



The Alien Warrior's Vow

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Science Fiction

Description: While the war for the planet rages, so will the war for her heart... Lans was my alien kidnapper and I've hated him since he saved me from an intergalactic space auction. To everyone else, he's the anchor who holds them steady. To me, he's cold, grumpy and heartless. Hades with blue skin and tattoos. We fight every time we make eye contact, so I try to keep my distance. But all attempts to avoid him end when a powerful enemy tears through the planet and threatens everything I hold dear.

Now, Lans and I have to work together to train for a battle we might not survive. As our training heats up, so does the attraction between us. But getting distracted now could mean losing the war against our enemies and worse—losing my heart. Can I trust Lans with everything or will our desperate romance end in tragedy?

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

One

Lans

“What do you mean they’re all dead?” Korben’s eyes widened and he stared across the room at the projection. “No, that can’t be right. One hundred Plutonian warriors can’t just... no.”

Lans struggled to contain his fury. It was a massacre, but it could have been avoided. “The tribes to the north grew impatient.”

Korben slammed his palm on the table.

The wood shook.

It was the only thing that moved.

Everyone else in the room remained frozen.

Lans turned sideways, noting Clavas’s tightening lips. He lowered his voice. “It is not your fault, Clavas.”

“It is.” His friend glared into the air, no doubt thinking about his escape from the Heronas prison. Only two sun rotations ago, Lans had joined in the mission to free Clavas and the Healer. They’d been half successful, having only gotten to Clavas in time.

Tiegan leaned forward, his voice gruff. “How did it happen? What... technology is that?”

“We’re still analyzing the footage.”

“We?” Tiegan lifted an eyebrow nub.

Lans cleared his throat. “Chozo and I.”

Zar scowled. The hulking warrior barely tolerated having a Heronas expel in their midst. Though he had been a lab rat for his species, Chozo was still—technically—the seed of their enemy. Lans had been just as suspicious when Zar and his mate, Simone, brought Chozo to the camp, but the brood had proven to be invaluable.

“Should we trust a word he says?” Korben asked pointedly.

“Chozo has intel into the Heronas’s mind. It’s an unprecedented advantage.” Lans moved his eyes gravely to the projection. “And one we’re going to need.”

Shuddering slightly, Tiegan mumbled, “How did they just... evaporate?”

“We’re not sure.” Lans tapped his interface and pinched the raised holos that appeared on his arm. “According to the report, they believed the Healer was within the clutches of a Heronas city near their camp. They gathered all their warriors and rushed the walls only for that to happen.”

The footage expanded around them.

Light filled the room, revealing a hundred Plutonian warriors.

Valiant fighters.

His comrades.

They shared his blue skin, his tail and his loyalty to their species.

Each one was precious in their own right, but even more so because they were the last of their kind. Plutonian females were no more, and there had not been a Plutonian birth in many sun cycles.

But perhaps that would change.

Korben had recently informed them that humans could mate with Plutonians and bear their offspring.

An image of a female filled Lans's mind.

Pale skin. Sharp eyes. Lips so soft they often fooled him into thinking that sweet words would come out of it. And they rarely did. At least when he was around.

Eema.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

Korben fisted his hands and thumped them against the table. The sound dragged Lans's mind back to the matter at hand. Solving a problem as impossible as this one was ten times easier than trying to understand that stubborn human's mind.

His terros hunched over, his back muscles pressing against his skin and his head almost parallel with the desk. Korben let out a heavy sigh. "We cannot afford to lose more warriors."

Pin lifted slender fingers. The warrior was broad and tall. He wore a grim frown as he nodded. "I agree."

"Denizi!" Clavas rose violently from his chair. His tail whipped the air as he turned sharply and paced the room. "If only we had gone after the Healer before the Heronas upped their defenses, we wouldn't have lost all those warriors. They..." His voice cracked. "They didn't have to die."

Korben stared at his bruda. "If we did not get you out when we did, we could have lost—"

"I would have rather lost my life," Clavas snapped.

"Not only your life would have been lost." Korben gestured to the room. "But theirs as well. You are the best strategist we have, Clavas."

Clavas shook his head and glared at the footage.

Lans sighed. He knew not what his friend was feeling, but he suspected Clavas's

anger was born of guilt. Lans had his own experiences with holding on to fury rather than facing his putrid self-loathing. He knew how it chewed away at the heras until there was nothing but char left.

“We need a new plan,” Pin tilted his head, his eyes sharpening on Lans. “Gathering an army of warriors won’t work if we all get vaporized by that shield.”

Lans strode to Clavas and gave his shoulder a squeeze. “We will avenge them.”

“But they’ll still be dead,” Clavas bit out. Fisting his hands, he charged out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

Korben rubbed his temple. “I will speak to him.”

“He might need space,” Lans murmured, shaking his head.

Korben clenched his jaw. “We do not have time for space. The sooner we come up with a plan to rescue the Healer, the better. Every second he is in the Heronas’s hands puts him and our entire species in danger.”

“Not our entire species,” Tiegan said.

Lans swung his head around. “What do you mean?”

“You have females now.” He jutted his chin at Korben, Pin and Zar. “All three of you returned from your mission with a mate and we know they are capable of birthing—”

“What are you saying, Tiegan?” Zar growled, his spine dagger jutting out of the back of his neck dangerously.

Alarmed, Lans held out a hand. “Settle down, Zar. There is no need to unsheathe your

weapon.”

“You think the same, Lans?” Korben asked angrily.

He lifted one shoulder. “We have a future now. We have hope that our lineage can survive through the females. And they can control the zaptens...”

“Neh.” Pin glared in Tiegan’s direction. “Word of the females having Plutonian brood cannot get out. Imagine what those who have turned from our ways would do to them? Not to mention, all Plutonian enemies would seek them out just to control us.”

Tiegan lifted his chin. “Are you worried about all the females,” his eyes darted between Zar and Pin, “or just your own?”

“The females are a part of us,” Korben said.

Zar nodded firmly.

Tiegan lifted his hands. “I want to protect them too. All I am asking is that you consider this—other Plutonians would choose to protect them as well.” He stood, scraping the chair behind him. “We could all use some hope right now.”

As Tiegan walked out, Korben rubbed his temples harder.

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

It eased open, revealing Chozo. He was short and thin with smooth green skin. The clunky mask on his face could not hide the youthfulness of his appearance. It was hard to imagine that he was, in truth, older than them all.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

“I saw Tiegan storm out. Did you decide on a solution?”

“Neh.” Korben raised himself up. “I should speak to Sah-ah.”

Pin and Zar stood as well, no doubt intending to seek their mates too.

“They’re in the...” Chozo’s voice faded as the three warriors strode past him without acknowledgement.

The brood sighed and hopped on top of the table. “They still hate me, don’t they?”

“They do not trust you.” Lans placed a hand on the brood’s shoulder. “But you will win them over eventually.”

His long, flat fingers bounced up and down. “Why are you the only one who trusts me, Lans?”

“Because...” He swallowed. “Because I know what it is like to be misunderstood.”

Chozo studied him intently through the mask. “You speak of the past.”

Soft laughter drifted to his ears. He glanced up and spied on Eema as she crossed the outer room. Thick brown hair spiraled to her slim shoulders. The dainty features of her face held him spell-bound. Serenblue eyes. Long lashes. A full mouth. She brushed a lock of her hair behind her left ear—always her left—and nodded at Ki-ah, Zar’s mate. Emma’s tunic hugged her curves and fell softly to her thighs, revealing her long legs and slender feet.

Chozo waved a green hand in his face. “Lans?”

“I speak of the past and the future.” He tore his eyes away from Eema. “Come. I need you to go over these prison blueprints again.”

Chozo winced. “Shall we relocate?”

“Why?” Lans swiped his interface to get to the blueprints. “We have the whole place to ourselves.”

A raspy voice spoke from the doorway. “Actually, we’re going to need the room.”

Lan’s veins tightened. His chin whipped up and his hands pounded as he fell into a pair of the most beautiful blue eyes he had ever seen. More sparkling than the sun and more dangerous than a dagger.

Eema’s lips curled up in a hint of a smile. “The boys had their time to play.” She lifted her chin as the other females joined her. “Now it’s our turn.”

Two

Emma

The brawny Plutonian folded massive arms over his chest. The frown on his face was darker than a poisonous storm. Emma felt her lips inching higher when she saw Lans’s reaction. Something about getting on this brute’s nerves was just too appealing.

Lans glowered in her direction. “I am staying right here.”

She opened her mouth to argue with him, but Sara moved forward. “As you should.”

Korben's mate slanted her a dirty side-eye was that necessary?

Emma just shrugged.

The answer was no. No, it wasn't. But ever since Lans had stolen her from the alien auction house and, not-so-gently, thrown her on top of his dinosaur machine, she'd felt an overwhelming desire to get back at him.

There was just something about his 'act now, grunt later' personality that made her want to push him to the edge of his control.

Of course, it wasn't that way at first.

When the huge blue alien had kidnapped her, she'd genuinely hated him.

But now it was something a little different. Something a little... softer.

"We need all the warriors here." Sara gestured to her alien boyfriend or... was he her husband now?

Simone, the newest addition to their rag-tag group of marooned humans in space, had explained the mate connection to her, but it still wasn't clicking. The thought of being so deeply connected to another being—alien or no—scared the crap out of her. The last time she put her trust in someone thinking they would always be there for her, she'd almost lost her life.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

Emma wasn't making that mistake again. Not on earth or any other planet.

Korben frowned hard. "My heras, why do you need to use the war room. We can speak in private."

Emma barely restrained the eye roll. Every time Korben, Zar, or Pin asked to speak to their mates 'in private', there was usually very little talking involved. These walls were thin and she had many opportunities to imagine what a human-alien coupling sounded like.

Her eyes drifted to Lans's brawny arms again. She tore her gaze away. "Guys, can you keep it in your pants for one minute? We have something important to share."

"Something important?" Lans stared at her as if she'd single-handedly caused the demise of his entire species.

Ugh.

He was infuriatingly annoying sometimes.

What did he have against her? Why did he always glare at her like that?

She scowled in return. "Yeah. Something important. Are you just going to repeat everything I say, Lans?"

"Emma," Lilliana warned beneath her breath. The only other 'single' female in their little clan, Lilliana was just as alien-crazy as the rest. She had her eyes set on Tiegan

and seemed intent on making the alien warrior her own.

Scoffing, Emma flounced ahead and fell into a chair.

Chozo waddled toward her, his long, green limbs reaching out and patting her hair. Of all the alien creatures she'd encountered on this crazy planet, Chozo was by far the cutest. His three, flat fingers tangled in her locks and he chuckled as he pulled them away.

"Relax, Emma," he said.

She blew out a breath. "I am."

"Did you know," he tilted his head, "whenever you see Lans, your face gets red?"

She pressed a hand to her cheek. "It's because I'm angry."

"You may be able to fool the others." Chozo grinned, flashing his flat teeth. "But not me."

Emma ducked her head, feeling exposed. "Can you go over there? I'm trying to prepare for my speech."

"What speech?" Chozo leaned forward. "Why were all the males summoned to the meeting room?"

"You should know. You're the one who gave us the idea."

Chozo's eyes widened. "Emma..."

A loud chair creaking brought her attention away from the baby alien. Lans folded his

giant body into the seat across from her. His purple eyes bore into hers like two lasers and a muscle in his jaw spasmed from how hard he was clenching it.

All the Plutonians were big, brooding, and blue, but there was something especially dangerous about Lans. Maybe it was that scar that crossed his eyebrow nub. Maybe it was the perpetual frown that very rarely left his face and always got darker when he was around her. Maybe it was the two plaits in front of his forehead that should have softened his look but didn't.

Whatever it was, Emma could give as good as she got.

She mirrored his pose and folded her arms over her chest. Did the alien think he could intimidate her like that?

Please.

She might be half his size with arms the width of noodles, but she'd survived on this planet on her own far longer than any of the girls in this room.

Sara rose and planted her brown hands flat on the table. She was a beautiful woman, only a few years older than Emma, and she had all the hope in the world.

Emma still remembered the first time she'd met Sara. It was at the auction house, surrounded by guards and an orange force-field. Despite their circumstances, Sara would not shut up about how they were definitely going to escape. She'd believed it so fiercely that even Emma had started to become convinced.

Chozo whispered in her ear. "Tell me you're not about to do anything foolish."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

Lans growled.

Chozo flashed him a scared look and eased away from her. “Emma, no.”

“Sh.” She pointed to Sara. “She’s talking.”

“My heras, what is this about?” Korben asked Sara, staring at her with a befuddled expression.

Pin rubbed Kia’s shoulders. The couple had been near inseparable since that harrowing incident with the jelly aliens and their weird, raider friends. Emma didn’t fault them. That night, she’d been pretty sure she was about to get carted back to the auction house.

“I was told this pertained to our plan.” Pin studied his mate.

“Babe,” Kia whispered, pecking his lips, “let her talk.”

The alien warrior’s eyes softened after that.

Gosh.

These Plutonians were fierce in every way, but they turned into melted wax with their mates.

It was almost cute.

Almost.

“First of all, we want to offer our condolences.” Sara glanced at each of the warriors. “We heard about the loss you suffered today.” She licked her dark lips and her eyes lingered on her mate. “We know how important every Plutonian warrior is to your species.”

Korben took Sara’s hand and rubbed it gently. “Thank you.”

Emma could feel Lans’s stare burning into her cheek. His deep rumble skittered over the table and slammed her in the heart. “Why do I get the feeling that you did not gather us all in here just to apologize?”

“What if we did?”

Lans leaned over. Despite the fact that he was all the way across the table, Emma felt as if he were pushing her into the wall. She only managed to keep her expression plain because she’d had years practicing how to appear disinterested. Still, her pulse kicked off like a race horse.

“Actually, Lans is right.” Sara licked her lips. “We had a meeting—”

“We?”

“Us girls.” Simone nodded at her mate, Zar. Like all the other warriors, Zar had muscles upon muscles beneath that blue skin. Because he’d been in captivity, his hair was thinning in places, so he wore it pasted back. The style only highlighted his rugged good looks. Simone gestured to her. “Us women, I mean.”

Lilliana nudged Tiegan in the side. “We called it the Council of Females. Has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

He smiled politely and inched away.

Emma wished Lilliana good luck, but she didn't see the alien looking at her the way the other Plutonians looked at their mates.

“And what exactly did the Council of Females decide?” Korben asked gravely, as if he, too, could already sense what was coming.

“Emma?” Sara gestured to her.

She stood and tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Plutonians, we'd like to join the war.”

Three

Lans

The room went quiet for a moment and then it exploded with chaos. Lans ignored everything happening around him as his eyes narrowed on Eema. She stood tall and regal, completely unmoved as his comrades shouted their objections.

Lans saw the determination in Eema's eyes. The stubbornness.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

She thrived on the opposition.

She needed the resistance to convince herself that rebellion was her strength.

He'd spent many sun rotations with her since rescuing her from the beluda. Even when she irritated him, his eyes followed her everywhere. Whenever he entered a room, he looked for her first. If he did not see her, his heart pounded and terror slicked his veins.

In all that time, Lans had observed her expressions and committed them to memory. She was headstrong. No argument would convince her.

Lans stood slowly.

His chair scraped against the ground.

The sound was loud enough to echo over the ramblings of his terros and his comrades.

Every eye shifted his way, but his eyes were on Eema. What are you up to, human?

As soon as quiet descended, Eema arched a delicate eyebrow. "May I continue?"

"You must have known we would never be agreeable to such a plan," Korben growled.

"Who said we need your approval?" Eema challenged.

Pin frowned. “We will stick to the plan. All the females will be taken to the elders tribas where it is safe.”

“That was your plan,” Ki-ah said, her eyes burning with determination. “Not ours.”

“Ki-ah!”

“Pin, we can help.”

“How?” Zar mumbled, his gaze on his mate.

Si-Moon studied him. “The zaptens.”

The human females could control their machines and wear the exoskeletons as protection, but that was no guarantee that they would not come to harm. “A war is different than warding off a few raiders.”

“We’re the only ones who can get through the force field around the Healer’s prison.” Eema pressed both hands into the table and leaned toward him. “You need us.”

“I need no one,” he ground out.

She smirked. “Just admit that you don’t think we’re capable.”

“I never said females are incapable.” Lans frowned. “But you are inexperienced.”

Her eyelashes flickered. Red circles burned her fair cheeks. He’d seen that reaction often on Eema, especially when he’d done something to annoy her. Sometimes, he sought out that reaction intentionally just so he could admire her beauty when she was furious.

But this was not one of those times.

Lans found it utterly ridiculous to include the females in their war plans. As he'd said, they were inexperienced but, beyond that, Zar, Pin and Korben would be incredibly distracted by their mates. They would worry about them constantly and lose focus on the mission.

The heras caused them to make tactical decisions that made little rational sense. They could not afford such an issue when it came to rescuing the Healer.

“Guys, let’s all take a breath.” Sah-ah held a hand out to Eema, indicating that she should sit back down.

Eema did so slowly, her scowl still aimed his way.

Lans had an answering snarl for her even as he sat as well.

“This war can’t be won with brute force. You can gather all the Plutonian warriors you want, but you’re not getting through that force field. This mission requires someone with an indistinguishable amount of Plutonian blood to get through.” Sah-ah tapped her fingers against the table. “You need a human.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

“And how do you know the Heronas force fields are activated by Plutonian blood?”
Lans snarled, his gaze hardening on Chozo.

The brood squirmed and ducked his head.

“Did Chozo show you the footage?” Korben narrowed his eyes.

Eema threw her hand out protectively over the brood. “This isn’t about Chozo and the footage. While you aliens were sequestered in here having your little meeting, we,” she pointed a finger at the females, “were having a session of our own.”

Ki-ah nodded. “If you think about it, you’ll see that we have a point. We can wear the zapten exoskeletons and sneak into the Heronas prison undetected, just like Sara did to rescue Clavas.”

“And we can find a way to destroy the generator powering the force field, allowing the Plutonian army to slip through.” Si-moon turned pleading eyes on her mate. “Zar, it’s a good plan.”

Zar shook his head. “You forget that the Heronas have upped their defenses on the outside which means they’ve tripled it on the inside. After the devastation of Chozo’s camp, they’re even more paranoid than usual. Imagine what they will do to you if you’re caught? Remember where we met? Do you want to go through that again?”

A solemn expression fell on Si-Moon’s dark face.

Lans frowned as well. Zar and Si-Moon had met inside a Heronas prison where the

filthy bastards were trying to force a mating. With their species facing the Red Death, the Heronas were desperate to harvest the blood of humans and Plutonians. Their experiments had doubled and so had their kidnapping attempts.

Lans found Eema's eyes.

She stared right back at him.

It was something she did no matter how flustered she got. Lans had been around plenty of females, many of whom rarely met his eyes. Most skittered away in fear when he showed up.

At first, he'd assumed Eema's bravery was a human thing, something intrinsically born from the earthen DNA. But meeting Leel had cured him of that thought. The female with the tan skin and thick brown hair chatted incessantly and got spooked at the smallest things. She also crossed the room whenever he was around her. Eema, on the other hand, seemed to take pleasure in staring him down as if she wanted to duel.

"It's dangerous," he told her in a low voice.

"We knew that."

"Planning for a war and actually being a part of one is not as easy as it seems."

She narrowed her eyes. "Then we plan harder."

"You may die."

"I'm not going to let that happen."

If the matter weren't so dire, Lans would have scoffed at her impudence. Did she

really think she could conquer the planet by her stubbornness alone or was that just a front to hide her true fear?

Sah-ah frowned. “You guys, how many times have we saved your behinds since we’ve gotten here?” She pointed at Korben. “I was the one who snuck into the Heronas camp and saved you, Pin, and Lans.”

Korben opened his mouth, only to snap it shut.

Lans squirmed.

“And they,” Sah-ah pointed at Eema, “held down the fort while we were gone.”

Ki-ah nodded. “I saved you from those orange orbs that were going to suffocate you all to death.”

Lans squirmed harder.

“She’s right,” Chozo squeaked.

Every Plutonian glared in his direction.

The expeh ducked again. “Sorry.”

“If you don’t trust us,” Si-Moon slapped her hand against the table, “thentrainus. Make us as strong as we can possibly get in a few days.” She lifted her chin. “And then let us help.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

“You said that females were just as good in battle as the males before the Red Death,” Leel said, her tone gentle. “You all told us that they were warriors too and that they were respected.”

“Plutonian females had years of training,” Korben pointed out. “Not mere sun rotations.”

Tiegan nodded, rubbing blue fingers against his chin. It was a sign that he was thinking deeply.

“We have a few days.” Sah-ah shrugged dismissively. As if all she had to learn was how to flip a switch. As if they weren’t volunteering to walk into an extremely dangerous battlefield.

Korben caught his eye. “Lans?”

“You want my opinion?”

“I fear my thoughts are compromised on this matter.” He raked a hand through his locks. “So are Pin’s and Zar’s.”

“My vote is no,” Zar said pointedly.

“Zar!” Si-Moon shrieked.

He shook his head. “Maybe if the war was not coming so soon.”

Zar's mate glared at him. His comrade would likely hear an earful when he and Si-Moon were alone.

Taking a cue from Zar's mistake, Pin kept quiet. But his expression whispered that he thought the same.

Tiegan sat quietly with his arms crossed. "My vote is yes."

Korben stiffened, but he did not argue.

"It's a terrible idea." Lan's gaze moved to Eema who sat with her chin high and her eyes firm. If not for the slight tremble of her fingers, he would never have guessed that she was, indeed, uncertain. "But it has the makings of a good plan."

Korben let out a shuddering breath. "My heras, are you sure about this?"

"Yes." Sah-ah smiled bravely.

"Very well." Korben sighed. "We start training immediately. The three of us will look after our mates. Tiegan, you can tutor Leel and Lans," Korben paused, "you have Eema."

He bore his eyes into the female. "I will not go easy on you."

She offered an arrogant, tight-lipped smile. "Bring it, Blue. Do your worst."

He frowned grimly. There was no possibility of that. His heras was too soft toward this female and he would, inevitably, hold back.

The Heronas would share no such sentiments.

If Eema perished, it would be on his head.

And Lans could not have another death on his conscience.

Four

Emma

Lilliana squealed in her ears as she got dressed for training. “I can’t believe they actually agreed to that.”

“To be honest, I can’t either.” Emma pulled up her space spandex. The shiny material grafted to her waist like a second skin. It had been a gift from Sara’s mysterious friend, Ga Eun, another human that had, apparently, gotten the alien love bug.

“I’m just glad I’m staying home,” Lilliana said. “And watching Chozo.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “We know you’ll be bawling the entire time.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

“Will not.” Lilliana pouted.

Emma just shook her head.

“You and Lans looked tense back there.” Lilliana leaned closer, her thick brown hair brushing against Emma’s arm.

“He gets on my nerves.”

“You get on his.” Lilliana shuddered. “He’s way too big and scary-looking for me. I would faint if I had to train with him.”

“You think Tiegan would go easy on you?” Emma asked, strapping her feet into the thick space shoes. They looked like refined astronaut boots.

“He’s definitely easy on the eyes.”

Emma stiffened. “What’s wrong with Lans?”

“Nothing.” Lilliana shrugged. “If big, burly I’m going to kill you with my scowl alone aliens are your thing.” She paused and gasped. “Wait, is it?”

“Aliens aren’t my thing period. It’s weird enough that Sara, Kia and Simone are sleeping with them—”

“Do you see those women complaining?” Lilliana slanted her a wicked grin that caused her eyes to squint. “Every time Sara comes out of that room with Korben, she

looks—“

There was a knock on the door.

Both Lilliana and Emma jumped.

Heat blasted through her cheeks as Emma finished zipping up her suit. In a shaky voice, she called, “Come in.”

Sara walked in, her dark eyes cutting through the room before landing on Emma. Emma instinctively wanted to crouch back but stood her ground instead. Since Sara was the mate of the terros, she had begun to take on more and more leadership roles. Emma didn't mind, but nobody controlled her. She went along with the order of things because she respected Sara. It went no further.

Sara shut the door and whirled around, causing her beautiful coils to shake with the movement. “Emma, I wanted to talk to you before we started.”

“About what?” She folded her arms over her chest.

Lilliana squirmed. “Um... I'm going to see myself out.”

Sara turned her head slightly, waiting for Lilliana to scurry out of the room.

Emma groaned. “If you're here to scold me about the way I acted back there, I'm not going to apologize.”

“We had a plan, Emma.”

“And we succeeded.” She thrust an arm at her outfit. “See? We're sneaking into the extremely dangerous Heronas camp to rescue the Healer. Point one for the girl's

team.”

“No, we succeeded despite your attempts. You let Lans get under your skin.”

“You know, when someone snatches you from a rowdy alien auction and throws you on top of a giant metal dinosaur without warning, it kind of leaves a bad impression.”

“It was a first impression.”

“And those are the ones that last, aren’t they?”

Sara said nothing, but her stare carried a thousand words.

Emma sighed heavily. “I’ll be nice.”

“Can you?”

She thought about it. “Probably not.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

“Whatisit with you and Lans?” Sara threw her hands up.

“Don’t look at me like I’m the crazy one for not trusting these guys just because you fell in love with one.”

“Look,” Sara pinched between her brows, “I’m not saying you have to fall in love with Lans. Hell, you don’t even have to like him.” She stepped forward. “But you need to listen to him.”

Rebellion flared in Emma’s heart.

She opened her mouth.

Sara lifted a slender hand, cutting her off. “You want to join us on this mission, you play nice with your teacher. Lans has been fighting for centuries. Every move he teaches you is a move that could keep you alive. We don’t have time for you two to be fighting and not training.”

“It’s not like I intentionally fight with him. We rub each other the wrong way,” Emma grumbled.

“Then start rubbing each other therightway.”

A vision of Lans dropping to his knees and slipping his fingers down her thighs slid through her mind.

Emma bit down hard on her bottom lip as electricity skittered through her veins.

Sara smirked. “Where did your mind go?”

“Nowhere.”

A knowing look crossed Sara’s expression but, before the other woman could speak, the door breezed open. Kia and Simone strode through. Both women wore an outfit similar to hers except theirs had a metal bracelet on both wrists with a blinking light protruding from the top.

Emma jutted her chin at the device. “You and your mate celebrating your three-day anniversary?”

“No.” Kia lifted both hands, flashing her bracelets. “They’re supposed to help us control the zaptens.”

“I thought you could control them with your minds?”

“Yeah, but there’s a whole lot of things they can do that we’re not even aware of yet. This will help to access those commands more easily,” Simone said. She scooped up her thick hair and pulled it into a messy bun at the top of her head. “Are you going to use Lans’s zaptent?”

Emma shrugged. “I’m not sure it will like me.”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

Emma nervously played with a lock of her hair. “We should go. There’s no time to waste as our lovely leader just pointed out.”

“Emma...” Sara sighed.

She backed up to the door. "I know. I know. I'll be on my best behavior."

The room was silent.

Emma could feel the gazes of the other women heavy on her, but she didn't look back.

They all thought she was closed off, rude and jaded.

And they were right. She was all those things.

If they'd ever met on earth, Emma doubted any of those women would try so hard to be her friend. Being stuck on an alien planet with little human contact meant that they didn't really have a choice but to put up with her.

Emma stomped into the sunshine and fell into the shadow cast by the giant zaptens. They'd moved from the cabin where Lans had originally taken her and now they were in a more mountainous area that seemed closer to the sky.

Her heart thumping in anticipation, Emma stared at Lans's zaptен. It was huge, hulking and scary-looking, just like its owner. Even if she didn't know it was his, she would have guessed that by the scowl on its metallic face and its dark, imposing eyes.

"Hey there, big fella." She inched closer to the zaptен. Its gears made a clicking sound as it tilted its head and stared at her.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

Emma licked her lips. After riding this mechanical beast all the way across the planet with Lans, she should have gotten used to it by now, but the sight of the large dinosaur still made her antsy.

“Hey,” she whispered.

The zaptan bent its head toward her. She patted it nervously, pressing her hand against the spikes attached to the top of its head and straying away from the sharp points.

“Think you could just fuse to me so we can skip this whole training thing?”

“The exoskeleton won’t protect you if you don’t know how to use it,” a voice said.

She startled and jumped around.

Lans strode toward her, sunshine bouncing against his rugged jaw and his hulking chest covered in tattoos. He stopped close in front of her, dark eyes drilling holes into her face. “I don’t think you should go.”

Her hackles rose almost instinctually. More than anything, Emma longed to wipe that smugness from his face. “Well, it’s a good thing your opinion means crap to me.”

Instead of answering, Lans grabbed her by the elbows and swept her around in a fluid movement that felt almost like a dance. Except his hand ended up at the base of her throat and his lips brushed against her ear. “First lesson is focus. At any point, your enemies can use your inattentiveness against you.”

She squirmed. “We’re going in with the exoskeleton. Just show me how to point and shoot a gun and we’ll call it a day.”

“Neh.” He pulled her closer.

His body was hard against hers. Warm. Firm.

She licked her lips. “Then what? You’ll teach me hand-to-hand combat?”

“I will teach you to survive.” Lans body rubbed against hers and she gasped when she felt him pressing up against her rear.

He pulled back quickly, scowl firmly in place.

Her eyes dripped down to his pants to confirm what she’d felt, but Lans gripped her chin and forced her head back up. “Emma.”

“What?” she asked breathlessly.

“Focus.”

Her body tightened as she stared at him. Suddenly, that instruction seemed far more difficult than it should have been.

Five

Lans

His blasted body could not contain itself around Emma. She tempted him by simply breathing. Moving. Glaring. Why did his heart thump and his veins run hot around her?

The pants she wore clung to her body, highlighting every one of her curves and making it hard to concentrate. Her hair flowed freely in her face, tangling in front of eyes so devastating, they could be mistaken for Juverian crystals.

This training had become a lesson in self-restraint. Lans had not accounted for the way his body always responded when she was close. His mating instincts roared with need every time her softness brushed against his hardness. Her fragrance was soft and sweet, pulling him closer to her without him realizing it.

Despite how infuriating she was to him, his desire could not be tucked away.

Lans kept his distance as he began his training.

As long as he did not touch her, he would be safe.

Keeping his frown in place, he analyzed Eema's movements. "Again."

"How many times will I have to do this?" She spun, her gaze fixing on him. "I've been learning your alien martial arts for hours."

"It is calledtrasdezand it is the most basic training that all Plutonian warriors receive."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

Sweat caused the hair on her temple to cling to her cheeks. A red flush spread beneath her skin. Lans was not sure if it stemmed from her annoyance or her exertion.

Either way, he did not care. “Again.”

“If I do this one more time, my arms will fall off. I’ve gotit.”

“Do you?”

“Look,” she turned to him fully and planted her hands on her hips, “I promised Sara I wouldn’t fight your instructions, but this is ridiculous. How does any of this matter when all we’re going to do is sneak past the barrier and let you guys in? It’s not like I need to fight with the guards.”

“You think it will be that easy?” He walked around her.

“If all goes to plan.”

“And if the plan goes up in flames?”

Her gaze followed him. “We can just blast them with our guns.”

“Very well.” He selected his laser gun from the table he’d dragged out and offered it to her.

Eema stared at it as if he offered her poison.

He shook it. “Do you remember what I taught you before?”

She jerked her chin down.

He doubted that she had forgotten. That was the first time he had trained her. During their mission to free Clavas, they had left Eema alone at the dwelling. She had taken to the gun training much faster than he’d anticipated. Something about her posture and confidence told him that she had handled a weapon before.

“Go ahead.” He spread his legs, squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. “Shoot me.”

If he had expected hesitation or concern for his well-being, Lans would have been sorely disappointed. As if she had been waiting for the opportunity all her life, Eema hefted the gun. It clanked loudly in her hands as she stared down the barrel and pointed it in his direction.

Lans burst into motion. In three steps, he grabbed the gun from Eema’s hands and pointed it upwards. A neon bullet sprayed the treetops. His eyes widened.

The seren would have actually shot me.

