



The Alien Warlord's Fated Mate (Warlords of Zephyria #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: In a desperate bid to save his people, Zoran Kerus flies halfway across the galaxy to Earth. His mission? Locate suitable fertile females to help his people rebuild their civilization. Hes determined to do his duty, no matter how delicate and weak these human females are, or how distasteful bedding one might be.

Then he lays eyes on research scientist Mia Reynolds and knows her for exactly what she is: His.

The moment Mia spots a ginormous alien male marching toward her, her body lights up. She doesnt expect to be kidnapped, thrown on his bed, and marked as his mate during their trip to his planet, and she sure as heck doesnt expect to want him as much as he wants her.

But how could she want a male who took her freedom and threatens her calm? Even one as steady and gorgeous as the one whos claimed her.

When Mia is given a chance to dig deeper into Xeruvian science, she realizes that things arent always what they seem: not Zoran, not his people, and definitely not the disasters that nearly wiped the Xeruvians out of existence.

Uncovering the truth comes at a heavy price, threatening Mia and the fragile life shes building with her alien warlord as both their worlds are turned upside down.

If you like hot, possessive alien warriors, kidnapped brides, a steamy Fated Mates romance, and great worldbuilding, youll love the Warlords of Zephyria Series!

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Mia Reynolds hummed beneath her breath as she inspected the plants growing in the greenhouse dedicated to her experiments. She'd been working on developing highly nutritious, drought-resistant strains of various cereal grains her entire career. The tray of newly sprouted oat seedlings in front of her represented one tiny step along the path to ending world hunger.

These seedlings could do that without requiring tons of chemical fertilizers and pesticides to grow, the way genetically modified corn did. Or any corn, for that matter.

At least, she hoped they could. Many tests lay in front of these tiny plants, tests and a whole lot of hope.

She bent toward them and said softly, "You can do it, little oatlings."

"I think they're going to need more than encouraging words, Mia."

Mia stood and turned toward her research assistant, grinning at his dry remark. Peter Streible stood half a head taller than her five feet five inch height, his lanky runner's build nearly lost in the folds of his oversized lab coat.

"Be nice," she admonished. "They'll hear you."

He rolled his eyes. "They can't really understand you."

She patted him on the shoulder on her way toward the door. "It's all in the tone of voice, Peter."

Mia ignored his muttered reply as she exited into a sunny California afternoon. The greenhouse had been muggy even with the fans on, but outside, the weather was a perfect mid-seventies. Fluffy white clouds floated in a crisp, blue sky, and if she tried really hard, she could almost ignore the sounds of Sacramento's traffic filtering to her from the nearby highway.

Mia sighed happily. And it was Friday, too. Date night. Well, girls' night out, since she wasn't dating anyone at the moment, but close enough, right?

She wrinkled her nose at the faint longing lodged in her chest. Her thirtieth birthday was approaching, and with it hints from her parents for grandchildren. Mia wanted children, someday. She just hadn't found the right partner yet. None of the men she met seemed right. None seemed to fit well into her life.

But she wasn't desperate yet, just lonely. She still had time to find Mr. Right, to create the deep, enduring bond that had carried her parents across six continents and thirty-five years of marriage.

Didn't she?

Peter trailed behind her as she headed toward her lab, finally catching up as they entered the nearest side door of the Plant Sciences wing of the Center for the Advancement of Humankind. The research center was a global cooperative between governments, businesses, and concerned individuals, dedicated to promoting the prosperity and well-being of all humans. Hundreds of researchers worked there in a wide variety of fields, everything from the sciences and technologies to political and cultural studies. Research covered anything that could advance humanity into the next century, including space exploration, though humans hadn't made it much farther than Mars yet.

Mia's research was critical to that movement. She'd gained a passion for science

from her parents, both leaders in their respective fields, and had paired it with a natural compassion developed during a childhood spent in the dozens of different countries her parents visited for work. After seeing the effects of poverty and poorly used resources in Third World countries, how could she not want to make a difference?

And she'd always loved nature, had always been fascinated by the way plants evolved and adapted to their environments. What better way to forward humanity than by helping evolution shape the next generation of food plants?

Peter veered toward the stairs leading to their second-floor lab.

"I'm going to grab a snack from the cafeteria," Mia said. "Need anything?"

He flashed an irreverent smile at her. "Two blonde babes and a stack of pizzas?"

"I'll take that as a no."

"Party pooper."

She laughed. "Back in a minute. Don't start the fun stuff without me!"

He opened the heavy fire door and stepped into the stairwell. "You're the only person I know who thinks splicing genes is fun."

The door shut behind him, and Mia tucked her hands into her lab coat, humming as she continued down the hallway. Up ahead, the Plant Sciences wing emptied into the main lobby of Research Building 3, a cavernous, glass-fronted room planted on one side of the massive quad in the middle of the CAH complex.

A group of fellow researchers stood facing the quad, talking excitedly among

themselves. Mia stopped beside her colleagues and fellow girls' night out participants, Kira Patel and Leona Hayes. The three met in the cafeteria not long after Mia took a junior research position, then discovered a shared passion for creating a better future. It had only taken one late-night bar hop session for them to discover their other shared passion: searching for the man of their dreams.

Kira and Leona were night and day in appearance, one short, curvy, and brunette, the other tall, svelte, and blonde. But they were the best of friends and Mia loved them dearly.

"What's going on?" Mia said.

Leona popped a Nordic blonde eyebrow at her. "You've been buried in your plants too long, hon. Listen."

Kira waved an elegant hand at the glass wall, jangling the dozen or so bangles she wore. "Or look."

Mia turned toward the glass wall, aware now of a distinct thrum reverberating through her bones. The manicured lawn stretching between them and the other CAH research buildings was dotted with people staring into the sky. A few started yelling, a few more running, and soon, the entire quad emptied.

Mia followed the glass wall up and goggled. A huge, ovoid aircraft slowly descended from the sky, its metallic surface seeming to absorb sunlight. Gusts of heated exhaust roiled around the strange craft. The trees lining the sidewalks bent and shook in its wake.

"Look at the size of that thing," Kira whispered. "I'm surprised it fit."

"I heard you said the same thing to your last lover," Leona said dryly.

Mia shot them both a quelling glance. “Is the tech wing working on a new airplane design?”

“Oh, hon,” Leona said. “That’s not an aircraft.”

“More like a take me to your leader craft.” Kira snagged Mia’s elbow and squeezed gently. “I’m getting a bad feeling about this.”

Mia placed a hand over the knot in her stomach. “I think your bad feeling’s catching. Maybe we should leave and let security deal with this.”

Leona shot them both an exasperated look. “Are we scientists or what? Especially you, Kira. What happened to exploring the stars, meeting alien species, and all that Star Trek jazz?”

“It’s a little different when the aliens show up on your front door,” Kira muttered.

“We don’t know that they’re aliens,” Mia said. “It could still be a tech-side experiment.”

Her voice trailed off as an opening appeared in the side of the craft. Roughly a dozen humanoid creatures stepped off the edge and dropped into crouches beside the ship. Humongous male humanoid creatures with gray-brown skin, horns curving away from their foreheads, and the muscled builds of weightlifters barely contained by what looked like skintight wetsuits.

Leona sucked in a sharp breath. “My panties just melted off my hips.”

“You don’t wear panties,” Kira reminded her.

The men stood and split up, most skirting the ship while two approached Research

Building 3.

Straight toward where Mia and her friends stood.

“First contact time,” Leona breathed. “Dibs on the big one.”

Mia eyed the two males rapidly striding toward them. “Which big one?”

A low murmur filled the lobby and several of the other scientists gathered there began backing away.

Kira shifted her stance and glanced nervously around. “Can we leave now?”

Mia risked another glance outside. The two males were already at the top of the steps, just a few feet from the double-doored entrance. A moment later, one yanked the left door open and stepped inside, followed closely by the other.

Up close, they appeared far larger. Nearly seven feet tall, Mia thought faintly, and starkly beautiful in a very alien way. Their features vaguely resembled humans, with two bright green eyes, long, hooked noses, and strong, sensuous mouths. Five fingers on each claw-tipped hand, enough muscles for three men each, and a promising bulge at the juncture of their thighs.

Despite the warning growing in her gut, Mia’s heart stuttered into a full gallop and butterflies danced in her stomach. Holy Hannah. Those guys were potent, and they were just as clearly not human .

The men, or whatever they were, stopped just inside the entrance, their gazes dispassionately scanning the crowd. The one on the right glanced down at the oversized watch affixed to his wrist.

“We are looking for females,” he said in lightly accented English. “Surrender peacefully and you will not be harmed.”

The lobby broke into chaos as people turned and fled.

If that bothered the aliens, it didn't show. The one on the right ran his flat gaze across the lobby, going straight past Mia and her friends. Immediately, his gaze swung back, focusing on her with an intensity hot enough to melt steel. His odd green eyes flicked down her body and up, then locked onto her face.

Their gazes met and held. Something zinged between them, a hint of recognition or rightness or something. Mia's breath fled and her head went dizzy. A scene from a RomCom flitted through her mind, of a love at first sight meet-cute. Two strangers locking eyes across a crowded ballroom.

But she didn't believe in love at first sight. She believed in mutual respect and friendship and a long, slow-build courtship involving pizza, shy kisses, and romantic walks along the river.

With a normal human man, not an alien with biceps bigger than her thighs.

A low growl rumbled in the alien's chest. “Mine,” he snarled, then he stalked toward her, his determined strides eating up the distance between them.

Mia's legs trembled and she gulped. Oh, God. He'd said that to her. By the look on his face, he had only one thing on his mind, and it had nothing to do with pizza and long walks.

Kisses, oh yes, many, many kisses, but there'd be nothing shy about them, not with him. This male would devour her whole, if she let him. The thought sent a delicious shiver down her spine and her thigh muscles clenched together.

“Oh, fuck,” Leona said. “Run.”

Mia didn’t need to be told twice. She fled, her heart thudding in time to the rapid clicks of her heels.

Zoran Kerus stalked toward his assigned building’s entrance, quelching mild irritation at having to hunt down the females promised to his people in exchange for certain Xeruvian technologies. The piddling human bureaucrats he and the other warlords dealt with in the past few days had been all too willing to take. But when it came to giving, the humans were no better than sniveling thieves, skulking among the shadows.

Eirik Drakon, a fellow warlord, raised his left hand, flashing the wristcom affixed to his forearm. “Five of the target females work in this facility.”

Zoran nodded and checked his own wristcom to confirm. While Aklan Phyrz, the most diplomatic of the warlords, had been negotiating a treaty with the humans, Nyklan Zikri and Thorian Kael, two other warlords, had quietly sifted through human databases and genetic samples, searching for females of an appropriate age and status, aided by information given to them by an ally among the humans: Scientists to help them rebuild their species, females young enough to handle the rigors of life on Zephyria, unmated and childless, but fully capable of bearing and rearing young.

They’d selected as large a pool as they’d dared from among key scientific centers, then chosen this one not far from Earth’s largest ocean as a starting point. If the warlords succeeded in capturing every female on their list from this facility, they could return to Zephyria without having to risk a military response from the puny humans by raiding others.

On this trip, anyway.

Zoran yanked open the building's glass door, nearly ripping it off its hinges. Humans gawked at him and Eirik. Zoran was of half a mind to bare his teeth at them, just to show them their place in the universe. Humans were weak little creatures, prey, good for little more than breeding, if Nyklan's research proved true.

Xeruvian warlords, on the other hand, were predators, their bodies honed by decades of training and war.

Even as their species shrank to nearly unsustainable levels.

A dull, familiar ache gripped him, grief and guilt and longing. Once again Zoran cursed the disaster that had decimated his people, claiming the lives of his father and sister, and the virus that had nearly dealt the final blow when it killed off the remaining fertile females. Three years spent searching for a cure, for salvation, had led them here, to these pathetic little aliens, whose females might hold the key to saving the Xeruvian race.

Eirik stepped into the building beside Zoran and glanced around, his bright green eyes flaring dangerously. "Be afraid, little klika ," the other warlord murmured.

