat earlier, but the mention of the kitchen kicks my hunger into high gear.

"You may choose whichever suite you prefer," Horek continues. "There are more than enough for you to pick one you like, I'm sure. Additional guards should be arriving any moment with your belongings. If you have any questions while you're getting settled, you may ask one of them."

A woman raises her hand. The commander stares at her and she clears her throat.

"When will we meet our potential husbands?"

"You will have an opportunity to meet them at the welcome dinner tomorrow evening," he tells her. "Or any time you walk through the city. Every male of a certain age is eligible for a bride."

Devon, Olivia, Lindsey, and I all share a glance within the small circle we've made slightly away from the others. The city is massive so I assume the population is as well. Do we really have that many possible men to choose from? It feels a bit

overwhelming. My gaze shifts to the commander. He appears to be the appropriate age. Is he looking for a wife?

“There is a comm unit in each suite for emergencies. If there’s nothing else?” Horek asks.

No one else raises their hand or breaks the silence. He dips his head and quickly pivots on his heel before walking out the door. All the women stand around a moment longer exchanging glances. It’s like no one wants to make the first move.

“Let’s go get first dibs on the best rooms,” Olivia whispers. She’s always been fearless and willing to get people to do things.

We might as well. The four of us head for the lift that’s near the entrance.

“I’m thinking the top floor,” Devon suggests. “We’ll have the best view, plus we won’t have to hear people walking around above us.”

Olivia grins. “I like the way you think. Plus, that leaves one other suite empty on our floor so we won’t have to split up.”

Lindsey pushes the button for the eighth floor and the lift doors close just as a flash of someone comes into view. Sorry. Hopefully with only twenty of us and the stairs, one lift will be enough. Unless there’s another one we’re not aware of.

The lift comes to a stop and the doors slide open, and we step out onto the wide landing with a glass balcony that runs the length of the building. Opposite where we stand is the wall of windows with the perfect view of both the palace and the city below. To my surprise, a small amount of excitement builds. Maybe because everything is so beautiful and clean.

“Quinn, are you coming?” Olivia calls out.

I turn. She, Lindsey, and Devon are halfway down the walkway. I rush to join them.

“Why don’t we take the two on the end?” Olivia asks.

“Sure.”

“Lindsey and I will take the ones in the middle then and leave the outer one closest to the lift empty,” Devon adds.

“Meet back out in here twenty minutes?” Lindsey suggests.

We all nod in agreement. The two of them enter their suites while Olivia and I reach ours. We glance at each other and she smiles at me.

“I’m so happy you’re here,” she says.

“I’m glad I’m not alone.”

“Never.” Olivia shakes her head. “Where you go, I go.”

I swallow down the emotions threatening to choke me. “I’ll see you in a little bit.”

“See you then.”

With a slow turn of the knob, I step inside my new home.

Chapter4

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Horek

I'm not sure what to make of these humans. There is something about them that is different from the ones on Tavikh. The ones on our neighboring planet are much more open with their emotions. More...approachable, perhaps. Despite being out on patrol again, my mind is not on my surroundings, but rather on the females I left back in their new home. From the quick study I took of our new arrivals, most of them appeared guarded. Is it because these females are from what their planet calls the bottom tier?

That was one of Alik's stipulations when he made the arrangement with the female human's leader. Eloise had suggested it. She and her Tavikhi mate travelled back to Bohna with us after our last trip to Tavikh and assisted him with the bride negotiations. According to her, the females in the bottom tier would benefit greatly from leaving Earth. They are not treated well, and offering opportunities to those who wouldn't ever get them by remaining was the right thing to do. On Bohna, the females will have access to anything they want or need, from better healthcare to an education, if that is something they desire.

One female in particular had caught my eye. There wasn't anything specifically about her that stood out from the rest, and yet I found my gaze drifting to her more than once. Her long dark hair had shimmered with highlights that matched my skin tone perfectly. But it had been her bright eyes that held me. There had been sorrow and pain within their inky depths, yet they glinted with a steely determination that matched the ramrod straight posture she presented. She and three other females remained close to each other but separate from the rest.

I push her image away and return my focus to the task at hand. Pedestrians stroll through the city streets intent on their destination. Conversations carry on the wind, as do the scents filtering from the market square where many of our people still peddle their wares. Food stalls line one side of the market where they sell everything from tannek meat kebobs to leaf wrapped geck. After technology, agriculture is our biggest industry.

My comm beeps. I tap the button on the wrist device and speak into it. “Commander Horek. Report.”

“Sir, there is a disturbance on the outer city perimeter near the rainforest,” the voice on the other end replies.

“What kind of disturbance?” I’m already heading in that direction.

“A rebel was caught trying to sneak into Preska.”

“I’m on my way.” I end the communication and increase my pace.

What is one of the rebels doing this close to the city alone? Is this a diversionary tactic?

I won’t get any answers until I interrogate the male. It takes far too long before I finally reach my destination. There, shackled to a tree, is a lone rebel surrounded by no less than four armed guards. He sits on the ground with an air of confidence like he doesn’t care he’s been detained. There’s no fear in his gaze. In fact, the smirk on his lips indicates he’s amused more than anything.

“Commander,” one of the younger guards greets me.

I nod but don’t remove my focus from the rebel. Unlike most of the city residents, his

horns haven't been shorn. They spiral up from either side of his head and curl slightly backwards. For someone who inhabits the rainforest, his clothing is clean and intact. He could be any one of our citizens, which is problematic. There are rumors of spies living within Preska's walls.

"So you're the great Commander Horek." the rebel drawls.

"And you are?"

His smirk changes into a full-blown smile. "I'm no one important."

"Is that so?"

"Not to you at least," he says.

"Maybe you should let me be the judge of that." This rebel is far too cocky for my liking.

"I'm not sure I trust your judgment. You are, after all, loyal to the interloper on the throne."

I grit my teeth. "Alik is no interloper. He is the only son of King Danik and Queen Veroneek and the rightful heir of Preska."

That smirk reappears. "If you say so."

"I do say so, and for anyone to question otherwise is treason."

The rebel tsks. "Treason is a such a strong word. Although your defense of your cousin is admirable."

I'm tired of these games already. "What were you doing trying to sneak in to Preska?"

He sucks in a fake shocked breath. "Sneak? I was doing nothing more than minding my own business when your guards grabbed me and bound me to this tree like a common criminal. What laws did I break?"

"You were skulking about," one of the guards says.

The rebel laughs. It's deep and from his belly. "Skulking? Is that what you say I was doing?"

"It's more than obvious you're not a citizen of the city." It's my job to be aware of every single person that populates Preska. This male is not one of us.

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“Do you no longer welcome poor refugees? Or do you only allow those who can afford the prince’s exorbitant price for kanet powder?”

“What do you mean ‘those who can afford kanet powder’? Never has Alik made our people pay for it. Besides, we both know you are no refugee.” I try to maintain the same careless attitude as him, but it is not in my nature and is more difficult than I expect.

“You wound me, Commander.”

“If you won’t answer my questions here, maybe spending time in the pit will loosen your tongue.”

One side of the rebel’s mouth cocks up. “Are you always so eager to imprison innocent people?”

It is my turn to laugh. “Is that what you are? Innocent?”

“As an untried youth.”

A sudden clicking sound has my senses on full alert. I recognize it. My gaze locks with the rebel’s whose smirk turns into a broad smile. A raucous boom is deafening and I slam my palms over my ears as an explosion of dark smoke blinds me. I try to snap out an order, but the noxious gas chokes me. My lungs and throat burn. A coughing fit that has me bowled over. The guards are no better off than I am.

I do everything I can to shield my mouth and nose, but my eyes burn as I try and seek

out the perpetrator of the attack. It's no use. I stumble around, colliding with several large masses until far too slowly the air clears enough for me to get a visual on my surroundings. All the males are present and accounted for. Except one.

Lying on the ground at the base of the tree where the rebel had been bound are the shackles used to hold him. Yet, he is nowhere to be seen. Water leaks from eyes that sting and ache.

"Fuck." I stomp over to the iron restraints and inspect them.

They haven't been cut. It's as though he merely slipped out of them or they were removed with a key. I study the guards. Is one of them secretly part of the rebel's forces and helped the other male? They are young, but none have a look of guilt about him.

"Return to your posts."

"Yes, sir," they say in unison.

I remain a few moments longer after they've left and observe the area, hoping to find a clue to...well, anything. The unrest has been escalating over the last few moon cycles until the rebels suddenly went silent. Until today. I fear the quiet is only a temporary thing that will soon turn to something much bigger than either Alik or I anticipate.

What was the rebel doing sneaking into Preska on the same day the human females arrived? It can't be a coincidence. I tap my wrist comm.

"Yes, Commander?" Lorik answers.

"Increase the rotation of patrols along the rainforest border as well as the humans'

dwelling.”

“Right away, sir.”

I end the transmission and take one final glance around. As before, nothing stands out besides the shackles still lying on the ground and the empty smoke canister used to disorient us. I pocket both to take to our scientists for examination. Perhaps there is something they might discover that I’m unable to.

The back of my neck tingles. I spin to confront whoever is behind me, but I’m alone. I scan the streets and buildings along the city limits, but nothing is out of place. It doesn’t matter. I’m being watched. Whoever it is has hidden themselves well. I suspect it’s the rebel we detained.

Since there’s no use waiting him out, I walk away and return to my duties. I’ll need to report to Alik what happened, although I hate not being able to give him any news, or admitting the rebel got away right beneath our noses. So far, they haven’t incited any true violence, only made life difficult for my cousin by vandalizing transport ships and machinery, as well as disrupting trade lines with other cities on Bohna.

Everything they’re doing, however, has made some of our people question Alik’s fitness to rule. More rumblings have made their way to the capitol and there has been a hint of unrest, even within Preska’s city limits. It is another reason for the human females to be here. Not as a distraction, but rather, a way to bring hope to the Bohnari.

Chapter5

Quinn

Nothing could have prepared me for my new home. The bathroom alone is bigger

than the bedroom I shared with my mom back on Earth. There's a high tech toilet with a wall of buttons whose functions are completely unknown to me. I might have squealed a little at not only the walk-in shower, but the huge bathing pool. Back on Earth, my mom and I only have a bathtub.

The bed is enormous. At least twice the size of the double I shared with Mom and there's far more storage space in the closet than I have clothing. It would probably take me a lifetime to fill it up. I glance around the seating area from my position on the neutral-shaded sofa.

While the place is huge, it's also...sterile. Almost cold, even. There aren't any windows, which I'm not used to, and no decor on the walls. The bedding is pretty enough considering it matches the entire planet, but there's nothing in here that makes it homey.

Different ideas run through my head, like adding some plants or flowers. Of course, they won't get sunshine so maybe that's not an option. A sharp knock on the door has me standing and moving to open it. One of the Bohnari guards stands on the other side, easily holding two large duffels which contain everything I own in the world.

"Greetings. I'm Bannik. Are you Quinn Brooks? I have your things." He raises his arms slightly like I can't see what he's carrying.

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“Please, come in.” I step back so he can enter. “You can just set them next to the sofa, if you don’t mind.”

I study him as he walks across the room and places them where I indicated. It’s a little hard to tell exactly how old the Bohnari are. None of the few I’ve encountered since arriving have any lines or wrinkles. His copper skin is just as shiny as all the others and the small horns at the top of his head are barely visible through his hair.

My gaze drops and my cheeks heat, because he’s turned around and looking at me in the same appraising way I’ve been staring at him. I’m the first to break eye contact.

I clear my throat. “Thank you, Bannik.”

“You are most welcome,” he says, but doesn’t move to leave. After a few seconds he finally speaks again. “Once you are settled, I would be honored to show you around Preska.”

“Oh, um, thank you. I’d like that.” I shift nervously and a bit self-consciously and finally glance at him again.

“Quinn, are you about ready?” Olivia calls out. “Oh, sorry, am I interrupting?”

I spin a half-turn and my gaze darts between the two of them.

“No.” It comes out too fast and too breathless. “Bannik brought my bags to me and, um, offered to give me a tour of the city some time soon.”

A sly grin appears. “That’s awfully nice of you...Bannik, is it?”

The guard nods. “Yes.”

Olivia closes the distance between us and loops her arm around mine. “Quinn is my best friend. You better not do anything to hurt her.”

Bannik rattles his head so fast I’m surprised it doesn’t come clean off. Me? I want to sink into a hole in the floor.

“I would never hurt a female,” he states.

“Good. Now, if you don’t mind, we’re going to get some food.”

He bows slightly at the waist. “Of course. I need to return to my duties anyway. Have a pleasant day.”

“You too.”

I’m not sure he hears me though with the way he dashes past Olivia and out the door, closing it behind him. I push her playfully away from me and she bursts out laughing.

“Oh my god. He’s never going to come back and see me now.” I slap my hands over my face and slide them down it.

“Are you kidding? He was enthralled with you when I walked in. I can guarantee he’ll be back,” she says. “And if I scared him that easily, then he’s not the kind of guy you want anyway.”

I suppose she’s right.

“You know I’m right,” Olivia says, reading my mind because she knows me so well. “Now, come on. Devon and Lindsey are waiting for us so we can do a little exploring.”

She leads the way and I make sure to lock the door behind me. Instructions had been laid out inside how to program the door to my biometrics, so that had been the first thing I did. Our two friends wait down by the lift.

“What did you think of your place?” Devon asks me when we reach them.

“It’s big. Nice. Could use some personality though.”

“Agreed. But it’s a far cry from the shithole I lived in back on Earth,” Devon says. “I feel like I’m living in the upper tier here.”

I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or not. Maybe this is all so we’ll be more willing to overlook the bad stuff when it comes. The lift bell rings and the doors open for us to step inside. No sooner does it close than Olivia snags my arm.

“I know what you’re thinking, and you need to stop.”

The other two glance back and forth between us.

“You have that look on your face,” Olivia continues. “The one where you keep waiting for something to go wrong. We both know that’s what you do when you think life is going too great. You’re preparing yourself for it to start going to shit.”

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These are the times when I really hate how well she understands me. “It’s rude of you to point out my flaws, you know?”

“And yet, you still love me.” She tightens her hold before releasing me.

I sigh heavily. “You make it really hard sometimes.”

Because she’s fully aware I’m only messing with her, she gives me a cheeky grin. The lift comes to a jerky halt before the doors slide open and we step out. Scattered around the spacious atrium are a few women. A brunette in particular catches my attention. Mostly because she hadn’t been on the ship.

I can’t confess to knowing all the other potential brides beyond recognizing a face here and there, but I’ve definitely never seen this woman—humanwoman—before. It isn’t even her obvious Bohnari clothing that makes her stand out. She’s glowing like she’s obscenely happy. The two lottery brides standing at her side laugh at something she says.

At our approach, the three of them turn.

“Hi, there. I’m Johnna.” The new woman sticks her hand out with a large smile and Olivia is the first to reach for it.

“Olivia. This is Quinn, Devon, and Lindsey,” she introduces all of us.

“It’s great to meet you all. Welcome to Bohna.” Johnna swings her arms out in a sweeping gesture. “Sorry I wasn’t able to greet you when you first landed, but I was

helping my mate at the hospital.”

“Mate?” Devon speaks up.

“Husband, sorry.” Johnna chuckles. “The Bohnari don’t really understand the concept of marriage like we do on Earth, but it’s essentially the same thing. Except they mate for life.”

For life?

“Were you a lottery bride?” One of the other women standing with us asks. “I thought we were the first.”

Johnna shakes her head. “Oh, you are. I was part of a terraforming crew ship. We were on our way to a planet just beyond the outer rim when we were attacked. A few co-workers and I managed to get out using the escape pods before the main ship exploded. My pod suffered serious damage from the aftershocks and I crash landed here about eight months ago or so, believe it or not. My mate is the head healer and saved my life.”

“Was it your idea then for the Bohnari to reach out to Earth for women?” I find the courage to speak up. If Johnna was part of any space program, then she was definitely a resident of the upper tier. Why would she care about us bottomers?

She grins madly. “Oh no. You have my best friend Eloise to thank for that. Why don’t we head to the market square for food and I’ll tell you all about it on the way?”

Since I’m not sure I’m ready for my own personal chef quite yet—as surreal as it sounds—it might be nice to have a person familiar with the planet and its people to act as our tour guide. We all nod in agreement.

“Excellent. I’ll show you around,” Johnna says.

The six of us follow her out the door, with the two unknown women taking the lead directly behind her. My friends and I hang back slightly. The air smells fresh the minute we step outside. Clean. Far different from the heavy grime that always lingered low in the sky back on the bottom tier. It was so thick, we often didn’t even get a glimpse of the upper tier. Just one more thing to keep us separated.

I’m so focused on breathing it all in, I almost miss Johnna speaking over her shoulder.

“Eloise is my best friend. She was on Helios 3 with me when we were attacked. Only she wound up on Tavikh, which is our closest neighboring planet.” She pauses. “I’m not sure how much news reaches Earth about the various planets the government has terraformed over the last decade.”

“Not much,” Devon replies although I’m not sure it was really a question.

Johnna slowly nods. “I didn’t figure. I’ve spent the last five years traveling and don’t have any family back home, so I wasn’t really sure. Anyway, the Bohnari and Tavikhi are allies and have a close trade relationship. Not long after Vornak and I were mated, we made a trip to Tavikh, where I was reunited with Eloise. After our last trip there, she and her Tavikhi mate Zedam came back with us so she could help Alik with the negotiations with the President.”

“Why us?” The question slips out before I can call it back.

Johnna glances at me with a wrinkled brow. “What do you mean?”

I don’t look at Olivia or the others. “I mean, why only those of us from the bottom tier?”

She stops in the middle of the street so we all follow suit. Johnna's gaze bores into mine. "Because regardless of what you might think, not everyone from the upper tier agrees with the way our world is run. Some of Eloise's closest friends on Tavikh were from the bottom tier. What better way to stick it to all those rich assholes who think they're above everyone because they have more credits than they could ever spend in their lifetime than to give people—givewomen—a way to leave? Especially to go to a different planet where those same women will be worshipped by males and who have all the control because they need us far more than we need them. Does that answer your question of why you?"

Yes, I suppose it does.

Chapter6

Horek

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I exit the main science building a few streets away from the market square. Garek, our head scientist and the Bohnari in charge of research on our fertility issues said the smoke bomb was homemade and well done at that. Whoever had crafted it knew what he was doing. Garek hasn't always been a part of academia. In fact, he was my mentor when I entered the guards.

An unfamiliar scent reaches me, and I breathe it in, my gaze searching for its source. It's a light fragrance I've never smelled before. Sweet and crisp. Perhaps some type of fruit? I follow the trail, pausing every few moments to take another inhalation. My path leads me to the city center. Bohnari walk the streets, as well as a few other races who stop on Bohna to refuel their ships and replenish supplies.

Preska isn't a huge spaceport that sees a lot of traffic, but we do get occasional visitors and passersby since we are one of the more resource-heavy planets in this sector. Toveeka is the biggest and busiest station, but it's still a distance to travel between us.

I reach the market and the scent that drew me here has been covered by the various food being sold. It's still there, but not as strong. Yet, I continue searching for its source. My gaze is drawn to the far end of the road from where I stand. Gathered around a booth where an elder Bohnari sells his handcrafted jewelry made from stones mined in the mountains behind Preska is Johnna and a small group of human females.

Amongst the females is the same one who caught my attention when they arrived earlier. Before I realize what I am doing, I weave through the crowd toward them. I'm so focused, I nearly collide with several different people. Grumbles follow in my

wake, but I ignore them all. I stop a short distance away in front of a table display of blades and pick up one. I pretend to inspect the craftsmanship but tune into the conversation happening close by.

“This one would look so good with your skin tone,” a female says.

“Except for the fact I have no place to wear it.”

My skin tingles at the second voice, and somehow I know it belongs to her, as well as the scent I followed here.

“Who cares? Wear it around your house. Get it because it’s beautiful and makes you feel good about yourself,” the first female replies. “We’re not back on the bottom tier anymore, Quinn. None of us have to worry about money or food ever again. We all know the number of credits that were deposited into accounts for each of us will last half a lifetime. And that’s if we’re not even trying to be frugal.”

Quinn. It is an interesting name for a female. I glance over my shoulder to get a better glimpse at what piece has their attention. Her friend is right. The necklace is crafted from the pikela stone and would look stunning on her. She stares longingly at it, hesitates, but in the end, she places it back on the table.

“It’s a frivolous expense for something I really don’t need.” She glances up at the male behind the table. “Thank you for letting me look at it. It truly is gorgeous. Maybe another time though.”

The Bohnari smiles at her without an ounce of visible disappointment at the loss of a sale. “You are most welcome. If I sell this one to someone else, I will keep an eye out for another piece just as lovely as this one for when you are ready.”

“Thank you.” Quinn dips her head and their group walks away with Johnna in the

lead.

I follow at a distance as they continue strolling through the city center. They pause at several tables, but not a single female makes any purchase except Johnna, who buys a length of shimmering fabric. Eloise explained what the bottom tier was like for the people living there. Not just the females either, but the entire population.

As part of the deal to bring the potential brides to Bohna, Alik made sure each female had enough credits to purchase things while they searched for the male they would bind themselves to. If they choose to work, they will be paid a fair wage, and any credits they earn will be added to the ones already in their accounts. There is no need for them to worry about having enough. Yet, it would seem that is still a huge concern for them. I will need to address this with my cousin.

“Horek? What brings you to the market?”

I jerk, completely unaware that I have moved close enough to the group of humans to attract Johnna’s notice.

“Patrolling.” My response is automatic, if untruthful. I dart a glance in Quinn’s direction before quickly returning it to Vornak’s mate. “A rebel was detained inside the city limits and I am making sure no more managed to sneak past the guards.”

“What do you mean by rebel?” The question is from the female I have seen speaking most frequently to Quinn. “No one told us anything about rebels.”

Johnna and I share a look that causes the same outspoken female to snap her fingers in front of my face. Something no Bohnari would dare try.

“Excuse me, but no silent communication with each other please. It’s rude,” she says.

“Olivia,” Quinn hisses beneath her breath.

This Olivia only glares at her. “Don’t ‘Olivia’ me. You know I’m right. No one mentioned anything to us about rebels when we boarded the ship to come here. If there’s some kind of civil unrest happening on Bohna, don’t you think it’s something we should have been made aware of?”

She makes a valid point, but I’m not sure Alik would approve of sharing the information. Not that it’s likely to have remained a secret for long.