Annoyed by the thought, he put more force than necessary into his next move. Sweeping Eema’s legs from under her, he threw her to the ground and climbed on top of her body, pinning her in place. One hand pressed on her throat while the other dug into the dirt near her hip.

She glared up at him, her chest moving up and down as she sucked in deep breaths.

“You tried to kill me,” he said.

“Wasn’t that the lesson?”

Stubborn, infuriating female.

“Now, you have no gun and no zapten. What do you do?”

She grunted, trying to push herself up. He held her down firmly, not budging an inch. Lans was much bigger and heavier than her. He was being careful not to crush her, but he wanted to break that cockiness of hers and show her just how dire a situation she was about to face.

With her level of inexperience, arrogance would be fatal.

Eema let both hands flop on the ground. Groaning, she said. “Alright. I give up.”

“Is that so?” He eyed her with suspicion.

She pushed the tendrils of her long hair that clung to her face away with sweaty fingers. “Yup.”

“Hm.” Lans began to ease up.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

As soon as she had control of her hips, Eema wrapped both legs around his waist and jolted him toward her body. Unprepared for the assault, Lans fell on top of her.

Their bodies collided in a rush.

Her soft flesh accepted his weight. For a moment, her fingers rasped against his side, setting flames all over his skin and shooting straight to his pants. Eema wrapped her arms around his neck and rolled, using his distracted state and his own weight against him.

She straddled his waist, her body leaning over his and her long hair falling against his chest. “Bam.” She mimicked plunging a dagger into his chest. “You’re dead.”

“You fight dirty.”

“And the Heronas are known for playing by the rules?” She arched an eyebrow, looking pleased.

He set his hands on her thighs and rubbed his thumb against her calf. “Who taught you that?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she taunted. Pushing herself forward, Eema started to get up.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her to him. She gasped, falling hard on top of his chest. The sweat on her body mingled with the sweat on his, turning their bodies slick and slippery. The warmth of her pierced his flesh and sank deep

beneath his skin.

She balanced on both hands, her face near to his. This close, Lans could see the brilliant flecks of green swimming in her eyes. He saw slight dots—Sah-ah had called them freckles—brushing over her nose and cheeks. The brilliant pink of her lips made him lick his own.

“Kiss me again and I really will stab you,” Eema said fiercely.

Lans chuckled. The first time he met Eema was outside the beluda. He had stolen her from her owner and carted her onto his zaptén, but the fragile thing had kept on screaming and hollering, nearly giving their location away. In an effort to quiet her, he’d swooped in close only for her lips to collide with his accidentally.

“If I recall correctly, human, you are the one who suckedmylips.”

She wiggled a finger in his face. “There was no sucking involved, Blue.”

Neh. There hadn’t been, but he wished there was.

Eema shifted a little. Her hands moved from the ground to his chest. The dirt on her palms mingled with his sweat, causing mud to smear over his tribal markings.

Lans barely felt the discomfort.

Every venas, every muscle was focused on the female straddling him.

Eema tucked a strand of hair behind her left ear. Always the left. “Why won’t you let me into your zaptén, Lans?” Her gaze skittered away from him. “Is it because you don’t trust me?”

“Neh.”

“Then?” She frowned. “We’ve been training without it all day and we both know that I’m going to spend more time inside the zaptén than out. Everyone else has some experience wearing those things. I’m the only one who hasn’t. What if I don’t even have a connection? What if it doesn’t like me?”

“The zaptén is already linked to you.”

Eema’s jaw dropped. “What?”

He pushed up on his elbows so his face was eye-level with hers. Eema eased back, sliding away from him while still balanced on his hips. Continuing to brush her thigh with his thumb, Lans admitted, “She is already connected to you.”

“How do you know that? I mean... Korben told me that they’d have to mess with my neural implant to find the zaptén’s frequency.”

“Neh.” He swallowed hard. “You do not have to do that because... the zaptén found yours.”

“She found my frequency?”

He nodded.

“When?”

He glanced away, his heras threatening to burst. She was too close. Too tempting. Too much.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

Lans grabbed Eema by the waist and tried to hoist her off him.

She resisted, pushing his hands away and rubbing against his hardness in her stubbornness to remain seated on him. Heat pulsed through Lans and he gritted his teeth.

“Tell me,” Eema insisted, her face charging toward his.

Lans growled and pushed up at the same time.

Their lips collided.

Sparks exploded in his head.

It lasted only a moment before Eema jumped back, a hand to her chest and her eyes wider than her fists. She pressed a finger to her lips. “W-what was that?”

“A spark from our neural implant.”

“Wait.” Her bright eyes narrowed. He could tell that she was already putting the pieces together.

He nodded. “My zapten connected to a new frequency...”

She gasped as realization dawned. “The moment we kissed.”

Six

Emma

Alien nights were different than earth ones.

The air felt heavier. Stiffer.

The shadows were thicker.

But that only made the moonlight brighter whenever it was out and in full glory. The yellow rays splayed over the expanse of the mountainous region, bathing the tips of the caps in gold. She sucked in a deep breath as she sat by the window, unable to sleep because of Lilliana's snoring.

No, that wasn't entirely true.

She was unable to sleep because of her rushing thoughts.

Her fingers moved up to her lips and she pressed down, applying the same amount of pressure that Lans had during training today. She could still feel the zap from that collision thrumming through her veins.

Emma shook her head.

Whatever.

Her body was obviously having some allergic reaction to being kissed by an alien. She was a human, after all. It wasn't like she'd been built with alien make-out sessions in mind. Or maybe it was something in the air.

Her inability to stop thinking about their kiss definitely wasn't because she felt a connection to that closed-off, hulking alien warrior.

Absolutely.

Freaking.

Not.

She was stronger than this. Smarter than this.

The last thing Emma wanted to do was go falling in love with someone she was determined to leave. Why start a relationship that was doomed to fail?

Lilliana snorted in her sleep again. Emma shot the girl a dirty look over her shoulder. Her roommate sprawled off, completely at peace with her hair ruffled and her mouth hanging open.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

“Oh, Tiegan,” she murmured in her sleep.

Was she dreaming about the alien? From the smile on her lips, Lilliana was enjoying herself.

Emma sighed. Everyone else seemed to be skipping down this alien romance road so easily, but she just couldn't accept it.

They were a completely different species.

And they lived on completely different planets.

When this nightmare was over, Emma intended on finding a way back to earth. She couldn't stay here where every plant and animal was out to eat her. She couldn't stay here when she still had unfinished business on earth.

A soft, broken voice filtered in her ear, carried on the winds of a memory. “He left before you were born, Emma. I'm sorry I told you he was dead.”

She gritted her teeth. Emma had things to do on earth.

She had alifethere.

Building a new life here on this planet with an alien wasnotgoing to happen.

Lilliana snored harder.

Grunting in frustration, Emma eased her door open and checked the hallway. Darkness shrouded the corridor and only a sliver of light guided her way. Satisfied that she was alone, Emma tiptoed out as quietly as possible.

She wasn't in the mood for company tonight. If one of the girls saw her sneaking out, they'd definitely try and come with her. If one of the aliens spotted her, they'd call the girls.

She just...

She needed space.

Time.

To think.

To breathe.

To settle herself.

She'd kissed Lans twice now—both accidental. But this time, something had shifted between them. The spark she felt when he came around wasn't just in her head. It was manifesting through his zapten. That connection—it was dangerous. It needed to be cut off immediately.

Emma eased the front door open and stepped out. She inhaled a deep breath, hoping that the breeze would settle her nerves. Instead, her thoughts just rushed harder and harder.

She heard gears shifting and glanced to the side, stunned to see Helix, Lans's zapten, marching toward her. Its heavy metal feet did not make a sound as it stomped the

ground and edged closer to her.

She stared up at the monstrous metal hulk. “Hey.”

Helix dipped her chin, allowing Emma to touch her.

She began to reach out and then her hand froze. Should she be seeking comfort in Lans’s zaptin? Wouldn’t that just make their connection stronger?

Pulling her hand back, Emma turned away. “Go.”

The zaptin groaned softly, its gears whirring as it inched closer to her.

“Go!” Emma hissed. Her heart pulsed and clenched with conflict. She hated this feeling. Hated pushing the innocent zaptin away.

She felt lower than mud when Helix turned and marched back to where the other zaptins were standing watch over their hideout.

A corpse probably had more of a heart than she did. Emma sank to her knees and buried her head in her hands. How had things gotten so messed up? Why did she have such a strong connection to the only alien who could get under her skin?

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:08 pm

“That was cold,” a voice said.

Emma’s eyes widened and she shot to her feet. “W-what?”

A Plutonian warrior stepped out of the shadows. Blue skin. Blue tail. Tattoos similar in style and shape to Korben’s. Even if she didn’t recognize the markings, his bruised face and tattered hair immediately set him apart from the other brawny blue aliens.

“Clavas,” she stuttered, “I didn’t know you were out here.”

“I could not go in. ” His smile was lopsided and weighed with sadness.

“I wouldn’t be able to either.”

His eyebrow nubs shot up.

She shrugged and leaned against the side of the cabin. “When you’re beating yourself up like that, no one else has to throw stones. You crush your head against them all by yourself.”

“You sound like one with experience.”

“Not me. My mother.”

He went quiet. She glanced over and saw his profile—the rugged jaw, the slope of his nose, the firm lips. Even weakened and bruised, he was still attractive.

For an alien.

Not that she was looking.

“I keep thinking of all the things I could have done differently,” he said quietly. “I keep thinking of all the ways I could have protected the Healer, my brother. Myspecies. They are all in danger because I was not strong enough to resist the Heronas torture.”

“You’re right.”

He glanced up, shock crossing his face again.

“Well, you want me to lie? Everything you said is true. You could have done things differently.”

“You are very blunt, Eema.”

“The truth is everyone can come up with great alternatives in hindsight, but the past is gone. It’s over. All you can do is make a better future.”

He smirked. “As rallying speeches go, it...”

“Sucked?”

“Was shaky at first.” He chuckled. “But it got better in the end.”

She shared a smile with Clavas. “It’s my charm.”

“Humans seem to be full of these charms.” He nodded at her. “Although they are rarely as brusque as you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Please do.” Clavas cleared his throat and set his eyes on the mountain peaks. “How did your training with Lans go today?”

“Oh, you know. He taught me how to throw punches and escape Heronas guards who nab me from behind.”

“Indeed?”

“What? You’re surprised he didn’t throw me into his zaptin like all the rest of the guys here?”

“If you’d like,” Clavas hesitated, “you can use mine.”

“Yeah?”

“He’s much more nimble. Not so big and clunky. And not so many spikes.”

“Yes, I was worried about being impaled while in the exoskeleton.”

Clavas smirked. “Well?”

She chewed on her bottom lip. There was no connection with Clavas. No electricity between them. She doubted there would be sparks if they ever kissed.

He was the much safer option.

The muchbetteroption.

She needed distance from Lans right now.

Emma opened her mouth to tell him ‘yes’, but she couldn’t get the word out.

Clavas saw her struggle and smiled. “It is alright, Eema. I understand that you have a loyalty to Lans.”

“What?” She sputtered. “Loyalty? No way?”

“You are thinking of his feelings, are you not?”

“I don’t care if he gets offended. In fact, I’d prefer that.”

“And yet you cannot accept my offer.”

She hung her head.

Clavas leaned back. “It is very strange thinking that humans can now carry our young. We have been without females for so long that most of us have forgotten what our own mudas look like.”

“I’m so sorry.”

He shook his head. “It makes me wonder though. How much of this shift in my heras is genuine and how much is a desire to continue my own kind.”

“What are you talking about?” Her eyebrows quirked.

“Nothing.” His eyes flashed with sadness. “It is no use anyway. Lans would kill me.”

“He’ll have to get through me first.”

Clavas’s lips inched up. “Will he?”

“Yes. Broken people have to stick together.”

“Lans is broken as well.” Clavas studied her intently. “Have you ever asked him how he got his scar?”

“No. And I don’t care either.”

Clavas jerked his eyes to the sky. “We are all broken, Eema. Humans and aliens. That is one thing we have in common.”

Silence fell amongst them after that.

Even though she tried not to think too hard about it, Emma found herself wondering what could possibly break an intimidating alien like Lans.

Seven

Lans

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

Sunlight blasted the treetops, fighting the thick foliage overhead to shine upon them. In his ear transmitter, he heard the steadiness of Eema's breath as she clung to the shadows, taking up the rear behind her fellow comrades.

"Now," Korben said.

Lans tapped his interface and pressed a button.

The rock of an explosion ripped the ground and sent the females skittering back.

Eema shrieked curses, all of which he could hear clearly. "Are they trying to kill us?"

If the circumstances were not so dire, he would have smiled.

Undeterred, the females regrouped. Fitted in the hulls of their exoskeletons, they looked more like machines than humans. Metallic hands pushed past the low-hanging vines as they sprinted on clawed feet.

He recognized Eema right away. The spikes on Helix stood out from the others, glimmering along her metallic armor like a pointed spear.

Korben clicked his timer. "That was not half bad."

"Which means it wasn't fully good," Lans grumbled.

"You think they are not ready, Lans?" Zar asked, his dark eyes slamming into him.

“I worry we are putting a responsibility on their shoulders that does not belong to them.”

“Try telling Ki-ah that.” Pin shook his head and his long, plaited hair fell down his shoulders. “She insists that, as my mate, she should free the Healer.”

“Why?” Korben asked.

“Something about the Healer being our ‘medical insurance’.” Pin shrugged as if he had no clue what that was.

“Si-Moon shared a similar concern,” Zar grumbled, spitting to the side as if he wished he could change his mate’s mind.

Korben nodded. “The injuries on my back have not fully healed so Sah-ah is also concerned.”

“The females all seem to have a personal stake in this fight,” Tiegan said thoughtfully.

“Except Eema.” Clavas rubbed his chin. “Eema is no one’s mate and yet she seems very determined.”

Lans whirled around, surprised to hear Clavas speak of her. The fondness in his eyes unnerved him too. He had known Clavas for several sun cycles and he was always laser focused on missions. Known as the best strategist in their tribes, he very rarely got distracted.

Unease slithered through his veins. “Eema does not like to be left behind.”

“You speak as if you know her well,” Clavas said, his lips inching up.

“You speak as if you know her better.”

Clavas smiled fully.

Lans narrowed his eyes in response.

The clatter of the zapten’s feet thudded closer.

Lans looked away from Clavas to seek Eema out. She stood inside the zapten, breathing hard. Sweat dotted her pale skin—at least, what he could see of her skin through the armor.

Korben approached his mate. “My heras, you did well.”

“Of course.” Sah-ah stepped out of the exoskeleton. Gears whirred and creaked as it opened up like a flora in blossom. “We’re more than capable.”

Lans kept his eyes on Eema. “You were not watching your surroundings.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“I’m the one who warned them about the bomb.” Her voice sounded from behind Helix’s exoskeleton. It slowly peeled back to reveal her beautiful face. “Was that your idea?”

“You warned them about the bomb after stepping on it.”

“But I thought fast so it didn’t explode on us,” Eema huffed.

“She did.” Ki-ah dismounted the steps her zapten created for her.

“I’m with Ki-ah.” Lilliana scoffed, handing out flasks of dama. “Seriously? Who decided to put a real bomb in our training?”

“Me.” Clavas moved forward, holding a flask to Eema. “Thirsty?”

She nodded. “Extremely.”

Clavas smiled.

Lans frowned at their interaction.

“You females did not falter.” Clavas addressed the rest of Eema’s comrades. “Not that I expected you to.”

“Are you just trying to gas us up, Clavas?” Ki-ah teased.

Zar arched an eyebrow. “Had you been in the meeting, you would have voted for

this?”

“If you had asked my opinion, I would have been on the females’ side.” Clavas nodded firmly. “And reminded you of who rescued us from the Heronas dungeon. It was not any Plutonian but a human female who broke us out.”

“I was pretty fierce back there.” Sah-ah tossed her curls over her shoulder.

Korben kissed her temple. “Indeed, my heras.”

Zar wrapped his arms around Si-Moon and held her tight. “I still think this is incredibly dangerous.”

“But you have to admit,” Si-Moon patted the warrior’s cheeks with a dark hand, “we’re not half bad for only three days of training.”

“You were quite... tempting in that suit.”

Si-Moon smirked, sharing a secret look with her mate.

“See that?” Eema arched an eyebrow at him. “See how they’re praising their students?”

“I only offer praise when it is deserved.” Lans folded his arms over his chest. He did not believe in handing out compliments simply because a female was beautiful.

As stunning as Eema was, he needed her to be focused.

If she got hurt because of him...

Neh.

That was not an option.

Eema's eyes sharpened. "How sweet of you."

"I thought you were quite fast on your feet," Clavas said.

"Yeah, yeah." Eema sent a scowl his way.

"Does my praise mean nothing, Eema?" Clavas asked, laughing.

"You're biased."

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“I disagree.” Clavas tilted his head. “I am seeing quite clearly.”

A growl started low in Lans’s chest.

Why did Eema look at him with such disdain and give Clavas such sweet smiles?

When had those two grown close?

“I can’t believe I finally get to fight in one of these things,” Si-Moon patted the zaptan that had transformed back into its original form.

Eema nodded. “It’s so weird to be inside the zaptan like that. It feels like I’m in a video game.”

“What is a video game?” Chozo asked.

Leel patted his head. “It’s like real life but not.”

“Hm.” The Heronas still seemed confused.

Korben’s interface lit up.

He cleared his throat. “It’s Na’vak.”

Lans stiffened. “Should we head back to the hideout?”

“Who’s Na’vak?” Chozo asked.

“He is the leader of a tribes to the south and he is organizing the army that will march on the Heronas fortress at dawn.” Korben frowned. “He requires our attendance.”

“Does he know about us?” Eema asked.

Korben exchanged a quick look with his bruda. “Neh.”

“Why not?” Ki-ah’s brow wrinkled. “I thought you guys would have mentioned it.”

“Ki-ah, not every Plutonian follows the ways of our fathers.” Pin rubbed her arm.

“If we expose you, we face the possibility of putting all your lives in danger,” Lans growled. “Rebel Plutonians will stop at nothing to get their hands on you.”

“Especially when they discover that you can carry our offspring,” Clavas added.

Leel shuddered. “Are Plutonians as bad as the Heronas then?”

“Everyone is capable of good and bad.” Chozo lifted a hand. “These choices are not based on their species but on their character.”

Si-Moon squeezed the alien in a hug. “How wise of you.”

Chozo beamed.

Zar scowled.

“I must take this,” Korben mumbled.

“We’ll stay behind you so he can’t see us,” Sah-ah suggested. “But we’d like to be a part of the call.”

“Very well, but stay quiet. If he finds out of your existence, it could be dangerous for all of us.” Korben accepted the comms and a holo of their comrade appeared in front of them.

Lans gathered behind Korben to greet Na’vak.

He encompassed them all with a grim nod. “Comrades, it is good to see you well.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“It would be better to speak to you under better circumstances, Na’vak,” Pin said.

Zar grunted. “If you have called to verify our attendance at the Heronas fortress, you can write us in.”

“Good. We will try to fly in from the top and see if we can find a hole in their force field,” Na’vak explained.

“Is that not dangerous?” Clavas asked.

“It is.” Na’vak dipped his chin. “But our warriors are prepared to die for the cause. Better we lose a few Plutonians now than keep the Healer in the Heronas’s hands and lose everybody.”

Korben lifted his chin. “Na’vak, we’d like to try something else first.”

“You have another plan, Korben?”

Lans nodded. “We have an elite team go in and disrupt the power source.”

“We have tried this. Our analysis shows thatnoPlutonian can penetrate the walls from the sides. Even in our zaptens, the energy will kill us.”

Lans glanced up and locked eyes with Eema. “We have a secret weapon.”

“A secret? Is it technology? Have you gotten in contact with the technician Rune?”

“Neh. We have something better than technology,” Zar said.

“Something stronger,” Pin added.

“Fiercer,” Korben said.

“More beautiful,” Clavas whispered.

Lans’s eyes narrowed on his comrade.

Korben sighed. “Gather at dawn. We will have the energy field down by then.”

“If you fail...”

“We will not fail.” Lans growled. The thought was inconceivable to him.

Eema was walking into the fortress and she would emerge alive.

There was no other option.

Eight

Emma

Lans grabbed her hand as the others filed out of the training grounds. “Wait.”

“What?” She shook her hand free and folded it over her chest to hide how much her pulse jumped from that innocent brush.

Since their accidental kiss three days ago, Emma made an effort to keep her body from brushing against Lans. The alien was far too dangerous. It didn’t take much to

send that electrical charge skittering through her body. If she couldn't control it, then she needed to avoid it.

Silence fell between them as Lans waited for privacy.

Clavas was the last to leave.

He lingered for a while, glancing at her as if asking if she needed him to stay.

I've got it. She lifted a hand.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

Clavas nodded and sauntered away.

Lans's scowl was deeper than usual when he looked at her.

She sighed. "What is it, Lans? I'm tired and hungry and I smell like a mechanical dinosaur."

"Again."

She blinked rapidly. "Again what?"

He jutted his chin at the zaptens. "Run the simulation again."

"Why?" Annoyance pulsed in her voice. "No one else has to."

"I told you." He frowned harder. "You were lagging behind."

"Since when?"

"The others have more experience in the zaptens."

"Si-Moon has zero experience in those machines." She flung her arms wide. "And Zar's not on her back about it."

"I am not Zar."

She rolled her eyes. "You're being ridiculous."

“I’m being cautious.”

“Lans, I’m exhausted.” She strode toward him. “I need rest.”

“You need practice. Do you think the Heronas will take pity on you because you rested well?”

She growled. “You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you? You’re trying to piss me off because you’re angry.”

“Angry?” Lans scoffed. “Why would I be angry?”

“You’re always angry.”

“And you’re always stubborn.”

Emma stopped when they were only inches apart. They were close. So close she could see the way his eyes were darkening as he looked at her.

Alarm bells clanged in her ears.

She shouldn’t be this close to Lans.

She shouldn’t let her anger sweep her away.

But Emma couldn’t help it. This alien got under her skin.

“You’re not responsible for me, Lans. Whether I live or die is not your concern.”

“It is my concern.” He lowered his head so his face was almost on top of hers. “I was so concerned about you that it changed the frequency of my zapten.”

Her heart thudded wildly in her chest. She studied the thickness of his long hair, the broadness of his forehead and that brutishly sexy scar along his eyebrow nub. He looked like danger and temptation combined and she should definitely back away.

But she didn't.

Lans tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. "Tie that up. It will get in your way in battle."

“I’ll think about it.”

“Eema.” His voice was sharp.

She narrowed her eyes. “If you haven’t noticed, I don’t take orders well.”

“I have noticed.”

“Maybe if you weren’t so overbearing, it would be easier.” She tilted her head. “And compliments help too.”

Lans’s jaw tightened. “Oh? Like Clavas’s compliments? Is that why you smile at him?”

There was an edge to his tone.

Emma smirked. “Oh.”

“Oh?” Lans growled.

“You’re jealous.”

Lans grunted. “You are very mistaken.”

“You don’t like that Clavas is so friendly with me.” She leaned closer, wagging a finger in his face. “You’re threatened by our friendship.”

Lans's nostrils flared.

She was totally on to something.

Was this big brute that childish?

Amusement made her lips twitch.

"Stop trying to change the subject and get in the suit," Lans grumbled.

"Admit it."

"Admit what?"

"You're jealous."

"Never." He sulked like a petulant child.

Emma insisted. "I saw the way you glared at him when he gave me water."

"You enjoy his attentions?"

"If I said I did?"

Lans planted a hand on her waist and dragged her into him. Their bodies collided. Heat spiraled through her chest as he held her close. Her heart thumped to a crazed rhythm and she was certain that Lans could hear it.

He lowered his lips until they were a breath away from hers. "Do you?"

"Do I what?" She squeaked.

Lans's mouth tilted up. "You are not allowed to die, Eema."

"What?"

His thumb brushed against her cheek. "You are not allowed to get captured. You are not allowed to get hurt. These are my rules. If you break my rules, I will hunt you down. I will find you and I will make sure that you never make such mistakes again."

She gulped.

His fierce tone, his narrowing eyes, his firm touch—it all felt like a threat.

And yet...

His words were caring.

She swallowed hard and tried to pretend it didn't matter. "How exactly do you plan to punish me if I'm dead?"

Lans's jaw clenched. He released her roughly. "The suit."

She stumbled back on unsteady legs. Feeling like the planet had just tilted on its axis, Emma struggled to find her breath.

Lans's growling and snarling, she could handle. But when he turned on those gruff charms...

She fanned her face. "Y-yeah."

"And focus," Lans spoke quietly. "Your face is getting red."

"It's because I'm tired."

He shook his head, but a slight smirk told her that Lans didn't believe a word of that lie.

Climbing back into the zaptan, Emma closed her eyes and imagined the metal pieces forming around her. The zaptan responded to her thoughts, clanking together until the metal pieces formed a strong armor.

“Now,” Lans strode around her, his muscles glistening in the moonlight, “fight me.”

“You?”

He nodded.

“Aren’t you afraid I’m going to hurt you?”

He gestured for her to come at him.

“Alright, I guess I’ll just have to—” She threw a punch mid-sentence. “Pow!”

The zaptan’s gears made a soft clicking sound as she threw power behind the hit.

Lans jumped out of the way, nimble on his feet. “You seemed too eager to do that, Eema.”

“You dodged.”

“And you’re relying on the zaptan too much.” Lans pointed at the exoskeleton’s feet. “You were kidnapped and brought here. Which means you have Plutonian and human blood. You can unlock things in the machine that we can only dream of.”

“Who told you that?”

“Rune.” Lans crooked a finger. “Again.”

She mimicked throwing another punch and the zaptan launched its arms. Lans did a backflip and her arm swung over his body. By the time she was pulling back, he had already straightened on his feet.

“Eema,” he scolded, “do you not listen to what I say?”

“I’m trying, but I don’t understand what I’m supposed to do.”

Lans was barely winded. “You are connected to the zaptan through your neural implant. It can see what you see and it will do what you want it to do. You can’t be afraid of it. You can’t be astonished by it. The connection is yours. It belongs to you. Embrace it and let it embrace you.”

“I can’t.”

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“You can.” He bounced on the balls of his feet. “Again.”

Emma paused for a minute.

Her eyes shuttered closed and she sucked in a deep breath.

It was so weird to have control of a beast this big and damaging. It almost felt undeserved.

It is undeserved. You were supposed to be dead.

But here she was.

I can do this.

She snatched Lans by the shoulders. He blocked the exoskeleton’s arms and twisted away from her clutch. Exhaling, Emma instructed the zapten to appear in front of Lans.

One moment, she was behind him.

The next, she was in front of him.

Emma saw Lans’s eyes widening as if in slow motion. She swept his legs out from under him, grabbed him by the neck and slammed him on the dirt. The ground cracked from the force of the collision and his head bounced against the soft grass.

He looked stunned. “What... just happened?”

“I don’t know.” She climbed off him, the zapten’s gears buzzing with her movements. “I thought about moving faster than you could see and I did.” Her breathing deepened as she asked, “Did you know I could do that in the suit?”

“Neh.”

“Wow.” She blinked rapidly. “That was intense.”

“That ability makes you more dangerous than we could ever be.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m on your side then.”

“Try it again.”

“Fine. I—” The world spun around her. Before she could finish, Eema stumbled.

The exoskeleton hit the ground with a crash.

“Eema!” Lans rushed her. He unlocked the armor and hauled her out of it, cradling her to his chest.

Her head pounded.

Her stomach roiled.

Still, she struggled to sit up. If Lans saw her injured, he would definitely try to ban her from the rescue mission.

“I’m fine. I’m fine. Just... winded.”

“Increasing the speed of the zapten took too much energy from you.” His fingers tightened on her. “You must not use the skill again until we can train you to handle it.”

“I’ll agree on one condition,” she whispered.

Lans’s brow quirked.

“You admit that I’m ready for tomorrow.”

He studied her face intently. Slowly, Lans brushed her hair away from her forehead.

“Eema... you are ready.”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

Nine

Lans

The night slipped through his fingers like sand. Lans wanted to take hold of it and keep it in his grip. He wanted to capture the night, so it could never escape. So the dawn would not arrive.

Because the dawn brought unknown calamities.

The dawn meant Eema's life would be at risk.

Lans expanded the holo he was studying. The graphics floated in the air all around him, glowing softly and providing light in the heavy darkness.

A shuffling sound made his head snap to the left.

The silhouette of the Heronas caught his eye.

“Chozo.” Lans grunted.

“Have you been up all night?”

Lans did not bother answering.

Chozo's soft footsteps waded closer. His green face came into view. “What is this?”

“Do you know anything of zaptens, Chozo?”

“Only what I’ve seen of yours.” He lifted one boneless shoulder. “We have no access to the Plutonian’s neural connector technology.”

Lans sighed. “Eema unlocked a new ability in Helix.”

“What did she do?” Chozo’s eyes were wide behind the mask.

“She increased the zaptens’ speed function with her thoughts.”

“I... don’t understand.”

He whirled toward the Heronas. “She was behind me one moment and she... blinked in front of me. The zaptens moved faster than I could see.”

Chozo’s jaw dropped. “How did she do that?”

“That is what I am trying to figure out.” Lans studied the Plutonian writing hovering on the walls.

“Perhaps,” Chozo said quietly, “that is simply an excuse.”

“What do you speak of?” Lans asked, only half listening.

“Perhaps you are trying to distract yourself from worrying too much about Eema.”

His fingers paused on the holos. “Why would I worry about that frustrating human?”

“Maybe because you li—”

The door opened at that moment.

Korben strode in, wearing a firm frown. “You also could not sleep?”

“Terros.” Lans nodded in greeting.

“The others begin to stir.” Korben stared into his eyes. “Do you think we are doing the right thing?”

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“If all goes well, this will be nothing more than a rescue mission.”

“The Heronas will not give him up easily.”

“Then it will become a war,” Lans growled.

“Still...”

“Without the Healer, we slowly go extinct,” Lans reminded him.

“Yes.”

His eyes drifted to Korben’s back. “Even now, your injuries persist. You need the Healer’s attention.”

“I do.” Korben’s frown deepened, revealing all his thoughts.

“We need the Healer, Korben.”

“But if we lose even one of these females... will it be worth the price?”

Is one human life worth that of our entire species?

Had Korben asked him that before he met Eema, Lans would not have hesitated. Indeed, he would have been appalled his comrade would dare to question the worth of their species.

They were all warriors. Each and every Plutonian. They had to become so after losing the females to the Red Plague.

In war, some sacrifices had to be made.

Every Plutonian entered battle knowing that if his life was lost, it would be for the greater good. They were stronger together and, alone, they would sacrifice everything to keep their fathers' legacy alive on this planet.

But now?

The way he felt about Eema—

Lans shook his head. “Neh. It is too great a risk.”

Korben tightened his fist. “Should we lock them up? Trap them in their zaptens somehow until we return with the Healer?”

“And risk their undying wrath?” Chozo said.

Both Lans and Korben looked his way.

The Heronas pulled his lips in. “My apologies. I will stay out of it.”

“He is right.” Korben sighed. “They would never forgive us.”

“At least they will be alive to hold a grudge.”

Korben crossed his arms. “They are ready.”

“Yes.”

“We have trained them well.”

“Indeed.” Lans nodded, needing to hear the words as much as Korben did.

“They are intelligent, strong and capable of far more than we know.”

“And they can go even faster in the zaptens too!” Chozo bounced on his feet.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“What?” Korben gawked.

“Eema managed to move faster than the blink of my eye in the suit today,” Lans explained. Turning to Chozo, he finished through gritted teeth, “but she grew weak immediately. It was very dangerous.”

The Heronas shrank back. “Oh. I did not know that part.”

“Lans, that’s incredible.”

“I warned her against using that technique today. She needs more practice.”

“And yet, it gives me peace to know they can speed away if they are in grave danger.”

Lans licked his lips. “Let us hope it does not come to that.”

