



Royal Alien Mate

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Science Fiction

Description: He's determined to conquer her heart...

Desperate to save her parents from debtor's prison, Esmay signs up as an alien mail order bride. She'll travel to Mars to become a savage alien's mate, and in exchange for her sacrifice, all her family's debt will be forgiven. She prays she'll find some semblance of happiness on Mars and hopes her future husband treats her with kindness. But she's stunned to discover the muscle-bound blue alien she's been matched with is Prince Vaath, a fearsome alien who once led a deadly battle against Earth. How can she willingly give herself to an alien who killed so many of her people?

Prince Vaath is aware many of his followers are hesitant to mate with humans, but after losing most of their females, it's necessary that they claim as many human females as possible in order to procreate and strengthen their numbers. He's shocked by the possessiveness he feels when he first looks upon golden-haired Esmay, and long-buried instincts soon rise to the surface as he claims his new princess time and time again. He knows she's afraid of him and believes him to be a savage, but he can't get enough of the little human who incites his desires, and he is determined to one day win her heart. But dark forces are gathering, and it will take all his power to keep Esmay safe from harm.

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Chapter 1

Esmay crept down the narrow hallway, careful to avoid the creaky spots in the ice-cold floorboards. Unease spread through her, but she followed the murmuring of voices, curious about the late-night conversation that was occurring in the kitchen. Her parents were usually fast asleep by now.

Without warning, a chill descended upon her, a sudden sense that something terrible was about to happen, that all of their lives were about to change forever.

She swallowed hard and tried to shake the unpleasant premonition away, but the heavy feeling only strengthened as she drew nearer to the stilted, high-pitched whispers.

What were her parents talking about? Desperation and fear tinged their hushed voices, a realization that only caused Esmay's worry to deepen. Her hands started shaking and a full body tremble soon followed. She crossed her arms over her chest in an attempt to calm her trembling, but it didn't help much.

Keep going. You have to find out what's wrong.

The kitchen door sat ajar, allowing a sliver of light to escape into the otherwise darkened hallway, beckoning her to slink closer. She paused just outside the room and pressed herself to the wall, holding her breath as she listened. The tense exchange within persisted and she leaned toward the light, eager to hear every word, even as the content of the discussion broke her heart.

“If we get divorced and I claim all the debt as my own,” her father said in an anguished tone, “it’s possible you won’t be sent to prison as well.”

“No,” her mother said, “absolutely not. I-I can’t do that. We’ve been married for twenty-three years and—”

“The girls need you here,” he interrupted. “Esmay would need to take a second job just to afford rent for a one-bedroom apartment. Who would look after the twins while she’s working? At least if you’re not in prison, taking care of the twins will be easier. You and Esmay could try to get different shifts at the factory.”

Esmay’s stomach dropped to the floor. She had suspected something was amiss for a while now. Both her parents had recently taken extra shifts at the factory, but despite the additional money coming in, the kitchen cabinets had become practically barren as of late.

Employed at the same factory, Esmay recalled her co-workers talking about a recent increase in both rent and taxes, which made it more difficult than usual for families to make ends meet. Those who couldn’t pay their bills were jailed until their families could settle their debts.

Her heart lurched at the thought of her parents going to prison.

“You make more money than me,” her mother said. “I would hate for us to get divorced, but if-if we do get divorced, it would make more sense for me to claim the debt as mine.”

“No. I will not allow it. I’ll call a lawyer in the morning and we’ll try to get everything taken care of before the first deadline. Fucking Martian governor and his fucking taxes.” His shadow blocked out the sliver of light, causing the hallway to darken completely.

Having heard enough, Esmay made a quiet retreat to the cramped bedroom she shared with her younger sisters, the aforementioned twins.

With an air of forced bravery, she drew in a deep breath and opened her bedside table drawer. She pulled out the flyer and ran her fingers gently over the embossed lettering.

BECOME A MAIL ORDER BRIDE TO THE MARTIANS!

SINGLE HUMAN FEMALES WANTED

AGES 21 – 35

Benefits:

Live on beautiful terraformed Mars

Receive a one-time payment of 10K galactic credits

Bonus - all family debt erased!

Esmay had swiped this flyer from a post office message board a couple of weeks ago, telling herself she was just grabbing it in case her family ever fell upon hard times. She had hidden the flyer away at the bottom of the drawer, hoping she would never have need to look at it again, but here she was, still tracing the embossed letters as she seriously considered applying to become a mail order bride to the Martians.

What choice did she have?

She sighed. The benefits were listed on the flyer, and in her current circumstances they sounded almost too good to be true. The cons, however, were not spelled out on

the brochure, though she had no difficulty imagining the many downsides of marrying a Martian.

If she became a mail order bride, she would likely never see her family again. Her throat burned when she considered being forever separated from her twin sisters Carmen and Lilly, as well as her beloved parents. She glanced at the nine-year-old girls and watched as they slept peacefully, both blissfully unaware of the troubles facing their family.

They can't lose Mom or Dad. I won't let it happen.

Still holding the flyer, she moved to the small bedroom window and peered into the darkness. Her family's apartment rested on the tenth floor of a dilapidated New York City apartment building. From this window, all she could see was a trash-filled alley and the brick side of another equally derelict apartment building. There were also two campfires burning in the alley below, and she spotted the figures of several people huddled together close to the flames, trying to keep warm on this unseasonably cold winter night.

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I won't let the same thing happen to my family.

She exhaled a sharp breath and ran a hand through her long locks. As a child, she used to stand at this very window and pretend she was looking over green rolling hills bordered by tall trees that swayed in the wind. She used to dream she saw animals grazing—usually a herd of deer, an image she must've picked up from a book long ago—and birds flitting amongst those make-believe trees.

In such visions, she could open her window and inhale the pleasing fragrance of flowers that flourished around the perimeter of the building, rather than the stomach-turning stench of overflowing garbage bins.

Mars.

She clutched the flyer to her chest and said a prayer. She'd never been particularly religious, but she still prayed sometimes, usually in her most desperate hours.

Like the time her father got hit by a truck and barely survived, or the time Carmen caught a bad strain of the flu and ended up hospitalized for a month.

She set the brochure aside, then closed her eyes and bowed her head.

Please let this work. Please let my family understand why I'm leaving.

Please keep them safe and healthy. Please keep them together.

Please, God, please.

She opened her eyes and peered at her sleeping sisters. Careful not to disturb them, she sat down and brushed their blonde locks from their faces, memorizing their features and trying to preserve this quiet moment in time.

What if she never saw them again?

Her heart clenched with sorrow. The heavy feeling from earlier persisted, until each breath became a painful, shallow gasp.

Her gaze fell upon the flyer again.

BECOME A MAIL ORDER BRIDE TO THE MARTIANS!

She shuddered and turned back to her sisters.

“I love you both.” She leaned down to press a kiss upon Carmen’s forehead, followed by Lilly’s. “Please take care of Mom and Dad.”

Quickly and quietly, she donned her warmest pants, a thick long-sleeved shirt, and an oversized sweater. After slipping into wool socks and a pair of boots, she packed one of her old school backpacks with as many of her belongings as she could shove inside.

She had heard terraformed Mars was warm, almost tropical, though some of the aliens preferred to live in caverns beneath the surface of the planet that were not as warm, so she packed a variety of clothing—pants and heavy sweaters, comfy socks her mother had knitted for her, a few sundresses, and her nicest undergarments. She also threw in a beautiful wooden hairbrush her late grandmother had gifted her, her prized collection of gemstones, a small family photo album, and a tiny stuffed bunny given to her by her late grandfather on her sixth birthday.

She found writing supplies and began drafting a letter to her family, clutching the pen tightly in her trembling hand to keep her penmanship legible.

Dear Mom, Dad, Carmen and Lilly,

I've decided to become a mail order bride to the Martians. Forgive me for not saying goodbye, but I know you would try to stop me. Don't worry about me, I promise everything will be fine. This is for the best. I will try to contact you once I reach Mars.

With all my love,

Esmay

There. Short and to the point. She didn't want to admit she knew about her parents' debt, though of course they would realize she must be aware.

Otherwise, why would she take the drastic measure of becoming a mail order bride to the very aliens who had conquered Earth twenty years ago?

She'd been an infant during the quick but deadly war, but she'd heard stories about it from her parents and grandparents, as well as older coworkers at the factory. No woman would sign up to marry a Martian unless she was desperate, unless she wished to help her family.

Those poor girls, she remembered her father uttering once as they passed a line of young women waiting to enter the Martian Affairs building a few blocks away. Her stomach flipped when she recalled his pitying expression as he glanced at the women. God help them, he'd said once they reached the next city block. God help those poor girls.

Giving herself a mental shake, she listened to the sounds of the apartment, waiting until she heard her parents finally go to bed. Once all was quiet, she slipped on her backpack and escaped into the cold, unforgiving night.

Chapter 2

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Esmay couldn't help but stare at the huge male Martian guards who stood along the walls. She sat inside the twenty-four-hour Martian Affairs building, waiting for a clerk to call her name. Her hands trembled in her lap. She hadn't been so close to one of the Martians in a few years.

The guards were about seven feet tall, exceedingly muscular, and they had brightly colored skin. Most were green, but several were orange, purple, and red. They had fierce looking horns that curved back over their heads too.

Everything about them was frightening and intimidating.

She had seen videos of the Martians fighting like barbarians during the war, charging their opponents and headbutting them to death. Apparently, their skin was naturally armored and they were impervious to most weaponry. Though they were an advanced species, capable of interstellar travel and of terraforming entire planets, for some reason they preferred ground combat. From what she'd witnessed in the videos, it seemed they enjoyed fighting by hand, relished slaughtering the human soldiers who were trying to defend their planet.

Technically, the aliens weren't from Mars, though their species name started with an M and was so long Esmay and most other people could never remember it, so humans generally referred to the invaders as Martians. They had made Mars their new home planet, after all, changing the gravity to match that of Earth's and causing green landscapes to flourish upon the once red, barren planet. But they also had several settlements on Earth.

Alien savages. That was what her grandparents had always called them. Before the

war against the Martians, Earth had been in contact with several other alien races, but all those who'd come before had been mostly peaceful. None had ever attacked Earth.

I'm going to become a savage Martian's mate.

Her stomach flipped at the thought. She glanced around the room and noticed all the other women who were waiting their turn looked nervous and pale. None of them spoke to one another. She felt as if she were part of a vigil of sorts, observing a long moment of silence with all the other prospective human brides before they met their collective doom.

Were all these women as desperate as Esmay?

Judging by the tattered clothing most wore, she supposed they were facing similar circumstances. She caught the eye of a petite brunette sitting nearby and gave the young woman a sympathetic smile. The woman tried to smile back, but tears blurred in her eyes and her lips quivered, so she looked away from Esmay and stared at the floor while hugging herself.

"Esmay Cantrell!" a human female sitting behind a desk called out as her gaze swept around the room.

On weak legs, Esmay stood up and moved to sit across from the clerk, her heart pounding rapidly in her chest. She set her backpack down beside her and took several deep breaths in an attempt to calm herself. The middle-aged human woman wore a name tag that said Vivian and her hair was swept into an elaborate updo. Her clothing appeared strange, the material of her flowing blue dress shimmering with her every movement, and Esmay wondered if it was the Martian style. She'd never seen a female Martian though, since their numbers were so few.

"Good morning, Ms. Cantrell," Vivian said.

“Good morning,” Esmay replied, forcing a smile.

The clerk passed her a tablet that displayed a questionnaire. “Please enter your citizenship number here,” she said, pointing to a line at the top of the screen, “and while I conduct a background check you can fill the rest of this application out.”

Esmay entered the number and continued filling out the application. It contained basic questions, asking her name, the names of her parents and siblings, education and work history, health status, sexual history, and so on. She answered the questions honestly, though her hands shook harder when she selected the I’m a virgin box on the sexual history portion of the application.

If her application was accepted, she wouldn’t remain a virgin for much longer. She would be given as a bride to one of the Martians. From what she’d heard about their race, they were trying to procreate as quickly as possible. That meant she would be having lots of sex with her new mate, didn’t it? At least until she got pregnant, that was.

It was crazy to think humans and Martians were sexually compatible, but she’d seen photos of the offspring produced from the unions. Scientists claimed the two races held a common ancestor, despite how different the Martians looked in appearance to humans, an ancestor who must have existed over two hundred thousand years ago.

Once she finished answering all the questions on her application, she pushed the tablet toward the clerk. Vivian pricked Esmay’s finger for a blood test and then smiled broadly. “Thank you, my dear. Now, if you’ll just go have a seat, I’ll call you back up in about an hour and let you know if your application has been accepted.”

Esmay drew in a deep breath. “Do-do you think I have a good chance?”

Vivian cast a glance at the nearest guards and then leaned closer. “Your application

looks fine to me. As long as your blood test shows you're relatively healthy, you should be good."

"If I'm accepted, I'll be leaving Earth right away, is that correct?" Esmay had heard spaceships regularly departed Earth for Mars, most of them containing mail order brides to be delivered to their new mates, though some were simply supply ships. Many of the factories on Earth specifically manufactured goods intended for Mars.

"Yes, the next ship is scheduled to depart in a few hours. Don't worry, your application and blood test will be processed before then, I assure you."

"Thank you." Esmay watched as Vivian handed the tablet, as well as her blood sample, to a passing assistant who immediately walked through an automatic door situated behind the rows of desks. Before the door closed, Esmay caught sight of more Martian guards standing along the walls of a long hallway lined with doors.

She returned to her seat with her backpack, her heart in her throat. She felt perfectly healthy and prayed everything with her blood test came back okay. If her plan failed, then her father would end up in jail, or, possibly both her parents, if a judge didn't accept her father's declaration that the debt solely belonged to him.

She glanced at a nearby guard and felt a stab of hatred. If it weren't for the Martians' absolute rule over Earth, her parents probably wouldn't be in such dire financial straits. The former United States had been divided into twenty-four zones, and each was ruled by a Martian governor appointed by the King of Mars. Other countries had been divided into zones as well, and the Martians ruled the entirety of Earth with an iron fist, squashing any hint of rebellion with deadly force.

If the newest governor hadn't raised taxes, her parents wouldn't be so behind in both taxes and rent. The guard she was staring at turned his head to meet her eyes and she immediately glanced away. A shiver ran through her. His eyes had been black and

cold. Would her future mate have the same dark, frightening gaze?

She clasped her hands tightly in her lap to keep them from shaking so hard. Please let my future mate be kind. She swallowed hard and tried to remain calm as she awaited the results of her application and blood test. Over an hour passed and her impatience kept growing, alongside her nervousness.

She couldn't believe it had come to this. She couldn't believe she was actually offering herself to the Martians. From the corner of her eye, she kept peeking at Vivian, but the woman was continuously busy with other prospective brides.

But finally, after an hour and fifteen minutes of waiting, the clerk called Esmay's name.

Chapter 3

I'm going to Mars.

Esmay felt as if she were in a dream while she boarded a spacecraft bound for Mars. The silver walls of the corridor gleamed under the bright overhead lights. She accompanied a group of over two dozen human women, most of whom were in their early twenties. From the bits of conversation she'd gathered, many of the mail order brides were also desperate to save a family member from debtors' prison.

She couldn't help but wonder if the Martians had increased taxes in hopes that more human women would sign up to become their mates. While the Martians could easily take human women by force, and in the early years after the war many Martians did just that, this had eventually led to protests and even full-blown riots in several Earth cities. This had resulted in much bloodshed, but it also convinced the Martians to devise a new method of obtaining human brides—by offering something in return.

Payment.

The ten thousand galactic credits would deposit into her parents' account by tomorrow morning. Vivian had showed her the transfer order, as well as the order dismissing all rent and tax debt owed by her parents, and a weight of worry had lifted from her shoulders. They would be okay. As frugal as her parents were, ten thousand galactic credits would stretch for years, and it would at least last until Carmen and Lilly reached adulthood.

Five burly Martian guards escorted the women into a large dormitory that contained

dozens of bunk beds lining the walls. In the center of the room, there were several couches and a screen arranged into a living room area, and beside that rested a huge kitchen. Near the kitchen, there were two long dinner tables, and a hallway on the far side of the room opened into a huge bathroom complete with showers and hot tubs.

Esmay explored the mail order bride quarters with the rest of the women, a sense of awe spreading through her. Compared to what she was used to, they would be traveling in near luxury. She hadn't known what to expect when she boarded the spacecraft.

As Esmay made her way back into the kitchen, one of the women gasped.

“Look! I think this is a food replicator!”

Everyone gathered around the gleaming kitchen contraption that looked like an over-glorified bread maker to Esmay. A guard approached, his face set in a deep scowl. At first, Esmay thought he was going to yell at everyone to back away from the device, but to her surprise he cleared his throat and then, speaking in perfect Galactic Common, patiently explained how it worked, though he also pointed out that the cabinets and refrigerators contained plenty of fresh food.

As he moved around the kitchen, opening the cabinets and refrigerators to reveal what was inside, Esmay felt her eyes growing wide. In all her life, she had never seen so much food in one place before, not even at the local market where her family shopped for groceries each week.

Guilt descended upon her, that she should travel in such luxury and have access to so much food, but she quickly reminded herself that her family would soon receive the ten thousand galactic credits. The cupboards in their apartment would no longer sit barren.

Her heart contracted painfully at the thought of her family.

She prayed she would manage to contact them soon via a video comm, or at the very least, to send them a message letting them know she was all right and that she loved them. She also prayed they would understand her decision to leave Earth. Her throat burned at the prospect of them being angry with her.

“Hey, you okay?” the tall brunette standing next to Esmay asked.

“Oh, I’m fine,” she replied. “Just a bit overwhelmed.”

“I know what you mean. This place is crazy. It’s like a palace compared to where I used to live.”

“Same here.”

The brunette smiled. “I’m Faith, by the way.” She offered her hand and Esmay politely shook it.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Esmay.”

“Are you from the New York area too?” Faith asked.

“Yes, right in the city. I think most of the women here are from the New York area. At least that’s what I heard one of the clerks from Martian Affairs say. I believe they send ships containing brides to Mars from the more populated areas of Earth quite frequently.”

“Do you know how long this trip will take? I’m pretty sure the clerk I talked to told me, but after she said my application had been accepted I sorta zoned out in my excitement.”

“About ten hours.” Esmay gestured at the beds and then the kitchen, where several women had lined up to take turns trying out the food replicator. “I’m surprised they’re going to all this trouble for us when we won’t even be aboard the ship for very long.”

“Well, I hope it’s a good omen. I hope it means life on Mars won’t be too hard.” A shadow crossed Faith’s face and she leaned closer to whisper her next words. “Do you think the Martians will treat us with kindness? I mean, do you think they’re really the bloodthirsty savages everyone says they are?”

Esmay didn’t know how to answer. In her heart, she was already praying that her own mate would treat her with kindness, but there was always the risk that he would be cruel or unfeeling. Always the risk that he would only care about getting her pregnant. She swallowed hard and gave a slight shrug of her shoulders. “I-I honestly don’t know. I mean, I know they are fierce warriors, but I’m not sure how they treat their females. Unfortunately, none of the mail order bride advertisements I’ve seen have mentioned it, instead they focus on how much money you’ll be given and the fact that your family’s debt will be forgiven.”

Faith grasped Esmay’s arm and guided her away from the other women and the huge Martian guards who were lingering in the doorway. Esmay walked with her over to the bunks, where they selected their beds and placed their backpacks down. From the worried look on her face, Esmay got the sense Faith wanted to say something else about the Martians but desired privacy first.

“I’ve seen videos,” Faith eventually said in a hushed whisper. “Violent, frightening videos from the war. The Martians are practically indestructible.”

Coldness gripped Esmay. “I know. I’ve seen the videos too.”

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“Have you ever talked to a Martian before?” Faith asked.

“No. My parents taught me to avoid them at all costs. Whenever I saw a Martian enforcer in the street, I would always turn the other way, and none have ever directly approached me.”

“Once, when I was a child, I was running through the streets, playing tag with my friends, and I accidentally ran straight into a Martian enforcer.” Faith’s eyes grew wider and she paled as she seemed to recall the distant but shocking memory.

“What did he do?” Esmay asked as both women sat down beside one another on a bottom bunk, huddling close so no one would overhear their private discussion.

“He looked at me with a murderous glare, his eyes gleaming black as sin, and then he drew in a deep breath and growled so loudly that the windows in a nearby house shattered. I thought he was going to kill me. I was frozen in place and couldn’t make my legs move to try to run away. Eventually, he growled at me again and by that time, someone had alerted my father to what was happening. He came outside, apologized to the enforcer, and carried me home.”

“That sounds terrifying.” Esmay reached for Faith’s hand and gave it a quick squeeze. “I’m sorry that happened to you. Maybe that particular Martian was just an asshole. Maybe they’re not all like that. At least I hope some of them are nice. I-I keep thinking that people—humans, I mean—can be so different. Maybe it’s the same with Martians.

Faith cast another glance toward the guards. “I hope you’re right.”

The two women grabbed a drink and made their way to the sitting room, where they conversed with the other women. The guards soon left the room, though Esmay heard a loud clicking sound after the door shut behind them, leading her to believe they had locked the women inside. She tried to repress the shudder that ran through her at this realization.

Suddenly, the wall beside the kitchen transformed, all at once becoming transparent. Esmay stood up and gaped at the image of Earth growing smaller and smaller in a viewscreen. Apparently, the ship had already taken off, though she hadn't felt even the slightest vibration as the sleek alien vessel departed her home planet. Not for the first time, she marveled at Martian technology.

As she stared at the blue-green orb on which she'd spent her entire life, a pang of preemptive homesickness resounded in her chest. She wrapped her arms around herself, because she all of a sudden felt as if she were falling apart.

In a matter of hours, her entire life had been upended.

She'd gone from believing her family was simply struggling a little financially to realizing her parents were facing jail time to deciding to leave Earth in order to save them. In order to keep her parents and her sisters together.

In a matter of moments, Earth became a pale blue dot in the vastness of space. Her stomach dropped, as if she sensed the rapidness of their departure, though in reality she didn't truly feel the movement of the ship, and she sat back down because her legs were also becoming unsteady.

No matter what happens on Mars, at least my family will be safe.

At least they'll be together.

Chapter 4

Vaath watched as the ship descended to a landing platform outside the palace gates. He stood on the balcony of his royal chambers, trying to decide whether he should leave the palace grounds to greet his bride, or simply allow her to be brought to him.

All the other males who had been promised a human female from today's shipment were supposed to retrieve their new brides directly from the spacecraft, though Vaath's father—the King of Mars—had ordered him to remain inside the palace walls until his bride was escorted to him.

“It would look unseemly if you appeared eager to claim your human female,” his father had said in an imperious tone. “Besides, you are the first in line to the throne. People and things are brought to you, not the other way around.”

Vaath growled as he recalled his father's words. He wished his father a long life, but when Vaath ascended to power, he intended to make many changes. For starters, he wouldn't allow servants to constantly wait on him, nor would he spend so much time within the palace walls. He intended to travel the planet and come in contact with his people on a regular basis.

The best way to understand what his people needed and what issues required his attention was to talk directly to his constituents, rather than only glimpsing the few messages the royal council members deemed worthy of passing along to the king.

Several Marttiadoxalian males who'd been waiting near the platform boarded the ship, and suddenly Vaath could wait no more. He wanted to meet his bride now. He exited his chambers and rapidly descended the steps, not caring if he appeared overly eager, and not caring if his father learned of his disobedience.

Vaath had led several successful attacks on Earth during the war, including the final

battle that had resulted in the planet's surrender, and whenever the king questioned Vaath's actions, simply reminding his father of his steadfast dedication to his people seemed to appease him.

In comparison, Vaath's father had not led a single battle in his two-hundred and fifty-nine years, instead allowing his wartime advisors to appoint generals to do all the difficult, and often deadly, work of defending Marttiadoxalian interests and battling their enemies.

Vaath emerged through a servants' exit in the gardens and as he approached the gates, he shot a stern look at the palace guards, letting them know that he expected the gates to be opened even if the king had publicly, during last night's feast, ordered him to wait for his human bride to be brought to him.

Rem, one of the guards on duty, simply nodded at Vaath, his expression solemn as ever, as he pressed a button to open the gates. Rem had worked for the royal family for a long time and was one of the palace's most trusted guards, though Vaath didn't interact with the male very frequently, as Rem kept to himself and rarely spoke to anyone unless duty demanded it.