“There is a faction of Bohnari who reside in the rainforest outside of the city that are unhappy with the way Alik...leads.” I won’t be the one to share my cousin’s true role over the Bohnari. “They have been making their disappointment known with increasing frequency. No violence has occurred, nor will it. Patrols of both the city border and within the perimeter have been increased to make sure no harm comes to any of our citizens.”

The group of females share looks between them until the one called Olivia, who appears to have elected herself their communal voice, stares at me. “So what you’re saying is we’ve landed on a planet filled with political conflict?”

My gaze bounces over all the females before settling on Quinn. “Yes.”

One of the humans I’ve seen with Quinn and Olivia throws up her hands and releases a huge burst of air. “Are you fucking kidding me? No wonder the President was perfectly fine with the stipulation that all lottery brides be from the bottom tier. God forbid should any of the precious women from the upper tier have to leave their privileged lives for some place with actual conflict.”

The other females murmur to each other and I send a helpless look to Johnna, silently begging for her to come to my aid.

“Hey, just listen.” She bounces her hands in the air as if that will get the females’ attention. “This isn’t like Earth. Yes, there is conflict here, but it’s not the kind you’re used to. The rebels haven’t been violent in any way. There is nothing to be afraid of.”

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“Yet,” Olivia adds. “There’s nothing to be afraid of...yet. Because how can you guarantee that your little conflict won’t become violent? You can’t, and you know it. Life doesn’t come with guarantees. I don’t know what these rebels are doing now that makes them rebels, but at some point, if what they’re doing continues not to work, they’ll come to a decision to escalate things. It’s how conflict works. Always has, always will.”

I shake my head. “It will never come to violence. You have my guarantee.”

“Why should we trust you?” Quinn asks quietly. “How can we be sure you’re right?”

“Because I know Alik. He loves Bohna and he loves our people. If there is any chance any of those people might be harmed by the rebels in any way, then he will give them exactly what they want. A new leader.” My cousin would do anything to protect the Bohnari, including bringing humans here to become brides so we don’t die out. “I swear this to you.”

Other than Johnna, none of the females appear to believe me. There is nothing I can do to make them see the truth except give them time. My wrist comm beeps and I am almost grateful for the distraction. I tap it.

“Commander Horek.” I don’t take my eyes off Quinn.

“His Highness is asking for you, sir.”

“I’m on my way.” I end the comm. “Excuse me, but I have to go.”

Without waiting for a response, I spin and once again weave my way through the crowded market square. Behind me, the females all ask the same question.

“His Highness?”

No doubt they’ll question Johnna about it and I’m not sure if she’ll be able to get away with not giving them the answers they seek. One more thing I may need to warn Alik about.

It takes me far too long to reach the throne room for the second time today. At least I did notice an increase in guards around the females’ housing. Again, I enter without announcing myself. Only this time, Alik isn’t alone. Queen Veroneek sits in a plush chair reserved for her when she wishes to converse with her son.

“Horek, my dear,” she greets me with a pleasantness that never fails to make me feel warm inside. My aunt is as kind as my mother is not. I’ve never understood how the two of them are sisters.

“Greetings, Your Highness. I didn’t realize you were here. Is all well?” Despite our relation, I still can’t drop the formality of her title. She stopped asking me to a long time ago, when she realized it was pointless. Not because I don’t care for her in the only way I know how. It’s just best to keep a measure of distance between myself and people.

“Other than the pesky rebels causing more problems? Mostly,” she says. “I merely wanted to get your take on the human females that arrived. Alik mentioned you escorted them to their dwelling. Were you able to speak with any of them? What sort of impression did you get?”

A vision of Quinn flashes in my head. The way the sunlight made her eyes sparkle and how my fingers twitched with the need to see if her hair was as soft as it

appeared. Or how I'm curious to know what she thinks of Preska so far.

"I didn't really get a chance to converse with any of them, although I did run across a few with Johnna in the market before coming here. She was showing them around, I believe, and introducing them to our culture."

"That is lovely of Johnna for doing that. I'm sure they felt some sort of relief knowing there's another human female here that is mated to one of our people already," Queen Veroneek says. She has a genuine fondness for the healer's human mate.

"Most likely."

"Did you find one that sparked your interest?" she asks with the same brow raise as her son, although hers is less imperious and more curiously optimistic.

"You know I have no interest in a bride."

Queen Veroneek waves me off. "That's your mother talking. I'm not sure how she's convinced you that you have no wish for a mate or children. You would make a wonderful father and a loving partner."

I glance at Alik, who's remained quiet this entire time, only to find him failing to hide a smirk. I'm sure he's relieved that his mother's attention and insistence about a lack of desire to be bonded is currently being directed at me and not him.

"Alik would make a far better mate than I would. He is the crown prince after all. He's the one who needs to further our line and produce an heir, don't you think?"

My aunt barks out a laugh. "My son has already made his feelings about a mate known to me. Not that I agree with either of you, but I will leave it. For now."

She rises from her seat and kisses Alik on the cheek. She pats my shoulder, which is the most affection I accept from anyone.

“I will say one more thing before I leave, though, and that is don’t let others dictate what you want most out of life.” Her gaze shifts from Alik to me and back to her son. “You could be missing out on the most wonderful thing life has to offer. True love. Your father and I had it. He’d want you both to have it as well.”

With another glance over us, Queen Veroneek dips her head and exits through the double doors that are opened by the two guards stationed at them. I stare after her a moment longer before turning to my cousin. He meets my gaze.

“Tell me about this rebel that got away.”

Chapter7

Quinn

“There looks to be a lot of things our President left out regarding Bohna when she offered this ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ opportunity to us.” I knew there was something suspect about this whole bridal endeavor.

Johnna glances around. “Why don’t we go back to your housing complex? I’ll explain more there.”

Although I’d prefer to have answers now before she has time to organize her thoughts, she’s probably right. The six of us aren’t the only ones affected by this new information. There are fourteen other brides who deserve to hear it as well. Hopefully they’re all back at our building and not out wandering around.

We follow Johnna as she leads us through the city. Devon and Lindsey walk side by side in front of Olivia and me. I can sense the tension in all three of them. Olivia nudges my arm.

“What other surprises do you think are in store for us?”

I huff. “At this point, your guess is as good as mine.”

“Not to detract from the seriousness of the current situation, but I find it interesting that we just happened to run into your commander while we were out.” Olivia waggles her eyebrows at me.

“He’s notmyanything.”

“He did appear awfully focused on you,” Devon says over her shoulder with a grin.

“I think you’re imagining things.” Weren’t they?

“Come on. You can’t tell me you didn’t notice how intently he was watching you?”
Olivia quirks her lips.

“Or how you couldn’t quite look away from him either,” Lindsey points out.

My neck gets hot. I admit there’s something about Horek that draws me in, but I’m not sure he’s looking for a bride or if he’s the kind of guy I’m interested in beyond his looks. There’s an aloofness to him. A wall. Some type of barrier to his emotions. I can’t explain it.

“Fine. I admit to...admiring him. Who wouldn’t? He’s attractive. Like every other Bohnari I’ve seen since we got here. It doesn’t necessarily mean anything.”

“At least you’re admitting it,” Olivia says. “I’m not sure he’s your type anyway.”

For some reason, I’m offended on Horek’s behalf. “Why not?”

“I don’t really know to be honest. I guess I just pictured you with someone,” she hesitates. “lighter, maybe? Less serious.”

I shouldn’t feel the need to defend him. Yet, I do. “He’s the commander of the entire Bohnari guards. There’s probably a lot of responsibility that goes along with that. If he’s in charge of making sure the whole city is safe, I don’t suspect he has a lot of time for fun.”

Olivia holds up her hands, palms facing me. “I didn’t mean it to sound like an insult.”

I'm not sure why my back's so up about her description of Horek. As if she still senses my emotions, she loops her arm around mine. "I'm sorry. If you're interested in getting to know him better, then I think you should. Not that you need my permission or anything."

I know what Olivia's trying to do and I appreciate it. We've been best friends practically since birth, but that doesn't mean our relationship is perfect or that we don't have our disagreements.

"Thanks, Liv."

We finally reach our building and walk through the front doors held open by the guards stationed there. Several women are seated in the lounging area chatting, but there are still quite a few missing. Johnna turns toward us all.

"Why don't you guys join them and I'll see if I can find the rest?" she suggests.

The six of us make our way to the others, grabbing four chairs grouped together around a small table.

"Do you think she's going to tell us everything?" Devon crosses one leg over the other and bounces it.

"I have no intention of leaving this spot until she does." Even if that means I have to trail after Johnna if she tries to get out of it.

My gaze shifts to Olivia who's grinning madly at me.

"What?" I wrinkle my brows.

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“You are one sexy bitch when you get all fierce like that. I like this side of you and don’t get to see it nearly often enough.”

Devon and Lindsey crack up.

I snort and shake my head. “You’re such a dork.”

“And yet, you still love me.” Olivia bats her eyelashes.

Yes, I do. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

Just when I think Johnna’s t actually ditched us, the lift door opens and she, along with six more women step out. They head straight for us.

She clears her throat and her gaze bounces from one woman to the next. Her smile appears strained. “Thank you ladies for joining us. I met most of you earlier today, but for those I didn’t, I’m Johnna Roberts.”

I tune out the rest of her introduction about her prior career on the terraforming ship and how she got to Bohna since she already told us during our walk through the city.

“My mate, or husband if you’d rather, is the head medical doctor,” she continues. “He reports to Alik, who’s the leader of the Bohnari.”

One of the women—Cadence, I believe—raises her hand. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to be rude, but we were told all of this already. At least, about Alik being in charge, I mean. He greeted us when we arrived.”

“Yeah, except he’s a little more than just ‘in charge’.” Johnna winces. Her gaze shifts to me before returning to the others. “Technically, Alik is the crown prince of Bohna.”

Jaws drop, including mine. I expected something like this, but hearing it out loud makes it real.

“Holy shit. He’s a fucking prince?” Devon whispers loudly.

“Guess that explains the palace,” Lindsey deadpans.

Chatter grows louder until I speak over everyone. “And the rebels?”

Silence quickly follows and I keep my gaze locked on Johnna. The women shift their attention back to her as well. She blows out a heavy sigh.

“Not everyone on Bohna believes Alik should be the ruler, despite him being the son of the king and queen,” Johnna finally explains. “There is a faction of Bohnari living and hiding out within the rainforest beyond the city limits who are rebelling against the monarchy. They are trying to prove to the citizens that Alik isn’t fit to be the crown prince. Nothing they have done is violent. Merely inconvenient.”

“Yet,” Olivia speaks up.

“I’m sorry?” Johnna’s mouth turns down.

“Nothing they have done is violent...yet.”

More shared glances occur between the women. Their foreheads crease in obvious worry. Even a flash of fear appears in a few.

“Like Commander Horek said, Alik won’t let it come to that. He cares too much about his people. You all being here should be evidence of that.” Johnna sweeps her arm out. “We are the only things standing in the way of the Bohnari going extinct. Alik negotiated with the President for human brides because he wants this planet—these people—to survive. To create new generations of Bohnari. He’s not going to throw all of that away.”

What Johnna says makes sense. Why allow this civil unrest to escalate to a level where his people might die when the whole purpose of the bride program is for the Bohnari to find a bride and have children? Olivia and I share a glance. I can tell her thoughts align with mine. We’ve learned to read each other over the years.

“If you have any specific questions, I will do my best to answer them,” Johnna offers. “I may be mated to Vornak, but that doesn’t mean I’m part of the inner circle where decisions are discussed and made. So if I say I don’t know the answer, please don’t think I’m purposefully withholding anything.”

“You said the rebels are causing inconveniences,” a woman calls out. “What do you mean?”

“As you know, Preska is the capital city. Which means most of the trade with other cities initiates here,” Johnna explains. “There have been some minor hiccups.”

“Minor hiccups, how?” The question comes from Lindsey.

“Warehouses have been vandalized. Supplies stolen. Things of that nature. Fuel cells have been removed and not replaced from the ships that transport supplies so they’re unable to get out of the city, for one.” Johnna flashes her thumb. “There’s also an express light rail that travels between Preska and Haveeka. Herds of tannek have been led onto the tracks, and they’re notoriously stubborn. It takes hours to lead them away and clear the path so the train can continue its journey. Of course, while people are

trying to get the beasts to safety and away from the tracks, the supplies are looted.”

So the rebels are thieves, really? I suppose there’s something to be said about rebels who aren’t trying to incite violence. And truthfully, every example Johnna gave really is nothing more than inconveniences, although some more major than others. Exactly like she said. I do feel a sense of relief now that she’s explained.

“Any other questions?” Johnna’s gaze drifts over the room.

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Geneva raises her hand. “Is Alik looking for a bride?”

Olivia, Devon, Lindsey, and I all share a look. I should have guessed once they heard there was royalty here, at least one of them would try to snag whoever it was.

“You’d have to ask him. Anything else?” When nobody raises a hand or speaks up, Johnna dips her head. “Good. I need to get back to the medical facility then. Feel free to comm me if something comes up. I really hope we can all become friends.”

Her gaze shifts to the four of us and her strained smile softens a bit. I give her a small smile in return. Johnna waves at us all and then leaves us to talk amongst ourselves.

“You believe her, then?” Devon asks.

I nod slowly. “Yeah, I do.”

“Do you think she left anything out?” Olivia wonders out loud.

My gaze travels to the double doors where Johnna exited. “I sure hope not. Although what can we do if she did?”

It’s a question none of us can answer.

Chapter8

Horek

The palace is buzzing with anticipation in preparation for the arrival of the humans. Queen Veroneek has spent the entire day directing staff for the reception and making sure no details have been forgotten. I walk the perimeter and check that everything's secure. There are a few advantages of being located halfway up the mountain, but that doesn't mean reaching the palace and getting past the guards is impossible.

Bohnari patrol the entire grounds as well as inside the walls. Nothing will go wrong tonight. Johnna sent a message about her conversation with the females. I'm not sure Alik will be happy the humans are aware of his status now, but it's too late to worry about it at this point. I understand his need for secrecy. Especially since the one and only female he ever courted was only interested in being Queen one day. When she realized that was never going to happen, she left Bohna on a transport ship and returned to her own planet.

I suppose that could be his reason for not wanting a mate. How would he know the female wanted him because she cared more for him than his title? Not that I'm looking for my own bride, but I appreciate the fact Johnna left out the small detail of my relationship to Alik.

"Commander," a young guard halts abruptly. "The palace is secure. Guards are placed at every entrance and various points around the grounds. There is also an increase in security near the city border closest to where the rebel was spotted yesterday."

"Thank you."

He nods and heads back toward his station. I take a final glance around and make my way into the palace to Alik's wing. The fragrant scent of the evening meal fills the air. There are hints of smoked meats, the faint odor of bread, along with the fruitiness of the lulesh berry used to make the special Bohnari drink guests are always served.

The soft notes being played by the musicians flutter around as well. I'm sure the night will be filled with merriment as the Bohnari males are finally introduced to all the human females. It is a celebration of hope for the future of our people. I only wish my gut wasn't telling me to expect some kind of disruption.

I reach Alik's set of suites and rap the door before entering. Several staff are inside, bustling around and preparing his clothing. Moments later, my cousin steps out of the hygiene room wearing only a pair of low slung pants. His hair has been blown out and is mussed enough to make it look as though a female just finished running her fingers through it.

"You're dismissed," he tells the males who hustle out of the room, leaving us alone. "Any updates on the rebel?"

"Nothing. It's back to being as quiet as it was before he snuck into the city yesterday." The sense of foreboding grows stronger.

"So still no idea what he wanted or what he was looking for." It's not a question, but one I answer anyway.

"No."

"Do you think it was their leader? Janik, if your sources are correct?"

One of the first things Garek taught me when I joined the guards was to always trust my instincts. They're telling me that's exactly who was detained. "I do. There was something infinitely cocky about him that only comes from a person who's in charge and knows how smart they are. He acted far too smug to have been a lowly scout. If it wasn't this Janik, then my next guess is it was someone close to him. A second-in-command, perhaps."

“And there’s been no mutterings from them since he got away?” Alik asks.

The anger at myself for letting him outsmart me flares. “Nothing. Like I said, quiet. There aren’t even any whispers of them knowing the humans arrived.”

My cousin chuckles, but without amusement. “Every citizen of Preska and its outer cities knows they arrived yesterday. It’s all anyone has been talking about. The chances of our males finding their mate and producing progeny is too big of news for it to remain quiet for long. I suspect the entire planet itself knows they’re here.”

Alik’s no doubt correct. With all the trade lines, word has to have spread far and wide. Which means there’s not a chance the rebels don’t know. Knowing there’s a possible spy in our midst doesn’t help either.

“We’ll flush them out. Somehow.” I only hope it’s before things escalate.

“I trust you.”

The words hang in the air a moment.

Alik doubles over with a groan. I rush over to help. His head jerks up and a growl erupts from his throat making me come to an abrupt halt. His eyes shift colors, and his skin-tone deepens. Fuck. It's the fever. Not making any sudden moves, I reach into my vest and bring out my vial of ground kanet powder.

“Alik, you need to take this.” Carefully I unscrew the cap and pour a larger portion than I normally would. “Breathe, cousin. Everything's going to be fine. It's Horek. I need you to breathe.”

With slow, methodical steps, I move forward with both hands outstretched in front of me. In one is the cap containing the kanet powder. Alik's chest rises and falls rapidly and a slow rumble climbs from his chest to land in his throat. At his sides, his fists clench and his claws elongate, no doubt cutting into his flesh and causing even more pain. I'm finally within an arm's reach.

“Easy. Just breathe.” I place the cap under his nose. “That's it. Breathe it in.”

The first inhalation is slow, the second faster. At last, he takes in a sharp breath and the powder disappears. I keep my own breathing even until Alik calms. His eyes return to normal, and the tension he'd been holding in his body releases. His breathing evens out, and he straightens to his impressive height. His color lightens but only by a fraction.

“Fuck.” He snaps the curse in a harsh tone.

I step away to give him space. He meets my gaze, but I let the words I want to say remain unspoken. We both know what they are and we both know nothing is going to change.

“You should hurry and finish dressing before your mother comes searching for you. I’ll let her know you’re on your way.” I recap my supply of kanet powder and toss it on Alik’s bed. “You need this more than I do right now.”

His jaw tightens and he gives me a sharp nod. I stare a moment longer and then leave. That’s the worst I’ve seen the fever hit. Most days there’s a barely noticeable pain in my chest. It’s dull, and the smallest amount of kanet powder keeps it at bay. My cousin is the only one it’s affected this badly and I don’t understand why.

Even the rebels get it although the exchange is never done in person. More times than I can count, I’ve laid a trap to catch whoever comes to get their supply of it, and every time they slip between my fingers. It’s maddening. I make my way through the palace toward the main gathering space.

Tables flanked on either side with backless benches fill the room in preparation for dinner. The musicians are seated together in the far corner and play an upbeat tune. Already several males have arrived. All of them ready to court one of the females.

“My son appears to be missing.”

I turn at the sound of my aunt’s voice. She approaches dressed like the queen she is, wearing traditional Bohnari royalty clothing and a small, delicate crown on her head. Her slightly shorn horns are just visible over the top of it.

“I just left him in his room, Highness. He will be down momentarily and asked me to

let you know he was running slightly behind.”

“That is good,” she says with a soft smile. “I thought perhaps he had tried to make his escape off planet so he didn’t have to sit on display in front of all the new females.”

“Only because he knows you would hunt him down if he dare tried.”

Queen Veroneek chuckles. “How right you are.”

“You look lovely, by the way, Aunt.”

She waves off the compliment, but I can tell it pleases her. “You should save your flattery for one of the young females.”

I stare her down. “You know I am not interested.”

Her lips turn downward at the corners. “Never have I met more stubborn males than my son and you. Not even his father was this bad. It’s your mother getting in your head again, isn’t it?”

“We haven’t spoken in several moons.” Not since word spread that Alik was negotiating for brides. I do my best to avoid her.

“That doesn’t mean you don’t hear her voice in your head telling you all sorts of nonsense about the sort of male she says you are. About how females want a male who is less serious and stoic. A male who knows how to laugh and flirt and charm. Someone exactly like Alik.”

I nearly flinch at the accuracy of everything she just said, because those are all the things my mother spoke of the last time I saw her. My aunt moves forward and lays her hand on my cheek.

“You are kind and gentle, Horek. Protective of those you care for. Your heart is much bigger than you think it is. Any female should count herself lucky to be loved by you.” She places her hand on my chest next. “Don’t let fear or untruths spoken by others keep you from searching for a female to spend the rest of your days with. There is nothing greater than finding your heart’s fire. Trust me. I found mine.”

Queen Veroneek focuses on me for a moment longer and then heads in the direction of the kitchen. I’m not sure how long I stand there, but the sound of approaching people reaches me. I push back my aunt’s words and turn my attention to the entrance. Alik still hasn’t arrived. Males trickle in like a slow leak that soon runs faster, until the eating area is nearly bursting.

They choose their seats carefully in order to get the best view of the table where the females will sit. I’m not sure how comfortable the humans are going to feel being fully exposed and treated like a spectacle. Not that I predict anyone will behave badly, but I plan on keeping a close eye on them all. It won’t do if the females grow uncomfortable from a male’s unwanted attention.

“They’re like starving animals waiting to pounce on their prey.” Alik’s voice comes from beside me.

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I curse that I missed his arrival.

“It’s merely excitement.” Although his assessment isn’t too far off.

My cousin side-eyes me. “They’re nearly salivating.”

A bit of amusement strikes me and I can’t hold back my grin. “Perhaps I do see a hint of rabidness in their gazes.”

Alik barks out a laugh. “So you do have a sense of humor. There may be hope for you after all.”

The sound of faint conversations draws our attention. All the males have shifted in their seats and stare at the doorway to the banquet hall. Standing there are twenty females, each with varying degrees of nervousness lining their faces.

Chapter9

Quinn

I’m not sure why I’m surprised to see so many people—men—staring. It’s been like this since we arrived, except I feel more exposed now. Maybe because we’re in such close quarters. Plus we’ve been invited here to meet our potential husbands. Mates. Whatever they call them on Bohna.

Nobody moves though. Not the Bohnari. Not us women. Not even the group of people sitting in the corner who have stopped playing whatever interesting looking

musical instruments they hold. It's the most awkward sensation to just stand here and stare at each other.