“Were you not training Eema for the worst?” Chozo asked.

“Yes.” Lans dipped his head. “But I do not wish for her to need that training.”

Sunlight crept into the room, first bathing their boots and then their legs and finally their faces. The three of them stood still for a moment.

Lans wished he could chase the sun away, but it stubbornly dawned without his permission.

Clanks of metal echoed in the distance.

“What is that?” Chozo asked, twisting his neck.

Lans spoke without hesitation. “Eema is baking.”

He had been living with her for longer than anyone else. The female had a strange habit of making scrumptious desserts when she was stressed. Despite having to work with meager ingredients and their alien tools, Eema found ways to make all kinds of delicious meals.

Determined female.

She would come back safely.

She had to.

Lans headed out of the room with Korben and Chozo on his heels. The others were also gathered.

Whenever they were together it was usually loud, raucous and chaotic, but the mood was incredibly subdued. Even the chatty human, Leel, clamped her lips shut and said not a word.

He stared into Eema’s eyes. The stunning green and blue—reminiscent of the planet from which she came—pulled him in like a magnet. Lans’s arms throbbed, needing to hold her close.

Instead, he nodded at her. “We have no time to sit and eat.”

“I know.” She lifted her chin. “It’s for when we get back.”

When we get back.

The room shifted uneasily.

Reality spoke of a much harsher end. The females destroying the force field from the inside was only the first part of the plan. They would storm the colony next. It would, undoubtedly, emerge in a clash between the two species.

The Plutonians were fierce in battle with centuries of training and experience. They had a cause to unite them and a future to protect.

But so did the Heronas.

Their enemies fought to find a cure for their disease. They had far more dangerous and experimental weapons. Though the Plutonians could take them in hand-to-hand combat, they could not compete in the areas of weaponry.

Not everyone would return alive.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

Korben stood beside his mate. A hand to her back, he spoke gravely. “Today, we rescue the Healer from the Heronas. We do this for our species.” His eyes lifted to the ceiling. “And for our planet.”

The silence deepened until it echoed.

Lans recalled the footage Chozo had shown of the Heronas camp where every being had been disintegrated by a more powerful source. An enemy with untold power had set their eyes on this planet. To even begin to stop it, they needed the Healer.

And they would get him back.

Korben lifted a hand. “Females, suit up.”

Lans watched restlessly as Eema set her meal on the table and marched behind the rest of the females. She wore a determined expression, her shoulders leaning back and her eyes staring straight ahead.

Unlike the couples, Lans could not sense Eema’s emotions through his neural transmitter. They were not mated and such a privilege was only afforded to those who had or were close to a coupling. But he could read her expression almost as well as he could read his holos.

This female was confident.

Cautious.

Prepared.

He had done his best to push her as hard as he could so she could face what was to come.

Flat fingers wrapped around Lans hand. Glancing down, he saw Chozo staring up at him through his mask.

“Lans.”

“What?”

“Here.” Chozo slipped a thin piece of string over his wrist.

Lans scrunched his nose. “It is...”

“I know. It is not that pretty.” Chozo’s lips tilted upward. “Ki-ah taught me, but I am afraid I am not very good at weaving strings as yet.” He blinked rapidly. “Si-Moon is my best friend, but... you are my friend too.”

He patted the brood’s head. “We will return, Chozo.”

“Please keep Eema and the others safe.”

“I will.” The promise hung heavy on his shoulders. “You keep Leel safe. Do not let her talk you to death.”

Chozo laughed softly. “I will.”

Giving the brood’s shoulder another squeeze, Lans turned away from him and strode out the door.

Ten

Emma

“This is where we leave you,” Korben said, gesturing to the Heronas city that loomed ahead. “We cannot walk any further.”

Lans held up a large hand, his eyes dark. “I can feel the dangerous energy from here.”

“Can you?” Emma asked.

He nodded. “It is like... flames.”

She glanced at the city. The force field was completely invisible to her eyes. It just looked like a normal alien city with spiraling towers and hovercrafts zipping in the air.

Look at how comfortable I’ve become with all this. Since when has an alien city been ‘normal’. Emma brushed away the thought. She needed to focus.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“How did they build such a lethal force field?” Clavas snarled, his chest puffing out in the wind. The tattoos all over his blue skin made him look fiercer. She could tell he was angry and she didn’t wrong him for it. After all the Heronas had done to him, Clavas was allowed to be pissed.

“They are not that advanced.” Tiegan tilted his head.

Lans spoke up. “Chozo believes the Heronas studied the technology that annihilated his camp.”

“Disgusting.” Zar spit to the side.

Ki-ah patted her mate’s chest. “It doesn’t matter that they made it. All that matters is that it can hurt you. So stay back.”

“My heras,” Zar took her hand and turned her to him, “be careful.”

One by one, the couples broke off to say their goodbyes.

Emma’s eyes moved to Lans, but he had his back to her and was discussing something with Tiegan.

The sun washed his blue skin with gold. His back muscles flexed as he pointed and nodded to whatever Tiegan was saying. Big, rough fingers clutched his narrow waist.

Emma remembered how calloused the tips of Lans’s fingers were. How big his palm had looked next to her head. And yet, how gentle he had been when he cradled her

chin and brushed her hair behind her ear.

The thump of her heartbeat increased just thinking about it.

Wetting her lips, she continued to memorize Lans.

The strong legs.

The nimble tail.

The tattoos. Goodness, those dangerous tattoos.

She knew all Lans's markings by heart. All his scowls. Every one of his grunts.

Her stomach roiled. Was he really going to ignore her? What if she never saw him again?

Footsteps thumped close to her.

Clavas's voice rang in her ears. "He has never been comfortable with goodbyes."

"Clavas." Emma spun, embarrassed at being caught staring. "Hey."

"Lans prefers to be the one who leaves."

"Why?"

Clavas grinned. "You will have to return safely to hear that from me."

"Evil."

“I believe in offering incentives to get the results that I want.” Clavas turned fully to her. There was no teasing glimmer or mischief in his violet eyes. “I want you to return safely, Eema.”

“Why? You’re going to miss my baking?”

“Neh. If even one of you are injured, it will be on my head.” He smirked a little. “And you don’t want me to live with even more crushing guilt, do you?”

She laughed softly. “Only you would take your trauma and make a joke of it, Clavas.”

“I live to please.”

Her gaze slid over to Lans again.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

She caught him watching her with a hard frown but, as soon as their eyes met, he looked away.

Frustration nipped her chest.

Why was he being so stubborn? Everyone else was making out, hugging, and whispering sweet words to each other. She was in the middle of a freaking alien Hallmark movie out here.

Annoying brute.

Unable to keep still, she nodded at Clavas. “Can you excuse me?”

“Go right ahead.” He swept his arm out, bowing slightly.

Her eyes locked on Lans, Emma stomped over.

The zapten’s heavy metal feet clopped against the ground. SheknewLans could hear her. The machine wasn’t in quiet mode right now. Still, he continued to talk to Tiegan, even though Tiegan’s face had already lifted to her.

She stopped in front of Lans. The exoskeleton was slightly taller than him, so she opened the hatch and stormed down the steps that Helix made for her. The gears clicked and whirred softly as Helix returned to her usual form for a stretch.

Lans finally looked at her, scowl in place. “Why did you leave your exoskeleton? It is time to go.”

“Why aren’t you looking at me?” She demanded.

“Must I look at you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, you kind of do.”

“Why?” Lans folded his arms over his chest, bringing her eyes to his thick muscles.

She sucked in a breath, anger flaring inside her.

Tiegan cleared his throat. “I will... be over there.”

Emma barely registered the warrior’s exit. Her eyes remained fixed on Lans’s purple gaze. Adrenaline pounded through her veins, moving so thickly she thought she’d burst.

“Why do you care if I see you off or not?” Lans challenged.

“I don’t,” she snapped. “It’s just the polite thing to do. As my teacher, you should at least offer me one last word of wisdom.”

His stormy expression grew even darker. “I have no last words to offer. You are either ready or you’re not.”

She whirled around, embarrassed and hurt. “Jerk! I don’t want your freaking advice either.”

It felt like her lungs were on fire.

Her heart.

Her soul.

Why did Lans's coldness sting so much? Was she feeling vulnerable because she was about to head into a dangerous situation? Was she losing her mind?

It didn't matter.

She just hoped that no Heronas guards stepped in her way. Thanks to one infuriating blue alien, she was ready to kick some butt. And she was going to make it hurt.

"I don't need you," Emma mumbled, stalking toward the zapten that had already begun to transform back into its exoskeleton state.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed her shoulder and wrenched her around. She collided into a broad blue chest and knew, without looking at his face, that it was Lans who held her.

At first, she stiffened.

Then her body relaxed.

Her senses swirled with him, filing information away like a super computer.

His muscular arms roping around her.

His rough skin.

His scent—stars and sweat and something distinctly Lans.

In his arms, she felt safe and secure.

He stepped back and stared into her eyes. Emma could only stare back, shocked speechless.

Lans growled, “Remember what I told you yesterday.”

“That I lag behind?” she croaked, her brain reeling.

“That I will make your life difficult if you get hurt.” He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Do not get hurt, Eema.”

She could barely breathe.

Her throat had decided it wasn't going to function today.

Lans pressed his lips together, looking even more brooding and grumpy than usual.

Her pulse jumped faster.

“Females,” Korben spoke loudly, “it’s time.”

She tore herself away from Lans and climbed into the zaptén. The armor clanked as it fused together and formed the protective exoskeleton around her.

Struggling to get her mind back on the mission, Emma stared at Korben as he gave his speech.

“Sneak in and remove the force field.” Korben glanced at Sah-ah. “That is your only mission.” His eyes swerved to Ki-ah. “Do not engage with the Heronas.” To Si-Moon. “Do not join us when we invade.” To her. “Do not ignore my words.”

“We will be fine,” Sah-ah said confidently.

Emma looked at Lans. “Just have the warriors ready when we bring those walls down.”

He nodded.

Turning, Emma followed the other girls down the hill. No one spoke, each of them concentrating on the first milestone—getting through the force field.

Their roles in the rescue mission had been based on an assumption, but it was time for it to be tested.

“Are you ready, ladies?” Simone asked.

Kia pumped her zaptén’s fist. “Let’s do this.”

Holding her breath, Emma turned on cloak mode and dashed through the invisible barrier. The energy knocked into her, reminding her of a giant wave from the ocean, but it wasn't strong enough to hurt.

"Everyone okay?" Emma asked, glancing at the other women.

Ki-ah lifted her zapten's arm and flashed a metal thumbs-up.

Emma ran ahead and scaled the wall of the Heronas city. With the zapten's powerful thrust, she propelled herself to the other side. In cloak mode, the machines barely made a peep when she landed.

"Whoa," Emma whispered, staring at the Heronas city up close. There were hundreds of aliens that looked like Chozo, all wearing masks as they scurried back and forth.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

According to the blueprints, they were close to the Heronas labs where the generator for the energy field should be.

Emma took her first step when she saw a metal band whirring through the air like a high-speed boomerang. It clanked around her exoskeleton's neck, forming a brace immediately. Panicked, she glanced up and saw the others had frozen and turned to stare at her.

The collar started to beep.

Fear skittered down her spine.

They'd been caught.

Eleven

Lans

A beeping sound echoed through the quiet knoll. He tore his gaze away from the Heronas' city and stared at his interface that was beaming with red light.

"It's a comms," Korben said, his eyes on the interface.

Lans glanced up in surprise. "From Na'vak."

"The warriors have gathered?" Zar asked, his face grim.

“They’re early.” Clavas’s expression tightened. “Why would they gather already? We haven’t confirmed the success of the female’s mission.”

Lans growled. “Something does not feel right.”

Unease traveled through his chest. He was already worried about Eema. He did not need the terros adding to his anxiety.

“We have no choice,” Korben said softly.

Lans nodded.

Together, the warriors accepted the comms from Na’vak.

The terros appeared in holo form. Na’vak had a thick neck and skin a darker blue than most.

“Warriors,” he spoke in a low, gravelly tone, “we request your presence.”

“We are mid-mission.”

“Now,” Na’vak said firmly.

Korben’s eyes lifted and he stared at Lans.

The unease in Lans’ chest grew until it became a knotted ball in the pit of his stomach.

Na’vak summoning them all spoke of nothing good.

“Very well.” Korben dipped his head. “Give us your coordinates.”

A map flashed overhead. Na'vak gestured to it. "We will meet you soon."

The holos disappeared as the comms ended.

"I don't like it." Lans strode forward. "They know we are trying to cut off the force field. Why summon us now?"

Pin grunted. "Perhaps they need our expertise to solve a problem?"

"Then they would request one of us," Tiegan said.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“Maybe they have come up with another solution.” Clavas rubbed his forehead. “Na’vak was an ally of our fathers. He would not wish us harm.”

“He answers to the elders,” Zar reminded him.

“And the Healer is the most important elder of all.” Lans shook his head. “Should we ignore it?”

“The consequences of that would not be worth the risk.” Korben rubbed his chin.

“Then?” Clavas asked.

“We go.” Korben glanced up, his purple eyes burning. “It will take the females time to reach the Heronas labs. Even in the simulations—”

Zar growled fiercely. “Korben, that is not the plan.”

“Plans change,” Tiegan said.

“You speak so casually because it is not your mate that’s in there.”

“I speak so casually,” Tiegan stepped forward, “because I am one of the few who can see the bigger picture. Your mate would rather return to find you whole than have you all banished from the tribes or worse. Trust them to carry out the mission they were prepared for.”

Silence fell on them all.

Tiegan's speech reverberated in Lans's mind. He hated it with all his might, but his comrade had a point.

"He speaks the truth," Lans said quietly.

Zar's nostrils flared. "Very well. We go to Na'vak."

"And we return to the plan as soon as possible," Pin said.

Korben jerked his chin down.

Lans turned, instinctively calling for his zaptén only to realize that Helix wasn't there.

"You'll have to ride with us," Clavas said, gesturing to his and Tiegan's zapténs.

Lans frowned. "I'd rather walk."

"It'll take you all day then." Korben arched an eyebrow nub.

Frustrated, Lans marched in Clavas's direction.

It was a tight fit, but all three managed to fit atop Clavas's zaptén. Rather than wrap his arms around Clavas's waist for balance, Lans held on to the metal gears that jutted from the side.

"Isn't that uncomfortable?" Clavas yelled, raising his voice to be heard over the roar of the wind.

Lans pretended not to hear. He hadn't been blind to the way Clavas had taken Eema aside before they'd left for the mission. Their closeness grated on his nerves for some

reason that he did not want to investigate.

Clavas just smirked. "Very well then."

They rode in silence until they saw the gathering of the Plutonian army below, a sea of able-bodied blue fighters that filled the entire valley.

Pride swelled in his chest as he watched his comrades from above. The Heronas were no match for them. While they cowered behind their force fields for now, the moment those barriers fell, they would be trampled beneath their feet.

Clavas set his zapten on the ground.

Lans was the first to spring off. Before he could get too far, Clavas grabbed his arm.

"What is it?" Lans snapped, shaking his comrade off.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“With me and Eema...” Clavas licked his lips. “It is not what you think.”

“What Eema does with you is none of my concern.”

Clavas grinned a little harder. “You are a very bad liar, Lans. If you expected me to believe that, you should at least try not to make it so painfully obvious.”

“I have no idea—”

“We all saw you embrace her. You held her like she was the most precious gem in the world.”

Lans snapped his mouth shut.

He had moved on instinct, not caring that they were surrounded by the others. It had not occurred to him that his actions might have been observed.

“Korben, did you notice us too?”

“I would have brought it up when the mission was over,” Korben said, his eyes on Tiegan’s zaptens that alighted next to Clavas’s. “I will tease you the moment the females are safely beside us.”

“Don’t you dare,” Lans growled.

Tiegan, Pin, and Zar strode toward them. They observed the Plutonian camp. Warriors sharpened their weapons and prepared their zaptens. It was not their way to

be so heavily armored, but the fight between the Heronas and the Plutonians had been brewing for a long time. It would require more than their spine daggers.

Just then, footsteps crunched nearby. They turned and spotted a warrior striding toward them. He had leather straps crossing his broad chest. In the satchels attached to the straps were two swords. His eyes were hard as flint and his lips did not inch up in welcome when he called their names.

“Na’vak is this way,” the messenger said, gesturing to a broad tent with the Plutonian flag waving in the wind.

Korben took the lead and Lans was right there on his heels. They needed to complete this task quickly so they could check in on the females. The mission should be over soon.

Eema, you must return alive.

He let the thought loop through his mind. Lans had never been the type to hope for the best. The world was a dark place filled with evil and wickedness. Trust was hard to build and easy to break.

And lives were easily lost.

But Eema made him nervous.

Or, more accurately, the thought of Eema in trouble made him nervous.

Death was not allowed to touch her.

Muscles tense, he followed the scout to the open flap of Na’vak’s tent, hoping that the unease in his stomach was not a warning.

Na'vak sat around a circular table filled with the other elders. They all wore firm frowns and stared at them darkly as they entered.

Na'vak stood, his eyes trained on Korben. "Welcome, comrades."

"Na'vak, what is this about?" Korben demanded. "You tore us away from the mission. It must be an emergency."

"Clavas is back whole and well," Na'vak said, his gaze sliding to Clavas.

Clavas dipped his head. "Yes."

"Were you not held in captivity with the Healer?"

Clavas hesitated, his gaze darting to his brother.

Korben's jaw clenched. "He was."

"And why did you not rescue the Healer when you had a chance?" Na'vak approached them slowly. "Why did you save one instead of all?"

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

Zar stepped forward, rage building in his voice. “You called us here to interrogate us?”

“Zar,” Korben hissed.

The furious warrior stepped back, but his gaze was sharp.

Lans understood Zar’s frustration. What were these elders yammering on about? They had bigger challenges to overcome.

From the corner of his eye, Lans saw Pin checking his interface. They had set a timer that began the moment the females left. Tension coiled around Lans’s neck when he saw the frightened look on Pin’s face.

The females should be out by now.

He could feel it.

“Tell us why we are here, Na’vak. Maybe we could put your mind at ease.” Korben nodded at the council of elders. “What exactly would you like to know?”

Na’vak strutted in front of them, hands clasped behind his back. “The Heronas requested a female in exchange for Clavas’s life.”

“Yes,” Pin said.

“Did you search for them?”

Lans nodded.

Na'vak's eyes shot to him and stayed there. "And did you find them?"

Lans pinned his lips shut. It was not yet time for the rest of the tribes to learn of the females.

Sweat beaded on his forehead.

Na'vak swooped in. "Did you?"

Lans hardened his eyes and stared straight ahead.

Twelve

Emma

"Sara!" Emma screamed, her metal hands clawing at the collar. "Sara, there's something..." She grunted, straining to pluck it off with the exoskeleton's fingers. The material was fused on and refused to budge.

Sara rushed to her side. "What is that?"

"It looks like that thing the Heronas used on Zar when they held him captive." Simone gasped. "It's a shock collar."

"Awhat?" Emma panicked.

"It's beeping." Kia pointed to the red light. "Do you think it's a locator?"

Sara glanced around nervously. "It's a trap. They probably put preventative measures

in place after I rescued the guys last time.”

“So this collar...” Kia winced.

Sara nodded gravely. “The Heronas probably know we’re here.”

“We need to get it off!” Emma shrieked. Panic crowded her mind, cutting off her breath. She clawed desperately at her throat. If the Heronas got their hands on them...

It would be her fault.

“You can’t do anything right, Emma.” She heard her mother’s voice in her ear. “You’re a complete waste of space.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

She gulped in air, but it felt like the collar was getting tighter and tighter.

“Sara, we have to do something,” Simone hissed.

“I’m thinking,” Sara snapped. “Just give me a minute.”

Footsteps echoed in the distance.

It sounded like a hundred boots clomping in their direction.

“Guys,” Kia’s voice trembled, “I don’t think we have a minute.”

Emma bent over, the weight of the world on her shoulders. “You guys should go without me.”

“What?” Sara shook her head. “We’re not going to do that, Emma.”

“You have to! The others are waiting on you. All those Plutonians are waiting. They need that energy shield to go down.”

Kia planted her hand on her hips. “Do you think we’d run away from you just because you told us to?” She grabbed Emma’s exoskeleton by the shoulders. “We are in thistgether.No one gets left behind.”

Simone jutted her chin down in agreement.

Emma’s heart filled with warmth. She shushed out her mother’s words from her head

and thought of Lans instead. She pictured his violet eyes narrowing on her as he commanded, ‘again’. She thought of the roughness of his hand as it scraped gently over her cheek. The cadence of his words as he spoke firmly to her. The way his lips inched up just a smidge at the corners when he approved.

“You are connected to the zapten. It can see what you see and it will do what you want it to do. You can’t be afraid of it. The connection is yours. Embrace it and let it embrace you.”

Her eyes burst open. “Sara! Laser!”

“Laser? Where?” She glanced around, her exoskeleton clanking loudly.

The Heronas guards were coming closer.

Emma spoke as fast as she could. “You need to cut the collar off me.”

“How? I can’t... we didn’t train for that,” Sara shrieked. “What if I hurt you?”

“They’re rounding the bend!” Simone pointed. A line of Heronas guards holding laser guns hurried in their direction.

They’d be on top of them soon.

Everyone was in cloak mode, but the collar was visible to the Heronas. The moment they saw it, they’d know for sure that the wall had been infiltrated.

“I’ll do it,” Kia said, stepping in front of her. “I tried this once before when the raiders had Pin trapped in orange bubbles.”

Before she could ask what that meant, Kia’s exoskeleton stopped in front of her.

Behind the slits of the armor, Emma glimpsed her friend's face.

Dark brows pinched in concentration, Kia exhaled loudly. Sweat beaded on her temple and dripped down her chin. Long, dark hair spilled over her shoulders, shaking slightly as she moved her head back and forth.

A moment later, a laser beam emitted from the zapten's finger.

"Careful, careful," Sara said.

The red beam slid over her collar.

A moment later, it thumped to the ground.

The Heronas troops shouted.

They'd seen the collar fall in mid-air.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“Come on!” Simone screamed.

They ran desperately away from the Heronas’s tracking device. When she had the courage to glance back, she saw the troops gathering around the broken collar. One of the warriors held it up in his hands, inspecting the serrated edges. He scowled fiercely, his eyes darting back and forth in search of them.

Thankfully, his gaze passed right over hers and skittered away.

They were still cloaked.

“This way,” Sara said, darting into a tall building and flinging herself through the doors.

Emma lined up behind her, breathing hard.

Simone bent over, metal claws wrapping around the exoskeleton’s knees. “My heart was about to burst. I was so scared.”

“Me too.” Emma glanced at Kia. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

“You saved the guys from orange bubbles, huh?” Simone said, straightening slightly.

“Yup.” Kia nodded.

Simone smirked. “Sounds... weird.”

“It’s an interesting story,” Emma said.

“One we’ll share in detail when this is over,” Sara mumbled, her eyes on the many doors in front of them. “The guards will be looking for us.”

Emma raised her chin. “Then we need to be quick.”

“Let’s go.” Kia glanced over her shoulder, “Simone, are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Let’s hope Clavas’s blueprint was right,” Sara mumbled.

They raced down the hall, following the directions Chozo had traced for them.

“I was born in the lab and spent all my years there. There’s no one who knows Heronas underground facilities better than me.”

“But are you sure it’ll be the same?”

“Yes.” He nodded firmly. “The blueprints don’t change.”

“It’s this way.” Emma hissed, charging down the stairs and rushing into the last door on the right.

The room was filled with boxy computers that hovered in the air. She saw no wires or connectors and yet every screen flashed with some kind of alien code. It looked like something from a techno-thriller and Emma’s head immediately began to ache.

“Run me through the plan again?” Emma murmured.

“We install the Trojan code into the Heronas computers, giving Rune the chance to bypass their firewalls and kill the force field.” Simone trembled. “It’s perfect except for the fact that I don’t read alien.”

Emma patted Simone’s shoulder. The clank of her metal fingers against the exoskeleton rang loudly. “Zar was boasting to everyone that you unlocked his restraints back when the Heronas held you hostage. You’ve done it before.”

Emma nodded at Simone. “You got this.”

“Alien technology is a lot harder to handle than ours.” Simone nervously bit her lip.

Kia made a fist. “Why don’t we just punch some things? Maybe that’ll be faster.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“We can’t.” Emma strode over to her. “Chozo said the force field is probably hooked up to a backup generator. If we make a mess in here, the wall will stay up and the Heronas will know for sure where we are.”

“You’re right.” Kia glanced at the door. “I wonder why they haven’t found us yet.”

“They probably think we came to steal the Healer.” Sara paced back and forth.

Simone sat in the chair facing the largest computer. She placed her fingers to the keyboard that looked like a fancy typewriter with suspended keys. Instead of moving down when she pressed them, the keys projected holographic numbers that blinked and shuttered upon contact.

“How’s it looking, Simone?” Emma asked.

“It looks like a bunch of characters that I’ve never seen before in my life,” she said through gritted teeth. “They don’t teach this stuff in community college.”

Sara eased the door shut and leaned against the wall. The exoskeleton’s chest heaved wildly, mimicking her frantic pose. “There are guards coming down the stairs.”

“Can you work faster, Simone?” Kia asked.

Emma’s heart lodged in her throat as she stood helplessly to the side. She’d never been the type to rely on others. Her mother had taught her that it was better to go it alone. “You can’t trust nobody in this world, Emma. Nobody.”

The computer started beeping.

All the screens flashed red.

“Simone...” Emma called in a low voice.

“I don’t know what happened.” Simone’s dark fingers slammed against the keyboard. The clacking noise competed with the thudding of Emma’s heart. Frantically, Simone explained, “It’s not... guys, it’s not working.”

“I think they heard us!” Sara screeched, peering outside. “The guards are coming this way.”

“If they walk in here, we’re going to have to fight them,” Kia said.

Sara nodded.

Emma bit down on her bottom lip and strode to the frazzled programmer. “Simone, is there anything I can help you with?”

“Yes, actually. Can you keep an eye on the numbers that flash up there. Make note of all of them.”

“I will.”

Simone’s fingers moved at warp speed over the keyboard.

The red lights on the screen flashed harder.

Emma groaned, sweat beading down her neck. “Simone...”

“It’s not responding,” Simone hissed, slamming her fists on the keyboard. “It’s not going to work.”

Suddenly, the computer flashed green.

The beeping stopped.

“What just happened?” Emma whispered.

“It worked.” Simone glanced up with big, relieved eyes. “I’m in.”

Thirteen

Lans

Lans kept his hand behind his back and his gaze fixed on a point just beyond Na’vak’s head. He kept his anger on a tight leash. They were trained to respect their elders and he would not disrespect his father’s legacy by breaking that cardinal rule now.

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

But that didn't mean he didn't want to.

Na'vak pulled back. His eyes zipped through the line of them. "Where are the rest of your zaptens?"

"They are where they should be," Korben said briskly.

"That is a rather vague answer."

"You are the one throwing vague accusations," Lans growled through gritted teeth.

Na'vak's eyes slammed into him and narrowed. "You have something you wish to say, Lans?"

"Neh."

"Because it sounds like you do." Na'vak's boots thumped against the ground as he stepped closer. "It sounds like you and the others, encouraged by your terros, tried to take on a monumental Heronas problem on your own."

Lans clenched his jaw.

"You deny it?"

"We only did what we had to." He stared right at Na'vak. "We protected our tribas."

"You endangered our entire species and when you had a chance to save the Healer

you saved your comrade instead.”

Korben stepped forward. “If you wish to scold anyone, scold me. I was the one who insisted we follow the Heronas’s every instruction in order to protect my brother. I will admit,” he glanced aside, “I was conflicted and desperate. I am ashamed as the terros.”

“You may be the terros, Korben,” Na’vak said in a slow tone, “but every Plutonian is capable of choosing on their own. The principle of free will still applies and it will as long as there is Plutonian life on this planet.”

Lans stared a hole into the ground. If he caught one look at Na’vak’s smug face, he would explode. The problem with living forever thanks to the Healer’s skills was that the older generation never passed on to make room for new ideas.

He had long since been agitated against the elders’ unbending regime. It was why he’d gone far in search of a smaller cluster where he would not be so deeply scrutinized and controlled.

Korben was his comrade and his terros. He did not rule by force. He did not expect those around him to obey simply because he had a title. He earned their respect in battle. He put himself in danger for them countless times over and thus had gained loyalty. Many times, Korben encouraged others to take the lead.

But Na’vak?

Neh. This old warrior only wanted to hear himself speak.

“And,” Na’vak pointed a finger in Lans’s face, “there is the issue of the females.”

Every sinew in his body pulled tight.

Na'vak arched an eyebrow nub as he rubbed his chin. "If I know you all, and I do, there is very little chance that you failed to acquire these rare females."

"What would you need of human females?"

Na'vak tilted his head. "There are rumors saying these females can carry Plutonian young."

Lans jerked forward, but Pin slapped a hand over his bicep. His comrade spoke calmly. "You heard this from where?"

"Warriors who escaped from Heronas prisons." Na'vak's sharp eyes took in Lan's agitation. "They overheard Heronas' technicians speaking of the coveted blood from the offspring of humans and Plutonians. They seek the healing properties afforded by this blood as much as they seek the secrets of the Healer."

Lans pulled his lips in and struggled to hold himself together, noticing that even Zar was keeping his peace. The warrior was usually the first to explode at the slightest provocation, and yet he was remaining stoic and tight-lipped.

Zar could not be as calm as he looked, which meant that he was keeping his emotions close to the chest to protect the females.

Lans determined to do the same.

Na'vak marched toward him. "Lans, is there something you want to tell me?"

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“Neh.” He lifted his chin.

“Where are the females?”

He said nothing.

Na’vak pressed in. “Are they the reason the four of you do not have your zaptens?”

A vein in Lans’s neck bulged.

Na’vak pulled away. “If what the Heronas said is true, we will have great use for these females, won’t we? And as the elders,” he gestured to the council, “we should have the privilege of picking them first.”

Lans felt his spine dagger rising. It was an instinctual response and the moment Na’vak saw it, he would know.

Tension poured from Korben, Pin, and Zar.

The air turned as taut as a string pulled tight.

“What if these females do not wish to be picked like tumari in the market?” Korben snapped.

Before Na’vak could answer, a commotion rose outside.

“What is going on?” Na’vak muttered.

The elders all stirred, staring at each other in confusion. Suddenly, the flap of the tent shot up and a warrior rushed in.

“What is the matter of this?” Na’vak barked. “I told you there was to be no interruptions!”

“It’s the force field! It’s down.”

“What?” Na’vak’s eyes widened.

Korben started to rush outside, but Na’vak swung to them and gestured wildly. “Stay inside. I am not done with you yet.”

“You would rather keep your best warriors imprisoned when the Healer’s life is at stake?” Zar growled.

Pin frowned. “Did you not just say it is better to sacrifice one to save all?”

“There is no time.” Clavas let his spine dagger unleash and snapped it free. “Choose now, Na’vak.”

The elder gritted his teeth. “You join the battle, but do not think I have forgotten this.”

Korben looked like he wanted to say something, but he simply dipped his head.

After Na’vak and the other elders ran off, Lans turned to the terros. “We can’t let them touch the females.”

“I do not care if they are Plutonian. I will kill them with my bare hands if they try to take Si-Moon from me,” Zar threatened.

“We save the Healer first.” Korben glanced at each of them in turn. “We bring him back home and secure the existence of our species.”

“And then?” Lans asked.

“We do whatever we must to protect our females.”

Clavas gripped Korben’s shoulder. “Do not engage on the front lines. You won’t have your zaptens.”

“We can handle ourselves just fine,” Lans grumbled. Sprinting past his comrades, he joined the charge into the Heronas city.

A Heronas guard stormed toward him. Lans stabbed the blade straight through the Heronas’s armor, drawing down with a powerful thrust. The enemy choked and gulped up blood, staring with unseeing eyes at the sky.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

Lans roared. The anger he'd held back during Na'vak's interrogation begged to be unleashed. He dove eagerly into the battle, grabbing two Heronas guards that were bearing down on a zaptan's back.