As Vaath left the palace grounds and headed for the landing platform, Jav stepped out of the bushes, his manner overly casual, as if he'd been hiding there waiting for Vaath to pass by.

"Good morning, Prince Vaath," Jav said, tapping a foot against one of Vaath's. "I figured you would be coming this way."

"Did my father ask you to watch over me?" Vaath asked as he tapped a foot to one of Jav's, returning the traditional Marttiadoxalian greeting. However, he couldn't help but feel annoyed by his friend's sudden appearance. Jav was a member of the Vash'arr, an elite group of genetically enhanced Marttiadoxalian warriors, and Vaath

thought the male had better things to do than guard a prince who was perfectly capable of defending himself, should the need arise.

Jav shook his head. “No, but I decided to come, just in case the drakk show up.”

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“The anti-Earthers haven’t proven violent thus far,” Vaath replied.

“Yes, but if they are aware that the great Prince Vaath is expecting a human bride today, they might be moved to do more than shout their disapproval of Martian-human mating unions.”

“Martian?” Vaath scoffed at his friend’s use of the shortened version of Marttiadoxalia typically utilized by the humans.

Jav shrugged. “Well, the humans refer to this planet as Mars and we’ve taken to calling it Mars as well, rather than giving it a new name as your father originally wished to do. Your father is the King of Mars, not Marttiadoxalia 2 or New Marttiadoxalia. Besides, I like the way it sounds. Martian. It’s exotic sounding and makes me feel like a savage, just as the humans say we are.” He chuckled as they neared the landing platform.

“You’re a member of the Vash’arr,” Vaath reminded him, keeping his tone humorous. “You are very much a savage and I pity any human female who ends up married to you.”

Jav smiled. “Speaking of human females, I have signed up to receive one.”

“Have you? Well, I will see that you’re moved to the top of the waiting list.” Though Vaath truly did worry for any female matched to Jav, as he knew that members of Vash’arr were positively ravenous and insatiable in the bedroom, he trusted his friend would not truly harm a female. He would simply need to learn to control himself, so as not to damage his human bride. If anyone was capable of such control, it was Jav.

“Thank you, Prince Vaath, I truly appreciate it. Speaking of favors, I do have a request for you. It’s about Rem.”

“Speak your request.” Though Vaath didn’t think Rem had friends, he recalled that Jav had fought alongside Rem in several battles against Earth, and even though Rem wasn’t a member of the Vash’arr, Jav claimed the guard had fought admirably and had personally disabled a nuclear weapon the humans were attempting to release upon a fleet of Marttiadoxalian warships.

“He’s lonely. I think he would benefit from a bride. As you might have heard, he lost his betrothed mate many years before the war against Earth—she died when the Xieandans poisoned our water supplies—though what you might not know is that before the female perished, she had broken their betrothal and left him for another.”

“And you want me to...what? Order him to take a human bride?”

“Precisely. He is like a brother to me,” Jav said, surprising Vaath, who hadn’t realized how close the two males were, and he resolved to pay better attention to the goings on and interpersonal relationships in the palace. “I wish for him to find healing and peace.”

“I doubt he’ll be happy if I issue such an order,” Vaath replied in a wary tone.

“If you want me to beg,” Jav said with a small laugh, “I will get down on my knees and embarrass you during the next feast.”

“If you ever do such a thing,” Vaath said, “I will see you banished to the corners of the known universe. You know how I feel about such displays. When I am king, I will expect my subjects’ loyalty and respect, but I intend to earn it and I will not demand anyone kneel before me.” There was a bitterness to his tone and Vaath looked around to ensure no one had overheard him. He ought not to speak out against

his father where anyone but his closest confidants might hear. His relationship with his father had only become more complicated since the Marttiadoxalians had settled upon terraformed Mars and he didn't wish for tensions between them to rise, not when he was about to meet his human bride.

Jav paused just before the landing platform and reached for Vaath's arm. "I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. I see darkness in Rem's eyes, a bleakness that I think only the sweetness and companionship of a female could cure."

"Very well," Vaath said, "I will grant your request. I hope you are correct that a bride is what Rem needs."

"Thank you, Prince Vaath."

"Any friend of yours is a friend of mine. Now, if you'll excuse me," Vaath said, gazing up at the ship, where several males were disembarking with their new females, "it is time I meet my bride."

Chapter 5

Esmay stood in the women's quarters alone, her heart pounding a frantic rhythm in her chest. A guard had informed her that he would personally escort her to the palace to meet her mate once all the other females had been claimed by their males. She didn't understand why her future husband wasn't meeting her at the ship and her spirits sank as she considered the possible reasons for his absence.

Perhaps he was coldhearted, or maybe he wasn't anxious to meet her at all.

But the guard had specifically mentioned taking her to the palace. She wasn't sure what that meant. She supposed it was possible she had been matched with a Martian who worked at the palace, a servant or mayhap a guard or a royal advisor. Her heart

thumped faster. The idea of living in a luxurious palace—well, she assumed it would be luxurious, weren't all palaces?—sent her nerves into overdrive.

She paced back and forth in front of the door. Though she was impatient to meet her mate, she was also growing increasingly anxious. She would soon meet the alien male with whom she would spend the rest of her life. Martians mated for life, or so she'd heard. They also lived a long time, much longer than humans, which meant her mate would probably outlive her.

What about their children? Would their children have the long lifespans of Martians, or something closer to a human's lifespan? Before she could contemplate this further, the door zipped open and a huge blue Martian stood before her.

Her mouth went dry and she struggled for breath.

The male's dark, unblinking gaze fixed on her and she got the sudden sense that he was sizing her up. He wasn't dressed like the guards and she wondered about his identity. She took a step back and swallowed hard, then felt her face heating in embarrassment over her reaction.

Be brave, she told herself, and in the next moment she forced herself to take a step forward and lift her chin, despite the fact that her legs felt suddenly weak.

"Are you Esmay?" the huge Martian male asked, speaking in Galactic Common.

"I am." She lifted her chin higher and studied his features. Like all Martian males, he had ridges on his forehead and long horns covered in dark markings that curved downward over his back. He wore tight, form-fitting black pants and a sleeveless white shirt that revealed his massive muscles. Her face heated further and this time it wasn't due to embarrassment.

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She found herself strangely attracted to this huge alien male, whoever he was.

He stepped closer and it took all her strength to remain in place. She judged him to be at least seven feet tall and she had to lift her chin higher just to hold his penetrating gaze.

Why was he staring at her with such a fierce intensity?

Her skin prickled with awareness and she felt increasingly faint in his presence.

“Who are you?” she asked.

His sensuous lips curved in a slight smile, and to her shock, his eyes lit up with what appeared to be pleasure, completely transforming his rigid, imposing features.

He reached for her hand and placed a kiss upon it, his lips branding her flesh with a tingling heat that made her shudder. He also tapped one foot against hers, ever so lightly, and she vaguely remembered it was some sort of Martian greeting—instead of shaking hands, they tapped one another’s feet.

But he soon lifted her hand to his lips again, as if unable to resist placing another kiss upon her knuckles.

In her surprise over his bold actions, she gasped, even as warmth flooded her center. She wasn’t certain if she should tap her foot to his in return, so she simply stood before him and awaited his response to her question, even though she now had a very good idea about his identity.

“I am Vaath,” he replied. “Your mate.”

Oh God. She sucked in a quick breath and was once again struck by his huge size. He was taller than most Martian males she’d seen. And she was supposed to marry him? Nerves seized her and for several long moments, she couldn’t find her voice. When she finally managed to speak, her words issued as a shaky whisper.

“It-it is nice to meet you, Vaath,” she said as a sudden bout of shyness overcame her. She didn’t have much experience with men or dating and now she was about to become a married woman. Before she’d signed up to become a mail order bride, her life had consisted of working long grueling hours and helping to take care of her younger sisters, which had left little time for socializing with her peers, let alone dating.

Vaath. The name sounded vaguely familiar but she couldn’t quite place it.

Still holding her hand, he reached up with his free hand and cupped her face, stroking his fingers along her cheek in a slow, enticing caress.

The warmth flooding her center flared hotter and she found herself shifting in place. When she inadvertently pressed her thighs together, she felt the throbbing of her arousal, a steady pulsing sensation unlike anything she’d ever experienced before. And yet, despite her attraction to Vaath, she still couldn’t help but fear him.

Not only was he so much larger than her, but he was also a Martian, he belonged to a race of fierce aliens who had conquered her people. Though the war had occurred when she was too young to remember it, she’d heard stories about what life had been like on Earth before the arrival of the Martians.

The people of Earth still longed for life to return to the way it once was.

Humans still longed for freedom.

She couldn't help but wonder if she was betraying her people, in a way, by agreeing to become the bride of a Martian.

"You are beautiful," Vaath said in a deep rumble as his eyes shone brighter. "Your hair is like spun sunshine and your eyes are like blue bottomless lakes." His nostrils flared as he leaned closer, taking a deep inhale as he very obviously smelled her. When she tried to back away, he released her hand and grabbed hold of her upper arm, forcing her to remain in place. "And you smell quite enticing, my sunshine." He took another deep inhale. "You are excited. You desire the consummation of our marriage."

She pushed against his chest, though he didn't release her. "I-I do not," she insisted vehemently, "desire the consummation of our marriage, and I would appreciate it if you stopped smelling me."

He pulled back just far enough to peer into her eyes, and his face remained so close to hers that she felt the heat of his breath upon her neck and cheeks. Amusement sparkled in the depths of his dark eyes.

"Don't worry, my eager bride. You won't have to wait long." He grasped her hand again and led her out into the corridor. "Come, and I will show you where you will live, and then we will find a Wise One to bless our mating union."

Esmay's mind whirled as they navigated the corridors of the ship and finally emerged into the brightness of a beautiful day. The sun hovered on the horizon, though she wasn't sure if it was morning or late afternoon. Everywhere she looked, she saw green, more green than she'd ever seen in her whole life. Well, aside from pictures of rainforests. There were houses too, large structures that appeared sculpted from red clay, all of which were surrounded by thick vegetation.

In the distance, she glimpsed the largest structure of all—the palace. Her heart raced. It towered over the entire landscape, its tall red spires reaching high into the blue sky, almost touching the white, billowing clouds above.

That's where I'm going to live.

Disbelief swept through her.

She paused on the ship's ramp and gawked at the planet that would be her new home. She'd seen images of Mars, a rust-colored barren land, taken before the aliens had terraformed it, and the difference left her stunned.

If only the aliens would use their terraforming technology to help repair the places on Earth that had been left barren or uninhabitable due to global warming and pollution.

Was that even possible?

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She had left her family with plenty of money to get by, but what kind of world would her sisters and their future children inherit?

Vaath tugged on her hand, jarring her out of her trance, and she finished descending the ramp at his side. He guided her down a smooth white stone path that curved through the thickness of the tall forest. Overtop the trees, she glimpsed the palace's spires as they approached the imposing structure. A flock of huge yellow birds swept through the sky, speeding beyond the palace toward the forest-covered mountains in the distance.

"Oh, I forgot my backpack," she said. The handsome alien's sudden arrival in the women's quarters had left her so frazzled she hadn't remembered to grab her belongings, all that she had left from her life on Earth.

"It's all right. Someone will bring it to my chambers," he said.

She nodded her thanks and hoped she was soon reunited with her things. She could just kick herself for forgetting the backpack, especially since it contained family photos and mementoes.

What if she never managed to contact her family again?

It was possible her mate would not allow it. A tight ball of worry formed in her stomach. She wouldn't be able to relax until her backpack and the contents within were once again in her possession.

"A guard told me you lived in the palace," she said as they continued walking hand in

hand. “In fact, the guard said he would escort me to the palace, that you weren’t coming to pick me up.”

He glanced down at her as he squeezed her hand. “Yes, I live in the palace. A guard was originally supposed to bring you to me, per the king’s orders, but I found I could not wait to meet you.”

Alarm filled her. “You defied the King of Mars? Forgive me, but is that wise?”

“I have spent my entire life defying the king,” he said, amusement tinging his deep voice.

Esmay found this statement rather curious. “I thought the King of Mars was all-powerful. How exactly do you get away with your defiance?” She really hoped she wasn’t walking into some kind of strange political war. That would be just her luck.

“Easy,” he replied. “I am his only son and heir to the Martiaxoxalian Empire.”

“You are Prince Vaath?”

“I am.”

Shock resounded within her. Vaath. Of course.

No wonder his name had sounded familiar.

Her knowledge of the war returned to her in one horrid sweeping realization—her new mate was the feared Prince Vaath, the very Martian prince who had led several well-known and deadly battles against Earth, including the final battle that had resulted in her home planet’s surrender.

She was very much about to marry the enemy.

Chapter 6

Vaath couldn't help but notice a chill had descended upon Esmay once she learned of his status as a royal. She kept her head down as she walked beside him, her demeanor more subdued than before, and he felt her tiny hand trembling within his.

Was she afraid of him? Or did she hate him after recalling the importance of his role in the war against Earth?

Before she'd cast her gaze down, he had noticed a glimmer of worry in her blue eyes. He resolved to try his best to make her feel at home in the palace, and also promised himself he would treat her gently as he bedded her for the first time. He didn't want to accidentally hurt her and give her more reason to fear him.

Butfluxx, she was lovely, and he couldn't stop glancing down at her and admiring her beauty as they approached the palace. He had never seen a female with hair so shiny and golden before, nor one with eyes so blue or expressive. He could drown in that bottomless blue gaze of hers and spend days upon days simply stroking her sunshine locks.

The gates opened up and Vaath guided his tiny human bride underneath the arching entryway to the palace grounds. Her trembling increased and he noticed her peeking up occasionally to take in her new surroundings, though she didn't look in his direction once. She acted as though he wasn't beside her, despite the grip he still had on her hand.

Irritation warred with his more rational side. He ought not be angry over her reluctance to acknowledge him. She was new to his planet and his people had conquered hers, lending an inescapable tension to their impending union.

“You needn’t fear me, sunshine,” he said, infusing his voice with warmth.

She breathed deep and finally looked up to meet his eyes, though she said nothing. After a moment, she glanced away and focused on the wide stone steps that ascended to the palace’s main entrance.

Her hand remained trembling in his and his arms ached with the urge to wrap around her and hold her until the shaking ceased, until the last vestiges of her fear dissipated in the safety of his embrace.

Soon, he thought. Soon he would have her alone in his chambers, where no one would disturb them. But first he needed to visit Wyvonus, the palace’s highest Wise One, and secure a blessing for their union.

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Guards, palace officials, and servants paused to stare as he led Esmay up the steps and into the vestibule. She peered upward at the high arching ceiling and her eyes widened. She gulped hard and her steps slowed. He paused to give her a moment to look around, and he took the opportunity to admire the handiwork of the artists who had carved images of ancient Marttiadoxalian beasts into the ceilings, as well as the walls. There were also several massive statues in the vestibule, all of which depicted the deadliest animals once found on Vaath's home planet, vipasandthormisand all manner of yepkins.

A Marttiadoxalian male could not join the Brotherhood of Warriors without slaying at least one of the three beasts by hand and living to tell the story. Vaath had battled a rare ten-horned vipasand eventually strangled the beast with one of its tails. As the memory flitted through his mind, he recalled the thrill of the battle and the satisfaction of victory.

A growl left his throat as the echoes of battle-induced rage washed through him, heating his blood and making him hunger for another fight, or perhaps another war.

He would be lying if he claimed he hadn't enjoying conquering the humans, and sometimes he lamented that the war had been too short and not challenging enough. In his mind, the humans had deserved their defeat and all the suffering that had come with it, as they had attacked his people first—destroying their first settlement on Mars, before the entirety of the Marttiadoxalian race had arrived on the planet.

Five thousand souls vanquished in one brutal, unprovoked attack. His people had sent an ambassador to Earth to inform the humans of their arrival in the solar system, as well as their intention to settle upon Mars and terraform the planet to make it

habitable for their needs, yet the humans hadn't been happy to share a planet so close to theirs, viewing Mars as their property despite not having a settlement upon it. The Marttiadoxalians had found evidence of several failed human colonies on Mars, but at the time of his people's arrival, no humans had currently been living here.

Esmay tried to pull her hand from his, but he tightened his hold and yanked her closer, frustrated that she would show defiance toward him in public. "Our mating union is very important. You will abstain from any displays of rebellion while we are around others. Do you understand?"

Her face paled as she stared up at him. "Important?" she asked. "Why is our union very important? Surely you must realize I'm no one. I'm not the daughter of a former human politician or general."

He leaned down, placed his lips to her ear, and whispered, "Our union is important because rather than mate with a female of my own kind, I have decided to set an example for my people by willingly taking a human. There are some males who are resistant to the idea of mating with a non-Marttiadoxalian, even if it means our numbers will dwindle because we no longer have enough females of our own kind left to even sustain our current population level."

"So, you expect me to be obedient and pretend I'm happy because you want more Martian males signing up to receive brides from Earth?" Though her words were infused with bitterness, he was at least pleased that she had whispered her terse reply.

"Yes," he said. "And might I remind you that you signed up to become a Martian's bride," he said, putting an emphasis on the shortened version of his race's name. "You were not forced."

"You probably have no idea what it's like on Earth. When was the last time you visited? Did you know people are jailed if they can't afford their taxes or fail to pay

their rent? Did you know the Martian governors keep raising taxes, which forces rent up, which creates a cycle of debt from which few can escape? Did you know families are being torn apart when parents are sent to debtors' prison and their children end up in orphanages?" Anger glimmered in her eyes and he felt quite taken aback by her fiery response.

"Taxes are raised whenever there are too many acts of civil disobedience in a particular zone. This is common knowledge among your people, yet that does not always stop those who are intent to plot against Marttiadoxalian rule. We will do whatever it takes to prevent a human uprising."

"I find it difficult to believe that is the only reason taxes are being constantly increased. My parents have never plotted against your people, yet they would have been sent to debtors' prison had I not signed up to become a Martian's bride, thus forgiving their debt. I've spoken to other human women who were in the very same predicament as me. In fact, almost all the women on the ship that arrived today only signed up to become a Martian's bride because they wanted to ease the financial burdens on their families, or keep their parents out of debtors' prison."

"I have never met a female who speaks as boldly as you," he remarked. "You know who I am, you know what I've done to your people, yet you are standing here, in my own palace, lecturing me as if I am your subordinate." He had the sudden urge to grab her and kiss her, but he refrained from the action, for he feared once he kissed her he wouldn't be able to stop. Despite himself, he was drawn to her like no other female. He hadn't expected to experience such a strong attraction to his human female, yet he found himself pulling her closer and enjoying the pressure of her body against his. He also found himself craving her beyond all reason, nearly to the point of madness. It became difficult to form a coherent thought as he peered into her angry gaze.

"I do not usually speak so boldly," she said, the fire in her eyes dimming slightly, "but

now that I realize who you are, I feel compelled to make sure you understand what my people are going through. There aren't many humans left who fought you in the war, and the commanders and leaders who led those soldiers are all dead. It's wrong to keep punishing us when those who opposed you most fiercely are long gone, especially when the vast majority of your population doesn't even live on Earth."

"I would be delighted to speak more about politics with you later, my sunshine," he said, trying to lighten the mood, "however now is not the time. We must secure a blessing for our mating union and then consummate our marriage."

"Do you really mean it?"

"Yes, I do. I intend for us to consummate our union as soon as possible."

A flush overcame her and she appeared somewhat scandalized as she looked around, as if checking to ensure no one had heard what he'd just said. "Not that," she said. "I mean... do you truly mean you will speak with me about Marttiadoxalian rule over Earth at a later time?"

Holding her gaze, he pulled her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss upon her delicate knuckles. "I give you my word. Now, let us find the Wise One. I am growing most impatient to make you mine, sunshine."

Chapter 7

Sunshine. Why did he keep calling her that?

Esmay cast a sidelong glance at Prince Vaath as they moved down a wide, opulent corridor lined with statues of huge Martian males.

Did he truly meansunshineas an endearment?

Her heart leapt at the thought. He had complimented her hair earlier, as well as her eyes.

Your hair is like spun sunshine and your eyes are like blue bottomless lakes.

Of course, he had uttered those flowery words before their little argument. She still couldn't believe she'd spoken so boldly to the Prince of Mars and wondered what had come over her.

A combination of anger and fear and frustration, she supposed.

Like most human women who signed up to become a Martian's bride, she'd done so out of desperation. She couldn't just sit by and watch while her father went to prison, possibly never to be released, or, the worst-case scenario—both of her parents. Her heart broke at the thought.

She eyed the large door they were approaching, which rested at the end of this long hallway that was filled with the ancient-looking statues. Had the statues been transported here from their old home planet, or had they been recently constructed, along with the rest of the palace? She had noticed the detailed carvings upon the ceiling and the walls in the entryway and couldn't help the sense of awe that swept through her, just from standing in the presence of such impressive art. It reminded her of photos she'd seen of ancient human castles and structures in old library books, those which had been bound in a clear protective material and weren't allowed to be checked out.

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If not for the spaceship that had brought her here, she could almost pretend she had stepped back in time, back into some alternate past where aliens had walked the Earth.

But she wasn't on her home planet any longer. She was on Mars and she was about to marry Prince Vaath, conqueror of her people and next in line to the throne. What would it be like to be mated to him?

Was there any trace of kindness in his heart?

Sunshine. Would he call her that if he weren't at least somewhat kind?

She latched onto this idea and prayed for the strength to get through her first day on Mars. In mere moments, she would face a Wise One, a holy man who would bless their union, the Martian version of a marriage ceremony. She didn't know much about Vaath's religion, but she had heard they worshiped several gods and they looked to the Wise Ones for spiritual guidance.

The door zipped open upon their approach and Vaath guided Esmay into a large cavernous room that was lit with thousands of tiny sparkling lights, some of which were affixed to the walls, others which appeared to be floating in the air, just below the ceiling. It gave the illusion of candlelight and reminded her of the time her parents had taken her and the twins to a Christmas Eve service late at night. The church had been darkened and lit up with thousands of candles, or so it had seemed to Esmay. She recalled the peaceful walk home from church in the dark, when the snow had started falling and the city had gone so quiet, it had felt as if Esmay and her family were the only souls left on Earth.

“This way,” Vaath said, directing her further into the huge room.

She spotted several more statues, similar in appearance to those in the corridor outside, though much larger, standing in a more illuminated area of the room. It was here that Vaath led her, and she also soon noticed the figure of a Martian male seated on the floor before the statues. His skin was a deep orange shade and he wore a long white robe. His horns were a darker shade of orange and curved down his back to touch the floor.

“Prince Vaath, is that you?” the holy man asked, though he didn’t turn around to look.

Esmay appreciated that he had spoken in Galactic Common. She didn’t know a single word of the Martian tongue and from what she’d heard, the alien language was physically impossible for humans to speak, as it consisted of some buzzing and clicking noises humans typically couldn’t make.

“Yes,” Vaath said, “I have brought my mate, Esmay of Earth, in hopes that you will bestow a blessing on our union in front of the Gods.”

The Wise One rose to his feet and turned to face them. He looked older than any other Martian Esmay had ever seen. In fact, he was the first Martian she’d observed with wrinkles, and she found herself curious about his age, though she didn’t dare ask.

The elderly Martian stared at her with interest and walked closer. There was a compassionate glint in his dark eyes that put Esmay at ease, and an aura of peace and understanding surrounded him. He wasn’t like Vaath and the other warriors who had conquered Earth and this realization helped her to relax further.

Though this room had felt imposing when she’d first walked inside, it now felt like a

refuge of sorts, a place she might come in the future when she needed a moment to herself or perhaps some guidance.

“Hello, Esmay,” he said. “I am Wyvonus and I would like to welcome you to Mars. Your arrival marks a turning point in our history, though it will be some years before our people recognize the importance of this day.”

She shot a confused look at Vaath, who appeared startled by Wyvonus’s words, before returning her gaze to the holy man. “I am pleased to meet you, and I sincerely thank you for the welcome. I must ask, though—what do you mean by turning point?”

“Wyvonus, we would appreciate it if you could bestow the blessing upon us now,” Vaath said before Wyvonus could respond to Esmay’s question.

The holy man nodded and began to chant in the native Martian tongue, or at least it sounded like chanting to Esmay. As he continued, the floating lights above them glimmered brighter and moved closer to the statues. Vaath grasped both of her hands and guided her to stand facing him in front of the Wise One, a pose reminiscent of a human marriage ceremony.