"Okay, ladies, let's do this." Olivia gives a sharp nod. "It's why we came all this way after all, right?"

She snags my arm and guides me forward with no chance to think about stopping her. That's the thing about Olivia. She's like a bulldozer and drags everyone along with her for the ride. Based on the sound of footsteps, at least Devon and Lindsey follow us.

I try my best to appear friendly by smiling and nodding at the males we pass on our way to the large empty table I assume has been left reserved for us. Olivia and I take our seats, as do the others. The silence continues for an inordinate amount of time.

"I leave the room for mere moments, and none of you can greet our guests properly?"

All our heads turn at the feminine voice that scolds from the other side of the room. There's no mistaking the fact the female standing there is the queen. It's not even the crown she wears that gives her away or the way she's glaring at Alik and Horek. It's her regal bearing. She strides forward like she owns the room, her satiny cape billowing behind her until she reaches the table where we're sitting.

"Please forgive my son's rudeness." She scans down the table, pausing briefly on each of us before continuing. "Welcome to Bohna. I am Queen Veroneek. Thank you for joining us this evening. I hope the food and drink are to your liking. More so than the present company of males who clearly need to be reminded of their manners."

When she glares again, this time over her shoulder at the entire room, I press my lips together to hide my smile. Not that I've ever met royalty before, but I have a strong suspicion Queen Veroneek is unlike any other. Teal hair is plaited and wound into a

bun at the base of her head while her horns are visible over the top of her jewel-encrusted crown. But her most outstanding feature is the kindness on her face. I like her already.

“I look forward to getting to know each of you lovely females before the night is over,” Queen Veroneek tells us and claps her hands in front of her.

A bevy of staff rush forward and pour some fruit-scented liquid into the cups already placed on the table in front of us.

“The meal will be served momentarily. In the meantime, drink, converse, and try to enjoy yourselves.” She tips her chin down and heads for Alik and Horek.

The musicians play their instruments again and a lovely melody adds to the quiet conversation that picks back up amongst the Bohnari males.

“How much do you want to bet someone’s getting lectured? And by someone, I mean the prince.” Olivia snickers and takes a careful sip of her beverage. She makes a smacking sound. “Damn, that’s some good stuff.”

I slowly sniff it and the barest hint of fermented fruit emanates from the cup. Alcohol and I don’t always get along well, but a small taste can’t hurt. I drink the tiniest bit and bubbles tickle my tongue. My eyes widen at the flavor. “Oh, wow, that’s nice.”

“Told you.” She’s a little too proud of the fact.

I cast what I hope is a discreet glance out onto the Bohnari seated around the room. They still study us, but at least it’s not quite as blatant as it had been when we first arrived. My gaze catches on the guy who brought my belongings to my suite yesterday. Bannik meets my stare and nods his head just slightly in my direction. My cheeks warm and I give him a small smile.

“Looks like Quinn’s already found a potential date,” Devon practically coos.

Olivia nudges me. “And you didn’t even want to come.”

She’s right, I didn’t. Honestly, I’m still not sure being on Bohna is the right decision, but I’m here and I need to learn how to love it and make it my home.

Someone appears out of the corner of my eye, and I lean back as a Bohnari places food on my plate. He moves on to Olivia and keeps going down the line until he is met in the middle by another guy coming from the other end of the table serving food as well.

It took a few days on the ship for my stomach to get used to real food. For thirty years, I survived on protein bars. It’s the only thing to ever make me envy the upper tier and the things they had that I didn’t. Although there’s no division on Bohna that I’ve discovered, I feel like I’m now a member of the wealthy population that took great pleasure in making the lives of bottomers hell.

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“This smells as good as that drink tastes.” Olivia leans closer to her food and inhales deeply.

I don’t have to be as close as she is to get a whiff of savory spices and meat. There’s also some type of root vegetable covered in a sauce alongside it. A basket of different breads is placed in front of us. My stomach rumbles in delight. I pick up the utensil and stab a piece of the meat. It nearly melts in my mouth. I glance over at Olivia, who meets my gaze with one of pure ecstasy.

“Holy shit, that’s good,” she mumbles around a mouthful.

Not that I have a lot to compare it to, but so far it’s the best thing I’ve eaten to date. “It’s amazing.”

Muted conversation continues throughout the room, but I don’t pay it any attention. I’m enjoying my meal far too much to care about what the Bohna males are talking about. Even if it’s us.

I savor every bite on my plate until it’s completely gone and wash the last taste away with a long sip of the fruity beverage. Except now that nearly all of us have finished eating, my nerves act up again and make my belly flip and twist.

“Don’t forget what Johnna said.” Olivia leans in close. “They need us more than we need them, so relax. It’s up to the males to impress us women, not the other way around.”

Her words rattle around inside my brain a few times before it hits me that she’s right.

They both are. The Bohnari are probably as equally, if not more, nervous than we are. Their entire race depends on finding suitable brides. If we don't choose a husband, we're still allowed to remain on Bohna, to ensure no one was forced into a marriage she didn't truly desire.

I'm soothed by the realization and the queasiness in my stomach settles.

I squeeze Olivia's hand under the table. "Thank you for always knowing the right thing to say."

"It's what best friends are for." She grins.

"Excuse my interruption, but would you like to dance?" Standing on the other side of the table from me is Bannik.

I glance around to find the entire room staring and cringe against the scrutiny. Except another part of me is flattered by the attention, especially considering it had to have taken a lot of confidence to approach our table before anyone else and ask.

"I'm not sure I'll be any good, but I'd like that." I swipe my sweaty palms down my thighs and stand up.

Bannik holds out his hand and I take it. He leads me to an open area near where the musicians play and the music quickly changes into something lively and upbeat. The Bohnari smiles revealing the tiniest flash of fangs.

"Just follow the beat and you'll be fine," he says.

As though a floodgate opened, more males rise and head for the table where the rest of the women sit. In seconds, we're joined by nineteen other couples. It takes me far longer than I wish to catch the rhythm, but soon, Bannik and I are twirling and

spinning around. Laughter that's been absent from a lot of my life spills out of me. I'm clumsy and step on his toes more than once, but he doesn't appear to mind.

In fact, Bannik is clearly enjoying himself and laughs along with me. This is the most fun I've had in ages. Song after song plays, and with each one comes a new partner until my feet and sides are aching. I excuse myself and make my way over to the table for a sip of my drink.

"You look like you are having a wonderful time."

I sputter at the sight of the queen standing so close and wipe my mouth with my sleeve like an ill-mannered child. My attempt at a curtsy is clumsy at best. "Your Highness."

She waves me off with a smile. "Please, none of that. No need for such formalities. Queen Veroneek is fine."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And what is your name, dear?"

"Quinn. Quinn Brooks."

"How are you enjoying your time on Bohna so far?"

We've only been here for two days, so I'm not sure I can give it an honest assessment, but I don't want to offend her. "What I have seen of your planet so far is extremely beautiful."

"Thank you. While I have not traveled off-planet more than a handful of times, I haven't seen any place more stunning than here." The queen glances around the

dance floor and her gaze appears to pause on someone. “Bannik has taken an interest in you, it would seem.”

I cock my head slightly, trying to gauge her tone, but I can’t puzzle anything specific out. Nothing was mentioned about having to get approval from the queen—or anyone else, for that matter—on any potential suitors we might have, but maybe I’m wrong.

“He’s been kind and friendly during our brief interactions.” Is that neutral enough?

“I am glad. He has been a member of the guards for several years now and has done well for himself and his family,” Queen Veroneek says. “I believe he would make a fine mate for a female.”

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I wonder if all the Bohnari males will get a glowing recommendation or if she's being sincere in her assessment of Bannik?

“That's good to hear.”

Her gaze bores deeper into me and I fight the urge to fidget under its intensity. “I'm not sure if he would be right for you, though. I have something of a talent for judging people's character and mine is telling me you need a mate who is a bit more...seasoned. A male who takes himself far too seriously and needs a bride who can remind him how to laugh and enjoy all life has to offer. A male like Commander Horek, perhaps.”

Chapter10

Horek

I scan the room and, while remaining alert for any signs of trouble, I can't help but suffer from a sense of...some unnamed emotion. It's nothing I've ever felt before so I'm not sure exactly what it is. I don't care for it either. It leaves me unsettled.

Queen Veroneek's reprimand still rings in my ears, even though it was directed mostly at Alik. However, there was no mistaking she included me in her chastisement of not greeting the females properly or putting them at ease when they arrived for the meal.

My aunt prides herself on being a generous hostess who wants nothing more than for her guests to enjoy themselves and feel at home. Even in a palace. Like Alik, she

doesn't stand on formality unless the occasion calls for it. And a party certainly doesn't. Not when she's trying to find a bride for her son, even if he doesn't think he wants one.

"The females appear to be enjoying themselves, and the males are all on their best behavior." Alik leans in slightly although there's no chance of anyone hearing him over the music and laughter.

"That's what you hoped for, isn't it?" I raise my brow. "The females to become enamored by the males so courting can begin quickly and matches found even quicker?"

"Of course."

"Then what has that look on your face?" I know my cousin well enough to notice a change in his emotions, even if I don't always recognize each one specifically.

"There is no other look besides relief." Alik's eyes narrow slightly.

I study him a moment longer. "If that is what you say."

Silence lingers a few minutes more before he breaks it. "Aren't they just enjoying themselves a little too much?"

My forehead crinkles. "The males or the females?"

"Both. Neither." Alik shakes his head. "Forget it. I'm not sure what's wrong with me tonight."

"You're on edge from the mating fever. Did you have another attack after I left your suite?"

He glares. “No.”

“You need to find yourself a bride.”

A growl rumbles up from his chest. “Now you sound like my mother. I’ve already told both of you I have no interest in a female.”

“You’re getting worse. We both know it. Before long, no amount of kanet powder is going to be enough to keep the madness at bay. Don’t do that to your mother or to me.” I blow out a harsh breath. “Not just because I’m your heir, either, but because you’re my closest friend and I don’t want to lose you. Especially not when there’s something you can do to save yourself.”

Alik doesn’t respond. Instead, he walks out of the room. I face the crowd again and my gaze catches on the queen who watches the door her son just left through. Sorrow blooms in her eyes and they meet mine. Already, she is grieving. Anyone can see it.

I shift my attention to the females standing and laughing in a small group not far from my aunt. Or rather, I shift it to a particular female. The same one from the market yesterday. Quinn. Her face is flushed and there is a glow about her. I’m not sure if it’s from the lulesh drink or because of one of the males. She certainly hasn’t been without her share of potential admirers. Not that I’ve been counting. It’s merely my duty to notice details. I’m sure the other females have had an equal number of males attempting to woo them.

More laughter reaches me and I’m almost certain I can pick hers out of the many. The same way that I know the fragrances I’d scented and followed outside the market square yesterday and smell again tonight belong to her as well.

The queen comes to my side. “You should go speak with her.”

“I’m not interested in speaking with anyone.”

She laughs and pats my cheek. “You and my son are both fooling yourselves, but you’re not fooling me. I see the way you’ve been watching Quinn. It may not be obvious to the rest of the people, but I have known you since birth, Horek. Not much with either Alik or you gets by me, despite what you both might think.”

My aunt is far too uncanny for her own good. “I can admit she is an attractive female, but that still doesn’t mean I’m looking for a bride. You know my highest priority is being Commander.”

“Perhaps you should rethink your priorities.” With that statement, she returns to mingling with the females.

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For far too long, I remain seated at the table with the queen's words rolling around inside my head. But another voice creeps in and grows louder. It's that of my mother, and her reminders of my many failures. I'm surprised she's not here, actually. It would be so much like her to give her unasked for appraisal of the human females.

Originally Queen Veroneek wasn't entirely in favor of Alik bringing them here. Not because they aren't Bohnari. She is worried that, despite all indications the humans are compatible with our males, our people's hopes for the future won't come to fruition and we're only going to wind up broken hearted and extinct.

Before I can help myself, my gaze wanders, but not for long. I home in on Quinn almost instantly, as though I sensed exactly where she'd be. That same unnamed feeling rears up again at the sight of her laughing with Bannik. He had been the first to approach her after the meal. In fact, he had been the first of any of the males to approach the females. The fact it was Quinn he went to isn't lost on me.

Whatever this thing is I'm feeling, it's powerful enough to make me stand and head in their direction. I shoulder my way past couples, while several automatically give me a wide berth, until I come to a stop in front of them. Quinn startles at my nearness. Bannik moves to put space between us, but somehow manages to refrain from taking a step back.

"Commander." He dips his head in respect, but there's a slight rise in his tone like he's asking a question.

I ignore him and keep my focus on Quinn who meets my gaze with an arched brow. As if on cue, the music changes from fast-paced to a haunting melody that's much

slower.

“Would you like to dance?” The back of my neck suddenly itches. What am I doing?

She glances at Bannik before coming back to me and takes far too long to answer. “If you don’t mind bruised toes.”

“I doubt it will come to that.”

Quinn laughs and drops her gaze to my outstretched hand before placing hers in it. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

A sting of electricity sparks my skin the second we touch, but I refuse to acknowledge I felt it. She can’t stop her muscles from jerking though. Her eyes widen briefly, and she clears her throat. I guide her away from Bannik, and we join the other couples. Her skin is soft against mine and I can’t help but admire how different our coloring is. Whereas mine is a dark copper, Quinn’s is pale with only the barest hint of pink.

Together we move to the rhythm, our hands linked and our eyes locked on the other’s. Every other sound and person in the room fades away, leaving only the two of us. I have never been more aware of someone as I am of this female. I don’t care for the sensation and yet, at the same time, I sense myself yearning for it.

We dance in perfect sync. Almost like we’ve been doing it together forever.

“My toes appear to be surviving.”

Quinn’s lips curl and part to expose her white teeth with the tiniest gap between the top two. “The song’s not over.”

“Yet, I still believe they’ll continue to be safe.”

“I must be getting the hang of this dancing thing then.”

My head cocks. “Do you not have dancing on Earth?”

“Oh, no, we do, but it’s not really something us bottomers often have the opportunity to participate in. We’re too busy spending all our time working to try and pay our bills and make sure we have a large enough supply of protein bars to get by.”

Unless she is well-versed in hiding it, Quinn shares all of this without a hint of shame. Not that she has anything to be ashamed about, but I’m not sure I know of anyone who would share something as personal as casually as she.

“Does that bother you?”

She jolts. “Does what bother me?”

“Missing out on opportunities.” At first I’m not sure she’s going to answer. This is why I don’t talk to females. I can’t ever say the right thing. “Apologies. I should not have asked.”

To my surprise, Quinn’s smile is soft. “You have nothing to apologize for. The question just took me a little off-guard. I’m not sure if anyone has ever asked me that. Mostly, I think, because they want to forget I came from basically nothing. It can get a bit awkward for people when I mention being a bottomer. Like it’s contagious.”

“Bottomer? You’ve mentioned this twice now, but I’m not sure what that is.” Our translators are highly advanced and capable of learning, but that isn’t a word in any database we have access to.

“It’s slang, and not a really good kind some people would say.” Quinn lifts a single shoulder. “Bottomers is what some of the upper tier people call those of us from the bottom tier. I think they use it to remind us of our place.”

“Why do you use it, then?”

“Those from the upper tier say it to hurt us. To belittle us. Except it winds up meaning nothing when I say it. It’s lost the sting it’s meant to cause. Bottomers is nothing more than a single word instead of an insult or a weapon being lobbed.”

What Quinn says makes sense.

“And to answer your question,” she continues. “Before today, I would have said, no, it didn’t bother me to miss out on opportunities. You can’t really miss what you’ve never had, I suppose. But now, after spending an entire evening dancing and having fun? If I had to go back to the bottom tier for some reason, then, yeah...it would really bother me.”

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“It’s a good thing that you won’t ever have to go back if you don’t choose to.”

“Yes, it is.”

Our gazes lock. Quinn’s eyes darken and the tip of her tongue flicks out leaving her lips shiny and damp. Beneath my uniform, my cock goes semi-hard. Her scent intensifies, and my body heats. The mating fever burns through my veins and my teeth ache with the need to bite her. Mark her as mine.

A rumbling noise shatters the moment just before the room rocks and trembles beneath our feet. Cracking sounds come from above and dust and pieces of ceiling crumble and fall. Quinn and I stumble and nearly collide with others around us. I pull her to me as more debris rains down and cover her body with mine. Females shriek. At last, all movement stops, but I hold onto Quinn a moment longer. When I’m sure whatever just happened is over, I release her.

“Are you all right?” I clasp her upper arms, not letting her get too far from me.

She nods. “I’m fine.”

I scan her from head to toe, confirming her state, and raise my head. Queen Veroneek is rushing around checking on the rest of the brides who stand in varying states of shock. She lifts her gaze and meets mine. I can read her without her having to say anything. I glance down at Quinn again. “Go to the queen. She’ll make sure everyone remains safe.”

With great reluctance, I tear myself away from her and snap out orders for the guards

to follow me. I need to find out what just happened.

Chapter 11

Quinn

Olivia rushes over to me, completely out of breath. “What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know, but it felt like an earthquake.” Is that even something that occurs on Bohna?

Bohnari males that aren’t part of the guards are still present, but they’re more focused on herding all the humans together. Several of the women clutch each other, while others stare blankly with faces that have lost all color. Tears swim in more than one pair of eyes. Devon and Lindsey join us.

“You two all right?” Devon wraps her arms around herself.

Olivia and I both nod. “You?”

She jerks her chin, but Lindsey’s quiet and pale.

“Linds?” Devon’s voice is soft.

The woman in question blinks and finally looks at us. “I’m good now.”

I’m not sure if she’s saying that for our benefit or hers, but at least her cheeks are finally starting to pinken. Queen Veroneek hurries forward with two armed guards.

“I’m not sure what’s going on, but everyone should come with me.”

We only dart a quick glance in each other's direction before we follow the queen and her guards out of the room and down a long corridor. The rest of the men trail us. We barely make any distance when Alik bursts around the corner with a weapon in his hand.

"Mother, is everyone well?"

"I believe so." She glances behind her. "I'm taking the females to the ancestral room."

"Go, and be safe."

Alik sprints away without another word.

"Come," the queen commands and hurries along again.

Every corridor we travel is exactly like the one before it. They all bleed together until I'm completely lost. Finally, we reach a set of double doors that the guards wrench open. Once we've made it in, the doors slam shut and are barred from the inside.

There aren't any windows, but a fire burns in the hearth built into the far wall. Considering all the technology the Bohnari possess, this room feels like something out of history. Colorful, beautifully woven tapestries hang from wooden rods mounted horizontally just below the ceiling and drape nearly to the floor. Besides the fire, light is given off by copper wall sconces interspersed between the tapestries.

Plush sofas and an abundance of chairs are scattered around the room as well.

"Please, have a seat wherever you feel comfortable," the queen directs us. "Once Horek and Alik have discovered the source of the disturbance and made sure it is safe to return to your home, I'm sure they'll come and get you. This is the most fortified

room in the entire palace, which means nothing, or no one, is a danger to you in here.”

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Her appearance is neither frazzled nor ill at ease. Queen Veroneek is the picture of calm, which should probably make me feel better, but doesn't. She appears completely unbothered by what happened down in the great hall. Maybe that's what worries me. The queen reminds me of my mother and how she always acted so nonchalant and carefree when all the worst things in our life happened. Like she had to hold herself together so I didn't fall apart.

The fact we're in the most secure room in the palace speaks for itself. I get it's likely a precaution. We are, after all, precious commodities. At least according to a conversation I overheard more than once on the flight from Earth to Bohna. The words were said with no little amount of sarcasm by the crew who used them. It was made clear how they felt about us bottomers getting a free ride off-planet to somewhere allegedly better. I don't want to think if they coined the term or if the Bohnari did.

Most of the women find some place to seat, but I'm too keyed up. I pace the side of the room closest to the fire. Not because I'm cold, but because up until tonight, I've never been this close to one. Not one with real flames, anyway. Back on Earth, heat had been converted to natural gas or oil. Trees used for wood had all been destroyed during city expansions.

"I'm sure it was nothing." Olivia joins my pacing.

I side-eye her.

"I mean nothing to worry about, because obviously it was something," she clarifies. "Buildings don't shake because of nothing. Probably just some type of seismic

activity.”

“Except even the Bohnari were caught off guard. If it was seismic activity, it’s never happened before, so maybe it’s a little something to worry about.”

“Fine.” Olivia huffs. “Be your usual logical self, then.”

“That’s why we work. You’re the imaginative one to my logical one.” We keep each other from getting too deep inside our own heads.

I finally give up pacing and we join Devon and Lindsey who took one of two sofas across from each other. Lindsey still looks shaken up. More so than the rest of the women, who all appeared to have recovered.

“You sure you’re okay?” I’ve gotten to know her a lot better since we left Earth and she’s more...fragile, maybe, than I originally thought.

Lindsey jerks a shaky nod. “I’ll be fine. Really. It just brought back a memory I’d hoped to have forgotten.”

“Want to talk about it?” Olivia asks gently.

She chuckles, but it’s more a harsh puff of air. “Not really.”

“That’s okay, you don’t have to.” I can understand some things being too painful to discuss. My dad’s one of them.

Opposite where we sit, a comm goes off. One of the guards by the door presses a button on his wristband.

“This is Commander Horek. All clear. Please escort the females to the front of the

palace,” he instructs. “I’ll meet you in the main courtyard.”

The comm ends and the two guards unbar the doors. They swing them open, and the one who answered the call turns back to us.

“Please follow me.”

All of us glance at each other, and the queen steps forward.

“Everything will be fine.” She clasps her hands. “If Horek says it is safe to leave, then it is. He wouldn’t endanger any of us.”

I’m a little surprised she included herself in the assessment. Not that I think Horek would want his queen to be unsafe. I guess it makes me feel like I have a little more value than just someone who might bring new life to the planet and its people. That I’m important as an individual.

Of course, I could be reading way more into it than I need to be.

Slowly, we file out of the room with a guard leading and the other trailing. The queen walks with us as well. There’s an eerie silence while we travel the corridors. When we first arrived at the palace, there had been a buzz of activity, even though there were few people bustling around. There had still been this...energy in the atmosphere. It’s gone now, along with the people. Like whatever happened made everything, and everyone, scared to move or breathe.

It doesn’t take as long as it feels to reach the entryway of the palace where we first arrived earlier in the evening. An entire contingent of guards—similar in number to the ones present when we landed on the planet—stand at the doors. Was it only yesterday? Two Bohnari males push them open and the fading light of the sun shines onto the courtyard, reflecting off the water of the fountain that sits at its center.