He ripped them off the machine and stomped his foot into the first one's chest while gripping the other by the neck and squeezing tightly. Spinning into a high kick, he brought his heel down on the Heronas and crushed his head.

As he fought, he thought of Eema. Her soft, pale skin. Her beautiful eyes that threatened to drown him every time he gazed into them. Her sweet pink lips. Her slender hands. Her lithe, graceful body. He imagined her under Na'vak's hands. Under Na'vak's body.

"Ah!" Lans slashed a Heronas's neck.

Blood spurted everywhere.

The battle was vicious and thick. Heronas guards continued to pour from every corner of the battlefield. He slayed the enemies that came into his path, imagining that they were an immediate threat to Eema's life.

No one will touch her.

He stabbed a Heronas, withdrew the dagger and broke the arm of another.

No one will harm her.

He roared again, spreading his arms wide.

Blood oozed down his face.

His blood?

The Heronas's?

It mattered not.

He tore through the Heronas with his every breath, seeing nothing but a red haze and feeling nothing but the protective thrumming in his heras.

Protect Eema.

All who stood in the path of this objective would fall.

He would not let another that he loved die because of his incompetence.

He would not allow...

An object whittled in the air behind him as he was fighting off three Heronas at once. He felt the sting but did not pay it any mind. Adrenaline kept him moving and he stabbed another Heronas guard without stopping.

“Lans!” A familiar voice shouted over the clank of zapten feet and the clash of metal.

“Lans!”

Korben? Why would he call so urgently in the middle of a battle?

Lans felt something wet trickling down his side. He glanced slowly at the blood and

saw a wicked Heronas arrow pierced through his chest and out the other side.

His eyes widened slowly.

The adrenaline subsided to allow pain to rush in.

His body started sinking to the ground seconds before it all went black.

Fourteen

Emma

“Why are Heronas guards...”she grunted, “so heavy?” Emma gripped the left arm of one of the guards as she dragged him into the room.

“Can you guys keep it down,” Simone asked from her comfy perch at the alien desk.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“Why don’t you try and lug these green pickup-trucks-with-arms, huh?” Kia stuck her tongue out at Simone.

Sara huffed as she dragged the alien’s leg. “I’m with you, Em. We should have run.”

“If we’d run,” Simone murmured, “and Rune didn’t get access, all of this would have been for nothing.”

Emma knelt beside the alien’s body. She was used to seeing Chozo’s green skin and long neck, but seeing the Heronas in full gear made them seem a lot more vicious. These were the creatures responsible for causing so many Plutonians pain.

According to Korben, the Heronas had continued to attack them even after the peace treaties were made. They had little regard for keeping their word or honoring their commitments, unlike the Plutonians who took every vow seriously—especially those they made to their mates.

“I think we bought you some time, Simone, but you need to hurry it up,” Sara said.

Kia plopped the guard’s hand on the ground and blew out a breath. “You’d think these guys would be light since they’re scrawny, but even with the zaptens’ help, it feels like they weigh a ton.”

“Tell me about it.” Emma nodded.

“So, while we’re waiting,” Sara winked at Emma, “should we return to our earlier topic?”

“What earlier topic?”

A mischievous smirk crossed her dark face. “You and Lans.”

Emma groaned. “Really? Now’s the time you want to bring that up?” She gestured to the Heronas guards who lay sprawled in a heap. “We didn’t even bind these guys or anything. They can pop up at any minute.”

“They’re fine.” Kia waved away her concern.

“I’m pretty sure Kia gave one of them a concussion. They would have heard the punch you gave him all the way on earth.” Sara giggled.

“Laughing about violence,” Simone murmured. “I never thought I’d reach this place.”

Sara smirked. “Anyway, you and Lans looked cozy when we were leaving to go on mission. He held you so tight I thought you’d break.”

“She’s exaggerating, of course,” Kia said slyly. “The human body can withstand way more than we thought. Especially when a hot, blue alien is the one doing the heavy-lifting—”

“Okay. Ew. Ew. I don’t need to know.” Emma squirmed.

“So?” Sara nudged her with an elbow. “Was all the fighting just a front? Do you have feelings for Lans?”

She sputtered. “What? Feelings? The only thing I feel for him is disgust.”

Kia rolled her eyes. “You did not look disgusted when he hugged you a few hours ago.”

“You can tell us,” Sara coaxed.

“Well,” Emma chewed on her bottom lip, “I—”

A roar resounded outside.

Bodies thumped.

Someone grunted in pain.

The zing of a blade hissed through the air.

Simone spun around. “What’s that?”

“Let me check.” Sara tiptoed to the door and inched it open. She hauled back immediately.

“What is it?” Emma asked, her pulse spiking. “More Heronas guards?”

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“No,” Sara hissed, “it’s Plutonians.”

“They got in?” Simone jumped out of her seat. “They got in!”

“Which means we need to get out,” Kia said urgently. “You heard what the guys said. The rest of the Plutonians can’t know about us yet or we’ll be in danger.”

“So how do we get out of here?” Simone asked, balling up her wires and stepping back into her exoskeleton.

“Wait.” Sara inched the door wider and breathed out in relief. “They’re going the opposite way. They must be looking for the Healer.”

“It’s not any of our guys, is it?” Emma asked hopefully.

“Our guys?” Sara slanted her a coy look. “Or Lans?”

“Really?” Emma threw her hands skyward.

“Just clarifying.”

“Look, she’s blushing.” Simone pointed to her cheeks. “How cute.”

Emma slapped a hand over her skin.

Darn it.

She and Kia were the only pale ones of the group and the way her skin reflected everything she was feeling sucked in moments like these.

“Don’t worry, honey. You’ll see Lans soon enough.” Kia rubbed her shoulder.

Sara shook her head. “I can’t believe we actually did this.”

“We won.” Kia pumped her fists. “We saved the day.”

“We have to get out before we can celebrate,” Emma reminded her.

“Piece of cake.”

Sara eased the door open again. Emma started to follow her when she felt a sharp pain in her side. Doubling over, she clutched her torso and the exoskeleton followed suit. The clank of its metallic arm echoed through the room.

Simone jumped and shot her a concerned look. “Emma?”

“Ah!” She stumbled.

A large, metallic hand shot out.

It was Sara’s exoskeleton.

Concern rang from her voice. “Emma, what’s wrong?”

“I-I don’t know. It felt like something just tore through my...” She groaned as a burning sensation swept her body. “What’s wrong with me? What happened to me?”

“Nothing.”

Her head swam with pain.

“Guys,” Simone stared at her worriedly, “you think it’s the mate connection?”

Emma panted as the pain subsided as quickly as it had come. “The... what?”

“Are you better now?” Sara asked, helping her up.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

She straightened and nodded. “Why would I have a mate connection? I haven’t slept with L—“ She hesitated and finished lamely, “anyone.”

Simone shot her a puzzled look. “You thought about it?”

Emma’s mouth opened.

“It takes more than that.” Sara gestured to the door. “But we really don’t have time to figure it out now. Can you walk?”

“Yeah. The pain is gone.” Strangely.

Emma had never felt anything like that before. It was as if someone had shot her through the chest with an arrow. Every vein in her body had exploded with pain.

She never wanted to feel that again.

“Come on.” Sara ushered her forward.

They walked in a tight group, pushing the door open. To Emma’s surprise, they ran into no guards at all. Every corridor resembled a ghost town. The only slap of footsteps was their own.

Following the plan they had created three days ago, the women took the back exits and scaled the wall again. They ran in the opposite direction of the fight, stopping only when they were at the meeting point.

Sara opened her exoskeleton and stepped out. Thick curls clung to her mahogany-colored skin. Sweat dampened her outfit and dripped down her chin. She swiped it away with the back of her hand, almond-shaped eyes sparkling.

“So, we didn’t get out on time, but that wasn’t bad for our first mission.”

Kia bobbed her head. “I’d say that was a decent first attempt.”

“Think we’ll do better next time?” Simone joked.

Emma walked out of her exoskeleton with a wry smile. “There better not be a next time.”

Sara looked in the direction of the Heronas city. Smoke billowed from within the gates. The faint sounds of battle rode on the wind. “Do you think they got the Healer out?”

“I’m sure they did.” Kia’s voice did not waver. “It’s only a matter of time before they meet us up here.” Despite her confident tone, a worried furrow appeared between Kia’s eyebrows. It grew with every minute that passed.

Sara stroked her zaptin’s chin. “Do you think they forgot the location?”

“No.” Simone shook her head. “Zar wouldn’t. I know that for a fact.”

“What if something happened to them?” Kia frowned.

“We would have felt something.” Sara gave Kia a hug. “Don’t think like that.”

Emma froze. “Felt something. Felt—I felt something. I... back in the Heronas lab.”

Simone, Sara, and Kia looked at her with dread.

“You said it was a mate connection, Sara. What did that mean?” She stumbled forward, horror ballooning in her heart. “Was I feeling Lans’s...?”

“We could be wrong,” Sara said, trying to calm her.

Just then, she saw a zaptin flying through the air. It landed in front of them. A moment later, Clavas scrambled off.

Emma threw herself forward.

Her voice rose to a feverish pitch. “Clavas, where’s Lans?”

“Where is everyone?” Sara glanced behind him. “Are they running behind?”

Clavas’s worried expression cut Emma to the quick. The alien’s blue skin was dotted with blood and gunk, but it was the look in his eyes that freaked her out. His lips pinched into a thin line and he held a hand out to her. The truth dawned then, pouring like hot wax and scalding to the touch.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“No.” Emma shook her head, tears welling in her eyes. “No. No. No.”

“He is severely injured, Eema,” Clavas said softly but firmly.

“No.” She backed away from him.

“He may not—”

“Don’t say that!” She screamed. “Don’t you dare say that! You have a freaking Healer. We—get someone and heal him!”

“The Healer gets his power from the sacred damas. He’s gone a long time without replenishing his source of energy.”

“So we get him to the lake.”

“We might not make it in time,” Clavas said. “But we’re going to try.”

She took his hand. “Take me to him, Clavas. Take me to Lans.”

Fifteen

Lans

A warm hand stroked his chest, slim fingers tracing the tattoo that spanned over his shoulders. Soft lips pressed the underside of his chin. A floral scent wafted to his nostrils, at once exotic and familiar.

His eyes burst open.

“Finally,” Eema said, eyes half-open and a smirk on her plump lips. Long dark hair spiraled over her shoulder and fell on the cot.

Lans gasped.

He lay in a large bed. Swaddled in damp sheets.

Entangled with Eema.

But how could this be?

He had been in the Heronas city a moment ago.

The blood had caked his face.

His spine daggers had grown like weeds. He’d snapped them off.

Over and over again.

He had killed.

Stabbed.

Beaten so many Heronas.

Then, at the end—

He had gotten shot with an arrow.

He...

Panicking, Lans patted his chest where the arrow had pierced through his bone and flesh.

There was nothing there.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

Nothing except his blue skin and muscles.

Whole.

Unblemished.

Amusement in her voice, Eema studied him with her startlingly blue eyes. Thick lashes bounced up and down. “Lans, what are you doing?”

“Wh—where am I?”

“In our home, silly.” She laughed, a tinkling, musical sound.

Lans blinked in confusion. “Home?”

“Yes.” She played with a strand of his hair and stared lovingly at him. “Home.”

“Neh.”

“Neh?” She arched a slim eyebrow.

He sat up completely. The large bed creaked with the movement. His gaze swept his surroundings. The large furnishings. The open windows. The paintings on the wall.

He recognized this place.

This was the home he’d grown up in.

The home he'd shared with his mother and father before...

Lans dug his fingers into the damp sheets that smelled like Eema's essence.

He did not know how he was so sure of that, but he was.

Her scent lingered on his skin.

On his lips.

He had tasted her sweetness.

"This cannot be right." Lans rasped.

"This is so right it's wrong." Emma rose on her knees. The soft blue tunic she wore matched her eyes. Pressing behind him, she flattened both hands on his shoulders and slid them down his chest, leaving skitters of electricity everywhere she brushed. "Do you have any idea how much I love you? Even if you drive me crazy sometimes." Her hands wrapped around his neck.

Lans expected her to choke him.

She did not.

Instead, she took the lobe of his ear into her mouth and sucked it.

Heat exploded in his heras.

"E-Eema..." He groaned.

She released his ear and whispered, "Intera-won, Lans."

“What?”

One corner of her full lips tilted up. Crawling on her hands and knees, she moved in front of him and straddled his lap. Her heat poised right over his hardness and he nearly roared from the way his body throbbed in response.

“Do you want me, my warrior?” Eema teased, gazing at his lap before looking up again. “Will you pump me full of your seed?” She bucked her hips against his, rubbing hard on him. “I want you, Lans. And I want another brood.”

He froze. “Brood?”

“Yes, you know what a brood is. We have two of them.”

His heras sputtered. “T-two? But how?”

“How?” Her eyes sparkled. “Well, it starts with me doing this.” She grabbed the hem of her tunic and inched it up to her waist.

Lans averted his eyes. “Eema.”

“What? There is no need to worry. Your mother is watching our little gems.” Eema’s hands deftly pulled at his pants, her slender fingers reaching for the hardness inside. “So you and I could have some alone time.”

“Mother?” Lans pulled away from her.

Neh. This had to be a dream.

His mother was dead.

Eema remained on her hands and knees, her eyebrows pulling tightly. “Lans?”

“My mother is no longer alive.” He shook his head. Pointed to where she had been about to instigate a mating. “And you would never... you detest me.”

“What?”

“This is not real.” His eyes darted around the room. “None of this...”

“Lans. Lans, my love, listen to me.” She grabbed his hands. Her pale fingers wrapped around his blue ones.

“Neh.” He shook her off.

Eema grabbed him again. “I am real. So is your mother and our broods.”

His chest heaved as he fought her words.

The Red Plague wiped out every Plutonian female.

There was no peace on the planet.

Threats of war and nature abounded.

They had been existing for so long only thanks to the Healer and his ability to reverse all wounds.

And Eema—

At times, only in snatches of moments, her eyes flashed with desire when she looked at him, but she would never be so aggressive in bed. She would never rub her hands over his chest and suckle his ears. She would never paw at his pants and straddle his waist and insist he mate her.

Neh.

This...

Neh.

“Lans, please.” Eema licked her lips nervously. “You are scaring me.”

“This is not...” He stumbled out of the bed.

“Lans!”

He ignored Eema’s pleas and shuffled to the door. Throwing it open, he stepped out and fell into a pair of familiar purple eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“Father,” Lans whispered.

“Son!” His father broke out into a big smile. Then his eyes slipped behind him to where Eema stood. “We were told you would be busy for a while.”

“He is acting strangely,” Eema said.

He swung around to watch her.

She padded on bare feet to him, her soft tunic hugging her shapely frame. Tucking her hair behind her left ear, she spoke to his father. “He seems to have had a nightmare.”

“A nightmare?” His father reached out and squeezed his shoulders. “Are you alright, son?”

Tears filled his eyes.

Eema rubbed his back, her touch warm and gentle. “Lans, please. You’re breaking my heart.”

“How can this be?” he whispered. “Father, you died trying to save me. You... died because of me.”

“In this dream?” His father lifted his chin.

Emma frowned. “Lans, you never—”

His father held up a hand. "Let him explain."

"You were," Lans sucked in a breath, "you told me to stay at home. You told me I was not ready for battle. But I snuck out to fight. You saw me and... you turned back to walk me home. Then the lizera pack appeared. You hid me and took them on yourself."

His father's dusky blue lips softened into a smile. "That sounds very heroic."

"I struggled with the burden I felt for causing your demise. I... I felt so sorry to you, father."

Strong, blue thumbs wiped his tears away. "There is no need to feel thus, Lans. Even if that story were true, I would never regret dying to protect you."

He sobbed. "Father."

Eema slipped her hand around his waist and hugged him close.

Just then, the door slammed open and his mother strode through. She was a tall, elegant woman with a square face and short, black hair. Her eyes widened when she saw the tears in his eyes.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"Father!" Two broods rushed his way.

They had his blue skin and tail, but their eyes were both the color of the earth from space. Startingly blue. Crystal blue.

Just like their mother's.

“Father, why do you cry?” The oldest, a boy, asked.

Eema touched their son’s shoulder softly. “Let us give your father a moment. Why don’t you show me what you and your grandmother planted in the garden today?”

“Yes!” The smallest one, a little girl no higher than his knee, squealed. Before leaving, she threw her tiny hands around his leg and squeezed. “Do not be sad, father.”

He patted her head, his heart overflowing with warmth.

Eema tilted her head expectantly.

Lans stepped closer to her and pressed his lips to hers.

She smiled with wistful eyes. “I love you.”

Page 50

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

His voice shook. “I... love you.”

“Mother!” Their little girl tugged. “The garden.”

Eema’s fond laughter filled his world with light. “I am coming.”

As they left, his mother and father led him to a chair.

Lans stared at them and wondered if the tragic life—the one he had experienced before waking up here—was indeed real. Surely, his mother would not look so... alive if this were his imagination.

But he had to be sure.

Lans straightened. “What of Korben, Clavas, Tiegan? Pin and Zar?”

“Your comrades are all in the tribas,” his father said patiently.

His mother flashed him worried eyes. “Why is he asking these questions?”

“It is alright.” His father patted her hand to comfort her. “He had atuvana, a nightmare.”

“A tuvana?”

“You were taken by the Red Plague, mother.” Lans turned to his father. “And you were... killed.”

“There is no need to think about such dark things, is there?” His mother’s eyes turned glassy.

“Neh.” His father shook his head. “You are here now, Lans. You are with us. There is no need to return to such dark dreams.”

“No reason...” He repeated breathlessly.

“Yes.” His father leaned toward him and said in a firm voice, “there is no reason to go back.”

Sixteen

Emma

Water lapped at her heels, seeping into the black suction pants that clung to her ankles. She leaned over Lans, shaking him over and over again.

His body remained still. Floating. Aimless.

His chest did not move.

Not a single eyelash fluttered.

“What’s wrong with him?” she shrieked, staring up at the Healer. Water splashed around as she slapped the lake in anger. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Eema, please.” Clavas grabbed her shoulders.

“Let me go!”

The Healer lifted his hand. Though she had expected him to be an old man, he was surprisingly free of any grey hair or wrinkles. His skin was a deep blue, his eyes a deep purple and his lips were a dusky navy. He had four braids at the front of his head that hung heavily with silver clips.

She glared at him. “Why isn’t he waking up?”

“Perhaps the Healer is tired.” Clavas spoke to her beneath his breath. “He has onlyjustreturned from many sun rotations of captivity. Give him a moment.”

“Neh. It is not that,” the Healer said in his gravelly voice.

Though his appearance did not show a lick of his age, his voice did. It sounded like an old, rolling drum that had been cured and hewn for decades.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

Emma had trusted him on sight.

Maybe that had been the wrong decision.

A few hours ago, Clavas rushed her to the sacred lake, keeping her out of sight. The Healer saw to those with the most devastating wounds first and, since Lans counted among that number, he had gotten to Lans quickly.

Strangely, the Healer had known she was there even though Emma had been hiding in another room.

“He wants to see you,” Clavas had said.

They’d taken her to a dark cavern where the lake flowed and pooled into a sort of reservoir. Somewhere, deep in the back of her mind, Emma had known that she should probably be asking questions. Like how the Healer had known who she was. Why he’d invited her in here. What his master plan was.

Instead, she’d kept her eyes on Lans and hadn’t taken them off once.

While the Healer worked, she’d waited.

Waited.

Waited.

At any moment, she expected breath to fill his lungs.

Expected his eyes to burst open.

Expected him to scold her for endangering all the other girls by sneaking into a place crawling with Plutonian warriors. By exposing herself to the biggest, most important Plutonian—the Healer himself.

But Lans didn't wake up the first hour.

Or the second.

Or the third.

They were crawling into the fourth hour and he was still lying there.

The Healer had taken out the arrow that caused the damage to his tissues, but there was still no progress.

“What the hell is he even doing?” Emma flung a crooked finger at the Healer. “He just poured some water and hovered his hand over Lans body! You expect that to work?” She glanced around, her voice echoing in the cavern. “Don't you have medicine up here? Surgeons?”

The Healer's voice remained calm. “His body is healed.”

“What?”

“He can wake up.”

“Then why isn't he?”

The Healer glanced at Lans and said softly, “He doesn't want to.”

If Emma could have throttled the most sacred Plutonian warrior on the planet and gotten away with it, she would have.

Gritting her teeth, she said instead, “You’re a Healer, so heal him!”

“I did.”

“Emma! Emma!” Clavas grabbed her elbows and wrestled her out of the water.

She fought him every step of the way, digging her heels into the sand and trying to remain by Lans’s side, but the warrior was too strong. He carted her easily through the hewn entrance and into a private side room away from Lans’s floating body.

When he set her down, Emma huffed. “What are you doing? We can’t leave Lans alone with that quack!”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“Emma, get ahold of yourself. The Healer is doing everything he can.”

“How do you know that? Because he squeezed his eyes really hard when he was waving his hands over Lans’s body?”

“I’ve seen him work before. The sacred lake has never denied us.”

“Look, I’m not hating on your traditions. I’m just...” She swallowed hard.

“I know.” He touched her shoulder. “You are worried about Lans.” Clavas’s eyes dropped to the ground. “You... care for him.”

“I just want him to wake up.” She sniffed.

“There is nothing we can do if he doesn’t want to.”

“Clavas. Emma,” a deep voice said.

She glanced up and saw the Healer standing in the doorway.

“Healer,” Clavas whispered, his eyes wide.

“Do you mind watching Lans for a moment, Clavas? Make sure he does not drown.”

“Yes.” Clavas dipped his head.

When he was gone, the Healer remained by the doorway.

Emma turned around, swiping the tears that leaked from her eyes. “If you expect an apology for calling you a quack, you’re not going to get one.”

“The Heronas energy field contained rhythmium. It is a highly potent substance that reacts violently to Plutonian blood. It is like inhaling a viral bomb. Any Plutonian touches it and they disintegrate.”

“Thanks for the random science lesson.”

“It is strange.” The Healer stopped a few paces away. “The energy field that no Plutonian could cross suddenly came down from the inside. Would the Heronas really be that foolish?”

“Guess so.”

The Healer gave her a knowing look. “Thank you for saving us all.”

“It wasn’t me.” She kicked at a loose rock. “The other girls did most of the work.”

“You are very humble, Eema.”

“Should you be in here talking to me?” She faced him. “Shouldn’t you be doing everything you can to help him?”

“I have done all I can, but you...”

“Me?”

“You are the only one who can save him now.”

Her heart thumped. “What exactly are you trying to say?”

“He is slipping away without a fight.”

“And?”

The Healer’s eyes fastened on her. “He needs a reason to stay.”

“Me? You think he’d stay for me?”

Page 53

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

The Healer clasped his hands behind his back. “You and Lans are not the first human and alien couple to mate.”

She blushed as she thought of the three couples waiting at the hideout. “Trust me, I know.”

“A long time ago, Plutonians intermingled with humans. The bloodline still exists on your planet.” He pointed to her hand. “Their ancient blood runs through your veins.”

She pulled her wrist back. “I already know that. It’s why we can connect to the zaptens. The machines recognize our faint Plutonian blood.”

“You have done your research.” The Healer looked impressed.

“No. I just happen to be surrounded by women who can’t get enough of these Plutonians.”

“And you?” The Healer arched an eyebrow. “You run from your feelings?”

“I have no feelings.”

“And yet you cry over Lans’s wounds.”

“I—” She snapped her mouth closed.

“He needs a reason to stay, Eema.”

“Fine. I’ll kiss him and see if he wakes up.” Her heart thundered at the prospect, but it wasn’t all that different than waving her hands over him and hoping really hard that he’d wake up. She could kiss him and more if she really thought that would work.

“Skinship is not what I am referring to.”

“But you said—”

The Healer shook his head.

“Wait. So... you’re not talking about True Love’s Kiss here? Then how do you expect me to give him a reason?”

The Healer stepped closer and gently lifted her hand. “Because of my time in the lakes, my sensitivity to smell has increased.” He inhaled. “Humans with Plutonian blood have a peculiar smell. It was how I spotted you right away.”

“Look, Mr. Healer, sir, what exactly are you suggesting? I’m kind of tired of talking in vague circles. Lans is in there dying. He’s... barely breathing. We need to do something now.”

“We will.” He gestured to her. “Come with me.”

They returned to the cavern where Clavas was outside the lake waiting.

The Healer beckoned him. “Clavas, carry him to the recovery quarters.”

Clavas did as he was instructed.

Emma hung back, watching as the Healer deftly clamped a tube around Lans’s wrist and then held up a wicked looking needle attached to the other end of the tube. He

motioned for her to sit.

“What are you going to do?” Emma asked, her voice trembling.

“I will give you an opportunity to plead your case.” He stuck the needle in her arm without warning.

Emma hissed. “Ow!”

A whirring sound competed with the thud of her beating heart. In the tube, blood oozed from her veins and travelled to Lans.

Clavas gasped. “Healer.”

“You were connected to Lans’s zaptin, which means you are connected to him.” He pressed both hands on either side of her head. “Go, Eema. Bring him home.”

A moment later, a bright light exploded in her vision.

When she blinked, she was no longer inside the Healer's secret cave.

She was standing in a cozy alien dwelling.

And, standing across from her, was Lans.

Seventeen

Lans

The door opened and Eema stormed toward him. Strangely, she was no longer wearing the beautiful blue tunic. Instead, she wore a shiny black suit that clung to her body. But more than her shift in outerwear, he saw confusion in her eyes. Had something happened?

Lans flew toward her. "Eema, where are the broods? Are you alright?"

"The what?" She gave him a strange look as if he spoke another language.

Unease pooled in his chest. "Our broods."

"We don't have any broods." She scrunched her nose. Shook her head. Raised a slender hand and pressed it against her temple. "Wow. This is a trip."

His father gave him a puzzled look.

Lans rounded the table and slowly approached Eema. "What is the matter?"

“What is all this?” Her eyes slid around the room. “Where are we?”

“Home,” Lans said, warmth wrapping around the word like a thick cloak.

Eema did not smile as he had expected her to. Instead, she frowned. “No, Lans. You aren’t home. You’re dying.”

“Dying?” His mind whirred.

Neh. That could not be.

He was alive.

He had woken up from a terrible dream and now he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

“Lans,” his mother’s tone was cautious, “of what does she speak?”

Eema approached him slowly. “You have to listen to me. You were hurt in the raid against the Heronas. The Healer was rescued and taken back to his sacred lakes where he started healing everyone that got injured.”

“Neh.” Lans held his head as a keening wail erupted inside him.

“You were taken to the lake and the Healer tried to help you, but he couldn’t wake you up.” She glanced at his mother and father. “You refused to wake up and I see why.” She licked her lips. “Lans, I get it. If I had an opportunity to change my circumstances and live in a dream world where everything I wanted was in front of me, I would be tempted too.”

“Stop it.”

“You can’t be fooled by this. Your home is out there.” Her voice cracked. “I’m out there.”

He stumbled back.

The table rumbled as his mass knocked into it.

Lans blindly reached out for something to hold on to.

His palm flattened on the table.

His fingers dug into the grooves.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

Neh. This had to be his world. This was the table he had grown up eating around.

See? There. The nick he had made when whittling his mother's gift of a wooden rizer.

This was home. "I am home," he said firmly. "You know nothing."

"I do know, Lans." She paused. Swallowed loudly. "I grew up with an alcoholic mother. She would leave me for days while she went on benders. I had to learn to fend for myself and I preferred being alone." Eema inhaled deeply. "That's why I find it so hard to trust people."

"Lans, do not listen to this!" His father barked.

Tears glittered in Eema's eyes. "Lans, I never met anyone who cared about me without expecting anything in return. All my life, I saw people using others for their own gain. I saw cruelty and selfishness. I didn't just see it. I understood it. That was the only world I knew." She stepped closer. "Then I met you."

"Eema..." He remembered the dream again. Stealing Eema outside the beluda. Throwing her on the zapt.

He remembered their lips colliding for the first time.

The dream—

Or was it a dream?

Was he dreaming now?

The keening wail got louder.

He groaned in agony.

His side began to throb.

“I met you and you scared me more than anything. You snapped and growled and grunted at me, but you were never cruel; you were never mean; you never tore me down. You only lifted me up. It wasn’t my world. I didn’t understand it.”

A vein in his temple bulged.

He struggled to find the truth, but it was too painful.

Could he not rest?

Since his father’s death, he had been unable to find peace. Only when he was with Eema did he feel close to happiness.

“Believe me, Lans,” Eema stood in front of him, her eyes gleaming, “I wish this was your reality. I really do. You deserve that, but life isn’t perfect. Crazy things happen. Terrible things happen.” She smiled through her tears. “Sometimes you get kidnapped out of your bed and auctioned off to aliens.”

His fingers closed over her wrist. “Eema...”

“But life is also,” she moved so near that her chest brushed his, “beautifully flawed. And all the ugly, horrible pieces of our past and present can make beautiful things. Stronger things.” Her eyes darted to his lips. “It shapes people who are kind and

proud and who love in spite of everything.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist. “I do not want to leave.”

“I know.” She pressed a palm into his cheek. “I know, Lans. But losing you is not an option. So even if it hurts, you need to come back. Okay? You need to come back with me because there’s still a mysterious evil spaceship roaming around the planet. We can’t figure out what’s coming without you. We can’t...” She shook her head. “Clavas, Pin and Zar need you. Chozo needs you. The other girls need you. I—I need you.”

“Lans.” His mother’s bottom lip quivered.

He glanced at Eema’s pleading eyes and then back at his mother.

A memory of the day she passed flew through his mind. Red skies. The screams of pain and mourning. A cold body in a cold bed.

His mother was gone.

This one wasn’t real.

It wasn’t real.

The keening wail stopped.

His pain subsided.

He embraced the truth because, deep in his heras, he had known it was the truth all along.

“Neh.” His mother reached out to him, her voice rising. “Lans, stay with me.”

“I want to, mother, but I can’t.”

“Why not?” His father asked gruffly. “Because this female asked you to? Because of a tribas who will only bury you and move on when you’re gone? Because of a new threat you most likely won’t be able to win against? You return only to face troubles, pain and sadness.”

“Yes. But within that pain,” he glanced behind him and sought out Eema’s gaze, “there is light.”

Redness crept across her face.

The flush made him smile.

Indeed, this was his Eema.

His.

“Come on.” She held her hand out to him.

Lans did not hesitate to take it.

The moment he clasped her hand, a bright light flashed before his eyes.

Lans shot up with a gasp, his chest heaving as he sucked in buckets of air. His fingers dug into a thin cot and he glanced around, noticing how dark his surroundings were.

Eema sat beside him, her eyelashes fluttering like one rousing from deep sleep. The moment she saw him, she scrambled to his side. “Lans?”

“He’s awake!” Clavas thrust a fist skyward in victory.

“It worked!” Eema threw her arms around his neck and tumbled onto the cot with him, embracing him tightly. Lans hesitantly placed a hand on her back.

She smelled like Eema.

Like home.

He grunted, eyes widening when he saw the Healer striding into the room.

Eema backed away, a huge grin on her face.

The Healer nodded at him. “I am glad you decided to join us.”

“I am glad we succeeded in our rescue mission.” Lans dipped his head. “It is an honor.”

The Healer smirked in Eema’s direction. “Neh. The honor is mine. Had you not

woken up, I fear I would have faced the wrath of a thousand suns.” He laughed softly.
“You have a very hot-tempered mate, Lans.”

“Oh, we’re not mates,” Eema said.

The Healer just smiled as he left. “Something tells me that will change very soon. But not too soon. Lans needs rest.”

Eema’s cheeks flushed again.

How stunning.

He took her hand. “You saved me.”

Page 57

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“You saved yourself,” she whispered. “I just reminded you there was something worth fighting for back here where it sucks.”

He chuckled.