For a brief time, Esmay allowed her mind to wander. She pretended she was in a church on Earth, about to marry her very own prince charming, a man whom she loved with her whole heart. She pretended this was the happiest day of her life and her family and friends had come to witness the joyous occasion.

But the lights soon grew brighter and moved from the statues to surround Esmay and Vaath, dancing around them like fireflies flitting through the night. Vaath tightened his hold on her hands and pulled her closer, so close the heat of his body radiated onto hers, and it became impossible to pretend she was on Earth marrying the love of her life.

She was far from home.

At this very moment, her family was probably trying to come to terms with her abrupt departure and the fact that they would never see her again.

The Wise One stopped chanting and the sudden silence filling the cavern left her uneasy. But Vaath was staring down at her with an almost reverent gleam in his dark eyes. Without either of them saying anything, she understood that the blessing had been bestowed.

It was done.

Her heart raced as the fluttering lights circled them several more times before returning to the towering statues.

Vaath released her hands and lifted her in his arms in one rapid movement. She opened her mouth to protest, but then immediately clamped her lips together. Perhaps he was supposed to carry her out of this holy room. This could be a Martian mating custom.

After they departed the cavern, Vaath said nothing as he carried her past dozens upon dozens of Martians who passed them in the hallways. Some of them were dressed all in black, which she thought meant they were guards, while others wore lighter colored clothing. Everyone they passed was male; she saw no Martian females, or human ones for that matter.

Vaath lifted her higher, as if trying to encourage her to lean against him.

How she wished she could lean her head upon his chest and relax in his arms, but she couldn't allow herself the luxury.

According to all the stories she'd heard about the wars, he had singlehandedly killed thousands of human soldiers. She already felt guilty over her initial attraction to him, the warmth she'd felt flowing through her before she'd learned of his true identity.

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“We’re almost to my chambers, sunshine,” he said, a hoarse whisper in her ear. His breath tickled her neck as he spoke, a caress far too sensuous for her liking, causing goosebumps to rise all over her body as endorphins rushed her scalp, leaving her deliriously lightheaded yet increasingly warm.

No no no, she thought. I don’t want this. I don’t want him.

He was a murderer and a royal member of the race who was suppressing her people. Yet their union had already been blessed by the Wise One, the elderly Martian who had claimed her arrival on this planet heralded a turning point in history. Whatever had the holy man meant by that?

In any case, she couldn’t fathom a circumstance in which she could ever harbor affection for her new mate, even if they were about to consummate their union.

Fear seized her when he carried her through a wide set of double doors that opened upon his approach. They entered a huge, opulent chamber that bespoke great wealth.

A growl resounded from Vaath’s throat, causing her fear to deepen.

“At last,” he said, “we are truly alone.”

Chapter 8

Esmay’s pulse quickened as the double doors zipped shut, sealing them inside Vaath’s chambers. He carried her near a large open window and finally set her down. She slipped out of his arms and turned to gaze outside, peering over the city that

surrounded the palace, as well as the lush green forests, distant mountains, and huge blue lakes. She had no idea how their terraforming technology worked, but she was beyond impressed. The Martians had created an absolute paradise.

“Your world is amazing,” she said.

“I am glad you like it.” He stepped behind her and wrapped his arms around her, hugging her to him from behind. “It is my hope that you will come to think of Mars as your home.”

Her heart sank. Would she ever think of this place as home?

She stared at the mountain peaks, some of which were covered in snow, and pondered this question. The only place that currently felt like home was the tiny two-bedroom apartment in New York that she had, until very recently, shared with her beloved parents and sisters. Oh, how she missed them already, and not even a full day had passed since she’d left Earth.

Without warning, tears burned in her eyes.

“Are you hungry?” Vaath asked.

She shook her head. “No-no,” she replied, her voice cracking with emotion.

At once, he turned her around in his arms and peered down at her with concern reflecting in his dark, otherworldly gaze. “What is wrong?” He held her out a bit and looked her up and down, as if searching her for bodily injuries.

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.” She blinked rapidly and hoped no tears escaped her eyes. She didn’t wish to break down crying in front of her new mate, especially only minutes after the blessing of their union. She couldn’t even remember the last time she had

cried. Probably when she was fourteen, when her dear grandmother had passed away. She had always tried to remain strong for the sake of her sisters, as she had never wished for them to understand the level of cruelty that existed in the world. Even after they fell asleep at night, she had refused to cry, refused to surrender to the frustrations that had often plagued her, the worries that had prevented her from sleeping.

“Tell me,” Vaath said, and though he didn’t speak harshly, it struck her as a command. “You are my mate, sunshine, and your pain is my pain. Tell me what is wrong so that I might help ease your burdens.”

She blinked at him, startled by his words. Did he mean it? Was he truly concerned about her? “I’m just thinking about my family,” she found herself confessing as she held his gaze. “I left Earth without saying goodbye.”

“Why didn’t you say goodbye to your family?” He ran his fingers through her hair, his movements gentle and soothing, as if he were trying to calm her. Despite herself, she wasn’t immune to his touch, and she gradually relaxed as he continued petting her.

“I didn’t say goodbye,” she eventually replied, “because they would’ve tried convincing me to stay on Earth.”

“I see. You mentioned earlier that you became a mail order bride in order to save your parents from prison, yet you claim they would have tried to stop you from leaving Earth. Are you saying they would have willingly gone to prison for you?”

“Yes. They would have,” she said, her heart cracking at the thought of her parents behind bars. “I overheard them talking the night I left to apply to become a Martian’s bride. They were going to try getting a quick divorce so that my father could claim all our family’s debt as his own, thus sparing my mother from going to prison too. But I

couldn't let that happen. My younger sisters would have been devastated to lose our father like that. At least now they'll be okay for a long time. The ten thousand galactic credits they received on my behalf will keep them comfortable for many years."

Vaath cupped the side of her face as his expression turned compassionate, reminding her of the way the Wise One had looked upon her but minutes ago. "I will see to it that your family is given an immediate deposit of one hundred thousand additional galactic credits and I will waive their future tax requirements. If they do not live in a safe area, I will also be happy to have them relocated to a new home. Furthermore, you may contact them whenever you wish, sunshine. There are several video comms in my chambers, all of which you are free to use."

Esmay gaped up at him in stunned silence. Had he really just said what she thought he had?

Not only was he planning to give her family a massive amount of money, but he was offering them safety as well. Plus, he promised she could contact them whenever she wished. It all sounded too good to be true, and gratitude swelled in her chest as she stared up at Prince Vaath, her enemy and her mate.

The tears she had been holding back started to fall.

* * *

Vaath wrapped his arms around his bride and ran his hands up and down her back, attempting to soothe her. The penalties the humans incurred for rebelling against Martti axoxalian rule seemed perfectly just to him...that was, until he was faced with Esmay's personal and undeniably tragic circumstances.

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Her suffering affected him deeply. The sound of her sniffing as she tried to stop crying wrenched at his heart, making him want to wage war against those who had caused her sadness.

But it was Vaath and his people who were responsible for her anguish.

“You need not cry, my sweet sunshine,” he said. “If your family needs more money, I would be happy to give it. Whatever they require, you need only ask.”

“It’s not that,” she said, pulling back to meet his stare. He wiped at the tear tracks on her cheeks, wishing he could erase the sorrow that had caused them. “I’m not crying because they need more. One hundred thousand galactic credits is an exorbitant amount of money. I-I’m a bit overwhelmed by your generosity. It is unexpected. Thank you.”

“You are very welcome,” he said, pleased that she wasn’t crying out of despair. “What about their housing situation? Do they live in a safe place?”

She shook her head. “No, they don’t live in a safe area. I know they would be grateful if you relocated them somewhere safer. In fact, they have often talked about their desire to leave Zone 18 and perhaps travel to a less populated zone in North America. A place where it’s safe for my sisters to play outside.”

“I will have a delegate meet with them soon to discuss their housing preferences and allow them to select exactly where they wish to live.”

Her eyes widened. “Thank you, Vaath.” Tentatively, she placed a hand upon his

chest, the first time she had willingly touched him.

Desire swept through him in heated waves, his cock thickening in his pants as his balls drew up tight.

Fluxx, he wanted to strip off her clothes, carry her to the bed, and fully claim her as his mate.

But he didn't move. Not yet.

Instead, he continued holding her and stroking her hair. She kept her hand upon his chest, occasionally drawing her fingers up and down, enticing him with those faint caresses.

He detected the sweet yet pungent aroma of her arousal in the air and took a long inhale. His lust flamed hotter and pleasure swept through him. It was a heady feeling, knowing that she desired him, that his attraction to her wasn't simply one-sided.

A deep sense of possession for his bride stole through him, almost murderous in its intensity.

Mine. My sweet sunshine. My human. My mate.

Chapter 9

“Are you nervous?”

Esmay peered up at Vaath as they stood next to the bed. She was nervous, incredibly so. Who wouldn't be? She was about to lose her virginity to a huge blue alien, the feared Prince of Mars who had conquered Earth twenty years ago. She'd heard countless stories about him, most of them positively frightening. He was the dark

avenging angel who had inflicted terror upon her planet, and now she was his bride.

And his people mated for life...

"I-I've never done this before," she finally replied.

His nostrils flared and his eyes darkened with increasing lust. A low growl rumbled from his throat as he worked open the fastening on her pants. She shuddered as he began to undress her, but despite her nervousness, the aching between her thighs only mounted.

She felt breathless with desire and he'd barely touched her yet. With shaking movements, she managed to step out of her boots and socks as he finished opening the last button on her pants.

"Do not be afraid, sunshine." He helped her out of her pants and tossed the garment to the floor. Next, he reached for the hem of her shirt. When his fingers grazed her bare stomach, she began quivering anew as yet another heated flush stole through her. "I will be gentle with you, little Esmay, and I shall endeavor to bring you nothing but pleasure."

Her fear lessened slightly and she nodded her appreciation, praying he would keep his word. At the same time, she promised herself that no matter how sweet and gently he treated her, she wouldn't develop any sort of affection for her mate. As he carefully removed her shirt and gazed upon her with warmth filling his eyes, she again reminded herself that he had killed thousands of her people.

He was a monster, an invader of her home planet, a heartless conqueror.

But when his lips crashed upon hers, she found it difficult to focus on his malevolent side. She couldn't prevent the quaking pulses that raged between her thighs, nor calm

the relentless pounding of her heart in her ears. His lips were firm and insistent upon hers as he kissed her, though his kiss was also achingly tender and slow, making her head swim as a sense of euphoria spread throughout her entire body.

When he finally pulled back from the kiss, she was gasping for air yet also strangely relaxed, as if the simple act of kissing had settled her nerves. His eyes gleamed darker and his nostrils kept flaring as he breathed long and deep. Her face flushed, for she realized he could once more sense her arousal. She instinctively pressed her legs together, though she doubted it would help.

She eyed his clothing, trying to decide if she should initiate undressing him. She reached for the front of his pants, then quickly lowered her hands to her sides after she glimpsed the colossal outline of the bulge encased within. All at once, her bravery fled, and she began to worry over the size of his manhood.

Exactly how large was he?

He placed a finger beneath her chin and forced her eyes to his. "I won't hurt you, Esmay," he said. "I promise. Now come here. I want to kiss you again."

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There was something about the taste of him, she thought, as he delved his tongue between her lips, that was downright addicting. The longer he kissed her, the more she didn't want him to stop, the harder her pussy ached and the faster her heart raced. In fact, she whimpered when he eventually pulled away, and she stepped closer to him as he set about removing his boots, pants, and shirt.

She watched in fascination as he disrobed, completely entranced by his physical beauty. He was a work of art even more magnificent than the resplendent statues lining the corridors of the palace. Her fingertips tingled with the urge to trace the lines of his muscles, and she found herself reaching out to do just that.

A shudder rippled through him when she touched him, but otherwise he didn't move. Instead, he allowed her time to explore his body as freely as she wished. She let her fingers drift over his arms and his chest before stepping nearer and wrapping her arms around his body. She proceeded to run her hands up and down his back while staring at him, lost in his sexy dark gaze, feeling as though she were in some sort of erotic dream. Surely this wasn't really happening right now.

Next, she spent some time moving her hands over his horns, unable to resist touching them. This prompted a growl to rumble forth from him. Ever since she'd first laid eyes on Vaath, she'd been curious about what his horns would feel like. They were hard and cool to the touch and a shudder rushed through her, because it was said that a Martian male's horns were his most deadly feature.

He was a fierce warrior and a powerful royal, and she was about to become his in every sense of the word.

After releasing her hold on his horns, she stepped back slightly and her gaze dropped to the massive appendage that jutted out from him, hard and ready to impale her, and she felt her eyes widen as her stomach tightened with anxiety. Not only was his cock huge, but it was also unnervingly thick. How could it ever possibly fit inside her?

She repressed a shiver and hoped he kept his promise not to hurt her. At the same time, it would be easier to hate him if he caused her pain, easier to think of him as the brutal warrior who had helped conquer her people. She pushed the thought away as pleasurable quivers continued assailing her, causing her breath to quicken and her heart to pound against her ribcage.

She felt his hands upon her hips and soon realized he was tugging her panties down. A shaky breath escaped her as he helped her step out of them, and when he straightened he immediately eyed her bra with disapproval. He reached for the front clasp and opened it, allowing her ample breasts to spill out as the undergarment slipped down her arms and fell to the floor.

Her heart skipped a beat. They were both completely naked now and very much alone in his private chambers. There was nothing left to do but consummate their mating union.

He guided her to lay down upon the huge bed and urged her legs wide apart, all the while holding her gaze with affection gleaming in his eyes. She could almost pretend he was her very own prince charming, that she had actually just married the man of her dreams. She latched onto this thought and told herself this was in fact a dream, that it was perfectly all right to enjoy herself, to lose herself in the arms of this handsome alien, because in the morning she would wake up and all would be back to normal. She wasn't truly giving herself to an enemy Martian, because this wasn't real.

"You are the most beautiful female I've ever laid eyes upon, my sunshine," he said,

leaning down to kiss her lips, then her cheeks, followed by a trail of kisses upon her neck. Each time he pressed his lips upon her flesh, she sank deeper into the fantasy she was creating.

Before she realized what he was doing, he had kissed his way down to her lower stomach. When she suddenly felt his tongue upon her nether folds, she gasped and tried to scoot away, but he held her in place as he cast her a brief, almost censorious glance from his position between her spread thighs.

“The scent of your arousal has been driving me mad, Esmay. Hold still and let me taste you.” He growled again.

She ceased squirming around, despite her continued surprise over his bold actions. She hadn’t expected any sort of foreplay from Vaath. In fact, now that she thought about it, she was surprised he’d even kissed her. Since Martians needed human females in order to procreate, she had assumed their transactions in the bedroom would be quick and to the point. Businesslike, even. But it would appear Vaath had other ideas in mind. Deliriously wonderful ideas. She moaned and leaned back against the pillows as he began lapping at her slick folds and circling her clit with his tongue.

Her thighs quivered when he placed one large digit to her sopping wet core and started inching inside, all the while licking her pulsing nubbin and pushing her closer and closer to the heights of ecstasy. He began shoving his finger in and out of her pussy, though his drives were shallow. When he touched a part of her that almost hurt, he withdrew his digit before sliding straight back in. Pressure coiled in her lower belly and she gasped for air, writhing upon the bed as Vaath expertly ran his tongue in circles upon her most sensitive place.

The pressure increased and in the next moment Esmay was flying.

She twisted around beneath Vaath and found herself clutching onto his head, touching the wide base of his horns as she cried out in the throes of a thunderous climax.

She blinked up at Vaath as he withdrew his attention from between her thighs. His eyes gleamed blacker than she'd ever seen and his nostrils were flaring wide. Growls emanated from him, and a shudder of fear ran through her, because he very much looked like a savage in this moment. She expected him to snap at any second, hold her down, and force his way past the barrier of her innocence.

Her face heated and she tried to close her legs, but he positioned himself on top of her in such a way that she couldn't quite move. She was trapped beneath him and he meant to consummate their union. Her fear increased, but the warmth throbbing between her thighs also pulsed hotter. She swallowed hard and braced herself for his attack.

But a deafening explosion suddenly rattled the walls, and a blinking red light soon filled the room, along with the intermittent blare of a siren.

Everything became a blur as Vaath hurriedly dressed her before he also put his own clothes back on. Her ears rang painfully and when he spoke, she couldn't make out his words. She looked around the room and noticed several items had fallen off dressers, but none of the walls had been breached. What had happened? A glance out the nearest window showed a trail of smoke rising in the distance.

Vaath picked her up and carried her out into the corridor, where other Martians were hurrying by in a whirl of panicked activity. The ringing in her ears began to dull and her hearing returned, but she still couldn't understand what was happening, as everyone was shouting to one another in the Martian tongue.

"All will be well, my sweet sunshine. Do not worry," Vaath said, placing his lips to

her ear. "I promise to protect you."

Chapter 10

Vaath jogged through the corridors beneath the castle, heading for the massive underground bunkers that spread out beneath the city. The caverns were safe and could house the entire Martian population, if necessary. He held Esmay close, embracing her securely in his arms while he carried her toward safety.

He entered the royal bunker to find his father standing amidst his most trusted advisors. Shock reverberated through Vaath that his father was already here. How had the king and his advisors arrived so quickly? His father approached him with a concerned expression causing the ridges upon his forehead to deepen, and the men tapped their feet together in greeting. The king cast a curious glance at Esmay but didn't look at her for long, for his gaze soon turned to the screens behind them that displayed images of the city in real time. Several advisors also greeted Vaath with quick foot taps, even though he still held Esmay in his arms.

The back of Vaath's neck prickled, but before he could inquire as to how the king had gotten here so rapidly, as he was usually in the royal receiving chamber on the far side of the palace at this time of day, Advisor Testtak cleared his throat and stood taller as he pointed at the city surveillance screens on the wall. One of the screens showed a close up of a smoking pile of rubble. Advisor Testtak pressed several buttons on a panel next to this particular screen, allowing for a playback of the event that had led to the devastation.

The screen displayed a house situated near the bustling market in the center of the city. A green Martian male entered the door, accompanied by his human female, and Vaath recognized them as a couple he'd seen disembarking the spaceship on the platform earlier today. After several moments, the entire house exploded. Some of the advisors gasped, though Vaath simply scowled at the screen.

Esmay trembled in his arms, and he turned away from the screens and carried her to a chair and set her down upon it, then fetched a blanket from a nearby cabinet when he noticed her shivering was increasing. As the room erupted into an argument behind him, he took his time tucking the blanket around his bride. He had a feeling she wasn't simply shaking because her human anatomy couldn't withstand the chilled temperature of the bunker, but because the situation that was unfolding had frightened her.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead, hoping to help calm her. "You are safe here, Esmay."

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She nodded and then cast a worried look at the screens. Apparently, Advisor Testtak was replaying some of the other surveillance videos. Vaath turned and walked to join the men, ignoring the disapproving glance the king shot at Esmay. No doubt his father believed Esmay should be housed in another location in the bunker, but Vaath had no intention of letting her out of his sight.

“Can she understand the Marttiadoxalian tongue?” the king asked with a sneer.

Vaath glared at his father. “No, but even if she could, I would keep her with me. She is my mate and it is my sacred duty to keep her safe.”

Before the king could reply, Advisor Testtak displayed a message from the Vash’arr. It didn’t surprise Vaath that the Vash’arr had rushed to the site of the explosion. In fact, Vaath caught a glimpse of Jav on a surveillance feed, already sifting through the smoking rubble.

“The attack was caused by the anti-Earthers known as thedrakks. Five members of the organization have been captured near the site of the explosion. The residents of the house, a male Marttiadoxalian and a female human, are both deceased.”

Vaath growled. “All suspected anti-Earthers should be rounded up and questioned. I will oversee their interrogations.” He had personally questioned several drakks before and had great success, however, for a reason he couldn’t fathom, the king usually seemed hesitant to take action against the anti-Earthers. This was the first time the resistance had killed anyone, though, and Vaath hoped his father finally took the matter seriously.

“The dungeons are at your disposal,” the king said, filling Vaath with relief, “but you will not have long to question the five who’ve just been captured. They will suffer a quick, public execution before the sun sets today.” His father puffed out his chest as most of the royal advisors murmured their approval.

“I understand,” Vaath said as he peered at the screens, wishing he were out in the streets with the Vash’arr and the other warriors. He turned and glanced at Esmay, reminding himself of why he’d hurried to the bunkers. The moment he’d heard the explosion, his only thought was to get her to safety. His heart swelled with warmth when her gaze collided with his.

“What’s happening?” she asked as he approached.

“The anti-Earthers attacked the home of a Marttiadoxalian male who’d recently returned home with his new human bride.”

She gasped and cast a worried look at the screens. “Are they okay? The Martian male and his human bride?”

“I’m afraid they both perished in the explosion.”

Her eyes widened. “Do you know the female’s name?”

“No, but I can find out.”

“Please do,” she said. “I-I didn’t really know any of the females who arrived here from Earth today, but I spoke with almost all of them on the ship.”

“I am sorry that one of the females died, Esmay, and I can assure you that her family on Earth will be well-compensated for their loss. I will personally take care of the matter.”

She drew back as if he'd slapped her. "Compensated? Of course," she said, her gaze falling to her lap.

He didn't understand her odd reaction. Shouldn't it please her that he would compensate the human female's family? It grieved him that two lives had been lost today, one human and one Marttiadoxalian. Didn't she understand that he lamented for the suffering of any of his subjects on Mars, even the human females who lived among them?

"I need to assist in the investigation," he said, helping her to her feet. "But I wish for you to remain in the safety of the caverns beneath the palace until it's been determined that there are no more pressing threats."

She paled somewhat and nodded, though her face fell when she glanced at the advisors and the king.

"That's your father, isn't it? I can see the family resemblance." Her voice quavered and he wished he didn't have to leave her, but he had duties to which he must attend.

"It is. Come, my sunshine, and I will quickly introduce you to the king," he said, "and then I will leave you in the place I believe you'll feel safest."

He guided her to stand before his father. The king looked at her with interest, though Vaath sensed the elderly Marttiadoxalian's disapproval. His father had been very vocal in his desire for Vaath to take a female of their own kind as a mate.

"Father," he said in Galactic Common, "I would like you to meet my mate, Esmay of Earth. Esmay, this is my father, King Verruik of Mars."

The king inclined his head slightly and placed a hand upon Esmay's shoulder as he tapped one foot against hers. "I am pleased to meet you, Esmay."

Esmay met his gaze without blinking, an almost bold glint in her stark blue eyes, and Vaath felt a surge of pride that she wasn't cowering or trembling before his father. Even some of the king's advisors became visibly nervous in front of him from time to time. His admiration for Esmay grew when she finally spoke.

"I am pleased to meet you as well, King Verruik," she said, tapping his foot. "Your planet is beautiful and welcoming, though I hope no other human females who arrive here suffer the same fate as that human woman did today." She nodded at the screen that currently showed an image of the smoking rubble.

The king's eyes practically bulged at Esmay's bold words. It sounded as though she were chastising his father over the death of the human woman, and perhaps that really was her intent. He gave her hand a squeeze to show his support of her statement, even as the king stammered to give a response.

"Those guilty for the murder of the human female and her mate will suffer greatly during their execution," the king finally said, speaking in shaky Galactic Common. "Anyone who opposes Marttiadoxalian law will suffer."

Though Esmay's gaze remained sharp and steady as she continued looking up at the king, Vaath noticed the slight movement of her throat as she swallowed. Annoyance with his father flared inside him and he gripped Esmay's hand harder as he began ushering her toward the door. The king and his advisors would remain in the royal bunker until the Vash'arr and the royal guard deemed it safe to return aboveground.

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“I will transmit any important information I learn from the interrogations directly to this room,” Vaath said, switching to his native tongue.

“Why don’t you leave your mate here?” the king asked in an incredulous tone. “This is the safest location for her.”

“The holy bunkers are just as safe. Wyvonus was kind to her and I am certain she would appreciate getting to spend more time with him,” Vaath replied, though this wasn’t quite the truth. He didn’t trust his father to treat Esmay with politeness and he doubted she would feel comfortable in the presence of so many strange Marttiadoxalians anyway. She had just been introduced to the king and she didn’t know any of the fourteen advisors who were in the room. Wyvonus would be a much better choice.

