



A Bride for the Alien King (Romance Among the Stars #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: The alien king can save Eden's colony, but only if she pays his price.

For Eden Sumner, the first human born on planet Eden, the bargain is an unwelcome one. She didn't plan on marrying an alien, especially not if it means getting caught up in a noble's schemes. The king may be the hottest male on the planet, but he knows it, and he's only interested in how useful she is politically.

King Rhakaris needs a bride who fulfils an ancient prophecy, and he needs her right now. Eden might just fit the bill. She's argumentative, disrespectful, and an all-round pain, but better her than the alternative.

With Eden's colony on the line, and a duke scheming to seize Rhakaris's throne, they both agree there's no space for feelings in this relationship. Of course not. It would be a foolish risk.

And they aren't fools... are they?

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EDEN

Stars glittered above me in the chill night sky, strange constellations looking down with cold disinterest at their reflections in the ink-black lake. The water was still enough that I could hardly tell the difference between it and the sky.

“Okay, it’s a beautiful night.” Eden Colony didn’t live up to its billing, but had some redeeming features. “Pity about the days.”

Eden’s sun burned hotter and brighter than Earth’s, and pushed out a lot more radiation. Like most colonists, I avoided daylight wherever possible, and cursed the pictures in the brochures that fooled my parents into making the long journey. I’d seen the brochures they kept, with pictures of beautiful rolling fields. Color correction removed the blue tint of local sunlight, and brightness controls made it less blinding than reality.

Back at the colony pod I called home, my family would be hard at work trying to raise crops and hoping they didn’t grow too toxic to sell. Usually I’d be there with them. Tonight, I had other duties.

Duties that so far meant watching the night sky. Guilt gnawed at me for abandoning my brothers to all the farm work. More guilt for feeling relief at being alone. Our pod had all the comforts of home, if by ‘home’ you meant cramped rooms, a single shared bathroom, and a foodmaker that only produced flavorless nutrient mush. No space, no privacy, and no life. Don’t get me wrong, I love my family. It would just be nice to

love them from a little further away sometimes.

It was the only life I'd known, and I wondered if that made it easier or harder for me. My older brothers remembered Earth, if only vaguely. I'd been born here, the first human native to Eden.

A shooting star brought me out of my thoughts, and I sat up to watch it. Sure enough, it changed course—that was a spaceship, not a meteor entering the atmosphere. Hopefully the right spaceship, but there was no way to check aside from going and asking.

I kicked the buggy into gear, driving along the coast and up into the imposing mountains. Looming over our plot of land, Karych Castle waited for me, clinging to a cliff's edge. The seat of Duke Strahar of Vazand, the alien ruler of the planet. The Drachali were few, and somehow the Eden Colony Company had missed them in their surveys. They claimed the radiation messed up their sensors. I doubted that—more likely, the surveyors pocketed their fee and did the bare minimum.

Which led to a short, sharp war on our arrival, one that ended in a stalemate and the Compromise. Humans could stay on Eden, but we were guests of the Drachali and would pay for the use of their land. Between that and the reduced yields from the radiation, we were screwed.

"I can change that," I muttered to myself as I piloted the buggy slowly up the mountain. "Speak to their king. He has to see me. It's their law."

The previous king died a year ago, and now his son came out of mourning to take the throne. That meant visiting his vassals, like Duke Strahar, and listening to petitioners from the commoners. That was me.

Karych Castle rose imposingly over me when I reached it, black stone blending with

the night sky. The gloom hid any details, and I only saw the spires by the starlight they blocked. Giant gates opened as I approached, like a mouth waiting to swallow me up if I was unwise enough to step inside. Which might be true. Duke Strahar had never liked humans.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out. This is my chance to help the colony. I'm not backing out because there's a scary door. They're probably throwing their king a feast. Opening my eyes again, I drove on into the castle.

Everything was quiet, strangely so. I'd expected to be met by someone, by guards or servants. Instead, I was left to drive into the courtyard and park. That put my buggy next to the spaceship I'd seen earlier, a beautiful bird-like thing of pure black, the swept-back wings still glowing faintly from the heat of re-entry.

Okay, whoever owns that has taste. It looked like it wanted to fly, like it resented the ground for holding it. Maybe, if I was lucky, I'd get to see it take off?

"Eden Sumner?" Hearing my name, I spun around. Yes, I have the same name as the colony, and yes, that gets annoying. My parents had their reasons.

The speaker was a tall, slender Drachali female wearing a dress that put mine to shame. I'd dressed up for the occasion as best I could—this lady effortlessly blew me out of the water. Her smile could have been friendly or predatory, showing off a row of needle-sharp teeth.

I'm here now. What am I going to do if I don't trust her? "Yes, that's me."

"Delighted to meet you. I'm Ellarax Vitvha, lady-companion to Lady Kharmiya, and I'm the one who told your people about the royal visit. If you'll come with me, I'll lead you to his Majesty King Rhakaris."

RHAKARIS

I resisted the urge to tear Duke Strahar Vazand's throat out and quench my thirst with his blood. The formal mourning period for my late father finished at dusk, and Strahar had wasted no time springing his trap. Tall, spare, and hard-faced, the duke was formidable despite his age, but that wasn't why I held back my anger.

I was king now. Killing a duke would be a poor way to start my reign, even if he was using the Ancestors to bind me to his House, taking advantage of a prophecy and his closeness with the Keepers of Ancestral Memory.

Three Keepers waited behind him, stoic and unmoving in their simple robes. The royal Keeper, Rennic, stood behind me, looking through the documents they'd brought him. I didn't need to see him to feel his discomfort.

"It is a legitimate interpretation, Highness," Rennic said at last. "And the translation is valid."

He sounded no happier than I was. A wintery smile flashed across Strahar's face, almost too fast to be seen. "Rejoice, Highness. Even among kings, it is rare to have such a personal prophecy. For it to guide you to your fated mate? That shows unheard of favor from our ancestors."

How convenient that the mate in question is your only child. A match that would place your grandchild on the Sanguine Throne and likely kill me as soon as that child

is born. Kharmiya, the heir to the Vazand dynasty, stood at the back of her father's retinue, taking no part in the conversation. Her eyes downcast, she was the picture of meek and demure womanhood. Nothing like the mate I'd dreamed of, though she fitted her role so perfectly I wondered how much was an act. Whether she was honest or deceitful, my mind rebelled at the idea of marrying her.

The problem was, the prophecy was either true or an excellent forgery. Either way, I couldn't just ignore it. Nor could I kill the duke without starting a civil war, and I had no desire whatsoever to become a holy king and let Strahar steal the throne. Time, that's what I needed. Enough time to escape his trap.

So I restrained myself and met his gaze with a calm I did not feel, smiling. "If the Ancestors found it important enough to carve into the side of a mountain, I would be a fool to cast their wisdom aside."

This time the duke's smile lasted longer, twisting his lips into an expression that was no more friendly than the stony scowl he usually wore. The man couldn't even pretend happiness when he was winning.

"Good. Then you will marry my daughter, and the Ancestors' blessings will surely make your reign magnificent."

Behind him, his three pet Keepers nodded eagerly, and one stepped forward to join the conversation. "Lord, we have consulted the writings, and our Ancestors were clear—the most auspicious day for such a wedding would be tomorrow."

I shot him a hard look. Even if he'd been a skilled actor, that line wouldn't play. As it was, he sounded like he was reading from a script. But even as he paled and stuttered, Strahar spoke into the silence. "Wonderful news! We shall have to move fast to take advantage of it. Doubtless, word spreads even now, on the lips of every Keeper."

That went too far for Rennic. “Perhaps I might see those writings too? The Ancestors’ messages are rarely so precise.”

“Of course, of course.” Another Keeper stepped in, clapping Rennic on the shoulder. “Shall we go now?”

“Indeed,” Strahar said. “Let us see the prediction for ourselves. Daughter, stay with his Majesty. Get to know each other before the wedding.”

With that, the ducal party swept out, leaving me alone with Kharmiya and my thoughts.

Fuck. The Duke of Vazand had planned this well, taking advantage of my mourning for my father. I had not prepared for such an immediate and unprincipled attack, and had no answers ready.

A physical attack? I’d welcome a fight, a problem I could solve with sword and claw and fang. Let anyone raise their hand to fight me, and I would cut it off. But a political fight? I was not ready, nor trained, for that. My older brother had been, but he lay in the vaults beside our parents.

This was a fight I had to face alone, and I’d already lost the first round.

I stood on the balcony and gazed out in, fighting for calm. The still, cool air steadied me as I looked out into the night, but not enough. My hands crushed the stone railing that separated me from the long fall into the lake below.

“The prophecy is clear,” his daughter said, moving to join me. She kept a respectful distance, whether out of a sense of propriety or self-preservation, I couldn’t say. “‘The first of Vazand born shall be thy wife, oh King of Ages.’ It sounds rather cut and dried, doesn’t it?”

“The prophecy your father discovered and had translated?” I let out a bitter laugh. “I am not surprised it agrees with him. And it was he who proposed reign-name Ages for me.”

“ Before he discovered the prophecy. Which, as you know, scholars have checked and verified.” Did I hear a hint of reproach in her voice? “And the wisdom of our ancestors guides us, doesn’t it, your Majesty?”