Clavas shuffled his feet. “My apologies for interrupting, but the others are eager to hear about your progress, Lans.”

“They wanted to be here,” Eema explained.

Lans grunted as he sat up. “The Healer only allows one accompaniment per patient.”

“So I was told.” She tucked a lock of hair behind her left ear. “Although I managed to sneak in.”

“You got in because the Healer wanted you in,” Clavas corrected her.

Eema shrugged. “Technically true, but I’d rather not think about it. Today’s been crazy enough for everybody.”

Lans stared at Eema. The dream version had been very handsy and quite eager for him to bury his heat in her. He wondered if the real Eema felt the same.

Eema froze. “Why are you staring at me like that?”

“I’ll go give that progress report,” Clavas said, backing away.

Eema fiddled with her fingers. “You should probably rest.

“Come,” Lans said quietly.

She bit down on her bottom lip. “What?”

He patted the bed.

Eema blinked rapidly. “Look, I know you’re probably fully healed or whatever, but you just got stabbed with an arrow. I wouldn’t do anything too physically taxing—”

“Just lie with me, Eema.” He lowered his head on the cot. “I want to stay tethered to what is real while I am asleep.”

“Oh.” Flushing red again, she climbed into the cot with him.

Lans held her from behind, bending his knees into hers so she fit into the pocket of his body. Her warmth, her scent, and the silky texture of her hair made his heras calm.

Later.

He would mate her as soon as he had the strength.

But for now, his body reeled with exhaustion and all he could manage to do was close his eyes.

“Lans?”

“Mm.”

“Why was I in your dream?”

“Because you are my dream,” he said plainly, having no energy to fight his feelings.

Eema’s fingers slid down his arm. “And broods?”

“Yes.”

“With me?”

“As many as I can fill you with.”

Page 58

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

She went quiet.

Lans would have rolled her over to see her expression but, at that moment, his eyes could stay open no longer and he drifted to sleep.

Eighteen

Emma

How did Lans still look so intimidating while sleeping?

She tucked her hands beneath her cheek and studied his face. This was a first. Lans was always scowling, grunting, and glaring at her, but right now, he was knocked out cold. No scowl in sight.

It was a prime opportunity.

She reached out and slid her fingers through his black hair. Her nails rasped against his scalp and he made a pleased rumble in the middle of his throat.

Brute? Where?

This alien was just a big baby trapped in a warrior's muscular body.

Her lips inched up.

And then they sank.

Lans's words before he fell asleep haunted her.

Broods?

Yes.

She'd stepped into his dreamscape and found out the truth. What Lans really wanted was his parents alive and well.

And her.

He wanted her.

Not just now.

Not just her body.

A future.

Babies.

Babies.

The very thought made her tremble.

Emma shook her head and focused on Lans. Plutonians and humans weren't that different. Her fingernail grazed down the line of Lans's nose. It was long and slightly crooked with little bumps along the bridge that told her he'd broken it and didn't bother to correct it.

What should have been a flaw only served to enhance his rugged masculinity and

dangerous charm. This face was not a 'pretty' face the way Tiegan's was. Lans's face had been hewn from rock and stone and knives. It had a lethal grace that she was drawn to.

Next, her exploration landed on his lips.

Emma immediately licked her own in response.

Blue lips.

Dusky blue.

Page 59

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

They shouldn't look so appealing, but they were.

Because they were his.

Because it was Lans.

Broods?

Yes.

She stiffened. Blew out a breath.

Lans's jawline. She'd focus there.

Her fingers moved down. Scraped against the sharp edges. She half-expected his jaw to cut her.

It didn't.

Her hands slid to his shoulders.

Rock. Muscles.

So hard.

My goodness. What was this Plutonian made of?

His chest boasted abs that were so solid that trying to punch them would result in a broken wrist.

Lans groaned in his sleep and his body saluted in response to her touch.

He was so... big.

Every part of him.

And what was happening in his pants wasn't her only evidence.

She'd peeked once.

Just once.

And she'd nearly run the other way.

But she wasn't running anymore.

Emma was trapped in his arms.

In his bed.

Waking him from the dream had revealed her feelings. Feelings she'd been denying for so long that it had become a part of her life here on this alien planet.

But now the truth was out.

And Lans felt the same way.

It was only a matter of time before he...

Heat blazed in her core.

What would it be like to mate with him?

Page 60

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

She widened her legs a little. Slid her thighs over his.

What would it be like?

Tension pooled in her stomach.

Made her feel like she was about to explode.

She needed...

Emma bit down on her bottom lip.

When was Lans waking up?

She needed him.

She was about to...

Her hands slid up his chest.

So good.

It would feel so good.

Broods?

Yes.

Emma froze, all the heat turning to ice in her veins. She hauled her leg back and inched away from Lans.

Fear crowded her mind.

Panic made her tremble.

She wanted to escape, but Lans had her bundled close to him. Snuggling with an alien warrior had its downsides. Like the fact that Lans's arm was three times the size of hers and getting it off her would require a freaking crane.

Emma squirmed, inching back like a worm trying to ease itself off a hook.

Lans made a sound in his sleep, his body reflexively holding her tighter.

Emma rolled across the bed and slammed into his chest.

So much for getting away.

New plan.

She patted him. "Lans."

Nothing.

Her smacks got a little harder. "Lans, release me."

"Eema," he mumbled, deep in his sleep.

Clavas had told her the healing would take a toll on Lans's energy and that he would need to replenish his strength, but she hadn't realized just what that meant for

scrawny humans trapped in the 'big spoon, little spoon' position.

Gritting her teeth, she searched for some flab of skin she could grip between her thumb and forefinger. Maybe Lans would respond to a pinch.

Unfortunately, the alien was pure muscle.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

No flabby skin in sight.

Frustrated, Emma flapped back—as much as she could in the circle of Lans’s embrace—and stared at the ceiling. Lans was hibernating and the room had suddenly gone from cool to hot. With all of him pressing against all of her, she had no idea how she would escape.

Unless...

An idea dawned.

Maybe Lans subconsciously clamped down on her because he sensed she was trying to escape. Any other day, she’d call that a reach, but crazier things had happened. Plus the evidence was right in front of her. Whenever she made to get away, Lans found a reason to pull her closer.

All the other girls had spoken about the mate connection which, through their shared frequency with the zaptens, allowed them to read their mate’s emotions. It was possible that Lans had read her intentions and was responding to them while sleeping.

Or maybe she was slowly going crazy on this alien planet and none of that was true.

Either way, it was worth a shot.

Emma calmed her energy as best as she could. If Lans could sense her tension and unease, he would probably be able to tell when she was relaxed too.

If she could loosen up a bit, maybe he would follow her lead.

Stretching her arm slowly, she patted Lans's chest.

"I'm not going to leave you," she whispered.

His embrace slackened.

Just a smidge.

But it was enough to show her she was on the right path.

Hiding her excitement as best as she could, Emma rose on her elbows and planted a soft kiss on Lans's cheek. "I'll be right back."

More slack.

She could wiggle around now without him trying to cut off her breath with his cuddling.

"I'll be right here when you wake up, okay?" She caressed his cheek. "I'll be right here next to you."

His tail slid away from her waist.

Carefully, as if every move had the potential of shattering glass, she inched back. "I'll just step out for a quick minute and see if Clavas—"

Lans's arm tightened.

Sinewy muscle flexed as he yanked her back.

She flopped against his chest.

Back to square one.

Damn it.

Instead of being deterred, Emma kept a tight hold on her emotions and tried again.

“Alright now, don’t be so possessive.” She draped her fingers up his elbow to his shoulder and back down to his wrist. “You’re plenty enough for me. He’s just a friend.”

Still nothing.

Lans was not letting her go.

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

She was in a hot alien prison.

“Fine.” Annoyance sizzled in her voice and charged through her chest. So much for keeping a handle on her emotions.

After their big, romantic moment, she thought everything would be rainbows and skips over alien beaches. Now that she and Lans had an understanding, everything would work itself out. Surely, they wouldn’t fight as much now that they’d admitted to feeling something more.

Nope.

Her feelings for Lans didn’t change the fact that he was the most annoying alien she had ever met in her entire life.

Emma glared down at him. “Fine. You want to cuddle, big guy? Let’s cuddle.” She crawled on top of him and squeezed him tight. “Hm? You like that?” She pressed her lips to his, kissing him roughly. “Hm? You want some of that?” She dug her nails into his shoulders and thrust her hips. “I should—”

Suddenly, Lans’s eyes burst open. She yelped and tried to spring back, but he had a firm hold on her waist.

“You would what?” Lans asked in a deep voice.

Emma gasped. “You were up this entire time?”

His lips twitched.

“And you didn’t say anything?” She glared at him.

“I was resting, but I felt you touching me.”

Her eyes fell away from his. Can the ground just swallow me up now please!

Lans gently trapped her chin in his grip and lifted her head to face him. “Plutonians are light sleepers, but they are especially so around their mates.”

“Why are you calling me your mate? It’s not like we’ve done anything yet.”

“You are my mate in here.” He tapped his chest. “Do you think two become one when their bodies join? Neh. The commitment they make to one another should happen long before the coupling.” Moving faster than his huge size should allow, Lans rolled her over and pinned her hands above her head. “I am committed to you, Eema of earth. And I have waited long enough.”

“W-what do you mean?” Her heart thudded.

“Intera-won.” He spoke in a guttural rumble that made her body sizzle with desire. Lans stared deeply into her eyes. “I will show you what that means this night.”

Nineteen

Lans

Eema’s seduction had not gone unnoticed. He had been tightening in his pants from the moment she slid her fingers through his hair and rubbed his scalp. Lans was especially sensitive there and it had taken all his strength not to jump on her right

then.

He had held back for one reason.

Lans wanted to know what Eema would do to him if she thought he would not notice.

The game amused him greatly. To escape his arms, she tried to play coy and sweet for only a short while before her true ferocity leaped out of her.

That was the Eema he knew.

Fierce.

Sharp.

Heated.

And, when she revealed this side of her, he could not stay still any longer.

Neh.

Page 63

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

The moment she climbed on top of him and kissed his lips as punishment, Lans knew that it was time for mating.

He slid his hand down her back, itching to feel her soft skin against the pads of his fingertips rather than the slippery material of the suit. “You look frightened, Eema.”

“I amnot.”

“Your eyes say differently. They have grown in size.”

“Is this how you want to start the mating? By making fun of me?” She huffed.

Lans smirked. “You are not too angry to mate.”

“You say that like you know what I’m feeling.”

He nodded. “I do.”

She scoffed. “You’re a little too cocky for me.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “You’re not my type.”

“What is your type, female? Tell me while I undress you.”

She laughed. “That’s not how it works.”

Lans gave her a wicked smile. “I know exactly how it works.”

She bit down on her bottom lip.

The red flush stole into her cheeks again.

Impatience made his blood rush faster.

He enjoyed every conversation with Eema, but he was finding it harder and harder to concentrate on words when all he wanted was to dive between her legs and taste her sweet places.

“Mm-mm.” Eema swatted at his hands when he tried to find the slit in her clothes.

“Would you rather undress yourself?” Lans would be much faster at it, but he would give her the privilege if she so chose.

“No. These clothes are staying on.”

His eyebrow nubs cinched together. “Eema, you realize how difficult it will be to mate with your suit on?”

Neh. Not just difficult.

Impossible.

She wore black fabric from the neck down. The suit had been designed to protect her in case a weapon slipped past the exoskeleton.

And now, it was keeping every inch of her from him.

An injustice.

His tongue and fingers needed access to her heat.

Now.

She wiggled a finger in his chest. “No, no, no.”

Page 64

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“Are you resisting because of your pride?” He studied her. “Or do you really not want to mate?”

Lans was about to combust from the need to have her, but if she did not want his invasion, he would stop immediately.

The teachings of his father had not gone unheard. All females were to be protected and honored. It was the responsibility of the male to ensure that his mate received everything she needed and more. For so long, they had lived without females, but these truths were the foundation of Plutonian culture and morality.

He would probably have to dive into a freezing damas to temper his lust, but he would not lay a hand on her if Eema rejected the coupling.

“You’re getting punished for pulling a prank on me.” She pouted.

Relief poured through his body and loosened the knots in his stomach.

So she was not rejecting him.

She was only trying to prove a point.

“A punishment?” He growled.

“Yes.”

“Am I the only one getting punished in such a case?” He slid his finger down her

throat to the pulse at the base of her neck. Her breath shuttered and her back arched off the bed. He smirked at her response.

His Eema was so easy to read.

She would be so easy to please.

“Do you know all the ways I could make you scream, Eema?” His fingers dipped between her legs. “So, so many ways.”

“You... evil... jerk,” she panted. “You think you can seduce me?”

“I will only follow what you did to me.” He arched an eyebrow nub. “If I recall correctly, your leg was... here, I think.” He pointed with his tail. “And you were rubbing me as if your heat was—”

She slapped her hand against his mouth. “You should have told me you were awake.”

“And miss the opportunity to tease you? Neh.” He slipped a strand of her hair away from her cheek, keeping his touch whisper-soft. “Should I stop?”

She moaned.

Growing serious, he pulled his hands off her and said, “We do not have to mate now, but if you choose not to engage in the coupling, I must sleep in another room.”

“Why? Can’t we just,” she gestured to where his hands had been, “keep doing that?”

“If I start, I will not be able to stop, my heras. I do not trust myself to lie in bed with you and not taste your heat.” He paused, sensing her anxiety. She was nipping at her bottom lip with her flat, white teeth again. Her hands trembled slightly. “Is there a

reason you want us to mate with our clothes on?”

For a moment, her eyes flickered.

Lans wondered if he had stumbled upon the very root of her concern, but the expression dissolved as quickly as it had come. Wrapping her arms around his neck, Eema pulled him down, sucking his lips as if she had no time to waste.

His weight pressed her harder into the cot. His lips took control of her frantic suckling until he had slowed her pace to the speed and rhythm that he wanted.

Neh.

His female would not be taking over their mating.

Not today.

He pulled back and studied her parted lips.

Her tongue slipped out of her mouth to slide along her lower lip and he stared at it.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“Eema, the weight of your life, your past, your present and your future will be protected by me.” He slid his fingers over the suit and found the tab that would allow it to peel off. “I accept everything you are and everything you will be.”

“Lans,” she whispered.

He pushed the suit off her shoulders. “You are my heras. My responsibility. My light.” He rolled it down her waist. “From this day, I will stay by your side.” He shucked the suit off her waist and rolled it down one of her long, pale legs. “Eema, will you stay by my side for the rest of your life?”

“Yes,” she said.

He sucked her lips, dragging his hand down her thigh and squeezing her harder as his tongue stroked hers. He claimed her mouth, swallowing her groans that spiraled into the air and shattered every molecule with tension.

He bowed to her.

Sucked of her.

Heat.

Desire.

Sweetness.

She was so perfect.

So good to the taste.

His body spiraled into pleasure with every wave of ecstasy.

Finally, he let her catch her breath.

His mate's essence coated his tongue and made his fingers slip as he removed his pants.

Eema was panting hard, her chest moving up and down as she whimpered his name. He knew her well and so he knew that she would not beg in many words. But the way she looked at him and the way her hands found his hardness told him that she was pleading in her own way.

Take me, her eyes seemed to say.

Lans's gaze swept his female.

His.

Her long graceful limbs.

Her curves.

Her dark hair that clung to her cheeks.

He had prepared her as best as he could, but she was so incredibly slender and fragile. The mating would break her if he was not gentle.

Still burning with need, Lans tenderly brushed his lips against Eema's. "Open."

She spread her legs.

So obedient.

For once.

His beautiful Eema.

She was his treasure.

His everything.

Page 66

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

He would never let her go.

He would never leave her.

No harm would befall her and no enemy would touch her.

Mine.

His.

Fire swept through his veins. His hips bucked against his ribs as he pressed against her body. Her eyes locked on his and he saw them widen in shock and a little pain. He heard and felt her gasp, felt the expansion of her chest and the hiss of her lips even as he tried his best to not invade her fully.

Slowly.

Slowly.

His lips rejoined hers.

Her skin was hot.

Her body welcomed him.

Stretching.

Stretching.

She cried out, her nails digging into his back and her hands clawing for something to hold on to. Her screams of passion rolled out of her in low, quiet waves.

As he began to move his hips, Lans leaned down and whispered, “Mine, Eema. Intera-won means you are mine.”

Twenty

Emma

Intera-won means you are mine.

Well... hell.

She could have figured that out from the way Lans claimed her body.

Her fingers dug into the mattress as she struggled to catch her breath after several hours of relentless Plutonian mating. Every inch of her skin felt like it had been licked by the most delicious fire and she was still bathing in that heat. Still drenched in the afterglow.

Soreness throbbed from between her thighs.

Decadent pain.

She tried not to move too much even as the sunlight warned they would have to get going eventually. There was still a mystery to unravel. They had to get back to the others who were, undoubtedly, worried about Lans.

Lans hiked his head up on a fist, staring down at her. His fingers gently rubbed the shape of his tattoos into her shoulder. “Eema, are you alright?”

“Yup.” She paused. “Actually, you may have to carry me around for the next few days. I don’t think I can walk.”

She expected him to laugh.

He didn’t.

Instead, his stare grew more concerned and his touch on her shoulder stopped.

Emma groaned. “Lans, that was a joke.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

The skin between his brows wrinkled even further.

She hoped last night hadn't changed the dynamic of their relationship. She kind of liked getting under his skin and hearing him growl at her. She didn't want that to change just because he'd pounded into her like a hammer on a nail.

"I did not mean to hurt you, my heras," he grumbled.

"It's okay."

And it was.

She thought he'd been gentle.

And he'd tried to be.

She could see it in his eyes. The concentration on her pleasure. On her comfort. On her safety.

And it touched her. The last thing she'd expected was a strong, scary-looking alien warrior to be so sensitive.

But the problem wasn't Lans' intentions.

It was pure human-alien logistics.

The pleasure had ripped through her, totally eclipsing the pain. But adjusting to an

invasion of that size and width wasn't easy.

Even if she'd suffer for it, Emma didn't care. She enjoyed every minute of their mating. And all the others that followed after the first time. As Sara, Kia and Simone had hinted, Plutonian stamina was...something.

But it also meant that her most sensitive places had taken a beating.

Lans pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I will carry you everywhere. Your feet will never touch the floor."

"Did you learn those lines from the elders?" She snorted.

"You find my sincerity amusing?" His lips twitched.

"Just a little." She held her fingers a centimeter apart. "I'm not used to you being sweet."

"That surprises me. I am the definition of romance."

She laughed. "If this warrior thing doesn't work out, consider comedy."

Lans smirked and pulled her closer. "My heras feels at peace for the first time, Eema." He glanced down at her, the sheets rustling as he moved. "Thank you."

She tucked her head into his shoulder, letting the silence rush over them.

Broods?

The voice resurrected from the back of her mind.

She'd managed to drown it out while Lans had kissed and undressed her.

She'd shoved it into a corner while Lans teased her with his tongue.

She'd silenced it when Lans burned her with the brunt of him.

But now?

In the quiet?

When her pulse had returned to normal and her clothes were back on?

The voice tortured her.

Broods?

She shook her head and ran from the terrifying thought.

One night of passion would not result in pregnancy.

Right?

Wrong.

Stupid.

Of course she could get pregnant.

Sara had spilled the tea about Rune, a Plutonian technician, and his human mate. Ga Eun had given birth to a baby. A healthy baby.

But it had taken them three years.

Not one night.

She was safe.

Or she hoped so.

Her heart burned. Lans wanted kids. He'd made that clear with his words and she'd seen that desire in his dreams. She cared about him, which was why Emma was terrified of letting him know that she didn't quite feel the same when it came to having offspring.

Lans straightened, his eyes on the locked door.

A moment later, there was a knock.

Emma looked up at him. "Why don't I have super hearing?"

"Let us hope no other patients could have heard you last night," Lans said with a mischievous grin.

Emma's mouth dropped open.

Seriously. Who was this guy flashing smiles and making jokes?

Was he Lans?

Had he swapped bodies when he was in that dreamscape?

She shook her head. "Your fault."

"True." He gave a self-satisfied nod.

She laughed.

Just then, Clavas's voice rang through the door. "May I enter?"

Emma slipped out of bed and dressed quickly.

“Enter.” Lans finished pulling up his pants just as Clavas and the Healer walked in.

Her friend carefully avoided her eyes, but the Healer stared pointedly at the bed and then at her. “Eema, I believe I instructed you both to wait. The patient needs rest.”

“He seemed all healed to me,” Eema mumbled.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

Clavas coughed to hide his twitching lips.

Lans cleared his throat. “Thank you for coming to check on me personally, Healer. It is an honor.”

“It is no trouble. I wanted your mate’s presence here to remain a secret.”

Emma strode toward the aliens. How strange that she felt completely safe surrounded by a species that was much bigger and more dangerous than her. They stood several leagues taller with blue skin and bustling muscles. Tattoos spanned the length of their giant chests and their nimble tails could slam a Heronas guard into a tree.

If any of these guys turned on her, she wouldn’t have a way to defend herself.

On earth, Emma would have been nervous and frantic.

But here, for the first time in her life, she was beginning to trust others.

Everyone in this room had become an ally.

And Lans...

Well, Lans had become her mate.

This is insane.

“Eema.Eema,” Lans called her.

“What?” She blinked rapidly, her eyes fastening on him. “Did you say something?”

The Healer wore a bemused look. “What did you do to her, Lans?”

“She is tired.” He strode over to her and picked her up gently. “Would you like to return to bed while we discuss these matters?”

“No.” She squirmed.

“Are you sure?”

“Put me down, Lans,” she hissed, noticing the way the Healer and Clavas were looking at her. She was not some dainty princess who needed coddling. Life on earth had made her tough. Life on this planet would make her even stronger.

“You asked me not to let your feet touch the ground,” Lans reminded her.

She wiggled. “Lans...”

“Very well.” He set her on her feet.

Emma brushed her hair down and tried to regain some of her earlier somberness. Glancing at the Healer, she lifted her chin. “Why do I feel that you’re here for more than a regular checkup?”

The two aliens exchanged glances.

Lans stepped forward. “What is the matter?”

“The Heronas city...” Clavas glanced away.

“It was annihilated,” the Healer said. “Every Heronas in the vicinity was killed. A few Plutonians were also disintegrated.”

Emma’s heart lurched to her throat.

“What do you mean?” Lans’s eyes widened. “Disintegrated?”

“Here.” Clavas lifted his wrist.

The interface embedded in his skin projected footage of a fierce battle between the Heronas and the Plutonians. A moment later, a dark cloud hovered over the sky and a fierce wind blew, tearing every living organism apart.

Emma covered her mouth, horrified.

Lans's lips flattened into a grim line. "It looks like the footage Chozo showed us of his city's destruction."

"Indeed," Clavas said.

"But why were the Plutonians harmed too? I thought the big, mysterious aliens were only upset at the Heronas?"

Lans studied the Healer. "Do you know anything of their origins or what they could want?"

The Healer kept quiet.

Emma stared at his stoic expression.

He knew something!

"What aren't you telling us?" she insisted, walking right up to him. "There's something you know, isn't there?"

"There is." The Healer started hesitantly.

Lans's eyes widened. "You are familiar with this threat?"

"They are the Ungazi. The destroyers of 'impurities'. The balancers. They believe they

have been tasked by the universe for a sacred duty.”

“Which is?” Emma prodded.

“To keep all bloodlines pure.”

“Bloodlines pure?” Clavas echoed.

“They track the intermingling of species. They appear and wipe out the species to keep the bloodlines from ‘deteriorating’.”

“So we’re dealing with the alien version of Nazis?” Emma frowned. “Great.”

Lans looked at her. “Plutonians and humans.” His eyes widened with horror and he whipped around to stare at the Healer. “We have been mating humans throughout history.”

“Which is why they manufactured the Red Plague through the Dultge.”

Clavas’s bottom lip trembled. “My mother...”

“They tried to do the same to the humans too,” the Healer looked at her, “but your sun protected you.”

“That’s why the Heronas wanted my blood. It’s immune because we’ve survived the Red Plague,” Emma said.

“Here.” Clavas lifted his interface. “Remember what Si-Moon and Zar told us? About the Dultge terros taking a Bluroin female as a mate?”

Emma nodded.

Clavas's hologram spread out until it filled the room.

Darkness eclipsed the ceiling overhead and it felt like she was inside the Dultge camp.

A loud boom shook the air.

Mountains trembled.

She crouched instinctively, fearing for her life even though she knew very well that it wasn't real.

"What is this?" Lans asked, his gaze darting all around.

Page 71

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“The Ungazi were there. They found the terros and his pregnant mate.”

“We have reason to believe they are heading this way,” the Healer said gravely.

Fear struck her heart and Emma glanced at Lans. “They’re going to kill us.”

Twenty-One

Lans

“Korben is here?”he asked, striding down the hallway of the cavern with Clavas right on his heels.

“Yes.” Clavas tapped his interface. “They did not want to leave the area without making sure that you had recovered well. If not for the Healer’s instructions, they would have crowded the room.”

Lans was glad they had not made camp in his recovery room. Because of that privacy, he had mated with Eema.

Lans’s fingers curled into fists.

The sweetness of their union had been cut short by the Ungazi threat. He should have been whisking Eema off to celebrate their mating. He should have been tongue deep in his mate until nightfall. Instead, he was facing a calamity that had once wiped out every female in his tribas.

Including his own mother.

The Ungazi would pay for all the wrongs they had done.

“Why appear now?” Lans wondered aloud. “Why not sun rotations ago when they were near our hideout?” He recalled Zar’s tale of the huge, mysterious ship that had tried to kidnap Chozo. “Why would they go after Chozo instead of the females at that time?”

“We shall ask them before we end them,” Clavas said, his jaw clenching.

They turned the corner and stepped into a small room. It was the Healer’s own study, fitted with a small damas that spilled into a delicate rock carving, huge interfaces with spinning holos, and more books than Lans had ever seen in his life.

“Lans!” A deep voice cried.

Moments later, Lans was wrapped in two burly, blue arms.

Korben stepped back and smacked him. “You look well.”

Pin approached, his eyes fixed on Lans’s chest where the arrow had pierced him. “I am most grateful to the Healer.”

“Not more than I, I’m sure.” Lans accepted Pin’s embrace.

Tiegan strode up to him next. He said nothing, but the way he clasped Lans’s upper arms spoke volumes.

Lans’s lips twitched when Zar hung back. “Comrade, you are not going to cry, are you?”

“Do not ever scare me like that again.” Zar gave him a hard look. “Apart from Si-Moon, I have no one I trust more than you five. That number cannot shrink.”

“Understood.” Lans nodded.

“Did Eema join the other females?” Korben asked. “My mate was quite anxious to see her when we arrived.”

Lans dipped his head in affirmation.

Tiegan rubbed his chin. His lean face caught the light and a sparkle crept into his blue eyes. “They seemed almost eager to leave us. Do you think they wish to badmouth their mates?”

Zar scowled. “I have given my Si-Moon nothing to complain about.”

“Neither have I.” Pin crossed one ankle over the other. “I did find it strange how happy they were to huddle together.”

“They must be plotting something,” Clavas mused.

Page 72

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

Lans lifted both shoulders. “The females will tell us in their own time. We have bigger matters to attend to.”

The room instantly sobered.

“We had a chat with Chozo over the comms,” Korben said softly, his hands clasped together.

“Chozo did not travel here?”

“We thought it safer to leave him with Rune,” Zar explained. “Since the brunt of the Ungazi seem to be focused on this side of the planet. Rune and Ga Eun will keep him and Leel safe until we can come back for them.”

Lans nodded. “What did he say about the Ungazi?”

“He confirms that the Ungazi ship is the ship that tried to kidnap him.”

Pin pushed off the wall. “They killed many Plutonians in the Heronas annihilations. Na’Vak and the other elders among them.”

Lans stared at his feet. Na’Vak had been around for countless sun rotations. Though he did not always agree with the elder’s philosophies, he had been from an era when his father was alive.

Now the elders were dead.

“Then who will lead?” Clavas asked.

“You,” the Healer croaked, striding into the room. He’d pulled his hair back into a braid and his shrewd purple eyes bore through each of them in turn.

Korben gawked. “Us?”

“Why not you?” Lans frowned. “Every warrior in every tribas respects you.”

“I am the Healer. That is my function. I have no time nor any desire to do anything else.”

Lans’s eyes followed him. “The others will fight.”

“Yes.” The Healer nodded easily.

Zar shook his head. “I have no desire to fight anyone over a position I did not ask for.”

“Neh. You didn’t ask for it, Zar.” The Healer fixed him with a pointed look. “And yet you have been chosen.”

Korben straightened and approached the Healer. “Should we be discussing leaders right now? The Ungazi will follow us here. If they throw those powerful explosives into the sacred lake, they will destroy what feeds your power.” Korben pointed at the Healer. “We need to summon everyone and fight them.”

“Neh.” The Healer shook his head.

“Neh?” Lans barked.

“It will be a fruitless battle. They are stronger than us.” His gaze landed on Lans.
“We have many who are just healing.”

Lans lifted his chin. “I feel fine.”

“Feelings are not always an indicator of the truth. Your body is no longer sending pain signals, but if you push yourself too far too soon, you will face pain much worse than what you started with.”

“It is a sacrifice I will make for my tribas,” Lans said.

“And your mate?” The Healer arched an eyebrow.

Lans’s chin inched down.

“Mate?” Korben whispered.

Four pairs of violet eyes pinned him in place.

Page 73

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

Lans squirmed. “Eema and I...”

“You what?” Pin tilted his head.

“Neh.” Zar made a sound that was part laughter and part gasp. “Neh. I do not believe it.”

Tiegan’s eyes widened.

Clavas smirked. “We had to put up the soundproof shields to give them privacy.”

“Did you need to share that information?” Lans grumbled.

Clavas shrugged mischievously.

The Healer laughed. “It seems facing death gave Lans a new perspective.”

“Fantastic, Lans!” Pin slapped his back. His eyes glowed with sincere happiness and affection.

“You and Eema?” Korben pointed his way. Then his questioning gaze snapped to Clavas. “Him and Eema?”

“Do you not see the gentleness in his eyes?” Clavas asked.

“I thought it was from the Healer’s ministrations?”

“Neh. I only heal the body. Not the heras. The human did that all on her own.”

Korben frowned. “I now owe Sah-ah three gold coins.”

“You bet on me?” Lans’s jaw dropped.

Korben nodded. “I was sure Eema would kill you in your sleep. Sah-ah thought...”
Korben paused as if contemplating whether he should share exactly what his mate had wagered. Finally, he shook his head. “My mate thought otherwise.”

Lans rubbed the back of his neck. He had tried to hide his interest in Eema by growling and snapping at her. Indeed, at certain points, she had raked his patience. However, he had not been as successful at hiding his true feelings as he had thought.

“You care for her?” Korben asked. “Truly?”

“You are asking if I only mated her to have offspring?” He stiffened. “Are you doubting my intentions?”

“Neh. I am only confused. It feels so sudden.”

Lans thought of the moment he first saw Eema outside the beluda. “She is bruised on the inside and I am broken. But when I am with her, she pieces me back together. And I care for her wounds so they do not hurt.” He huffed out a breath. “I cannot live without her.”

The Healer strode toward them. “And that is why I have chosen you. All of you. Your connection to the females will be the beginning of a new Plutonian dawn. Your offspring will rise and be stronger, faster and,” his lips inched up, “may have the skills of the Healer within them.”

“You mean our broods will be able to heal themselves?” Zar asked, his eyes wide.

“And others.”

Lans’s heras throbbed with happiness. He thought of Eema’s soft body beneath him. Her fingernails scratching his back. Her body shuddering with every thrust. The softest of whimpers as he invaded her, suckling her chest and her lips.

Over and over.

Harder.

Harder.

Coupling with his mate could one day result in a brood that would save his species.

Neh. Having offspring was not the reason he had mated Eema, but he looked forward to it with his every breath.