He guided Esmay outside the royal bunker, keeping his arm wrapped around her waist. Once they reached the corridor, he swept her up into his arms so that they might travel to the holy bunkers as quickly as possible. Some parts of the cavern weren’t adequately illuminated and he also didn’t wish for her to stumble along the way. He breathed in the floral scent of her hair as he held her close and jogged through the underground corridors.

“Are we returning to your chambers?” she asked, peeking up at him from under thick, dark eyelashes. Gods, she was lovely. He couldn’t wait to get her back in his chambers and in his bed, couldn’t wait to finish what they had started before the ill-timed explosion.

“No, not yet,” he said, rushing down the narrow passageway that led to the holy

bunkers. “I am going to leave you with Wyvonus while I help conduct the investigation into the attack. When I have finished and it is safe to go above ground, I will come fetch you, my sunshine.”

Chapter 11

Hours had passed and according to Wyvonus, night had long since fallen. Not that Esmay could tell how dark it was outside—she was still in the holy bunkers with the Wise One and several other holy men.

She cast a glance around the large cavernous area, wondering exactly how deep beneath the ground this place was. She felt safe here, but what about everyone in the city above?

“The bunkers spread out beneath the city, child,” Wyvonus said, as if reading her mind. “Anyone from the city who wishes to retreat to the bunkers can always reach them quickly. Most houses contain entrances to the bunkers from their basements. And, of course, some people live beneath the ground in large subterranean houses.”

“That is good to hear,” she said, shooting him a suspicious look. “Can you hear my thoughts?”

He pressed his hands together, as if in prayer, and nodded twice. “Your mind is loud, Esmay of Earth. There is a part of you that is shouting, a part of you that is fierce and angry and proud. Any Wise One standing close to you would probably hear the shouting.” He gave her another one of his sympathetic smiles that always put her at ease.

“What about Prince Vaath?” she asked, suddenly worried. “Do you think he can hear the shouting in my mind?”

Wyvonus shook his head. “No. He has not trained as a Wise One. However, Prince Vaath is very perceptive for a royal. He is also far wiser than his father. This has always been both a blessing and a curse to him. I tell you this so you understand that it will be difficult for you to hide truths from your mate. Your mating union will be a happy one if you are honest with Prince Vaath.”

“A happy union?” she asked, unable to keep the mocking tone from her voice. “The prince killed thousands of my people. How could we ever possibly share in a happy union? I-I am only here because I wished to keep my family together, because my family desperately needed financial assistance. Surely you must know that is the reason most human females sign up to become brides to the Martians.”

“One day, you and Prince Vaath will find happiness together,” Wyvonus said with a mysterious smile, “and it will change the world.”

“Change the world? What does that mean?” Esmay liked the Wise One, but she didn’t care for the cryptic hints he kept dropping or his insistence that she would one day find happiness with her mate. She’d promised herself she would never feel affection for Prince Vaath. She would go through the motions of being his mate, but she would keep her heart closely guarded.

Another holy man called for Wyvonus and the Wise One gave her another strange, all-knowing look, before he joined the male in the corner of the room. They were in the largest room in the holy bunkers, one which contained several beds and sofas, as well as a large kitchen area and five separate bathrooms, each complete with showers and massive bathtubs. Exhausted from her travels—she hadn’t managed any sleep on the spaceship—she had fallen asleep on a couch earlier, but she must not have slept for long because she didn’t feel well-rested. Her eyes were growing heavy again and she covered her mouth as she repressed a yawn.

How long until Vaath returned? Was it even safe aboveground? He’d told her some

anti-Earthers had been captured near the site of the explosion, but what if another attack soon followed? Her mind raced with possibilities and she started pacing the length of the living room area, unable to stop herself from worrying about Vaath's safety.

Her frustration grew. Why was she worried for him? It didn't make sense. She shouldn't waste a single second in worry for any Martian, let alone the feared warrior prince who had slaughtered thousands of her people. From across the room, Wyvonus caught her gaze as he stood talking to another Wise One. He gave her a slight nod and her face flamed as she wondered if he could hear the shouting in her head from so far away.

She turned her back on the holy man and wandered to one of the beds in the corner of the room, seeking a quiet, private place to gather her thoughts where no one would be watching. She liked Wyvonus, but that didn't mean she wanted him reading her mind. She didn't want anyone reading her mind, especially when her thoughts were so conflicted.

She sighed as she curled up in the bed and faced the smooth orange stone wall. Even after she reminded herself of the human blood on Vaath's hands, she still couldn't keep herself from worrying about him. If she didn't know better, she might say she missed him and yearned for his return.

A flush overcame her when she recalled the way her mind had whirled as he kissed her, the way her body had grown warm and tingly as he ran his fingers through her hair. And when he'd boldly settled his mouth between her thighs... God, she was getting achy all over again just remembering the ecstasy that had followed.

Her heart raced when she recalled what had happened after she'd shattered to pieces. He'd been on top her, his hugeness resting at the entrance of her sex. He'd been an instant away from surging forward and claiming her and officially consummating

their union, but then the explosion had stopped him just in time.

She was still a virgin.

She pulled the covers over herself and wondered how much longer that would be the case.

Would Vaath claim her immediately upon his return? He'd seemed eager to do so as he'd carried her to his chambers after they received the blessing from Wyvonus.

She tried to sleep, but despite her utter fatigue, her racing mind prevented her from drifting off for more than a few minutes at a time. She couldn't stop thinking about her family, mourning for the human female who had just lost her life, and, much to her dismay, worrying about Vaath. She kept nodding off, only to jerk awake a short while later, with thoughts of her family and Vaath invading her mind.

“Sunshine.”

She turned at the sound of her mate's deep voice. Vaath's dark eyes were fixed on her as he stood over the bed. She hadn't heard him approaching and marveled at how quiet a male as large as him could be on his feet. Sitting up in bed, she found herself reaching for him, needing to touch him to make sure he was okay.

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A low-pitched beeping noise reverberated through the cavern, and she noticed the holy men started filing out of the bunker. Apparently, the danger was officially over and it was now safe to return to the surface. She swallowed hard as she held Vaath's gaze. What did returning to the surface mean for them? Would he carry her directly to his chambers and claim her as his bride?

"It is safe to leave the bunkers now, Esmay." He reached for her hand and grasped it tightly, then helped her out of the bed. Even once she was standing, he didn't let her go.

She discreetly looked him up and down, just to make sure he wasn't injured, and relief filled her to see him unharmed. She was also relieved by his arrival, though she tried to push such thoughts away. If she were truly loyal to her people, she wouldn't care one way or another if he got hurt in a clash with anti-Earthers.

"Are we going back to your chambers now?" Esmay asked.

"Yes. The hour is late and the dinner feast is about to begin, however I will have an evening meal brought to my chambers. That is, unless you wish to head for the banquet hall and dine with my father and his dignitaries?" He didn't have eyebrows, but the ridge above his right eye lifted, giving the appearance of a brow lifted in question.

Though she suspected joining the feast would give her more time before he resumed claiming her, she couldn't bear the thought of joining his father and other Marttiadoxalians for a meal. She shook her head. "I'm too tired to join in the feast," she said, "but thank you for offering."

He smiled briefly, which made him appear younger and far less intimidating than he usually looked. For the first time, she realized he had deep grooves on both of his cheeks when he grinned.

Dimples.

Her big, scary alien warrior husband had dimples.

She found herself returning his smile as a spark of hope ignited in her chest.

Vaath wrapped an arm around her and escorted her out of the bunkers.

Chapter 12

“So the anti-Earthers are calleddrakks?” Esmay asked. She was seated at the dinner table in his chambers. Dessert had just been served, as well as steaming cups of traditional post-dinneryuguliantea. The servants had just departed his chambers, per his orders, and would not return until morning to clear the table, as he sought complete privacy with his bride.

“Yes,” he replied carefully, his heart heavy. He hadn’t yet told her the name of the female who had died today, but he worried over her reaction when he finally did. She said she’d talked to almost all the females aboard the spaceship and while she claimed she didn’t know any of them well, they were all still her people. He cleared his throat. “We believe there are about three hundred anti-Earthers in the city.”

She paled and set her utensil down. “And this is the first time they’ve killed anyone?”

“Yes,” he replied, his spirits darkening. He didn’t like the worried look in her eyes. She had only recently arrived on his planet and he wanted her to feel safe here. How could she feel safe if there were those in the city who were against Marttiadoxalian-

human unions? He vowed to make the destruction of the entire order of drakkshis top priority. He wouldn't rest until all the members were jailed or driven away from Mars. Or executed. Those who held leadership positions wouldn't be shown any mercy.

"Vaath," Esmay said, shifting in her seat. "Am I supposed to call you Vaath, or Prince Vaath, or..."

He smiled, grateful for the change in subject. "I would prefer you call me Vaath."

She nodded and then appeared thoughtful. "Why did you not tell me you were the Prince of Mars when you first introduced yourself?"

"I-I am not sure." He thought back to their first interaction, when he'd entered the women's quarters aboard the spaceship that had brought her to Mars. He'd been so struck by her beauty and the sweetness he'd felt emanating from her that his thoughts had gone muddled. "Wait," he continued, deciding to be honest, "that is not entirely accurate. The truth is, I was entranced by your beauty and felt as though I were fumbling for words when I first looked upon you, sunshine."

Her eyes widened and a pretty flush darkened her cheeks. She glanced away from him in a nervous manner before eventually returning her gaze to his. He pushed his dessert plate aside and reached across the table for Esmay, holding his hand out and hoping she would grasp it. To his delight, she placed her tiny hand in his. He ran his thumb over the underside of her wrist, reveling in the softness of her. He couldn't wait to strip off her clothes once again and this time finally succeed in claiming her as his. As his mate. As his wife. As his future.

He considered Wyvonus' odd declaration that Esmay's arrival on Mars marked a turning point in history. What had the Wise One meant by that? At the time, Vaath had been impatient to get the blessing over with and had wanted nothing more than to

carry Esmay to his room, so he'd interrupted when she had asked for clarification about the holy man's statement. But as Vaath continued staring into his bride's pretty blue eyes and stroking the softness of her wrist, he could easily imagine a great love would one day bloom between them. Perhaps their love would shine as an example to other Marttiadoxalians who were considering taking a human mate. Dare he hope that his plan to set an example for his people would actually work?

Still holding her hand, Vaath rose up and moved to Esmay's side. His blood heated the closer he got to her, and by the time he'd reached her and lifted her in his arms, he felt downright feverish. Her golden locks gleamed underneath the overhead lights, making it seem as though her hair were glowing. Her face became further flushed and he soon detected the telltale scent of her womanly essence, the heady proof of her arousal. His nostrils flared and he took a deep inhale, savoring her feminine scent.

He carried her to the bed and set her down beside it. Her lips parted slightly as she lifted her face toward him, and he leaned down to kiss her as he pressed his hardness against her stomach. Gods, he couldn't wait to sink himself inside her, to thrust in and out of the tightness he'd only yet slipped one finger into. A tremor of sensation rushed up his inner thighs and his balls tightened as his cock grew rock hard in his pants. He growled as he deepened the kiss, savoring the sweet taste of his mate.

When he finally broke the kiss, her eyes were glazed over. She trembled in his arms and the scent of her arousal heightened in the air, causing him to swelter in the confines of his clothing. He eyed the pants and sweater she was still wearing and set about undressing her as quickly as possible, eager to glimpse her naked form once more, longing to run his hands over her smoothness and part her thighs to accept his length.

He tossed her clothing to the floor and allowed his gaze to drift over her curvy features. Her breasts were full and pink-tipped, and he bent down to take one hardened nipple in his mouth. Delicious. She arched into his touch and a moan

escaped her throat. He took his time lapping his tongue against each of her nipples in turn, delighting in the whimpers and moans that left her. She was so beautiful, so sweet, and she was all his. His mate. It was a heady feeling, knowing that she belonged to him, and the fierce sense of possessiveness he already felt for her only grew stronger.

Mine, he thought. You're mine, little human.

He worked his way up her neck, kissing and dragging his teeth along her flesh. She wrapped her arms around him and the feel of her hands moving up and down his back drove him wild with the need to be inside her. Soon. He needed to plunge into her soon or he would combust.

With a growl, he pushed back from her and stripped off his clothing. She watched with wide eyes and placed a hand upon the bed to steady herself.

Then he was on her, pressing her down atop the covers as he coaxed her thighs to open.

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He placed a hand between her legs and met her suddenly fearful gaze. “Open for me, sunshine. I promised not to hurt you and I meant it. I would die before I caused you pain, little Esmay.”

* * *

Esmay parted her thighs and groaned when Vaath stroked two thick fingers through her gathering moisture. She shuddered and opened her legs wider, the aching in her core increasing as her clit pulsed faster.

“Is all this wetness for me?” he asked, and his bold words stunned her.

She whimpered, unable to form a reply, and her head fell back against the pillows when he removed his fingers from her center and replaced them with his cock. Her hips lifted of their own accord as she arched into his hugeness, pressing her pussy to his thick shaft. Heat enveloped her, as well as a haze of arousal that seemed to help hold her fear at bay. His size still frightened her, but she trusted him to be gentle.

Her heart lurched at the realization that she was starting to trust him, but before she could examine this thought any further, he started inching his massive cock inside her. She gasped as her insides stretched to accommodate his huge size. She held her breath, certain she would experience at least a slight amount of pain, but it never happened. Vaath took his time pushing inside her, pausing every few seconds, allowing her to get used to his size. Whenever she met his gaze, he was staring at her with warmth reflecting in his dark eyes.

Once he was finally all the way inside her, he brushed his hands through her hair and

pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. She melted. She couldn't help it. His tenderness and the affectionate glint in his eyes were doing her in, paving the way for surrender.

He rose up and gathered her wrists in one hand, pinning her down to the bed. With his other hand he grabbed hold of her left hip. Slowly, he began to withdraw from her center. She gasped at the sensation, already aching for him to shove back inside her. When he pushed into her again, she jerked her center up, meeting his thrust as the delicious pressure coiling within surged forth. Her legs trembled and she struggled in his grasp, though he wasn't hurting her.

A thrill rushed through her that he was holding her down, still pinning her wrists to the bed.

His fingers tightened on her hip as he set a torturously slow rhythm of thrusting in and out of her tightness. Her muscles kept clamping down around him, causing him to growl and his body to tense. Perspiration trickled down her temples and she fought for air, growing breathless as he claimed her.

"You're mine, Esmay from Earth," he said in a possessive tone, gripping her wrists harder. "My mate. My female." A deep animalistic growl rumbled from his throat.

The aching in her pussy propelled her to continue meeting his thrusts, the building urges within her becoming all-consuming. She was on fire for Vaath, eager for each drive of his cock, desperate for him to fill her up with his hugeness time and time again.

He released her wrists and grasped her hips with both hands, holding her in place as he commenced plunging into her more rapidly. With the increase in his pace, his balls started to impact against her bottom. The sounds of flesh slapping into flesh filled the room, along with her moans and his fierce growls. She liked it when he growled, reveled in the vibration of heat that resounded throughout her body.

He met her gaze. “I’m going to fill you with my seed, little Esmay, and you’re going to lay there and take it, take my essence inside that sweet little pussy of yours.”

Not for the first time, his crass words made her blush. She could only nod and remain beneath him as he pounded into her faster.

He tensed and the well-defined muscles of his blue chest gleamed under a sheen of perspiration. His nostrils flared and when he closed his eyes and his head fell back slightly, the tips of his horns brushed over her thighs.

Not missing a beat as he continued thrusting into her, he reached between her thighs and circled one digit over her pulsing clit. At the same moment she felt the heat of his seed spurting into her, she cried out and began writhing under the impact of a long, drawn-out orgasm.

Her vision blurred and she soon closed her eyes as the euphoria carried her into the sky.

Chapter 13

Vaath cradled Esmay in his lap and stroked her hair. Gods, she was perfect, and she was all his. He breathed in her enticing scent and his cock stirred. Mindful of her small size, he didn’t make any move to take her again. He would allow her the night to recover from their first mating.

He caressed her thigh and met her eyes. “Are you in any pain, sunshine?”

“I’m just a little sore,” she replied, her cheeks turning bright pink.

He carried her into the bathroom, chiding himself for not tending to her needs sooner. He sat her in a chair and immediately set about searching through the cabinets for a

healing balm that would ease her discomfort. Once he found the medicinal ointment, he opened the bottle and scooped up a dollop with two fingers. He turned to Esmay.

“Spread your legs.”

“What?” Her eyes widened and she looked wary.

He knelt before her and held up the jar of healing balm. “This will help you recover more quickly. It will ease your soreness, Esmay.”

She gulped hard and shook her head. “Vaath, please, that’s really not necessary. I’m fine. Really.” Her blush deepened and she glanced at the doorway, as if she were thinking of hopping off the chair and making her escape. He couldn’t be certain, but he thought she appeared embarrassed. Nevertheless, he wouldn’t allow her to suffer when it was within his power to help her feel better and heal faster.

“Esmay,” he said a bit sternly, as he wasn’t used to his orders not being followed, “please open your thighs. I am trying to help you.”

“Vaath, I don’t think—”

“Now,” he said in a voice full of command.

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Her face hardened and she crossed her arms over her chest, but she eventually parted her legs, though he had to urge her to spread wide enough for him to apply the ointment to her pink, swollen parts. She had a thin layer of golden hair covering her pussy lips, and once he finished lathering the balm upon her insides, he took his time to admire her femininity more thoroughly, holding her thighs open wide as he looked upon her.

“Please,” she said. “Please, Vaath, you’re embarrassing me. You shouldn’t look at me there.” She made to cover herself but he pushed her hands out of the way.

“I will look upon you whenever I please, Esmay,” he said. “I am your mate and you belong to me.” He stroked a finger through her pink folds, transfixed by the smooth wet texture of her private parts. His cock thickened and his balls drew up tight.

Gods, what he wouldn’t give to be inside her in this instant.

To his shock, defiance suddenly glinted in her blue eyes. She lifted her chin and glared at him. “I want to close my legs now, Vaath,” she said.

Confused by her sharp tone, he released his hold on her legs and rose to his feet, backing away from her. “Forgive me if I made you uncomfortable, sunshine. That was not my intent.” Guilt settled upon him. He had suspected she was embarrassed over having to spread her thighs. He ought not have forced her to keep them open for longer than necessary. I will look upon you whenever I please. He wished he could take back those words. Now that he considered it, he had behaved somewhat like a brute just now.

But he couldn't help it. When it came to Esmay, he felt like an untamed beast, a creature ruled only by instinct, one who was ready to seize his mate in an almost violent manner. It had taken all his self-control not to pound into her roughly as he claimed her for the first time. A growl built in his throat, and his muscles kept tensing and his blood kept heating in her presence, the urge to carry her to the bed and claim her once again rushing through him and dominating his senses.

She reached for a towel and covered herself with it. "I-I'm not used to being naked around other people," she said with a glance at him. "And it's not as though we're still in bed together."

He looked down at himself. His cock stood erect and he was still completely naked. "Does my nudity make you uncomfortable?" he asked. Though he was perfectly comfortable being naked around her, he would gladly get dressed if it pleased her.

"I-I don't know," she said after a moment. "I mean, I guess it kind of does, but then I've never been around a naked man before." She made a sweeping gesture with her hand. "I'm not really used to any of this. This planet. This palace. This room. You. Everything is new."

"I see." He reached for a towel on a nearby rack and wrapped it around his torso. The front of it tented over his growing hardness and he tried to better cover himself, though his cock pushed the towel outward even further during his efforts. When he tried pushing the towel flat over the front of himself once more, his cock sprang up yet again and shifted the towel so rapidly this time that he almost dropped it.

She smiled suddenly and her whole face lit up. His spirits lifted to see her face so beautifully illuminated, especially when she'd appeared uncertain and almost fearful but an instant ago. She was his mate, and he wanted her to always feel safe in his presence. A tight, affectionate sensation swelled in his chest, and it took him a moment to realize he was starting to care for this little human who'd been randomly

matched to him. The warm feeling went beyond possession, beyond ownership.

He reached out a hand to her. “Come, sunshine, and I will show you where your nightclothes are kept and then you may shower and prepare for bed if you wish.” To his relief, she accepted his hand and rose up, though she paused to skillfully wrap the towel around her little body before they exited the bathroom. He could smell his seed drying on her inner thighs, which didn’t help tamp down the desire heating his blood. But he pushed it aside once more and focused on his mate’s needs. After the long and eventful day she’d had, he knew she was probably exhausted and needed her sleep.

He guided her out into the master bedroom and opened a walk-in closet he’d recently had filled with all manner of female clothing in the Marttiadoxalian style. Unsure of his bride’s measurements, as mating matches were made only after the human brides departed Earth, he’d asked for a variety of sizes to be included. She gasped when they entered the closet and peered at the clothing with wide eyes.

“I-I didn’t expect this,” she said. “Thank you, Vaath. It was kind of you to prepare for my arrival like this. Oh, and there’s my backpack.” She nodded toward a black bag that had been placed on the floor next to one of the dressers.

He was glad a guard had already delivered it to the palace and appreciated that a servant had thoughtfully placed it in Esmay’s closet. Though he would provide her with anything she needed, he suspected the backpack contained some cherished personal items.

“Some of these items will probably be too large for you,” he said with a glance around the closet, “however, I will have those that don’t fit resized immediately.”

He released his hold on her to allow her to explore. She walked ahead of him and spun in a slow circle as she looked at everything.

“This closet is larger than the bedroom I used to share with my sisters.” As soon as the words escaped her mouth, her face darkened and she appeared lost in thought.

“Perhaps after you get ready for bed, I can show you how to use the video comms and you can contact your family. Do you think they will be home right now?”

She suddenly looked hopeful. “Oh, that would be wonderful. Thank you. I’m not sure what time it is in Zone 18 right now, but I can certainly try contacting them to see if they’re around. Oh, I hope they’re home. I also hope their video comm is working. My father bought an old one and refurbished it, though it requires constant upkeep.”

Vaath made a mental note to have a brand-new video comm delivered to her family’s home, even if they wouldn’t be living there for much longer. First thing tomorrow, he would appoint a representative from Martian Affairs to reach out to his bride’s family.

He watched as Esmay spun around and grabbed the first item of clothing she saw, though he didn’t have the heart to tell her the flowing blue dress she’d reached for wasn’t a nightgown. For all he knew, it might look similar to the type of pajamas humans wore. He would give her a longer tour of the closet at a later time, he decided, as he moved aside for her to return to the bathroom. She gave him a shy glance just before she shut the door, and a short while later he heard the shower running.

It brought him joy to see her so happy and animated, and he hurried to take a quick shower in a spare bedroom within his chambers and don a pair of loose pants and a shirt. He wasn’t certain if she would want to introduce him to her family during the video comm call, but it was probably best he was dressed just in case.

He stood outside the bathroom door, eagerly waiting for his sweet human mate to emerge. She hadn’t been out of his sight for long, but, may the Gods help him, he

already missed her.

Chapter 14

Esmay's heart pounded as she tried calling her parents on the video comm. She perched on the edge of her seat, watching the blank screen and praying she soon saw her mother or father's face.

Vaath stood beside her with a hand resting upon her shoulder. She had asked him to stay in the room during the call, believing that her parents would likely wish to meet her new mate. In any case, it would be better to get the introductions over with as soon as possible.

"There's no answer," she said, her spirits sinking as the call timed out after several minutes of waiting.

Vaath gave her shoulder an affectionate squeeze, then pressed several buttons on the screen. "It is almost noontime in Zone 18," he said.

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She clasped her hands together, still staring at the blank screen. “Oh, that makes sense. My parents are both usually at work right now, and my sisters will be in school.” She felt ridiculous over her disappointment of the unanswered call. She had permission from Vaath to use any of his video comms whenever she wished. She would still get to speak with her parents and sisters, as well as see their faces upon the screen.

“Perhaps you ought to get some sleep,” Vaath said, “and first thing in the morning you can try calling again.”

“Good idea.” She pushed back from the video comm and he helped her to her feet.

Vaath wrapped his arms around her and met her gaze, and her heart skipped a beat at the warmth filling his eyes. Her determination to hold him at a distance faltered even more. How could she dislike him when he was going to help her family? He’d announced he would give them a large amount of money, waive all future taxes they might owe, and allow them to select a new home within the zone of their choosing. Soon, her family would be living in a much safer location, a place where her sisters could hopefully enjoy playing in the outdoors, and she had Prince Vaath of Mars to thank for it.

“How old are you?” she found herself asking, not for the first time wondering about their difference in age.