As promised, Horek strides across the brick toward us. He pauses in front of the queen and inclines his head.

“My males and I will escort the females back to their home. Afterward, I will meet the prince and you both in the throne room for a debriefing.”

I can hear the unasked question on Queen Veroneek’s lips, but she keeps herself from asking it. “I’ll let Alik know you’ll be coming.”

I’m not so reticent. We deserve answers, and I refuse to allow us to be treated like we’re back on the bottom tier where those in the upper tier cherry-picked what news they shared, even when it concerned us. It hadn’t always been easy to get the full and complete truth. Not when those in power covered it up with half-truths and outright lies. “What happened?”

Horek and the queen exchange glances.

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“Just a minor disturbance,” he says.

“Bullshit.”

He blinks at my curse. “I’m sorry?”

“I said, what a load of bullshit. That wasn’t minor. The whole banquet room could have collapsed on top of everyone. And you’re trying to deflect. It doesn’t take an idiot to know you’re hiding something.”

Horek blinks in an oddly human gesture. “I don’t think you’re an idiot.”

“Then don’t treat me”—I sweep my arms out and glance around—“or any of us like one. We may not be wives yet, but we’re still residents of this city and planet. We deserve to know what really happened just like any other Bohnari.”

I fist my hands at my sides to hide their trembling and try not to vomit. The sound of nineteen women actually gasping echoes loudly around me. God that felt good though. Terrifying, but good. I wouldn’t have dared confront a person of authority like that back in the bottom tier. It isn’t done. Not by anybody unless they want to be punished. Any type of defiance is dealt with swiftly and never fairly. It’s how the upper tier keeps us bottomers in line.

“You are right.” Horek sighs.

Wait, what?

“It isn’t fair that we keep things from any of our people. That includes you.” He scans over all the women before returning to me. “There was an explosion in one of the mines within the mountain. Someone hacked into the computer system and overrode the safety mechanism on a machine we use to excavate precious stones. It overheated which caused an electrical fire. The fire triggered the explosion.”

“Oh no. Was anyone hurt?”

Horek’s shoulders drop. “The mines were shut down for the evening because of the welcome banquet. No one was supposed to be in there, but we found a body.”

Several women gasp, including Olivia, who moves in close enough that our hands brush. My belly hurts like I got punched. Memories of my dad rush in. The taste of blood lingers on my tongue. I didn’t realize I’d bitten it until the pain sets in.

“A—a body?” Nausea hits and I swallow down the vomit.

“Yes.”

“I see.”

Horek’s mouth opens slightly, closes, and opens again. “It’s late. You should get some rest. All of you.”

I doubt I’ll be getting any sleep tonight. Already I expect the nightmares to visit me.

Olivia wraps her arm around my shoulders. “C’mon. Let’s head back to our apartments.”

She nods at Horek who gestures for the guards to flank us and leads us through the courtyard to the lift we took to get up here. I tune out the voices and trust Olivia to

guide me in the right direction. Before long, we come to a stop and a cool breeze hits my face. My surroundings come into focus. We're standing in front of our building and a couple guards hold the doors open.

We walk inside and head for the lift. The bell dings and I jump.

"Quinn," a male voice calls out my name.

I turn and it's Horek.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, but thanks for the offer."

"You can comm me if you need to."

I nod my appreciation and try to offer a smile but fail miserably, I can tell. Olivia, Devon, Lindsey, and I all step into the lift. My eyes meet Horek's, but then the door slides closed and he's gone.

Chapter12

Horek

I don't like the haunted look in Quinn's eyes. Of course hearing the news of a death would disturb most people, but her reaction felt personal. Perhaps she is one of those people who feels loss deeply.

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“Set up a perimeter around the building until further notice.” I turn to the male standing inside the door. “I want check-ins at every half tick. Monitor the security system and triple check all entry points.”

“Yes, Commander.”

I jerk my chin and head for the palace. The incident still needs to be dealt with. Vornak was called to the scene and had the deceased male transported to the medical facility. Once his family has been notified, I’m sure Alik will have a remembrance ceremony for him. My top priority is to find the person responsible. It could only have been the rebels. The machinery sabotage fits with their tactics. Besides, no one else has any reason to cause the chaos. Except this time, they’ve gone too far. A male died.

Guards patrol the streets, and a somberness hangs over Preska. Already signs of mourning are being displayed. Wreaths of flowers hang on doors, and black bands are wrapped around biceps. The last few Bohnari we’ve lost have been to the mating fever, but it’s been many moons since.

The palace is also in a state of mourning. Only the barest murmur of voices drift through the air. I pass the banquet room, where staff clean up the debris left behind by the explosion. Tables have already been cleared off and wiped down. The musicians have packed up their instruments and departed. Not a single piece of evidence remains that there had been a welcome party for the human brides.

With a sigh, I continue on to Alik’s wing and stop at the throne room. To my surprise, it’s empty. I expected both my cousin and aunt to be waiting for me. When they don’t

appear after a short time, I go searching. I pause outside my cousin's door and rap on it.

“Enter.”

I've never heard Alik so fatigued. I step inside and close the door behind me. He sits at his desk staring out the window, although I'm not sure he's truly seeing anything. The patterns on the skin along his shoulders is faded, and weariness pours off him. His shoulders sag like he's carrying far more than just the weight of this planet and its people on them.

“I've spoken to Konek's father.” Even Alik's voice is rough. “My mother will go sit with him tomorrow.”

“Where is she?” Her complete absence is a bit of a surprise.

“In her rooms. Grieving.”

I incline my head. Queen Veroneek cares deeply for our people. To have one's life cut short in such a way is probably quite difficult for her to deal with. “I'll find out who did this.”

Alik blows out a harsh breath. “We both know who did it. The godsforsaken rebels.”

There's no point in arguing when he's right. What I need to know, though, is why? All this time, no matter what they've done, it's never ended with any Bohnari hurt. What changed? “They'll pay for Konek's death. All of them, but especially Janik.”

Alik turns his gaze to me. “Yes, he will.”

I let our vow sit between us a moment longer. “Did you find out why he was in the

mine in the first place? It was supposed to be closed for the banquet.”

“According to Merik, they were at Warik’s getting a drink when Konek got a transmission on his comm unit. It was an automated message that one of the machines was malfunctioning. He went to find out what was going on.”

“Do we know who the transmission really came from?” We have some of the best tech people on this side of the galaxy. They had to have found something.

“Not yet, but Lorik’s working on it.”

“I’ll talk to him tomorrow and see what he’s found out.”

Alik dips his head. “I take it you escorted the females safely back to their homes?”

“Yes. I’ve also assigned extra patrols to the city as well as their building, just in case.” Not the I suspect they’re in any type of danger. Then again, I also never expected the rebels would escalate their resistance to include murder.

“My mother said you danced with one of the females.”

“A momentary lapse in judgment.”

“Was it?” Alik raises that imperious brow again.

It has to be. Even if Quinn felt far too good in my arms. “Of course. We are alike in our disinterest in finding a bride. I was merely curious to learn what the females were like. They are, after all, residents of Preska as well as the mothers of our next generation. Besides, as Commander of Bohna’s guards, it’s important I know each of our citizens.”

“Yet you spent the entire rest of the evening seated at the high table staring at one female in particular. It wasn’t until this Quinn was about to dance with Bannik once again that you stepped in.” His smirk appears and Alik looks far too pleased with himself.

Damn my aunt and her gossiping.

“We’re not here to talk about a single dance I had. It’s the rebels and what we’re going to do about them after tonight’s incident.”

My cousin’s lips flatten into displeasure. “There isn’t much more to be said tonight. Tomorrow will be here soon enough. We’ll have plenty of time then to devise a plan to finally flush Janik out and deal with the rebels once and for all. I have let their treasonous behavior remain unchecked for too long. Perhaps a large bounty leading to his capture will motivate people to talk.”

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“I’ll do some strategizing when I return to the barracks and meet you back here in the morning to go over ideas.” Sleep always eludes me at times like these.

Alik dips his head and I stride out of his rooms to make my way to my own. That’s just one more reason a bride isn’t for me. What kind of male would I be to ask a female to live in the small suite where I dwell within the barracks? A bride deserves her own home with a garden and several rooms for a growing family. That life isn’t for me. I just have to keep reminding myself.

I go out of my way to patrol past the females’ building myself. I am Commander of the prince’s guards, and it’s my duty to ensure their safety. My gaze lingers on the windows I’m unable to see through as I pass. Have Quinn and her friends returned to their rooms? Or are they even now gathered in the common area discussing the evening and the males they met and may have danced with before the night turned to shit?

I shake off this feeling and increase my pace to the barracks. All’s quiet inside. Which is as it should be. The guards under my command should either be sleeping or at their posts. I lay my palm on the bioscanner outside my door, and it slides open with a near-silent swoosh.

The interior lights automatically turn on, and I step inside the place I’ve made my home since I was promoted to Commander. The living space is bare of no more than a sofa and table. To the left is a spotless kitchen area that doesn’t get used. I move into my sleeping room and have my shirt pulled over my head before I cross the threshold.

This room is nearly as barren as the seating area. What sense is there in having an overabundance of things when I spend so little time here? A bed and a place to sit are the only things I truly need. I can't help but compare my suite to the ones where the females reside. They are about the same size, but I'm curious what sort of personal touches the humans might put in theirs.

I'd been more than ready to leave my mother's home when I reached adulthood. Everything about it is ostentatious. She is, after all, sister of a queen and daughter of one of the high lords of the Bohnari council. My mother didn't want any of our people to forget who she was and where she came from. I was never comfortable in her home. It had been worse when my father was alive.

I discard my shirt into the cleanser and add my pants to it before stepping into the hygiene room. Once inside the cleansing stall, water already set at the perfect temperature sprays from above. I quickly wash up and wrap a warmed towel around my hips. Today has been long, and I expect the night to be even longer.

Scattered across my desk are various books on battle strategy, weaponry, and the history of the Bohnari people. Nearly every piece of information I would ever need access to is available in digital form. With a few key strokes, I could have it all at my fingertips. Except I enjoy the tangible feel of the parchment beneath my fingers. It's why I'm one of the few people who keeps a small library in my suite.

I sit and pick up one of the strategy books to flip through. Every single one of these has been read more than once. A few of them more than a handful of times. My mentor stressed how important knowledge is. Because knowledge is power. With it, a person can do almost anything.

Time stretches and I reach for the next book and the next. My comm goes off and I startle. Faint signs of dawn appear through the single window. I stifle a yawn and quickly put on a clean pair of loose trousers. Alik won't be up for some time which

means I can get some training in before we meet.

The training building is empty, although a few of the doors to the simulation rooms show they're occupied. I find a vacant one and scroll through the list of simulations. Frustration has been building all night and I have a lot of excess rage to get out. I pick a level five difficulty, grab several weapons from their racks, and walk into the room.

Chapter 13

Quinn

I'm glad for a room with no windows, because this headache is killing me. My eyes remain closed and I stay perfectly still in my bed hoping it will go away, but knowing it won't. Do the Bohnari even have something I can take to get rid of it? I guess that's a question I should have been asking earlier.

A soft knock on my door makes me groan, which only exacerbates my aching head. I slowly roll off the mattress and grab my robe. I walk out into the seating area—tying the belt as I go—and press the release button. I'm not at all surprised the door slides open to reveal Olivia.

In each of her hands is a steaming mug, no doubt filled with the special morning brew the Bohnari's drink. It's not quite coffee, but it's also not quite tea. We didn't ask what it was exactly—or at least, I didn't. It's good and I don't want to ruin that by discovering what it might actually be made from.

"For you." Olivia passes me one of them.

I take a small sip and ignore the pain of my burning tongue. "Thanks."

"How'd you sleep?" She holds up a hand. "Never mind. I already know. A better

question is...how are you holding up?"

"As good as I'm going to get for the day, I think. My head hurts. There's a throbbing pulse beating right behind my eye."

Olivia winces. "Shit, I'm sorry."

I wave off her apology. "Don't be. Hazards of a night filled with nightmares."

She plops down on the sofa with a leg tucked underneath and pats the cushion next to her. I sit at her side and rest my head on her shoulder. She leans hers against mine and we sit quietly for a few minutes. Finally, I breathe out and sit upright with my drink.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Olivia asks.

"Not really, no."

She bobs her head gently. "If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

"I do, thanks, babe." That's just one of the many reasons Liv is my best friend. She's there when I need someone and doesn't push me to talk about something when I've said I'm not ready. She knows exactly when I do and don't need to be prodded to let things out.

"Of course."

We take a few more drinks before she sets hers down on the table and turns to me.

"Do you want to go get some breakfast?"

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Maybe food is what I need to make the headache go away. But the thought of eating anything doesn't sound good. I'm not really hungry. Except I know from experience that it's probably the way I feel that's doing the talking, and the minute I put something in my mouth I'll be starving.

"Let me brush my teeth quick and throw something on. Then I'll be ready." I chug the last few swallows of the beverage and disappear into my bedroom.

I get ready in record time. My hair gets thrown up in a messy bun, because it's easy. Olivia's in the kitchen area washing the mugs when I come out.

"You didn't have to do that, you know? There's an automatic washer built into the cabinet."

She shrugs. "I don't mind. Besides, you know I'm one of those weirdos who actually likes doing dishes."

I swivel my head slowly, because I will never understand how that's possible. My mother and I used to joke I was allergic to housework. Of course, I still did it, because I wasn't going to leave it all for her. Olivia even dries them both and sets them on the counter.

"I'll grab them when we come back."

We head out and walk down the hallway toward the lift. "No Devon and Lindsey?" Not that I don't like our two friends, because I really do. It's just been a while since it was Olivia and me spending time together without anyone else.

“Devon commed me and said they were both going to stay in this morning, but they might meet up with us later on for lunch.”

It’s a quick ride down to the ground floor. The gathering area is empty except for two women sitting a fair distance from the other, both sipping on a drink. One has a book of some kind—she’s too far away for me to read the title—and the other has a 3D puzzle on the table in front of her.

Outside is cool, but temperate. Two guards stand outside the doors and there are two more at each visible corner of the building. I suspect the other two corners have a man stationed there as well. Bohnari move about the streets, but our surroundings are different than they were when we went to the market square yesterday with Johnna. People had been curious about us and did a lot of staring. Today their heads are down and they walk painfully slow like a boulder is being dragged behind them. Most have a black band wrapped around their upper arm.

I glance at Olivia who returns it. Neither of us speak while we stroll through the somber streets. At least it’s clear the Bohnari are grieving for the person who lost his life last night.

“Maybe we should have stayed in as well.” Is the market even open today?

“If it’s still like this when we reach the food vendors, we’ll go back and have the chef cook something up for us.”

That sounds like a good plan to me. I almost feel guilty for being out and about. Just then the scent of food reaches me. At least now we know businesses are open. At least those that serve food, anyway. We turn a corner and a large cloaked body collides with Olivia. She stumbles back with an oof and he reaches out to keep her from falling. I only get a minor glimpse because of the hood covering his head, but the skin tone and flash of teal hair marks him as Bohnari.

“Pardon me, female,” he says in a gravelly voice, still holding onto her. “I apologize for my distraction. You aren’t hurt are you?”

“Don’t worry, I’m fine.” She glances down at his hands. “You can let go of me now.”

“Perhaps I like touching you.”

“Perhaps you’d like my knee to your nuts even less.” Olivia pastes on the fake smile she uses when she was getting harassed by the jackasses back at the sanitation facility.

The Bohnari’s laugh is deep and gruff. Finger by finger he loosens his hold until, at last, he slowly draws his hands away and his arms hang down at his sides. “You’re a fierce human. I like that.”

“Good for you. And it’s not female or human. We have names.”

He continues grinning. “Of course you have a name. Would you like to share it with me?”

“Not really.”

“I’m Janik, if that will make it easier for you to tell me yours.”

“It won’t. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we have some place to be.” She walks around him and I do the same.

“Lovely females like you should have an escort,” he says right behind us before he moves up to keep pace with Olivia, completely ignoring the brushoff she’d been trying to give him. “I’ve heard there are rebels in the city. You never know when you might run across one of them.”

There's obvious amusement with a hint of sarcasm in his statements, but he's also not wrong. And with the circumstances behind the death that happened last night, signs point to the rebels being the culprits. From everything Johnna and Horek told us, they're known for sabotaging equipment. Who else could it have been?

"They better hope I don't run across one of those murderous cowards," Liv snaps.

The Bohnari jerks back at her vehemence, but quickly recovers. "The rebels have murdered no one."

I scoff. "Tell that to the dead Bohnari in the mines."

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He shakes his head and takes several steps away from us. “You’re wrong. No one was supposed to be there.”

Olivia crosses her arms. “Well, they were.”

“I must go.” He spins and takes off, nearly colliding with another Bohnari exiting a building.

We stand there for a second and then look at each other. Olivia’s forehead’s wrinkled and there’s a crease between her brows.

“Was that weird or was it just me?”

I nod. “Definitely weird. Even before he took off. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you knock a guy down a peg that fast before. Not that he didn’t deserve it.”

“He was way too full of himself. I hate that shit.”

“I know.”

“Come on. We can restart the conversation after we get some food and sit down.”

We turn another corner and spread out before us is the market. Lining each side are all the various food options to choose from. We passed a place yesterday that Johnna pointed out served really good Bohnari breakfast, although they don’t actually call it that.

“You good with here?” Olivia asks when we reach it.

“Works for me.” I’m actually glad there aren’t too many people bustling around yet and that it’s quiet. My head still aches, but at least the throbbing is dull.

We head inside and are immediately assaulted by the most delicious scents. I haven’t eaten enough of the food yet to be familiar with the smells of specific dishes, but there’s a mix of savory and sweet. When Liv asked me to breakfast I really hadn’t been hungry, but now that I’m here, my stomach’s decided to change its mind. It rumbles in anticipation.

There are a few people seated and eating already. They take us in and return to their meal.

“Greetings, females. Welcome to my establishment.” The Bohnari at the counter grins widely.

He’s one of the few I’ve seen whose horns aren’t completely shorn, although his closely cut hair might also make them appear taller. Kind of like how I heard some men back on Earth a couple hundred years ago used to shave off all their pubic hair to make their dick look bigger.

“Greetings,” Olivia replies.

“What can I get for you this morning?”

“What do you recommend?” I’m not good with making choices when there are too many. I’d prefer someone give me an option to go with and the next time I’ll either get the same thing or try something different.

“You can’t go wrong with the tannek. It’s the best thing on the menu.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“I’ll have the same,” Olivia says.

“Wonderful. If you would like to have a seat, I’ll bring it out when it’s ready.” The Bohnari gestures toward the mostly empty seats.

I nod my thanks and we pick a table that’s away from others. Once seated, a different male—one whose race isn’t known to me—brings us something to drink. I try not to stare since I’m uncomfortable when people have done it to us, but it’s hard not to when he’s only the third type of alien I’ve ever seen.

He’s the complete opposite of the Bohnari. Not only in build, but in coloring. After he walks away, Olivia leans across the table.

“He kind of makes me think of a skinny vampire snowman.”

I press my lips together. Maybe not quite how I’d describe the guy, but also not completely inaccurate.

“I am a Njeri, not this...vampire snowman.”

Olivia and I both jerk our heads up to find the man standing only a table away. His back is ramrod straight and he proudly juts his chest out. Liv’s face colors and I can tell she wants to break eye contact with him, but she holds it instead.

“That was unkind of me. I’m sorry.”

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There are so many things to love about her, but Olivia's ability to accept when she's wrong or has hurt someone's feelings and apologize—and actually mean it—is one of the biggest ones. The Njeri dips his head.

“I'm Olivia and this is Quinn.”

“Zerim.”

“It's nice to meet you.”

“And you.” He inclines his head again. “You are human, correct?”

“Yes.” The least we can do to make up for our rudeness is try and be friendlier. “Have you lived on Bohna long?”

“I fled my home planet approximately seven anums ago.”

“Do you like it here?” Olivia asks.

Zerim pauses briefly. “There are times I miss my village and tribe, but I do not regret coming to Bohna.”

The door opens and a towering Bohnari walks in. My stomach does a little flip flop. It's Horek.

Horek

I nearly stumble at the sight of Quinn and her friend seated in Erik's establishment. I'm also a bit surprised Zerim is speaking to them. He tends to keep to himself as the Njeri are generally not well-liked or respected, although he himself hasn't caused any problems since he sought asylum here. And of all the places they could have chosen to be this morning, within the market isn't one I expected, especially not in this place specifically. Not after the events of last evening. Not with the way I left Quinn at her building.

She and the other female stare at me before Quinn quickly looks away. I stride to the counter and attempt to ignore the sting of what feels like rejection.

"Greetings, Commander." Erik gives me his signature grin.

"Greetings."

"Your meal will be coming shortly."

I nod. He walks into the cooking area leaving me standing alone and, to my annoyance, feeling like an awkward youth. Something I haven't been for quite some time. Another person comes in behind me. I glance toward the door. Fuck. Bannik scans the room and his gaze locks onto Quinn. Unlike with me, she doesn't turn from his stare. In fact, she smiles and raises a hand in greeting.

That same emotion that choked me last night while I watched her dance with him returns. Except now its name doesn't elude me. For the first time in my existence, I'm...jealous. My fists clench at my sides and I wince at the jab of pain that shoots through them. A warm liquid sensation crawls across my flesh and I glance down just as several drops of blood hit the floor with a small splash. My claws have extended and pierced my palms.

Stabbing agony shoots through my stomach and I nearly double over from it. This can't be happening. I rush outside and snatch the vial of kanet powder from my pocket. People stare at my harried appearance, but I can't care. I fumble with my stash and nearly drop it in the process. At last, I manage to dump a portion into the cap and jerk it up to my nose.

The cooling rush of it traveling upward barely soothes the fire rushing through my veins. I pour out some more and sharply inhale that dose as well. Slowly—far too slowly—the burning that heats my insides calms to a manageable level. I take long, deep breaths to further quell the raging inferno. A scent that is becoming my new addiction assaults me.

A soft touch brushes against my arm. I shiver with the intensity that comes with it and curse beneath my breath, because there's only one person who could be causing it considering the reaction I've barely gotten under control.

I lift my gaze. Quinn is at my side, smelling sweet and crisp like a fruit I want to devour.

“Are you all right?” Her voice is like a melody I could listen to over and over again and never get tired of hearing it.