Page 74

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“I can hardly believe it,” Korben breathed.

“But,” the Healer lifted a thick finger, “what we see as a gift, the Ungazi sees as an abomination.”

Lans’s spine dagger shot out of his back at the thought of anyone stealing their future from them.

His future.

Lans snapped it off and stared hard into the distance. “Then we will just have to show them who the true abominations are.”

Twenty-Two

Emma

She flew into Sara’s arms, falling into her like a mother colliding with her child. It felt so good to be back with these women. Emma had trouble expressing her feelings, but she truly, truly cared for them.

“Aw,” Simone cooed. “Group hug!”

Everyone crowded around her.

Emma almost suffocated from their sincere but aggressive squeeze.

When they pulled back, she shyly tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Thank you for sticking around in the caverns. I know you guys would have preferred to be back at the cabin.”

“Are you kidding? We were worried sick about Lans.” Kia took her hand and squeezed. “And you, of course.”

“Here.” Sara presented a cloth-covered basket with a flourish.

“What’s this?” Emma asked, lifting the cover.

“They’re fruits. Piths, actually,” Sara explained, her full lips inching up. “The guys helped us root around for them. We only picked the best and the freshest.”

“Which meant a lot of the guys’ hard work got tossed,” Simone giggled.

Emma grinned. “I wish I could have seen their faces.”

“It was something like this.” Sara dropped her mouth into a small ‘o’ and widened her eyes. “Like a kid who just got told their painting was crap.”

“I feel horrible for laughing,” Emma said, slinging a hand over her stomach and bursting out in loud cackles.

Simone gave her a side-look. “You’re in a good mood.”

“Well, I—” She swallowed and immediately thought of baseball, manure... anything other than Lans. If she even dared to imagine all the things he had done to her last night, her blush would give her away.

“Emma,” Kia said her name in a warning tone, “is there something you want to

share?”

“No, I—I’m just touched that you guys brought food for me. But why only raw ingredients?”

“We know you bake when you’re stressed and we figured the Healer didn’t have a configured oven lying around in his sacred lake, you know?” Simone hopped onto the bed. “So we figured we could make a stew with that together. Get your mind off ...” Simone gestured with a dark, slender hand, “everything.”

“Everything? What in particular? The fact that Lans almost died yesterday? Or the fact that alien Nazis are trying to kill us?”

“Pin said the bomb they threw at the sacred lake was just a warning shot. The Healer put up an energy field so everything they throw at us will launch right back at them.”

“Ha!” Simone kicked her legs. “We showed them.”

“They’re gone now.” Sara nodded, her black coils shaking.

“Gone where? And for how long? You know they’ll be back.” Emma nervously plucked at the sheet on the bed.

Page 75

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“And we’ll be ready.” Kia sat beside her and strung a pale arm over her shoulder. “Lans will be fine. The guys have his back.”

“Since when have you been so worried about Lans?” Sara asked, crawling on the bed and sitting, cross-legged behind her.

Emma dipped her chin in her hands. “He rescued me from that auction house, didn’t he?”

“Oh? Herescuedyou now?” Kia bumped her with her shoulder. “Every time you mention that day, you always say he ‘stole’ or ‘kidnapped’ you. And then you scowl.” Kia laughed. “Likereallyhard.”

“Yeah, well, people change.” She stared into her lap.

Suddenly, Simone froze.

Her dark eyes bounced over Emma’s body. “You did it, didn’t you?”

“Did what?”

“It.” Simone leaned back. “Oh my go—you did it so hard!”

“What?”

“Did you do it on the bed?” Sara pointed. “This bed?”

Simone glanced down.

Kia froze.

Sara gasped.

At once, all three of them sprang off the cot.

Emma raised both hands. "I can explain."

"I knew that bed smelled like sweat and lust," Sara said with a laugh.

"It does not!" Emma bent down and sniffed the cot. She caught the distinct fragrance of Lans. "Hm. Well, maybe a little."

"The guy got shot by a freaking arrow and... you didn't even wait for him to heal?" Simone asked, both hands on her hips and her head cocked. "You couldn't wait till he was out of this... alien hospital? Girl!"

"To be fair, he was the one who was pushing."

"Really?" Simone tilted her head.

"Um..." Emma tried to recall the steps leading up to Lans diving between her legs.

Flashes of memories filled her head.

Her body bouncing harder into the mattress.

Her cries getting lost in his mouth.

His tail sliding inside her.

Explosions of pleasure, pain and heat.

“Girl!” Sara shrieked. “You’re thinking about it, aren’t you? Your face is getting so red.”

The women burst out into loud hoots of laughter.

“Sh!” Emma pressed a finger to her lips, half-embarrassed and half-concerned. “The Plutonians shouldn’t know about us. And there are other patients in here. The noise—”

Page 76

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“The Healer told us to stay in here because he’d put up soundproof shields around the room.” Sara laughed. “And now I know why.”

“Girl, how crazy must they have been that the Healer had to do some construction work?” Simone slapped hands with Sara.

“Okay, we were notthatloud.” Emma’s face was probably completely red.

Nope.

She was sure it was.

Kia strode toward her and rubbed her back. “Honey, I wasn’t there, but as a fellow human who’s mated to her own alien, I can say that you’re wrong. Especially the first time. It’s so overwhelming that we can’t help but lose our minds.”

“So how does it feel?” Sara asked, moving toward her.

“How does what feel?”

“Loving an alien?”

“You mean physically or...?”

Sara waved her handwhichever.

Emma sucked in a breath as she thought about it. “It feels like I’m falling.” She

pressed a hand against her chest. “Like I’m falling and falling and I’ll never reach the bottom. It feels like someone’s taken up space in here and if they leave, I’ll never be the same.”

“Aw.” Kia hugged her around the neck.

Emma squirmed. “I’ve never felt this dependent on anyone. When Lans left for the meeting with the other warriors, I wanted to go with him. Not even to contribute. Just to be near him. And the thought of him getting hurt again makes me so…” Her voice cracked. “So emotional.”

“We all go through that.”

“But I hate it.” Emma shot to her feet, dislodging Kia’s arms. “I hate being like this. I don’t understand what’s happening to me.”

“That’s love, honey,” Sara said.

“Well, it sucks.”

“There she is.” Simone nodded. “That’s the Emma I know.”

She shook her head. “Enough about me. Let’s talk business. The last time the guys had a mission, we came up with a plan of our own.” She looped a circle with her finger. “Is that why you’re here? Is the council of females in session?”

A huge grin broke out on Simone’s face. Her white teeth flashed against her gorgeous dark skin and made Emma’s lips turn up in response. Kia’s reaction was equally exuberant. She chewed on her bottom lip as if she wanted to explode with a secret that wasn’t hers to tell.

Sara cleared her throat. “Actually, we wanted to lock ourselves in here for a different reason.”

“Yeah?” Emma’s eyes bounced from Kia to Simone and back to Sara. “What’s going on?”

Sara tugged on one of her springy curls. “Well, my period was a couple months late.”

“And...” Emma hurried her, leaning on every word.

“I was feeling kind of queasy, but I thought it was just a bad reaction to alien food.”

“No!” Emma’s eyes widened. “You’re—”

“Yes!” Sara squealed.

“And how do you know for sure?”

“I felt movement.” Sara’s dark skin glowed in the morning light. “It probably sounds crazy, but I know. And one of the reasons I came here—apart from checking up on you and Lans, of course—was to get checked out by the Healer.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“Have you told Korben yet?”

“No.” Sara shook her head and her curls wiped her cheeks.

“He’s going to be ecstatic!” Emma wrapped her friend in a hug. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you,” Sara sniffed.

“Don’t you dare cry,” Kia scolded. “If you cry, I cry.”

“It’s weird to think about it,” Sara confessed, dabbing at the corners of her eyes. “A few weeks ago, I was a normal girl with a normal life. And then I got kidnapped by jelly aliens and taken to this crazy planet. And then I fell in love with a Plutonian warrior and now we’re having a kid.”

Emma’s smile froze on her face.

Just a few weeks ago.

A few weeks.

A few.

Fear threw a bucket of ice down her back. She reached out to Sara. “But didn’t you say that Ga Eun took three years to get pregnant?”

“Yes, but every woman is different.” Sara knitted her eyebrows. “Are you okay, Emma? You look a little queasy.”

“Maybe she’s pregnant too,” Simone joked, elbowing Kia.

Their laughter sounded distant to her panicking ears. Emma stared at the bed in horror, recalling all the wicked ways the alien had invaded her. Lans had emptied his seed into her body more times than she could count.

It had taken Ga Eun three years.

It took Sara three weeks.

Emma slipped a hand over her stomach as dread pooled in her veins. At this moment, there was a chance she could be carrying Lans’s child.

Twenty-Three

Lans

Walking down the smooth hallway leading to his room, he spotted Sah-ah through an open door. She had her hands deep in a bowl and seemed to be cooking something. White dust covered her wrist to her elbows, a sharp yet beautiful contrast to her dark skin.

“Lans!” Sah-ah waved.

He changed course and strode closer to the room, wedging his body through the door. He did not want to stay long, but he would not ignore her greeting.

His eyes scanned the open flame where meat was roasting. It had been skinned, so he

could not tell what it was, but the savory smell made his stomach gurgle.

“How are you feeling?” Sah-ah asked, pulling her hands away from the bowl and wiping them on a cloth.

“A little tired.”

“Is the meeting done?”

“Neh. I was kicked out.” He shrugged. “The Healer instructed me to rest.”

“Getting shot through the gut with an arrow must suck. You should take it slow.” She smiled and her entire face glowed.

He studied her keenly. Had Sah-ah always looked that shiny? Lans knew her skin was dark and her hair was thick and coarse, but she seemed to behave, act, and even smell like the other ladies with lighter skin tones.

Perhaps it was the flickering fire. But neh. As she waited for him to speak, her hand rose and covered her belly protectively. There was something more to her now.

Page 78

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

He thought of what they had discussed with the Healer. His comrades had assumed the attack by the Ungazi had been random.

But what if they were wrong?

What if the destroyers had been drawn to this damas because they sensed a Plutonian and human child was forthcoming?

“If you’re looking for Emma, we kicked her out too,” Sah-ah said, gesturing to a table laden with treats. “She was working herself into a frenzy.”

“She made all that?” Lans’s eyes bugged when he saw the display.

“The woman was cooking like crazy. I know she bakes when she’s stressed, but I’ve never seen her so... intense. She must have been really worried about you.”

“Indeed.”

“Sorry. I don’t mean to talk your ear off.” Sah-ah shook her springy coils out of her eyes. “You must be eager to get back to your mate.”

He gave her a polite nod.

Indeed he was.

But the suspicion that Sah-ah was with child stuck with him.

Korben had told them of Ga Eun and Rune's brood, but Rune seemed adamant about hiding his family from the tribas. Lans had not understood that at first, but he did now.

Eema meant the world to him. If he could sequester her away from this madness with the Ungazi and the responsibility of being an elder's mate, he would. In a herasbeat.

Lans quickened his pace until he stood in front of the room he shared with his mate. The soundproof shields were still up. He pressed his hands against the holo and heard the familiar zap that proved they were on.

Good.

The Healer had instructed him to rest, but Lans had been missing Eema all day. It was as if her presence was his food and her laughter was his drink. If he did not have regular fills of her, he became weary.

He stepped through the door and heard something rattling. Stopping at the entrance, his eyes fastening immediately to Eema. She stood bent over a case of some kind. Instead of the suit she had worn for several sun rotations, she now wore a soft tunic that was similar to the one she had worn in his dream. The fabric fell over her curves and highlighted her ethereal beauty.

I cannot believe this female is mine.

Lans's tattooed chest rose and fell with each hungry breath. He let the silence linger for a moment as he leaned against the doorway and stared at her.

Her body moved with such grace and elegance. Her long hair was as soft as her skin. He traced her eyes, nose and lips. Admiring her mouth made his pants tighten. They were full and curved. A lovely shape. Like tender flora. How he loved suckling on

them. Loved when her mouth opened to receive his tongue. Loved the way she gasped in surprise every time she realized how long and flexible his tongue was.

Lans's eyes slid down. Had he ever seen a neck so delicate? His mouth went dry thinking of how sensitive she was there. How his mouth nuzzled against her throat in delight. He'd lightly bitten her there and left a mark that he was proud of.

Eema whirled around.

The moment she saw him, she yelped. "Lans!"

"My heras." He narrowed his gaze on her tunic. "You have changed."

"When Tiegan dropped off Lilliana and Chozo, Ga Eun sent him back with clothes and things. Isn't she sweet?"

"Indeed." He moved toward her.

Her gaze turned skittish and she inched back. "How did the meeting go?"

"The Healer made us elders of the entire tribas."

"Of everyone? Like all Plutonians?"

He nodded, too distracted to devote himself to conversation. Since the moment he met Eema, he had been enraptured by her. It was more than her appearance that spoke to him. It was the way she carried herself—full of fire and fight. Unwilling to let her circumstances break her.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

Before he had even understood what he was feeling, he was already hers. And now, staring at her, he realized how privileged he was to be able to touch her and hold her. She was a dream from another world and yet, she had become his mate.

Everything he had ever wanted was in his hands.

“I should,” her tongue darted out to lick her lips, “I should check on the food.”

Lans nabbed her before she could escape him. Pulling her closer, he dropped his head into the crook of her neck and licked her. Mm. “Sah-ah left instructions to keep you occupied.”

“She did not.” That familiar flush crept up her cheeks.

Lans found himself delighted by it. “Very well. She did not say it in those words, but that is what I heard.”

Eema shook her head. “You’d think someone with super hearing would get the message right.”

“You would think,” he mumbled, his eyes on her lips. Had Eema still not seen his intentions? Perhaps he should be more aggressive in order to bed her.

Eema spun away, slipping out of his grasp. “What about the Ungazi? Did you figure out a way to defeat them?”

“Not as yet.” Lans frowned.

Eema was behaving strangely. His gaze ran the length of her and mating instincts flushed his body at the sight, making his hardness strain almost painfully against his pants. He needed to touch her, but he settled for admiring her openly instead.

Dark hair spilled over her slim shoulders. Her long legs were pale and toned. Her eyes captured pieces of the sky.

She was perfection.

She was everything.

“Is something the matter, Eema?” he asked pointedly.

She returned to the wooden case, giving him her back. He leaned forward, waiting to hear what she had to say. As the male, it was his responsibility to fix whatever was bothering her. He would do anything.

Anything but let her go.

She shook her head. “No. It’s... later. Let’s just try to get through this crisis.”

“Eema...”

“It’s nothing. Really. I just... want to hear more about your day.” She smiled slightly.

“That’s what couples do on this planet, right? Talk?”

“They do more than talk.”

She inched back. “Lans.”

He sighed, disappointed at her reluctance but trying to be respectful. “Very well.” He

searched for a topic and recalled Sah-ah's condition. "Have you noticed anything strange about Sah-ah?"

"Strange? How?" Eema pulled her hair up.

He watched her intently, noticing the delicate slope of her neck as she gathered her hair. The dark strands swung back and forth. She tilted her head just so, providing the perfect angle for him to suck on her.

His fingers twitched, begging to touch her. "I saw Korben's mate protecting her stomach and wondered if she was with child."

Eema froze.

His eyes snapped away from her neck and found hers. "Am I right?" Lans laughed heartily. "Korben will be bursting with joy."

"I know." She tugged on her ear. "It's kind of quick though."

"Neh. I would have a child with you in the next sun rotation if Destin sees it fit."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

She turned around. “Tomorrow?”

“Of course. It is a dream of mine to have broods.” He chuckled. “Of which you know.”

“So that’s important to you.”

“Yes.”

“And you think that’s an important function of a female?” she asked, her voice strung tight.

“Females are the only ones who can deliver broods.”

“Oh?” Her voice rose. “So is that all we’re good for?”

Lans almost stumbled back. “Eema, I did not say that.”

“Is that how things work here? You make all the decisions and I get to cook the food and have the children?”

“Female...”

“I’m supposed to be naked in bed when you get home. When you’re horny. Whenever you ask. In fact, you don’t even have to ask. I just make sure my legs are open when you growl at me. Make sure I take you hard and hold you close, so you can ‘pump me with your seed’!”

Annoyance filled his chest. “Eema.”

“Is that how you do things, Lans?”

“We do not need to have broods right away.”

“But we better have some eventually, right?”

His jaw clenched. “Eema, where is this coming from?”

“Nothing!” She stormed past him. “I’m going to check on the food.”

He reached out and grabbed her hand. “Neh. You will go nowhere until you explain why you are so angry.”

“Oh? So you’re giving orders now?”

“Eema—”

“Let me go!” She wrenched her hands, trying to pull it free.

He released her, but strode in front of the door and crossed his arms. His fiery human could blow all the flames she wanted. Lans was not letting her out of this room until she was in his arms and all was well again.

Twenty-Four

Emma

She glared at Lans’s dangerously beautiful face. His irritation snapped through her neural connector and only agitated her even more.

This stupid mate connection.

When she'd agreed to take the neural implant weeks ago, she had no idea what it was really capable of.

“The connector will translate for us so we can understand them.” That's all Sara told her.

The implant would change the Plutonian language to English.

But it had done so much more.

Page 81

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

Because of that tiny slice of technology in her head, she could connect remotely to Helix and she could feel all of Lan's strong emotions. They danced in her mind, pressing against her own riotous feelings.

Emma scowled. Right now, she didn't want to be in Lan's head. And she didn't want him in hers either.

She felt like she was going crazy.

The world was moving too fast for her to keep up.

They were moving...

She needed a minute to breathe.

They'd jumped from hating each other to liking each other to sleeping with each other and becoming mates.

Now they were talking about babies.

Emma dug her nails into her palm.

Helplessness clouded her vision.

It was irrational.

She knew that.

But she also didn't want to let that misery go.

It fed her anger.

Like a cloak, she wrapped the fury around herself.

She would never take it off.

Never.

The moment she did, she would fall apart and the truth of her insecurities would rise to the surface like dry, dead leaves in a tortured sea.

She had been strong all her life.

All of it.

There had not been a moment that she had been allowed to cry and throw herself a pity party. Those parties took too much energy. They required too much time and she had never given herself the luxury.

Now that she was on an alien planet, things hadn't changed.

Emma lifted her chin. "I think mating you was a mistake."

The words echoed in the room.

Still.

Cold.

Sharp.

Her nostrils flared and her chest warred with a million conflicting emotions.

Lans had made himself very clear.

Crystal clear.

Page 82

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

He wanted many children.

He wanted them soon.

And he wanted them with her.

That scared her more than any Ungazi or Heronas guards ever could.

And yeah. Maybe it was a conversation they should have had before the mating, but it wasn't like she had been thinking with her head that night.

The way he'd touched her.

The way he'd called her name.

The way his tongue had slid over her thighs.

She'd been putty in his hands.

Lans's stare turned intense and tingles skipped down her spine.

Hell.

No.

She was going to hold strong.

He wasn't going to shake her up.

The blue warrior took a firm step toward her. "You do not mean that."

"You should have chosen someone else if you wanted your mate barefoot and pregnant." Her voice didn't shake, but her legs did as he moved close to her. "We should have thought of that before—"

A low growl rumbled in his throat. "Donotspeak for me, Eema."

"Are you getting upset because I'm too close to the truth? Because all I am is a babymaker for you?" She hurled the words like poison. Like the arrow that had pierced his chest.

Guilt ate up at her stomach. Chewed at the nerves that were pulled tight.

She should stop.

She should explain why she felt this way.

But that would mean exposing everything she was to Lans.

She'd already allowed him to drill deep inside her. Further than any man on earth got access to. But letting him know why she was so against having children...

It would mean letting him so deep into her heart that she could never recover if he left her. If he got angry with her. Or if he died.

Lans's brows pulled together. "If it bothers you so much to have my brood—"

Emma crossed her arms over her chest.

“Then,” his purple eyes narrowed, “we shall not have any.”

Lans backed away from her. Emma was immediately filled with both guilt and fury.

She had never been this torn up over anyone.

Her heart had never been so shaken.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

She looked at Lans standing in the doorway. Desire crept over the anger as she allowed herself to want him. Silky black hair flowed over his broad shoulders. His naked chest was toned and ripped. That jaw line was more pronounced now as he clenched it.

He was beautiful. As much as his sharp chin and that dangerous scar over his eye hardened him, it carved a stunning face too.

He deserved to have kids.

He would be such a great father.

His integrity was unshakeable. He treated her with respect and honor. He was loyal to his friends and his species. He protected her since the moment they met—and Emma hadn't exactly made it easy on him. Despite trying to run away and get on his nerves over and over again, he had never disrespected or intimidated her.

What she wanted was a direct and devastating clash to what Lans did. But, suddenly, the thought of retreating from Lans made her heart bawl out like a sentient piñata.

Conflicting emotions tore through her.

Guilt. Need.

Lust. Anger.

Hurt. Pain.

She took a step forward. “Just give me up.”

“Never.” His eyes burned. His voice thickened. “I would rather die.”

She burned in the blistering heat of her desire. Of her anger.

Her past was dragging her down.

But it shouldn't take Lans down too.

She scolded him sharply. “Leave.”

“Your pain is in my head, Eema.” He glared at her. “Your anguish is mine.”

“Run away, Lans! I'm giving you a chance. I can never be what you need.”

Instead of heeding her words, Lans pulsed forward. He grabbed her by the back of the neck, his other hand sliding down her throat. His blue fingers, so long and thick, caused tiny shockwaves to course down her spine.

“I will never let you go, Eema,” he said roughly, a bite in his voice that warned he was still irritated.

“I know,” she snapped.

And then she rose on her toes and met the lips descending toward her.

Their kiss was a crashing of nerves, rage, and a dangerous, haunting lust that thickened in her throat and made her movements wild. Raunchy. Deviant. His groin stabbed her thighs, bursting against his pants as if he were already inside her.

She licked at his tongue, taking the full length of it into her mouth and gasping as it continued to fill her. He pulled it out suddenly and then stabbed it back in, finding all the pleasure sensors she never knew existed inside her mouth.

Her chest heaved and her body arched, pushing into his as if they were already becoming one. Her fingers rose and she clawed at the back of his neck. Desperation clouded her mind, drowning in the feverishly violent kiss.

Lans's tongue was pounding into her mouth. It felt like a preview of what he would do to the rest of her. Her heart raced and she groaned loudly, almost delirious from how badly she wanted to push his head down and feel his tongue on other parts of her.

Emma wrapped her arms around his neck, rubbing her hips against his and almost exploding when his hardness bucked against her center. She was kissing him back so passionately that she knew her lips would be bruised when he was finished with her.

Lans's tail wound around her like a noose, tightening around her waist and freeing his hands so he didn't have to hold her to keep her close to his body. She'd never thought that a tail would be so devastatingly hot, but the moment she felt it against her, Emma's core jumped in anticipation. She was soaking wet and panting harder than if she'd gone on a run.

Lan's musky scent enraptured her.

It smelled like stardust. Like sweat. Like him.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

It turned her knees to jelly. “Please.”

She didn’t know what she was begging him for.

For more?

For him to stop and walk away before she fell any deeper?

For him to tear her apart and piece her back together so he could do it again?

“I will show you, Eema.” He took one of her arms and pinned it on the wall. The rough cavern scraped against her flesh, sending goosebumps sprinting up her skin. “That I would vanquish the moon if it dared to harm you.” He took her other arm and planted that one on the wall too. A flash of heat slid through her body as she waited for more. “That I would fall on my own dagger if it meant keeping you safe.”

His deep, guttural voice had her more wound up than a plush toy.

She was throbbing everywhere.

Every vein.

Every muscle.

On fire.

Too impatient to let him tease her with his breath and his snarling words, Emma lifted

one leg and wrapped it around his waist, jerking the alien flat on top of her. With her leg in the air, the tunic lifted and pushed up around her thighs, exposing her creamy white skin and knitted underwear.

She felt a flash of guilt for ruining the pretty panties so soon after receiving them, but that feeling fled when Lans stared at her exposed skin. His eyes were more black than purple. He looked like an animal. Like a beast.

Her heart pattered loudly as the alien growled and dragged a hand down her side. He captured both her hips and flipped her around, so her face was pressed into the wall. Roughly, he dragged her tunic up to her waist, not bothering to undress her, only caring to bare enough of her.

She felt a cool wind on her backside and knew that he was staring at her exposed cheeks. Seeking his heat, she pushed out her rear and they both hissed when her body made contact with his pants.

Lans stepped right up against her, his chest brushing her back and his hands cupping her chest through her top, soothing circles around her sensitive skin until her chest was hard enough to drill into the wall. “I would conquer this planet to lay it at your feet, but I will not—neh, I will never let you out of my arms. No matter what I have to sacrifice or who I have to turn my back on.” His tongue dipped to her skin. Slid over the sweat on her neck. Swirled close to her ear.

She exploded.

Without warning. Without preparation.

Her body convulsed, clenched and released.

And he hadn't even invaded her yet.

But he would.

He did.

Right there in the middle of her body's violent shudders.

She felt him push into her and her mind almost tipped into infinity. Her fingers clawed at the wall and, when she could not make purchase, Emma pushed her hands behind her back and grabbed ahold of her mate's waist.

His blue skin felt hot to the touch. Rough. Muscular.

She found his rhythm and pumped with him, taking more than she could handle and screaming from the pleasure that rushed through her veins. Her moans bounced off the wall and mingled with Lans's hard grunts.

His heat punished her.

His scent overwhelmed her.

His touch.

His lips.

Page 85

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

He surrounded her, his hand touching every inch of her body. Every strain of her heart. Going deeper and wading through all her crazed emotions until there was only one.

Desire.

She needed him to quiet the noise in her head.

She needed him to make her forget that they were still at an impasse. That no solution had been found regarding kids.

He was thrusting too hard. Too angrily. Too much. She could no longer hold on to him and returned her palms to the wall to keep upright. Heat skittered over her neck and down to her core. Pressing her hands flat for balance, she used the wall to push against his force, her body coiling and tightening as he filled her to the hilt. Her mouth opened in a delirious gasp when his tail slipped under her tunic and went to work on her chest.

Emma fell into a tailspin of pleasure and need.

So good.

So good.

The alien's lips suckled her ear as she whimpered, unravelling so violently this time that she felt like her skin was peeling off.

Lans kept pumping through it all. “Promise me you will never ask me to give you up again.”

She moaned, unable to speak since she was too busy screaming his name and begging for mercy.

“Promise, Eema,” he growled, taking his tail away.

“I-I promise,” she panted.

He went still inside her but did not back off. His fingers glided around her hip, to her stomach and between her legs. “Now I will punish you because I cannot hold back.”

The alien was threatening her and all she could do was bob her head like a dog.

“Would you like me to hurt you, Eema?” Lans whispered.

“Yes. Oh, yes.” Adrenaline pounded through her veins, spiking her pulse up to a hundred. She thought about asking for details—how much hurt was he talking about here? Shouldn’t there be a safe word? But she was too drunk on lust to turn this alien brute away and, deep down, Emma knew that Lans would give her more pleasure than pain no matter what.

She was ready.

Lans slipped his fingers lower.

Lower.

Then he touched her.

Teased her.

And his hips began to move in slow, deliberate circles.

The alien claimed her completely.

He broke her down until she was nothing but moans and cries and desperate whimpers that didn't even sound human or alien or like anything she'd ever heard.

She forgot about babies and her past and the Ungazi.

There were no thoughts.

No anger.

No fear.

Beneath her alien warrior's hands, she became liquid fire.

Twenty-Five

Lans

He wiped the sheen of Eema's essence from his chin and pulled his pants back on. His tail would need to be washed, since nearly a quarter of it had been inside her as well, but he had no energy to worry about cleanliness. He was exhausted from the angry coupling and could barely move.

Despite his languid bones, a ball of fire still burned in his stomach.

Quiet.

Simmering.

It blazed like an eternal flame.

Eema.

The seren.

After hurting her, she asked if she could hurt him back.

Then she'd gotten on her knees in the cavern.

Taken his hardness into her slender palms.

She'd done unspeakable things.

With her mouth.

With her tongue.

Even now, he could feel her perfect lips gliding down his length.

Could see the fury in her eyes as she knelt.

And yet, even in that position, she was the one with the power.

She made him growl with her strokes against his hardness. Made him roar with her little nips at his tip. Made him call for mercy in the ancient Plutonian tongue as she made a fist and squeezed him until he was dry.

The urgency in her movements had caught him by surprise.

She wanted to drown in him.

And she nearly had. He had emptied himself far longer than he should have given how much he'd already released into her body before then.

Lans moved with delirious languidness as he stretched his arms.

He had not been prepared for it.

For her.

Eema almost made him forget about her sudden words of anger.

Perhaps that was her intent.

To obliterate every thought in his head.

To shake his focus.

Lans would have to admit that she had succeeded.

Page 87

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

He turned to watch her as she slipped the tunic over her back. He saw bruises on her hips where he'd gripped her as he'd mated her against the wall. It was only a flash as the fabric slid down to cover the marks, but it was enough to paint his mind in red.

Lans winced.

Again.

He had lost his control again.

She was too small. Too delicate. Even if she accepted, he should have held back rather than give in to the urge to break her. But it was Eema who made him lose control. Eema who had urged him. Who had demanded more.

More.

More.

Harder.

She had scratched at his back.

Cried in passion.

Taken him deeper and deeper.

She had given her all.

In doing so, she had torn through him .

Turned him to dust.

To nothing.

He could not understand his female.

Lans scratched the back of his neck. Had she started a fight just to coax out his impatience? Just to make him rough with her when he invaded her heat?

Neh.

That would be foolish to even consider.

There was more behind this behavior.

Something deeper.

Eema had distracted him when she instigated a mating, but if he ignored the problem now, it would only grow into something serious.

“Eema,” he caught her eye as she turned to face him, “about what we were discussing before—”

There was a knock on the door.

Lans growled. “What?”

“The food is prepared. You must eat.” The Healer’s voice sounded muffled through the wall.

Puzzled, Lans strode to the door and opened it. “Healer?”

“I asked your comrades to fetch you, but they seemed certain that you would be...”
His eyebrow nubs arched in Eema’s direction, “otherwise occupied.”

Eema’s face flushed.

The Healer nodded at him. “But you have not had a proper meal since dawn. You must eat something.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:09 pm

“Later,” he said impatiently. “My mate and I will bathe in the lakes. Our appearance and smells are not... suitable for company.” He saw the wet spots on Eema’s tunic and shook his head. “We need privacy.”

The Healer smiled. “You are not the only couple in this disheveled state. You may bathe after.”

Eema shifted her tunic. “You should listen to the Healer, Lans.”

“Your mate is very wise.” The Healer jutted his chin down, his lips twitching in amusement.

Lans sighed.

Very well. Perhaps he could speak to Eema about her outburst when they returned to bed.

He followed her down the long hallway that led back to the meal room.

“Why is it so quiet?” Eema asked the Healer as their steps echoed in the cavern. “Don’t you have any patients?”

“I moved them out so that you and your human comrades could move freely without fear of being discovered.” The Healer arched an eyebrow. “Also, the other warriors retired to their rooms after the meeting. They met their mates and... ehem... we heard many couplings. I do not have enough soundproof shields for all of you and so I thought clearing the area best.”

Lans restrained his smile behind a cough.

“Why are you going to all that trouble if you’re just going to out us eventually?” Eema asked, her cheeks turning red.

Lans frowned. “Out you?”

“Yes.” She met his gaze, her expression carefully guarded. “If you’re going to become the elders of the Plutonians, you’re going to have to tell everyone the truth eventually.” She huffed. “Although I don’t know how well that will go down since we’re kind of the reason the destroyer-alien-things are after you again.”

“I did not consider that.”

“I did,” the Healer said, opening the door to the meal room, “but I was hoping we would discuss that after dinner.”

“Discuss what?” Sah-ah asked, sitting upon Korben’s lap. The female flashed Eema a worried look.

Eema shook her head. “The fact that the guys being elders of the tribe means that we’ll have to be shown to the world.”

“Shown? Shown how?” Kia scrunched her nose.