“I am sixty-five Marttiadoxalian years old,” he replied, “which equals about eighty Earth years. The days on my home planet of Marttiadoxalia were longer than a day on Earth or Mars.”

“You’re older than my father,” she said, her eyes growing wide. “However, you don’t look like an old man. I’ve heard your kind live much longer than humans.”

“I am still considered a young male by my people’s standards,” he said. “Marttiadoxalians usually live to around the age of three hundred and twenty-five, or, in Earth years, around four hundred.”

She forced a smile. “Well, you’ll probably end up taking about two more human brides during your lifetime then. The average human only lives to the age of seventy, though I believe before the war, when we had better access to medical care, that age was higher.”

“I will not outlive you, sunshine,” he said, stroking a hand through her silken locks, and his words left her confused.

“Of course you’ll outlive me, likely by over three hundred years.” For a reason she couldn’t fathom, she didn’t like the idea of him outliving her long enough to take another mate, yet it seemed an inescapable prospect.

He leaned down to press a gentle kiss to her forehead, and her head swam with dizziness at his nearness. Despite the seriousness of their conversation, excitement awakened within her, the first pulses of arousal quaking between her thighs. She pressed her legs together when his nostrils abruptly flared and a knowing look entered his dark eyes.

“Our scientists have devised a method of slowing down human aging, using a combination of nanotechnology and vitamin infusions. Anti-aging treatments are given once every thirty rotations, and it is our belief that such treatments will allow our human mates to live just as long as a typical Marttiadoxalian. The first females to receive the treatments were those who were taken as brides shortly after the war ended. Though twenty Earth years have passed since that time, those females appear

just as young as they did when they were brought to Mars.”

Shock reverberated through her. Was it true? Did the Martians truly possess such technology? She glanced toward the large window that overlooked the city. During the nighttime hours, it was a sea of bright sparkling lights, though she recalled easily enough what it looked like during the day. Green, fertile land as far as the eye could see. If the Martians were capable of terraforming entire planets, surely they possessed the ability to extend the human lifespan.

“That’s incredible,” she said, still stunned as she tried to process what this meant for her and all the other mail order brides who arrived on Mars.

He brought her hands to his lips for another kiss. Hope suddenly filled her to bursting. If the Martians were going to the trouble to keep their human brides so healthy, including the drastic measure of lengthening their lives, perhaps it meant at least some of the aliens cared about their mates. As she peered into Vaath’s otherworldly dark gaze, she realized she liked the idea of him feeling affection for her. Hadn’t she prayed for her Martian husband to treat her with kindness?

She swallowed hard past the abrupt burning in her throat and gazed into the bedroom area of Vaath’s chambers. Maybe a sound night’s sleep would do her some good and allow for a fresh perspective in the morning.

“You look exhausted, sunshine,” he said, wrapping an arm around her as he guided her toward the large bed, where not long ago he’d claimed her for the first time. Warmth flowed through her at the memory.

“I-I could use some sleep,” she admitted.

As he helped her under the covers, it occurred to her that she no longer felt even the slightest soreness between her thighs. Despite her embarrassment during the

application, she was thankful Vaath had insisted upon putting the healing salve on her. Her eyes felt heavier as she laid her head on the pillow. Vaath soon joined her under the covers, his massive warm body curling around hers. He gathered her close, spooning her from behind.

Closing her eyes, she said a quick prayer for her parents and sister. She hoped they were faring well, despite the circumstances of her leaving Earth. Though she'd been impatient to speak with them via the video comm, she'd also been nervous, almost to the point of illness, as she had waited for the call to connect.

When she awoke in the morning, her family would likely be at home, making dinner and getting ready for bed. She could only imagine the anguish they were experiencing right now. Oh, how she wished she could've said a proper goodbye and given each of them one last hug before her hasty departure. Her throat started burning and she tried to think of something else, but despite her utter fatigue, she found it difficult to drift off as thoughts of her family kept plaguing her.

Her parents had awoken just a few hours ago to her shocking and heartbreaking letter, no doubt, and despite likely reeling from the knowledge that their oldest daughter had left Earth to become a Martian's bride, they had had no choice but to send Carmen and Lilly off to school before heading in for their shifts at the factory. Even if they were already aware of the extra ten thousand galactic credits in their account, she knew they would still insist on keeping their jobs. They would be careful with their money.

What would they do when they received the one hundred thousand galactic credits Vaath had promised? She turned in his arms to find him sound asleep. His eyes were shut and he was breathing deep. Gratitude swelled in her heart as she looked at him, admiring his handsome face and the way his horns curved over his back. She snuggled closer and shut her own eyes.

Because of Vaath, her parents would be able to spend more time with the twins and less time working. In fact, given the exorbitant amount of money Vaath was gifting them, plus the fact that they would no longer be required to pay taxes, they might decide not to work. At least for a while. She hoped they accepted the money. Her father could be a bit too prideful at times, in her opinion, though she knew she'd inherited this oftentimes infuriating trait.

When she spoke with her parents in the morning, she would need to put a positive spin on the money that her father might very well see as a buy off. She would also need to make her family believe she was happy on Mars, happy with Vaath; she despaired over the thought of them, particularly her father, feeling sorry for her. Even if Vaath stopped treating her with kindness at some point, she still didn't want their pity. She wanted them to enjoy their lives on Earth as best they could, to take advantage of the amazing opportunities they were about to receive.

As she pictured her sisters laughing and running through a flower filled meadow on the edge of a lush green forest, a large yet quaint cabin in the background, she finally drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 15

Vaath woke up before dawn, still holding Esmay in his arms. She was curled up close to him, her cheek resting upon his arm as her steady breaths puffed against his chest. A tenderness unlike anything he'd ever experienced before made his insides ache. It was painful, and yet it wasn't. The conundrum of the conflicting emotions stealing through him gave him pause.

He stroked his fingers through his little bride's golden hair, mesmerized by her delicate beauty. When she gave a soft sigh of contentment and shifted closer to him, that odd painful yet pleasant tugging in his chest strengthened. It was more than sexual desire he felt for this human, he realized, as a sense of disbelief stole through

him. Though he hadn't known her for long, he admired her, and he was starting to care for her.

Was he falling in love with the human female?

She stirred again and her eyes fluttered open. He stared at her, lost in her blue eyes. He continued stroking her hair as she held his gaze. The moons rested low in the sky, but shone just enough light through the window that it bathed her in a blue hue, shining upon her hair and reflecting in her eyes. The palace was still quiet at this hour, as was the city below, making it seem as if they were the only two souls left on Mars.

“How did you sleep, sunshine?”

“Better than I expected,” she said. “This is the most comfortable bed I’ve ever slept in.” She sat up against the pillows and tucked her knees to her chest. She peered out the window and her eyes grew wide. “The moons are incredible. Where I lived on Earth, I rarely got to see the moon. The city lights were too bright, plus there is usually smog covering the city.”

“I’m glad you like the view.”

“Could your terraforming technology help Earth in any way?”

He stared at her, surprised by her question. “You mean could we get rid of the pollution?”

“Yes, and possibly help the areas affected by climate change?” She turned to look at him, her gaze hopeful.

He considered her question. Yes, it was possible to use terraforming technology to clean up a planet and make Earth like new, but relations between Marttiadoxalians and humans were tense at best. Even if Vaath championed such a proposal, his father and likely all the royal advisors would be staunchly against it. He reminded himself of the humans' assault on the first Marttiadoxalian colony on Mars, of the five thousand colonists who were killed in the unprovoked attack.

“Yes, Esmay, I believe it would be possible for our terraforming technology to improve Earth's environment, however, I do not think any members of the royal council, including my father, would vote to help Earth in such a way.”

Her face fell. “Why not?”

“Well, for a lot of reasons, but mainly because of the humans' attack on our first Marttiadoxalian colony on Mars, as well as the occasional uprisings against Martian forces on your planet. We initially tried for peace with your people, but—”

“What attack?” she interrupted. “What do you mean? Earth didn't attack Mars. Your people arrived in our solar system and immediately waged war against mine. Millions died in the war.” She pushed away from him when he reached for her hands.

It didn't surprise him that she wasn't aware of the initial conflict that had started the fighting between their people. He'd heard that most human brides arriving on Mars didn't know about the attack on the Marttiadoxalian colony. Teachers in public schools were supposed to teach their pupils the true history of the Marttiadoxalian-human conflict, though perhaps the human teachers were not being adequately supervised by Martian Affairs. It was yet another rebellion on the humans' part, and a deviously quiet one. He made a mental note to contact the governors in charge of each zone on Earth and demand a full accounting of their efforts.

“Esmay,” he said, finally succeeding in grasping her hand. Even when she tried to

wrench out of his grip, he didn't allow her off the bed. He pulled her closer and cupped her face with his free hand. "Over twenty years ago, my people sent an ambassador to Earth, who was tasked with informing the humans of our peaceful intentions to settle on Mars, which we were preparing to terraform."

"An ambassador? Are you certain?" A look of disbelief crossed her features.

"Yes, a male named Rothinus. The humans imprisoned him and he eventually died in captivity. The armed forces of several Earth countries then banded together, traveled to Mars, and killed the five thousand Marttiadoxalian colonists who had settled in the first terraformed region of this planet."

Her eyes grew wide and she opened her mouth, as if to speak, before clamping her lips together and turning to stare at the moons. The sky was becoming lighter and the sun would soon rise, bringing with it a brand-new day. He stared at Esmay, hoping she would believe him.

"I can show you proof of the attack, if you require it. Images of the devastation, as well as video surveillance of the assault on the colony that was transmitted to the fleet of Marttiadoxalian vessels that were bound for Mars at the time."

"No, I don't need to see any proof." She turned to face him. "I'm sorry about what happened to your people, to the five thousand colonists, but how could you justify killing millions of humans in return? I've seen videos of the battles. You took no prisoners. You killed so many humans. Millions of soldiers, and some civilians too."

"Very few human civilians were killed," he said. "And those who were did not die by Marttiadoxalian hand. Instead, they died from what your people call friendly fire. They died when a weapon intended to hit Marttiadoxalian forces hit a populated part of a city instead."

* * *

Esmay stared at Vaath, shocked to her core. But she didn't think he was lying. For a reason she couldn't quite explain, she doubted he would lie to her. Though he was an enemy of her people, he struck her as a man of honor, a man of principles. While some of the Martian males in the royal bunker had made her uneasy, particularly the king, she didn't feel as though Vaath had a deceptive bone in his body. She'd always been good at reading people, at sensing other's emotions, and her ability to do so apparently extended to Martians. To her new mate.

Perhaps it was the same reason she'd become so cold the night she crept toward the kitchen, intent to eavesdrop upon her parents' late-night conversation. She'd experienced a sense of knowing before she'd even discovered what they were talking about. She'd known that their lives were about to change in a drastic way.

But, while she likely wouldn't see her family again, the change wasn't all bad. Her parents would avoid prison and their living circumstances would improve. She sighed and ran a hand through her hair as she tried to take in all the new information Vaath had just provided.

Technically, Earth had started the war. Humans had attacked first, and after the Martians had tried to arrive peacefully in the solar system. But, despite the fact that Earth had decimated the aliens' first Martian colony, she didn't think Vaath's people had responded appropriately. Surely, they hadn't needed to kill millions of humans.

She thought of the stories she'd heard about the war, as well as the videos she'd seen of the brutal fighting. Vaath's people had sought revenge on a disproportionate scale, in her opinion. Not only that, they had all but enslaved the people of Earth.

All humans paid taxes to the Martians, taxes that only kept increasing. Many humans also worked in factories run by the aliens. Martian enforcers patrolled every town and

city, and an alien governor firmly controlled each zone on Earth. Under the current system, humans could not become wealthy or even somewhat comfortable in their finances. Not without the Martians coming in and taking it all. She'd heard horror stories of humans trying to hide their wealth, only for bloodthirsty enforcers to storm their residences and execute the poor souls on the spot.

She stared at Vaath and repressed a shudder. His grip on her hand remained firm, and the tension between them swelled. Gone were the affectionate feelings from yesterday, when he'd finally claimed her as his mate.

“We waged war against Earth, in the manner that we usually conduct warfare, until your planet offered an unconditional surrender.” His tone was firm, almost angry. “Our homeworld of Marttiadoxalia was no longer inhabitable, as our enemies, the Xieandans, did something to our sun that caused it to dim. Even after we slaughtered most of the Xieandans and drove the rest from our solar system, we could not reverse the damage that had been done. Our explorers located your solar system not long after they ran into a group of humans at an outpost—where they discovered we were compatible with your race—and my people soon decided Mars would be the perfect planet for us to terraform.”

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“Why terraform Mars in the first place? Why not just take Earth for yourselves and kill every last human—well, except for the females you need?” She uttered the words in a sharp tone, bitterness taking hold.

“First of all, we wished to create the planet of our exact specifications, and despite what you may think, Esmay, we value all life, including human life. We would never destroy an entire race of aliens simply because we want their planet. We strove for peace with your people first, yet you repaid us in blood.”

She scoffed. “And now you intend to keep us subjugated forever? Even twenty years after that war? Haven’t you taken enough from us? Haven’t we suffered enough for our sins?”

His nostrils flared and he grabbed her suddenly, holding her by her upper arms as a deep growl reverberated from him. “My mother was among those killed in the first colony. I also lost other relatives and many friends. Most Marttiadoxalians alive today, aside from those born in the last twenty years, lost someone that day. What would you say is fair, Esmay? Exactly five thousand Marttiadoxalian lives for five thousand human lives?” He gave her a slight shake and his eyes darkened, a look of absolute rage falling over him. His reaction chilled Esmay to the bone.

“I-I am truly sorry about your mother and everyone else you and your people lost during the attack on the colony,” she said, hoping to diffuse his fury. But she also meant every word. Despite their many differences, it grieved her to know he’d lost his mother during the unprovoked attack. “But years have passed. It is the children of those who attacked your people who are suffering the most. Is it fair that we are paying for the sins of our elders?”

“War is never fair, Esmay,” he replied as he thankfully loosened his hold on her arms. “There are always injustices on both sides.” He nodded toward the closet. “Now go get dressed. The sun is rising, and we are expected in the banquet hall soon for breakfast. We will finish this discussion later.”

To her relief, he let go of her entirely and got off the bed. She watched as he strode into the bathroom, his footsteps heavier than usual. She cursed under her breath. How had their conversation, which had started with her asking about whether or not Martians could use their terraforming technology to help Earth, have dissolved so quickly into an angry exchange?

Vaath left the bathroom and entered the closet next to hers, presumably to get dressed. He gave her only a brief glance as he walked by, and she sensed the fierceness of his violent mood. She rubbed her upper arms, where he’d grabbed her, as fear waved through her. Though she didn’t wish to leave the relative safety of his quarters—the prospect of having breakfast in the banquet hall surrounded by so many Martians left her uneasy—she forced herself off the bed and headed for her closet.

She grabbed a flowing blue dress and a pair of matching slippers and hastily got dressed. She visited the bathroom quickly and found Vaath waiting for her in the center of the room after she finished, an expectant look upon his face. Pausing in the doorway, she gave him a hesitant glance, unsure of what to do or say. She sensed waves of frustration rolling off him and as her gaze swept around the room, she caught sight of the video comm she’d used last night. Her heart sank, because she had hoped to try contacting her family this morning, but she didn’t want to anger Vaath any further.

“Esmay,” he said, his voice surprisingly gentle. “Come here.”

When she finally looked up and her gaze collided with his, all the tension from earlier suddenly dissipated. His expression was apologetic and when he reached out a hand

to her, she found herself walking toward him, as if pulled by an unseen force.

Chapter 16

Relief spread through Esmay as Vaath drew her in for a hug. His embrace was warm and wonderfully tight. She welcomed the peace that was settling between them, the mutual forgiveness she sensed, even though he remained quiet. After a long moment, she wrapped her arms around his center, returning his hug. For several minutes, neither of them said a word, they simply held onto one another as if for dear life.

“I would like to apologize,” he said slowly, contemplatively, “for becoming angry with you, Esmay, when you only sought to tell me of your experiences, the experiences of your people. I am sorry I grabbed you so hard, as well.” He withdrew from the embrace and held her, very gently, by her shoulders, as he looked her up and down. “Did I hurt you?”

His apology stunned her. “Thank you.” She paused, considering her next words. He’d asked if he’d hurt her, and she decided to be honest. She was a terrible liar, anyway, even when it came to little fibs meant to keep the peace. “Yes, you were too rough with me,” she said, meeting his worried gaze. “And you scared me. I-I realize you could hurt me badly if you wished to. I wouldn’t have much luck fighting back. You’re a lot bigger than me.”

He rubbed her upper arms, where he’d grabbed her, a look of anguish taking over his features. She’d never seen a man appear so apologetic before, and she sensed his genuine regret. He wasn’t faking. Was she a pushover if she forgave him so soon? She sighed inwardly. Try as she might, she could no longer summon even a spark of anger.

“From the depths of my soul, little sunshine, I am truly sorry.” A reverent gleam, startling in its intensity, filled his eyes as he reached up to pet her hair. “I vow that I

will never shout at you, or grab you as I just did, ever again for as long as I live. If I break this vow, may the Gods turn me to stone. You are my mate, and it's my duty to protect you always. I don't want you to fear me."

His apology, and his promises, calmed her somewhat. She no longer feared him in this moment, but despite his regretful demeanor she couldn't help but worry about tomorrow and all the days that would follow.

Could she really trust him? Would he indeed keep his promises?

How would he react if she angered him again, or if they had another disagreement?

"I appreciate you saying all that," she replied. "I hope you mean it."

As he stroked his hands through her hair, his fingers occasionally grazed her head, causing her scalp to prickle and goosebumps to rise on her arms. "I mean it," he said. "Now, would you like to try calling your family again?"

She eyed the video comm hopefully. "Do we have time? You said we were expected in the banquet hall."

"We can be late." He smiled, revealing the dimples she couldn't help but find charming. "You can take as long as you need, sunshine. Would you like privacy while you speak with your family? Or would you like me to stay?"

"Stay," she said without hesitation. "I think it would be better for my parents to meet you soon. It'll help ease their worries. At least I think it will."

He nodded and guided her to the video comm. "Very well." He pulled out the chair for her to sit, then crouched beside her.

Esmay typed in her parents' comm number and waited for their answer. Her heart pounded frantically as she stared at the blue screen, nerves filling her to the brim. She smoothed her hair down and then clasped her hands together in her lap.

Her mother's face soon appeared on the screen. "Esmay?"

"Hey, Mom," she said, speaking in English.

"Oh, dear Lord, Esmay." Her mother placed a hand over her heart. "I can't believe what you've done." Tears welled in her eyes and she blinked fast.

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Esmay's father soon appeared beside her mother, and his reaction was much the same. Her parents started talking at the same time, both expressing joy over seeing her face, only to chastise her for leaving in the next breath. Once they calmed down, their gazes moved to the side, where Vaath was still crouched next to her.

She couldn't help but smile when he offered her parents a friendly wave. "Hello," he said in Galactic Common, and Esmay suddenly realized she ought to hold the rest of the conversation in the common tongue, as she didn't know if he understood English. He'd been thoughtful enough to almost exclusively speak Galactic Common in her presence, and she wanted to show him the same consideration.

Her father's face grew stern. "Who are you?" he asked, continuing the conversation in Galactic Common.

"My name is Vaath. I am your daughter's mate."

Both of her parents paled and exchanged a worried look.

"Everything is fine, Mom and Dad. I promise." She reached for Vaath's hand and he clasped it firmly in both of his, peering down at her with affection glimmering in his dark eyes. It was the perfect show of unity in front of her parents, as far as she was concerned, however, it didn't feel forced. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world to hold Vaath's hand and stare into his eyes like a lovestruck newlywed.

"You didn't have to do this," her father said, switching to English. He leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his thinning hair. "My poor girl. Not you. Not you, Esmay. This isn't the life I wanted for you."

Her spirits fell. She hadn't expected either of her parents to jump up and down for joy over her decision to become a Martian's bride, but their reaction was more negative than she had predicted. Didn't they realize there was no changing her mind? She was already on Mars. She had already mated with Vaath, and his people mated for life.

"Your father does not seem happy," Vaath whispered into her ear. "Would you like some privacy after all? Perhaps it would help ease their minds if they can speak with you while I'm out of the room."

"Good idea." She patted his hand and shot him a smile of gratitude. "Thank you."

"Anything for you, sunshine." He spoke so low she doubted her parents could overhear. He leaned in to kiss her forehead, then turned to face her parents. "I must go now," he said, "but I look forward to speaking with you again, and I promise you that I will always cherish and take care of your daughter."

Her father shifted in his seat and appeared uncomfortable. "Thank you," he said after a long pause.

"It was nice to meet you, Vaath," her mother said in a stiff tone, though she forced a smile.

Esmay watched as Vaath exited his chambers, leaving her alone with her parents. Her stomach clenched when she returned her focus to them. The look of worry in their eyes deepened.

"Mom, Dad, I did what I had to do," she said. "Please understand. Please don't be angry."

"You want us to be happy for you?" Her father scoffed. "How can we when you've mated with one of those savages? He's a cold-blooded murderer. They all are."

The level of hatred in his voice broke her heart. No matter how joyous or miserable she ended up being as Vaath's mate, she didn't want her parents to despise him. If they hated him and held grave misgivings about her very permanent mating union with Vaath, they would undoubtedly worry about her and perhaps blame themselves for her fate as a Martian's bride, as one of those poor girls her father pitied so much.

"The war broke out twenty years ago, Dad." She shot him a pleading look, desperate for his approval. "Look, I know you and Mom weren't doing well. I heard about the tax and rent increase, and I couldn't pass up this opportunity to help you," she said, not wanting to admit she'd overheard their private conversation in the kitchen. "I love you both with my whole heart, and Carmen and Lilly, too. Your tax debt has not only been erased, but Vaath has permanently waived all your future taxes."

"I would've done anything to keep you on Earth, Esmay," her father said. "Anything."

"I know, and you're a wonderful father, but I'm all grown up now. The twins are still so young. They need you guys. Both of you." She paused and glanced out the window, momentarily distracted by the Martian sunrise, a deep orange glow on the mountainous horizon. This was her home now. She couldn't return to Earth. "What's done is done. Look, I need to go soon—I'm expected at breakfast with Vaath's family—but I have something important to tell you. It's rather amazing, actually."

"What is it?" her mother asked.

"In addition to the ten thousand galactic credits that should've been deposited in your account already, you're going to receive an additional one hundred thousand from Vaath. Can you believe it? Oh, and it gets better," she continued before they could interrupt. "Vaath is sending a delegate to speak with you about moving out of the city. You can relocate to any zone you wish, perhaps a more rural zone. You guys could get that little cabin in the woods you've always talked about. Whatever you

want, the delegate will assist you. Vaath gave his word.”

Suspicion gleamed in her father’s gaze. “How is it your mate can afford one hundred thousand galactic credits, and how does he have the power to waive our future taxes and send a Martian delegate to move us out of the city? Who exactly is this Martian?”

Esmay felt cornered. This wasn’t how this conversation was supposed to go. She’d hoped her parents would be won over by Vaath’s smile and his generosity. He’d even promised her parents he would cherish her and take care of her, yet they could only focus on the fact that he was Martian. They couldn’t see beyond his race and the memory of a war that transpired twenty years ago.

“Is he someone important among his people?” her mother asked. “Vaath. Hm. Now that I think about it, that name does sound familiar.”

Her panic rising, Esmay pretended to glance at an imaginary clock on the wall. “Oh, dear. Look at the time. I’m very late. I’m sorry, Mom and Dad, but I’ve got to go. I’ll call you tomorrow though. Tell Carmen and Lilly I said hello. Love you all.”

“Esmay, just wait a sec—”

“I really have to go,” she said, cutting off her father. “Talk to you tomorrow.”

She disconnected the call before either of her parents could say anything else. What the hell was she going to do? Now that her mother realized Vaath’s name sounded familiar, Esmay doubted it would take her parents long to realize his true identity. How would they respond when they learned she was mated to a Martian royal? And not just any royal—to the warrior prince whose reign of terror upon the battlefields had resulted in Earth’s surrender?

Odd, how their rejection of Vaath was making her feel so defensive of their mating

union. She pushed away from the video comm and rose to her feet, then started pacing the room in an effort to expel her nervous energy.