Not reproach, then. Mockery. Friendly banter or genuine hostility remained to be seen.

“You are hardly unbiased, either,” I said, then added. “We are in private, so let us drop the formality. Call me Rhakaris.”

“I suppose I am not,” she conceded. “But prophecy is prophecy, whether one likes what it says as my lord father does, or whether one objects, as we do.”

That brought my head around. She raised her head and met my gaze, unflinching, as I asked. “We?”

“I am as much a prisoner of this prophecy as you, Rhakaris.” For the first time, her smile seemed genuine. “And we share an equal desire for this marriage.”

Irrational annoyance surged in me, and I crushed it viciously. I didn’t want to marry her, why should I expect her to want me? Idiotic pride. “You have found an answer, haven’t you? Or you would not have mentioned this. You do not seem the type to come running for comfort.”

Her smile widened, and she whistled a signal before answering. “I wouldn’t know about comfort. There’s none here to run to. As for an answer, judge for yourself.”

The doors opened again, and I turned to see who she'd called for. Some ancient Keeper, ready to dismiss the prophecy? A scholar, disputing its authenticity? An assassin, perhaps, to save her from marriage by killing me?

I liked that thought. A fight would work off my anger, and killing her hired murderer would provide ample reason to avoid marriage.

But no, the newcomer wasn't even Drachali. Ellarax Vitvha, Kharmiya's lady-companion, ushered a human into the room. One of the guests who'd forced themselves onto Vazand during my father's reign, arriving in their thousands with no way to go home. My claws bit into the palms of my hands as I looked at her, trying to keep my anger from showing. This human was too young to be among their leaders, so it wasn't her fault she was here.

I looked closer. The human female was small, like most of her kind. Long, dark red hair tumbled down her back, and her emerald green gown enhanced her full figure, displaying her delicious curves to good effect. It left her pale neck bare, and my gaze followed it up to her face.

It was a masterpiece, a beauty any sculptor would have wept at creating. Who could hope to equal such glory? Her skin, soft and radiant, flushed with emotion, and her full lips parted slightly as our gazes met. It was her eyes, though, that stopped my mind in its tracks. Even amongst the Drachali nobility, few can hold my gaze. The human stared back at me unflinching, eyes narrowing.

The glare took my breath away. Defiant, suspicious, and determined, it was the most refreshing and honest expression I'd seen in a long time. No one dared show their emotions to me unguarded, not as a prince and especially not now I was king.

No one except this human.

“Your Majesty, allow me to present Eden Sumner.” Kharmiya spoke formally, stepping away. For the human’s benefit, she repeated herself in Galtrade, the common language of the stars.

The human’s glare shifted briefly to her, then back to me. She didn’t otherwise respond.

“What is this, Kharmiya?” I kept to Galtrade, despite its ugliness, out of courtesy to the human who was, unaccountably, my guest.

“The answer to your prayers and mine, Majesty.” I didn’t need to take my gaze off the human to know Kharmiya was grinning. “Your new bride.”

“What?” We spoke nearly in unison, the human’s objection coming just ahead of mine. Both of us turned to face the princess, and I caught the last vestiges of her amusement vanishing behind her calm and pious pose. Her father might not be much of an actor, but Kharmiya had more than her share of the talent.

“Explain yourself,” I commanded, at the same time as the human’s shout.

“What the fuck do you fucking mean, his bride?”

Kharmiya’s lips quirked with the hint of a smile, but she didn’t leave us hanging. Wise. Both I and the human were close to snapping.

“Majesty, the best way to avoid marrying me is to be married already.” I bared my teeth in a growl. Kharmiya might be patient, but I was not. Recognizing that, she swallowed and talked faster. “It can’t be just anyone. If you already had an acknowledged lover, that might be different. Without one, you’re stuck. Either you follow the prophecy or you tear the kingdom apart.”

“I know.” Keeping my anger out of my voice was impossible. My body trembled with a burning rage, my breathing came too fast, and my strained tone showed how close I was to an explosion. “Your father has arranged it cleverly. How does this human help me avoid his trap?”

Instead of answering directly, she turned her full attention to the human female. “Eden, darling, why don’t you explain the meaning of your name to his Majesty?”

Her brows creased, confused, but she complied. “Uh, there’s not much to tell. Sumner is my family name, and Eden—well, I’m called Eden because I was the first human born on this planet. My parents named me after it.”

It took me a beat to understand, looking between the two women. Then the realization struck like a hammer between my eyes.

“You call this planet ‘Eden?’” I asked. A stupid question she’d already answered. “We call it Vazand.”

The first of Vazand born shall be thy wife, oh Rhakaris, oh King of Ages. The line of prophecy that tied me to Kharmiya Vazand now offered me freedom from her and the grasp of her father. If the human would play along.

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EDEN

This is a joke, right? I kept the words inside my head, because looking at the aliens, either they were the best actors I'd ever seen, or they meant every word.

"No," I said instead. "No, fuck off, fuck you, and fuck no."

The ice-cold smile on Kharmiya's lips didn't move. "Isn't that precious? I'm afraid there's no choice here, Eden."

Against all logic and reason, my glare didn't cause her to burst into flames. If anything, it added to her amusement.

"Stop that, Kharmiya," the alien king snapped, with a hard chopping gesture. The lady's smile vanished behind a practiced submissive mask, and she bowed her head. After a second's silence, he nodded and turned his attention from her to me.

It was like being hit with a ten-ton boulder of lust. There was no space for anything else, not while he looked at me, his dark eyes boring into my soul. Long dark hair tumbled past his shoulder, black as the midnight sky, framing a pale blue-white face that belonged on a holo star.

His full lips called out to be kissed, his broad shoulders made him look like an athlete at the top of his game. Everything about him sent thrills racing through my body.

I hung onto my anger as best I could—this asshole wanted to marry me for some prophecy, and didn't care what I thought.

My body didn't care what I thought, either. It melted in his gaze, and I felt the tingling heat deep in my core, spreading through me as my mind insisted on conjuring images of King Rhakaris naked. However awful he was, goddamn, he looked good enough to eat.

Had he spoken? I thought so, but not a word lodged in my mind. Thankfully, I was already blushing. I took a deep breath and tried to think. Options, that's what I needed. Options other than where to start undressing him.

I could run. Yeah, that'll go well. I doubt I'd make it out of the room, and there's no way I'd get out of the castle.

Fight? That's a joke, right? There isn't a human on Eden I'd bet on against him.

Stand here, panicking, until he decides what to do? Fuck that.

Which left talking my way out. Shit.

"No, look, it doesn't make sense," I objected, tearing my eyes from the irresistible alien king to glare at Kharmiya. "Your prophecy doesn't take humans into account. It can't have meant me."

Her laugh was like ice cracking, hard and sharp and cold. "Darling, the prophecy is either a clever forgery or the hallucination of an old man high on volcanic gasses. There is no 'true' answer, and my interpretation is as meaningful as anyone's."

"The Keepers of Ancestral Memory would disagree," the king said.

“True,” she conceded. “I’d need to bribe one to back me up. That’s fine, it’s not as though they’re expensive.”

Trying to hold back a laugh, I snorted. The king’s eyes narrowed and his muscles tensed, but she didn’t acknowledge the danger. Off to one side, Ellarax turned away, shaking with silent laughter.

“Your father would not approve of blasphemous jokes,” the king relaxed as he spoke, shaking his head. Kharmiya sighed.

“Majesty, my father would not approve of anything I do if he knew of it. The lesson he’s taught me best is how to keep my secrets from him.”

Against my better judgement, I found myself warming to the woman. Which didn’t change the fact that she’d brought me here to use me in a scheme.

“I’m not here looking for a husband,” I said, hoping directness might get through to them. “Flattering, sure, but I have more important business. Someone—” I shot a look in Ellarax’s direction “—told the colony that the Drachali king will hear requests from anyone when he emerges from his year of mourning. My family needs your help to survive. All the humans of the colony do.”

King Rhakaris turned serious, nodding. “That is the custom. Whether a human can invoke it remains an open question. Our law is intended for subjects of the Sanguine Throne, not offworlder guests.”

I swallowed. Hope twisted me up, and I tried not to hang onto it. “We need more land, better land. The toxins in the soil are killing us, slow but sure, and you have the technology to filter them out. You can save us.”

I’m certain the speech I practiced on the way here was ten times better, but

everything else slipped from my mind. They should have sent someone with training, a diplomat or lawyer or something. But no, I get stuck dealing with alien royalty and some bullshit plan to avoid a prophecy by marrying me. It'd be hilarious if this happened to the Colony administrator. Less funny when happening to me.

But the alien king looked like he took my request seriously. Leaning forward, he no longer stared at me, but past me, flexing his long, pale fingers as he thought.

"I do not want your people to starve," Kharmiya said, raising her eyes to meet mine. "But this is not a small request. It would usurp the authority of Duke Vazand over his own planet, all to aid those he considers intruders. I regret to say that it might cause my father to start a civil war, all over aliens with no standing under our laws."

Something flashed in her eyes and Rhakaris growled.

I saw what she was hinting at and tried to find another way. Something, anything, more agreeable. Nothing came to mind.

"This marriage, it only has to be ceremonial, right?" I crossed my arms and glared from one Drachali to the other. "You're not expecting me to... do anything?"