Pin kissed her temple. “Do not fret, my heras. You will not have to introduce yourself if you are not comfortable.”

“I thought we were keeping ourselves a secret though.” Si-Moon glanced at Zar. “Isn’t that what you told me?”

He scowled. “Indeed. And I would prefer to keep it that way.”

“We prepare for war.” The Healer sat at the head of the table. “We will ask your comrades to put their lives at stake to protect our species.” His sharp eyes zipped around the table. “To protect each of you. Do you not think they deserve to know?”

A quiet hush fell on the table.

Lans’s neural connector snapped with an emotion from Eema.

Guilt.

He glanced at his mate and found her staring at the hem of her tunic, lost in thought. Lans took her fingers in his grip. “The topic would have been broached eventually.”

“I know,” she whispered, “but some of us have more to protect than others. I shouldn’t have been so inconsiderate and started talking about it first.”

He shook his head. “Neh. You worry too much.”

Eema’s smile was faint but at least her guilt eased.

As they sat around the table, Lans realized that her guilt had felt familiar in his head. It had lingered beneath the layers of her lust, sneaking beneath the surface even as she bucked her hips against him in their private quarters.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

It had been there through the stroking of her heat.

Through their kisses.

Even through her pleasing of him.

The guilt had never gone away.

But what had his mate done to wear this burden on her shoulders? What did she feel so sorry about?

“Is that really the best option?” Korben leaned his elbow on the table. “If we tell them of the humans, they may revolt.”

“We only did what our ancestors did as well.” Zar growled.

“Your ancestors?” Sah-ah plucked at the tumari.

“How do you think we have strains of Plutonian blood, Sara?” Kia teased. “We weren’t the first women to fall for this sexiness.” She gestured to Pin’s entire body and gave him a wink.

The warrior fought back a smile, clearly proud to be complimented by his mate.

“What are our options?” Si-Moon asked. “Can’t we be like... ghost mates?”

“I’m sorry. What?” Sah-ah blinked rapidly.

As the table erupted in chatter, Eema remained subdued, only participating when she was called upon.

Lans would not have found this out of the ordinary before. The female had always been the quietest of the humans, always observing thoughtfully and only speaking when it was to argue with him. He always seemed to bring out the temper in her and it had amused him when they fought.

But now their circumstances had changed.

He had no desire to fight with Eema, at least not about anything as serious as what they had done in the private quarters.

And now, he could read her emotions.

She wrapped an arm around her elbow, nibbling at her food. Though he had loosened her body with his kisses, she seemed to have tightened right back up again.

Another round of mating would not open her heart to him.

He had to investigate her true feelings.

Now.

Lans was about to get up from the table and cart Eema—over his shoulder if he had to—back to their room, when footsteps thundered in the distance.

Silence swept over the table.

Tension split the air.

Lans's eyes widened and he placed a hand in front of Eema. Every warrior in the room did the same, moving in front of their mates and fixing their eyes on the door.

Clavas strode to the front of the table. "Healer, are you expecting company?"

"Neh." The Healer tapped his interface and widened a holo.

"What is it?" Tiegan asked quietly, his muscles tense.

The Healer gasped. "My security fields have been breached."

"By the Ungazi?" Lans asked, his voice low.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

“Neh.” The Healer glanced at him with worried eyes. “By our own.”

“Plutonians.”

Shouts erupted, echoing to their ears like low thunder.

“They sound close,” Sah-ah said, her eyebrows pinched together.

“Yes.” Eema met his eyes. “And they sound angry.”

Twenty-Six

Emma

“This way!” Clavas opened a square hatch and pointed down a flight of hewn stairs that looked older than any of the Egyptian tombs she’d seen on TV. He hurried them forward, his voice low but urgent.

“Why are we hiding again?” Simone asked. “It’s not like we did anything wrong.”

“Didn’t you hear the anger in their voice when they called for the Healer?” Sara shuddered. “I bet they spent hours sharpening those pitchforks.”

“They may not mean you harm.”

“And yet we’re being locked away like our life’s in danger,” Kia spat out.

“The sons of the elders are angry and grieving. They will not want to hear your rational thoughts. We cannot take the chance that they discover, not only your presence here, but your meaning to the future elders of the tribas.”

Kia frowned. “I get that. But running and hiding isn’t in my nature. Not anymore.”

Emma wanted to voice her agreement but, to be honest, she couldn’t.

She was a coward.

Instead of talking to Lans about why she didn’t want to have children, she’d snapped at him. When he’d asked deeper, she’d ignored him.

Back in the room, she had the perfect opportunity to come clean and what had she done? She let the alien destroy her against a wall. Rather than talk things through, she’d screamed his name and driven deep into an ecstasy that only his body could bring.

But it was just a distraction.

An escape.

For a coward.

If anyone had a right to be brave, it was those girls.

But it wasn’t her.

Not anymore.

“Be quiet.Please.” Clavas pressed a finger to his blue lips.

She glanced behind him. There was a long hallway that wrapped around the caverns. The Healer had given Clavas a map so they did not get lost.

“No one will be able to find you down there,” the old Plutonian had said before rising regally to distract the crowd so they could get away.

Clavas met her eyes. “Your mates will be back for you.”

“The mob isn’t going to...hurtthem, are they?” Sara winced, her usually flawless dark skin wrinkling in concern.

“Of course not. Our guys would beat them to pulps before that happened,” Simone snapped, but she didn’t sound sure.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

“Imagine it from their shoes. If my dad just died and I found out the reason was because a few of my family members had slept with our mortal enemies, I wouldn’t be too happy,” Kia mumbled.

“Humans aren’t the Plutonian’s enemies.”

“But we’re not exactly friends either.” Kia pointed out. “And we did bring the ‘purifier of alien bloodlines’ right to their door.”

Clavas gave them all a reassuring nod. “The Healer will take care of these concerns. You are being hidden away as an extra safety measure. If or when your presence is revealed to the rest of the tribas, it will be when you are ready.”

His interface glowed.

Emma recognized the symbols popping up. It meant that either Korben, Lans, Tiegan, Pin or Zar was calling him. While they were running from the auction house where Lans had saved her, Emma had seen the blue warrior make many calls to his friends.

Clavas looked straight at her. “All will be well, Eema.”

She nodded.

To be honest, the Plutonians breaking through the Healer’s security shields were the least of her concerns. Right now, Emma needed to decide if she would allow Lans to break past hers.

As Clavas left, she studied her surroundings, noticing the zaptens that edged toward them. Helix nudged her in the side and she rubbed her hands over his metal spikes.

Sara laughed, standing next to Korben's zaptен. "Even though Helix is the most scary-looking one with all the spikes," she pointed to Emma, "she's the most affectionate."

"Right?" Simone chuckled.

"Kind of like Lans, huh?" Kia patted Pin's zaptен. "He didn't take his eyes off you once at dinner."

Emma sighed. "I guess."

Sara, Simone and Kia all exchanged glances. In a snap, the girls crowded around her.

Sara folded her arms over her chest. "What's up?"

"Nothing."

"Is something wrong?" Simone leaned closer. "Are you in pain?"

Kia's eyes slid over her. "Are you sore?" She pointed to Emma's hips and lowered her voice to a whisper. "I'm guessing Lans threw you off the deep end too soon. You're bruising." She patted her shoulder. "Do you want me to ask for medicine?"

"No, I—I mean yeah. Lans got rough, but he didn't hurt me there." She sighed. "Something's wrong, and no, it's not physical."

Sara rubbed her stomach and Emma's gaze fastened there. Her emotions bubbled to the surface. She wished she could distract herself from the pain, but there was no

Lans to seduce right now. She couldn't fall back on that coping method until they'd sent the other Plutonians away.

Sara froze. "Are you... crying?"

"No." She sniffed and turned away, willing her tears to stay locked up. "I haven't cried since I was a kid."

"Well, maybe you should start," Kia cooed softly.

Simone wrapped her arms around Emma's neck. "You don't have to tell us what's wrong, but just know that we're here for you."

"Thanks." Emma sucked in a deep breath. "I'm just... sorting through something right now."

Sorting through her future.

Her past.

"I..." Emma sighed. "I can't have kids."

Everyone froze.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

The story went so much deeper than that.

So much.

But this was all she could share.

All she had the courage to.

Sara's expression turned crestfallen. "Emma, I'm so sorry. But you shouldn't beat yourself up about something you can't control. You are just as valuable and important to—"

"No." She shook her head. "No, it's—I can have kids." She glanced away. "I just don't want them."

She felt the why bubbling on Sara's tongue, but the other woman didn't voice it.

Simone cleared her throat. "Have you told Lans?"

"In so many words."

"I'm betting he said it was fine," Kia said quietly. "Because that's what Pin would say."

"Lans did tell me he was fine. He said he could live without everything else, but he couldn't live without me."

“But you don’t believe him,” Sara said, her eyes soft.

“I was there, you know? In his dream.”

Simone gave her a puzzled look.

“When Lans wasn’t waking up, the Healer strengthened our connection through a blood transfusion and I was able to enter his mind.”

“Whoa.” Simone looked impressed.

“I was his mate in the dream.”

“And this was before you were his actual mate?” Kia clarified.

“Yes. He wanted me.” Her bottom lip trembled. “And he wanted children.”

Sara tried to console her. “I’m sure he can—”

“No,” Emma snapped. “You don’t understand. Lans almost died because he preferred that dream world to real life. He was willing to stay there forever. When I told him the truth, that his parents were dead and he didn’t have kids... I saw him mourn over that.”

Simone sighed heavily.

Emma swallowed past the lump in her throat. “He thinks he can be satisfied with me now, but one day, he’s going to wake up and he’s going to realize that he wants more. That he’s always wanted more. And his vow to stay with me won’t be enough to keep him.”

“Plutonians keep their word,” Kia said with conviction.

“And Lans is as honorable as they come,” Sara added.

“Which is why he deserves to have what he wants.” She rubbed her temple. “Can you guys cut out the pity looks? It’s annoying.”

Simone looked away. “Pity? What pity? These tears are pure love, sis.”

Emma forced a smile and changed the subject. “I wish I could hear what those Plutonians were saying about us.”

“How did they find out we were here?” Kia wondered.

“Zar told me that the previous elders were already suspicious. Maybe the rest of the tribas were too.” Simone shrugged. “It is a little annoying, right? I kind of wish we could stay just us. Me and Zar. Keep that bubble for a bit longer.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

Helix's metal gears whirred as she moved away from Emma after seeing that she would not receive any more attention. The machine returned to her friends who were resting near the other end of the room.

"You're not happy about him being chosen as an elder?" Emma asked. Focusing on someone else's misery would help her ignore her own. It wasn't as good as Lans's mouth sucking the life out of hers, but it would do for now.

Simone frowned. "I'm happy for him, but not if it means that he has to lie to the very people he's trying to lead. How do you gain someone's trust with a huge secret like that? You heard the Healer. These evil aliens are only killing out the Plutonians because of us. You'd think that information is worth sharing."

"They're only trying to protect us." Sara came to Korben's defense. "They don't want us to get hurt."

"So why don't we show them that we're not afraid?" Emma blurted.

Everyone turned and stared at her again.

She lifted her chin, latching onto a bit of courage that was starting to rise inside her. Nodding to the zaptens, she spoke firmly. "Why don't we show everyone?"

Sara's lips inched up.

Simone nodded.

Kia threw her hand forward. "I'm in."

"So am I." Simone joined the huddle.

"Sara?" Emma asked.

Sara threw her hand on top of the pile. "What the heck?"

Emma turned to stare at Helix. "Let's do this."

Twenty-Seven

Lans

As Clavas hurried away with Eema and the other females, Lans let his spine dagger sharpen until it shot through his skin. Turning, he caught Eema's eyes for a moment before she was whisked away.

Guilt.

It pressed upon him.

Tainted his mind.

Thickened every shadow.

What was his mate hiding from him?

Footsteps grew louder.

The thump of boots.

The clank of zaptens.

There was no time to linger on the mystery of his mate.

Lans broke off his spine dagger with a snap and got into position.

Pin frowned at him. “Do you really think it will come to that?”

“I hope it doesn’t.” Lans gave his comrade a dark look. “But I will protect what I must.”

“As will I,” Zar scowled.

Page 94

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

The warrior's agreement did not necessarily fill him with peace. Zar was known for his temper and he held that fury close to the chest, always willing to fan the flames when it suited his purposes.

Lans had always prided himself on being more objective.

But it seemed he had changed.

The Healer walked in front of them. His eyes brimmed with displeasure when he saw the spine dagger in Lans's hands.

He did not bother to hide it.

His intentions were clear.

If the greater tribas went after the females, he would stop them.

It was that simple.

"Let me speak," the Healer said. His voice was strong, but it held the hint of a plea. "Lans, Zar, Pin, Korben. Let me speak to them first."

Korben dipped his chin. "We owe our everything to the tribas, but you know with whom our loyalties lie."

"And Clavas and I will stand beside our terros," Tiegan said quietly but firmly.

The Healer turned fully to them. “You would kill your own brethren? Your own blood?”

Lans’s heras twinged.

He did not want to.

No one did.

“If it is possible to spare us bloodshed, we will take that chance,” Korben said. “We will give as many opportunities to preserve peace as possible.”

“But we will not allow harm to come to our females.” Zar nodded.

Pin’s eyes narrowed to slits. “We will do what we must.”

“You will kill?” The Healer pressed.

Lans growled. “We will protect.”

The Healer shook his head. “That is not the question I asked.”

Footsteps grew louder.

Voices rose in a throaty roar.

The angry shouts sounded like a chant.

Dispel the humans. Dispel the humans!

Lans’s body tightened.

Every muscle coiled in preparation.

The Healer stood with his palms open and his body relaxed. Perhaps he was confident in his ability to negotiate with an angry mob of warriors, but Lans was not. His fingers adjusted on the dagger, gripping it tightly even as he pointed it down.

The swell of furious Plutonians turned the bend. Lans was momentarily caught off guard by the magnitude of the crowd. This was not just a few comrades of the elders' sons. This was the entire Plutonian faction.

His jaw slackened.

Page 95

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

A disbelieving gasp came from his left.

He glanced over and saw both Zar and Korben staring at the warriors spilling into the room. Though he could not read their thoughts, he imagined their horror mirrored his own.

Tens of warriors could be restrained by their group.

But thousands...

The Healer held up a hand at the Plutonians who stood in the front lines. Lans recognized them immediately. They were the sons of the elders. Tanek, Na'vak's son had his father's eyes and temper. His shoulders heaved and a fierce scowl lingered on his face. Liquid dried on his cheeks. The humans had a word for the release of their sorrow—tears.

“Tanek, welcome.”

“Do not play that game with me, Healer.” Tanek lifted his glassy purple eyes. “I will not be swayed.”

“You have come to seek healing?”

“I have come for the humans.”

Grunts of agreement rose from the warriors behind him.

Lans's heras increased in speed. He watched the front lines intently, making sure that no one stepped out of place. As he swept his gaze over them, his anger faltered.

He saw the comrade he used to go hunting with back when he was just a brood.

He saw the teacher who helped him learn to read the ancient symbols of his elders.

He saw weavers.

Storytellers.

Warriors with families.

Uncles.

Grandfathers.

Lives.

He saw and his heras faltered in the wake of who he was up against.

Put Lans in front of a pack of lizera and he would tear them to pieces with his iron will, no matter how powerful they were. No matter how easily they could snap his neck. The animals that murdered his father were instantly killed on sight. It was a personal rule. And he never, ever hesitated when it was time to rise against them.

The Heronas, too, were subject to this treatment. Vile and wicked, they stole broods from their mothers to experiment on them. They turned on their own. Broods like Chozo had been subject to unspeakable horrors all in the name of advancing their own kind.

Lans rarely felt regret for taking the lives of such dangerous enemies.

That included the Uldimar Raiders.

The Rulari guards.

Everyone who abused, stole, or brought pain to the innocent.

But in this war, there was no monster on the other side.

There was no lizera with teeth twice his head and big beady eyes.

There were no Heronas with their energy shields and bombs.

It was his own.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

His species.

His comrades.

He swallowed the lump in his throat, his fingers loosening on the dagger.

The Healer's voice rose above the chaos. "Why don't we sit down and discuss this calmly, Tanek? There is no need for your weapons or your threats."

Tanek shuffled ahead of the army, his eyes locked on the Healer. "The time for calm discussion was sun rotations ago, when the Heronas first demanded humans in exchange for Clavas's life!"

Grumbles broke out behind him.

Clavas scowled. "Would you have left me there to rot, Tanek?"

"I am not saying that." Tanek spoke through gritted teeth. "I am only asking for the humans."

"We cannot give them up," the Healer said.

Tanek's eyes flashed darker. "My father lies in his resting place. He is gone to meet Destin." His voice cracked. "For what purpose?" Tanek turned and pierced Lans with a dark look. "For females that we have no business mating? Females who have brought monsters in spaceships and death to our doors?"

The crowd roared in agreement. Angry cries lifted to the ceiling. Boots thumped the ground, shaking the ceiling until rocks fell and skittered near his feet.

Lan's nostrils flared. "Put your weapons down, Tanek. Do not do something you will regret."

"Regret?" Tanek pursed his blue lips. "The only thing I regret is that I never got to tell my father goodbye before the Ungazi turned him into ash in onesnap." His spine dagger grew out of him and he tore it off. "I do not want to do this. None of us do. But we will rid ourselves of this curse before the Ungazi come for us all."

"Tanek, put your weapon down."

"Move the Healer out of harm's way," Tanek growled, jutting his chin at the two warriors on his right.

They swept forward, grabbing the Healer by the arms.

"Release him!" Clavas cried. "How dare you put shackles on our last remaining elder?"

"We do this for his own protection," Tanek said.

Lans saw more warriors jumping on the Healer. Despite spending most of his time in the sacred damas, the Healer was also a trained and skilled warrior. His legs scrambled beneath him and he tried to wrench his body free, but the Plutonians had something that they didn't.

Numbers.

Lans's eyes swept over the warriors standing behind Tanek.

Unease tightened his stomach.

“I beg of you, comrades,” Tanek whispered, “let us do this the easy way. We know the females are here. We know that you have mated them. We know this is what has brought the wrath of the Ungazi on our heads.” He took another step. “Hand them over to us and there need not be any bloodshed.”

Lans heard daggers snapping off. Heard the shuffle of feet. The whisks of sharp blades knifing through the air. His comrades spread out in a line, preventing the army from stepping deeper into the cavern.

“To get to our females, you will have to kill us first,” Lans growled.

“Very well.” Tanek roared and sprinted toward them.

The army ran behind him.

Lans grabbed a warrior by the neck and yanked him back, slamming him in the face with a fist. The Plutonian groaned and Lans shoved him away rather than slicing his neck with the dagger.

He did not want to harm his own species.

He did not want to...

Page 97

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

At that moment, ten skilled Plutonians surrounded him.

And more kept pouring into the cavern.

He saw Korben, Clavas, Tiegan, Pin and Zar surrounded as well.

None of them could keep the army back. They spilled out on either side, streaming down the dark hallways.

One of which led to the basement.

Led to his mate.

Led to Eema.

Twenty-Eight

Emma

“Did you hear that?” Kia asked.

Emma pulled her fingers into fists and the exoskeleton mimicked her movements. The metal clanked as it collided into itself. “Nope. Didn’t hear anything.”

A distant roar seeped beneath the door.

Emma froze.

“I heard that,” Sara whispered.

Simone scrunched her nose in concentration. “What are they saying?”

Emma pressed her ear to the door.

Dispel the humans!

She gasped and sprung back.

Sara crowded her. “What was it?”

“I think the Plutonian army got through Lans and the others.”

“What?” Simone’s eyes widened. Her dark, slender fingers closed around Emma’s arm. “Are you sure?”

Before she could answer, footsteps pounded close to their room.

Emma held her breath, squeezing her eyes shut as she desperately prayed to go undiscovered. She would fight to protect herself, but if the five Plutonians she’d come to know on this planet hadn’t been able to stop their friends from storming the place, how would they?

The footsteps faded.

Emma let out a breath.

Tap, tap, tap.

She seized up again.

Kia met her eyes in the darkness and mouthed, “He’s coming back.”

They would have to fight.

“You and me.” Sara pointed two fingers at herself and then at Simone. She then jutted those fingers at the door, giving silent directions on how to move.

Page 98

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

Fear trapped her in place.

She couldn't face these guys.

They were stronger than all of them combined.

They would never succeed.

There was no way.

Tap, tap, tap.

Simone strode forward, the exoskeleton glimmering in the dim light. Its broad metallic shoulders hugged her slim body in a fierce husk. She faced the approaching warrior head-on, fist raised in preparation.

Emma's chest crowded with too many emotions. Her knees went weak. She slapped her hand against the wall, stumbling to the left. The exoskeleton's palm flattened against the rocky cavern surface.

"Hey, hey, hey," Sara hissed, springing toward her. "Are you okay?"

"I can't do this. I can't—"

"Yes, you can, Emma," Sara said quietly.

Tap, tap, tap.

The Plutonian warrior would find the door to the basement soon.

They would find them.

And they would kill them.

They had to.

That was the only way to keep the threat of the Ungazi at bay.

But maybe you deserve to die.

Emma squeezed her eyes shut.

That voice sounded like her mother's. Those words had played a repeat loop in her head almost a month ago when she was trapped in the auction house and sold to the alien with the deepest pockets.

“Emma.Emma!” Sara dug her brown fingers into Emma's arms. “Look at me. Hey.” Metal gears whirred as the head of her exoskeleton folded back into the shoulders, revealing Sara's dark skin, big brown eyes and firm lips. “I know you're scared. We all are.”

Emma glanced at Kia and Simone.

Both of the women watched her with wide eyes and she saw, in that moment, the same fear mirrored in them.

“But,” Sara said quietly, “we're not going to let that fear guide us. We're not going to let it rule us. We're going to beat them, no matter what. We're going to win.”

“How are you,” Emma panted, “still as confident now as you were in that auction house’s prison cells?”

She smiled slightly. “Here’s a secret. I was terrified too. But you know what made me strong?”

Tap, tap, tap.

“What?”

Tap, tap.

Sara lifted her chin. “You. Alone, I wouldn’t have been able to do it, but I took courage from you. We’re stronger together, Emma.”

Page 99

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

Tap.

“Incoming,” Simone murmured.

The door thudded.

Emma flinched.

Sara winced.

Bang.

Someone was slamming on it.

“Why is this locked?” A unfamiliar voice growled.

Emma squeezed her eyes shut and felt the fear overwhelm her.

You’re not good enough.

You’re a failure.

You’re a waste of space.

Her mother’s words bounced around in her head.

You’re strong.

Lans's words.

You're precious.

Lans's heart.

I will never let you go.

Lans's vow.

Her eyes burst open just as the door ripped from the hinges. Sara's exoskeleton formed around her face and she sprinted toward the surprised Plutonian warrior. Emma was right by her side, arms pumping and body thrusting into the air.

She landed on the Plutonian warrior first, her fist slamming into his face. Despite the fact that it wasn't her hand crushing into his flesh, she felt the ricochet from the collision and heard the sickening crack of a jaw breaking.

Adrenaline surged through her veins.

Her blood ran hot.

In her head, she kept repeating Lans's words. Her words.

You're strong.

You're strong.

You're strong.

She'd always pretended to be. Always pushed others away and closed herself off in

an effort to show the world that she was unbothered. Because maybe, if she gave the appearance of strength, it would come true.

But Sara had shown her that strength didn't always mean fighting your battles alone. Sometimes, the most courageous thing to do was to fight alongside someone who loved and cared for you.

Ten Plutonian warriors turned the bend and saw the girls. The warriors shouted, their eyes widening when they recognized the zaptens.

Page 100

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

Emma didn't wait around for them to alert their friends. She exchanged a glance with Simone. The other woman nodded, her exoskeleton head dipping slightly.

In tandem, they rushed the warriors.

Metal clashed against bone, ringing like a giant gong in the cavernous hallway. She recalled every move that Lans had taught her in the training field.

The Plutonian swung his tail, trying to sweep her feet from under her. She caught him by the throat and stepped on his tail, pressing it down until she felt something snap.

The Plutonian cried out in pain and she sent him flying into his friends.

They went keeling over like bowling balls.

Emma strode ahead, but froze when she saw an insurgence of Plutonian warriors, probably drawn by the sounds of their troops being defeated. There were too many of them. They needed help.

Lans.

She tried to connect to his emotions.

A wave of his fear, anger, and helplessness crashed into her.

Instead of offering strength, it only reinforced how totally out of their league they were.

Dizzying fear slipped through her veins.

She stumbled back, starting to ease into that familiar vein of hopeless thinking.

No.

Emma forced herself to step forward.

She wouldn't back down.

If Lans didn't have the courage, she'd give him some of hers.

No more running away.

Not anymore.

Emma heard a clank and saw Sara standing beside her.

Another clank.

Kia joined up.

Another.

Simone stood at the far end, her eyes flashing between the slats of her exoskeleton husk.

“Ladies,” Sara said, “let's show these gentlemen what we're made of.”

Together, they roared and clashed with the Plutonian warriors.

Emma fought with all her might, throwing punches and slamming as many warriors as she could into the walls. But the Plutonians were more experienced and too numerous for her to keep up with.

Fighting ten of them, she managed to subdue five, but the other five sawed at her exoskeleton.

She heard a slashing sound.

Metal creaked.

Page 101

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

Electricity snapped.

She felt the exoskeleton shudder and saw the Plutonians breaking the husk apart with their weapons.

Helix!

That couldn't be good for the machine.

“No!” Emma spun, but a warrior jumped on her back and wrapped its arm around her throat. Another dragged her exoskeleton by the wrist. A rope wrapped around its neck and yanked.

She slammed against the husk.

Pain exploded in her head.

The exoskeleton went vertical as the hands and feet were restrained.

Emma heard a loud thud.

Kia's exoskeleton had crashed on the ground as the Plutonians used the same technique on her.

More metallic creaking exploded around her.

A warrior jumped on her chest and brought his blade up. The light glinted against the

sharp edge.

Emma screamed as the warrior brought the dagger down.

The exoskeleton jolted.

Sparks erupted from the center of its chest, streaking from where the dagger had collided.

One by one, the Plutonians forcibly peeled the exoskeleton back. She crawled away, but she was trapped inside and could only wait with tortured breaths as they drew closer and closer to her.

Lans!

His terror was all that echoed back to her.

He wasn't coming.

“No!” Sara’s scream tore through the air. “Let me go!”

Dark blue hands filled the husk of Emma’s exoskeleton and grabbed her hands and legs. The warriors yanked her to her feet. She glanced around and saw Simone and Kia had been captured too.

Emma struggled to break free. “So much for ‘protect all females’, huh!”

The warrior who held her flinched but didn’t let her go.

“Didn’t your fathers teach you to honor and protect? Are you turning your back on that because of your grief?”

“It’s either you or us,” the Plutonian said, dragging her close. Conflict filled his purple eyes, but there was determination too. “If we are wiped out, our fathers died for nothing. We have nothing but our legacy.Nothing.”

She gulped, seeing in his expression that he believed he was doing the right thing.

And that... that scared her most of all.

Twenty-Nine

Lans

“I don’t wantto kill you, Tanek,” Lans growled, spattered in the blood of his comrades.

Page 102

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

“You have not killed anyone, Lans,” Tanek said, walking in a slow circle around him.
“And we have spared your life as well.”

“Do you think I will spare yours? One lost life and this all stops.”

Tanek laughed. “Is that what you want to believe? The mission will not die with me.”
He tilted his head. “And do not fool yourself into thinking that death is a threat. My father is gone. I am eager to see him again.”

“Step aside, Tanek or I will grant that wish,” Lans said.

The urgency in his heras made his bones quake.

Eema’s emotions were spiraling through his head.

Courage.

Fear.

Determination.

Hopelessness.

Something had gone wrong with the females.

He could sense it.

Korben, Pin and Zar must have felt it too because, a few moments ago, they had formed a line in front of him.

“You felt your mate’s fear as well?” Korben had hissed.

“Yes.” Pin scowled. “They need us.”

“We cannot get past the others,” Zar pointed out.

“Not all of us.” Korben’s eyes had met his. “But one of us may be able to.”

“I will protect them with my life.” Lans had dipped his head.

Zar scowled. “We know.”

They had covered for him as he rushed for the doors that led to the basement. But, on the way, Tanek had dropped in front of him, barring his path.

Tanek lifted his dagger. “I do not want to do this, Lans.”

“Think this through, Tanek,” he hissed. “There will be no winners if we fight against each other. When the Ungazi appear, they will take the humans by force and we will be wiped out.”

“That is assuming you win,” Tanek said. “You would really injure your comrades to save a handful of humans?”

“Yes.” Lans started to propel forward.

A beautiful voice made him freeze.

Eema's voice.

“Lans!”

Whirling around, he spotted his mate struggling in the grips of Adere. The warrior's eyes were hard, and he stared straight ahead.

“Neh!” Lans rushed toward Eema when something hard slammed into the back of his head.

It was a laser gun.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

Tanek lowered the weapon as Lans's world tilted toward the darkness.

“Lans!” Eema screamed. “Lans!”

His arms trembling and pain clanging through his head, he put one palm on the floor. Then another. He tried to raise himself up but Tanek slammed him back down.

“Do not fight me anymore, comrade,” Tanek said. “Do not blind yourself to the truth. What we are doing is right. What we are doing is just. What we are doing will protect us all.”

“How can you justify the killing of the innocent?” Lans spit out, his nostrils flaring and his body burning with fury.

“You would rather we all perish to save another species?”

“They are females.”

“They are cursed,” Tanek spit. “Heronas kidnappings increased. The Ungazi have raided our land. Our fathers...” He shook his head, a vein in his neck popping out. “Our mothers. They all died because of them.”

Lans kept his eyes on Eema. She stood in the warrior's grip, her head high even as tears streamed down her face. She looked especially small and fragile. And it reminded him of the night when he rescued her from the beluda.

So much defiance.

So much fire.

There was as much anger as there was terror in her eyes.

“We must turn them over to the Ungazi,” Tanek said, glancing at Korben, Pin, Zar and the others who were being subdued. “We are saving your lives as well.” Tanek flicked his fingers. “Take them.”

The warrior holding Sah-ah pushed her forward.

Korben roared. “Let her go!” The terros flapped his arms and struggled to no avail.

Zar’s voice, raw with fury and despair, rose next. “Si-Moon!”

“Zar!” She screamed. “Please!”

“Go!” Tanek said.

Lans’s eyes met Eema’s. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

The warrior holding the gun on his mate froze suddenly, his eyes fastening to something in the distance.

Tanek shrieked. “What are you waiting for? Take them to the Ungazi!”

A low rumble swept through the army.

Warriors shuffled.

Armor clanked.

Whispers spread like an acid storm.

Lans twisted his head as much as he could. What he saw made his jaw slacken. The Healer stood atop a rock where the warriors had dragged and chained him. He had broken the chains clear off the rock. The links were snapped in half and hung limply like dying string.

The Healer's blue lips flattened into a firm line and his eyes sliced through every Plutonian before him.

In his large hand, he held a blade pressed to his throat.

Thirty

Lans

Page 104

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

Blood dripped from a tiny cut in the Healer's neck.

It slid against the edge of his spine dagger.

Dripped down his wrist.

Plopped to the dark rock at his feet.

No one moved.

Or breathed.

"If they die, I die," the Healer said.

His voice was quiet, but the air was so deathly still that it carried to the ends of the cavern.

Tanek's eyes widened. "Healer."

Warriors rushed to the base of the rock.

The Healer pressed deeper.

They froze as the blood dripped.

"Do not test me," he growled.

“Put the knife away,” Tanek shouted. “Put it down!”

“Listen to me. These humans are not curses. They are not harbingers of destruction.” The Healer glanced at the girls. “They are the descendants of humans and Plutonians from many, many sun cycles past.”