“I'm fine.”

She cocks an eyebrow in a way that closely resembles Alik when he's being imperious. “I don't claim to be a doctor, but you don't look fine. Your skin is about four shades darker than it was when you walked into the restaurant a minute ago. Almost like you're running a fever. Not only that, but I don't remember your eyes being that color.” Quinn's coloring is the one to now change. “Not that I was paying that close attention. I mean, I noticed them, but it's not like I was noticing them. God, never mind.” She snaps her lips closed. “You just...are you really sure you're okay?”

Thankfully, the effects of the mating fever that had hit me are slowly dissipating. At least to a minimum intensity. “Yes, I really am. Thank you for your concern though.”

She still doesn’t look as though she believes me, so I hope she doesn’t question me again. “I guess if you’re okay, I should probably get back inside.”

“Yes, you don’t want your friend to worry, and my food is most likely ready as well.”

Quinn nods. “Right, then. I won’t keep you.” She pivots toward the establishment, but stops halfway and glances back. “Oh, and before I forget, we ran into some strange Bohnari on our way here. He mentioned rebels in the city, although I think he was trying to flirt with Olivia more than anything. It was a little bizarre though.”

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I go on full alert. “Bizarre how?”

Quinn half shrugs. When he found out someone was killed during the explosion last night he was... shocked. Appalled even. Definitely in denial. As if we’d lie about something like that.”

“Did he say anything else?” Could this be a lead?

“Not really. He flirted, got shot down, and then took off at a near run when he found about about the dead Bohnari.”

Damn. That’s not really much. “Could you describe him?”

Quinn shakes her head. “Other than the fact he was Bohnari? No. He wore a hooded cloak that hid his features. I only got a quick glimpse of his hair and of course the skin on his hands and arms. Oh, wait. He told us his name, except it’s not coming to me. Liv might remember.”

My heart jumps at the news. If it’s not a name I recognize then it will prove that the rebels have managed to infiltrate the city. Or at least one of them has. We go back inside and head for the table where Quinn’s friend remains seated. Bannik has taken residence at the nearest table to theirs on the side closest to where Quinn had been sitting.

“Hey,” she says to the other female—Liv. “That guy who ran into you? Can you remember what he said his name was?”

Liv doesn't have to think. "It was Janik."

"You are sure?"

The female nods and blows out a harsh puff of air. "Positive. I don't tend to forget the name of men who annoy me."

"Thank you for the information." I bow my head.

"Commander," Erik calls out. "Your meal is ready."

Frustrated that my time has been cut short, I glance at Quinn. "I need to speak with Alik. Enjoy the rest of your day."

One side of her mouth curls. "You too."

I pick up my bag of food from the counter and exit the establishment. A tugging sensation hits me hard enough to make me want to return to Quinn's side. I push it way down, burying it so deep that it will be difficult to make its way to the surface again. Whatever is going on can't happen.

More people traverse the streets now than they did on my way here. Protective instincts swell inside me. Not only for them, but for Alik. My cousin is a male of integrity, honesty, and one who genuinely loves his people and planet. On its heels is anger. No, rage. That there are some who would dare try to usurp him and his rule. Males like Janik who do nothing but destroy.

My pace quickens as I storm through the city, vengeance fueling my fury. I refuse to admit there's lingering mating fever at work. The urge to claim Quinn and show anyone and everyone who dares look at her that she is mine. The sweltering heat I'd managed to cool bubbles up again.

This shouldn't be happening so soon after taking as much kanet powder as I had. This is starting to resemble the reaction Alik had last night. I knew the plant wasn't as potent for him, and his usage had increased, but to my knowledge he was the only one effected this severely.

Until now.

Until me.

Deep inside my pocket, the vial of kanet powder calls to me. I stop abruptly and take another dose, this one larger than the one outside of Erik's establishment. The scalding heat burning through me comes to a pleasing warmth. Yet, I'm still more feverish than I should be. A glance at my arm and the dark coloring confirms it. I'm not sure the fever is hitting even Alik this hard.

Fuck.

The ride up the lift is excruciatingly slow. I exit, sweep past the guards without a word, and don't speak to or acknowledge anyone else until I reach Alik's suites. I beat on the door with my fist and enter without being given leave to or waiting to find out if my cousin is still in bed.

"Out." I glare at the staff who are setting out his clothing.

They scurry through the doorway and close it roughly behind them. Alik stands in the center of the room wearing only a pair of briefs.

"You've been afflicted too." It isn't a question.

"I don't understand." How is this happening? Why?

“Neither do I. Whatever it is, it’s not good.” He strides forward and dons the pair of trousers left out. “Do we know if the fever has escalated in anyone else?”

“Not that I have heard. It appears to only be the two of us.” I cock my head. “Could it be our bloodline?”

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Alik pauses. “Do you think?”

“What other explanation is there, if no one else has been hit this hard? The kanet powder appears to be working for the rest of the Bohnari population. It’s only gotten worse for you.”

He gestures with his head. “And now you.”

I swallow. At least it isn’t the entire population. Yet anyway. Will that change? Or is it only our bloodline? That’s not my most pressing concern yet.

“We’ll deal with it later.” There are more important things to discuss first. “A rebel—Janik, if he’s to be believed—accosted two of the humans in the city center this morning.”

Alik goes rigid. “Explain.”

I repeated what Quinn and her friend told me. About running into him and him quickly disappearing when he discovered the death caused by the machinery sabotage last night.

“Do you really think it was him? Do you also trust he knew nothing about Konek?” Alik asks.

Do I? “Up until now, the rebels have appeared to go out of their way to make sure no Bohnari have been injured, or worse, with their little uprising. But I also know that people who continuously don’t get what they want tend to become frustrated and

change tactics in order to serve their purpose.”

Alik paces for several minutes before coming to a halt in the middle of the room. “Regardless of whether they intended for Konek to be killed or not doesn’t change the fact he’s dead. If the rebels sabotaged the equipment that caused it, then they should be punished. Which means we need to move forward with bringing them to justice. I want Janik and his people caught.”

I’d spent the entire, sleepless night coming up with any strategies to do that exact thing.

“We have options.”

“Besides a bounty on his head?” my cousin prompts.

I nod. “We can gather our forces and storm the rainforest. Full frontal attack. They’ll either surrender or they won’t.”

“Which we lead to a significant death count, I suspect.”

“Perhaps on both sides.” That is worst-case scenario. Considering the whole purpose of Alik negotiating with Earth for brides is because he doesn’t want more of our people to die. Which is why it doesn’t surprise me when he doesn’t agree.

“No one needs to die.” He pauses. “No one else.”

“We lure Janik out. Capture him and make him force those who follow his lead to surrender.”

“We’ve tried that, and he always manages to elude us.”

A fact that frustrates both of us to no end. “I can arrange a parlay.”

“You’ve attempted that already as well. Janik wasn’t interested.”

“That was before one of our people died because of him.”

Alik is quiet a moment longer before finally, he nods. “Do it.”

Chapter 15

Quinn

“I still haven’t figured out what made you think something was wrong with your commander earlier.” Olivia won’t let the subject go.

“First off, he’s not my anything. Second, I don’t know. It was just a...feeling.” I can’t explain it even to myself. “He rushed out of here so fast, and he looked off, I guess.”

“You must have been paying awfully close attention to have noticed.” She waggles her eyebrows at me. “Poor Bannik doesn’t stand a chance, does he?”

I glance over at the Bohnari guard, who’s out of uniform, thankful Liv’s barely talking above a whisper. He seated himself a few tables away after I invited him to join us, because he didn’t want to interrupt our time together. “Only one of them has asked me to spend time with him.”

“True. But you’re secretly wishing it was Horek, aren’t you?” She points her bare utensil in my direction. “Don’t think I didn’t notice you avoided answering my question.”

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“I didn’t avoid it. Bannik asked me out on what I’d consider a date.” I hope. “Why wouldn’t I give him a chance? Besides, the queen gave her approval of him. She was extremely complimentary of his character.”

Olivia snorts. “What? You really think she’s going to say anything bad about one of her subjects when he could be the first of the Bohnari to find his bride, marry her, get her pregnant—with a girl, of course—and save their race from extinction?”

“I don’t think she would encourage any of us to accept just anyone by falsely praising him. If she didn’t actually believe what she said about him, she wouldn’t have said anything at all. Guys who are shithheads reveal their shittiness pretty quickly.”

Liv winces. “Not always.”

My shoulders drop. “Fuck. I’m sorry.”

She tries to blow off my apology. “It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not. I know how much damage Craig did before any of us realized what a monumental piece of shit he was. I should have thought about that before I spoke.”

Olivia reaches across the table and grabs my hand. “I wouldn’t have gotten through it without you, so I think that gives you a pass.”

“Thanks, Liv.”

She squeezes my fingers and releases them. “I shouldn’t have said that about Bannik,

either. He does seem like a nice guy. I really hope you give him a chance.”

I glance over at him again to find him watching us. Crap. I hope he hasn’t heard anything we’ve been saying. How good is the Bohnari hearing? He rises from the table and approaches. I swallow down the trepidation that I fucked things up already.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.” I gesture at my empty plate. Thankfully the food also helped ease my headache. “Olivia and I were just finishing up.”

Bannik smiles easily. Or at least he appears to. “There’s no rush. We can go whenever you’re ready. I still need to pay for my meal anyway.”

I push my chair back. “I’m ready.”

“Excellent.”

Since I have to pay as well, I walk with him to the counter. Olivia joins us but remains a few paces away.

“Thank you for coming in today,” Erik says. “I hope to see you again soon.”

“I’m sure you will. Everything was delicious.”

He grins. “Didn’t I tell you it was the best thing on the menu?”

“Yes, you did.” I chuckle.

Once he’s taken the credits off our accounts, Bannik and I head for the door. Outside, Olivia waves.

“I’ll see you back at the apartments.”

“You sure you’re okay to walk back by yourself?” What if that Janik guy is still around somewhere?

She gestures around. The sun has fully risen and shines brightly from the clear sky casting a lovely glow over the city. It’s a stark contrast to what we saw when looking up back in the bottom tier. “I’m pretty sure this place is way safer than the bottom tier ever was and I walked alone there all the time. I’ll be fine.”

“No one would dare bother her,” Bannik adds. “Females, especially humans, are meant to be protected at all costs.”

Liv thumbs in his direction. “See? Nothing to worry about.”

“Fine. I’ll see you later then.”

“Have fun.” She pivots and starts off in the direction of our building leaving me standing alone with Bannik.

He turns to me. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

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We walk down the tree-lined street away from Erik's. I still can't get over all the beautiful landscaping. Or how clean and pristine all the buildings are. "The trees and flowers are so pretty."

Bannik glances at me. "Do you not have them on Earth?"

"Not really. At least, not anymore." It's been a long, long time. "When the population grew so large and cities had to build and expand, they destroyed all the natural habitat and forestry and replaced it all with more buildings."

"That's terrible."

I nod. "Agreed. But it tends to happen when people get greedy. The richest men in the world destroyed it all for profit."

"How very sad for you and the rest of the humans. I'm not sure I can ever understand why there are those who have everything, and yet, it's never enough." Bannik's disgust is obvious.

I glance over at him. "Sounds like you might have some experience with people like that."

His eyes meet mine. "My older brother."

Ouch. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

“Doesn’t make me any less sorry.” I smile gently. “I can’t imagine how painful that must be for you.”

“Thank you. He’s no longer in my life, which is for the best.” Bannik faces forward again. “Do you have any siblings?”

My chest aches. “Not anymore.”

He darts a glance my way again. “You did at one time?”

I swallow down the grief that’s never quite left no matter how many years have passed. “I had a younger sister. She died when she was five and I was eight.”

“This time, it is I who am sorry.” Bannik palms his chest.

“Thank you. It was years ago.”

“I don’t think that matters though when it comes to grief.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

We pass under an archway that spans from one side of the road to the other. Twining teal vines decorate it and small, white flowers burst from random buds. I breathe in the fragrance and try to identify the notes, but everything smells so different here than back home. Not bad. Just different. I point up at them.

“Do those have a name?”

“It is called the Kavaki vine.”

“And the flowers?”

“Calanthium.”

“They’re lovely.”

The streets have grown more crowded the longer we walk, but at least people aren’t gawking like they were the first day of our arrival. I take in the architecture of the surrounding buildings and can’t help but remain in awe of it. A shadow falls over us and I glance up at the sky again. A large space craft hangs low and is slowly descending somewhere nearby.

Bannik points at it. “That is one of the Kundartha’s ships. They’re frequent visitors to Bohna.”

I try to recall any of the information we were given on our flight here as well as what Johnna told us. “Preska is a trading port, isn’t it?”

“It is,” he confirms. “Not a large one, but we do our fair amount. Mostly precious metals and some tech. We also do our own trading with one of the nearby planets.”

That surprises me. The Bohnari appear to have everything they need. They’re technologically advanced well beyond Earth. Nothing I’ve heard would make me think they would need to trade for anything. “Really? Anything specific?”

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“The Tavikhi are a primitive race, but on their planet a very specific plant that grows. One that doesn’t grow anywhere else and is vital for the survival of the Bohnari. It is nothing more than useless vegetation to them, so they are more than happy to trade with us and we are willing to give them almost anything they ask for. Within reason, of course.”

“Why can’t you just plants some seeds and grow it here?”

Bannik shakes his head and sorrow radiates from him. “Sadly, it’s not viable on our planet. Whether it’s something in the earth, the air, or the water, we don’t know. Not even our most educated and brilliant scientists can figure out why.”

“You said this is a plant you all need to actually stay alive?”

“It is.” He studies me. “What do you know about the Bohnari?”

I blink at the question. “Um, I guess I know whatever we were told by our President. Who, I assume was told by Alik. He said your people have been unable to give birth to females and that data analysis of our DNA shows we’re a compatible species that should have no problem birthing them. Which is why we came here as part of the bridal lottery program.”

“All correct. Having stopped birthing females is not the only problem that is leading to our extinction. We also suffer from a mating fever that can only be soothed by our mate. Or by the plant we trade for with the Tavikhi.”

I stop in the middle of the path and stare at Bannik. “Explain this mating fever to

me.”

“Male Bohnari are afflicted with the mating fever until they meet their mate. Without her—or the kanet plant—it gets progressively worse. Our bodies overheat. We suffer excruciating pain. Rage. Madness. Until eventually it overtakes us, and we go on a rampage and need to be destroyed.”

Horror fills me. “What you’re telling me is that if your males don’t find a mate, or if they stop taking this plant thing, they eventually go mad and have to be killed?”

Bannik slowly nods and the sorrow pours off him in waves so strong they nearly make my knees give out. “That is why the prince has been so desperate to find brides for us. We don’t just need female children, but also mates.”

Apparently there was a whole lot Johnna left out.

Chapter 16

Horek

I have no idea how long it will take for the message to reach Janik. We don’t have a specific system other than to send comms across the computer interfaces and wait for them to be intercepted. Some times they go astray. If I don’t get a reply back from him within the next few days, I’ll try again.

I turn to the Bohnari at the mainframe. “Let me know when you hear something.”

“Right away, Commander.”

I leave the palace’s communication room and head out for patrol.

My hope is, for Janik's and the other rebels' sake, he's open to meeting with Alik. My cousin can't let what happened to Konek go unpunished. He's done his best to avoid violent retaliation against the rebels.

The implication that Alik is intentionally withholding kanet powder from them won't leave me. It's not possible. And yet, the rebel was so earnest in his belief.

My patrol leads me past the females' building. As if sensing Quinn through the walls, my body temperature rises and already the heat of fire courses through my veins. My fangs throb and my skin feels too tight around my body. I don't have to see my reflection to know my coloring has darkened and my eyes have changed shades as well. Anyone looking at me will know I'm burning up with mating fever.

I quicken my pace, needing to increase the distance between me and where Quinn resides before I do something I'll regret. Or that she will.

Did she spend the morning with Bannik? He showed an immense amount of interest in her last night at the welcome banquet, and he was at Erik's earlier. Was that a coincidence, or had they planned it? A rough, deep growl rumbles up from my belly, into my throat, and spills from my lips. Several Bohnari snap their heads in my direction and stare open-mouthed.

Fuck. No doubt word will spread throughout Preska about what they witnessed. It will probably raise some concerns about my possibly succumbing to the madness that resides inside me. Before more complications arise, I snag the vial of kanet powder from my pocket and take a large dose. I'm becoming as bad as Alik.

Who will lead Preska if both my cousin and I go mad? Queen Veroneek is the only living member of the royal line, much to my mother's disappointment. I suppose the High Council will have to appoint someone. But who? I suppose it doesn't matter since I refuse to allow myself to fall victim to the fever. I'm stronger than that and I

will fight it with everything I am.

I patrol the streets, keeping my eye out for any disturbances. Several guards do the same and they nod as we pass. Against my will, my thoughts drift back to Quinn. What is it that continues to draw me to her? Is there a higher power at work? The Bohnari don't have fated mates like the Tavikhi do, but a few have been lucky and found their heart's fire. The one person who causes the mating fever to burn out of control and yet keeps the madness at bay.

Vornak found it with Johnna. Queen Veroneek found it with King Danik. It's not a guarantee that all Bohnari will find their heart's fire. In fact, they are rare. But our ancestors still managed to settle for companionship and respect with their mate, all while extinguishing the fever entirely. Most oftentimes out of necessity. But they are relationships without any true passion.

A familiar scent hits me, and I curse. Are the gods punishing me? Surely they must be. My blood has barely cooled and the sweet scent that belongs to only one female heats it again. I follow the tantalizing aroma through the streets until I come across its owner. To my surprise, Quinn is alone.

She's seated on a bench just inside the botanical garden. Her head is tipped back and her eyes are closed. There's an expression of pure rapture on her face that hardens my cock. Would she look like that beneath me while I thrust into her tight cunt? My fist clenches as I imagine Quinn's hair wrapped around it so I can pull her head back the way it is now and watch her breasts rise and fall as she tries to catch her breath.

Almost as though she senses me, she tips her chin down and opens her eyes. They lock onto mine. I stride forward—neither of us looking away—and don't stop until I am before her. I watch her throat move as she swallows. Does she wish as much as I do that it was my cock she was swallowing?

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I take another step forward, spearing my thigh between hers and forcing her legs farther open as I bring myself even closer. The heat of her cunt warms the flesh beneath my pants and a second, even more intoxicating scent rises from her. A female's pleasure has never smelled so good. I haven't even touched her yet, either.

Quinn tips her head back again, but her eyes remain open and intently focused on me. Her mouth parts and the barest hint of her tongue is visible. I want to know if she tastes as good as she smells. Forces more powerful than me guide my movements. I bend forward at the waist and press my palms against the bench's back support on either side of Quinn's shoulders. My fingers clench the wood and the splintering sound from my claws piercing it is faint, as if from a distance.

Desire sparks in her gaze, surely a reflection of mine.

"What are you doing?" she whispers at last.

"Exactly what you want me to do."

To my relief, she doesn't attempt to deny my words. Not that I would let her. My fangs ache and throb with need. It's so intense I want to do nothing more than bury them in the soft flesh where her neck meets her shoulder. The blood in my veins is so hot I'm surprised it doesn't burn me to a cinder. I'm on the edge of madness and yet something—or perhaps, someone—is keeping it from wreaking havoc.

Is it possible that Quinn is my heart's fire? It's the only explanation I can come up with for this strong of a reaction.

“I think it is now I who should be asking you the question. What is it you’re doing to me?” I don’t even recognize my voice.

She shakes her head, but the desire burning in her gaze says otherwise. “I’m not doing anything.”

“Lies. You’ve put some sort of curse on me.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“There’s no other explanation. I can’t stop thinking about you. Dreaming about you. Even when you’re not around your scent lingers.” I lean in closer and inhale her sweet scent. Pleasure shoots straight through my cock.

“You’re mistaken.” Quinn’s gone breathless.

“The gods have sent you to torment me, haven’t they?”

She opens her mouth—I’m sure to argue again—but I’m done listening. I claim her lips with mine, at last getting my first decadent taste of her. The blood coursing inside my veins sizzles and burns its way through my body. I’m hot enough that it wouldn’t shock me if I burst into flames. A knowing ripples across my mind that Quinn is the only one who can put them out.

I sweep my tongue against hers and she matches each movement with her own. There’s no hesitancy. No fear. We both give and take from each other, neither of us giving up any ground. She passionately battles for control—or at least gives the appearance of it—but I’ll never yield. Nor does Quinn truly want me to. I can sense it in the way there’s something she’s holding back.

A moan tumbles from her and I move to deepen the kiss, but she rips herself away

from me. Her hands go to my shoulders and the shock allows for her to push me away with little effort. Quinn jumps to her feet and stares at me with her chest heaving. Her eyes are wide and she gapes. I would chuckle in self-satisfaction, but I bite it back.

“This isn’t real.” Again, she swallows and I want to call her back to me.

“Of course it’s real.”

“No.” She rattles her head. “No, it’s not. What you’re experiencing is mating fever. It’s only because I’m female. Nothing more than that.”

I nearly laugh, but can tell she’s serious. Quinn truly believes I’m overcome by the fever and not by her. Not the insane desire she—and only she—causes. “I admit that the fever is part of it. But only a small part.”

“You can’t help yourself.”

“I have far more control than you’re giving me credit for.” I’m almost offended on her behalf. As though she couldn’t possibly be the reason I want to drag her back to my room and fuck her until she admits there’s more to this attraction than mating fever.

“Maybe, but I also know your people are afflicted with the mating fever and that’s why you need brides. Not just because you want us to give you children.” Quinn crosses her arms over her chest. “Without us, you’ll slowly go insane as the madness takes over. That’s why you did what you just did. The fever needs to be brought down. I just happened to be the closest female.”

Loud, raucous laughter bursts from my chest. “Do you truly think that what just occurred between us is because you were nearby? What if your friend—the one you were with this morning—had been the one I stumbled upon? Can you sit there, look

me in the eyes, and tell me I would have behaved the same way with her as I did with you?”

Quinn glances away and briefly I think I’ve gotten through to her. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

Any bit of amusement withers. I stare, waiting for her to meet my eyes, but when she shifts her attention back to me, her gaze fixates on my chest. She won’t look any higher.

“If my excuse is the mating fever, then what’s yours?” Without waiting for an answer, I walk away.