Zoran grunted. He'd trained many years with Eirik and the other warlords who'd journeyed with them into the far reaches of the galaxy to negotiate for breeding females. They'd become fast friends long ago, though each headed different clans. When Zoran's deceased sister's mate Nyklan, one of the other warlords, stepped forward with his solution, Zoran had formulated a plan, one Eirik had endorsed by fang and claw. One by one, the other warlords had been swayed, only to journey here and have the humans betray them.

Zoran clicked his teeth together in amusement. As if denying a warlord his due could stop him from taking it. Words. Bah. Humans lacked the technology to deter them. Just look how easy it had been to insert the Xeruvian battle cruiser into the planet's

atmosphere and hide their landing from human warriors.

His amusement died. And these were the creatures Nyklan advised breeding with? How could they rebuild their strength with beings such as these?

Zoran glanced around at the crowd, noting the uneasy glances, the hunched shoulders. Good. They feared him. That might make this easier.

“We are looking for females,” he growled. “Surrender peacefully and you will not be harmed.”

Before his final word left his lips, the little klika scattered, all but a handful who watched him and Eirik with wary expressions. Well, that hadn’t gone as planned. Now he’d have to chase the females down. At least that would burn off some of the restless energy eating at him. He hated being cooped up in a ship, and they’d been cooped up for entirely too long during the negotiations, only to be thwarted at every turn.

He allowed his gaze to roam over the humans who’d stayed, then swung back to a fragile female wearing a long white coat over a short skirt. A primal instinct roared to life within him and a low growl welled up.

Mine .

His cock hardened and a crimson rage filled his mind. If he’d been on Zephyria, surrounded by the jungles filling his home jutji , he would’ve thrown back his head and roared his triumph for all to hear, heedless of the danger. He felt that strong, that brave, that fierce. When he looked at the tiny female standing just out of his reach, his entire being coalesced into a singular thought.

Claim her .

At a word from one of the other females, his female gasped and fled. A dark grin stretched his mouth, baring sharp fangs as he stalked after her. Good mate, letting him chase her, as was proper and right. This was one hunt he intended to enjoy.

The yellow-haired female that had sent his female running stepped into his path, her chin held at a defiant angle. "Leave her alone, you alien thug."

Zoran flicked his wrist, activating the sedative hidden within his wristcom. "You will make a fine mate, klika ." But not for him.

Her eyes widened and she turned and fled as the other scientists had. Zoran caught her in two strides, subduing her easily despite a credible effort on her part to thwart him. Quickly, he released an aerosolized dose of sedative into her face. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she slumped against him.

Though every cell in his body urged Zoran to chase after his mate, he carried the female to the door and laid her gently beside it, where she would not be hurt, in deference to both her femaleness and to her future mate, whomever he might be. Quickly, Zoran retrieved a restraint band and secured it around her wrist, then activated it. The ship's medical team would retrieve her, leaving Zoran free to continue tracking down the other females on their list.

His female first. Her scent lingered where she'd stood beside the other two females. He strode back to that spot and inhaled deeply, absorbing the scents eddying around him, sorting them instinctively. The third female had run ahead of his, down the same corridor to the left. His tracker could pinpoint them, but he knew their scents now. They could not escape him.

Zoran broke into a slow jog, following their scents, one light and floral, the other, his female's, subtly sensual. The scents broke apart at the end of the hallway. The other female's disappeared at a heavy door to his right.

Later , he vowed.

His female's scent continued forward. Zoran pushed through a door leading outside, then stalked down a walkway and entered a strange, arced building made of an unknown green material. The air inside felt blessedly muggy after the exterior's dryness, almost like the jungles of home, and Zoran's shoulders relaxed under his skinsuit.

He sniffed once, testing the air, and caught the scents of soil, chemicals, and growing things. Buried among those scents was a hint of something else, an alluring smell that made his muscles tense and his cock twitch beneath his armor.

His female.

He bared his teeth in a challenging grin and let the building's door flap closed behind him. "Here, little kikla . You cannot hide forever."

A gasp filtered to him, scarcely audible above the two fans humming at either end of the building. The gasp had come from the far side, somewhere beyond the central raised row of seedlings. Zoran stalked toward it and spotted a sliver of white cloth peeking from behind a stack of soil sacks, under another rack of seedlings.

Without hesitation, he batted the soil aside and squatted beside the female crouched under the rack. Dark, untidy hair surrounded a narrow face and her Earth-blue eyes shone wide and afraid as she looked up at him.

Pleasure rumbled in him. The mating chase had ended with him victorious, as it should.

With one claw-tipped hand, he snagged the female's ankle and dragged her out of her hidey hole into his arms. She struggled briefly, and he tightened his grip, suppressing

her resistance.

Foolish female. She could not win against him.

He buried his face against her throat, nearly lost to the haze of amazement and need surging through him. She felt so small against him. Yet her heat warmed him and her curves seemed to fit snugly into the planes of his much larger body. Holding her felt good. It felt right, as if part of him had been missing and had now returned to him.

He licked her throat, needing to taste her, to memorize every aspect of this fascinating gift he'd been given. "Mine," he growled softly, unable to resist the urge to claim her in some way, though time was short and he had other females to capture.

The female gasped and squirmed, her struggles evoking the most delicious heat within him. "What are you doing? Why are you here?"

Her voice sounded sweet and musical even through the implanted translator Thorian had developed for them. Sweet, musical, and defiant .

Zoran groaned, fighting the urge to strip off her clothing and bury his cock in her. Had to get her back to the ship. Had to lock her away before the others saw her and tried to stake a claim. My female , that inner instinct rumbled, and Zoran stroked his horn against her temple.

Never would he give her up .

Quickly, he drew back long enough to administer the sedative Nyklan had devised specifically for subduing the human breeders. His female's eyes widened as the thin mist eddied around her face. She coughed once, then her eyelids fluttered closed, and she slumped in his arms.

He cradled her to his chest, mindful of her slightness. Such a precious, fragile creature his female was. Such a wonderful fighter, unlike the sniveling bureaucrats who had betrayed them.

Perhaps Nyklan was right. Perhaps these human females were stronger than they appeared.

Claim her .

Zoran shook free of the mating haze and surged to his feet, carefully arranging her over his shoulder. The mating instinct might be strong, but his need to save his people, to atone for the sins of his past, was stronger still. It had to be, or they would not survive.

He checked the tracker again, marked this female off the list, then returned to the hallway and caught the other female's scent. The sooner he and the other warlords retrieved the chosen females, the sooner they could leave, and the sooner he could begin wooing the female he'd caught and claimed as his own.

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Mia came to gradually. Her first awareness was of a strange dizziness, almost like vertigo, as if she were detached from the world and it spun wildly around her. She focused on her breathing for a moment, and when that didn't help, curled her fingers into the fabric beneath her, using it as an anchor. The chaotic whirling stopped abruptly, and she sighed.

There. That was better.

She risked opening her eyes a slit, and when the dizziness remained at bay, opened them wider. The space around her appeared to be a bedroom, if the bed she lay on served as any kind of clue. It was wide enough for two people, barely, and covered in a soft gray sheet.

The bed, small though it was, occupied a full quarter of the room. At its foot rested a black trunk. A shelf to the open side of the bed held a few random objects she couldn't identify and looked as if it could be folded into the wall, judging by the indentation in the wall itself. Despite the spartan nature of the room, the walls were white tinted with soft swirls of soothing colors. The floor, on the other hand, was a stark black and looked like bare metal.

She turned her attention to the details, to the two arches inset into the walls (doors, she assumed), to the protrusions to the sides of those arches (though she couldn't fathom their function, if they had any), and to the soft glow illuminating the room. Try as she might, Mia couldn't pinpoint the source of the low lighting.

She sat up slowly, as puzzled by the lack of dizziness as her surroundings. Where on Earth was she? A vague memory nudged at her, of the elation of watching her

seedlings sprout, of chatting with Leona and Kira, of a giant ship descending from the heavens, and of a mountain of an alien pinning his gaze on her and saying, emphatically, “Mine.”

Her heart fluttered in her chest and sank like a stone, and she pressed a trembling hand to her stomach. Oh, no. Had that ridiculously attractive alien abducted her?

The door on the opposite wall slid back, and said alien stepped over the threshold into the room wearing the same skintight outfit, or a similar one. As before, his gaze zeroed in on her. This time, though, instead of stalking toward her, he merely stood just inside the room staring at her. Large as he was, the distance didn’t really help. He was just so big and muscled and horned .

She forced herself to stay exactly where she was, when everything inside her screamed at her to scramble away, to put her back to the wall, to ready herself for him to pounce and claim her as his hot gaze promised.

“You are awake,” he rumbled in that lightly accented English.

Well, duh , she thought crossly. “Where am I?”

“Shipboard. Come, little klika . I will show you.”

Uh, no. No way was she going anywhere with him. Anywhere else , she corrected silently, since clearly he’d taken her somewhere.

“I’m fine where I am,” she said. “Thanks.”

His nostrils flared and he sniffed. “You wish to rut now?”

She wheezed out a breath and squeaked out a startled, “ What? ”

“Rut,” he said, seemingly unruffled by the volume of her response. “That is your purpose here. In exchange for technology, your government promised to give us our choice of breeding females.”

Red hot embarrassment flared through her. She slapped her hands over her face and moaned a low, “Oh, my God. We don’t do that anymore. Women have a choice , you, you barbarian . You can’t just kidnap anybody you want!”

“They reneged.”

“So!”

“So.” His shoulders rolled under the black shirt-thing he wore. “We took you.”

“You say that as if you truly believe you’re in the right here.”

His expression remained implacably, furiously firm. “We upheld our word. Your governments did not.”

She sank back against the wall, shocked to her very core. Had some moronic government official really promised to exchange fertile women for technology? Surely whoever had made that deal had intended for the women to volunteer. If she’d had a choice...

She shook her head firmly. But no, she hadn’t had a choice. This lout had kidnapped her out of her own greenhouse without so much as a by your leave . All that work! Years of research, down the drain because she was here, wherever here was, locked away by this...

Barbarian seemed too weak a word for the anger and frustration filling her. How dare he take her against her will! How dare he!

“Did it never occur to you,” she gritted out icily, “that I might have better things to do with my time? That I might be in a relationship already?”

“It did,” he said evenly. “You are not.”

“That’s not the point,” she muttered.

“Is it not?” In one stride, he reached the side of the bed and snagged her wrist in a surprisingly gentle hold. “Come, little klika . You have much to learn.”

In that moment, she wished she were as brave as Kira, who’d left India against her parents’ wishes to travel to the States for grad school, or as feisty as Leona, who would’ve flattened this alien guy as soon as he walked into the room.

But no, she was just plain ol’ Mia, crop research scientist. Meek, biddable, too curious for her own good. He’d said the magic word— learn —and that curiosity had already overridden her brief spurt of fury.

Too bad. She could really use some indignation right now.

“No rutting?” she said, entirely too timidly for her peace of mind, but still, there it was. She’d drawn a line on acceptable behavior.

“We will rut,” he chided gently.

“You don’t have to sound so happy about it,” she muttered.

He cocked his head as his heated gaze slid down her body, warming her in places she’d almost forgotten existed. “Happy is not correct. Hunger, yes? Any male would feel the same upon meeting his mate. Is it not the same among humans?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again and shook her head. No man had ever looked at her the way this one did, and none had ever wanted to keep her before.

Finally, she said, “I wouldn’t know.”

“Then we shall learn together.”

Ok, not ideal, but she could work with that. Knowledge is power, right? And the more she learned about this alien, the better prepared she’d be. Learning was fine, great even, so long as he kept putting off this rutting thing.

Honestly, who even used a word like that anymore?

Carefully, she slid off the bed. Her bare feet landed on cold metal, and briefly she wondered what had happened to her shoes. Oh, well. At least she was still dressed in her own clothing, stained and disheveled as it was.

The alien towered over her, making her feel even smaller and meeker than she had when she’d been sitting. He was just so massive, like a living statue that had peeled itself off a rock wall, only his hand was warm against her skin, and he moved with the grace of a trained predator.

Awareness shivered down her spine. She abruptly pushed the warmth of his touch out of her mind before it caused any trouble. Learning she could handle. Trouble, not so much.