The king snarled, baring long, sharp fangs. Yeah, yeah, big guy. Pretend you aren't thinking about our wedding night all you like, I can see the way you look at me. Not that I was any better, of course. The idea of being carried over the threshold by this monstrous alien king was impossible to ignore, and I couldn't stop thinking about us undressing each other.

"The marriage must last a year and a day to be valid," Kharmiya said, rushing her words out as though she had to speak before one of us did something stupid. Which, I had to admit, was quite possible. "That's all. A year and a day as a mated pair, then you can separate without disturbing the prophecy."

I kept my eyes on Rhakaris, whose hands gripped the arms of his chair so hard I worried he'd break the stone. He nodded jerkily, the muscles on his neck standing out like steel cables, and spoke.

“Very well. Publicly, we shall wed. In private, I shall expect nothing from you, and after a year and a day, you are free. In return, I will help your people heal their land.”

RHAKARIS

Did Eden really think so little of me? That I might force myself upon my bride? I raged, but tried not to let it show. She was frightened of me, and while that was galling, I had no desire to make it worse.

The three of us stood in silence for an awkward moment. Kharmiya's lady-companion shook her head and opened the door a crack, watching the corridor for anyone who might interrupt us. I suspected it had more to do with escaping the embarrassing conversation than with our security.

"Okay, fine, bargain made. How do we manage a royal wedding in the home of someone who has every reason to object?" Eden spoke with hard, clipped words, hiding her emotions. This was a practical issue to her, nothing more—or at least, that's what she pretended. Her flushed cheeks hinted at more. "Just how much pomp and circumstance do we need here? And where the fuck are we going to get a priest?"

A clash of our cultures was to be expected, I told myself. It should be no surprise that she had other impressions of how a wedding worked.

"It would be best to have a Keeper as a witness," I conceded. "But we can proceed without one. And any Drachali of noble rank can bind mates together."

Kharmiya smiled her wintery smile. "My father commanded me to marry the king. He may regret not being more specific about who I marry him to."

Eden laughed, a short sharp sound, proving that the double meaning worked in both our languages.

“As for the lack of royal splendor, we shall have to make do. You can have another, grander ceremony when fewer lives are at stake.”

“And when you have more time,” hissed Ellarax, her face white and eyes wide as she turned from the door. “The duke is coming.”

“Do it. Fast.” I snapped the command at Kharmiya, who could not quite hide the fear in her eyes as she stepped forward to face Eden. The human female flinched as I hurried to her side, and I tried to remind myself that humans are slow by Drachali standards.

Kharmiya had done her homework. She launched into a cut-down version of the binding vows, brutally shortening the ritual. Behind us, I heard footsteps in the corridor, and the scraping sound of her lady-companion dragging furniture into position to barricade the door. As much as I yearned to look back, I kept my attention on the ritual and on my mate-to-be. Eden did her best to hide her emotions, but they were too much for her to control. She was afraid, and not without reason. Of all of us, she was the one Duke Vazand would be happy to kill.

“I will not let harm come to you because of this,” I murmured out of the corner of my mouth. “Do not worry.”

Somehow, that was the wrong thing to say. She glared up at me. “Fuck you, I can take care of myself.”

The door rattled, then shook as someone slammed their weight against it. Wood creaked, but did not break, and Eden’s angry glare stayed constant.

“What misbegotten devilry is this?” Duke Vazand shouted from outside. For the first time, Kharmiya stumbled over her words, but she kept going.

She couldn’t interrupt her speech. Nothing but tradition said I should hold my silence. “Your Grace, all is well. We simply wanted a little privacy to discuss our future.”

It had the virtue of being true, though incomplete. The disadvantage was that it failed to convince anyone. “His Majesty is trapped inside. Blow the lock.”

The low thrum of a pulse-gun sounded, and Ellarax dove for cover. Wood cracked and shook, sending a shower of splinters through the air where she’d stood a moment earlier. Someone shook the door again, but the barricade held. Pained swearing told me it had come at a cost—Kharmiya’s companion clutched a bleeding arm where the splinters had torn through it.

I gestured for Kharmiya to hurry up. We didn’t have much time.

“Yes. Yes. Okay.” She took a deep steadying breath and spoke fast over the thump-thump-thump of Vazand’s guards battering the door open. “The ancestors see you, King of Ages. You are their child and heir. Under their gaze, do you claim this female as your mate and swear you shall be true to her?”

“Yes.” It was a considerable shortening of the traditional vows, but it covered the important parts. Wood scraped on stone behind me as I answered, and she turned to Eden.

“Eden Sumner, I assume you’re in good standing with whatever gods you worship. Do you?—”

“Yes!” Eden’s reply was nearly a shout. “Yes I fucking do, alright?”

With a splintering crash, the doors finally gave out, and guards shoved their way through. Triumphantly, Kharmiya grabbed my hand and Eden's, raising them high. "Ancestors bless this marriage. Now kiss."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Duke Vazand shoving his way past his guards, face dark with fury and eyes flashing. The Keepers followed, all shocked expressions and wringing hands. No one had expected this, and I took great satisfaction at the chaos I'd stirred up.

Then my lips met Eden's, and everything else washed away in the sudden rush of indescribable joy.

EDEN

The kiss was everything. Rhakaris's alien lips were firm but yielding, cool and smooth. My eyes fluttered shut as his kiss brushed my lips, moving in a dance both familiar and intoxicating. His hand cupped the back of my head, steadying me, holding me close. Both gentle and possessive, his touch laid claim to me, and in that moment, I wanted nothing else.

The world faded to nothing. Time stood still. The kiss was my entire world. I moaned as his tongue probed my lips, parting them, finding mine and dancing with it. The tongue felt strange, rough but not unpleasant, long and flexible. Razor sharp fangs grazed my lips delicately, and a shiver of fear mixed with the surge of desire. He pulsed with a primal force, something ancient and powerful, something that drew me in like a beacon. Something that would not be denied.

When our lips parted, my head span and my heart pounded like a drum. The alien king's dark, inscrutable eyes stayed fixed on mine, and it felt as though he looked into my soul. They trapped me, prey caught in a predator's gaze, and worst of all, I didn't mind.

Around us, chaos reigned. Oh yeah. We're not alone. That realization broke the spell, letting me turn away to see how much trouble we were in.

Kharmiya stood between us and her father, her shoulders tense. Framed by the broken doorway, the duke looked like fury incarnate, and four guards with rifles stood at his

side. They weren't aiming at anyone, but the way they held the weapons made me certain that they were waiting for an excuse.

The duke and his daughter snarled back and forth at each other in their alien language, leaving me at a loss. Beside me, Rhakaris tensed, so I doubted it was anything good.

"Speak Galtrade," he snarled, interrupting Duke Vazand mid-growl. "You dishonor yourself and offend my mate otherwise."

"That is not your mate," the duke snapped, though to be fair, he snapped it in Galtrade. "My daughter is. Prophecy foretells that she will marry you?—"

"—and I have," interrupted Kharmiya, voice steady and dripping sincerity. "I married the two of them, as is my right as a noble lady."

The duke's eyes blazed with rage, but he bit back whatever he was about to shout at her with a visible effort and took a deep breath. "You have always been a prankster, my dear, but we all know a human cannot marry our king. The Keepers are here to witness the real ceremony. Guards, remove the alien."

He means me. I was still in shock from the kiss, and couldn't do more than blink as the four guards raised their rifles. And I think he means 'remove me' permanently.

While I froze, Rhakaris didn't hesitate. He stepped between me and the gunmen, into the line of fire.

"You are mistaken." His voice was crisp, hard, commanding. Even now, under threat of death, it sent a thrill through me. "I am your king, and I order you to drop your weapons."

That crack of command hit hard—and it wasn't even aimed at me. But the guards only paused for a moment, then spread out. Rhakaris shifted this way and that, but he couldn't block four people at once, and he knew it. Every move crowded me back, away from the door, but there was a limit to how far we could retreat.

The balcony railing was coming up fast, and beyond it was a long drop into the toxic lake. The fall would probably kill me, which might be a blessing. I'd prefer that to the lake dissolving my bones.

"Did you really think that would work?" I hissed at the king. He chuckled, making my blood boil.

"No, but I had to try," he said, his focus clearly elsewhere. Normally, that would have offended me, but his attention was on the gunmen trying to get a clear shot at me. I decided that gave him a pass.

"We're out of space to retreat," I told him. "Got something else you want to try, or is this a last stand?"

"I've got an idea or two," the alien king said. "But I don't think you'll like them."

"Yeah, well, it doesn't look like I've got a lot of choice, thanks to you. So fucking do something."

The winds whipping around the tower smelled of hot metal and sulfur, and they brought a chill that cut deep into my bones. I breathed deep anyway—if it was going to be my last breath, I wanted to make the most of it.

"Your Majesty," the cold, hard voice of Duke Vazand called out. "Be reasonable. You have no escape route, and I have no interest in seeing you hurt. If the human female means so much to you, fine, you can keep her. All you must do is marry my

daughter, who will give you strong and numerous heirs.”

Like hell she will, I thought, controlling a snort. I saw how Kharmiya looked at Ellarax, and how she didn’t look at Rhakaris.