The longer I remain, the more I want to prove to her she’s wrong and that she was more than just convenient. But I’m disappointed in Quinn and in myself. That I couldn’t control my impulse and now that I’ve had a taste of her, no one else will ever do. That the torture I’ll go through because of that single taste will haunt my dreams.

Chapter17

Quinn

There's a knock on my door and I sigh at the same time I rise to go answer it. I'm not really up for visitors, but I'm almost positive it's Olivia, and she won't let me ignore her. She's the best about giving me space, but I have to tell her I need it. Otherwise, she'll just hound me until I confess whatever's bugging me.

Right now, Horek is bugging me. Actually, that's not true. I'm mad at myself. Well, maybe a little at him, too, for kissing me like I've never been kissed before. The worst part is knowing I'll probably never be kissed like that again. I trigger the door to open. Sure enough, Olivia's on the other side of it.

"Okay, what's wrong?" she glides past me and makes herself at home on the sofa I'd just vacated.

I'd tell her nothing, but we've known each other too long for her to believe me. I sit at the other end. "Horek kissed me."

She rattles her head and blinks rapidly. "Excuse me? When did this happen and why am I only now hearing about it? You're holding out on me."

I drop my head onto the cushion behind me. "You know when I went for a walk earlier?"

"Yeah."

"There's this beautiful botanical garden not too far from here and I found a nice

bench to sit on and relax. I swear I've never felt so at peace before." I can almost feel the sun heating my face and the breeze drifting across it. "The scent of all the flowers and trees is incredible. Overwhelming, but also not. I never knew how calm being surrounded by greenery and blooms could be."

"I'm sure it's absolutely lovely and you'll have to take me there soon, but right now there are far more important topics you should be talking about than flowers and trees," she says with a fair amount of exasperation. "Get to the good stuff, please."

I make a face, but comply. "I was sitting there when I felt like someone was watching me. It was Horek. Our eyes locked and there was nothing I could do to break whatever hold he had on me."

Olivia sighs dramatically. "That is so hot."

Ignoring her, I continue. "He prowled forward like a damn predator cornering its prey. The next thing I know, we're kissing."

"Like I said...hot." She fans herself.

"Exactly. Hot. Like mating fever hot." I point out. "The only reason he kissed me was because he'd been hit with it. All the Bohnari males are afflicted with it. That's the other reason Alik negotiated for brides to come to Bohna. They don't just need us to birth their children, but also because the mating fever eventually makes them go berserk or something. When that happens, they have to be killed before they hurt people."

"Whoa, whoa whoa." Olivia shakes her palms at me. "Back up a second. How the hell did we get from Horek kissing you to mating fever insanity?"

I confess everything Bannik told me during our stroll through the city in regards to

the mating fever and its effects on the Bohnari.

“Wait one fucking minute. First off, we should have been having this conversation hours ago. Like, as soon as you got back from your date,” she scolds. “Second, this sure as shit is something Johnna conveniently left out.”

“That’s exactly what I said to myself when I found out.”

“I’m going to ignore, for now, the fact you didn’t tell me this earlier, but don’t think we won’t revisit it.” Olivia side eyes me and I wince. “The others deserve to know this little tidbit. Informed choices and all that.”

I agree. “You want to gather them all up now or wait until after dinner?”

“Since everyone’s kind of been doing there own thing, I have no idea if they’re all here. I’m going to start spreading the news that we need to have a meeting before the women all go to bed tonight.” She stands and heads over to the comm unit sitting on the table. “I’m calling Devon and Lindsey over now though.”

Considering they are our friends, they need to be brought up to speed. I nod and, while she comms the, I sit back and nibble at the nails I’d stopped biting last year. The familiarity of the old habit is soothing. I doubt five minutes pass before there’s another knock. Olivia goes over to let them in.

Devon walks in first with Lindsey right behind her. They glance between Liv and me. Devon is the first to speak up.

“You said it was important, but you didn’t say anything about things being tense. I can feel it in here. What’s going on?”

Olivia gestures toward the living space where I’ve remained. “Have a seat. You’re

going to want to when you hear what Quinn and I have to tell you about our Bohnari guys.”

“Shit, that sounds ominous.” Lindsey winces.

Both she and Devon make themselves comfortable and Olivia comes back to the sofa.

“You wanna start?” She glances at me.

I blow out a breath and then repeat everything I already laid out to her about the mating fever. Thankfully, Liv doesn’t out me when I keep the kiss with Horek to myself. It’s not pertinent to the conversation. Everything I learned about the mating fever came from Bannik anyway.

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Lindsey snorts. “I knew this all sounded too good to be true.”

“Unpopular opinion here.” Devon raises her hand and we all turn to her. “Does this new development really make that much of a difference? I mean, we came here with the sole intention of finding a husband and having children. We knew when we entered the lottery what we were signing up for. Marriage. Kids.”

None of us have a response. Devon continues. “I entered my name because there was nothing I wanted more than to leave Earth. To escape the bottom tier and the shit life I had there. The President announcing my name was like every dream I ever had coming true. I didn’t—still don’t—care why I was getting out of that place. Only that I was.”

Her gaze bounces over us. “I didn’t sign up for the bridal lottery for love, although I’m not opposed to the idea of it. In fact, I’m hoping for it. But if what I get is a husband who treats me with kindness and respect and a life where I’m not working myself to an early grave for nothing more than scraps, then I’m perfectly content with that. It doesn’t matter if it’s because some mating fever makes him want me or not. And maybe that makes me desperate or I’m settling for less than what other people think I deserve. The truth is, I don’t care.”

I let her words sink in. All the things Devon mentioned were the very reasons my mom entered my name in the lottery. She wanted me to have a better life. To not spend my days surrounded by shit. To find my own happiness, even if I had to make it myself. To appreciate all the advantages that coming to Bohna offered me. Does it really matter what prompted Horek to kiss me? If his intentions are for something long-term, then why am I so upset?

“It’s clear Devon is the voice of reason amongst us,” Olivia says without a hint of sarcasm. “You’re right. We all came to Bohna to be wives and mothers. To leave our crappy lives behind and forge a new path for ourselves.”

Maybe I have been fooling myself all along, and it’s love I truly want. The same kind of love my parents had. Isn’t passion the closest thing to it? Could it not turn into a deeper emotion?

Olivia’s face comes into focus in front of mine. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Just thinking.”

She squeezes my hand. Unlike mine, her parents hated each other. It’s one of the reasons we spent so much time together growing up. Liv had been at my house far more than her own. Also, unlike me, she’d desperately wanted to come to Bohna. To escape life back on Earth.

“Look,” Devon speaks up. “I know we all came from different situations back home so our expectations for our new life here are on Bohna are most likely different as well. Just because I feel a certain way doesn’t mean your feelings aren’t also valid.”

“She’s right. Again. It’s getting kind of annoying, in fact.” Lindsey laughs and nudges Devon with her elbow. “Never in a million years did I think my name would be called. Honestly, I sort of entered the lottery more as a joke than because I expected I’d be chosen. Deep down, though, I was terrified of coming here. Truth be told, I still am. I don’t know if it was the right decision, but there’s nothing I can do about it now. All I can do is hope I didn’t make a mistake.”

This might be the most honest conversation we’ve ever had with each other. Having Olivia with me as made it easier, but somehow, hearing what Lindsey just said makes me feel not so alone.

My gaze darts over the three of them. “You guys are the best. I hope you know that.”

Olivia scoffs. “Of course we do.”

We all laugh, which feels good. I haven’t done nearly enough of it in my life. Something tells me I’ll be doing a lot more of it with these women as my friends.

“Thank you.” I glance, and pause, at each of them. “All of you. I’m lucky to have you guys.”

“Why does this feel like a group hug moment?” Devon chuckles.

I roll my eyes but can’t stop the grin from spreading across my face. Olivia looks right at me.

“You good now?”

“I think so.”

“What are you going to do about Horek?”

That’s a question I still don’t have an answer to. “I don’t know.”

Bannik is sweet and makes me laugh. I’ve enjoyed spending time with him. Not once while we were together—even alone—was he overcome with passion for me. Then again, maybe that’s just the plant they ingest doing what it’s supposed to.

Except, if it’s supposed to keep the Bohnari’s mating fever banked so they don’t go mad, then why did Horek have such an intense reaction?

I suppose I’ll have to ask him.

Chapter18

Horek

It had to have been Bannik that told Quinn of the mating fever. Not even our Tavikhi allies know the true reason why we trade for the kanet plant. My claws extrude at the thought that Bannik might have been struck just as hard with it and couldn't resist the pull of Quinn either. Alik wouldn't appreciate me sending one of my guards to the medical facility.

Once my patrol is complete, I make my way back to the barracks. For the first time, my on-hand supply of kanet powder is getting low and needs to be replenished. I still don't understand why only Alik and I are the ones who appear to be afflicted with a fever that's becoming unmanageable. If not for the fact my cousin has been experiencing the problem for many moons, I would wonder if he hadn't met his heart's fire.

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Except for the fact he's been demonstrating the uncontrollable madness along with it. When I was with Quinn earlier, I didn't feel mad. Out of control, yes. But it was my burning desire for her, not my mind.

At this time of day, the barracks are quiet. Males are either out on patrol or in the training facility. I pause outside of my room, sensing some type of disturbance. With a hand on my blaster, I open the door of my suite and brace myself for a possible attack. The person standing before me is far worse than any assailant.

I lower my arms to my sides. "What are you doing here?"

"Is that any way to greet your mother?"

"It is when she shows up unannounced and uninvited within my private dwelling. Which poses the better question of how did you get in here?"

She waves off my question with a flap of her hand. "Just as you have your ways of doing things, so do I."

She stares more closely at me and her entire demeanor changes to something I can't define.

"Why is your skin tone darker? And your eyes?" She gestures in the direction of my face. "Have they changed color as well? By the gods, please don't tell me you've attached yourself to one of those humans."

Why, of all the days for her to surprise me with an unwanted visit, does it have to be

the same day I've been near Quinn?

"I would be careful how you speak of the females, Mother. One of them could be your future queen."

She waves off my warning as though it is of no consequence. "Everyone knows Alik has no interest in finding a bride."

I'd actually been speaking of my own bride, if my cousin is so determined to let the fever take him, and I—gods unwilling—become prince and eventual king. But I let her think what she wants. No sense in giving her any hope that if I inherit the title she'll get some kind of special privileges just because she's my mother.

"Even still, stranger things have happened. Perhaps Alik will change his mind once he has spent more time with the females."

"Gods forbid."

"You would rather our people die out." It's not a question.

"Than taint our bloodlines with an inferior alien species? Yes."

I control the breath I exhale so it doesn't come across as a sigh.

"You still haven't answered my question. What are you doing here?" Considering my mother lives in Haveeka—which is several ticks by shuttle transport—she would have to travel to Preska for a purpose.

"I came to remind you of your duty and to not let the queen's soft words turn you from your true path."

“You didn’t need to bother coming all the way here for something you could have said just as well over the comm. I’m fully aware of what direction my life is supposed to go.”

“See that you are.”

I’m not sure how to respond to what sounds so much like a threat, so I don’t. “If there’s nothing else then?”

My mother smiles with insincerity. “For now.” She sweeps past me and out the door.

No matter how brief any visit might be, every time I see her, I’m left emotionally exhausted. Thankfully they are few and far between. Because with each one, the voice inside my head belonging to her that I think I’ve banished returns. Only stronger.

I can’t help but compare myself to Bannik. Maybe he would be a better choice for Quinn. I can picture the joy on her face when they were dancing. The way he made her laugh. None of the things she did with me, although we didn’t get to spend near enough time together before the explosion occurred.

Yet it was me Quinn kissed earlier in the botanical garden. I was the one who aroused her. The one who made her lose control of herself, if only for a moment. It wasn’t the mating fever that caused her own reaction. Nor was it what caused mine. Not completely.

As if contradicting itself, the stabbing pain in my gut hits and I clench my fists while I breathe through it. The familiar drip-drip of blood from my pierced palms hits the floor. My fangs throb. I run my tongue over one and blood fills my mouth. My entire body surges with heat and urges me to find Quinn.

I take a huge risk and don't reach for the kanet powder. It's the only way I can prove what my mind is telling me. Of course, if I'm wrong, it may be Alik having to put me down instead of the other way around. My knees give out from the pain and I collapse onto them on the ground. I brace my hands on the floor, and breathe through the agony and torment.

Slowly, the excruciating torture abates, but the fever coursing through my veins continues to burn like an inferno. My mind, on the other hand, remains clear of the madness. There's no destructive rage. Instead, it's pure want. Need. For Quinn.

I carefully rise to my feet and enter the cleansing room to stare at my reflection in the bathing pool. My skin is a deep, dark copper, and the scales lining my shoulders and arms appear in a shade darker. It's my eyes I can't glance away from. They're nearly black, but within their depths, they glow brightly with flames of red, leaving me no doubt: Quinn's my heart's fire.

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The same thing happened to Vornak when he discovered Johnna. We all thought it had been the end for him, but his heart's fire had soothed the madness within and doused the flames that burned until all that remained was smoldering embers.

My comm beeps and hit the button on my wrist band. "Commander Horek speaking."

"Commander, there's a transmission for you."

"I'll be right there."

I end the comm and will my body to return to normal. Not that I don't want every Bohnari to know I've found my own heart's fire. But it's important that Quinn be the first. She deserves it. There's still a part of me that doesn't believe this is happening. Especially with my mother's visit fresh in my mind. All the things she warned me echo in my ears.

Just because I suspect Quinn is my heart's fire, doesn't mean she feels anything for me beyond attraction. There's no guarantee she ever will either. Not with Bannik's interest. Perhaps he is more suited to her than I am.

This constant self-doubt is getting me nowhere. I need to speak with Quinn. As much as I want to see her this moment, until the business with the rebels has been taken care of, my role as Commander has to come first.

I leave my barracks for the palace's communication room. Although it's far sooner than I would have expected to receive a response, my hope is that it's from Janik agreeing to a meeting. From the stares that accompany me on my way to my

destination, I haven't been able to lessen the effects of the fever. I'm sure word will make its way to Alik or the queen before I arrive.

Once I make it to the palace, more stares and whispers follow in my wake. I ignore them all. Finally, I arrive and step into the communications room. A different Bohnari male works at the mainframe than when I send the transmission.

"What do you have for me?"

"Here." He gestures to his screen.

I scan the transmission in front of me and with each word my anger and outrage grow. I storm out of the room before I've even finished reading. Staff scurry out of the way for fear of incurring more of my wrath. I don't stop until I reach Alik's wing and slam the door to his suites open.

He glances up from his desk with a raised brow. "Something bothering you?"

"I received a response to our request for a meeting with Janik."

This causes him to straighten and the smirk to fall from his lips. "Clearly it wasn't the reply we hoped to receive."

"Not even close." Rage simmers in my veins. "It's become obvious that the rebels are prepared to escalate the conflict. Full on war, if that's what it's going to come down to. They blame us for the death of Konek during the mining incident, and say that we're setting them up to take the fall for it as an excuse to retaliate with violence."

Alik doesn't speak at first but I know him well enough to see he's barely holding onto his temper. "I see."

“In the transmission, Janik says he refuses to take the blame for our actions. He says we’ve left him with no choice but to make sure the people on Bohna know the kind of prince who is ruling our planet.”

“So he’s threatening me.”

“It would appear so.”

“Then perhaps it is time for me to stop letting this petty rebellion continue without any consequences. Perhaps they’ll finally understand and realize who the true ruler of the Bohnari people is.” Alik grinds his teeth. “I have tried being benevolent. But that time appears to have passed. If one death is not enough, then they only have themselves to blame for any more that occur.”

Like Alik, I have avoided any hints of violent retaliation against the rebels. No matter their political beliefs, they are still our people. But when our people die, it’s no longer about politics. It’s personal.

“Send a final warning. If Janik chooses not to meet with me, then he best prepare for our conflict to no longer remain peaceful. We will not take responsibility for a death we did not cause. They are the only ones who can make this right. Otherwise, we will be taking action.”

“I’ll make sure it’s done.”

I hate that it’s come to this, but with this last transmission, the rebels have given Alik no other choice. He has to ensure the safety of the entire planet. Janik and his people have become a threat to that safety. It’s bad enough to lose any of our people to the mating fever, but to lose them that is something completely within our control is far worse. All we can do now is pray to the gods that our loss is minimal.

Chapter19

Quinn

I've spent the last two days inside and doing pretty much everything to avoid running into both Horek and Bannik. We finally took advantage of the chef in our own kitchen instead of eating in the market. His food was almost as good as what we got from Erik's. I suspect we'll eat in more often to save money, but head into the city for special occasions.

Luckily Olivia, Devon, and Lindsey have helped me pass the time. Including all of yesterday when I spent the day in bed crying and depressed after finally talking to my mom. I was able to tell her about everything happening on Bohna and how it was going here. She even listened to me explain my dilemma with Horek and the mating fever.

I've always trusted my mother to give me solid, unbiased advice. Yesterday was no different. It was almost like I hadn't left even if the connection was, at times, a little staticky.

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“Are you tired of hiding yet?” Olivia’s gaze remains on the cards in her hand.

Johnna had come over the night before last and taught us this Bohnari card game. I’m still not a hundred percent certain of the rules, so we’re making up some of them as we go along.

I glare at her. “What if I say no?” Although I am, and I need to woman up and go talk to Horek.

“Then we’re going to have to drag you out of here.” Devon doesn’t look like she’s joking either.

“You guys are supposed to be my friends, remember?”

Olivia huffs. “Which is exactly why we’re going to push you out of this room if we have to. This isn’t you. The Quinn Brooks I know doesn’t run away. She faces things head on even when they’re uncomfortable. Well, eventually, she does. Now is your eventually and you know it.”

I sigh. “I know.”

“Good, because I just won.” Olivia lays down her cards and the others groan in disappointment.

None of what she had in her hand says she won to me, but I’m not going to argue.

“I let you win.”

“Ha! Let me win? You don’t even remember the rules.”

Oops. I guess I didn’t hide my cluelessness as well as I thought I had. I toss down my cards as well and take my empty glass to the sink. There’s still quite a bit of sunlight left for me to go try and find Horek, I suppose.

“I’m going for a walk.” I glance at each of them and none volunteer to go with.

“Let us know how it goes with your boyfriend,” Olivia teases.

Arguing with her will only make her dig her heels in harder so I bite my tongue and nod instead. “I’ll be back later.”

The three of them get up as well and head for the door.

“We’ll see you then. Good luck,” Devon offers.

“Thanks.”

Alone, I walk down the hallway and take the lift to the ground floor. Like usual, a few of the women sit scattered about doing their own thing.

Sure enough, the sun still shines brightly, and all the copper buildings sparkle with newness. It’s a sight I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to. Every time I’ve gone outside, I expect to see the dreary, gray-hued sky of the bottom tier and smell the dirt and grime.

I breathe in the fresh, clean, and fragrant scent of Preska. I’m assaulted with earthy and floral notes, but in a good way. Now I regret staying cooped up in our building for two days because I missed this. I could have been visiting the botanical garden again or even just walking around the city and soaking it all up. From here on out, no

more hiding. No more ignoring things or people. That's not why I let my mom talk me into leaving her back on Earth.

Whether it's the mating fever or something else entirely, I have a guy—two guys, in fact—showing interest in me. It's a matter of whether or not Horek's is merely a physical reaction or something more. If it is more, I have no idea what's going to happen, but I need to give it—him—a chance. Except, I don't actually know where to even start my search for Horek. I ask the first Bohnari—one of the guards stationed outside our building—I come across.

“Excuse me. Where would I find Commander Horek?”

The guard straightens. “Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no, not at all. I just needed to speak with him.”

He still has a mild look of panic, like he's worried I'm going to tattle on him for some unknown offense. “He's probably in the barracks this time of the evening.”

I glance around in confusion. “I'm sorry, but I don't know where that is. Could you give me directions?”

He rattles them off and I do my best to memorize the route he's given me. I only hope I don't get lost. “Thank you so much.”

The guard nods, and I head in the direction he gave me. I silently repeat his instructions while I walk and carefully watch where I'm going until finally I arrive at what I'm guessing is the right place. I've never actually seen barracks before. As far as I can tell, they appear similar to nearly every building in Preska. Shiny copper beams, large bolts connecting giant round pipes that run vertically along the exterior walls and horizontally along the rooftops, and lots of reflective windows that conceal

whatever's inside.

I make my way to the first set of doors I find. Before I even start searching for a bell or knocker, a camera in the corner turns so it's pointing directly at me and the image of a Bohnari from the neck up appears on a monitor just above eye level.

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“Can I help you?”

There’s no intercom button or anything for me to push, so I hope he can hear me without it. “Um, hi. I’m looking for Commander Horek, please.”

“Enter and I’ll let him know you’re here.”

The monitor goes black and a disengaging lock sound comes from the doors. I grab the handle and pull. It easily opens and I step inside to a lobby area. On one wall are framed pictures of various Bohnari men. Copper nameplates are centered along the bottom of each one and I walk down the line, studying them. Every male showcased here has the title of Commander. I reach the last one and sure enough, it’s Horek.

His long hair is tied back and the tight-fitting black, sleeveless shirt he wears displays his rounded, muscular shoulders and bulging biceps to perfection. The only thing missing in the picture are the dark scales I noticed while he was burning up from the mating fever. Is that another one of the side effects?

“Quinn?” The familiar gravelly voice comes from behind me. “What are you doing here?”

I turn to find Horek standing there with a stunned expression. His skin darkens to a deeper shade of copper and there’s a flicker of light in his eyes that hadn’t been there before. Is the fever hitting him again? A sudden case of nerves hit me now that I’m here and my mind goes blank. Shit, what am I doing here? Oh, yeah. I came here to figure out this thing between us and what it means. I swallow.

“Sorry to show up unannounced. If you’re busy, I can come back another time.” I’m offering him the perfect out that a part of me prays he takes.

He shakes his head. “I’m not busy. Is everything okay?”

I shift from one foot to the other. “Yeah, it’s fine. I was just, um, wondering if we could go talk somewhere? In private?”

“Of course. Follow me.” He waits until I’m within reach before he turns and heads down one of the hallways that branches off the lobby.

The silence feels a bit awkward, but I don’t break it. Not yet. I’m still rehearsing what to say in my head. I keep changing the words even though once it’s time, I’ll forget whatever I planned on saying anyway. Lining the walls of the hall are doors spaced evenly apart. They’re all closed so I can’t begin to guess what’s behind them. Personal rooms of the guards maybe?