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At least she would have an entire day to sort out her thoughts before she spoke with her parents again. After exhaling a deep breath, she eyed the door of Vaath's chambers and decided to go in search of her mate. The door zipped open upon her approach and when she found him standing in the corridor, he stared at her with concern, as if he sensed her upset over the tense conversation she'd just shared with her parents. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and guided her down the hallway, though he kept their pace slow. She supposed they were late for breakfast by now, but he wasn't rushing her, and she appreciated his kindness.

"How did it go?" he asked just as they turned down another corridor.

"Not as well as I had hoped," she admitted.

He grasped her hand. "I am sorry to hear that, sunshine. Is there anything I can do to help? It pains me to see you looking so sad."

"Thank you, but I think this is something I need to take care of on my own." In spite of her dark mood, she forced a smile, wanting him to understand she appreciated his offer of help.

They soon entered the noisy banquet hall and took their seats at the head table, where the king was already seated, as well as several of the Martians she recognized from the royal bunker. She was stunned by the hundreds of Martians in the massive room—she had never seen so many aliens in one place before. But as she looked around, she glimpsed over a dozen human women, too. There were even two Martian females seated on the far side of the hall.

Vaath followed her gaze and leaned down to speak directly into her ear. “I will introduce you to the females after you eat something, my sunshine.” He nodded at the plate a servant had just placed before her, prompting her to pick up a utensil.

Though the food was probably delicious, she didn’t taste much as she picked at her breakfast. She was too distracted and overwhelmed by all the activity in the room. Did all these people live inside the palace? She noticed most of the Martian males wore black, like the enforcers who patrolled the streets on Earth. Perhaps these were all the palace guards, as well as a few of their mates.

When she spotted a familiar face entering the hall, she felt both joy and relief. It was Faith, along with the green Martian who’d picked her up from the spacecraft yesterday. Vaath hadn’t yet told Esmay the name of the human woman who’d perished in the attack, though she knew it was one of the women she’d met on the journey to Mars. Though she grieved the loss of that woman, whomever she was, it was wonderful to know Faith was all right, and the sight of the brunette laughing at something her mate said brought Esmay hope.

If some humans and Martians could find joy in one another’s company, perhaps it meant the mating unions didn’t feel like forced marriages to most of the women. She snuck a peek at Vaath as he spoke with his father, admiring her mate’s strong masculine profile. She thought him the most handsome of all the Martians in the room. He was certainly the most powerful looking, with his bulging muscles, thick forehead ridges, and horns that were longer than most of the other males in the gathering. Her face heated when she realized she was practically ogling him and she quickly glanced away.

But his hand came to rest upon her leg and he gave her thigh a firm squeeze. A low rumble left his throat and when she turned to peer up at him, his nostrils were flared, his eyes black yet glimmering. She flushed hotter and resisted the urge to squirm in her seat. The first tingling of arousal was heating her core, all because she’d allowed

her mind to drift and she'd started admiring him. Slight as the tingling was, he still detected her excitement.

“Hurry and finish your breakfast, my sunshine. I believe I am suddenly eager to be alone with you again.”

Chapter 17

After they finished breakfast, Vaath wanted nothing more than to escort his sweet mate directly back to his chambers. His blood heated with the urge to claim her once more. But he'd promised to introduce her to the human women who lived in the palace, so he set about honoring this promise first. He led her through the hall, pausing in front of each human-Marttiadoxalian couple they came upon.

She took the time to learn each woman's name. Some of the women got up to hug her and welcome her to the palace, while others shook her hand. One female in particular, a dark-haired woman named Faith, gasped with joy when they approached. Apparently, Esmay had met her aboard the spacecraft that had brought them both to Mars. It pleased him to see her making friends so easily with the other females in the palace. Even the two Marttiadoxalian females, Tresma and Kariss, both of whom were married to palace guards, approached her to introduce themselves.

Perhaps if Esmay felt welcome here, she would begin to think of Mars as home, and in the wake of such happiness, mayhap her heart would open to him.

Vaath couldn't deny the warmth he experienced whenever he looked upon his mate and he wondered if she yet harbored any affection for him. He knew she desired him sexually, which of course pleased him, but he longed to conquer her heart, to truly claim her as his.

Having her as his mate by law simply wasn't enough. As he guided her out of the

banquet hall, he considered how he might cause her to fall in love with him. It was a wildly romantic notion, one which he had never imagined concerning himself with when he finally took a mate, yet he was determined to succeed in this endeavor.

Once they reached the corridor that led to his chambers, he tugged her closer and then swept her up into his arms in a playful manner. His soul danced when she laughed and feigned trying to escape.

“Vaath!” She giggled again. “Put me down!”

He responded by holding her tighter and giving her a stern look as she struggled more fervently. The scent of her arousal, now heavy in the air, prompted him to growl and walk faster. When her slippers fell off her feet during her wiggling around, he didn’t pause to retrieve them from the floor. There was no time. His cock pressed to the front of his pants, hard and ready to sink into the sweetness between his mate’s thighs.

Moments later, Vaath carried Esmay into his chambers and called out a verbal command to seal the doors, as he didn’t wish for any interruptions, not even from a well-meaning servant come to clean his chambers or place freshly laundered clothes in the closets.

He set her down beside the bed and immediately divested her of the blue gown and her undergarments. Her breath caught in her throat and she trembled before him, even as the scent of her feminine essence filled his nostrils. Gods, but she was intoxicating.

Holding her gaze, he stepped back to remove his own attire. He tossed the garments upon the floor and reached for Esmay at once, desperate to assuage his need to claim her. Since this wasn’t her first time, he hoped to be a bit rougher with her, to pound into her faster and deeper than he had last night.

“My sweet sunshine,” he said, cupping her face.

He leaned down to kiss her, delving his tongue between her lips and causing her to whimper against his mouth.

Mine. You’re mine, and one day your heart will belong to me.

Not breaking the kiss, he guided her onto the bed and settled himself atop her, groaning at the feel of his hardness gliding through her slick nether lips. She was wet for him, and when she parted her legs wider without his encouragement, he gripped her hips and surged forward, pushing to the hilt in one rapid drive. She gasped into his mouth, only for him to kiss her harder.

Her needy moans spurred him to set a rapid pace of thrusting in and out of her. Sweltering in his desire for her, he finally broke their kiss, only to release a deep growl that made her eyes go wide. She leaned back upon the pillow, gasping for air as he continued the savage claiming.

Releasing one of her hips, he clutched her chin and forced her eyes to his. Her gaze was heated, though she also appeared surprised. Had his roughness shocked her? He breathed in deep, savoring the scent of the slickness between her thighs, the enticing aroma evidence enough that she was enjoying herself.

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Their bodies remained joined in a primal dance as he took his time with her, savoring each thrust into her tightness as she moaned and writhed beneath him. When her inner walls started clamping down around his length and he sensed the imminence of her release, he withdrew from her center and flipped her over onto her hands and knees.

His cock throbbed as he pushed back inside her. He cursed under his breath in his native tongue and forced himself to still within her, even though he ached to fuck her senseless. Though he'd claimed her once before, he reminded himself that she was a new bride and definitely not accustomed to this sort of treatment. He didn't wish to cause her any pain.

She trembled beneath him and he took the time to caress her shoulders and then ran his hands up and down her back, as well as over her sides. When she jerked as he touched her sides, he lifted his hands off her and stared at her in confusion. Had he hurt her just now?

To his surprise, a small giggle drifted up from her. "Sorry," she said. "I'm ticklish there."

Understanding dawned and he made a note to be especially careful when touching her sides. Many Marttiadoxalians had ticklish feet and he had horrid memories of his older cousins holding him down and tickling his feet when he was a young male. Pushing the memory away, he stroked a hand through her hair and then down her back, delighting in the enticing way she arched into his touch and pressed her center to his.

A spasm of desire tightened his balls and he gasped through an unexpected moan. Gods, he wanted this female. More than he ever imagined he might.

“Esmay,” he said slowly, “are you in any pain?” Before he continued claiming her, he had to make sure he wasn’t hurting her. Even though it might kill him, he would withdraw from her pussy at this moment if she wished him to release her.

“Yes, because you stopped moving.” Again, she pressed her center to his, harder this time, forcing his cock impossibly deep within her tight insides. “Please, Vaath. Please continue. And don’t hold back. I promise I won’t break.”

She didn’t have to ask him twice. He withdrew partially and then slammed back into her, the rapid movement causing the headboard to crash against the wall.

“Is this what you want, little sunshine?” he asked, as he pounded into her again and again. If she wanted rough, he would be more than happy to give it to her.

She gasped out an indecipherable response and clutched at the pillows, as if she needed something to hold onto. He grasped her hips hard and drove his cock into her, an all-consuming desire for the tiny human claiming him, propelling him to plunge into her with fast, rapid thrusts. His scrotum slapped heavily upon her engorged clit and the increasing scent of her arousal made his head swim. Beads of sweat broke out all over his body and perspiration trickled down his temples.

“Vaath,” she groaned his name with all the emotion of an urgent prayer, and in the next moment he felt her insides contracting around his cock as she reached the peak of her passion.

“That’s it,” he said. “Come for me, little human.”

The repeated clamping down of her tight channel around his cock pushed him over

the edge. He shot his seed into her with a mighty roar that rattled the paintings on the walls. His vision momentarily blurred as he pumped into her, spurting the last of his essence into her.

She'd fallen forward onto the pillows as he finished, and he withdrew gently from her center and turned her over, eager to glimpse her face. If her eyes showed any hint of pain, he would slather her well-used pussy in the healing salve, whether she protested or not.

But he saw no hint of pain, only a dazed, almost blissful gleam in her luminous blue gaze. She peered up at him and gave him a fatigued smile, and his heart soared when she ran her hand along his arm, caressing him in a familiar manner. Fluxx, he loved it when she willingly touched him. He wanted her to always feel comfortable touching him. He belonged to her as much as she belonged to him.

She shifted upon the bedcovers and gasped when a large amount of his seed escaped from her center, coating her inner thighs and the covers beneath her. She glanced down with wide eyes. "Um, this is more than last time. Is this, uh, normal?" A pretty blush stained her cheeks.

His cock lurched at the sight of her covered in his seed and her eyes widened further when she noticed.

"How can you..." she began, only for her words to trail off. She swallowed hard and met his eyes. "How can you be ready again so soon? I thought men, or most men..."

He grabbed her and pressed a firm kiss to her lips, settling her upon his lap as he did so. He circled his arms around her and stroked her hair behind her ears, delighting in the softness of those tiny delicate lobes. She shivered at his touch and tried to look away, but he grasped her chin and forced her gaze to his as a low growl rumbled in his throat.

“I am not most men,” he said. “Now, get up and bend over the bed. I’m not finished with you yet.”

Chapter 18

Esmay luxuriated in the warm bath, her hands skimming the bubbles on the surface of the water. She leaned back and sighed with contentment, every muscle in her body relaxing further with each moment. Oh, how wondrous this was.

She couldn’t recall the last time she’d taken a bath. Several years ago, most likely, before the water shortages had hit New York City. She’d been sixteen at the time and she remembered having to suddenly switch to quick two-minute showers, as each apartment was rationed a small amount of water per day.

But her parents and sisters would be leaving the city soon, moving to a more affluent and rural zone. She didn’t know if the representative from Martian Affairs had visited them yet, but she prayed they accepted the help. She hoped her father’s desire for a better future for the twins would outweigh his maddening pride.

She resolved to call her family in a few hours, when they were likely preparing to leave for work and school. Perhaps a good night’s sleep would help shift her parents’ viewpoint. Surely, they couldn’t remain cross with her forever?

Her thoughts soon drifted to Vaath. She was still shocked that she’d been matched to the Prince of Mars, but she was even more surprised by the kindness he’d displayed toward her thus far, minus the one rather tense argument they’d had. When she recalled the genuine apology he’d offered for raising his voice and grabbing her, she again experienced a surge of hope. Not for the first time, however, she wondered if she was a pushover for forgiving him so easily. She wasn’t sure. She only knew she couldn’t summon an ounce of hatred for him.

As she'd sat in the Martian Affairs building three days ago, anxiously waiting for her name to be called, she had felt definite hatred for the alien guards she'd glimpsed. But she hadn't known any of them. They had been nameless aliens who kept her people in subjugation. She knew Vaath's name, and she was starting to feel as though she knew his heart.

She still intended to speak with him about Martian rule on Earth and she prayed he kept an open mind as she shared her perspective. If she could convince him to implement even a few small changes, it could make a big difference on her planet. Would he consider decreasing taxes? Would he think about using Martian terraforming technology to help Earth?

She hadn't gotten a friendly vibe from the king yet and her heart sank as she recalled the distasteful looks he'd given her. Would Vaath be able to make changes without his father's approval, or without the royal advisors' agreement? She didn't know, but there was one silver lining: Vaath would be king one day. And even if he ascended to the throne one hundred or two hundred years from now, she would probably be alive to see it. Her stomach flipped at the amazing realization.

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But she hoped it didn't take one hundred years or more to change circumstances on Earth, and as she finished bathing and got dressed, a sense of determination flowed through her, boosting her confidence. Even if the king and his advisors made her uneasy, and even if Vaath was hesitant to empathize with her point of view, she would not give up. No matter how long it took, she would keep trying.

Dressed in a fresh gown, this one a darker shade of blue than the one she'd worn to breakfast, she walked from room to room, exploring Vaath's enormous chambers. All the rooms combined were larger than her apartment building. A couple of times, she became lost as she moved between rooms and had to backtrack to figure out her location.

She saw no sign of him as she explored, but after he'd drawn the bath for her, he had said he would clean up in another bathroom and that he had duties to which he must attend. He'd informed her that she was free to roam the palace and the surrounding grounds, if she so wished, but she would not be permitted to leave the gates and venture into the capital city by herself.

Given the danger posed by the anti-Earthers, she had no such wish to leave the palace grounds, so this edict didn't bother her. Besides, from what she'd seen of the palace already, it was a beautiful place and those who lived here, minus the king and his advisors, had been welcoming to her so far. She would be able to get plenty of exercise just walking around his chambers, let alone the palace.

She came to stand upon a balcony that overlooked the capital city of Ressimtron. Large orangish-red houses stretched to the horizon, and she supposed thousands of Martians called this city home. She wasn't quite sure how many Martians there were

in existence, between their settlements on Earth and Mars, but she'd heard whisperings that the human population was still far higher, despite how many humans died during the war. For some reason, there weren't many female Martians.

What had happened to them? Esmay couldn't repress a shudder as she considered this question. Of course, she'd heard rumors from time to time about this subject, but she didn't know for certain what tragedy had befallen the Martians that resulted in the loss of so many females. At least she assumed it must've been a tragedy. Surely it wasn't natural for an alien species to possess so few females of their own kind?

Small vessels occasionally zipped through the air, and two larger spacecrafts descended from the clouds, heading for the landing platform near the palace. Apparently, more human females were being delivered. Esmay hoped they found happiness with their new mates, though she supposed many of them would be frightened when they first met the Martian males with whom they would spend the rest of their lives. She thought back to the coldness that had gripped her when she first realized Vaath was her mate.

She turned and walked to her closet, searching for her backpack. She hadn't opened it yet, as Vaath had provided for all of her needs thus far, but she decided now was as good a time to unpack as any. She hung up her threadbare dresses next to the fancy Martian gowns, and placed her folded pants, sweaters, and shirts in a drawer. She tucked the warm socks her mother had knitted for her into an empty basket that rested atop a dresser, deciding she wanted this reminder of her mother out where she would see it every day, even if it was too warm here to wear the socks.

She placed the beautiful carved wooden hairbrush from her grandmother on a vanity in the bathroom, then set about decorating the bedroom with her prized gemstones. Most were rather large and looked like pieces of art, at least to her, rather than weird rocks, like her sisters had always called them. A distant cousin had mailed them to her family when she was around five years old, saying the collection had been passed

down from a great uncle on his father's side, but the cousin had no need for them and had kindly sent them to Esmay's family.

"They're somewhat valuable," her mother had said upon opening the package.

"Perhaps we can sell them in the antique market," her father had said while holding up a large chunk of rose quartz.

Esmay had held up a purple stone, turning it so it sparkled in the light. "Could I just keep this one?" she had asked in a timid voice. At the age of five, she knew money was tight and resources were becoming scarcer in their city, but she had seen magic in the sparkling stone she would later learn was called an amethyst, and she hadn't been able to resist asking her parents if she could keep just this one.

Tears welled in Esmay's eyes as she recalled what had happened next. Her father had smiled down at her and then exchanged a knowing look with her mother, before he'd patted her on the head and passed her the entire box of gemstones. "Here you go, my sweet girl, you can keep all of them."

Joy had filled her to bursting and Esmay had felt like the luckiest kid in the whole wide world. She sniffled and wiped one lone tear away as she remembered her parents' kindness. Even when times had been especially tough over the years, including more recently, they had never asked for Esmay's gemstone collection so that they might sell it. How many extra cans of food in the cabinets could these stones have provided?

If anyone deserved a better life, it was her parents. She didn't regret leaving Earth. Not for a moment. She eyed the nearest video comm, but only a few hours had passed since she'd spoken to them this morning. They wouldn't be awake yet. She would call them after lunch.

She turned at the sound of the door zipping open, and her heart filled with warmth to see Vaath entering his chambers. He was holding a large tablet and he appeared excited. He passed her the tablet and she peered at the screen, a bit confused by what she was seeing. It was an image of a cabin with a large wrap-around porch, nestled at the end of a long gravel driveway and surrounded by a huge green forest. It looked like something from a fairytale.

“Is-is this on Mars? Or Earth?” She glanced up at Vaath, wondering why he was showing her this picture. It happened to be the perfect place for her family to live, but how would he know that? He couldn’t read her mind. At least Wyvonus claimed he couldn’t.

“This is the home your parents have selected to be relocated to. It’s in Zone 5.”

She gasped. “Alaska.” When he gave her a strange look, she clarified, “Before the war, Zone 5 was known as Alaska. It’s not a very populated area and the air in this zone isn’t as polluted as most other places on Earth.” Excitement bounded within her. “But how have my parents selected this location so quickly? It’s not even morning yet in Zone 18. I didn’t think they would be awake yet.”

He smiled as she handed him the tablet. “I instructed a representative from Martian Affairs to call upon them very early in the morning, well before they would leave for work. They don’t need to work again, Esmay, I will see that they are always provided for, even as your sisters get older.” He swiped his hand over the screen on the tablet, zooming out from the house to show the landscape the cabin sat upon. He passed it to her and she held the tablet with trembling hands, her growing elation making her unsteady.

Her throat burned with emotion, happiness filling her. “Vaath, this-this is incredible. I never knew a place such as this still existed on Earth.” She stared at the image in awe. The cabin sat on the edge of a small village tucked in front of majestic snow-capped

mountains. There were no large apartment buildings or trash-filled alleys in this picture, only sturdy looking cabins, as well as stores lining the main street of the picturesque village.

“Your father has requested you call him as soon as possible,” Vaath said, taking the tablet from her as he guided her toward a video comm.

Before she sat down to call her parents, she turned and gazed up at her mate. Her family was headed to safety, to a place that looked like heaven on Earth. She would never forget his kindness, his generosity, for as long as she lived. She stood on her tiptoes and reached for his face, cupping his cheeks in her hands and pulling him down for a kiss. She pressed her lips to his briefly before stepping back.

“Thank you, Vaath,” she said, her eyes brimming with moisture.

He set the tablet aside and placed his hands over hers, a look of profound tenderness entering his dark eyes.

It was in this moment that Esmay first thought she might one day grow to love him.

Not because he was providing for her family, but because he seemed to genuinely care about those she loved most.

He kissed her forehead and nodded at the video comm. “I’ll give you some privacy, my sunshine, and I will return shortly to escort you to the banquet hall for the midday meal.”

“All right.” She smiled up at him. “I’ll see you soon, my-my mate.” Her face burned. She’d almost said, “my love,” though it would’ve only been spoken as a casual endearment, like when he called her sunshine. Still, the near slip confirmed her suspicions—she was starting to fall hard for the big blue alien with sexy dimples and

twinkling dark eyes.

Chapter 19

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“I’m sorry,” her father said the second his face appeared on the screen. “Esmay, my sweet child, forgive me for speaking to you so harshly yesterday.”

“I’m sorry, too,” her mother said, offering a tentative smile. “We’ve had some time to think about what you did—the sacrifice you’ve made for your sisters especially—and we are sorry we didn’t thank you for what you’ve done when we last spoke. We can only imagine what you must be going through right now.”

Esmay took a deep breath and returned their smiles. “You don’t need to apologize, you guys, and you also don’t need to worry about me or feel sorry for me. I love you all and that’s why I came to Mars.” She paused and briefly glanced down at the tablet, which still displayed the image of the stunning Alaskan village they would soon call home. “Vaath showed me where you’re moving. It’s beautiful. Carmen and Lilly are going to love it. Have you told them about the move yet?”

“They’re still sleeping,” her father said. “A representative from Martian Affairs knocked on the door at four in the morning.” He chuckled. “We thought it was the landlord asking for his late rent again. Imagine our surprise when the woman standing on our doorstep told us the real reason she’d woken us up. She introduced herself as Vivian and told us she’d been the one to process your mail order bride application.”

Esmay’s smile widened. “That was nice of her to stop by. I imagine Vaath requested her specifically in hopes that it would comfort you guys.”

“Anyway,” her mother said, “Vivian told us more about the mail order bride program and more about Martian mating customs, and it helped us feel a bit better about your departure. She said Martians mate for life and that they never cheat on their mates.

She also promised us that Martian males treasured their females. Vaath hasn't hurt you at all, has he?"

"It's all true and no, Vaath hasn't hurt me. He's been very sweet, actually."

Her mother glanced into the screen, allowing her gaze to sweep around the room. "Is he nearby right now?"

"No, he stepped out of the room, but he'll be back in a little while to take me to lunch."

"Your new house is very fancy," her father said. "Do all Martian houses look like that?"

She looked over her shoulder at the view he was seeing. There was a large table carved from wood with a sparkling chandelier hanging over it. The walls were decorated with paintings of landscapes, which she thought were depictions of Vaath's original home planet. A sculpture of some sort of bear-like animal was also within view. The open balcony behind her was also in sight, revealing the blue sky and the spires that rested atop distant buildings.

"Oh," she said, fumbling for an answer. What should she tell them? Apparently, they hadn't yet realized Vaath's identity, even though the last time she'd spoken with them they'd commented that his name sounded familiar. Should she get the unpleasantness over with and confess the entire truth right now? "Well, Vaath is wealthier than most Martians." She gulped hard and returned her gaze to the screen. Her parents didn't appear convinced.

"I'm not trying to start another argument," her father said in a cautious tone, "but I feel like there's something you're not telling us. Something important. Please, Esmay, don't hide anything from us. We're your parents and we love you with our

whole hearts.”

Shit. She couldn't very well lie to his face. Not after that little speech. She drew in a deep breath and looked from her father to her mother, praying they didn't freak out.

“Vaath is the Prince of Mars,” she blurted out, wincing as though she'd just ripped off a bandage. “That's why this place looks so fancy. I'm in the palace in the capital city of Ressiktron. Vaath is next in line to the throne. He's the only son—the only child, in fact—of King Verruik.”

Her mother gasped and covered her mouth. Her father paled and appeared downright shocked. She'd never seen him look so worried before, and it aged him terribly. For the first time in her life, Esmay noticed the deep wrinkles on his forehead and the smaller age lines surrounding his mouth.

“Prince Vaath led the final battles against Earth,” he said after a long silence.

“I know. I know what he's done, and I won't lie and say I wasn't shocked when I first learned who he really was, but I'm trying to see the positive side of this—and I'm not just talking about the kindness he's showing my family by giving you more galactic credits than you'll ever be able to spend and moving you all to the safety of Zone 5. I'm talking about the influence I might eventually have upon him. I-I think I can make him understand that Martians are needlessly repressing humans, making life more difficult on Earth than it ought to be. It is my hope I can help our people in some way.”

“Oh, Esmay,” her mother said. “Please don't put yourself in danger. You need to take care of yourself right now. You mustn't do anything to anger Vaath. Do you have any idea what he could do to you?”

“I will die before I harm your daughter,” came a deep voice from behind Esmay.

She turned to see him walking through the door. He crouched next to her, though even in this position he was taller than her. He reached for her hand, brought it to his lips, and placed a gentle kiss upon her knuckles. Then he looked at her parents, both of whom appeared uneasy at his arrival. Esmay's stomach flipped. Despite his promise that he would never harm her, she wasn't sure how much of this conversation he'd overheard. Did he know about her plan to influence him to loosen the Martians' grip on Earth?