It was hardly the most pressing matter, but it was better than focusing on the way the duke referred to me like an animal, or the choice facing Rhakaris. Giving in seemed the sanest option, and the one I least wanted him to take. A defiant charge might get us both killed, but at least it would be brave. Futile, stupid, but brave. Pleading? I couldn’t imagine it.

The last thing I expected was the deep, booming laugh. “Duke Vazand, my mating is not something to buy and sell, and nor is my mate yours to spare. We are nobles of the Drachali, and do not haggle like grocers. Where there is conflict, we shall settle it in the old way. Violence.”

“If it must be so. My daughter will have to rule as your swiftly widowed mate.”

That brought shocked gasps. Apparently, the duke’s pet Keepers weren’t on board for regicide, but it was a little late to draw that line in the sand. I didn’t think either the duke or the king would back down from a fight.

Ah. Doomed heroic charge it is. I wish he hadn’t given them that warning. I braced myself to follow him—no fucking way was I about to let him hog the glory while I stood back and waited to die.

I didn’t expect him to turn and grab me in a fierce embrace as the thump of the guards’ guns sounded. His powerful arms closed around me and my breath caught as he lifted me off my feet and leaped.

Over the railing, into the chill winds and the long fall into the toxic ocean below.

RHAKARIS

I wasn't expecting her to scream. The piercing sound made me flinch as we fell, and I almost let go of her. Overcorrecting, I nearly crushed her ribs. I felt them creak in my embrace and relaxed a fraction. At least the tight squeeze had emptied her lungs, silencing her and letting me think.

My combat tutors would say the time to come up with a plan was before jumping off a balcony. I'd answer that four murderers with pulse rifles made this the least bad plan available—even as it was, at least one shot had tagged me. Time to worry about that later, I told myself. It didn't hurt, so my armored coat had likely taken most of the hit.

The air whistled past us as we tumbled toward the sea below. At this speed, impact would likely be fatal, which while not ideal was probably preferable to trying to swim in the acid. But I didn't intend to try either, so I focused on keeping hold of my squirming burden and hoping that my gambit paid off.

Darkness embraced us moments before we hit the poisoned waters, swallowing us up and wrapping us in forcefields that set us gently down on a floor of black metal. The wind's howl cut off as the cargo hatch shut, leaving us lying in each other's arms, shaking and gasping for air.

I do not know which of us started laughing first. It started as spluttering, and grew as we both fought against it, until we were both shaking helplessly with the dheer joy of

being alive. Every time one of us started to recover, the other set them off again.

We might have gone on like that forever if Eden hadn't managed to sit up and look at me. The humor drained from her instantly.

"You're bleeding," she accused, thumping me on the shoulder. "You asshole, you've been shot."

Perhaps it wasn't sound diagnostic technique, but her light punch was enough to make me hiss in pain. Okay, perhaps my coat hadn't done as well as I'd hoped. It's amazing what you can ignore when your blood is up.

"Do not worry, it's only a flesh wound," I said, pulling myself to my feet. And promptly falling back onto the cargo bay deck with a crash. "Nothing to worry about."

Eden's litany of swearwords showed impressive range and variety, even if I didn't understand any of them. "You've. Been. Shot. Fuck, where do you keep the first aid kit on this damned thing? And how did we get aboard, anyway?"

I sat up, and Eden tried to stop me. Her hand felt warm through my shirt, and that warmth spread through my chest as I looked up at her, smiling. She snatched her hand back as though scalded, glaring.

"This is the Blackwing, my personal yacht. The ship AI is smart enough to do some simple tricks, and I hoped that would extend to catching us."

"You hoped?" Eden's lips compressed into a thin line, and she rested her hands on her hips. "You carried me off a balcony and hoped your AI was smart enough to catch us?"

“It was a very high balcony,” I pointed out reasonably. “She had plenty of time to figure it out.”

Perhaps it was unkind of me, but I took some pleasure in watching Eden splutter for words, her face darkening and hands flexing as though she was thinking of throttling me. I shrugged, gasped as my wound made itself known, and carried on before her anger got the better of her.

“It was a safer bet than fighting Duke Vazand and his guards in his own home. Besides, I gave Blackwing a head start. I called her for a pickup as soon as the duke had us cornered, so she was waiting for a chance to grab me.”

My plan had been to meet Blackwing on the balcony, but that detail didn’t matter. Eden kept up her glare for a few more heartbeats before throwing her hands up and sighing. “Fine. Sure. We’re alive, and I guess that’s the important thing. So let’s try to keep you that way.”

There was, of course, medkit on the wall. Eden snatched it down and holographic instructions flashed into existence to guide her in its use. The first tool it produced was a vibro-knife, which didn’t bode well.

“My wound can’t be that bad,” I said, trying to smile. “I don’t need to be put out of my misery just yet.”

Eden snorted. “Don’t worry, it doesn’t want you dead yet. Give it a few minutes to get to know you first.”

She set about cutting the sleeve from my coat, and I kept still. A vibro-knife is nothing to take chances with, and while the human’s hands were steady, I didn’t want to bet on her reflexes.

Once she'd removed the sleeve, she cut along the seams and peeled back the armorcloth fabric. I tried not to flinch at the pain as it tore free of my wound. "What do you see?"

I didn't like Eden's pause, but her words were no better. "It doesn't look good. Your coat took most of the hit, but there's a deep burn here and a lot of blood."

She sounded faint and a little nauseous, but she kept right on working. Tougher than she looked, this human. "I'm going to apply sensor-gel now, so keep still. It's cold, but I doubt you'll notice that past the searing pain of me spreading it on your wound."

"I do not fear the pain," I told her, then roared in sudden agony at the icy touch. I'd take being shot a thousand times over this crawling, blinding suffering. It spread out across my injury and into it, before a sudden numbness took hold. I took a few deep breaths before speaking again. "You see? It is not so bad."

That won a startled laugh from Eden. "Sure. I guess you just scream sometimes, huh? For the fun of it?"

"I do not scream. That was a roar."

"Right. Of course. How...ignorant of me to miss the difference."

"Just so," I said, my voice dripping with injured dignity. It got another laugh, this time more relaxed, and I smiled.

"I think I'm supposed to be the one making you feel better," she said. "You're the patient."

"You heal my wound, I heal your morale. A fine division of labor. What does the kit say?"

“That you should shut up and give it time to work.” Eden sighed, tapping her way through the kit’s readouts. “Okay, it can’t fix you, but it can keep you functional while we get you to your autodoc. Which is good, because I’m trying to imagine me hauling you anywhere, and it would make a funny farce.”

I groaned at the news. “That means I’m going to have to stand up.”

EDEN

The kit's magic gel stabilized Rhakaris and stopped the bleeding. That left me looking at the giant alien king and wondering how the fuck I was meant to get him to the medbay, wherever that was.

"I have it this time," he said as he made his third attempt to stand. He made it up on one knee before his strength gave out, dropping him back on the deck with a thump that I felt in my bones.

"Yep, I can see that." I shook my head. "Stop that before you injure yourself again."

The medkit's hologram display was already complaining that its patient was moving too much and aggravating his injuries, and the 'Next Step: Remove Patient to Medical Facility' message was flashing more and more urgently. I looked around the cargo bay at the neatly stacked crates that took up perhaps half the space. None of them had fallen or even shifted during whatever violent maneuvers the Blackwing had taken to catch us. For that matter, aside from a faint vibration in the deck, I couldn't feel the ship move.

It had first rate gravity manipulators, then. Which gave me an idea.

"What are you up to, human?" Rhakaris asked, watching me from the deck as I walked to the interior hatch and examined the bulkhead.

“Just looking for—aha!” As I’d expected, a section of wall opened at my touch, exposing a control station with a detachable tablet that I picked up. The display was entirely in Drachali script, but it looked straightforward enough. “Okay, yes, this will work. Pretty intuitive, too. Let’s try this...”

I swept a finger gently about the controls, guiding a golden trail of light over a map of the hold.

“Human. Eden. Put that back, I don’t know what it does.”

I grinned. I couldn’t help myself. Of course the king never found the manual controls on his ship. He’d have people for that wherever he docked. “Sure, just as soon as I’m done.”

A flick of my finger, and the gravity field took hold of Rhakaris and lifted him from the deck to dangle in the air, rotating slowly. His outraged squawk turned my grin into a laugh, and he crossed his arms, narrowed his eyes, and gave me a look.

“This,” he said with great deliberation, “is undignified and unbecoming a king.”

“I won’t tell anyone if you don’t,” I said, guiding him toward me and the hatch. “Now where’s that medbay?”

Fortunately, it wasn’t far. Once out of the hold, the gravity manipulators weren’t capable of carrying the injured Drachali, but I managed to put him down without knocking him off his feet, and he staggered onward. I helped as much as I could, but the alien was solid muscle—he weighed more than I expected even a giant like him to weigh.

There was another problem, too. With his coat cut away, I ended up with the skin of his torso pressing against me, my arm around his waist feeling the muscles move

beneath his skin. His abs were a deadly temptation, perfectly defined as though a sculptor had carved them from marble.

That sculptor would have thrown away his tools afterward. No one could hope to make such perfection twice.

I am not tempted, I lied to myself. He's an asshole, and he's injured.