We turn down another corridor. This one is not even a fraction of the length of the others and there’s only a single door. Horek comes to a stop in front of it and lays his palm on a bioscanner. A teal light scans its length and the door opens. He gestures for me to go first, and with only a single glance, I can tell we’re in living quarters. His living quarters. The fluttery sensation starts up in my belly, but I ignore it and just stand in the middle of the seating area.

Horek closes the door and the space that felt large seconds ago shrinks. Although it’s just my imagination, I’m almost struggling to take a breath. Like he’s taken all the air with him.

“Quinn?” He cocks his head and his stare intensifies, but he doesn’t move any closer.

I chuckle, the sound more uncomfortable than natural. I could swear I see actual

flames burning in his eyes, but they can't be real. "Right, sorry. Tell me more about the mating fever and this plant you take to calm it."

Horek blinks like my request has surprised him as much as my visit itself has. "Perhaps it would be best if we sat."

"Probably." Since the only piece of furniture is a couch, I sit at one end of it.

He takes the other end, and despite the distance between us, I can still feel the heat radiating off him. "What would you like to know?"

Everything. But that's a broad scope, I suppose. "How about we start with the fact that this plant you trade for is used to keep your mating fever at bay, right? Then why isn't it working for you?"

Might as well get straight to the heart of the matter.

Chapter 20

Horek

It became clear after our encounter at the botanical garden that Quinn was avoiding me. So I cannot be more shocked to find her not only at my door, but seated within my living quarters asking me about the mating fever.

"Perhaps you should tell me first what it is you were told. That way I don't explain something you already know." This will give me time to gather my thoughts, but she's shaking her head.

"Nope. I want to hear everything from you, even if Bannik mentioned it previously."

Her response confirms he's the one who told her. I should punish him for speaking of that which he shouldn't have. Maybe a few extra patrol shifts will remind him to keep his mouth closed. I won't, though, because as much as I wish otherwise, it is the females' right to understand the type of males they will become a bride to. They are part of our people now.

"Are you trying to come up with some fabricated story?" Quinn interrupts my inner thoughts. "Or trying to avoid answering me?"

"My apologies." I incline my head. "I was merely reminding myself that, as a future bride, you have the right to answers."

"Oh. Yes, I do."

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“All of our male ancestors have been afflicted with the mating fever. It’s a biological reaction to the need to find a mate and continue our blood line.”

Quinn raises her hand slightly. “Sorry to interrupt, but what does the mating fever feel like? The symptoms, I mean?”

“We experience a stabbing pain in our chest and bellies and the blood in our veins burns through us, heating our entire bodies. Our claws extrude and our fangs throb with the need to sink into the flesh of our mate and mark her so every other Bohnari knows she’s ours. Mostly, we have an undeniable urge to...” My voice trails off, because talking of the fever while my heart’s fire is within reach is causing every reaction I just explained. I need to get myself under control.

“An undeniable urge to what? You can’t just stop there.”

I pause only for another moment before responding. “To fuck.”

Quinn’s mouth falls open, but she snaps it shut. “I see. And this urge to...fuck. Is it for a specific person or will anyone do?”

I don’t want to lie, but it’s not that simple. “Both.”

Her forehead wrinkles. “Explain.”

“Every symptom I mentioned isn’t the only thing that happens when the mating fever strikes. If we don’t sate it, whether through sex or by taking the kanet plant, we are hit with bouts of uncontrollable rage. Nothing can calm us. Our only thoughts are

fuck or destroy.”

Quinn’s throat bobs and I have to redirect my thoughts away from imagining her swallowing my cock and back to explaining our affliction.

“Before the Bohnari stopped giving birth to females, most could find a female and be cured of the fever and madness that went along with it. There are a few rare pairings amongst the Bohnari, though, when the male finds his heart’s fire. She is the only female that continues to make the mating fever burn through him, but keeps the madness at bay.”

I pause to give her a chance to digest what I’ve told her and to ask any questions she might have. There really isn’t much more I can tell her that I haven’t already. Other than that I suspect she is my heart’s fire.

“Let me see if I get this. Every male Bohnari goes through this mating fever that causes rage and destruction until they find a mate or are killed before they do harm to your people. Since you all don’t have females, you have to take this plant, which soothes the fever and calms the anger. Do I have it right so far?”

I nod.

“If one of us becomes a bride to one of you, the mating fever and all its side effects go away. I’m assuming because the couple will be”—Quinn’s cheeks darken—“fucking as married people do.”

“Yes.”

“But there is also a chance that this bride has no affect on the fever itself, but rather is the cure for the so called madness only? These types of women are unlikely, though.”

“That is correct.” She appears to understand, which I am grateful for.

Quinn nods slowly and I can tell she is still processing things. “That still doesn’t fully answer my first question. From your reaction to me in the garden the other day, it’s clear you were under the influence of the mating fever. If this special plant is something every Bohnari takes, which I assume includes you, why isn’t it working for you?”

How will she respond when she learns the truth? It is my greatest fear and yet also my greatest hope. My mother’s voice attempts to work its way into my mind, but I knock it away. I don’t want her to come in between Quinn and me. If Quinn is going to turn me away, I want it to be her choice and not because I let my mother’s insidiousness destroy my chances.

“I believe it is because you are my heart’s fire. The mating fever has been burning out of control within me for days, and I feared the madness would take over, but it hasn’t. Even after I stopped taking the kanet powder. I needed to know.”

Quinn jerks upright. “You did what?”

“I stopped taking the kanet powder.”

She rattles her head. “Why would you do that? What would have happened if it didn’t work? Would we be having this conversation or would you be dead?”

“Most likely I would be dead.”

Quinn jumps to her feet and whirls on me. “For fuck’s sake, what were you thinking?”

I rise to my feet as well. “I suspected you were my heart’s fire. I was mostly

confident that I would not be consumed by the fever or the madness.”

“Mostly confident? You were ‘mostlyconfident’?” Her voice rises with each word until the last comes out on a yell.

Within two steps, I am in front of her and gently clasp her face between my palms. “I amfullyconfident that you are my heart’s fire, Quinn. After the kiss we shared, there wasn’t a single doubt in my mind. But I needed to prove to you that it wasn’t only the mating fever that made me kiss you. It wasn’t because you were just any female. You weren’t merelyconvenient. I kissed you because I could do nothing else but that. You are the only female who makes my body burn out of control, but eases the destructive and chaotic thoughts running rampant in my head.”

Because sheisthe one and only female for me, I claim Quinn’s lips with mine. She answers me in full with no hesitation. I slip my tongue inside her mouth and glide it alongside hers. The taste of her is as sweet as her scent, and I drink it all down.

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She wraps her arms around me and the coolness of them bleeds through the fabric of my shirt and soothes the heat burning through my body wherever she touches. The contrasting sensation of heat and cold goes straight to my cock and it hardens beneath my trousers.

With a soft, breathy moan, Quinn moves closer and rubs herself against my thickness. I walk her backwards until she collides with the sofa and falls onto it. I cover her body with mine, never once breaking the kiss. She quenches the thirst the fever brings.

I had no idea how desperate for this I was. I would die without another taste of her.

I rock my hips and she spreads her thighs as best she can so I settle farther into the nest between them. The heat of her cunt burns through the clothing that separates us. I curse the fabric that keeps me from skin on skin contact. I want to feel her naked flesh. I want to see it. Is her cunt the same pinkish hue as her cheeks have turned?

What about her nipples? I understand they come in various shades from the palest pink to the darkest brown. A need like no other fills me to know the color of Quinn's. Is she as sweet there as she is everywhere? Will her nectar quench my thirst as well?

I want to know these things more than I ever thought possible. Nearly as much as I want to sink my cock into her, I want to sink my fangs as well. Every time another male sees her, he'll know she is mine. I want her to bite me. To mark me just the same. I will proudly show it off so that every person knows I belong to her equally.

“You are perfection.” I kiss along Quinn's jawline and nuzzle the curve of her neck.

She tilts her head to give me greater access. “No, I’m not.”

I nip at her flesh but don’t break the skin. “Don’t argue with me my heart’s fire or I will have to prove my words in ways I’m not sure you’re ready for.”

“You have no idea what I’m ready for.” Her breaths skim across my face and she arches her lower body to press herself harder into me.

The groan that rumbles out of me is rough and feral. My claws threaten to extrude and I have to will them back for fear I might hurt Quinn’s delicate body. “Why don’t you tell me, then?”

Never before I have been teased and tempted by a female. Not during any of our travels while searching for a cure for the mating fever, on any of the various planets we visited. As much as I admire several of the human females that reside on Tavikh, none of them called to me the way Quinn does. None soothed the beast roaring in my head.

“How about I show you, instead?” She pushes against my shoulders and I draw back from her.

I let her slide out from beneath me and she goes to her knees on the floor.

“Sit back and spread your legs.” Her seductive voice washes over me and I do as she instructs.

My breath catches when she scoots herself forward and her hands go to the fastener of my trousers. With surprising ease, she undoes it and my cock springs free. Quinn’s eyes widen as she takes in my length. A sudden bout of nerves hits me. Am I strange looking to her? Is my cock so much different than a human’s?

“Wow.” She licks her lips and pre-come leaks from the tip.

“Is that a good wow or a bad one?” I try to keep my voice light.

She lifts her gaze to meet mine and a smile grows wide on her mouth. “It’s a good wow. A very,verygood wow.”

Chapter21

Quinn

This isn’t the first blowjob I’ve given, but I already know it’s going to be one I enjoy more than any other. Horek’s cock is only similar to a human’s in that it’s thick and proudly juts out from his hairless body. I highly doubt he needs to shave just to make his dick look bigger. The raised ridge that spirals around it from base to tip has small rounded spikes that have my pussy clenching, although I’m unsure if it’s in need or fear. Are they soft or rigid? What will they feel like rubbing along my inside walls?

The Commander gives me the impression of man wrung far too tightly. Although his intensity is part of his charm, I’d like to see him lose that tight control he maintains. A small amount of creamy pre-come glistens within the divot at the end of his perfect—and just slightly above average—length. My curiosity runs rampant at how Horek will taste. Not wanting to wait another minute to find out, I grip his hardness and lap up the essence.

Holy shit. An explosion of flavors linger on my tongue, but the most prevalent one is something sweet, but tangy. I haven’t eaten enough real food to give it a proper name. His entire body jerks, and I have to draw back slightly so he doesn’t ram himself down my throat before I’m ready. Not that I’ve ever been ready to deep throat a guy, but I’m not saying I’d rule it out.

“My gods.”

It's more like a guttural moan than a curse and I love the fact I'm the one who caused it. Along with it is a tearing sound. I glance over to find his claws have punctured the sofa cushion; the feral response of an untamed beast. I shiver, and definitely not in fear. He'd never hurt me. Something I just instinctively know.

“Has anyone ever done this to you before?” The question slips out before I realize I don't know if I want to hear the answer.

Horek rattles his head so fast I'm surprised it doesn't fly off his neck. “Never.”

Immense relief fills me and I don't suspect for a second he's lying to me. The Commander is too honorable for that.

“Good.” A possessive feeling runs through me. I'm the first to give him this kind of pleasure. I trace the ridge with the tip of my tongue and am pleased to discover the spikes that cover it are pliable, like a soft cartilage. My damp pussy grows wetter, preparing itself for the powerful sensation they're going to wreak on it. I can hardly wait.

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More come spills from Horek's cock, and I take the head in my mouth and capture it between the roof of my mouth and tongue. I suck for everything I'm worth, doing my best to drink down every drop. More guttural growls erupt from his chest, and the vibrations travel straight to my clit.

I rub my thighs together to ease the ache, but between the sounds Horek's making and the intense pleasure I'm getting from the taste of him, it's doing nothing to satisfy me. Pure need takes over, and I slide my free hand inside my pants. I've barely grazed my clit when my arm is pulled away, and I'm being lifted. Before I can call out or even draw a breath, I'm once again lying on my back on the sofa, and Horek looms over me. He thrusts his pelvis, and a small tremor ripples through me at the contact against my primed and sensitive nerves.

Heat pours off him, and those flames flicker in the depths of his eyes again.

"Your orgasm is mine. I'm the one who gets to touch you and bring you to pleasure." The feral beast has returned.

I shudder with arousal and more wetness soaks my panties. "But I wanted to make you feel good."

"Nothing will make me feel better, my heart's fire, than for you to fall apart beneath me. But it will be by my hands, my mouth, or my cock. Do you understand?"

If a guy from back on Earth spoke to me like this, he'd been tasting the balls I rammed up into his throat. But holy fuck, hearing Horek say it fans the desire coursing through my veins. I nod my assent, which apparently doesn't satisfy him. He

yanks my hands above my head, locks them in a tight, but gentle grip, and rocks harder against me. I moan with ecstasy.

“Tell me with your words, heart’s fire. I want to hear you acknowledge that I am the male who will bring you to release over and over again.”

“Y—yes.” That single syllable becomes two as I release it on a breathy exhale. “Only you.”

“Say my name. Who controls your pleasure?”

I swallow. “Horek.”

“Again.”

“Horek.” My voice is stronger this time.

“That’s right.” He releases the hold he has on my hands. “Keep them there.”

Unbidden, I do exactly what he says. I can’t take my gaze off him while he sits upright and stares down at me. His cock is still free and my mouth thirsts for another taste of it. With far more practiced ease than I demonstrated, Horek undoes my pants and tugs them down my legs, bringing my panties with them.

The flames in his eyes flare higher and the scales lining the top of his shoulders darken another shade. Are the Bohnari descended from the mythical dragon? Or an alien version of it? Is that why they burn hot and why fire shines from his gaze?

Any care I have for the answers disappears when Horek spreads my legs with his large hands and exposes me completely. There’s no hiding from him. He inhales deeply with his eyes closed and shudders. When he opens them, an inferno burns in

their depths.

“It’s my turn to taste you now.”

He doesn’t wait for me to accept or reject his claim. Instead, Horek feasts. For a man who doesn’t have first-hand experience with human anatomy, he knows exactly what he’s doing. My toes curl, and my back arches off the cushion. Unlike guys I dated in the past, he finds my clitoris right away. I cry out as the tension builds. The tingling intensifies, and I chase the orgasm I’m standing on the edge of.

Horek plunges his tongue deep inside me and a ripple of pleasure travels along my interior walls. He flicks it against a sensitive spot, and I nearly combust. I desperately need an anchor. Something to hold onto and ground myself. I happen to choose the shorn lengths of the horns on either side of his head.

I clench my fists around them and use the leverage to drag Horek closer and bury his face deeper against my center. There’s a sting of pain that’s quickly soothed by his tongue. Did he bite me? Why is just the thought of that hot? It doesn’t matter, every thought is erased from my brain when he latches onto my clit again and sucks. Hard. The precipice I’d been standing on crumbles, and then I’m soaring.

A scream of pleasure tears from my throat. I’m not even recovered when a large rigid object presses against my opening. My gaze flies up to meet Horek’s.

“Tell me you don’t want me to breed you. Tell me now, or I won’t stop until your belly is swollen from my seed.”

I know I should be putting a stop to this. It’s moving so fast. We haven’t talked about our future or what his intentions are. There are so many obstacles we’ll need to overcome. I mean, we don’t even know each other. But all my body wants is to be fucked by Horek. I’m sure I’ll give myself a strong talking-to when this is over,

but I'll worry about that later.

“Do it.”

“Say the words, my heart's fire. I don't want there to be any misunderstandings later. I want to hear you say it.” He inches forward only a fraction, stretching me, but then stops.

I whimper in need. “Please.”

“Say it,” he commands again and sinks another inch deeper.

“Fuck me. Breed me.”

With a single, powerful thrust, Horek seats himself fully inside me. The protrusions along his ridged cock drag across the sensitive flesh of my inner walls in a way that has me seeing stars. Colors burst in my vision and I'm transported to another world. For the second time.

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It's like I'm free-falling and waiting for him to catch me. Which he does easily. Horek fits perfectly, like he was formed only for me. It's utterly sublime. Lips meet mine. He kisses the hell out of me, and although it feels like we've done everything backwards, I wouldn't have it any other way.

He thrusts his tongue in my mouth and mimics the movement of his hips. The sounds Horek draws from me are unlike any I've ever made before. They make me feel sexy, slutty, and needy. What he's doing to me isn't enough.

"More." I'm not above begging, apparently.

"Anything for my heart's fire." He hits a spot inside me so deep I didn't know was possible. Then he does it again. And again.

There's a sudden urge to pee and I nearly panic. That doesn't stop him. Horek continues pounding into me. I want to tell him to wait. To give me a chance to try and make the urge go away, but he's an animal with a single focus. He reaches between us and plays my clit like a finely tuned instrument. A flood of wetness gushes out of me against my will and my cheeks heat with mortification.

Oh my god, did I just pee myself or did I squirt?

Straight on its heels is a powerful orgasm and it no longer matters. It crashes over me like a tsunami. I'm battered, but not bruised. The couch beneath me is utterly soaked. Please don't be pee. At last Horek releases a guttural sound that reverberates through me and sends another tremor down my spine. He throws his head back and roars. The muscles in his neck are drawn taut and his arms shake like he's struggling

to hold himself above me.

The seed erupts from his cock and coats my inner walls. Horek rolls his pelvis and I swear he settles even deeper, almost locking himself within my core. Like he doesn't want any of his come to escape. Maybe he doesn't. He near collapses on top of me—still half hard—and the weight of him warms my body.

“That was beautiful,” he rasps against my ear. “You are beautiful.”

“You make me feel that way.” Horek raises himself up onto his elbows and stares down at me with a questioning look. “Has no one else?”

I shrug a little self-consciously. He withdraws his cock from me and tucks himself back into his pants. I move to get up and grab mine he tossed away, but his palm between my breasts halts me.

“Lie still. I'll be right back.” He walks toward an open door off the living area and from here I see a bed.

Seconds later, there's the sound of running water. It shuts off and Horek returns with a cloth in his hand. To my surprise, he cleans me. Or at least, he wipes my inner thighs. His heated gaze zeroes in on my center and the flames in his eyes, which I'd thought extinguished, flare to life. He blinks, and they die to only a flicker, but remain burning.

He lifts me off the couch, settles back onto it away from the giant wet spot we left, and sets me across his thighs still bare-assed. I squirm but his firm grip on my hip makes me freeze.

“Now, tell me why no one else has made my heart's fire feel beautiful.”

Chapter22

Horek

I wish for nothing more than to revel in my mating with Quinn, but to see her so uncertain about her beauty makes me wish to travel to her Earth and destroy any male who ever made her feel unworthy.

“You don’t really want to hear about the men I’ve been with, do you?” She cocks her head in clear disbelief.

“Gods, no.”

Quinn snorts. “Didn’t think so.”

“But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to know how it’s possible that I am the first to make you feel beautiful. What is wrong with the males of your planet?”

She laughs. “I don’t think we have enough time for that.”

“Whatever it is, they are the ones who have lost out. I will be sure to tell you for the rest of our days how beautiful I find you.” I will worship my heart’s fire so that she will never doubt my feelings.

Quinn glances away and nibbles on her bottom lip before returning her gaze to me. “We should probably talk.”

The tone of her words give me pause. “Are you regretting what happened between us?”

“What?” She draws her head back. “No, but there are still a lot of things we need to

discuss.”

“Such as?”

“Such as this whole heart’s fire thing and what it means. Also—and maybe most importantly—what’s next?”

“It means you are my bride. My mate.” I thought she knew this. “It means that we will have a mating ceremony and bring forth the next generation.”

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Quinn once again bites her lip. “We don’t really know each other. Or...love each other. Not yet anyway. It’s too soon.”

I have to remind myself that she isn’t Bohnari and doesn’t understand our beliefs and customs. “Being my heart’s fire is far more than being in love. It transcends any emotion. It is the very essence of who we are. Who I am. You are now a part of me, just as I am a part of you.”

Quinn lays her hand on my cheek. “I understand that is how it works for your people, but there’s more to becoming a mate for humans. For us, it is about love. About emotion. It’s about being with the person we can’t live without, nor do we want to. It’s about feeling safe. Secure. Protected. It’s wanting that person’s happiness more than our own.”

“I feel all of those things for you.” I still don’t understand. “It is the way of the heart’s fire.”

“Except I’m human. We don’t have a heart’s fire.” Quinn moves her touch from my face to my chest. “Not the way Bohnari do.”

“What about what we just did?”

“It was incredible. The most wonderful thing I’ve ever done and have no regrets about. But I still want to get to know you. To spend time with you before we decide to commit to the rest of our lives to each other.”

Her request—while not unreasonable—doesn’t make sense to me, but for Quinn, I

will be patient. I will learn the ways of the humans. She is my heart's fire, and no length of time will change that.

"Ask me anything, and I will answer in truth."

I appear to have startled her, because she opens and closes her mouth multiple times. "Maybe we should continue this conversation with me wearing pants."

"Except I like you bare. I can feel the heat of your cunt and know it's because my seed is stored inside it. Even now, a child could be forming. Our child." The thought pleases more than I ever thought it would. I didn't want a bride, but I will kill anyone who tries to take her or our youngling away from me.

Quinn's cheeks brighten in color. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. People don't always get pregnant the first time they have sex."

"Then we will do it again and again until I have bred you and your belly is round and swollen with our young." I approve highly of this plan. Even now, my cock hasn't lost its hardness and twitches in agreement. I want to fill Quinn with my seed until it drips down her thighs. I want every Bohnari to smell it in her and know that this stunning creature is mine in ways she will never be theirs.

A tremor ripples through her, and the fragrant scent of her arousal grows intensely stronger. Her chest rises and falls in a rapid pace that tells me she is wholly affected by my words. I slip my hand between her legs. She parts them, and I strum the swollen nub that I discovered is the source of immense pleasure for her.

"You desire that too, don't you, my heart's fire?" I swirl my finger around that kernel of flesh and Quinn makes a ragged, breathy sound that shoots straight to my sac. "Tell me that is what you wish as well. For me to coat the inside of your cunt with so much of my essence that it will take root. You will nourish our youngling both before

and after her birth, and she will grow to be as beautiful and as strong as her mother.”

I slip two fingers inside Quinn’s still-tight passage and coax more pleasure from her. She rides my hand, taking from me what she desires most until her body spasms and she clenches down on my digits, squeezing them with her inner muscles. Her cries of ecstasy ring out. They are the most exquisite sound, especially because I did that for her. Several more small tremors quake through her cunt until at, last, she stills.