He guided her to the blank wall to the left of the entrance and pointed to the series of protrusions beside it, to a particular button-like square inscribed with an entirely foreign symbol. “Press this.”

She glanced at him out of the corners of her eyes. “Why?”

In answer, he merely maneuvered her closer to the wall and pointed patiently to the button-thing again.

With a sigh, she reached forward and pressed it. Immediately, a thin rectangular slab swung down from the wall and stopped parallel to the floor. It looked like a plain piece of black metal to her, but when the alien touched the corner closest to the wall and door, it lit up like a screen, filling with a picture of an alien woman standing in a landscaped garden, her back to a distant jungle.

Mia gasped and leaned forward, sliding into the seat extruding from the wall. “Who is this? Is that your home world?”

“Yes. It is Zephyria, my planet. The female is my mother.”

“Your mother,” Mia breathed as she studied the woman. Horns similar to his, albeit smaller and more delicate, jutted from her temples, curling back along the sides of her head. The woman’s hair was braided out of the way, and she wore a deep red, embroidered robe over loose white pants. Alien, yet beautiful in her own way. Mia could see a slight resemblance between mother and son in the proud expression, the hawkish nose, the set of the woman’s strong shoulders.

“You will meet her soon,” the alien said. He tapped the middle of the screen, and it turned a solid, lurid green. “Press your hand there.”

Mia glanced at him again, uncertain despite her curiosity.

He gazed down at her from way above her, his green eyes darkening. “You wish me to touch you again?”

“No, no,” she said, and hastily slapped her palm to the screen. A searing heat scorched her skin. She yelped and snatched it away, but the pain had already receded.

“What was that for?”

“Imprint. Now you may access our database at your whim.”

“Oh.” She stared down at the screen now showing what looked like a search box. “I don’t know your language.”

“You need not. Speak and it will understand.” He squatted behind her, his thighs bracketing hers, one arm wrapped around her waist, the strong line of his jaw brushing her temple. His free hand danced over the screen, tapping buttons inscribed with images and those unfamiliar symbols, then the screen changed and everything was displayed in English. “Now you will learn, yes?”

“Oh! Yes,” she said, entirely too aware of the male heat surrounding her, of his large hand splayed over her stomach, of his face so close to hers. She cleared her throat nervously and reached for the manners her mother had drilled into her. “Thank you. That was very helpful.”

He grunted and buried his face in her throat. She stiffened against him. Would he try to do something now? Rip off her clothes? Throw her on the bed and force himself on her?

Were they even compatible that way?

Abruptly, he pushed away from her and palmed the door open. When he spoke, his voice held a gruff tone that sent a delicious shiver through her. “You are hungry. I shall retrieve human food for you.”

He left before she could contradict him. She wasn’t hungry. She was scared and irritated and curious and—

Her belly growled, and she poked it. “It’s a fine time for you to show up,” she scolded it. “I’ve got bigger problems right now than an empty stomach.”

Shifting light caught her attention, and she moved her gaze back to the screen. It now displayed an image of the human body, straight out of an anatomy and physiology textbook. With a laugh, she forgot about her hunger and the alien who’d carted her off to his man cave, and began testing the limits of the database he’d opened to her.

Zoran paused outside his shipboard quarters and rolled his head back, closing his eyes to savor the feel of his female’s body fitted snugly against his. A pretense, he admitted to himself. Helping her had only been a pretense to hold her, to see how well they suited. Her scent lingered on his skin, some light daintiness never used by Xeruvian women. And her skin! It had been so soft against his own.

Despite her earlier anger, she had not objected to his touch. Did she then harbor the same attraction he felt for her? Would she again reject the pleasures of a physical mating?

How could he feel such for so slight and weak a female?

He heaved a great sigh and resumed his course down the ship’s narrow corridor, toward the cargo hold and the women held there. When the human government had refused to honor the treaty, Zoran and the other warlords had scrambled to refit the largely empty space for the journey back to Zephyria. Their women deserved better treatment. They deserved better than stark metal walls, blankets for beds, and dried rations and raw vegetation for food. This was what they had to work with, however, and it would have to do until they reached home.

Zoran found Nyklan standing guard just inside the cargo hold’s entrance, as if the humans could escape. The women had clumped into small groups on the far side of the space, huddling together and murmuring softly. Occasionally, one threw a

narrow-eyed glare at the warlords.

“How are they?” he asked in his own language.

“Irritating,” Nyklan retorted. “Already the tall yellow-haired one has tried to push past me twice.”

Zoran sought out the woman Nyklan described and found only the one who’d been standing beside Mia before she’d run from him.

“Relax. I brought her no harm.” Nyklan lowered his voice and muttered, “She is not mine.”

Zoran glanced at the healer, surprised. “You have found a mate among these women?”

“I could never mate one of these females, not while the memory of my own beloved lingers in my blood.”

“My sister would not want you to mourn her, Nyklan, when you have an opportunity to honor her.”

“How is bedding one of these beasts honoring my beloved?” Nyklan snuffled out a breath through his nose, his expression full of the same bitterness he’d carried since the deaths of Kygana and their eldest youngling.

Zoran allowed Nyklan a moment to regain control of his emotions before continuing. “If you believe them to be beasts, why did you agree to breed with one?”

“Because we are dying,” Nyklan gritted out. “Because if we fail to act, we will cease to exist. Because I have an obligation to my people.” He drew in another breath, then

lowered his head and turned his back on the women. “She is there. I shall do my duty and bed her, but do not expect me to bring her into my home. She can never replace my beloved. I will not allow it.”

He left before Zoran could counter him.

Zoran turned his attention to the women, studying them for signs of maltreatment, and yes, searching for the one Nyklan’s mating instinct had singled out as his alone. If sorrow filled him for the loss his sister’s mate carried, for the grief and shame he carried as well, he could never acknowledge it. Could not afford to acknowledge it. Nyklan was right. They were too close to losing themselves as a people, too close to dying out. They had to try mating with the humans, even if it meant diluting their own strength and culture.

But Zoran was right, too. Kygana would never condone Nyklan’s mourning in the face of inevitable extinction. She would want him to move on, to find another mate, to fill their home with the laughter and love of children. Never replace her, no. But to deny him love again? She would not wish it on even the meanest among them.

Just as their father would want him to move on.

He saw again the face of the man who had been friend and mentor, felt the desperate grip of his calloused hand on his own. Heard the words his father had whispered as he fell beyond Zoran’s reach.

Save your mother, Zoran. Save my heart.

Zoran’s hands curled into fists at his side, the claws digging deeply into his flesh, drawing blood. He had honored his father’s final wish. Would that doing so could ease his own shame.

Carefully, slowly, he cleared the torment from his mind. The dead could not be unburied. Nyklan would work through his torment in good time. Nothing Zoran said or did would aid him, nor would lingering on it clear the burden either of them carried.

Instead, he sought out the two women who were his own mate's friends and, from a distance, assured himself of their well-being, then he retrieved enough rations, vegetation, and water to sustain Mia for the remainder of this day and the next, and left, carefully locking the hatch behind himself. Let the yellow-haired woman test the hatch's security once he was gone. It would amuse the warlords if nothing else, and they could all use some levity right now.

When he reentered his quarters, he found Mia still seated at the console, her very human nose nearly touching the screen. It showed a view of the expansive jungle at the heart of the continent where his jutji lay. She'd turned on the audio and was listening to an explanation of the ecosystem.

Good. She had discovered the encyclopedia. When they arrived at Zephyria, he would take her to the science center where she could indulge in deeper study. Perhaps she would even set up an office there, where she could, if she wished, continue her work, as his people so desperately needed her to. It would be easy enough to shoot any findings she made back to Earth, though he wouldn't tell her that just yet lest it encourage her to believe she could return there after they mated.

No, for now it was best that the women believed themselves severed from their native planet, until they adjusted to their new lives among his people.

Zoran rubbed a palm over his chest. Just seeing his mate relaxed him, that and knowing she had found pleasure, however small, in one of his gifts. He had watched his own parents' bond grow and strengthen, had witnessed their joy in each other, but never had he thought it would feel like this. Never had he understood the depth of

their need to nurture and protect one another, until his little klika had so wisely allowed him to catch her.

What had he done to that bond by choosing to obey his father's command?

No, he must not dwell on the past, not now with his own mate yet unclaimed.

He stored the bulk of the food he had brought, then knelt beside her and touched the pause button on her narration. "Drink and eat, little klika . Soon we must rest."

She absently took a compressed cereal bar from him and bit off a corner, her gaze never leaving the console as she dutifully chewed and swallowed. After a moment, she glanced back at him, her eyes wide. "Sorry. It's just so interesting."

"You will find the jungle itself more than interesting. After all, it is part of your new home."

Her eyebrows drew together. She spun back toward the console and savagely bit off another chunk of the cereal bar, grinding it furiously between her teeth. When she'd swallowed, she said, "I have a home, thank you, and I miss it."

"You have not been away from Earth long enough to miss it," he chided gently, amused despite the heavy sorrow lingering in his kii .

"Fat lot you know," she muttered.

He rose on a sigh, unfastened his skinsuit, and shrugged the sleeves off.

"Oh, my God!" Mia squawked, her gaze glued to the broad expanse of his bare chest. "What are you doing?"

“Undressing. It is time for rest.”

“Over my dead body!”

He cocked his head, puzzled by the expression. “Why would I want to rest with your dead body lying beneath me? Should death find you, I would not rest. I would seek revenge on the thing that had taken your life, be it foe, illness, or time.”

Her jaw snapped shut. “That is the weirdest thing I’ve ever heard anybody say. And I was just kidnapped by an extraterrestrial.”

“It is true. Once we have mated—”

“We are not rutting.”

“Rutting is not the same as mating.”

She sniffed and turned back to the console, chewing on the cereal bar.

He took that as consent to continue undressing, which he would’ve done anyway. A skinsuit might protect him from the weapons of his enemies, but it was uncomfortable to rest in. Once it and his boots were off, he stored them in the cleaning closet tucked into the wall near the foot of his bed. A bed he’d brought along for her, he thought, disgruntled. A bed she did not seem to appreciate at all, or she would be coaxing him into it, as a Xeruvian female would in the same situation.

But his little klika was not a Xeruvian; she was human, small, and entirely too fragile, though not as helpless and delicate as he’d first thought. She had no understanding of their ways, nor of the honor of mating with a warrior of his standing, and apparently had no care for the strength and honor he could impart to their children. His mother had counseled patience, and patience he would use.

Until his patience wore thin and he could freely act on his first impulse to claim her in every way possible.

Zoran ignored the redness of her cheeks as he stalked into the tiny bathing chamber attached to his quarters. The room was barely wide enough for him to walk past the toiletry functions and into the shower stall. He adjusted the temperature on the wall outside, then activated the spray and washed quickly, all too aware of the ship's limited water supply.

His planet, like Earth, was rich in liquid water. Would his mate appreciate that, or disdain it as she had his bed?

He could not help the humor that thought brought, and allowed it to lighten his mood and the fatigue that had been hounding him since his people had nearly been destroyed by the dual strokes of disaster and virus.

When he finished cleansing himself, Mia had finished the cereal bar and now sipped water. Her gaze swung automatically to him, then her cheeks heated, and she sputtered and spun on bare feet, putting her back to him.

“Do you have to walk around naked all the time?” she demanded.

“You will learn to enjoy it,” he countered calmly. “As I will enjoy your nudity.”

“As if!”

By way of an answer, he took her drink from her, stored it next to the bed, and lifted her into his arms. She squawked in an entirely too appealing way and clung to him, sputtering out nonsensical phrases like, “Oh, my God!” and “Never. In. My. Life !”

Her spunk pleased him. She pleased him, with her wide-eyed gazes and the hint of

pink in her cheeks and that little wiggle she did when something he said or did irritated her. The latter threatened his control, but he would never tell her so lest she cease wiggling and end his pleasure.

He dropped her on the bed in the middle of one of her sputterings and followed her down, quickly pulling her into the curve of his body before she could mount a defense. Her ass fitted nicely against his hips, enticing him into arousal with every pleasurable wiggle.