Injured getting in the way of a shot meant for me, I couldn't help adding.

Yes, aimed at me because he dragged me into his alien intrigue. Hence, asshole.

At least bickering with myself kept my mind occupied until we reached the medbay, and the autdoc pods within. Ornate stone caskets, they looked uncomfortably like coffins, but Rhakaris seemed to know what he was doing and pulled himself into one with a sigh of relief.

I watched as a white fog rose around him, filling the coffin. Then the lid swung shut, and all I could do was wait.

Half an hour later, the lid lifted with a hiss and fog tumbled out of it, spilling over the floor. Rhakaris rose easily, gracefully.

And nakedly.

The auto dock had freed him of his remaining clothes, which seemed to trouble him not at all. If I looked that good naked, maybe I wouldn't mind either. All I could do was stare at him as he stepped out of the coffin and flexed his muscles. Testing the healing or showing off? I decided it was probably both, and I couldn't blame him. His muscles were like steel cord under his pale skin, and every move he made seemed laser-focused on my desire.

I couldn't even lie to myself and pretend I wasn't interested. Not when taking my eyes off him was impossible. His black hair tumbled down over broad shoulders, his powerful arms which had kept me safe, his chest, everything about him was amazing. Unbidden, my gaze tracked lower, my face flushing as I saw his cock.

His very erect cock. It was bigger than I'd have imagined, big enough to frighten me. I hadn't made a study, but I was pretty sure he was thicker than any human. I knew human women had Drachali lovers, but how? How would that thing even fit inside a human? Only one way to find out, I told myself, warm tingling spreading from my core.

He stepped closer with a dark chuckle that drew my eyes up to his grinning face. "Your pardon, Eden. You are standing in front of the clothes maker."

My cheeks burned as I stood aside, mumbling some apology. I'd expected him to... I didn't know what, exactly. And he'd promised not to push me, hadn't he? It seemed like an age ago, but it was probably less than an hour.

I wish he hadn't promised. The thought came unbidden as he reached past me, opening a panel and letting out a puff of air with the unmistakable smell of maker-dust. Before he could remove whatever clothes the ship had made for him, I grabbed his wrist.

It was a stupid, impulsive move. One I hadn't planned, and had no follow up for. Rhakaris could have ignored me easily, but he stopped in place, and I felt a shudder run through him.

"Eden." He spoke slowly, carefully, and hearing my name in that deep, gravelly voice fanned the flames of my desire into an inferno. "Eden, do not do that unless you mean it."

Dark eyes bored into my soul, and I saw the struggle he had to control the beast within him. I considered pulling back my hand, backing away, forgetting this mad impulse. Instead, I met his gaze and nodded, a single quick motion.

Rhakarís didn't need anything else, and the next second was a blur. One second I held his wrist, the next he held me pinned against the wall, the breath driven out of my lungs by the impact and his mouth inches from mine. He held both my wrists in one hand, pinned above my head. The other cupped my face, thumb tracing across my cheek, over my lips.

Heart racing and panting for air, I looked up at him. Perhaps I should have felt frightened of him, but the wildness in him, the predator, the monster—that was what made him irresistible. I struggled, not to get away, but wanting to touch him myself, to feel those muscles under my fingers.

Another dark and deep chuckle. “No, my mate. You will have your chance later. This is my time to play.”

Before I could ask what he meant, he showed me. In a blur, he tore my dress from my body, his claws parting the fabric like fog. I whimpered as it fell to the deck in pieces, leaving me squirming in my underwear. Rhakarís growled, a hungry animal sound, pressing himself against me and pinning me against the wall.

His body felt so damned good, and I wanted more. He was close enough, now, and I leaned forward to kiss him on the neck, his skin cool against my lips, tasting of smoke and iron and sex. Rhakarís's growl deepened, and his already massive cock swelled between us. Hard as diamond, it pulsed as I bit down on his neck, its studded length terrifying and exhilarating.

A flick of his wrist was enough to rip off my bra, and he slid his hand under my ass, lifting me up the wall and pulling my mouth from his neck. His own teeth, needle

sharp and deadly, nipped at my skin with amazing skill and control, making me moan and writhe as he explored my breasts with lips and tongue and bites.

I barely noticed when his clawed fingers slices through my panties. Only when he positioned me over his giant cock did I realize there was no more fabric between my core and him.

My slick folds parted for him as he rubbed his cockhead forward and back along them, the pulses I'd felt before speeding up, becoming a constant vibration. When it brushed against my clit, I cried out, my whole body convulsing, and the look of raw, predatory joy on my alien lover's face almost sent me over the edge.

Releasing my wrists, he gripped my hips with both hands. Held still until I trembled with anticipation.

And thrust.

His cock slid into me, stretched me, filled me. My eager body opened for him, welcomed him, and it felt perfect. I threw back my head and cried out at the ceiling, and he seized the chance to bite my neck. Everything went white for a moment, an explosion of ecstasy rocking me.

My legs wrapped around his hips almost of their own accord, and I clutched at him, urging him on as he pounded me harder and harder. Lost in the sensation, I squeezed his magnificent cock, loving the hungry growl it won from him.

We spurred each other on, gasping moaning and crying out, and I lost count of how many climaxes he drove me to, each peak higher than the last. Finally, with a snarled triumphant roar, he thrust deep and came, taking me with him into the most powerful orgasm I could ever have imagined.

He held me there, pinned against the wall, both of us panting and dripping with sweat. Then, slowly, his legs gave out and we slid gracelessly to the deck to curl up in each other's arms.

RHAKARIS

The medbay floor was far from the worst place I'd rested, but it wasn't one that I'd have chosen. With Eden lying on my arm, her head resting on my chest, I couldn't even think of moving. I'd rather have gnawed off my arm than wake her. So there we stayed, snuggled together, my hand stroking her back as she mumbled something sleepy under her breath.

It couldn't last forever, alas. Far too soon, the human sat up and looked down at me, her cheeks reddening.

"That wasn't what we agreed," she started, then bit her lip. I gave her a small smile, keeping my lips closed. In my experience, a Drachali smile intimidated most humans.

"We both came through a lethal fight unharmed," I said, sitting up opposite her, my back leaning against the medical coffin. "Our bodies needed release. It does not have to mean more, unless you want it to."

Her expression mixed relief with disappointment. "Yeah. Sure. Just hormones, right? No one's shot at me before now."

I nodded, feeling as reluctant as she seemed. But I struck a bargain and I would keep it—Eden would be my queen for a year, but only in appearance. I would not push for more, as much as I desired her. I don't even know her, I told myself, though it rang hollow. The infuriating human meant more than just a dodge around a prophecy.

Much more.

“We must dress,” I said reluctantly, heaving myself up from the floor and taking the clothes waiting in the maker. Eden watched with a raised eyebrow, and I grinned. “As much as I prefer your current state of dress, here.”

The shirt I passed her was far too big, of course, but it covered her nakedness. A necessity if I wanted to focus on anything aside from her. From the way she looked at me, she didn’t mind that it left me topless. A win for both of us, then.

“The makers are only good for Drachali sizes,” I explained. “We can make adjustments for you, but first we should see how much trouble we’re in. Should have done that as soon as I left the autodoc, but someone was unbearably distracting.”

“Oh, you’re going to blame me?” Eden protested with a mock glare. “As I recall, you were the one parading around naked.”

“Because I got shot protecting you.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ve always got an excuse, don’t you?” A grin broke on her face, beautiful and deadly like the dawn. I’d step in front of a plasma cannon for her, and my only regret would be that I could do it only once.

It took all my willpower to turn away and lead her to the bridge rather than my cabin. She looked around as we walked, a thoughtful look on her face.

“This ship has everything you could need, right?” She asked eventually. “Does that mean it has an armory?”

“Hah. Yes, but if you’re expecting us to make a daring attack on a castle, you’ll find it disappointing. I have a pair of hunting rifles, power swords meant for dueling, and

stun pistols. I did not expect to get into a war with one of my vassals, and this is a yacht, not a warship.”

The bridge looked out onto the vast depths of space, holograms displaying status reports floating where they wouldn't spoil the view. Everything was well within tolerances, and we were alone with no sign of pursuit. Not a surprise—Blackwing might not carry many weapons, but she was fast. Vazand had no ships able to keep up with it.

“Where are we?” Eden said, looking out into the vast void beyond the viewport. “We can't have gone far.”

“That depends on what you mean by ‘far’—we're in a random orbit around Vazand's star. Even if they find us here, which they won't, we can jump to hyperspace. The drive is spooled up and ready. We're safe.”

She relaxed, letting go of tension I hadn't noticed. “So, what now? You're not going to let him get away with this, are you?”

“I will not, and I cannot. He attacked you, knowing you are my queen. As a warrior, I must defend my mate. As king, I cannot look weak. Either would be enough to doom him, and he must know that. He will move against me with whatever he can.”

“You don't need to take risks on my account,” Eden said, sliding an arm around me and holding on tight. “He tried to kill me, but he failed because you saved me. You got shot for me. I don't need anything more from you, but...since you have a whole other reason, I can say I hope you fuck him the fuck up.”

Her profanity startled a laugh from me, and I hugged her back. “Such a poet you are.”