She glanced over at him, trying to think of something to say. She turned back to her parents. "I-I promise Vaath has been treating me well."

"Why are females so scarce among your people?" her father asked, leaning forward as he stared at Vaath. "Did something happen? We've heard rumors on Earth, of course, about disease or an enemy attack or even an unknown cause, but I would like to know. I hope there is no continued threat to my daughter or any other human women who become your mates."

Esmay sensed Vaath's sudden sadness, even though his expression didn't change at all. She found herself squeezing his hand, out of her parents' view, as she offered him comfort.

"Before I was born, our enemies, the Xieandans, tainted the water supplies on our home planet of Marttiadoxalia. It took us many years to realize what they had done, as our scientists didn't discover the cause until most of our females had died. We learned the Xieandans wanted our world for themselves and had intended to poison all of us, male and female alike, but the compounds they used weren't harmful to the males of our species. Only female Marttiadoxalians of noble birth survived, as well as those mated to guards who lived at the palace, as the water supplies used in the palace came from deep underground, where their poison hadn't yet reached."

"These enemies of yours, the Xieandans, where are they now?" her father asked.

“Most of them are dead, though some managed to flee our solar system. While few are left, several elite teams of Marttiadoxalian warriors are hunting them down. They will never harm another Martian female again, nor will we allow them to harm our human mates,” Vaath said, casting an affectionate glance at Esmay.

“I’m glad they are no longer a threat to your people,” her mother said, “though I’m sorry for what they did to you.”

“Thank you,” Vaath replied.

“So you left your home planet to come in search of an alien race with whom you would be sexually compatible?” her father asked, his brows narrowing in concentration. Bleak as the current topic was, Esmay was glad her parents were having a somewhat cordial conversation with Vaath.

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“We had to leave our planet because our sun was dying. Once the Xieandans realized we were about to attack them, they did something to our sun, which even our most brilliant scientists couldn’t reverse. After we finished slaughtering the Xieandans, we searched the galaxy far and wide for a new planet. When we happened upon a group of humans at an outpost in the Fallushan Sector, we tested them and learned they were compatible with us, so we sent the first wave of our people to your solar system. It was around this time that we developed terraforming technology, and rather than settle our entire population on your planet, we opted to transform Mars into a planet more to our liking.”

“Why isn’t all of this common knowledge on Earth?” Esmay’s mother asked. “There’s a lot of mystery surrounding your people’s appearance in our solar system.”

“We attacked the Martians first,” Esmay said, feeling it important. She didn’t want her parents thinking the Martians were nothing but conquerors. They had tried for peace with the humans first, only to be attacked without warning.

“Is that true?” her father asked, his eyes growing wide.

Vaath nodded and explained more about the human attack on the first Marttiadoxalian settlement on Mars. “It is supposed to be common knowledge on Earth, however, it seems many human teachers are rebelling by not teaching their pupils the correct version of events that occurred, which has led to many untruths and rumors being spread about my people on your planet.”

“Ah, but I suppose the bad rumors about the Martians work in your favor at times,” her father said. “The more that humans fear your people, the more likely humans will

be to remain complacent as you rule over our planet.”

“I don’t want us to get into a debate about Martian-human politics right now,” Esmay said before Vaath could reply. “Let’s not argue. Let’s just agree that mistakes have been made on both sides. Vaath said something very wise to me recently. He said ‘war is never fair,’ and I think he’s right. The war wasn’t fair to Earth, nor was it fair to the Martians. We lost people on both sides.”

“We lost millions of humans,” her father said. “How many Martians died, did you say? Only five thousand?”

“We fought your people only until Earth surrendered,” Vaath replied. To Esmay’s utter relief, his tone was patient, rather than strained.

Voices sounded in the background and Esmay peered behind her parents. Carmen and Lilly were awake. God bless them for interrupting at the perfect time. She grinned and waved as they approached the screen.

“Hey, girls!” she said in Galactic Common, knowing they would speak it back to her since they loved practicing the language. “How are my favorite sisters?”

Both girls stared at Vaath, their eyes wide and their mouths hanging open. She couldn’t help but chuckle at their comical expressions.

“Is that the savage Martian you married?” Carmen asked.

“Carmen,” her mother said in a chiding tone. “Don’t call him a savage, it’s not polite.”

“But that’s what we heard Daddy call him yesterday,” Lilly said. “Except he actually put a very naughty word in front of savage.”

A quick glance at Vaath showed he wasn't offended. Instead, his lips were twitching, as if he were holding back a smile.

"Carmen and Lilly," she said, placing her hand upon Vaath's arm, "I would like you to meet my husband, Prince Vaath of Mars."

"Mom, how come she gets to marry a prince?" Carmen asked. "She's not a princess."

"Well, she's a princess now," Lilly said in her trademark bossy tone. Born a full minute before her sister, she always took her position as the older twin very seriously. "She's Princess Esmay of Mars, in fact."

"I am pleased to meet you both," Vaath said, peering at Esmay's sisters.

The twins proceeded to interrogate Vaath, asking him question after question about Martian customs and life on Mars. They even asked about his family and friends. Embarrassingly, they also wished to know how many children he planned to have with Esmay.

"Five hundred and twenty-eight," he replied, which caused them to erupt into a fit of giggles. The joke caused even her stone-faced father to crack a smile, and her mother gave a short chuckle as her eyes lit up.

As the conversation continued, Esmay felt a weight of worry lift from her shoulders. Her parents might not yet fully accept Vaath, but this was a wonderful start.

Chapter 20

The Martian funeral was as solemn as any funeral Esmay had attended on Earth. She stood next to Vaath as Wyvonus and several other holy men chanted a prayer. They stood outside a temple near the palace, and it was the first time Esmay had left the

palace grounds since her arrival. Keeping her head bowed during the prayer, she peeked up on occasion, curious about the city, though she couldn't see much, as it was close to midnight. Stars sparkled overhead, city lights stretched into the distance, and the two moons rested high in the sky.

Faith and her mate, whose name was Marxx, and a palace guard named Zimm, stood nearby, as well as several other Martian-human couples. Vaath had explained he wished for a strong human presence at the funeral, and he had also promised the event would be well-guarded. Thedrakkswould not succeed in harming anyone tonight.

Ten days had passed since the attack. According to Wyvonus, Martian funerals took place seven or more days after a death, long enough to allow for the deceased's soul to come to terms with the death. "Spirits sometimes like to linger amongst their family and friends. They need time to accept what has happened to them, and also time enough to say goodbye to those they care about most, before ascending to the stars," the Wise One had told her yesterday when she visited him.

She stared at the two urns that contained the remains of the poor souls who'd perished in the attack—a human woman named Quinn and her Martian mate called Akiddah. Esmay had briefly met Quinn while aboard the spacecraft as they traveled to Mars, and while she hadn't known the woman, she grieved her loss as if she'd been a dear friend.

What sort of life would Quinn and Akiddah have shared, had they not been murdered?

It was beyond tragic and she prayed the anti-Earthers were soon rounded up.

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After the chanting of the Wise Men ended, Akiddah's brother and father stepped forward to collect the urns. Esmay's heart went out to them. The two Martians spoke quietly with Wyvonus for several minutes, though she couldn't understand what they were saying. Once the conversation ended, Akiddah's brother and father departed the gathering and entered the temple, taking the steep steps two at a time.

"They must pray over the ashes until the Gods give them a sign that Quinn and Akiddah's souls have reached the stars," Vaath whispered into her ear as he guided her away from the group. Apparently, the funeral was over and they were headed back to the palace. "Once they receive a sign, they will spread the ashes in a quiet, scenic location, just in case their souls haven't reached the stars, they will walk in beauty and peace for eternity."

"What sort of sign do the Gods usually give that a soul has reached the stars?"

"Sometimes just a feeling, other times the family members might hear a voice. But it can be different with each departed soul." He grasped her hand, leading her down a curving street lined by tall trees. Large flying bugs that resembled fireflies kept buzzing by them, and some of the flowers and vines in the forest glowed in the dark, as well, illuminating the night.

"Have you ever prayed over anyone's ashes?"

"I prayed over my grandfather's ashes," he said. "And the ground shook slightly as I did so."

"You mean like an earthquake?"

He nodded. “Yes. My grandfather was a force to be reckoned with during his lifetime. I was but a few years old when he perished, but I remember him as a strong, highly respected leader of our people. It was no surprise to me that the ground shook after he reached the stars. The signs of ascension are said to match the deceased’s personality, and I have never known a male as fierce in body and spirit as my late grandfather.”

“Is your father very much like your grandfather?” she asked.

As they passed a glowing, flowering vine, Esmay caught a glimpse of Vaath’s sudden frown, and she sensed his mood darkening. “No, my father is nothing like my grandfather.” He offered no additional information, but she noticed him glancing around, as if to make sure no one was nearby.

What an odd but interesting reaction. Esmay was starting to believe Vaath held little respect for his father, the ruler of his people. Perhaps he didn’t wish for anyone to overhear his overt admission that the current King of Mars wasn’t fierce in body and spirit, nor was he strong and highly-respected by his people.

The gates opened as they approached the palace. Vaath greeted two guards standing nearby and then introduced her to the huge males. One was a large green Martian named Rem, and the other was an even bigger purple Martian named Jav. Rem was about as tall as Vaath, but Jav towered over both males, making Esmay wonder if he had a mate. If his mate was human, she would feel sorry for the woman. She couldn’t imagine belonging to a Martian so incredibly large, but there was a warmth when Jav conversed with her, at least. Rem, on the other hand, was standoffish and quiet.

“It was nice meeting you both,” Esmay said as Vaath started guiding her away. “Perhaps we will see each other in the banquet hall.”

Jav waved goodbye while smiling politely, while Rem simply stood ramrod straight

and stared at them.

“They’re an interesting pair,” Esmay commented as they moved through the darkened corridors of the palace.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Jav was pretty friendly and talkative, but Rem was quiet and almost looked as though he was in pain.”

“Jav is a good friend of mine,” Vaath said, “and I don’t know Rem very well, but he experienced a great personal loss before the war broke out that has deeply affected him.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that about Rem. How sad. What happened?”

“His betrothed mate left him for another male, then she died when she drank the water tainted by the Xieandans.” Vaath sighed. “Please do not tell anyone about his loss, as it is personal and Marttiadoxalians do not typically discuss matters that involve others, particularly others they do not know very well.”

“Got it,” she said. “Martians don’t do gossip.”

He gave her a strange look. “Gossip,” he said, as if trying out the word for the very first time. “Yes, I believe you are correct. My people do not typically engage in gossip.”

“Trust me, that is a relief.”

The door to his quarters opened upon their approach and he ushered her inside. The lights automatically flickered on as they walked in. But a second later, the lights went

off, and a thunderous boom caused Esmay to fly out of Vaath's grasp. She collided with the wall and slumped to the floor as darkness claimed her.

Chapter 21

When Vaath regained consciousness, everything hurt, and he groaned as he pushed debris off himself and rose to his feet. His vision blurred and he stumbled, but there was no time to pause and rest.

Esmay.

Where was she?

He glanced to the right and noticed a hole had been blown into the side of his chambers, reducing the size of his rooms by half, leaving a gaping wound in the palace that undoubtedly affected several floors.

"Esmay!" he called as he moved through what was left of his chambers. "Esmay! Where are you?" Terror clutched him, an unspeakable coldness. He ran about, pushing aside debris as he searched for her. When he found no sign of her, his heart raced with panic.

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He glanced out the opening in the wall and fell to his knees. No. She couldn't be gone. Yet she wasn't here, and that left only one possibility—she'd been blown outside during the explosion. He searched his muddled memories, trying to recall everything that had happened once they arrived in his chambers. As soon as they'd walked through the door...

He shot to his feet and sifted through the rubble around the door again, only to notice one side of the entrance had been blown through. He stepped out into the corridor and rushed to the blonde form slumped against the wall.

"Esmay!" He picked her up, cradling her against his chest, and rushed down the hall. "Don't worry, my sunshine, I will get you to a doctor."

She stirred in his arms and her eyes fluttered open, startlingly blue and filled with confusion. "Vaath," she said, barely a whisper. "What happened?"

Before he could answer, several palace guards rushed around the corner.

"Prince Vaath," a guard named Geiaz said. "Thank the Gods you are still breathing, and your mate as well."

"I must get her to a doctor."

"Follow me," Rem said, stepping forward as Vaath noticed him among the guards for the first time. "I will escort you to the medical unit in the caverns. You'll be safest there."

Though Vaath wished to begin investigating the attack alongside the palace guards and the Vash'arr, he nodded and followed Rem through the corridors of the palace. He would join the investigation as soon as he was certain Esmay would make a full recovery. He glanced down at her and didn't see any wounds, not even upon her head, but he worried she'd sustained internal damage.

"The attack was centered upon your chambers," Rem called over his shoulder. A unit of guards was trailing them, their blasters drawn. Though Marttiadoxalians didn't use weapons during most types of combat, as it wasn't considered an honorable fighting method, palace guards used blasters when protecting members of the royal family. He certainly wasn't about to balk at the practice when it helped guarantee Esmay's safety during this crisis.

"Any casualties?" Vaath asked.

"None that we know of yet," Rem said with a glance at his wrist comm. "Jav has contacted me and said his unit has discovered new information about thedrakks. He will meet us in the caverns."

As soon as they entered the caverns, Rem led Vaath deep into the tunnels, taking a route with which he wasn't familiar. Just as he was about to voice his concerns—he wanted Esmay to receive treatment as soon as possible—they entered a medical unit situated at the end of a narrow, darkened corridor.

"Your safety, and the safety of your mate, is of utmost importance right now," Rem said. "This is a secret location known only to the palace guards. Even your father and his advisors are not aware of this bunker." He touched his wrist comm and an orange stone-like wall descended, blocking off the corridor. "Anyone who travels this way will think they've come upon a dead end."

His mind reeling from this new information—why would the guards have a secret

bunker beneath the palace?—he carried Esmay into the bunker, heading directly for the medical unit in the far corner.

A doctor gestured him forward and motioned for Vaath to place Esmay down upon a table. Her eyes were open and she looked alert, if not a bit frightened. The doctor asked her several questions, such as her name and age, the year on Earth, as well as the names of her family members. After she answered each personal question, the doctor looked to Vaath for confirmation that she had answered correctly.

“Are you in pain?” Vaath asked, stroking his fingers through her blonde locks.

“My head hurts.” She reached for him and he grasped her hand. He would remain by her side even if the world was burning. She was his beloved mate.

Yes, he truly loved her.

His throat burned under the realization and he cursed himself for not having told her yet. It grieved him that she was hurting right now, and he glared at the doctor, his impatience growing.

“Can you give her something for the pain?”

The doctor nodded and pressed a hypospray to her temple. An instant later, Esmay’s face relaxed and she sighed.

“That feels much better. Thank you, doctor.”

Vaath watched as the physician skimmed her body with a handheld medical scanner, moving it back and forth over her head for a while as he studied the small screen on the device.

“She hasn’t endured any internal injuries,” the doctor finally said, “however she sustained a concussion.” The tall green male eyed Vaath. “You probably have a concussion, too. Did you fall unconscious for any amount of time?”

“You can treat me later,” Vaath replied with a growl. “Heal my mate. Now.”

“Vaath,” Esmay said in a scolding tone. “He’s just doing his job. You don’t need to be so rude. And you will submit to an examination from the doctor soon. You very well might have a concussion.”

The doctor’s eyes widened as he stared down at Esmay, and a guard standing nearby made a strange noise that sounded part cough and part laugh. A sharp glance at the guard made him fall silent. Vaath wasn’t used to being openly chastised by anyone, nor were his people used to seeing him reprimanded, but if anyone was going to scold him in public, it might as well be the female he loved. Before he could offer a response, he heard footsteps behind him and turned to witness Jav entering the cavern.

Esmay tugged on his arm. “Go and speak with your friend. It looks like he has something important to tell you. I’ll be fine.” She gestured at the table. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“It will just take a short while to treat the princess for her concussion, Prince Vaath,” the doctor said. “I promise to take excellent care of her.”

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“Very well,” Vaath said, taking five steps away. “I’ll be right here if you need me, my sunshine.”

Vaath faced Jav and motioned for the male to speak.

“We found the secret anti-Earther compound shortly before the attack on you,” Jav said. “We found recordings of communications in their stronghold. Not only have they been in direct contact with your father and ten of his advisors, but your father has financed and directed their operation from the start. I am sorry, old friend. I know this must be shocking to learn, but the King of Mars is behind the anti-Earther movement.”

Chapter 22

Vaath felt murderous.

He stood before his father in the banquet hall, seething with fury. But he didn’t allow his mood to show. He forced himself to remain outwardly calm, so as to not give his father any idea of what he was about to do.

A glance around the hall showed all the palace guards stationed at their usual spots. Some were on duty, while others were seated at tables, dining with their friends and their mates. By all appearances, nothing was amiss in the hall, but an undeniable tension filled the air. Vaath turned to stare at the king’s advisors, the fourteen males that made up the royal council. Ten of them were guilty and as good as dead. He made a point of pausing to look into each guilty man’s eyes for one moment too long as if to say, “I know what you did and I will make you suffer for your sins.”

“I am glad to see you unharmed, my son,” King Verruik said. “How is your mate? Why has she not joined us? Surely, our skilled doctors could have mended her wounds by now.” He smiled, though the grin didn’t reach his eyes, lending the king a sinister appearance.

“My mate is well. She is in a safe location, resting.” Vaath stood tall and glared at his father, summoning the memory of his grandfather.

May I be as brave as the former King of Marttiadoxalia, the one whose departing spirit made the ground shake as his soul joined the stars above.

“Why have you requested a formal audience with me during the dinner hour?” the king asked. “Certainly, whatever it is you wish to discuss with me, could be talked about in private.” He laughed, as if trying to make a joke, and Vaath noticed him shifting around in his chair. He was nervous. Good. He ought to be terrified.

Vaath pressed a button on his wrist comm, causing a screen to ascend from the ceiling. Immediately, a video of King Verruik ordering thedrakksto murder Akiddah and his mail order bride began playing. Vaath turned the volume up loud enough that even those standing in nearby corridors would hear the king’s treacherous conversation. Once the video ended, the banquet hall erupted into shouts. Akiddah had been a well-liked tailor and he’d fitted most of the guards in their uniforms. Almost everyone in the room had at least met him before, though many had known him on a more personal level.

Raising his hand in the air, Vaath turned in a circle as he looked at those seated around him. The banquet hall soon quieted and he turned to face the royal council. “Some of you are guilty, as well.” He pointed at the royal advisors whose innocence Jav had already proven. “The four of you are loyal to Marttiadoxalian interests, however.”

The four advisors cast angry looks at the secretdrakksamong them, then departed the table to stand behind an approaching group of guards led by Rem.

“Guards!” the king shouted. “I order you to seize my son and take him to the dungeons.”

Not a single guard made a move to imprison Vaath.

Chuckling, he looked at King Verruik. “It would appear you don’t inspire loyalty, Father.” He paused, considering his next words, words that would change the future of the Marttiadoxalian Empire forever. “I formally challenge these ten members of the royal council tovoogg,” he roared, much to the approval of everyone in the banquet hall. He waited for the cheers to settle before he continued. “I also challenge you, King Verruik of Mars, tovoogg. If you are too afraid to fight me, I will allow you to choose banishment from the Marttiadoxalian Empire.”

King Verruik jumped to his feet, his face turning a darker shade of blue than normal. “I-I am the king!” he shouted. “You cannot do this. Humans killed your mother. Have you forgotten so easily? Settling in this solar system was a grave mistake, one which I intend to rectify. Humans are a scourge! Even if it means our numbers will be fewer, we ought not to taint our bloodlines! Guards, seize him! I command it!”

Once again, the palace guards and the Vash’arr ignored him. Some even openly laughed. It was a wonder the Marttiadoxalian Empire hadn’t collapsed under King Verruik’s leadership. Vaath vowed that when he was king, he would do better. He would lead by example and inspire men to follow him, just like his grandfather.

“Guards, please escort thedrakks,” Vaath said, nodding at the ten guilty council members, “to the Judgment Arena. My father, too. The fighting will commence at dawn, as the Gods require judgment to take place during the daylight hours.”

* * *

“What isvoogg?”Esmay asked, worry evident in her tone. She sat up against the pillows on the medical bed, her golden locks spilling over her shoulders with the movement.

He touched her hair. “You look radiant, my sweet bride,” he said, distracted by her beauty. “I am glad you are feeling better.”

“Vaath, I’m fine. Good as new, thanks to the doctor. He even gave me my first vitamin infusion and nanotechnology treatment.” She glanced around the secret cavern. “I’m only still in this bed because it’s cold down here. Now,” she said, pausing to take a deep breath, “tell me. What isvoogg?”

“It is judgment.”

“Okay, so your father and the ten royal advisors will be taken to court to see a judge?”

“Not quite.” He cupped the side of her face and trailed his fingertips over her soft cheek. “Vooggis a fight to the death. The Gods will punish the guilty party, which means the advisors will die at my hand. If my father opts to fight me instead of banishment, then he will also die at my hand.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re going to fight eleven big Martians, one by one, at dawn in some big arena deep within the capital city?”

“You need not worry, my sunshine, for I will be victorious. The guilty always die.”

“The guilty always die? Are you sure? I-I’m not trying to contradict you, but I don’t believe in the same gods as you, Vaath. I’m sorry, but I don’t, and I can’t help but

worry for your wellbeing. Something could go wrong. You might become tired after fighting so many Martians back to back and then—”

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“I will win,” he said, helping her off the bed. “Now come, we must prepare for the arena. The sun will be up soon. All mates, family members, and friends of the participants are expected to attend. You’ll be my guest of honor.”

She gave him a dubious look but acquiesced and exited the secret bunker at his side. Rem trailed them and opened the secret door as they approached. Several guards walked ahead of them, too, and several behind them, and Vaath appreciated their support. They had kept Esmay company while he conferred with Jav and formulated his plan.

He had purposely waited to confront his father during the dinner banquet, knowing the challenge would keep the king up all night, worried and filled with fear. The king was a coward. While some of the royal advisors might put up an adequate fight during voogg, the king would probably find himself rooted to the ground in fear when Vaath faced him in the arena.

If Vaath faced him.

Despite all that had happened and the crimes his father had committed, he would much prefer to see his father exiled from the Martti axoxalian Empire, banished to the dark corners of the known universe.

Vaath escorted Esmay to the small abode her friend, Faith, shared with her mate, which was tucked into a wooded area on the palace grounds. While many of the guards lived in the palace, some of them lived in small houses nearby.

“Why are we here?” she asked, her hand shaking in his. He couldn’t wait to

getvooggover with, if only to see the worry leave her face.

“I must meet with the holy men before the battles begin,” he said. “Faith and her mate will escort you to the arena. Faith will also help you get ready. She says you may borrow some of her clothes. The attire forvooggis extremely formal.”

“Let me get this straight. I’m supposed to dress up just to watch you engage in a fight to the death in a big arena?” She exhaled a sharp breath, shaking her head. “Mars is a weird planet.” She started to laugh, only for tears to fill her eyes. “You must win. Vaath, promise me you’ll win.”

“I promise.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead and turned to walk away, but he paused and returned to her side, taking her hands in his. “One more thing,” he said. “I love you, Esmay.”

A smile broke out upon her face, even as her eyes filled with more tears. She threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly. He returned her embrace, not caring that several guards, including Rem, were standing close by. Let them watch. Let all of the Marttiadoxalian Empire know how much he cared for his sweet human mate.

“I love you, too,” she said. “Now go win. You promised.”

Chapter 23

The roar of the crowd hurt Esmay’s ears, but she sat tall and proud in the private floating box she’d been told was meant for Vaath’s guests of honor. Seated with her on a long padded bench were Faith and Marxx, Rem and Jav, and three other Martian males she didn’t recognize. Perhaps she ought to introduce herself to the newcomers, but right now she was too nervous to speak. Instead, she gave them a brief smile before returning her gaze to the arena below.

The clear box hovered in the air and it was strange that her feet appeared as though they were resting upon nothing. Her stomach lurched at the view. If the box fell, she imagined it would kill them all, but Jav had already assured her numerous times that the floating boxes were perfectly safe.