She stilled abruptly and whispered, “Why are we in bed?”

“To rest.” He waited until she’d relaxed before rubbing the tip of his horn against her temple. Solely to elicit her delectable outrage, he added, “We may rut now, if you wish. What are the pleasure points for a human female?”

The last he tacked on even though he well knew those pleasure points, having studied such guides as could be found on the human internet.

Immediately, Mia slapped at his restraining arm and tried to wiggle out of his grasp. “Oh, my God, I can’t believe you! Kidnapping me. Taking me away to some, some jungle planet, then acting like it’s no big deal when you throw me onto your bed and try to have your wicked way with me.”

He grinned at her response, a very human gesture he’d learned to appreciate, despite the baring of teeth. How could he not? She pleased him so.

Then, because he could, he teased her with a gentle chide. “Your responses are becoming predictable, mate.”

She glared at him over her shoulder, then turned away, curled into a ball, and muttered, “Predictable. Hmph. Barbarian.”

“My name is Zoran,” he replied.

“I could make so many jokes right now about Zoran the Barbarian. But I won’t. Unlike some aliens, I’m civilized.” She flopped over and turned her hot-eyed glare on him again. “And I am not rutting with you.”

“You will.” He whistled the console above the bed on and set it to show a countdown of their arrival in Zephyrian space. “But because you are human and unused to our ways, you may have time to adjust to your situation.”

She warily studied the display, worrying at her lower lip with small white teeth. “In English, please.”

Obligingly, he changed the countdown to display numerals she could read. As soon as they shifted, she paled. “Thirty-three hours? You’re giving me a day and a half before forcing yourself on me?”

“There will be no force,” he assured her, even knowing he would have to fight against the mating instinct to fulfill that promise. He would protect his mate unto his dying breath.

Even from himself.

The thought of protecting her satisfied him no end, eating away at some of the burden he carried, soothing him. Steadier now, more resolved, he whistled the console off, then the lights, and pulled her back into the curve of his body, wrapping himself protectively around her softer, much smaller form. “Rest now, Mia. We will transition again soon, and you do not wish to be awake then.”

“A day and a half,” she whispered. “I should’ve called in sick this morning.”

“I would have found you anyway. You are mine, little klika . Mine to mate, mine to protect.”

Mine to love , he added silently, and willed the hope swelling within him to subside. It was too soon for hope, too soon to rest the fate of an entire culture on her narrow, human shoulders. Too soon to show her how important she really was to him and his people.

He rubbed the tip of his horn over her temple again, licked the graceful column of her throat, and settled her firmly against him, savoring the taste of her delicate skin on his tongue. “All will be as it should. Trust in me.”

If she heard him, she did not respond. Soon, she relaxed into sleep, and he followed. He was beginning to suspect he would follow her anywhere.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:57 am

A low, pleasant rumbling beneath her cheek woke Mia from a deep and dreamless sleep. The best sleep she'd had in ages. She stretched, shifting her leg along a hard length of muscle and her hand down warm, smooth skin.

"Time's it?" she mumbled.

"Time to rut," a familiar, humor-tinged voice said.

Mia's eyes popped open on a gasp. She pushed herself upright and stared down at Zoran's strong features, horrified. "I thought you were a dream."

"I can be, if you wish." His hand covered hers where it rested against him and shifted it lower, his gaze so dark and hot, she nearly melted from that look alone. "Do not stop."

She stared for a moment at her hand under his, low on his washboard abdomen, just above the thin gray sheet covering his lower body, then yanked it away as if scalded. "Oh, my God. You corrupted me in my sleep."

"If I had corrupted you, we would now be rutting."

"Now who's being predictable?" she huffed. "Besides, you promised to give me some time."

His green-irised gaze shifted to the wall behind her, and he visibly stifled a sigh. "Very well. Come. You have more to learn."

He flicked the sheet off and stood, giving her an eye-level view of his amazingly sculpted, nude backside. She goggled at the miles and miles of flexing muscle as he walked toward the bathroom. Honestly, was the man made of nothing but muscle?

Then her memory caught up to her and she remembered the flash of a very hard organ jutting from between his thighs as he rolled off the bed, a very hard, very large organ that promised all sorts of naughty pleasures. An unfamiliar heat settled between her own thighs, warming her to the point of squirming. She hadn't had a good romp in the sheets, as Leona put it, for at least a year, maybe two, not since that rat bastard Timothy Riley had broken her heart, ending a whirlwind fling that had lasted a scant two months.

Which is what she got for dating a co-worker, albeit one working in an unrelated department.

Zoran stepped into the bathroom, and Mia caught another glimpse of his very un-Timothy like erection.

God. Here she was, acting like a nympho at the first sign of temptation. The barbarian really had corrupted her.

Her bladder awakened, reminding her that she hadn't tinkled in hours. She slid off the bed and was about to bang on the bathroom door when Zoran reentered the bedroom, still as gloriously nude as when he'd left it.

Mia crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. "I need a shower and a toilet and fresh clothes."

He raked his gaze down her body, and though his face remained as hard as a certain other part of his body, she got a sense that he was displeased. Abruptly, he stalked to the foot of the bed, opened the trunk, and rummaged around in it. Curious, Mia sidled

over and peeked over the lid as he pushed aside neatly folded fabric and pulled out a thin, shimmery robe similar in cut and color to the one his mother wore in the screensaver image.

He stood and handed her the robe. “I did not bring appropriate undergarments.”

“I can wash mine,” she replied gruffly, then temptation got the better of her and she held the robe to her chest, measuring the deep red color against her skin, the length against her height. It was too long and probably too loose, but it was so beautiful, his gesture so generous, she didn’t have the heart to complain. “Thank you. I’ll make do.”

He nodded solemnly, somehow regal despite his nudity. “Allow me to demonstrate the toilet functions.”

Her cheeks flared hot again, and she cursed both her fair skin and her modesty. He must think her a prude by now. Which is what she wanted, she assured herself hastily. If he thought she was a prude, maybe he’d prolong this rutting thing as long as possible. She wasn’t so sex starved that she’d fall into bed with just any old stranger, even one with hard slabs of muscle, an intense gaze, and a very promising, er, organ .

Zoran guided her into the bathroom and squeezed into the tiny space behind her, said organ prodding irreverently against her spine. Quietly, he demonstrated how to turn on the faucet and adjust the water’s temperature, how to use the miniscule toilet, and how to extract what he called “bathing scrubs” from the shower stall.

By then, she was nearly dancing from the need to tinkle. “Ok, got it,” she said and all but shoved him out, ignoring the humor softening the hard planes of his face. A few minutes later, her most pressing need taken care of, she stepped under the shower’s weak, tepid spray.

Mindful of his warning about the limited water supply, she squirted a tablespoon of bathing scrubs onto her palm. She'd expected something like liquid soap. Instead, the mixture resembled dark brown mud dotted with charcoal black specks. Cautiously, she lifted the mixture to her nose and sniffed, got a whiff of ocean and sand, and drew back. Not soap, she guessed. Definitely something to query the database about.

Quickly, she scrubbed herself clean and dried off with a thin towel stashed in a cage above the toilet. As she'd suspected, the robe he'd given her fell to the floor when she pulled it on, draping in a pool around her bare feet. She shrugged. Well, he was a lot taller than her. It stood to reason that Xeruvian women would be tall, too.

Carefully, she gathered her soiled clothes into a bundle and stepped out of the bathroom, her finger-combed hair falling in damp rings to her shoulders. The bedroom was empty, but the screen-table was down and food had been left on it. Her muscles relaxed, and she sighed happily. Alone with an alien database. Every research scientist's dream.

She dropped her dirty clothes on the trunk, then hunkered down in front of the screen, absent-mindedly gnawing on an apple while she dove into an entry on Zephyria's climate.

Mia wasn't sure how long she sat at the fold-down console, scrolling through the ship's database, absorbing every facet of Zoran's culture and home world that she could fit into her brain. After floundering through the incredibly non-intuitive—to a human, she amended silently—search, she'd chanced upon the Xeruvian equivalent of JSTOR, without the password protection or the sociopolitical bias.

Or, at least, if there was sociopolitical bias, her knowledge of Xeruvian culture was too limited to detect it.

Once there, she managed to find research papers related to her own discipline and

was absorbed in a study covering the intersection of biodiversity and crop rotation when Zoran's hard warmth surrounded her.

She sucked in a gasp and stiffened in his grasp. "Don't startle me like that!"

"How can you miss the hatch opening?" he chided in that ever-patient tone of his. "You did not finish your food."

She glanced guiltily at the half-eaten apple she'd shoved to one corner of the console, along with an unopened cereal bar. "I guess I just got carried away. Your scientists have made some fascinating discoveries—"

His tongue raked along the column of her neck, and she squawked and slapped at the arm he'd wrapped around her, pinning her against his hard chest.

"We are not rutting!" she snapped.

"This is not rutting," he replied. "It is licking. I enjoy tasting you."

Every cell in her body lit up like a cheap neon sign. "You really need to learn to ask before you touch me like that."

"If I ask, you will say no."

Well, he had her there.

He settled her more firmly into the cradle of his body and nuzzled her throat. "Is this a human female pleasure point?"

"I am not telling you that."

“Do you not wish me to please you?”

His voice had gone husky and a little needy, and her body softened against his. The traitor. She tried pushing him away, even clasped his forearm with her hands, but they refused to cooperate.

“We really shouldn’t,” she whispered.

He laughed against her throat and gently nipped it with his sharp teeth. “And deny ourselves such pleasure?”

“You promised.”

“Yes.” A sigh shuddered out of him, and his breath caressed her throat. “Come, little klika . I have something to show you.”

“I’ve already seen your penis,” she said, then slapped a hand over her mouth as heat of an entirely different kind flooded her cheeks. “Oh, my God. I can’t believe I said that. See what you do to me?”

The corners of his mouth tilted into a feral smile, and he lifted her high, cradling her against his chest as he gazed down at her. “I wish to do more.”

“That’s what worries me.”

No, what really worried her was how easily he slipped under her defenses. They’d barely known each other a full day, and already she’d allowed him to get halfway to first base. By the time they reached Zephyria and the much-dreaded deadline, how much farther would he get? Could she even hold out that long before she completely gave in?

Her thighs clenched together, trembling under the long robe. God. When had she become so easy? She'd never had such a hard time resisting a man's advances. Not even the Rat Bastard had gotten her so hot so fast, and she'd crushed on him for weeks before their first date.

Her stomach sank as Zoran strode out of the bedroom, still holding her tightly against his gloriously massive chest. There had to be a way to get out of this rutting-mating thing he insisted on before he completely melted her defenses. There just had to be.

Zoran leaned against the wall next to the cargo hold's interior hatch, his gaze on the women clustered at the far side. The minute Mia had spotted her friends, she'd wiggled out of his embrace and raced on bare feet toward them, holding the skirt of her shinsek'uk high enough to expose an enticing amount of her pale, smooth flesh.

He bent his knee and settled his foot flat against the wall, hoping to hide the erection the sight had caused. Merciful Fates, the way she affected him! If anything, the quickness of his lust reinforced the mating instinct still roaring inside him. Roaring loudly now, he acknowledged grimly, so loudly it threatened to drown out sense. Instinct urged him to cross the room and claim her, there in front of her friends and colleagues, to lift her silky shinsek'uk with the tips of his claws, to surround himself with the welcoming heat of her body and fill her with his.

He forced his urges down, ruthlessly quashing them for his own sake. A warrior who lost control also lost the respect of himself and the people he led. He could not afford such a loss, not when the means to save his people was finally within his grasp.

“Zoran!”

His mother's sharp tone snapped him out of his thoughts. “Yes, Mother?”

“Has the human female so addled you that you can no longer focus on matters of

state?”

He ignored the biting humor in her tone and forced the disgruntlement out of his. “I can do little about such matters from here.”

“Nonetheless, they must be dealt with.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Alara barked out a laugh. “Such obedience! Has the little one broken your resolve already?”

“She does not wish to mate. I fear she may never accept me,” he bit out, and let his foot drop to the floor, his gaze automatically seeking out his female, well aware of what he had not confessed. “I cannot force her to want me, and she does not bend to me as she should.”