For a moment we stood there, holding each other, and then we both remembered the

terms of our agreement and stepped back. Eden looked as unhappy about that as I was.

I promised no pressure, I told myself sternly as she looked away and chewed on her lip. It was the hardest promise I'd ever had to keep, and I pulled my eyes away, looking for something, anything, that would distract me.

I found it on the communication console, where a flashing light indicated an urgent message waiting. Dropping into the captain's chair, I called it up without checking further.

Duke Strahar Vazand appeared, a life-sized hologram standing before me, dressed in formal robes suitable for speaking with royalty. Stone-faced and collected, he bowed and spoke in a voice as cold as comet ice.

"Majesty, I regret our earlier interaction. It was unfortunate that the situation got out of hand, and your sudden departure was, of course, perfectly correct. Alas, I must insist that you return so that we can consider matters in a more decorous way. We do still have a wedding to plan."

I snarled at the hologram, blood boiling at the duke's arrogant insincerity. "If you have a point, make it already."

Eden laid a hand on my arm, calming me. I nodded my thanks. Losing my temper with a recording wouldn't help. Nor would listening to him drone on. I reached for the off switch, but Eden held my arm back. "Don't. I want to know why he's speaking Galtrade."

That hadn't registered to me until she mentioned it, and it ignited my curiosity too. Vazand didn't need to include her in the conversation, so why would he? Alas, finding out involved listening to his interminable thoughts on wedding plans, on how

honored his daughter was, and how wonderful the union of our houses would be.

“I think I’ve figured out his plan,” Eden said. “He’s going to bore us to death.”

I chuckled. “You’re the one who wanted to hear him out. But yes, I wish he made his schemes more interesting, or at least shorter. Preferably both.”

Eden laughed too, a bright and musical sound, sending a pulse of pure joy through my soul. I smiled, placing my hand over hers, and basked in the warmth of her company until the duke reached an actual point.

“As for your human companion,” he said, loading the word with more contempt than I’d thought possible, “I admit, I overreacted to her presence. Of course, your Majesty was pleased to joke about being married to her, and I should have realized it was humor. A Drachali king can no more marry a human than one of the scyr-birds that scavenge the poison sea.”

“Rhakaris,” Eden said softly, “you’re hurting me.”

I blinked and realized I’d tightened my grip on her, fingers digging into her flesh hard enough to bruise. I jerked my hand back as though scalded, apologizing as I did so.

The duke’s disrespect for her stoked a rage in me, leaving me shaking with tension. I wanted to put my fist through his face, but the only person I might hurt was my human companion. So I breathed in. Held it as I counted to four. And breathed out again, letting some of my anger flow with it. Eden pressed a hand to my chest, dispelling more.

A shift in the hologram drew our attention back to the message. The image had zoomed out to show the chamber behind the duke, revealing that he was not alone. Keepers flanked him, hard-faced and cold-eyed, but the bigger surprise was the group

of humans standing against the wall behind them. I didn't understand why they were there—six of them, huddled together and faces pale with fear. Four young males, and an older couple, with a pair of Drachali guards looming over them. Why would he...?

I winced, my thoughts interrupted by sudden pain as Eden's hands clenched, driving her nails into my skin. "That motherfucker! He's got my family!"

"...her family lives in my domain, and I will be glad to take care of them. Alas, Vazand is a dangerous planet, and I can't guarantee their safety if you don't return promptly."

Eden swore over his voice in a continuous stream, obscene words in a language I didn't need to understand. The hate and rage and fear in her voice was enough to know what she meant. Her nails dug in harder and harder until I hissed from the effort of keeping still.

Hearing my pain, she gasped and let go, blushing bright red and stammering an apology. I waved that away as unimportant and gathered her to me. "I do not care about a little pain, my mate. Vazand has hurt you, which is far more important. I promise he will pay a harsh price if any of your kin come to harm."

"Thank you, but I'd rather keep them safe than avenge their deaths, you know?"

"I do know," I told her. "I would give almost anything to speak with my parents again, and I will not allow you to suffer as I have. Not while there is another choice."

"So... what, you get your army and go give that fucker a kicking?" She sounded unconvinced, and I didn't blame her.

"Duke Vazand has a powerful army, and my royal guard would have difficulty defeating him on their own. It would be different if I rallied my loyal nobles to our

cause, but that would take many days. Far too late to save your family.”

“Even if we had an army right here, we couldn’t save them. So I guess they’re fucked, because I can’t ask you to turn yourself over.”

A tremble in her voice showed how close she was to losing control, and my heart felt like it was tearing itself in two. She was right. It was madness to risk my dynasty and my kingdom, to put myself back in the duke’s clutches. I should return to the Sanguine Throne, call my vassals, and enact such a vengeance that no one would dare strike at my mate ever again.

It was a smart plan, a sensible plan, but a plan with a deadly flaw: it would break Eden’s heart. And no matter what my duty demanded of me, I couldn’t do that.

I reached past her to the control surfaces, redirecting the Blackwing’s course. Eden clung to me, fighting back tears, and didn’t comment until she realized our heading was back the way we came.

“No. Don’t you dare.” She sat up in my lap, glared into my eyes, and spoke with a voice that should have commanded armies. “I told you, I’m not asking you for that.”

“You are not,” I confirmed. “I am doing it anyway. If I do not, we will both regret it for the rest of our days.”

“And if you do, how will we feel? You’ll be a captive, your kingdom will be theirs, and your dynasty will end with you.” Her voice rose as she spoke, and tears welled in her eyes. “You can’t surrender on my account. I won’t permit it.”

“It is not your choice to make. I will do this, Eden, because I love you and wish you to be happy. While there is still a chance we can save both our families, I refuse to give up. We have six hours to make a plan to save them.”

Burying her face in my shoulder, she squeezed me tight, and I returned her embrace. For all my bold words, we were flying straight into the enemy's trap and the odds against us were long.

EDEN

I should have slept, but sleep was impossible. Instead, I'd spent the hours in flight fighting with the alien makers until I had something that would serve my purpose and resembled a royal outfit. Or what I imagined one would be, based on my memory of the history holoshows I'd devoured as a link to the Earth I'd never seen.

It was pretty, despite its annoying imperfections. Okay, the skirts were wider than was practical, long enough to drag along the deck and wide enough that I doubted I'd be able to get through a human-scale door. But it did what I needed it to, I thought, admiring my reflection in the more-than-full-length mirror. The guest cabin Rhakaris had given me was small by Drachali standards, but scaled for the gigantic aliens. Which was one reason my emerald green dress didn't fit quite right—the computer refused to believe my human measurements. With more fiddling, I could have improved it, but I was out of time. I barely had enough time to reach the bridge before planetfall.

It was heavy, too, and I hoped it didn't show too much in my walk. It was too late to change now.

The Blackwing shook as she reentered the atmosphere, a cherry-red glow surrounding her as she bled off speed. Sensors warned of weapons locking onto us, but the castle's blasters stayed silent. That and automated landing directions were all the welcome we got as we came in to land.

I found a bitter irony in the fact that my second time arriving at Karych Castle was both more impressive than the first, and more depressing. Numb with fear and anger, even seeing Rhakaris in his royal finery did nothing to cheer me up. It was one more reminder of what I stood to lose today.

My alien mate seemed just as hollowed out, though he did his best to hide it behind an approving smile when he looked at me.

“You are stunning,” he said. “Every time I see you, I lose my heart to you all over again.”

“Flatterer,” I said with a wan smile. “What happened to our ‘no pressure’ agreement, anyway?”

“If we are alive and free come sunrise, you can dispute my breach of contract if you wish. For tonight, you are my queen and I, your king.”

I swallowed the complicated feelings that woke in me and nodded. “Okay, I can do that. We’ll fuck them up as partners, then.”

His smile twitched, a hint of genuine humor showing through, and guided us in to land. Blackwing settled onto a landing platform on top of one of the castle’s towers, and Rhakaris held out a hand.

“May I have the honor of escorting you, your Majesty?”

“The honor is mine, your Majesty,” I answered with equal formality, though in Galtrade it sounded ridiculous. Hand in hand, we descended the cargo ramp to meet the duke’s court as they emerging from the castle.

Vazand wasn’t taking any chances. As well as a crowd of nobles and courtiers, he’d

brought plenty of firepower. A dozen guards, armed and armored, waited with their rifles technically not aimed at Rhakaris. The duke and his daughter stood safely at the back, still flanked by Keepers, and another two guards kept watch over my family. A final guard stood beside Ellarax, holding her hostage for Kharmiya's good behavior.

I swallowed a mess of feelings at the sight of my family. On the one hand, they were in deadly danger. On the other, they looked unhurt. It could be a lot worse.

The duke strode forward to meet us, Kharmiya trailing behind her father. She looked as crushed as I felt. Our eyes met for a moment, and I wondered what she saw in mine. Hers seemed inscrutable, her practiced courtly skills paying off, but I thought I caught a hint of an apology there. Or was it just wishful thinking? Her scheming had gotten me and my family into this mess, and if she didn't feel guilt over that, she was a terrible person.

I didn't want to see Rhakaris marry someone terrible. Or, to be honest, anyone at all.

"Majesty," Duke Vazand started with a low bow. "Delightful to see you again so soon."