Shocked gasps rippled through the army. As the warriors who restrained him let go, Lans burst to his feet and headed straight for the females. He grabbed Eema and Sah-ah. Korben and the rest pulled Si-Moon and Ki-ah, forming a protective circle around them.

Relief spilled through his chest, mirrored by Eema’s own joy that snapped through his neural connector. But Lans did not look at her. Despite the fact that no one was stopping them yet, he had no intentions of letting down his guard.

“Can you prove it?” Tanek yelled.

The Healer scowled. “These humans are showing enhanced capabilities. They have paired with the zaptens.”

“They what?”

“The zaptens?”

“It is true.” Adere spoke up. “We saw them wearing the exoskeletons.”

The army mumbled amongst themselves.

“Beyond that,” the Healer shouted, “I have reason to believe that the offspring of these females and these Plutonians,” he nodded at their tiny tribes, “may have new DNA.” He paused. “And the ability of self-healing.”

Tanek's eyes widened.

“Don't you see?” The Healer finally dropped his knife. “They are the future of our species. We secure our future if we protect these humans.” He nodded to them. “And we must protect each other.” His eyes sharpened on Lans. “The Ungazi are coming. We cannot fight them without each other. We cannot make it if not together.”

“They tried to murder our mates,” Lans growled, glaring at Tanek. “We will never forget this.”

Tanek's eyes shifted to the ground.

Eema slipped her hand into his. “The Healer's right. The only way we're all going to survive is if we unite.”

His brow furrowed. “Eema.”

Page 105

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

She resisted him when he tried to push her behind their protective circle. To his surprise, Sah-ah also stepped forward. Ki-ah and Si-Moon followed suit.

His chest heaved.

They were not wearing their exoskeletons.

One rogue bullet and...

“What do you think the Ungazi will do with the humans?” The Healer spoke firmly. “Where do you think they will end up if they are turned over? If we deliver them to the Ungazi, we will be just like them.” He shook his head. “Is that the legacy you want to leave?”

Silence met his statement.

“Is it?” The Healer insisted.

Throaty bellows met his ears. “Neh!”

“We are one with the humans and we must fight together as one.”

Tanek hung his head.

The warriors training their guns on the females dropped them too.

“Tanek.”

“Yes, Healer!”

“When did the Ungazi expect the human delivery?”

“When the moon rises, Healer!” Tanek croaked.

The Healer nodded. “At that time, we will gather, but we are not going to give them what they want. Instead, we are going to deliver a crushing defeat.”

A roar erupted from the crowd.

“Go. Prepare yourselves. When night falls, we will be ready.”

Lans kept his guard up, but the room soon emptied as warriors filed out. Some slapped his shoulder in apology. Others did not look his way, guiltily avoiding his eyes.

Tanek’s lips were in a firm line, but he did not linger either.

He left with the others.

Soon, the cavern cleared out until it was only them, the humans and the Healer.

As soon as they were gone, Lans spun and wrapped his arms around Eema. She fell into him, accepting his embrace.

Lans rubbed her hair away from her face and soaked in her scent.

Eema.

His Eema.

Almost losing her had only reinforced how much she meant to him.

How much he would ache if he lost her.

How much he would sacrifice to protect her.

Shifting her back a little, Lans stared into her beguiling eyes and whispered, “We have something we need to discuss.”

Page 106

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

Instead of shying away, she nodded.

The Healer slid down from the platform and joined them. “You have only a few hours at the most. I am counting on you five to unite the tribes and encourage any Plutonian who might be having doubts.”

“Understood,” Korben said, dipping his head.

Sah-ah tugged on his shoulder. “Korben, the zaptens. They...”

“It is okay, my heras.” He soothed her.

At the sound of her comrade’s words, Eema’s lips tightened. “Helix. We should check on her.”

“I will go.” Clavas stepped forward.

Tiegan nodded. “You should prepare well. The Ungazi will not have the same respect for us in battle as our own comrades did.”

Pin’s jaw clenched as he nodded his thanks.

Lans did the same.

Zar swept Si-Moon into his arms and pulled her close. “No one interrupt us until it is time to leave.”

“Babe,” Si-Moon hissed, ducking her head in embarrassment.

Sah-ah smirked. “Have fun, you two.”

“My heras?” Korben held out his hand to Sah-ah.

She took it lightly.

For a moment, Lans wondered if the human would inform Korben that she was with child in these hours before battle. However, the thought quickly fled his mind as he fastened his gaze on Eema.

Gripping his mate’s hand, Lans guided her forward.

The trickling damas sang to them before they had even caught sight of it. A few more paces and they stood in front of the sacred lake where he had been healed.

“We were expecting you to wake up,” Eema said, glancing at the damas with a pure smile. “Everyone thought you would open your eyes, but you didn’t.”

He caressed her cheek. “The Healer took care of my injuries, but you are the one who saved me.”

She smiled, but it was a cracked and broken one.

Unable to stand the distance between them, Lans picked her up and cradled her in his lap as he settled on the flat rocks that bordered the sacred damas.

Eema’s slender body pressed against him.

Her warmth flooded his heras.

Her scent filled his nostrils.

When she spoke, her voice carried a grave fullness as it bounced against the walls. “First, I want to apologize for snapping at you earlier.”

“Neh.” He shook his head.

Eema reached out and pressed her fingers against his jaw. “No. That was uncalled for and completely...” She sighed. “I wasn’t angry at you, Lans. I was angry at myself, and I was grasping at straws to keep from facing my own demons. I’ve learned that...” her tongue swiped out to lick her lips, “being vulnerable is the fastest way to being hurt. I feel so much for you and I knew you had the most power to hurt me.”

“Eema,” he whispered her name reverently, “no matter what you have done or will do, I will never leave you. I will never turn my back on you.” He rested his forehead against hers. “When I invaded your heat, I was not seeking a good time. I was not looking for a female to unleash my lust. It was a solemn vow. You and I are one. And we can never be separated.”

Liquid filled her eyes. “You say that now, but you haven’t heard everything.”

Page 107

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

“Then tell me, my heras.” He caught a sparkling tear with his knuckle. “Unburden yourself so you do not have to live with this crippling guilt any longer.”

She opened her mouth and sucked in a big gulp of air.

Her fingers trembled.

Her chest heaved.

Lans felt powerless as his mate struggled to unveil herself to him. This moment was far more intimate than when she had opened her legs for their first mating. He wanted to pull her closer to himself, but she was already bundled up against his heras. He wanted to climb into her head and give her peace, but he could only signal his concern through their shared neural connector.

Eema’s voice sounded husky and broken when she finally spoke. “A long time ago, I... met someone. We weren’t serious about each other at all. He was just some guy at a party who gave me some attention and I—I slept with him.”

Lans hold on her tightened.

Eema squeaked out. “And I got pregnant.”

Thirty-One

Emma

She'd been stupid.

That was all there had been to it.

She'd been stupid, young and drunk.

The guy wasn't even cute. She remembered that much. He'd had shaggy brown hair and brown eyes and a slightly crooked grin. His breath had stunk of whiskey. He'd been standing a little too close and touching her a little too much.

But she'd been eager to feel something.

Anything other than the disdain her mother piled on her head everyday.

And here was this guy telling her that she was cute.

Her.

Boring, plain ole Emma.

So she had settled herself around the beer kegs and allowed him to keep her cup filled. The music pulsed around her and through her, but she didn't understand what it said. The cheers and smiles of her classmates flashed before her but it all looked hazy.

And then he started rubbing on her.

He whispered in her ear.

He touched her wrist, her hands, her hips.

He made her feel like she was the only girl in the world.

And, somewhere in the back of her head, she knew that it wouldn't last. She knew what the guy was really after. But the beer made the voices of reason get really, really quiet. And the way her body responded to his touch made her concerns really, really small.

Because nothing else mattered.

Nothing but the moment.

The temporary.

The fleeting, fluffy feeling of being loved.

Even if it was only a ploy to get between her legs.

Page 108

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

So she let him talk her into going upstairs.

She let him kiss her into a sloppy, tongue-riddled mess.

She let him take off her dress.

And pry her legs apart.

And she let him huff and groan and mewl on top of her.

When it was over, he passed out.

And she went home.

She never saw the guy again.

Which was a problem.

Because a few weeks later, she missed her period.

“I was so young. I had just graduated high school...” She caught a flash of confusion in Lans’s eyes. “It’s like Plutonian training except we don’t learn anything that useful.”

He nodded tightly.

His fingers gripped her arm like metal bands.

The moment she had mentioned ‘mating’ another man, Lans had gone absolutely still. Emma could tell that he was trying not to get angry, but it was seeping out—not only in his body language, but in the emotions that zipped through their neural connectors.

She shook her head and tried to focus.

If she let Lans’s anger take over, she would never get this out.

And Emma desperately wanted to bare her soul to Lans before their world turned chaotic again.

“Every day I woke up and I debated whether I should,” she paused and mumbled, “get rid of the baby or not.”

“Get rid?” Lans’s eyes widened.

She looked away from him. “But that choice was taken away from me.”

“Eema,” he whispered, brushing her hair away from her face.

“I lost the baby.” Tears pressed against the back of her eyelids and balled in her throat. Her heart whirled with anguish. “But I wasn’t sad. At all. I just felt relieved that it was gone. That my body had disposed of it for me without any...” Her voice broke. “I’m haunted by what happened. I have never told anyone.”

He cooed her name, rocking her gently. “I felt it for so long. Your guilt... it overpowers you.”

She glanced up in surprise.

Though she had known that Lans was connected to her in theory, it still shocked her

that he could not only feel her emotions but interpret them correctly.

“For how long?”

“Since the mating.” He rubbed her shoulder gently. “Although, at that time, I had been a little too distracted to make sense of what you felt. When I had a moment, I realized what it was because I have felt it too. My part in my father’s death weighed heavily on me. I was only able to let it go after I spoke to him. Neh, a vision of him.”

“The dreamscape.”

“Yes.”

Emma sighed. “When I entered your dreamscape and I saw that you were so excited to have children, I was frightened.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

“You are afraid you are incapable of conceiving?” Lans asked, his voice grave and his purple eyes intent on her.

She glanced away.

He turned her head back to him. “I have said it before and I will say it again. Eema, you are most precious to me. You are my treasure. My light. My life. It matters not if we have a brood. I would spend the rest of my life with you and feel incredibly grateful.”

“No, Lans.”

“Neh? Then what is the matter?”

“Itoldyou. It’s not that I can’t conceive. It’s that... it’s that I’m so afraid to.”

His eyebrow nubs crinkled. “Tell me what you are afraid of, Eema.”

“You wouldn’t understand.” She gestured with her hands. “Back then, when I found out I was pregnant, my first thought wasn’t that I couldn’t provide for the baby. It should have been because I didn’t have a lick of money and no job lined up. I barely had a place to live, but I figured I could work out the logistics.”

“You did not live with your family?” Lans asked, his voice grave.

“My mom would always threaten to kick me out and if I showed up with a kid, she definitely would.”

“That does not sound like a mother.”

“Yeah, well. She wasn’t much of one.” Emma’s voice snapped with hurt. “My mother was a drunk who kept making bad decisions. I thought I was worthless because she told me I was.”

Lans’s lips flattened into a firm line.

Emma shook her head. “But she was the only mother I knew and I loved her. Sometimes, I found myself acting like her. And that’s what scared me. What still scares me.”

“Eema...”

Fear made her eyes dart left and right. “What if I end up like my mother, Lans? What if I end up hating my own child and making her life miserable? What if I try my best to be a good mom and fail? The thought of that,” she trembled, “makes me feel like I’m drowning. Like I’m about to explode. I can’t subject another living being to that kind of torture. I couldn’t live with myself if I unconsciously treated my own flesh and blood the way my mother treated me.”

“Eema.Eema.”

Her hands flailed as she spiraled deeper into her hurt. Having kept these truths trapped for so long, they kept spilling out. Kept bursting free. Kept tearing through her until she felt ragged inside.

“I’d rather die than become my mother, Lans. I’d rather—”

“Eema!” His voice echoed. Lans grabbed her hands and kept her in place. “Look at me.”

She couldn't.

Her eyes fell on the still, clear waters of the sacred lake. It was so blue, she could see to the sand beneath it.

“Look at me,” Lans said firmly.

She turned her chin up, inch by inch, until her eyes slammed into his violet ones. Set in that rough and dangerous face, she should have shivered in fright. Instead, looking at Lans was like wrapping her body up in a warm blanket on a cold night.

She saw no judgement.

No anger.

No disgust.

Only steadiness.

This alien was nothing if not consistent.

And something about that made her heart melt.

Page 110

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

“Having a brood or not is a choice you must make, but know this. You fear becoming your mother. Not a mother.”

“But—”

“I gave you your chance to speak, Eema.”

She clasped her lips shut.

His eyes burned into her. “As I said and will say until the end of time, all I need is you. My heart beats for you. Almost losing you made me realize this with startling clarity and I will be immensely satisfied as long as I have you by my side, Eema.”

The tears started rolling again.

It felt like a long-standing wound had begun to heal a little.

“Lans,” she whispered, staring at him.

“But I want to make one thing very clear. You, Eema, are kind, strong, and bold. You protect your comrades as if they are your own blood. You fight beside them. You care for them and lay your life down for them. You are nothing like the mother you fear. Nothing.”

Sniffing loudly and blind from the tears that blurred her face, Emma leaned forward and kissed him.

As she did, more and more of her wounds began to heal.

Thirty-Two

Lans

He held Eema's hand as he led her out of the sacred dama. She seemed more at peace now.

At least, he hoped so.

The thick guilt that always crawled through their shared neural connector had lessened somewhat. Shriveled in size like a bloom losing petals.

Lans knew that Eema would need constant reminding. He would need to show her that she was nothing like the mother she spoke so ill of. Show her that she was his priority. That she meant so much to him, brood or no. And he was fully prepared to meet all those needs.

If he survived this final fight.

A shuffling sound greeted them when they returned to the main hall.

Voices chattered.

New arrivals.

His muscles stiffened.

The burn of his spine dagger rising reverberated through his body.

Last time, their guests had been fellow warriors hell-bent on betraying the humans and turning them over to the Ungazi. Though the Healer had used his authority on the masses, there would still be a few left unconvinced. If an angry warrior had returned...

The voices grew louder as they drew closer to the cavern. Lans's eyes widened when he recognized that high-pitched giggle.

Eema saw the female waiting in the room first. She rushed over and the two humans collided in a hug.

"Leel!" Eema cried. "What are you doing here?"

"You didn't think I'd let you fight those alien jerks by yourself, did you?" Leel gave her a big grin. The human female had her hair braided back, thus exposing more of her big cheeks and tan skin.

"Lans!" A thin, green mass came flying at him.

Lans instinctively went defensive but, the moment Chozo wrapped his scrawny, arms around his waist, he relaxed. A wry smile played on his lip.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

He patted the brood's head. "Chozo."

"I missed you." Chozo looked up with liquid in his black eyes.

Lans paused, his hand hovering over Chozo. "Where is your mask?" He turned the brood around. "Are you able to breathe without it?"

"That is thanks to me," a deep voice spoke.

Lans looked up and saw a Plutonian who seemed mildly familiar stepping into the cavern. He held hands with a human who had long black hair, almond-shaped eyes, and thin pink lips. In the human's arms was a brood.

Lans gasped and pointed. "Aren't you...?"

"Rune!" Korben strode into the cavern, arms wide and a brilliant grin on his face.

Rune's smile was subdued, but it held hints of fondness. "The Ungazi tried to tear into our hideout. They were nearly successful."

"Ga Eun!" Sah-ah came flying behind her mate. She wrapped the female in a hug. "I can't believe you guys left the hideout. I thought you would remain in hiding forever."

Rune's eyes strayed to his brood. "The Ungazi threaten everything I hold dear. They must be defeated. We want to be an active part of it."

Si-Moon and Zar joined them.

The moment Si-Moon saw Ga Eun, she rushed over.

Pin and Ki-ah strode into the cavern later, drawn by the noise.

The females happily chatted with Ga Eun as if they had known each other forever.

Korben shook his head. "Human attachment is a very interesting thing, is it not?"

"Have they not met on earth before?"

"Never."

Lans stroked his chin. "And yet they seem like sisters."

Korben dipped his head in agreement.

Lans's eyes strayed to the brood and stayed there. Blue skin. Tiny stub where a tail would grow strong and nimble. Eyes like the mother. Faint tattoos that greatly resembled the father.

He would never get to experience that.

A small twinge hit his chest.

He pushed it away.

Neh.

It was good.

He would not allow the what ifs to invade his mind.

Eema had made her choice and he would be content.

He was content.

A movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. The Healer stepped into the room, his eyes grim and his lips firm.

The females fell quiet, watching him intently.

Page 112

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

All at once, the warmth in the room drained to a somber grey.

Ga Eun, Rune, Chozo and Leel dipped their heads in greeting.

The Healer acknowledged them with a flick of his fingers. “Welcome. I wish we could have met under better circumstances.”

“Thank you for allowing my brood to find shelter here. I would have fretted about them constantly had they been left alone at our home.”

Lans winced. The Healer’s caverns had been invaded only hours before. It wasn’t as if they were war-proof.

“I only agreed because you said there would be modifications to the security system,” the Healer said. “You hold such a priceless treasure in your arms, female.” His eyes softened on the brood. “That even I feel the weight of such a responsibility.”

Ga Eun just shook her head. “Don’t worry. Rune’s been teaching me to fight. If anything happens, I’ll protect you both.”

Her words caused a ripple of humor to flow through the room.

Lans chuckled.

Eema met his eyes and smiled.

His heart pinched even more.

Yes.

That.

His female.

She filled his heart so completely.

And it was more than her heat. More than her body. More than the promise of having a mate.

It was something so unique to her and, obviously, so ingrained in every human he had met on this planet.

Determination.

Strength.

The ability to pick up the pieces, put them back together and keep moving forward.

These females were not the strongest or the most tech-savvy creatures on this planet. They were seen as commodities to some. Lab rats to others. And an abomination to the Ungazi whom sought to destroy them.

And yet, in the face of all that, they lifted their chins, raised their fists and jumped into any fight.

He stared at Eema.

Some had to fight more than others.

Invisible battles that no one else could see.

Scars that lined the heras and bled and scabbed without healing.

And still she fought.

Still.

He resisted the urge to grab Eema close and kiss her.

He had done plenty of that after her confession in the damas.

Page 113

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

Instead, Lans slipped his fingers between hers and squeezed her hand. Just to let her know he was in awe of her.

Eema's smile turned even softer.

In that moment, he knew she understood.

The Healer tapped his interface and holos filled the room. A picture of an Ungazi ship hovered above them, big and terrifying.

The Healer stared at them. "Rune and I were working together remotely to study the Ungazi. They are powered by one alpha. We get to the alpha, we end the war." The Healer swiped his hand and the image changed. "Here's the plan."

The Healer spoke at length until they were all sure of what their roles were. Lans almost smirked when the females were involved in the battle without any question of their ability. They had a role and it was settled.

No one disputed it.

When the Healer was done, Rune pulled out five rings from his trousers. He handed them to each of the females. "I heard your zaptens were severely injured in the fight with the other Plutonians. I've made some modifications to these. I got Ga Eun's opinion on the design."

"Don't worry, girls." Ga Eun winked as she rocked her brood. "This one was made for us."

Eema slipped the ring on and, immediately, an exoskeleton formed around her, covering her from head-to-toe. It was lighter and more svelte than the thick, hulking exoskeleton formed by their zaptens. Sparks of light zipped between the metal slats, each color different for each female.

Eema's was blue.

It suited her.

"I like it," she grinned, her exoskeleton's eyes beaming blue. "I like it a lot."

The Healer lifted both hands. "We fight for the preservation of our future. Both humans and Plutonians."

"We fight for humans and Plutonians," Lans murmured, conviction burning through his heras.

"The army has gathered outside." The Healer's eyes flashed. "It is time."

Lans usually felt no fear before a battle, but now he had someone to live for. Someone who would be on her own dangerous mission.

He turned to Eema. "Your only mission is to weaken communications—"

"So we can clear a path for you and the other Plutonians to kill the alpha."

"Do not engage," Lans growled.

"You know I don't do well with instructions," Eema teased him, her eyes sparkling.

He studied her entire face, committing it to memory. "You are my everything,

Eema.”

“And so are you.” She gulped. “I won’t be able to breathe until you’re back to me. Don’t do anything stupid and heroic, okay? Just tear through as many Ungazi as you can so you can destroy the alpha and get back to me.”

He swooped down and sucked her lips deeply.

Her taste was so sweet.

Her slender fingers dug into his shoulder as if she wanted to drag him closer.

He devoured her.

Inhaled her.

Tried to capture the moment and stretch them out to forever.

But alas, he had to pull away.

Page 114

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

Eema pressed her palm against his cheek, liquid glimmering in her eyes. “I love you, Lans.”

He pressed a kiss into her palm.

Sucked in a deep breath.

She pulled her hands away and turned to face the exits. “I’ll do my part, you big brute. Make sure you come home.”

Thirty-Three

Eema

They weaved through the grass under the cover of night. Alien insects sang throaty songs around them. She heard a beeping in her ears and a programmed voice spoke, “Plant here.”

She placed the marker in the grass. Turned. Placed another marker.

The other women worked beside her, staying alert and quiet. A large moon hovered over them, a brilliant black sky in the background. The twin planet she once considered a menacing threat, now hovered like an overprotective older brother.

Slowly, bit by bit, this planet had started to feel like home.

Or maybe it was Lans who had started to feel like home and his planet had grown on

her because of it.

“Plant here.”

She did.

With Lilliana beside them, they should have been chattering and catching up a mile a minute. All of them had secretly wished to meet and stay with Ga Eun in person, especially since all her gifts were fabulous indicators of her sense of style and ability to merge both alien and human elements into one.

But the mood was somber.

Still.

Serious.

The success of the plan rested on their shoulders.

If this first step faltered, they would fail.

And no one could laugh and chat with the stakes so high.

Emma worked until her basket of markers were empty. The exoskeleton barely made a whirr as she straightened. It felt strange to not be in Helix's bulky armor. This metal stuck too close to the skin and felt too thin to offer much protection. But Rune had assured them all that the material was ten times stronger than the zaptens and could move ten times faster.

That much she believed.

Rune was a genius.

The wind blew through the tall, blue alien reeds. The eerie moonlight lit their path as they sprinted away from the markers.

Chozo's voice squawked from the earpiece she wore. "Good work, ladies."

"How are the guys faring?" Emma asked, tapping the earpiece.

"They're trying to galvanize the troops with a rousing speech."

"Is it working?" Simone asked.

"Erm," Chozo cleared his throat, "sort of. The Ungazi threat is enough of a reason to work together for now, but they'll need to be more convincing in the future."

"There won't be a future if we don't stop the Ungazi," Sara mumbled.

“Are all Plutonians so stubborn?”

In the darkness, Emma saw Lilliana roll her eyes.

“When it comes to stubbornness, humans are the clear winners,” Chozo said.

“You really think we can beat them?” Emma asked quietly, watching as an Ungazi spaceship zoomed in the distance. “They’re much more powerful. None of Rune’s weapons can disintegrate an entire city in a second.”

“She’s right,” Simone mumbled.

“Indeed,” Chozo said. “Which is why we are not fighting them. They’re going to fight each other.”

At that moment, their markers lit up.

The Ungazi spaceship took note of it and whirred closer.

“Guys...” Sara said in a warning voice.

The spaceship opened fire on the markers.

“I think we might be too close to the blast,” Simone shrieked.

“Chozo!” Emma screamed.

At that moment, the marker reflected the blast right back at the Ungazi spaceship. The entire vessel went up in flames.

The ship careened in their direction.

“Run!” Sara screamed.

They turned and fled as the huge spaceship bounced into the ground. It dug up the reeds and slid across the field.

Emma glanced over her shoulder. Her eyes caught on the little village of Bluroins—at least that’s what Chozo had said when he directed them here. The tiny camp had a flickering fire and several small hut-like dwellings where the inhabitants slept peacefully.

They were going in the opposite direction.

And they’d survive.

But the spaceship would crush the village.

Rune’s explanation of the suit’s capabilities returned to her. You can build shields that protect you from the strongest elements.

Turning, she imagined an energy field in her mind.

A buzzing sound erupted from her hands. Electricity sparked between her fingers.

She saw a glowing energy appear in front of her, building and building.

But it wasn’t moving fast enough.

She braced herself for the spaceship to mow her down, when another buzzing sound joined hers.

Emma glanced to the side and saw Sara holding out her own shield.

Lilliana, Simone and Kia joined the line.

Emma dug her heels into the ground.

A roar of pain tore from her lips as she threw her all into pushing the spaceship back.

Page 116

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

Her armor-covered legs dug into the ground.

The dirt caved.

Sweat beaded on her upper lip.

“Ah!” She screamed.

The spaceship pushed them to the very edge.

Until it stopped.

Her force field disappeared.

Emma wilted along with the others.

“Good work, females,” Chozo said.

“Thanks.” Emma caught her breath. “And the Plutonians?”

“The markers were successful. All the Ungazi communications are down. The Plutonians are going after the alpha now.”

Sara bent over and grabbed her knees. “We cleared a path.”

Emma’s eyes widened. “Hey, are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Sara grunted. “Yeah, I just...” She pressed a hand against her stomach and forced a smile. “I’m okay.”

Simone held up Sara’s other side.

Kia stooped in front of her. “We shouldn’t have allowed you to join the mission.”

“You needed all hands on deck,” Sara argued.

“Did you tell Korben?” Simone asked.

Sara snorted. “Do you think my mate would have let me leave that cavern if I told him I was carrying his brood?”

“You’ve done your part,” Chozo said through their earpieces. “You can return.”

Sara’s lips tilted up. “Don’t you think the guys will need some help fighting to get to the alpha?”

Simone’s eyes widened.

Kia frowned. “Sara—”

“It was just a twinge.”

“No.” Emma shook her head vehemently. “We can’t let you do anything else that’s dangerous today. You have to think for two now.”

Sara lifted her chin and pressed a hand over her stomach. “Since the moment I stepped foot on this planet, I’ve been fighting to find my purpose. Guess what? I found it. My purpose is not to sit on the sidelines while someone else fights for me. I

want my baby to know that we don't give up and go home when the going gets tough."

Emma chewed on her bottom lip. She didn't like the idea. At all.

"Plus," Sara squeezed her hand until Emma looked into her eyes, "this kid has four awesome aunties looking out for it."

She sighed. "Okay."

Chozo blared from their earpieces. "Females, no."

Page 117

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

“I’m in.” Simone shrugged. “It’s humans and Plutonians, isn’t it? We deserve to do some butt-whopping of our own.”

“Humans,” Chozo’s voice squawked, “your mates left very explicit instructions that you—”

“Let’s do it!” Lilliana grinned.

“Sara? Emma? Simone? Lilliana? Kia? Do you want Korben and Lans to kill me?” Chozo gasped. “Pin is going to skin me alive. And Zar... I can’t even imagine what Zar will do to me.”

“We’ll be fine, Chozo.” Emma’s eyes landed on the massive spaceship that was three hills away.

She plugged her earpiece out and nodded at the other ladies.

Together, they started running toward the ship.

The closer they got to the alpha’s camp, the more Plutonians they saw fighting against the Ungazi. Without their weapons, the enemy was just a beastly being with grey skin and beady yellow eyes.

Emma spotted the alpha immediately. He was standing at the far end of the camp. His body was twice the size of the other Ungazi’s and he wielded a sharp two-pronged spear.

Just then, Emma felt Lans's shock and anger flash through her neural connector.

"Eema?" Lans boomed.

She spun and found him tearing an Ungazi's body in half as he stormed her way.

"Sah-ah?" Korben made a bee-line for them.

Emma opened her mouth but, from the corner of her eye, she saw an Ungazi flying toward Sara. Springing into action, she threw a laser blast toward it. Energy trembled through the suit and lit it up from the inside.

Lans skidded back, his eyes wide. "Did you just...?"

"Yes." She dipped her chin at him. Then her eyes found the rest of the guys. "You can scold me later."

"We're standing with you," Kia said, eyes narrowed.

Sara nodded.

Simone turned to Zar. "Let's finish this."

They raced side-by-side.

Humans and Plutonians.

Mates.

Friends.

The humans opened fire with their blasters while the Plutonians fought with their bare hands. The alpha roared, its yellow eyes glowing red.

Emma jumped back as it swiped at her.

Lans's anger increased and he jumped on the alpha's back, pulling at his neck.

Korben slashed the alpha's neck with a dagger.

Pin slashed his stomach.

Zar knocked him back with a punch that spurted fluids everywhere.

The alpha rocked and then fell to the ground with a thud that shook under their feet.

Page 118

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

All at once, the other Ungazis dropped like flies.

One by one.

She turned slowly and saw only Plutonians standing in the bright fingers of the dawn.

“We did it, guys.” Lilliana grinned. “We—”

“Sah-ah!” Korben shouted, cutting her off.

Horror filled Emma’s heart when she saw her strong, beautiful friend closing her eyes, her dark skin dripping with sweat. A moment later, Sara fainted into Korben’s arms.

Thirty-Four

Lans

Korben glared at his mate who rested against his side around the table. “If you ever scare me like that again, my heras—”

“Alright. Alright.” Sah-ah huffed. “I heard you the first three hundred times.”

Korben’s head whipped around to take in Ga Eun who sat at the end of the table next to Rune. “Are you sure—”

“Yes, Korben. I am very sure that this happens to most humans during pregnancy.

We tire very easily and we sometimes faint.”

“How many times must you ask, terros?” Lans chuckled.

“I am just making sure. When you and Eema go through the same thing, you’ll understand.”

Lans frowned. “Not every female has to—”

“Lans,” Eema glanced up at him with a smirk, “if we ever go through such a thing, you’ll have it worse than anyone.”

Lans gulped nervously.

Neh.

Eema was not saying that she would consider having his broods.

And he would not assume such.

She squeezed his hand and her lips tilted up slowly.

He continued to glower at her, even as he pulled her a little closer to him.

The moment the Plutonians had won victory over the Ungazi, Lans had dragged Eema aside and scolded her for making such a ridiculously dangerous decision.

“How could you join us in battle?” he’d bellowed.

“Because I wanted to.”

“Wanted...” He grasped at his head. “You could have been hurt or killed—”

“But I wasn’t.”

“Female...” he’d growled.

“So you just expected me to set some markers and jump out of the way so the guys could battle an evil alien race that wanted to kill us? No, Lans. I’m not going to do that. I’m not afraid anymore. I have something to fight for. And I have someone I love. If we fight, we fight together.”

Conversation had been cut short for, at that moment, he’d grabbed her by the waist and crushed her lips with his own. Had they not been surrounded by Plutonians, he would have ripped her out of the exoskeleton and rocked her with his heat.

Page 119

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:10 pm

Lans had the urge to taste his mate's lips again when a voice said, "Are they always this... sappy?"

He peered out of the corner of his eye at Tanek who stood stiffly across the table.

Clavas chuckled. "Insufferably."

Tiegan dipped his chin in silent agreement.

Tanek squirmed. "I was told we were having an important meeting."

"Yes." Korben nodded.

"It seems more like a celebration at the announcement of your brood." Tanek coughed. "Of which I have no relation."

"You do." Korben nodded. "As an elder of the tribas, you are responsible for the well-being of all Plutonians. That includes my brood."

"And mine." Rune stared softly at his mate.

Ga Eun's eyes disappeared as she smiled.

Tanek's skin turned from a sharp blue to pale purple. "Er..."

"Do you accept the honor, Tanek?" Zar prodded.

The son of the elder closed his eyes and nodded weightily. “I will guard them with my life.”

“That deserves a toast!” Lilliana said, cozying up next to Tiegan who did not push her away.

“To Plutonians!” Pin lifted his flask. “And to humans.”

Lans lifted his glass, but his eyes were on his beautiful mate.

The female of his dreams.

The human he had saved and who, in turn, had saved him.

“To Plutonians,” Eema said, her beautiful face beaming with a grin.

He pressed a kiss to her temple and whispered. “And to humans.”

* * *