“My son, my son.” Alara sighed, then clicked her teeth together once. “You have never liked when your problems could not be solved by strength alone.”

“I am more than muscle and bone,” he grouched.

“And yet, you talk of forcing her.”

A harsh breath hissed out of him, and he straightened away from the wall. “I have said I will not use force.”

“Did you?”

“Mother,” he said, a warning note underscoring the word.

“So like your father,” she murmured. “Rushing headlong into a fray when subtlety would work better.”

At the reminder of his father, the mating instinct withered under an onslaught of shame. “I am not my father,” he reminded her. His father would never have missed in the same situation.

“You are very like your father,” Alara countered harshly. “Honorable to the last. Do not assume the burden of his choices. He would never have asked that of you.”

Her words echoed his own to Nykklan, too closely for his liking, and he found himself voicing his deepest fear. “What if honor is not enough for her?”

“My son, you are a warlord, worthy of any woman the mating instinct chooses for you. Mia is a wise female, is she not? Thus will she learn to love you as you will learn to love her.”

He could find no counter to that, and after a moment, his mother continued.

“Seduce her, my son, but slowly. Give her time to know your heart. Show her who you are.”

He huffed and clicked his teeth together. Had he not been doing exactly that?

“Do you care for her?” Alara asked, her tone surprisingly gentle.

“I could,” he said slowly. “In time. She is an unusual female, as small and curious as a child, intelligent and questing. Strong of spirit.”

“You admire her.”

Mia glanced up and met his gaze, and just as quickly glanced away. His erection, softened by the conversation with his mother, twitched to life. Just one look and the mating instinct surged forward. She had only dared touch him in her sleep, had not stroked his horns or bitten him, and already she affected him so.

He quashed another sigh. “I do. But she is human, and humans are weak. I fear she may not be strong enough to survive our first mating, let alone the mating frenzy.”

“The Fates have given us guidance, my son,” Alara intoned solemnly. “All will be as it should.”

The ancient proverb soothed him in a way that nothing else she said had. Yes, all would be as it should. Mia would accept the mating bond, she would give him many fine sons and daughters, and his people would survive for another generation. By the ashes of his father, who had sacrificed so much, Zoran would accept no other outcome.

“Now,” his mother continued briskly. “Kaelen Drexus has forwarded a proposal requesting that all unmated warriors be given a chance to try the human females.”

“Kaelen Drexus.” Zoran’s upper lip curled, baring his teeth. “If he wanted a human mate, he should not have opposed me at the Warlord Council when the matter was discussed.”

“He has the right,” his mother reminded him. “The Council agreed—”

Zoran clicked his teeth together. “I lead the Council.”

“And thus must you be its greatest champion.”

“You should have taken the seat, Mother.”

“I could not deprive you of such joy.”

His bark of laughter was loud enough to draw Mia’s gaze. She smiled shyly at him from behind a curtain of her silky hair, and the need to touch her rose so swiftly, he took half a step toward her. “I can find my own joy, Mother. We shall speak of Drexus’s plea at another time. Peace be unto you.”

“And unto you.”

Zoran flicked off the call on his wristcom, his gaze yet again seeking his mate. Show her who you are, his mother had counseled. Aye, he should show her the warrior he had become. Thus could he use force to sway her without using force against her.

Decision made, he contacted the other warlords and commanded them to gather in the cargo bay bearing light weaponry, all save Nyklan who had taken watch on the bridge and would not agree to Zoran’s plan anyway. Most agreed eagerly, even those reluctant to accept human mates. Zoran closed off the last call, satisfied, and stalked across the cargo hold. His little klika had had enough time with her friends. It was time for another lesson, one she might enjoy learning as much as he’d enjoy teaching her.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:57 am

Mia sat on the cargo bay's chilly floor between Kira and Leona, not far from the other women Zoran and his merry band of warriors had abducted. It had taken a full five minutes for the frenzied welcome to die down. No one had known she'd been abducted, too, and none of them had a clue why they were there beyond what another woman had shared. A diplomat who'd met her warlord during negotiations between the Xeruvians and Earth had dropped by to check on them. Mia added what information she knew. Some greeted the addition with curiosity, others with fear. Thankfully, no one had broken down in hysterics. They were scientists, after all, and largely rational creatures.

Kira drew Mia's hand into her lap, clenching it tightly against her stomach. "You promise this Zoran character hasn't hurt you?"

"Well, he hasn't exactly been a gentleman," Mia hedged. "His clothes seem to fall off of him whenever he enters his quarters."

Leona's mouth curled into a sultry smile. "Do tell."

Mia laughed, relaxed now by the sheer normality of their conversation, as if they weren't stranded on an alien spaceship thousands of miles from Earth, surrounded by giant alien warriors who wanted to make babies with them. "Honestly, Leona. You're the only woman I know who'd think more about acquiring a new lover than escaping."

"When opportunity knocks."

Kira narrowed her eyes in a withering glare that did nothing to dampen Leona's fun.

“We should be more concerned about our eventual disposition. You said their culture is dying?”

Mia nodded and tucked a stray strand of hair behind one ear, giving her a clearer view of Zoran where he stood across the bay. “Their database—”

Leona sucked in a sharp breath, her eyes suddenly greedy for something besides sex. “You have access to their ship?”

“Just the database, I think. It’s incredibly comprehensive, almost like an encyclopedia, but so much more.”

Kira leaned forward, her hold on Mia’s hand loosening. “How much more?”

“Ancient texts more,” Mia said, her gaze going distant as she recalled the items she’d skimmed. “Research studies more. I think it includes just about everything they could lay their hands on. Some of it’s so old, it hasn’t been translated into their modern language yet, let alone English.”

Leona whistled between her teeth. “I know some of the women here who’d like to get their hands on a database like that.”

“Every one of us would,” Kira said quietly. “But what did you learn that’s pertinent to our current situation?”

Mia retrieved her hand from Kira and pulled her knees tight against her chest, crossing one foot over the other for whatever warmth the layering provided. The cargo bay was a lot colder than Zoran’s room. It was a wonder the other women were doing as well as they were with the thin blankets Zoran’s men had given them.

“Well,” she began, “the trouble began with a series of natural disasters, though they

see them as one. The Xeruvians, that is. They believe those disasters released a natural virus that infected the population and killed or sterilized many of their women.”

Leona pounced on her wording. “ They believe? What do you think happened?”

Mia shook her head, and her hair slithered around her shoulders, partially hiding her view of Zoran. She peeked at him anyway, caught by the tension in his shoulders, the strong tilt of his chin. The curl of those magnificent horns. He turned his head, zeroing in on her gaze as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. A flush heated her cheeks, and she yanked her eyes down, shutting him out.

“Not enough data,” she said. “I haven’t had enough time yet to comb through their database.”

“But there’s something,” Kira murmured, “or you wouldn’t hedge so much.”

Mia nibbled on her lower lip, remembered the feel of Zoran’s teeth nibbling along her neck, and blew out a breath. Curse that man and his infernal corruption. “I think we should make it a priority to reexamine the evidence independently of the conclusions drawn by the Xeruvians.”

“Spoken like a true scientist,” Leona said.

The pride shining in the other woman’s eyes warmed Mia in an entirely different way, earning her a shy smile. “That’s me, the trusty research scientist.”

Kira huffed out a tiny laugh, and her expression relaxed for the first time since Mia had joined them. “If we could only reason our way out of this situation, I would be satisfied.”

Leona turned a speculative gaze on Zoran. "I say we take advantage of the situation first and reason our way out of it later."

"Typical," Kira muttered.

Mia laughed. "So you've been approached by one of the warriors? I'm assuming there are more than the few we saw the day they abducted us."

"I've counted maybe a dozen so far," Leona said. "But no, they haven't approached us yet, even to give us food and water."

"Not once," Kira confirmed, then shivered and hunched into herself. "They do come in and stare at us quite a bit."

"Any one in particular?" Mia said.

Leona reached forward and grasped Kira's hand, squeezing gently. "No one's going to try to force you into an arranged marriage, sweetie, not again. They'll have to go through me first."

"I don't think they'll use force," Mia shrugged. She risked another peek at Zoran, and just as quickly looked away, before the mere sight of him corrupted her again. "He's given me a couple of days to come to terms with it."

The color drained from Kira's face, leaving her skin an odd ashen-honey color. "A couple of days! And then what?"

Mia nibbled on her lower lip, her shoulders drooping. "Then he wants to have sex."

"So he's going to force you," Leona said flatly.

“No,” Mia replied quickly with a firm shake of her head. “I don’t think so. I think he’s testing me somehow.”

“He’d better not test you farther than you’re willing to go.”

“Would that be logical, though?” Kira said. “To force you when he and his people so obviously need our help?”

“I don’t know if logic has anything to do with it,” Mia admitted. “He’s been kind.”

“The least he could do after abducting you.”

The molten steel in Leona’s voice touched Mia deeply. She unfolded and draped an arm around the other woman’s shoulders, then touched her temple to Leona’s. “He seems too honorable to resort to force.”

“I think she’s right.” At Leona’s hot glare, Kira shrugged. “If these Xeruvians wanted to harm us, they would’ve already. They’ve had ample opportunity. Some of us have been singled out, yet the men remain apart from us. Not a one’s invaded our privacy beyond helping us to be as comfortable as we can be, and that from a distance.”

Leona sighed. “There is that. Personally, I think they’re waiting to see how things turn out with you and the big guy, Mia.”

“So, no pressure, huh?” Kira said wryly.

Mia wrinkled her face into a frown. “Thanks, Kira. That makes me feel a lot better.”

The comment didn’t draw the smile from Kira that Mia had been hoping for.

“What about this other woman?” Mia said. “The diplomat.”

“Fully mated,” Leona said. “Sex and all. Apparently her warlord is quite the lover.”

Mia blushed under Leona’s playful leer. “Stop it. We haven’t gotten that far yet.”

Kira’s frown deepened. “There’s more to it than sex, though, isn’t there? And, what did you call it? Mating?”

“Yes,” Mia said. “That’s the term Zoran uses.”

Kira nodded. “I think we were chosen not because we’re young and presumably fertile. Look at the specialties chosen. You’re a crop scientist. Leona is a linguist.”

Leona’s gaze had gone thoughtful. “I can’t see them needing an exoplanet specialist, but you hold minors in geology and climate science, don’t you?”

“Yes, exactly. Emma Mitchell’s a noted immunologist. She’s worked with the CDC and published at least a dozen papers. Isabella Rossi is an evolutionary biologist.”

Mia’s gaze swung to the other women. “Mara Sullivan’s an engineer. Elara Vega’s also a climate scientist.”

“Who published a paper on terraforming a near-Earth exoplanet,” Kira said. “And Mara has worked on both the Alcubierre drive and interlocking habitation modules for colonies on the moon and Mars.”

“My God,” Leona breathed. “It’s so obvious, I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. They’ve got everyone they need to establish a human colony on their planet.”

“Zephyria,” Mia said absently. “Or to terraform it to make it more habitable for human-alien hybrids.”

Kira paled even more. “Think of the resources needed to undertake terraforming, even as subtle a change as that.”

“Yes,” Leona agreed. “They must be incredibly devoted as a society to the outcome of abducting us.”

“Having children with us,” Mia said. “Their species is dying. If humans were threatened with extinction, what would you do to save us?”

“What wouldn’t I do?” Leona countered.

“Abduct innocent males of another species?” Kira shook her head. “They must be very determined indeed.”

“Which makes it unlikely that they’ll let us waltz off this ship,” Leona said.

It took a minute for the implications to sink in, and when they did, Mia’s shoulders slumped. “He’s not going to let me go, is he?”

All three turned to look at Zoran. As if sensing their stares, he abruptly pushed away from the wall and stalked toward them wearing that intense look he got sometimes, one she couldn’t quite interpret yet.

“Uh oh,” Leona said, a hint of her familiar smirk curving her mouth. “Speak of the devil.”

Mia harumphed at that, then Zoran reached them and squatted in front of her, a determined glint lighting his green eyes. The other women fell silent, even the ones on the far side of the crowd. Mia could nearly feel them turning Zoran’s way.