I could hear Rhakaris's muscles tensing as he restrained himself from doing something he'd regret. "The Sumner family, they are safe now, yes? They can leave?"

Vazand straightened and favored us with a chilly smile. "Of course, just as soon as you are married. How lucky for them to witness a royal wedding! You would not deny them the honor, would you?"

And you won't give up your hostages until your hook is well and truly swallowed. I glared, and Vazand turned his icy gaze onto me. "In fact, this one should join her family now, while we prepare for the ceremony."

A guard took me by the arm, pulling me away from Rhakaris. My hand slipped from his with one last squeeze, a reassurance that everything would be alright. It didn't count as a lie; we both knew it wasn't true.

"Eden! You're alright!" My mother pounced on me as soon as I was close enough. "What the heck are you wearing?"

I couldn't help grinning. "Always lead with the important questions, right, mom?"

"Well, it is a ridiculous getup. You look like you stole a princess costume from a holodrama that had no budget for costuming or research." She hugged me close, whispering in my ear. "I won't let these motherfuckers see how scared I was for you. These alien pricks can go fuck themselves with razor blade dildos."

"And some people wonder where I learned to swear."

"Did that alien hurt you?" Dad asked, mind on more practical matters. "These assholes weren't exactly gentle when they grabbed us."

"No, no, nothing like that. Rhakaris has been nothing but kind to me, and he saved my life by getting me away from these guys."

"Now he's brought you right back to them," Dad said, eyes narrow, glare directed at my alien mate. "Some savior."

"We came back for you, Dad," I said, wishing there was time to explain. But I knew how quick Drachali weddings could be, and didn't dare risk this one going ahead. "Right now, we have to stop the ceremony. I'll tell you all about it later."

Dad snorted, though Hector and Andy, the older pair of my brothers, looked eager for a chance to fight back. Andy had already tried, I guessed. The bruises rising on his

face were a solid clue.

“Don’t you go putting stupid ideas in your brothers’ heads, Eden. The enemy outnumbers us, they’re stronger than humans, and they have guns. Our only weapon is your mother’s foul language, which might count as a war crime but won’t win the day on its own.”

“True. It would be spectacularly stupid to try anything,” I agreed, then grinned. “Which means we’ll have the element of surprise.”

RHAKARIS

Taking Lady Kharmiya's hand in mine, I tried not to let my anger or resentment show. I didn't want to give anything away, and I Kharmiya didn't deserve my rage. She'd done what she could to keep me safe from her father's schemes—for her own reasons, true, but she helped when no one else did.

I owed her for that, at least.

The duke's Keepers of Ancestral Memory, true to their nature, fussed about setting up a mobile altar. Their dedication to precision and detail made them valuable, but sometimes it made them infuriating, too. I took some pleasure in watching Duke Vazand vibrating with impatience.

"I think he'd prefer your version of the ceremony," I whispered, taking advantage of the distraction to exchange a few words with my bride-to-be.

"Indeed, but he's stuck with this. Your Keeper, Rennic, has been agitating for as long and involved a ceremony as possible."

I smiled, pleased that Rennic was making life difficult for my captors despite his vows of neutrality. He was safe. No one would harm a Keeper for fear of reprisal from the entire kingdom, and he could have sat back and let things happen. Instead, he bought me time.

“My father will not let your human friends free, you know,” she added, even quieter. “They will be hostages for your good behavior for the rest of their lives.”

My jaw tightened, my fingers flexed, and my gaze snapped across the roof to watch Eden speaking with her family. It took an effort to pull my attention away from her, but I didn’t want to give anyone else a reason to look in her direction.

“I know,” I said, answering her question once the storm of my rage had subsided. “But the alternative was worse.”

She nodded, indicating her companion and the guard looming over her. “It’s the same for me and Ellarax. If I go along with my father’s scheme, she lives—but once I give in, he will always be able to hold her safety over my head. Sometimes, there’s no good option. You just have to embrace a bad plan and commit.”

I looked at her, trying to read her intentions, but she was too good at locking down her feelings. No wonder, given the court she’d grown up in. I decided to take a chance.

“I have a terrible plan, and no time to explain,” I said. “Back me, and I will back you.”

She frowned, about to ask a question, but I’d timed my statement perfectly. Across the landing pad, Eden tore off her dress and flung the impractical garment aside.

For a moment, confusion reigned. All eyes turned to her, but no one knew how to react. Not because of her beauty, though her skin-tight undergarment showed her body off to perfection. Instead, it was because of all the weapons.

We’d tied them on a harness, covered by the oversized dress, and counting on the duke’s dismissal of humans to complete the disguise. It had worked. Stunners and

swords and the smallest of my hunting rifles, there for her family to wield. They leaped at the chance to arm themselves while their guards stared in amazement.

I was expecting this, so I was the first to react. The officer leading the duke's guards saw me coming, but was too slow to respond, and I grabbed him by his armor. My claws wouldn't penetrate the ceramsteel plate, but I'd caught him flat-footed, lifting him off his feet before he knew what had happened. He went for his pistol, and I threw him as hard as I could, sending him tumbling off the landing pad into the courtyard far below. While he was still in the air, I turned my attention to the duke and charged.

The officer's scream snapped the other guards out of their paralysis, but no one seemed to know how to respond. Shoot me? The whole point of their master's plan was to keep me alive and captive. Shoot Eden? The problem with killing a hostage is that you lose your leverage—kill her and there was nothing to stop me slaughtering them.

And their captain, the one who should make these decisions, was falling to his death.

The sharp crackle of stunners let me know the humans were joining the fight, and guards started dropping. I'd made it halfway to the duke, and the look of shock and fear on his face made this plan worth it, even if I died in it. Not if Eden died, though, so I put on a burst of speed as his bodyguards' pulse-rifles came to bear.

Caught one by the barrel and twisted it aside. Ducked past the other, though the near-miss scored my side with a sudden burning agony. Then my shoulder hit the first guard, sending him flying and leaving his rifle in my hands. Swinging it like a club, I smashed it into the second's head. Bone crunched and he dropped. I looked up for my target, but the duke was gone.

I cast aside the rifle—loyalty circuits made it useless to me anyway—and searched

for the duke. Screaming chaos surrounded me on all sides. Servants, courtiers, and noble guests panicked and ran in all directions. That worked in our favor: they blocked the guards' shots, but the humans blasted away with their stunners, not caring if they knocked out the wrong Drachali.

Kharmiya stood between me and a guard squad, shouting at them as they tried to take aim at me. What she said got lost in the confusion, but between that and her putting her body in the line of fire, they held off shooting. Other guards pushed and shoved their way through the crowd toward me. Too many of them. Once the surprise wore off, they'd overwhelm my strange band of allies.

Between the courtiers fleeing into the castle and the stunners knocking them out, the crowd was thinned fast. Taking a chance, I leaped up onto the altar, scattering icons of the Ancestors and hearing outraged gasps from the Keepers cowering behind it. I had to end this fast.

"Where are you, Strahar?" I roared at the top of my voice. "You run from the fight you picked, coward. You challenged your king! Now stand and fight me."

From my new position, I had a better grasp on the battle. The humans were a tight knot, Eden's brothers blasting away with the stunners while their parents hefted dueling blades, menacing anyone who got too close and stabbing those who didn't take the hint. But my mate was no longer with them.

I spotted her beside Ellarax, stunner in hand and a downed guard at her feet. The Drachali had armed herself with the fallen guard's pulse-rifle, holding it like a club. The two of them were fighting their way to the relative safety of Eden's family. Kharmiya still harangued the squad of guards, and they were listening rather than fighting. The other guards looked unsure of themselves, and none of them had taken a shot at me yet. A mad thought struck me: we might yet win the battle, duke or no duke.

“Stop!” As though summoned by my thought, Duke Vazand’s shout cut through the fighting. He rose from the pile of unconscious bodies he’d hidden under, leveling a pulse-rifle at Eden’s back. “Stop, or the human dies.”

EDEN

I froze in place, stunner heavy in my hand. There was no chance I could turn and shoot before he killed me, and the alien duke sounded unhinged enough to do it, despite Rhakaris's inevitable and terrible revenge.

Everyone else froze too, the sudden expectant silence deafening. Poison winds whipped around the tower, and no one dared to move. Even Rhakaris was motionless, staring past me at the bastard holding me hostage. He was the first to recover, though.

“Duke Strahar Vazand, I give you this one chance. Put down your weapon, accept your plan has failed, and I will allow you to abdicate with honor and go into exile.” His voice held an edge that I'd not heard before. It was cold as the void of space, and just as deadly. “If you do not take this offer, I will kill you. That is a promise from your king.”

“Exile? You are a fool and a weakling. I will rule the kingdom through you. You don't have the will to let her die.”

“It is not strength to allow your loved ones to die. If you think this makes me weak, then you are a fool, and will soon be a dead one.” Rhakaris dropped from the altar and cast aside his rifle, walking slowly and deliberately toward us. Everyone scattered out of his way. “But I will not let you kill Eden. Take the way out I offer you, Strahar. It is the only way you survive this.”

His gaze locked on my captor, Rhakaris stalked closer. Behind me, Strahar's breathing was shallow and fast, and he pressed his rifle's muzzle against the back of my neck. His hands were shaking. The duke wasn't as confident as he tried to sound.