“Don’t worry,” Faith whispered, giving Esmay’s hand a quick squeeze. “He’s the Prince of Mars. Almost everyone on Earth has heard of him and knows how fiercely he fights.”

Normally, Esmay didn’t appreciate reminders of the war, but in this case, she welcomed it. She reminded herself that Vaath had killed thousands of men during the war, with only his hands and his hard, horned head as weapons. Of course, the men he’d killed on Earth had been human. The males he was about to fight were all Martian. They were huge, though none were quite so tall and muscular as Vaath, but there were eleven of them. She swallowed hard and took a steadying breath.

Another floating box appeared in the center of the arena. A Martian male wearing flashy, sparkly clothing, waved at the roaring crowd and made a motion with his hands, which caused the crowd to grow deathly quiet. Esmay repressed a shudder.

“That is the announcer,” Jav said. “You don’t really need to know what he says, just know that it’s meant to excite the crowd. It is not every day the Prince of Mars challenges his own father, as well as his father’s advisors, tovoogg.”

The announcer launched into a speech that caused most everyone in the stands below to jump to their feet, shout at the top of their lungs, and shake their fists in the air. Some attendees even ripped their shirts off and pounded on their chests. The sight was more than jarring and Esmay folded her hands tightly in her lap to keep them from trembling.

She was Vaath’s guest of honor, his mate. His princess, she thought, with shock

reverberating through her as she recalled the doctor referring to her as a princess.

I am the Princess of Mars, and I will not flinch as I watch the battles below.

I will make Vaath proud.

The announcer ceased speaking and music blared, strange music that mostly consisted of violent drumming. The noises filled her head, making her almost dizzy, as she waited for the event to commence.

Vaath strode onto the field below and the crowd cheered with exuberance. But when one of the royal advisors walked across the field to face Vaath, the spectators jeered. It was clear the residents of the capital city had already decided who was guilty and who was innocent. In this moment, she realized just how much respect Vaath commanded amongst his people.

As she stared down at him, her heart beat faster. He loved her. Before he'd gone off to prepare forvoogg, he had confessed to loving her. God help her, but she loved him back. Despite all he'd done to her people, she couldn't push away the immense affection she held for him.

She thought back over the last several days. He had made strides with her parents, making a point to speak with them daily, though he also gave her time to converse with them in private. He had also begun speaking with her on political matters, listening intently as she told him about the cruelty of the Martian governors his father had appointed to rule over Earth. Though he hadn't promised to do anything specific yet to help her people, he had listened and asked many thoughtful questions, as if he sought to understand a complex problem.

The conversations had brought her hope that he would one day improve conditions on Earth, as well as hope for their future as a couple. Her stomach dropped when a horn

sounded and the first battle commenced. Please live. I need you. I love you.

Vaath charged at the royal advisor, and the two Martians' horns crashed together with a resounding thud. Esmay remained seated, still as the statues lining the palace corridors, as she watched Vaath repeatedly smash his head into the advisor's. After several minutes of this barbaric act, the man's skull caved in with one of the hits, and blood spurted from his eyes.

The advisor collapsed in a heap at Vaath's feet.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

One down. Ten to go.

Chapter 24

Esmay's stomach had never been twisted into so many knots. She felt positively sick as she watched fight after fight. Thus far, Vaath had killed seven advisors and was currently working on the eighth, a tall orange Martian with short but thick horns.

She watched in horrified fascination as Vaath ceased headbutting the advisor, reached for his throat, and twisted until the orange alien's head lulled to the side and his tongue dangled from his mouth. Vaath released him and he fell to the ground, yet another dead body on the field.

"He's doing well," Jav said, "as I knew he would."

Esmay nodded but kept her gaze on the field below. The ninth advisor, a purple-skinned Martian, approached Vaath and screamed something that caused the crowd to jump to their feet again. Confused, she watched as the tenth advisor, whose skin was the same blue shade as Vaath's, joined his companion on the field.

"What's happening?"

Jav growled. "The first one is a coward. He called for a friend to join him on the battlefield. He has selected the last advisor as that friend."

“Wait, Vaath is supposed to fight both of them at once?” She moved to the edge of her seat, her spirits sinking.

“Yes.”

“Is that legal?” Esmay’s heart pounded so loudly in her ears, she almost didn’t hear Jav’s response.

“It’s legal, though it is viewed as shameful. Even if these two advisors win, they will be viewed as cowards for the rest of their lives.”

The royal advisors circling Vaath were larger than the eight that had come before, making Esmay worry this was a sinister plot to see Vaath murdered. Two Martians against one wasn’t fair, even if the rules allowed it. She glared at the back of the purple advisor’s horned head.

Vaath was a strong and skilled warrior, but could he handle two large Martians who were trying to kill him at once?

“Esmay, I...” Faith said, but her voice trailed off. From her peripheral vision, Esmay noticed her friend trembling beside her.

Summoning bravery she didn’t know she possessed, Esmay straightened in her seat as she peered down at the battle about to commence. “Vaath will win, and if his father chooses death rather than banishment, Vaath will vanquish him as well. By the end of the day, Vaath will become King of Mars.” She continued holding her hands together, lest anyone notice them shaking.

In the field below, Vaath was easy to spot, even though one of the advisors was the same shade of blue. Vaath was dressed in a black uniform similar to that worn by the palace guards and enforcers, though colorful symbols decorated the back of his shirt,

which she suspected denoted his rank in the Brotherhood of Warriors. He had told her about the Brotherhood one night as they curled up in bed together, their legs tangled underneath the soft sheets after a rough session of lovemaking. He had explained that all Martian guards and enforcers were considered respected warriors, as their status as uniformed protectors meant they had survived a battle against a deadly beast native to Marttiadoxalia. He'd told her the beasts, some which were relocated from their old homeworld, now roamed one large island on Mars, and that young prospective warriors would venture to the island when they came of age and wished to join the Brotherhood.

The royal advisors were not guards or enforcers. Though they were large and muscular, as all male Martians were, they hadn't fought in any wars. You are strong and brave, Vaath. You can do this. You must do this. She closed her eyes briefly and kept summoning encouraging thoughts, which she imagined she was sending directly to her mate, though she realized there was no way he could hear her. But perhaps he would feel her encouragement and sense her support from above.

In Vaath's world, spirits ascended to the stars and shook the ground. It seemed as though the fantastic was possible here. Not quite magic, but almost.

The two advisors each growled at the same moment and charged at Vaath.

Esmay's heart nearly stopped when she saw the glint of a blade.

Chapter 25

Vaath growled when an electrified knife pierced his flesh, pushing through his armored skin, a sharp impact of agony deep within his chest. He backed away from the advisors and looked down at himself. A stream of blue blood gushed forth from the shocking wound. A knife. One of the cowardly advisors had disregarded the rules set forth forvoogg, rules blessed by the Gods, and brought a weapon into battle.

Advisor Grennul charged him, headbutting Vaath to the ground. Despite the pain ripping through him, Vaath jumped to his feet and returned the charge. Once he had Grennul on the ground, he stomped on the coward's head, over and over again, putting his full strength into each blow. When the male's friend, Advisor Wammlet, attempted to knock him over, Vaath struck the heel of his palm into Wammlet's throat, causing him to collapse on the ground as he fought for air.

With a roar of outrage, Vaath yanked the knife from his chest and tossed it to the edge of the battlefield. Bloodlust filled him and the pain in his chest receded. He cared not for his wound, deadly though it might prove. His only thought was to kill the curseddrakks, those who had tried to harm his sweet human bride and others like her.

He would make Mars a safe planet for all human females. Never again would an Earth woman need to worry about her wellbeing on this planet. After Vaath finished killing Grennul and Wammlet, he would deal with his father's outrageous treachery, and then as the new king, Vaath would order the execution of all the captureddrakks.

Assuming he survived the knife wound, that was. Blood continued gushing down his chest and he was beginning to feel lightheaded. But he continued fighting. He would not give up.

He felt a bone in his foot break as he persisted in stomping on Grennul's head, but he soon had the advisor's skull caving in, smashing it with brute force and pure rage.

Satisfied that he'd taken down one of the cowards, Vaath released a fierce growl and focused on Wammlet's current attack. The remaining advisor was charging him again, having recovered from his earlier injury. Next time Vaath throat punched him, Wammlet wouldn't manage to rise to his feet again. The shamed advisor would fall for the last time and join his comrades in death, join the bodies already strewn over the bloodstained field.

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The crowd roared as Vaath smashed his fist into Wammlet's throat, sending the male flying backward onto Grennul's fresh corpse. Clutching at his throat, the orange male's face turned bright red, and he appeared as if he were choking. Vaath smiled as he stood over the traitor. Though Wammlet might not have rebelled against the king, the male had rebelled against the empire. The majority of Marttiadoxalians had desired mates, and their scientists had urged the warriors to explore the galaxy in search of compatible females before they officially selected a planet to settle upon, lest the Marttiadoxalians lose their strength as their numbers dwindled.

Apparently when Vaath's father had answered the call of his people, he had hoped they would eventually change their minds and opt not to mate with humans. Drakks believed humans were too weak to mate with Marttiadoxalians, but the children born to such unions were growing up strong, some of them just as huge as a full-blooded Marttiadoxalian. But, even if such children were physically weaker or smaller than a full-blooded Marttiadoxalian, Vaath still believed his people needed the humans and should continue mating with their females. Otherwise, the males of his kind faced long, lonely lives.

Vaath stood over Wammlet as the male choked to death, the bones in his neck collapsed, cutting off his airway. It was a fitting death, a terrifying and painful one, as a Marttiadoxalian could hold their breath for a very long time. When Wammlet's face turned from red to black, he finally ceased moving.

Pressing one hand to the wound on his chest, Vaath raised his other fist in the air as he spun in a circle, facing the spectators who were cheering for his victory.

The Gods had spoken. All ten advisors had been guilty, and now they were dead.

Judgment had been served. Only one foe remained. Vaath's father.

He faced the king, who stood trembling on the side of the field, his wide-eyed gaze upon the ten lifeless bodies of his former advisors, the males who had erred in following him.

"The crowd is waiting, Father!" Vaath called in a taunting voice. "Come face me. Come face the judgment of the Gods!"

Vaath waited, wondering what his father would decide upon. Anger burned within Vaath, as well as a deep sense of betrayal. His own father had ordered the attack on his chambers, explicitly commanding the drakksin the compound to kill his own son, as well as Esmay. Vaath had decided not to show that particular video message on the screen in the banquet hall, as it had felt too personal.

The king started walking toward Vaath, his gait slow and cautious. He lowered his head, as if he were considering charging at Vaath, but he soon stood taller and came to a stop.

"I choose banishment," his father said, though he spoke so quietly that Vaath almost didn't hear his words of surrender.

"Say it louder! Shout it so the whole arena can hear!" When his father hesitated, Vaath added, "If no one else hears your capitulation, I might decide to pretend I didn't hear it either. I might decide to give you the same death as Wammlet."

"I choose banishment!" his father finally shouted, loud enough that the entire crowd likely heard the announcement. Then he knelt at Vaath's feet and bowed his head.

"All hail King Vaath of Mars!" a nearby spectator bellowed, and the rest of the crowd soon joined in.

“All hail King Vaath of Mars!” thousands of Marttiadoxalians shouted.

Vaath stared up at the hovering box that contained Esmay and the rest of his honored guests. She was standing up, cheering and clapping along with everyone else. He had glanced up at her on occasion, in between fights, expecting to see her looking worried, perhaps even crying or shielding her eyes.

But she hadn't once covered her face or broken down in tears. She had watched the entirety of every battle, as bravely as any female Marttiadoxalian who would have come to witness her mate participating invoogg. His heart swelled with pride for his mate. All hail the Queen of Mars.

* * *

“Esmay, I need to tell you something.” Faith stepped in front of Esmay before she could enter the palace, blocking her entrance. Her mate stood to the side, a strange expression upon his face.

“What is it? I would really like to get to Vaath. He's wounded.”

“Marxx says it's a survivable wound. Grennul missed his heart. I, um, I need to warn you about something. Marxx says it would be kind of me to tell you so you know what to expect.”

“Okay,” Esmay said slowly, “what is it?”

“Aftervoogg, the winner is always high on bloodlust, and once the killing has ended, the male seeks out a female to satiate the rest of his...energies.”

“Are you trying to tell me Vaath is going to want sex?” Esmay felt a smile tugging at her lips.

“Yes, but not regular sex. Crazy freaky rough sex. After killing ten males in the arena, he’s going to be off the charts aggressive. Anyway, Marxx says not to be afraid and that Vaath won’t hurt you, even if it seems like he might.”

“I appreciate the warning,” Esmay said with a chuckle, though inside she was trembling anew. Exactly how rough would Vaath be?

“Oh, and he won’t be able to control himself in front of others, so don’t be alarmed if someone else is still in the room when he pounces on you.”

“That’s certainly good to know,” Esmay said, wondering if her friend was exaggerating a bit.

“Okay, well, good luck,” Faith said, giving her a quick hug. “Tell King Vaath we said congratulations. Oh, and congrats to you as well. You’re the queen now, in case you haven’t realized it yet. Queen Esmay of Mars. Can you believe it? The first human queen! You’ve made history on this planet and among the Martian people.”

A sense of déjà vu flitted over Esmay as Faith’s words reminded her of something Wyvonus had said.

One day, you and Prince Vaath will find happiness together, and it will change the world.

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She wished the Wise One had thought to tell them about Vaath's father's involvement with the drakks, but perhaps the holy man hadn't known about the storm that had been closing in. After all, who would suspect the former king of such plotting against his own people and his own son? Though the royal had made her uneasy and she'd known Vaath didn't respect him, she was still shocked to her core by his duplicity.

Esmay mumbled a quick goodbye to Faith and Marxx, her mind swimming with the warning about the 'crazy freaky rough sex' coming her way.

Would Vaath really attack her the second he saw her?

Chapter 26

As soon as Esmay entered the medical wing near the banquet hall, a menacing growl sounded behind her. She spun around and saw Vaath standing along the wall, his muscles tensed and his eyes pitch black. His fierce expression startled her and she found herself backing away from him, only for him to stalk her until he had her backed into a room and against a bed. A glance around showed they were alone, for which she was grateful. What if Faith's warning held substance?

She studied him further and was relieved to find him no longer covered in his enemies' blood. He wore nothing but a pair of tight black shorts that reminded her of boxer shorts, a garment she'd never seen him wear before. Someone must've dressed him while he received treatment. Another quick look around showed no sign of any doctors or medical assistants. They were truly alone.

“I-I was told you were in here receiving treatment,” she said, her mouth suddenly dry. She glanced at his bare chest, but she saw no sign of the stab wound. “Are you all right? When that male stabbed you, my heart nearly stopped, Vaath. I was so worried about you.” She placed a hand upon his chest, but his face didn’t change, causing a shiver to run down her back. “Vaath?”

Nostrils flaring wide, he leaned down and inhaled deep, smelling her hair and her neck. Goosebumps prickled all over her, even as her lower belly tightened and heat gathered between her thighs. Her breath caught in her throat when Vaath’s nostrils flared even wider and a menacing growl escaped him.

He won’t hurt me. Not really.

But his eyes were still unnaturally dark. She’d read something once about a material developed by scientists that was the blackest black, capable of absorbing over 99.9% of all light. That was Vaath’s gaze in this moment. She tried to wiggle out from between him and the hospital bed, but he grabbed ahold of her shoulders and held her in place. His grip was as hard as the time he’d grabbed her during an argument, but this time they weren’t fighting about something. No, this time was different.

“Vaath?” she tried again, hoping to reach him.

His only response was another growl. He touched her hair, rubbing it between two fingers as he smelled her again, inhaling deeper and longer than before. Without warning, he stepped back, only to reach forward and rip her dress off. Her bra and panties came next, and she stood before him in nothing but her slippers. Faith’s slippers, technically. She had borrowed the dress and shoes from her friend, hurrying to dress up before running off to the arena to watch her mate engage in multiple battles to the death.

And he’d won. He had just killed ten huge Martian males fighting by hand and horn.

A glance up showed a speck of blood on his left horn, but it didn't bother her. The blood wasn't his and he was alive, his wounds already healed. She placed a hand upon his chest, touching the spot where he'd been stabbed, but he didn't so much as flinch. This area of his skin was blue and smooth with no hint of the smallest cut, let alone a serious stab wound.

"I-I'm grateful for the doctors who treated you," she said. "I'm glad you're all right." Again, her mouth felt dry, and she swallowed hard as she tried to calm her nerves.

In the next instant, Vaath growled loud enough to make her scream. Before she could recover from his outburst, he grabbed her and turned her around, bending her over the bed. He reached between her thighs, stroking a hand through her wetness. She couldn't help it—seeing this vicious side of him excited her, even though there was a small part of her that feared him right now. He seemed to be out of his mind.

What if he went too far?

She heard a ripping noise and the whoosh of fabric as he tossed his undergarments away. A second later, she felt his cock pressing between her thighs, driving straight into her, a fast and deep thrust that stole her breath.

She clutched onto the bed as he started pounding into her. His rapid plunges pushed the bed against the wall, and she had no choice but to remain in place, bent over the bed while he fucked her with animal savagery.

* * *

There was a constant roar in Vaath's head. His vision was blurry, but he scented his mate underneath him, and he kept surging into her, claiming the female who belonged to him. In the back of his mind, a voice whispered that he ought to slow down. She was a small human and he must treat her gently.

With great effort, he drew in a deep breath and stilled within her.

“Esmay,” he said, finally finding his voice. He had heard about the instincts that followed in the wake of vooggand had considered warning his mate beforehand, however, he had convinced himself he possessed enough self-control to keep from ravaging her like a beast in rut.

“I’m here Vaath.”

“Do not be afraid,” he managed to say. Why was it so difficult to form words? His mental processes were a bit incapacitated as well. It was as though once he caught the scent of his mate, he had lost the ability to think rationally.

“I’m not scared. I-I know you won’t hurt me. I trust you.”

Even in his lust-dazed state, her words penetrated his consciousness, bringing him comfort. His beloved mate trusted him. He recalled the exchange they had shared before he ran off to prepare for vooggand his chest tightened with emotion. Not only did she trust him, but she loved him as well. And he loved her. They’d confessed their feelings during a tense moment, when the future loomed uncertain before them, but the words rang true inside his head.

He had finally managed to conquer Esmay’s heart.

But in the process, she had conquered his as well.

“You are mine,” he said in a strained tone, still finding it hard to speak.

“Yes, Vaath, I am yours. Now take me. Take me and finish this.”

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He gripped her hips and thrust into her with abandon, pumping hard and deep, until at last her inner muscles contracted around his hardness. As she writhed underneath him, he came with a roar, spurting his seed into her tight depths. When he had emptied himself completely within her, his vision began to return, along with his senses.

He gathered Esmay in his arms and held her tight.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No.” She reached up to cup the side of his face. “Are you all right?”

“Me? I am fine. It is you I’m worried about. I used you.”

An amused look crossed her face. “Yes, but I am yours to use, King Vaath.” She grinned. “Just as you are mine.”

Relief filled him to see her in good spirits after he had all but attacked her. He sat on the bed and cradled her to his chest, caressing his hands through her hair and inspecting every little part of her body, just to ensure he hadn’t harmed her.

“You were incredible in the arena, Vaath.” She peered up at him, and her look of admiration caused his face to heat.

“The Gods spoke,” he replied. “I simply helped them serve justice.”

“And now you’ve eliminated the threat posed by the anti-Earthers. You’ve made

Mars a safe place for human females. And now you are king.”

“And you are my queen. The Queen of Mars, and a human one at that.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead.

She expelled a quick breath. “I have no idea how to be a queen.”

“That’s not true,” he said. “You have a lot of ideas. You’ve spent nearly every day since your arrival talking my ear off—is that the proper human saying?—about the situation on Earth and the hardships that cause human females to become mail order brides.” He grinned down at her, his heart swelling with affection for this tiny female who had altered his life forever.

Her gaze turned hopeful. “And you’ll be willing to take my advice on matters of Earth and humans?”

“Wyvonus wasn’t entirely correct in his prediction,” Vaath said. “We’re not going to change the world—we’re going to changetwoworlds. MarsandEarth. Now come here, sunshine. I want to kiss my queen.”

Epilogue

Four years later...

Esmay smiledat the sight of her sisters running through a green meadow. The girls giggled as two small blue figures chased them around in circles.

“They’re all going to sleep well tonight,” Vaath said with a chuckle. He sat down next to Esmay on the front steps of the cabin, wrapping an arm around her as they both watched their twin sons hurry through the tall grass. Carmen and Lilly continued leading the boys in circles, determined not to be caught.

With a sigh of contentment, Esmay leaned against Vaath and placed a hand upon her swollen stomach. The baby growing inside her—just one baby this time—gave a vigorous kick that startled a gasp from her.

“Is my son kicking you again?” Vaath asked with a crooked smile.

“No, your daughter is kicking me again. We’re having a girl this time, I just know it.”

“We could ask the doctor if you—”

“Absolutely not. I want it to be a surprise.” She glared up at him. “And you’d better not ask the doctor, either. I’m serious.”

He lifted one hand in a show of mock surrender and grinned at her, and she couldn’t resist smiling when she saw his dimples. Even after four years of being mated to Vaath, she still loved those dimples of his. Their sons, Krakk and Naxx, had inherited this particular trait from Vaath, and as she resumed watching them chase her sisters around the meadow, her heart swelled with happiness.

A few minutes later, the screen door screeched open.

“Dinner’s ready!” Esmay’s mother called out. “Come and get it!”

Krakk and Naxx stopped for a moment, turned and looked at the cabin, then suddenly sprinted toward it. Apparently, food was more important than playing tag with Carmen and Lilly. Everyone laughed as the three-year-old boys rushed up the steps and flew past their grandmother.

“There must not be any food on Mars!” Esmay’s mother remarked as she headed back inside.

Vaath grasped Esmay's hand and helped her to her feet. "Hungry, my sunshine?"

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“Starving, actually. It’s been a whole two hours since I’ve eaten anything.”

He opened the door and waited for Carmen and Lilly to run ahead of them into the cabin, then he guided Esmay into the dining room, where the delicious aroma of vegetable stew made her mouth water. Her stomach growled, and just before she sat down, she swiped a peanut butter cookie off the dessert tray that was resting on a hutch. Though she attempted to be as discreet as possible, Krakk and Naxx soon began makingtskingnoises at her.

“Mommy!” Naxx said, using the most indignant tone she’d ever heard him use. “You always tell us it’s naughty to eat cookies before dinner!”

Esmay stuffed the cookie into her mouth. “Yes, darling,” she said, chewing, “but it’s okay ifIhave my dessert first.” She patted her stomach again. “I have a medical condition.”

Krakk sat taller in his seat as he eyed the tray of cookies. “Can I have a medical condition too?”

Everyone erupted into laughter. As she clutched her belly, still laughing, Esmay gazed around the table, her spirits soaring. She was surrounded by those she loved most, including the big blue Martian at her side.

They visited her family on Earth frequently, and sometimes Vaath sent a spacecraft to pick her parents and sisters up so they could visit Mars and stay in the palace, which her sisters absolutely enjoyed.

Earth was also a cleaner and safer place than when she'd left to become Vaath's mail order bride. The Martians had recently begun using their terraforming technology to help her home planet heal, and humans were starting to move back into previously uninhabitable areas.

Now that the governors of each zone were appointed by Vaath, rather than his corrupt father, most places on Earth had become more peaceful as well. All debtors' prisons had been abolished, and both taxes and rent had been vastly lowered.

Human females still signed up to become brides to the Martians; however, they no longer did so out of desperation. The mail order bride program had recently undergone a complete overhaul, and Martian males now posted their own personal advertisements for human brides on a website Vivian had helped design.

During her four years as Queen of Mars, Esmay had worked hard to bring about change on both Mars and Earth, as well as to improve relations between Martians and humans. While Vaath didn't always agree with her, he never failed to listen to her and attempt to understand her perspective. Some Martians were already calling him the greatest king their people had ever seen. Esmay was proud of him and delighted in telling him so on a regular basis—if only to witness his cheeks flushing a darker shade of blue.

Vaath grasped her hand under the table and gave it a firm squeeze. “Are you all right, sunshine? You look as though you're deep in thought.”

“Oh, I'm fine.” She peered around the table, glancing from her parents to her sisters to her sons, before returning her gaze to Vaath. “In fact, everything is perfect.”

THE END