He nodded solemnly to her, then to Kira and Leona. “You must ask the women to sit

against the wall, for their own safety.”

“Ok,” she said slowly. “Why?”

One corner of his mouth quirked up in what might have been humor. “Training. We lack another space for practice. Rest assured that the women will not be harmed.”

“Oh. Well, we could move to another room—”

“That will not be necessary, little klik .” Half a dozen humongous alien men entered the bay and spread out behind Zoran, their gazes as intense as his, their horns as deadly looking. Abruptly, Zoran stood to his full height, stripped off his shirt, and held it out to her, leaving his muscled chest bare above the low-slung waistband of his pants. “Today, I fight for you, milady.”

Mia’s heart skipped a beat as she meekly accepted the garment. It was warm in her hands and his wildly masculine scent clung to it. Without thinking, she pressed it to her chest, her eyes wide.

Then the other alien males stepped forward in near unison, each before a human woman, and did exactly the same, stripping off their shirts and handing them over, voicing the same, almost ritualistic sentiment.

Including, she was surprised to note, the two who singled out Kira and Leona.

Leona tilted her chin at a challenging angle as she accepted the shirt of the male who stood before her. Kira shook her head until her male knelt and murmured comforting words to her, then placed the shirt in front of her as an offering.

Mia remembered then what Zoran had asked her to do and glanced toward the other women, but they had already pushed back against the wall and were staring wide-

eyed at the men gathering in the middle of the cargo bay.

“What in the world?” she murmured as she scooted backward, still holding Zoran’s shirt.

“I think we’re about to witness a stunning display of their strength,” Leona said, her mouth curved into a sensual smile. “Yummy.”

Mia rolled her eyes. Trust Leona to take it in stride.

Almost guiltily, she searched out Zoran. He was staring at her as he stretched the long length of his body, his muscles flexing and bulging under his smooth, tough skin. A tattoo flashed on his left pectoral, one she hadn’t noticed before. To be fair, she’d been trying not to ogle him every time he dropped trou in front of her. A thrill shivered down her spine and she swallowed, wetting a suddenly dry throat, unable to look away from the molten promise in his gaze, from the sheer strength and agility of his body. The slight sheen of perspiration turned him into a sculpture, like David if Michelangelo’s masterpiece had had horns and made his living wielding a sword or whatever weapon Zoran used.

Somehow, even with the horns, Zoran was better—living flesh instead of marble—and he was looking at her like he wanted to push her onto the floor and lick her until she came apart beneath him.

Something deliciously hot and wicked throbbed through her, and she clenched her thighs together, trembling beneath that look, scorched inside and out by the sheer amount of want he leveled at her.

“I am in so much trouble,” she whispered.

“Honey,” Leona purred, “that’s the best kind of trouble to be in.”

Zoran stretched facing Mia, his back to the jostling and joking warlords preparing for a mock battle behind him. Her brilliant blue eyes were wide, her lips slightly parted, and she held his shirt to her breasts as if it were a lifeline. He had not missed the way she pressed her face into it after he'd given it to her, breathing him in as a mate would. Reveling in his scent the way he wanted to revel in hers.

He felt the air behind him change ever so slightly and bared his fangs in fierce glee as he rolled out of the path of a strike. A staff thumped into the bay's metal floor where he'd been a moment before, creating a dull ringing sound. He had brought no weapon here, thinking only to give his female time with her friends, but he had no need of one. Every male here had trained as a fighter since the moment they could stand on their own. A warrior's body was his deadliest weapon.

Zoran gazed up at Ryrda, the fiercely loyal warlord of Clan Ashur. The other warrior easily topped Zoran's height by a hand's span and outmuscled him as well. They had long been friends, as many of the warlords were, having trained together as younglings. Perhaps that friendship had swayed Ryrda to Zoran's cause, for he had been among the first of the warlords to side with him against the more traditional Xeruvians. For that, Zoran owed him respect and a like loyalty.

Still, he could not resist a mild taunt. "Your female rejected your offering."

Ryrda rolled his massive shoulders, his hard expression unchanged save for the lightening of his eyes. "The courtship has only just begun. My protection is but the first of many gifts. Your own female has not fully accepted you either."

Zoran stood slowly from his crouch, acknowledging that truth with a spare nod. "Shall we show them some measure of our strength?"

Ryrda clicked his teeth together in agreement. "So that they will evermore know the depth of our protection and loyalty, aye."

It was the only warning Zoran got. Before the last word left Ryrda's mouth, the warrior flicked the staff up and jabbed it at Zoran's ribs. Zoran curved his body out of the way, caught the staff with one hand, and pulled it up over his head as he twisted around. Ryrda was too much the warrior to fall for that old trick; his grip on the staff loosened, and instead of being pulled forward off balance, as a less experienced fighter would, he dropped down, holding the staff's other end in one hand, and attacked.

Zoran grinned, relishing the fight as much as the opportunity to demonstrate his prowess. Relishing the energy it burned off so that later, he could return to his woman at peace with himself, fully in control of the desperate need pressing against his skin, of the instinct urging him to claim her, to take her, to bind her to him.

Show her , it whispered, echoing his mother's wisdom, show your mate what you are .

They fought until each male had been bested once, accepting their defeat with the equanimity of well-disciplined minds, bodies, and souls, their kii in perfect harmony. Winning had not been the purpose of this exercise, and so, none felt shame at being outmaneuvered by a warrior whom they knew they would best on another day, at another time. They were too evenly matched to stand for long against each other.

Zoran accepted one last hand clasp from Eirik, who had at last brought him down, then he turned to the human females, as the other males had, his gaze unerringly meeting Mia's. She sat where he had left her, one hand over her mouth, her eyes wide and unblinking, his shirt still clutched to her chest. Seeing it there filled him with satisfaction until he thought he'd burst from it.

She clung to this small part of him. Perhaps she would come to accept him after all.

One by one the other warriors approached the mates the Fates had selected for them.

One by one, those warriors lifted those women into their arms and silently carried them away. Even Ryrda, who had initially been rejected by Mia's dark-haired friend, was able to steal her away without protest.

When the last warrior had filed through the hatch with his chosen mate, Zoran strode toward Mia and knelt before her. "Milady, you honor me with your trust."

Her breath hitched, catching on her words. "I don't know what to say."

"Then say nothing, pjora-la ." Fate-given, to be honored above all.

"What does that mean?"

By way of answer, he lifted her carefully off the cargo bay's cold metal floor and held her against the steady thrum of his heart, ignoring the stares and whispers of the remaining females. She placed her palm against his chest and hesitantly rested her head against his shoulder, and he trembled beneath the simple beauty of her touch.

Mia lay in the cradle of Zoran's arms, cuddled firmly against the heat of his body. His warmth felt so good after the cargo bay's chill, and part of her, some wild, heretofore unknown part, wanted to wallow against him until that heat warmed her inside and out.

Another part of her panicked at the very thought of how attractive she found him. What was she thinking, cuddling up to an alien warrior like this? An alien warrior who'd spirited her away from her home like some virgin bride in a trashy Romance novel and now wanted to, what? Implant his seed in her womb?

She sputtered out a half-hysterical laugh. It sounded so ridiculous, how could she not find humor in her situation? Here she was, halfway across the galaxy from Earth for all she knew, being carried through an alien spacecraft by a man whose biceps were

bigger than her thighs, so she could help him repopulate his planet.

Another laugh hiccupped out, and she banged her head gently against his chest. Yup, that was her. A helpless damsel, caught in the middle of an improbable Romance, awaiting the pleasure of her new lord and master.

A door whispered open. Zoran stepped into his room and walked straight into the bathroom. He dropped one arm and let her slide down his body, his darkening gaze never leaving hers. Without saying a word, he stretched one arm past her and turned on the shower.

“What are you doing?” she said, her voice so thin, she could barely hear it above the water’s trickle.

His expression shifted subtly, morphing from hot promise into a gentle, teasing humor that made her knees weak. “The next transition is soon.”

“Um. Sure.” She shook her head. “What does that mean?”

“It means that we must rest now. Would you not prefer being clean for your sleep?”

“Oh, um. Yes. But...” She stared helplessly around the room, uncomfortably aware of his body planted inches from her, filling the small space with his presence. Of the precious water warming in the shower stall behind her, and of the heat pooling between her thighs. “Together?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he tugged his shirt gently from her grasp and dropped it to the floor, then unfastened his pants and slid them down, slipping his boots off with the same fluid grace, leaving his body beautifully nude. Her throat dried up again, and the protest she tried to muster stuck there. A formless mewl came out in its place as his hands cupped her shoulders and he eased her into the water, robe and all.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “But I’m still dressed!”

“For now.” He turned his back to her and knelt in the tiny space, gathered bathing scrubs in his hands, and scraped it off on his shoulders. His hands came down on his thighs as he resettled with his knees touching the shower’s floor. “Would it be your pleasure.”

It took her a moment to understand that he was asking her to bathe him in that politely formal way of his. She looked helplessly at her hands, so small compared to the breadth of his shoulders, so inescapably human next to his scarred, decidedly unhuman skin. What could it hurt to touch him, to learn the dips and valleys of his muscles, to explore every inch of him with her bare hands?

Like the lover he wanted her to be.

A sharp tingle started in her secret womanly parts, and she sucked in a breath. Oh, yes. She was in deep trouble here.

And still, she could not resist the lure of his body, or the curiosity rising in her. The need to learn him, to retake some measure of control over her life. What would he feel like? How would he react to her touch? Would this shower be the end of it, or was this the beginning of an elaborate seduction on his part?

He waited patiently, expectantly, as if her cooperation were a foregone conclusion.

That steadfastness moved her as much as the knowledge that she was wasting precious water by stalling. Tentatively, she placed her palms on the slopes of his shoulders and rubbed, lightly tracing the ridges of long-healed scars and tautly defined muscles. The bathing scrubs lathered under her hands, and that somehow made it so much easier for her to justify running them up his neck in slow circles, to tangle her fingers in his short, silky hair, to glance the back of her hand across the

edge of his horn, just to see what it felt like.

A low moan rumbled out of him, and he dropped his head back, resting it against her stomach. “More.”

Instinctually, she rinsed one hand off and ran it gently over the horn curving around the right side of his head. She’d expected the toughness of bone, and it was that. But it also had different textures, rough hatches in the larger part attached to his head near his temple, smoother at the tip.

The latter fascinated her. She ran her fingers over the sharp point, and he sucked in a breath and turned his head into her hand, murmuring soft words she had no hope of understanding, even with the wrist device he wore acting as a translator. She wanted to ask him to speak louder, loud enough for the device to pick his words out over the patter of water.

It seemed too rude, so she asked cautiously, “You like that?”

“Your touch feels...” He paused for a long moment, nuzzling his horn into her palm. “Electric.”

Her heart fluttered. Yes, electric. That’s exactly how it felt to touch him.

He shifted below her, widening his knees, and that jerked her back to reality. Right. They were wasting water. Quickly, she leaned forward and filled her palms with what passed for soap among his people, then she scrubbed him briskly, kneeling to reach the hard curve of his back, daring to run her hands over the firm curve of his bottom. Asking him to lift first one arm then the other, watching, fascinated, as his muscles flexed and bunched the way they had during the training exercise.

Once done with his back, she scooted around him, laughing breathlessly at the tight

space, and he accommodated the change in positions with a measure of the patient good humor she'd come to expect from him. She smoothed her hands over his chest, took a moment to examine his tattoo—round in shape, the lines oddly broken, obviously ritualistic in nature—and filed it away for future questioning. He lifted his chin for her, allowing her to cleanse the thick column of his throat, and she slowed down long enough to make a brief study of the masculine lines, the hollow at its base, the warmth pervading her just from watching him swallow as water cascaded gently over his face, wetting her as much as him.

She shifted once more and ran her hands down the tight skin over his ribs, counting one more than human males had. Evolution? Devolution? She shook her head and scrubbed his abs, an eight pack of defined muscle that made her drool despite the distinct lack of a happy trail. No one had ever accused her of being a man chaser, but boy, was Zoran turning her into one.