"Shut up and do as you're told," he shouted. "I will kill your precious human if you don't."

Rhakaris cocked his head to the side. "No, I don't think you will. Slay her, and you'll be dead before she hits the ground."

Another tremor ran through the gun pressed to my spine, and I wished I shared my mate's certainty. But Strahar didn't fire.

"My men will kill you."

"They will not," Kharmiya said, voice a crack of command. "House Vazand does not employ people stupid enough to shoot their lawful king for no gain."

The guards behind her shifted uncomfortably, but lowered their rifles. Rhakaris's smile was pure predator, making me shiver even though I wasn't its target. He paused beside my family and spoke. "Your daughter understands. It's one thing for a faithful follower of the Ancestors to force a king to obey prophecy. Quite another to kill him without a plan. No, it's just you and me now, Strahar. As it should be, a contest between equals. One of us will die, the other live."

Saying that, he reached into the cluster of humans, and I saw what he was going for. The hunting rifle had been no use to my family, too bulky for a human to use in this crazy melee. But in the hands of a man as big, strong, and fast as Rhakaris, it looked light as a toy.

He swung it one handed, like an oversized pistol, and everything seemed to slow

down. Strahar lifted his rifle from my neck, aiming past my ear, and I knew with a cold certainty that he would find his target first.

Like fuck he will.

I raised my foot and stomped down hard, all my weight on my heel as it landed on his shoe. Something crunched and Strahar jerked, yelling in pain. His shots went wide, deadly pulses of energy screaming past Rhakaris and into the sky.

The duke grabbed my throat, claws digging in and tearing as he fell backward. That was fine, if I had to die to save my family and Rhakaris, it was a sacrifice I'd make gladly.

But my alien mate didn't agree. He brought the laser rifle up one handed, like an oversized pistol, and he fired once. A ruby red beam sliced through the air next to my head, close enough to singe my hair, and Strahar let go of me with a gurgle, every muscle going limp.

Rhakaris's shot had struck true, burning a hole through his eye and into his brain.

Oh good, I'm going to live, I thought. That's nice.

Then I fainted.

Fainting may have been the best decision of my life. It meant that I missed out on all the messy aftermath of the fight. By the time I woke, everything was under control.

I woke to voices, lots of voices, all speaking a language I didn't know. Most of them sounded worried, some terrified, but the single stern voice answering them made me feel safe. Rhakaris. My mate. My husband. My love.

Eyes fluttering open, I saw the high ceiling of a room in Karych Castle. I lay on a sofa, a light blanket draped over me, and my hand was in Rhakaris's. No sooner had I moved than he hissed a command in Drachali. Everyone fell silent. Raising my head, I looked at the small crowd of noble, several of them looking relieved that I was recovering.

"Lady Eden needs my attention," my mate said, switching to Galtrade. "I will hear the rest of you later. Go."

"But, sire," one noblewoman protested, or tried to. That was as far as she got.

"Was his Majesty unclear?" Kharmiya said, making shooing motions at them. "The king's word is law. We are all leaving. Now."

She led by example, taking Ellarax by the arm and walking out. The others followed without a word, and in moments, Rhakaris and I were alone.

"Thank the Ancestors," he said. "They will drive me insane, all of them wanting to prove their loyalty by informing on their rivals. I'd much rather spend my time with you."

"I'm better than a court of bickering nobles?" I grinned. "Damned with faint praise."

He laughed, stood, and lifted me to my feet. "Come on, we'll get some proper rest aboard Blackwing."

"Oh, we're calling it 'rest' now?" I giggled and blushed. Rhakaris laughed too, shaking his head and pulling me along.

"There may be some distractions before the rest," he admitted.

No one dared to stop us as he led me back to the Blackwing and up to his cabin. I stopped on the threshold, looking around the elegant, empty room. Something important was missing, and I turned to my host.

“There’s no bed,” I said, confused. Rhakaris grinned at me, then answered by throwing me into the room. I had just enough time to squeak a protest before a gravity field caught me, leaving me bobbing in the air.

“What the fuck?” I glared at my beloved, trying to look stern. Not an easy task when you’re floating and flailing. “Put me down.”

“No,” he said. “It’s only fair that I get a turn.”

“What are you talking—oh.” Memory of the Blackwing’s hold resurfaced, and I wondered if I’d regret the fun I’d had at his expense. I flailed again, but to no effect. Nothing was in reach, and without leverage, I couldn’t move. “Come on, that was just messing around.”

His grin broadened, and he walked closer. “That’s fine. I, too, will just ‘mess around.’”

Grabbing my ankles, he spread my legs wide. My breath caught, and my cheeks heated. The bodysuit and harness I wore hadn’t been designed with modesty in mind.

“My brave mate,” Rhakaris murmured as he traced a claw up one of my legs and down the other. I shivered as he brushed my sensitive skin through the thin fabric. Leaning in, he planted kisses on one inner thigh, then the other, and each touch of his firm lips sent a burst of joy through my body. I arched my back and bit back a whimper of desire, refusing to give him the satisfaction so easily.

His dark, hungry growl told me I hadn’t fooled him. “Oh, you want more, dear one?”

Sliding his hands up my sides, caressing as he went, he kissed his way up my thighs, getting closer and closer with agonizingly slow progress to my sex. When his fingers found the fastener, he grinned up along the length of my body, and opened the bodysuit with equal slowness. I grabbed at him, my whole body shaking with need as he teased me mercilessly. All I managed was to make him laugh.

“You’re going to drive me insane,” I gasped.

“No, beloved. You are too strong, and besides, you are already insane in all the best ways.”

He peeled the bodysuit off me, slow and delicate. At last it fell free, floating away in the gravity field, and he kissed his way along my thighs again. This time his lips, his tongue, his fangs brushed my skin directly, and it was all I could do not to beg him for more.

It didn’t take long for him to reach my pussy again, and now naked and wet and eager to meet him. My blush spread from my cheeks down to my breasts as he tasted me.

Licked me.

Kissed me deep.

I cried out as his tongue parted my folds, clutching at his head to pull him to me, or me to him. He didn’t need urging, burying his face between my legs and eating my pussy with an eager hunger and incredible skill. It was like an act of worship for him, devoting himself to my pleasure with a single-minded focus that overwhelmed me. That damnable Drachali tongue, long and dextrous and rough, sent me into a screaming orgasm as soon as he found my clit.

I don’t know how many times he sent me over the edge. They all blurred together as

my brain stopped processing anything other than his touch, fingers playing along my sides and teasing my breasts, mouth devoted to my overstimulated pussy. Floating in the air, supported by a gravity field, I had no other sensations to distract me. I had to face his intense assault on my senses alone, and fuck, it was good. When he eventually lifted his mouth and looked up at me, his face dripping with my juices, I whimpered with the need for more. More of him.

“Please,” I said, my voice raw from shouting. “Please don’t stop.”

“I will always work to please you, my queen.” He spoke with utter, undoubtable certainty, adjusting the forcefield to tilt me just so. The head of his cock pressed against my entrance, vibrating in pulses that shattered my self-control. Wrapping my legs around him, I tried to pull him in, begging without words. He leaned in over me, kissing me on the lips and whispering a question. “You are my queen, aren’t you? For now, and forever.”

Fuck. Fuck. “Yes, fuck yes!”

His pulsing cock thrust into me as I spoke, and my words dissolved into incoherent cries. This time he fucked me slowly, deliberately, taking his time and making sure that I enjoyed orgasm after orgasm before he allowed himself to lose control. When he finally came, I was a shaking, sobbing mess, and he was exhausted. Clinging to each other, we floated in mid-air and panted for breath.

Eventually, I had enough breath to speak, though my throat was raw from screaming.

“What happened to ‘no pressure?’” I asked with a grin, snuggling into him. Rhakaris laughed.

“You know I would not hold you to something you promised under duress,” he said, brushing hair out of my face and planting a kiss on my forehead. “If you ever decide

to leave, you are free to do so. I hope you never make that choice, but I won't stop you. I wanted to present an argument for staying."

"And a powerful solid argument it is," I said with a grin, reaching down to caress his dick. It pulsed in my hand, stiffening again already. "But you didn't need it to convince me, my beloved. I am here for good."

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A year later, we were all back at Karych Castle. The atmosphere was different, though. In contrast to the cold and scheming court of Duke Strahar, Duchess Kharmiya's was warm and welcoming. That, despite her year of mourning for her father having just finished.

I suppose she had no more reason to love Strahar than any of us, I thought.

She waited for us, arm in arm with Lady Ellarax. Kharmiya wore a black dress that technically met the requirements of mourning clothes while showing off her figure far too well. Ellarax, in contrast, wore a stylish but modest robe. They made an odd pair.

Behind them stood the freshly minted Baron and Baroness Eden. My parents fairly glowed with their new status, and more importantly, the government had to acknowledge them as nobles. It would cut a lot of red tape.

I looked at my beloved king, my mate, my true love, and couldn't have kept the smile from my face if I'd tried.

"And to think you doubted the prophecy," I teased.

He laughed, swept me off my feet and into a kiss that won a cheer from our audience. "Perhaps we should see what the Keepers say is in store for us next?"

"I know that," I told him. "'And they lived happily ever after.'"

The End