Quinn breathes hard, and she lays her head on my shoulder. “It’s really unfair of you to use my pleasure against me.” There is no heat in her accusation.

“Do not think I’ll play fair when it comes to you, Quinn. Neither of us may have known it at the time, but I am who you came to Bohna for.”

“You and Olivia better not gloat about the fact.”

A rare smile creeps onto my lips. “I can’t speak for your friend, but I wouldn’t dare.”

Quinn nudges me with her elbow. “Yeah, right.”

“Now that we have that settled, you still have not asked me a question about myself.” I will never tell her an untruth.

“Fine. Are your parents still living? Any siblings? Did you always want to be a commander?”

The first is not an easy one. While my mother still physically lives, any emotions she might have once felt for anyone other than herself are no longer. I would consider her dead inside. “My father died many moon cycles ago. I was still a youngling and only have a few memories of him. I was an only child, although my cousin is as close as any brother could ever be.”

Quinn tilts her head. “Have I met your cousin?”

I nod. “It is Alik.”

Her eyes widen. “Your cousin is the prince of Bohna?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my god. What does that make you, then? Should I have been bowing or curtsying or falling to my knees before you all this time ?” She makes to slide off me for a second instance, but I’m not having it.

“Cease your movement or I will tie you to my bed so you can’t escape me.”

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Quinn freezes and her musky scent grows strong again. Interesting. Perhaps the idea isn't so abhorrent to her.

"That is better. For now." I pause to let that sink in. "And Alik being my cousin makes me nothing more than cousin to the prince and his heir. If he were to die before me. Which will not happen. The only time you will be on your knees before me is when my cock is in your mouth."

Quinn shifts just slightly and I mimic my cousin's imperious brow raise. She instantly stops, but I can tell how much she fights against it. "You're a bully."

I kiss the tip of her nose. "Do you want to hear the rest of my answers or not?"

"Fine." Her little huff after is adorable.

"I always wanted to be in the guards, but never had hopes of achieving the rank of commander. My father had been a lower ranking guard, which meant I would be as well." I pause to remember when Garek pushed me to become more. A fact I will forever be grateful for.

"You still haven't mentioned your mother. You don't have to talk about her, if it's too painful?" Quinn strokes my chest in the spot right over my heart.

"My mother is...difficult."

"So, she's still alive."

“Yes. Queen Veroneek and she are sisters, but the two are nothing alike. In fact, I often wonder how they could possibly be related. We aren’t on speaking terms. At least, not until she wants to remind me of all my flaws. Then she makes it a priority to travel from her home in Haveeka to list them all so I don’t ever forget.” My gaze loses focus and I stare out at nothing. “I should warn you, she’ll be extremely unhappy to find out about us. Or at least to have her suspicions confirmed that I’ve met my heart’s fire.”

Quinn’s forehead wrinkles. “Why would she be suspicious of anything? It’s not as though I’ve ever met her.”

“Because she showed up here announced and recognized the signs that mating fever had hit me.”

“Oh,” she breathes out. “I see.”

“She will just have to deal with the fact.” I’ll make sure of it. “No more talk of my mother. We have much better things we can discuss if you’d like. You have not told me about yourself.”

“Like you, my father is deceased. He died in a horrible accident right in front of me when I was sixteen.”

I pull Quinn tighter against my chest and brush my lips over her temple. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

She raises and lowers her shoulder. “It was a long time ago, but thank you.”

“And your mother?”

For a long moment, she doesn’t reply. Then I hear a sniffle and a single droplet of

water splashes onto my arm that rests over her thighs. Quinn swipes across her eyes with her palms.

“Sorry, I just really miss her. She’s the one who entered my name in the lottery and pushed me to come here when I told her I was refusing. In addition to Olivia, my mother is my best friend. Leaving her behind was the most painful thing I’ve ever done.” She sobs softly.

“Did you not want a mate?” Have I been so concerned with myself that I have disregarded Quinn’s wishes?

She shakes her head. “It wasn’t that. At least not entirely. I just didn’t want to have to leave my mom to get one, you know?”

My heart hurts for my mate. No one—not even my own father—cared for me the way she cares about her mother. “I am not sorry you came to Bohna, but I am sorry you and your mother have been separated.”

Quinn sniffs again. “Thank you. At least I’m able to talk with her over the comm. She and I actually spoke yesterday.” She pauses. “I told her about you. About the mating fever and the kiss.”

I draw my head back slightly. “You did?”

“Yeah.”

A strange nervousness settles within me. “What did she say?”What didyousay?

“She told me there were worse reasons to choose a guy than him being a passionate kisser who sets my blood on fire.”

An unfamiliar smile tugs at my lips. “I think I like your mother.”

Quinn chuckles. “I think she’d like you, too.”

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“I am glad. Of course, I hope that means it’s because her daughter also likes me.”

She stares up at me and cradles my jaw in her palm. “She does.”

Chapter23

Quinn

The last two weeks have been nothing short of extraordinary, at least between Horek and me. Things had been awkward with Bannik after he caught me coming out of Horek’s rooms after that first night together. In addition to that, the whole city—the whole planet, in fact—were grieving the loss of one of their people.

Slowly, though, things have been getting back to normal. Well, if we don’t count the tension that’s hung in the air while Alik waits to hear whether the rebels refuse to take responsibility for the death of Konek or that Janik is willing to talk. Whispers have been traveling through the city about impending war. I’m still a little uneasy about the fact that we were talking to the leader of the rebels that day in the market. God, Olivia even threatened to knee him in the balls.

“When are you and Horek going to just move in together already? Better yet, when are the two of you going to get married?” Olivia turns onto her stomach on the bed next to me and rests her chin on folded hands. “You guys are practically there. I mean, you’re at his place more than you are here.”

Devon and Lindsey sit on pillows on the floor, eating the lunch the cook prepared for them and stare up at us. It’s clear by their expressions, they’re anxiously waiting on

my reply.

“I’m only spending nights there. The rest of the time I’m hanging out with the three of you. At least, when none of you are out on a date,” I point out. “Maybe I should be the one asking you all when you’re finally going to go on more than a single date with a guy? None of you have had a second date. Why is that?”

Olivia pushes up on her elbows. “Stop deflecting and trying to change the subject. This intervention is about you, not us.”

I snort. “I didn’t realize this was an intervention.”

Liv rolls her eyes and maneuvers around until she’s sitting upright. “Of course it’s an intervention. You and your Commander have been banging every night like it’s going out style. It’s also more than obvious you have feelings for him. At least it is to me.”

“So obvious,” Devon and Lindsey echo, so in unison, it’s a little scary.

“See.” Olivia gestures in their direction. “We all see it. Why can’t you?”

It’s not that I can’t, because I do have feelings for Horek. I’m just worried they’re not enough. Or maybe that I’m not enough. I still haven’t wrapped my head around the heart’s fire thing. Nor do I know how deeply I should trust in it. I know when we first arrived, Johnna said Bohnari mate for life. Why is that so hard for me to understand?

Olivia clasps my hand. “You’re doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

She smiles softly. “Overthinking.”

I can't help but chuckle. "Fine. Maybe I am a little."

"Eh, maybe more than a little." She bobs her head side to side.

"It's hard not to. Everything is moving so fast that I don't have time to think like a normal person."

"Personally," Lindsey speaks up, "I think your whirlwind relationship is kind of romantic. As scared as I'd been about coming here, what woman doesn't want to be swept off her feet by a man who is so clearly obsessed with her? Not in a creepy, stalker way, either. A passionate, I will kill anyone who hurts you kind of obsession. Anyone with eyes can see Horek is entranced with you. No other woman exists for him but you. We know it, and you know it."

Devon and Olivia both "awwww" dramatically with their hands on their chests. I throw my pillows at them, which they catch easily despite their laughing.

"All three of you are fired as my friends, and I'm looking for new ones starting today."

This only makes them laugh harder. Olivia scrambles forward and tackles me onto my back.

"You wouldn't dare."

I'm struggling to control my laughter, but I manage to sputter, "Don't tempt me."

Lindsey and Devon jump to their feet and join us in a giant pile of bodies.

"Okay, okay, I give up." As if I would ever find friends as amazing as these.

We carefully disentangle ourselves but remain lying close together on the bed. I swivel my head to each side so I can look over at each of them. “You know I love you guys.”

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Olivia hugs me. “We love you, too.”

A knock on the door brings our heads up.

“Are you expecting someone?” Devon asks.

I shake my head and climb out from between them. “The only person who ever comes to see me is Horek, and he’s out on patrol.”

I walk to the door to peer through the view finder. To my surprise, it is Horek standing on the other side. I trigger the mechanism and it slides open.

“Greetings, my heart’s fire.” He steps forward and kisses me gently.

“Hi. Is everything okay?” I know what his job means to him. Only something important would pull him away from his duty.

He strokes my hair off my forehead with a gentle smile that’s been coming a little easier to him since we’ve been together. “Everything is fine, but I have something to show you, if you are able to come with me.”

I exchange glances with my friends, then take the hand Horek extends. We head down the walkway to the lift and step inside.

“Are you sure everything’s fine?” I ask. “This feels a little ominous.”

He pulls me in for a hug and holds me tightly, just the way I love. “Would I tell you

an untruth?”

I snuggle in closer. “No, I don’t suppose you would.”

“Then trust me when I promise that nothing is wrong. In fact, I’m quite positive when you see what I have to show you, everything will be perfect. At least, that’s my hope.” He kisses the crown of my head.

My heart flips at this sign of affection. Horek’s never shy with PDA, a fact I’ve discovered I’m extremely happy about. I didn’t think I’d be comfortable with it, but it comes so easily with him. Maybe that’s one more sign things are exactly how they’re supposed to be.

The lift bell dings, and the door slides open. Sunlight filters in through the one-way glass of the atrium adding some heat to it. As I always do here, I admire all the potted trees that are strategically placed throughout the spacious area. Some of the women asked the guards for vases and they sit scattered around on tables filled with bright and colorful flowers. It’s created such a warm and welcoming sight to come home to.

Horek and I stroll outside with our fingers threaded together. I breathe in the clean air—another thing I always do—and take in this city, and planet, I now call home. Of course, I still miss my mom like mad, but we talk as often as possible.

“You know, I’ve never asked if it gets cold here.” I guess I’ve been too busy with other things.

“We get what the humans call snow on the other side of the mountain range. Temperatures do drop slightly in Preska, but it’s mostly temperate because of the rainforest. It gets cold in other cities, but not enough to bring snow, only rain.”

“Sounds lovely. The temperate weather, I mean.” New St. Louis was freezing in the

winter and hotter than the sun in the summer, even if we rarely saw the blazing thing. Not with all the pollution. “I think that’s something I’ll enjoy.”

“I hope that’s not the only thing you’ll enjoy.” Horek grins, and I love how much less severe it makes him look. He’ll never lose it entirely—that’s just not him—but I don’t mind. I like his seriousness. It makes the times he laughs and appears at ease that much more special.

Finally, it hits me that we’re almost at the palace. I furrow my brows. What are we doing here? Guards dip their head in acknowledgement as we pass, and Horek holds open the lift door for me to go in first.

“Did the queen or Alik summon us?”

He glances down at me with a mysterious smirk but doesn’t answer. This is only the third time I’ve been within the palace walls. Queen Veroneek invited all the bride prospects to another banquet late last week so we—they—could dine and dance with the males again. Horek didn’t leave my side the entire time. Thankfully, no explosions or disasters ruined the evening. In fact, a few matches were made that night, and the queen is already planning the mating ceremonies.

We make our way through the palace. I’m as lost as I was the first time we were here. Every corridor resembles the last, and the place is so massive I’d never find my way to any location on my own. At last, we come to a stop in front of a set of double doors. Horek doesn’t bother knocking before opening them.

Inside the large room are two thrones on a raised dais. Standing near them is Queen Veroneek. Alik is nowhere to be seen.

“Ah, there you are. Welcome, my dear Quinn.” The queen strides forward and lightly kisses my cheek.

She's genuinely kind, but I'm the only one she treats with this level of familiarity. I assume it's because of my relationship with her nephew. Jesus, at some point, I'll be the queen's niece, even if only by marriage. The thought almost makes me break out into hives.

“Good afternoon, Your Highness.”

Queen Veroneek wags her finger at me. “What did I tell you about that? We're practically family, so there's no need to stand on such ridiculous formalities.”

My cheeks heat, but I smile at her. “Yes, ma'am.”

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She shudders. “I’m not sure that’s any better.”

I press my lips together to stop from laughing.

“Did Horek tell you the reason for your visit today?”

I glance between the two of them. “He didn’t.”

The queen claps her hands and laughs with pure giddiness. “Good. I do so love surprises.”

At least one of us does. She gestures to one of the guards I didn’t notice standing in the corner. He pivots and walks through a side door. My confusion grows the longer we all remain still and...waiting. Several minutes pass before the same door opens again and the guard comes back in. Only, he’s not alone.

My heart freezes in my chest, and I’m scared to blink for fear the woman in front of me is nothing more than a mirage that will disappear the second my eyes close. I stumble a couple steps forward and tentatively reach my arm out. Am I asleep and dreaming? Or am I just imagining this entire scene?

“Mom?”

“Hello, my love.”

Hearing her voice releases me from whatever trance I’m in, and I close the last bit of distance between us. We throw our arms around each other, and I can’t tell which of

us is crying harder.

“Mama.”

“Oh, Quinn, baby, I’ve missed you so much.”

“I’ve missed you more.”

Those are the last words either of us can say until our sobs slow and we’ve soaked each other’s shirts at the shoulder. My tears haven’t quite dried up, but I finally stop bawling and draw back only enough that I can look her in the eyes.

“How?”

She glances over my shoulder before returning her gaze to me. “You have a male who loves you very much.”

I don’t release my hold on my mom, but I pivot a half turn, bringing her with me, and face Horek. “You did this?”

He nods. “With the queen’s help. I know how much you were hurting from missing your mother, and I hated it. If there was something I could do to take your pain away I wanted to do it. So, I spoke with Queen Veroneek and she agreed to send a ship for your mother and bring her here. Permanently if she chooses to stay.”

“Oh my god.” I rush forward and jump into Horek’s arms, wrapping myself so tightly around him it’s almost as if I become a part of him. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“You are most welcome.”

I draw my upper body back. The flame burns low in his gaze. “This means everything to me.”

He cradles the side of my face in his warm hand. “I was more than happy to do this for you. I love you, my heart’s fire.”

The truth hits me then. I’ve been ignoring this feeling because I thought it was too soon, but the powerful emotion fills me to overflowing, and there’s no stopping it.

“I love you, too.”

Epilogue

Horek

The palace staff and its residents are buzzing with excitement, but none more so than the queen. She’s been planning for this day, and nothing and no one is going to ruin it for her. Or me.

Today is my mating ceremony with Quinn. Soon after her mother arrived, she agreed to become my bride in truth. An event I never expected to occur before I met her, but one that now I couldn’t imagine not having. My heart’s fire and I are finally standing before the entire city and pledging our commitment to one another, much to my mother’s utter revulsion and refusal to step foot in the palace.

It is better this way. She would only bring hatred and disdain with her, and I won’t subject Quinn to that. Once was more times than there should have been, but my mother chose to confront my heart’s fire when I wasn’t with her. She’s lucky, because if I had been present, I’m not sure I would have been able to control my rage. Even against the female who gave birth to me.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Alik strides into the room dressed in his most formal attire, but looking haggard.

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The mating fever is burning out of control within him. I fear it's only a matter of time before it consumes him, and I'll be forced to do what I have to, no matter how much it will destroy me. I'm already imagining the devastating effect it will have on my aunt.

"There is nothing more I want in this world."

"I am happy for you, cousin." Alik claps my shoulder.

The urge to caution him about what he's doing to himself rises, but I know it's no use. No one on Bohna is more stubborn than my cousin, and it's becoming clear he's determined to let the madness take over. I don't want this day ruined with an argument or harsh words spoken between us.

"Thank you." I reach into my pocket and finger the item stowed inside.

"Are you ready to make Quinn your mate?"

"Yes."

"Let us go then. Your heart's fire awaits."

Together, we leave his rooms where I got dressed and head to the coronation room where the mating ceremony will take place. Everyone from the High Council is in attendance, as well as all the human females and half the population of Preska. A few high-ranking officials from the various cities around the planet are also present.

While I'm not royalty by title, I am technically Alik's heir, and nephew to the queen which offers me a few benefits the rest of the citizens don't have. That includes a royal mating ceremony and all the pomp and circumstance that comes with it. If it were up to me, Quinn and I would have a private ceremony with only the two of us, Alik, Queen Veroneek, and Quinn's mother. But this is for my heart's fire. She deserves the best.

I might also want to present my mate in front of our entire population, so they know who she belongs to.

My fangs ache with the continued need to bite her. I've been holding off until we were officially mated, even though Quinn's begged me more than once to mark her. It's taken all I have not to comply with both our wishes, but I've also enjoyed keeping her on the edge of want.

Alik and I enter the coronation room and head to the front where the queen awaits. Conversation quiets, and a stillness falls over the room. Moments later, two guards open the doors at the back of the room, and in walks my heart's fire with her mother at her side and the largest smile across her lips. Our eyes meet and everyone else disappears.

I can't take my gaze off Quinn as she strides forward looking stunning in her traditional Bohnari garb. The shimmering teal and copper fabric encases her body perfectly and accentuates all her curves. Enough of her flesh is bared to tempt and tease. Her hair is plaited and coiled up on the top of her head in a fancy design that showcases her long, slender neck and taunts me by exposing the exact spot where I wish to mark her. My body heats and I can feel the fever's effects, the feral need to mate, but I control it.

It takes far too long for her to reach me, but at long last, she does. Tears sparkle in her eyes, and if not for the fact she told me they are tears of happiness, I would be

worried.

“You are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen.”

“So are you.”

I’m not, but she believes it to be true. My face is too harsh and severe to be beautiful, but Quinn has said it’s a face she loves to gaze upon, so I don’t refute her words.

Queen Veroneek speaks, but whatever she says is lost to me. My sole focus is on my heart’s fire. The ceremony continues until, at last, the queen clears her throat. I blink to attention and glance at her. She nods and I reach into my and withdraw the item I’ve had in my possession for weeks.

“My heart’s fire, please accept this mating gift as a sign of my devotion.” I reach forward and clasp the pikela stone necklace around Quinn’s neck.

She glances down at it and gasps. Her head snaps up and she lays her palm over the piece of jewelry she admired in the market square the day of her arrival on our planet.

“How?” She whispers. “When?”

“The moment I saw you staring at it, I knew it belonged to you. Like Olivia said that day, there is no one else it was made for. I went back later and purchased it, because deep down, I think I knew you were my mate and I wanted you to have it.”

The happy tears spill down her cheeks and she rises up on her toes to kiss me. “I love you so much. Thank you for the gift. I’ll treasure it forever.”

“As I will treasure you.”

With that, Queen Veroneek finishes the ceremony, and at long last, Quinn is mine. The crowd cheers and her friends and mother rush to embrace her and offer their congratulations. My aunt looks on with no small amount of affection and pride.

“Let us depart to the banquet room for the feast,” she calls out.

Everyone slowly disperses and a small contingent of guards leads the people out of the room and in the direction of the celebration. Quinn, her mother, and friends—each with happy tears in their eyes—all remain behind with the queen, Alik, and me. My aunt embraces my heart’s fire.

“I am so happy to have you as part of the family.”

“Thank you so much.”

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The queen nods her head and then she and Alik depart as well. My hand finds Quinn's, and I thread my fingers through hers. Olivia approaches and she fingers the necklace. She lifts her gaze to Quinn's.

"You know, I'm not one to gloat, but I told you that you would look amazing in this thing."

My heart's fire shakes her head and laughs. "We both know you've been doing nothing but gloating the last few weeks."

Olivia sucks in a shocked breath. "Not me."

Quinn embraces her within her free arm. "I love you, Liv."

"Love you, too, babe."

Our group leaves the coronation room as well and makes its way to the banquet hall. Just as we reach it, Olivia stops short.

"Crap, I forgot something in my apartment."

Their friend Devon gapes. "What in the world did you forget that you need this very second?"

Olivia fists her hips. "A mating present."

Quinn lays her hand on her friend's arm. "You didn't have to get me anything, but

since I know you're going to say, of course you did, I won't push the issue. Can you give it to me tomorrow?"

"Let's just say it's something you two are definitely going to want tonight." Olivia does something entirely human with her eyebrows that makes no sense to me, but it must to the other humans because my heart's fire turns red and glances at her mother before hissing at her friend.

"Oh my god, I'm going to kill you."

Unrepentant, Olivia grins madly. "You can thank me later. Look, I'll take a guard with me and be right back."

Before anyone can argue with her, she waves and takes off, pausing only long enough to speak to one of the males. The two head down the corridor before turning a corner and disappearing from sight.

"She'll be fine." I reassure Quinn.

"I know."

We finally enter the banquet hall where everyone awaits us. I guide my mate and her family to the head table where the queen and Alik are already seated. We all settle into our places while the staff serve us our meal. I can't stop touching Quinn, like I'm reassuring myself she's truly mine.

The musicians play and even while we eat, people come up to us and offer their congratulations. My mate smiles and accepts each one with kindness and grace, while I wish for them all to leave us alone. I want Quinn all to myself. She leans over and converses with her mother often. The happiness on both their faces is worth everything to me. I'm glad Cora chose to stay on Bohna. I know it pleases my mate as well.

We finish eating, although far too much food remains on Quinn's plate due to the constant interruption by our people. I'll make sure a meal is delivered to my quarters later because I'm sure we'll both be hungry. Plus, I need her to keep up her strength for the night I have planned.

A commotion at the entrance of the banquet hall draws everyone's attention. The doors crash open, and a guard stumbles in on unsteady feet. He's bloodied and bruised. Alik and I rush to our feet and hurry over. Fuck, it's Lorik.

"He took her," he rasps out in a voice filled with pain as he collapses onto the floor. Another guard runs forward and helps him sit up.

"Who?" Alik snaps. "Who was taken?"

"The female. I tried to stop him, but he had help."

Quinn appears at my side. She clutches my arm. "Where's Olivia?"

"Gone," the young guard says.

"What do you mean, she's gone? Where?" My heart's fire cries out.

"The rebels."

Alik curses and we exchange glances.

"Janik." It has to be him. I grip Quinn's arms and pull her to me. Her sobs fill my ears. "I will find her. No matter what. I swear it on the gods."