Then his upper body was clean, and she had no more excuses to postpone the inevitable. Quickly, she gathered her courage and urged him to stand, and nearly got a face full of his jutting erection.

“Oh, my God,” she gulped, her eyes wide.

“It will not bite,” he chided gently, and she laughed helplessly and gathered more bathing scrubs in her hands.

Yet it was his hands that cleansed himself there, in brief strokes over his length and between his thighs, his hands that encouraged her to soap down the long, muscled length of his legs and across each foot in turn as it was lifted for her. His hands that urged her to stand and tilt her head back into the water's thin stream.

His hands that slid under the neckline of her robe and pushed it off, baring her body to him from throat to feet.

He stood there for a moment, gently cupping her shoulders, his heated gaze molten on her skin. Finally, he rasped out, “The Fates have bestowed a great blessing upon my clan.”

A strangled laugh worked its way out of her throat, and she found herself again helpless when he reached behind her and soaped his hands and bathed her as methodically as she’d bathed him. More so, she thought dimly when he spread her thighs and worked two fingers into the folds of her femininity, sliding them along her skin until the tingling warmth gathering there stole her breath and her heart thudded against her sternum and her knees trembled, forcing her to lean against the stall’s slick wall.

And the way he looked at her, like he never wanted to stop touching her. His hands slid up her hips and over her ribs, his thumbs flicked across her nipples, and she gasped and held onto his shoulders and prayed both that he’d never stop and that she’d find a way to resist the need he stirred so easily within her.

He scrubbed her hair, gently scratching her scalp with his claws, and rinsed her off, then she blinked and they were out of the shower and he knelt before her again, rubbing a towel over her skin. A brush appeared in his hand, and he turned her and brushed her hair until it was nearly dry, holding her upright with a firm hand at her waist, the tip of his erection brushing wetly against her spine. Then he lifted her into his arms, carried her to his bed, and tucked her into it as if she were five.

Only, she wasn’t five. She was a grown woman, and he was a grown male, and as he curled himself around her, the rigid length of his erection pressing into her bottom and lower back. She was sure now, oh so certain, that he’d press his advantage while she was helpless and weak and needy, that he’d shift his hips and push that hard length against her core and take her then and there, promises be damned.

He whistled the lights off and rubbed the tip of his horn against her temple. “Sleep,

little klika . The transition comes soon.”

She gazed at the clock on the screen above the bed, watching it count down as he relaxed behind her and fell into sleep like he hadn't just given her the single most erotic experience of her life. Like she wasn't still tingly and needy and aching for his touch, as if some part of her weren't waiting for him to roll her over and take her.

As if she weren't beginning to want that from him, and more.

“So much trouble,” she whispered, then fatigue washed over her and sleep caught her in its merciful grasp.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:57 am

Zoran woke by habit, his senses automatically searching for enemies. He found his mate instead. During their rest, she had rolled into him and draped herself across him. Her slight weight now pressed him gently into their bed. Her hand rested on his abdomen, just above his erection, and the dark spill of her hair fanned across the arm he'd protectively curled around her in his sleep. He ran a hand down her side, lingering on the sharp indentation of her waist, the lush curve of her hip, the generous bloom of her ass. The middle two fingers of his free hand touched his forehead, mouth, and chest, then lifted to the heavens as he breathed a prayer of thanksgiving to the Pjorii.

For the Fates had truly blessed him with her presence, a gift beyond any he had ever received. He wanted to explore every inch of her, from the fascinating intelligence shining from her jewel-like eyes to the soft beauty of her skin. He wanted to dive into her, to bury himself within her tight heat, to breathe her in eternally, forever joined as one.

If not for duty, he might have awakened her then and found a way to ease her into taking some part of him now. But he had promised her time, his shift at watch was nigh, and much as he wanted to join with her, much as instinct demanded he claim her, the honor embedded in his bones since childhood would not be bent.

Gently, he slid away from her and readied for the day ahead. His gaze fixed on the clock above where Mia lay supine as he tugged on his skinsuit and boots. He had no understanding of her number system, and still, he recognized the countdown for what it was: the nearing of the deadline he'd given her.

He tried to push his anticipation down, to control the excitement simmering in his

blood, for her sake if not his own. In this, he would not force her, as he had promised himself and his mother. But landing in Zephyria, ensconcing her in his home, brought them one step closer to their joining, and that he could fully embrace.

Once dressed, he smoothed the sheet over her and rubbed the tip of his horn along her temple. She stirred restlessly, her hand skimming the mattress where he'd lain before curling under her chest. The gesture warmed him in a way he had not expected, deep in the parts well-hidden by years of training and discipline, and he could not resist burying his face in her throat and breathing her in. She smelled of soap and woman and him, a heady combination that aroused and gentled him in one fell stroke. How could this tiny creature affect him so? How could he resist such beauty when it found him, human though she was?

While his discipline still held, he pulled away from her and left.

He found Ryrda on the bridge manning the captain's chair, his expression thoughtful as he stared at the viewscreen.

"You are well?" Zoran asked.

Ryrda glanced around and rose, then dropped into the chair in front of navigation, twisting around to face Zoran. "Did you find it hard to leave your mate after claiming her?"

Zoran took the captain's chair and began a systematic check of the logs. "I have not yet claimed her."

Ryrda nodded, as if unsurprised. "I could not claim my own mate. She is...reluctant to accept me."

"Mia is reluctant as well," Zoran admitted. "She will learn."

“Pray they all do.” An uncharacteristic frown tugged at the other warrior’s mouth. “My mate has informed me that she has no intention of being forced into a mating not of her choosing.”

“You threatened to force her?”

“Never. Yet it is upon me to try.” Ryrda rolled his shoulders, then lifted a hand and smoothed the short curls growing between his horns. “Perhaps when we learn one another, she will feel differently.”

Zoran relaxed into the chair, pleased that Ryrda was searching for a way to soothe his mate to him. The task in front of them had seemed enormous when they had first conceived of finding mates among a compatible species. Now that those mates were in hand, it seemed less mighty. Or, perhaps, mighty in a different way. Like Ryrda, Zoran worried that his own mate would never yield to him. The very thought threatened to bury the pleasure she’d given him merely by seeking him out in her sleep. Threatened to reawaken the horrors of having a hand in the loss of his family.

He shook the unpleasant thoughts away, burying them deeply so they would not tempt him away from duty. No, he would find a way to woo her to his side, and to the cause that would ultimately save his people. Not as a penance, but because the Fates had handed him this path to redemption.

“Where is your second?” Zoran said, as much to distract himself from thoughts of possible rejection and failure as anything.

“Retrieving a meal for the two of us. Searching for a healing salve.” Ryrda’s eyes brightened a fraction, and he clicked his teeth in humor. “His mate is not as biddable as my own.”

Zoran searched through his memory of the mock battle they had fought for the human

females' benefit. "She is the taller female with the yellow hair. Mia's other friend?"

"That one, yes. Kira—"

"Kira?"

"My mate," Ryrda said easily. "She called Lorik's mate an Amazon."

Zoran's translator could not match the term with any like word or phrase in Xeruvian.

"What is an Amazon?"

"She did not say, but I take it the female is a fierce opponent."

Zoran grunted. "Then she will make a fitting mate for Lorik."

"He has..." Again, Ryrda paused, as if searching. "Met his match. So Kira says."

That phrase roughly translated, though Zoran feared not well enough for exactness. Still, he understood. "Your Kira must be very wise."

"She knows her friends."

"She related something about Mia?"

Ryrda shifted on his chair, replanting his feet against the bridge's black metal floor, dangling his hands between his widespread knees. "Kira worries that we warriors will not treat our females well. It is an old worry with her, I think, though I cannot pinpoint its origin."

Zoran breathed deeply for a moment, searching in his own way for the right words.

"Human culture is very different from our own, but in some ways, it is very alike. Do

our own females not crave a warrior's gentleness? Do they not search for a mate who will love and protect them, someone worthy of their nurturing spirit?"

The other warrior was silent for a moment, his head bowed in thought. "Yes," he agreed at last. "We are not so different in that regard. I never thought I would find a mate as kind and beautiful in spirit as Kira. After the disaster, it seemed an impossibility. I thought I would have to stand by and watch our people die out as the Var'Kol did, that we would be wiped clean from the great infinite reaches of the universe, forgotten for all time."

"Such is no longer our fate," Zoran reminded him.

"Aye, this is so." Ryrda clapped his hands to his thighs and rose, his expression fixed with the good humor and determination for which he was so well-known. "Let it remain so forever."

Zoran nodded formally. "Peace be unto you."

"And unto you, my friend."

Ryrda inclined his head in a respectful bow and left, and Zoran buried himself in his duty, forestalling any doubt that might intrude upon his peace.

Mia huddled on the bed, watching the countdown above the bed, her stomach a knot of nerves and some other emotion she refused to name. Naming it could get her into trouble, and she had plenty of that already.

Zoran had been gone when she woke, his side of the bed cool to the touch. She vaguely remembered half waking as he left, or maybe it was only her imagination that he'd rubbed the tip of one horn against her temple and licked her throat as a goodbye. Surely that would've awakened her.

She peeked at the countdown again and nibbled on her lower lip. Not that she'd wanted him to wake her. Only a few hours remained until they reached Zephyria, or Zephyrian space, or whatever he'd set the countdown to. Didn't matter. One way or another, her time was up, and she had no idea what she was going to do about it.

Restless now, she thought about opening the console and digging more deeply into her favorite new subject, Zephyria's biosphere. But her focus was so scattered, the worry lodged in her gut so distracting, she knew she wouldn't be able to concentrate.

With a sigh, she slipped out of the bed, washed off, and risked looking in the trunk at the end of the bed for fresh clothing. To her surprise, she found her own clothes clean and neatly folded inside. Oh, for this small piece of home! Quickly, she pulled them out, everything but her lab coat, and dressed. On second thought, she left her shoes inside. A spaceship was no place for heels, even the sensible ones she wore to work.

That done, she smoothed her skirt happily down her thighs and set off in search of her friends, pleased when the door opened to her touch. She retraced the path to the cargo bay, palmed the door open, and found a huge hunk of brooding warrior standing just inside.

She leaned her head way back—boy, did they grow 'em big on Zephyria—and smiled. “Hello. I'm Mia. Um, Zoran's friend?”

The warrior looked down at her, his expression implacable. “Nyklan of Clan Zikri.”

“Ah. Nice to meet you.” She glanced curiously between him and the women huddled against the far wall, every single one of them watching Nyklan with huge, wary eyes. “So, I just wanted to check on everyone?”

“They are well. We take care of our females.”

How to explain that the humans were not “our females”?

“Even the ones foisted on us by the Fates,” he muttered.

“Oh. I thought, since you were standing here.” She trailed off, uncertain how to broach such a sensitive subject. “I thought you hadn’t found what you were looking for?”

“How could an honorable warrior reject his duty? How could he ignore the Fates and forsake his chosen mate?”

He had her there, especially since she had no idea what he was talking about. “That is the question,” she agreed. “So you did find someone?”

His bright green gaze swung to hers and his expression shifted subtly. “Female, your questions would drive a sane male into a frenzy.”

With one final scowl at the women, he stormed out of the bay, his footsteps surprisingly quiet against the metal floor.

“Well, ok,” she said, baffled. “I guess that answers that.”

Quickly, she walked across the room and sat down in the middle of the pack, grateful when one of the women shared her blanket.

Later, after she’d answered what felt like dozens of questions, she searched out the women who’d been selected by warriors and carried off after the demonstration. She found another warrior first, leaning against a door with one hand pressed to his jaw.

“Hello,” she chirped. “I’m Mia, Zoran’s friend.” Why not? That introduction had worked the first time, sort of, and she absolutely, positively, one hundred percent

refused to use the word mate .

“Lorik of Clan Voss,” he grunted. “My mate is your friend.”

“Which one exactly?”

“The yellow-haired one. Stubborn klika refused to give me her name.”

Mia bit her lip, hoping to hide a laugh. “Tell you what. I’ll give you her name if you let me check on her.”

He pushed off the door and scowled at it. “Check if you wish. Me? I would not venture within until her anger cooled.”

For a moment, Mia was concerned. What had the man done to rile up her friend? Had he hurt her or tried to force himself on her?

Then she remembered who they were discussing and had to bite back another grin. Of all the women who’d been captured, Leona could take care of herself, and had proven it to Lorik, if the bruise darkening his jawline was any indication. No, Leona was fine. Apparently, the same couldn’t be said of the warrior who’d tried to claim her.

Unable to resist, Mia asked, “What did you do to earn that bruise?”

“Nothing a warrior would not do upon meeting his mate,” he growled.

“Ah. Hmm. You tried to have sex with her?”

“She did not give me a chance to.” He narrowed his eyes at the door, his free hand curling into a fist. “Stubborn klika . Such a mating is to be treasured above all others. The pleasure of the mating bond makes it so. She would hear nothing of it.”

Mia held up a hand, then dropped it. Nope, she was not in any way ready to hear about mated sex. And she absolutely did not want to hear about one of her friends having mated sex. Not from the guy, anyway. That was strictly a girls-only kind of talk.

“Let me check on her.” Mia said. “On Leona.”

“Leona,” he repeated, almost reverently, then he dropped his hand and dipped his head to Mia. “May the Fates look kindly upon your union with Zoran.”

He pivoted on one booted heel and stalked away, his footsteps as quiet as Nyklan’s had been. What was it with these warriors? Did they take a special class in walking silently?

She shook her head and palmed the door open to a room laid out exactly as Zoran’s was. Leona was seated at the console, frowning down at a blank screen, her hair smoothed into a knot at the base of her skull. To Mia’s relief, the other woman looked unharmed. Unruffled, even. She’d exchanged her soiled business shirt and skirt for a long, apricot colored robe similar to the one Zoran had given Mia. Her spiky heels lay on the floor beneath the console, one turned over on its side.

Leona looked up when Mia entered, still frowning. “I can’t get it to turn on.”

“Oh! Let me try.” Mia walked over and placed her hand palm down. A mild shock pinched her skin, and she jerked her hand away with a yelp. “Must be print-locked. You’ll have to get Lorik to sign you in.”

“Lorik,” Leona said, rolling the name over her tongue as her eyes narrowed on the door. “You would not believe the nerve of that Neandertal.”

“I gather things didn’t go well,” Mia said dryly.

“He tried to have sex with me as soon as he dropped me on the bed!”

“Weren’t you the one encouraging me to take advantage of Zoran’s willingness?”

Leona waved a languid hand. “That’s different.”

Mia cocked her head. “How?”

“You’re you, and I’m me,” Leona said with a coy wink. “Don’t worry, Mia. I have things well in hand.”

Mia just bet she did.

They settled down for a good chat, gossiping about the women who’d been taken, worrying over Kira’s fate. Discussing the intriguing promise of new research awaiting them on Zephyria, and the research left behind when they’d been abducted.

“Years of work,” Mia groaned. “Down the drain now because of that barbarian.”

Leona squeezed her hand. “Don’t worry, hon. Peter’s a sensible assistant. He’ll continue the work on his own until we get back home.”

“ If we get back home.”

“Still convinced your warrior won’t let you go?”

Mia glanced at the door, her conversation with Lorik upmost in her mind. “I don’t think any of them will. Yours certainly didn’t sound like he had any intention of doing so.”

Instead of rattling Leona, the statement seemed to please her.

Typical, Mia thought as she steered the conversation back to work and the fate of their friends. They had just decided to venture into the ship in search of Kira when the door opened and Zoran appeared.

He nodded respectfully to Leona, then held his hand out to Mia. “We have arrived.”

Mia’s stomach did a long, slow roll, whether in dread or excitement, she couldn’t tell. She swallowed once and scooted off the stool Leona had abandoned for her.

The other woman pushed off the bed and stood, one hand catching Mia’s. “Don’t worry so much,” Leona said softly. “There’s a way out. We just have to find it.”

Mia was very much afraid she already knew what she was going to have to do. She just wished she weren’t looking forward to it so much. “Don’t be so hard on Lorik.”

Leona winked. “I intend for him to be very hard before I’m through with him.”

Mia groaned and rolled her eyes, then she quit putting off the inevitable and stepped into the hallway and Zoran’s grasp.

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Zoran stood on the bridge, his arms crossed over his chest. Strictly speaking, his presence was not needed, but he had been unable to resist the urge to share the view of Zephyria with his mate.

She stood beside him, her eyes wide as she studied the viewscreen projecting a real-time view of their approach. The planet was a circular mass of swirling clouds, shrouding the oceans and land masses beneath green-tinged gray. Jagged streaks of lightning flashed through the clouds, and Mia gasped.

“It looks like a hurricane,” she said quietly. “Will we be able to land?”

“Yes.” He stroked a palm down the length of her silky hair, to soothe the tremor in her voice. To comfort her and the mating instinct rumbling steadily inside him. “I will allow no harm to befall you.”

She huffed out a nervous breath, but said nothing.

When the instinct stretched taut within him and he feared losing control of it, he lifted her against his chest and carried her back to his quarters. She’d gone silent against him, stiff, one small hand curled into a fist against his heart. Carefully, he locked the hatch behind him, all too aware of the roar in his blood, of the need clamoring at him.

“What are you going to do?” she said, and the smallness of her voice, the fear trembling through her, allowed him to wrest control over the mating instinct and force it down.

“You have been given sufficient time,” he said, nearly hating the gruff need

roughening his voice.

“But I’m not...” She sucked in a breath. “I’m not ready yet.”

“This do I know. Yet the choice must be made.” He strode to the bed and laid her gently upon it, then covered her body with his own, bracing himself above her so as not to crush her fragile form. “Will you accept the mating mark?”

Her blue eyes widened and her starkly white teeth nibbled her lower lip. “No sex?”

His hips jerked against her core at the word, and he forced them into stillness. “The mating mark only.”

“Explain it to me.”

Lying as he was, cradled by her body, with the mating instinct roaring in his ears, he was uncertain whether he could find the words. “Easier to show.”

Her gaze searched his, then finally she nodded jerkily. “Ok. Show me.”

Triumph rumbled through him, satisfying the instinct enough to dull its insistent roar. Slowly, Zoran lowered his head to the crook of her neck and pressed his teeth against her skin, gently at first, hesitantly awaiting her reaction. She gasped and rolled her head to the side, her hands sliding along his shoulders, and his hips found their own rhythm, rocking against her in an age-old mating dance, seeking her warmth through the layers of their clothing. He nipped her skin, eliciting another gasp, then dug his fangs in, breaking the skin as gently as he could. Even as she yelped a protest, her blood coated his tongue, enough to serve the mating bond.

Still, he could not resist running his tongue over her neck, cleaning every drop of the precious fluid from her skin, swallowing some of her down so that in this small way,

she would forever become a part of him. Already, the mating bond twined through his blood, cementing the connection, binding him to her, and the sheer thrill of knowing his mate pulsed through his veins, sharpening his arousal to a fever pitch.

Before he lost himself in her taste, before need overrode honor, he withdrew and pressed her face to his throat. "Now you."

"I don't know if I can," she whispered, her frantic breaths fluttering against his skin.

"You must," he insisted.

As if his words had given her courage, she bit him hard, breaking his skin with her dull little teeth. His cock pulsed, growing impossibly hard beneath his skinsuit, and he growled his pleasure, praising her with words grown thick with need.

Swiftly, he shifted above her and pressed his lips against hers, and as their blood mingled, the bond snapped into place, forever joining them as one.

Mia arched under Zoran, pressing her core into him as something shifted inside her and a sense of rightness filled her, a twin to the need burning in her veins. "Wh-what?" she stuttered out, and he roared and pushed his hips against her, and abruptly, the need burst on a sharp, breathtaking orgasm.

Never so good, she thought, dazed, as his hips jerked against her once more and he breathed her name, then he rubbed the tip of one horn along her temple, murmuring gently to her, his hands caressing her as he rolled onto his back and settled her atop him.

A ship alarm pinged, startling her out of the web of arousal he'd woven around her. His bite mark throbbed once, then the pain faded to a low sting. She placed trembling fingers against it and felt moisture. Blood? Her eyelids slid closed. No, she couldn't

analyze that yet, not with the brilliant euphoria of an orgasm lingering in her limbs.

“What was that?” she said.

His hands smoothed up her arms and down again, and his mouth curved in a small, satisfied smile. “We have arrived.”

“No, not that. The—” She sucked in a breath and pushed herself up, straddling him because there was nowhere left to go. Her limbs felt shaky and weak, she couldn’t stand, and damn his gorgeous hide, he sprawled across the bed, taking up most of its space. “What just happened?”

“We are mated.”

“We’re what ?” she squawked. “You didn’t say anything about mating!”

His head shifted against the bed and his gaze shuttered. “What else would the mating mark do?”

“Not that!” Heat pinkened her cheeks and she snapped, “Not rutting.”

That satisfied smile deepened, and he sat up, tangling one hand in her hair, leaving the other splayed across her thigh. “That was not rutting, *pjora-la* . That was mating.”

She slapped at his hand and tried to slither off him, only to have him tighten his grip, keeping her exactly where she was, straddling him with her core pressed against the length of his growing arousal. Keeping her right where he wanted her to be, she realized, and that ticked her off good.

“Oh, honestly!” she snapped. “That’s some nerve you have there, you high-handed, overbearing barbarian . I told you I wasn’t ready.”

“Yet did you agree when the time came to choose.” He touched his forehead to hers and his breath feathered across her mouth. “Such was necessary, else I would not have been able to walk with you among my people for fear of what the mating instinct would drive me to do. Now every warrior will see this mark upon your throat and know that you have been claimed. Even now, the urge to fully claim you remains strong. To know that you are wet for me, that you have accepted me and me alone. I am already fighting the need to bury myself within you. Do not ask me to risk having another male assert a claim over you.”

Somehow, his words calmed her anger. High-handed he might be, certainly barbarian was too light of a word, but in the wake of what he’d done to her, how he’d made her feel...

She shook her head. No, she wasn’t trying to excuse or justify his actions, merely understand the whys of it. She didn’t fully know how his culture worked, let alone the mating bond, but she had gained a certain knowledge of his personality. If he said it was necessary, if he’d done it to protect her and other people, could she really blame him for that?

And yet.

“You should’ve explained better,” she said. “And you definitely shouldn’t have forced it on me.”

He blanched away from her, settling her on the bed as he rolled smoothly off and stood, putting his back to her. His hands clenched into fists at his side, and he bowed his head. When he spoke, his voice was so hard, she flinched. “Ready yourself, female. Mother will be waiting for us at the spaceport.”

He stalked out of the room, and she stared after him, still dazed by the startling pleasure he’d given her, and by his equally startling departure.

Mia didn't know what to do, so she fell back on an old habit: when in doubt, take a shower.

She stood beneath the warm spray, letting it wash away the tangled knot of emotions whirling through her. First, the lingering anger over Zoran's forcing the issue, though she'd known he'd do something, hadn't she? Then that orgasm, dear lord, just about the best one she'd ever had, and wasn't that a kick in the proverbial teeth? A barbarian he might be, but Zoran sure did know his way around a woman's body.

She wrinkled her nose and got a mouthful of water for her troubles. The fiend! How dare he use her own body against her?

The question carried an unexpected burst of humor. Leona would tell her to grab the alien by the horns, ride him hard, and put him up wet, or something equally suggestive. In this rare case, Mia was inclined to agree. After all, she'd just mated the male, whatever that meant.

She snapped the water off and wrung out her hair. The short shower had done its job, allowing her to find some peace amid the turmoil. It hadn't been long enough to brainstorm a direction, but she already knew what lay in front of her. Today, she'd see Zephyria for the first time. An alien planet outside her home solar system! Such an exciting day.

And also, she had to meet Zoran's mother.

But no, she thought as she forced an automatic frown away. Excitement was the order of the day. She and the other women kidnapped from the CAH would be the first humans to step foot on this alien world, the first to breathe the air on a completely alien planet. The very first to sample alien life in a scientific manner.

An all-too-fresh memory of Zoran's mouth on her throat intruded, and she grimaced

as her body reacted predictably. Almost shyly, Mia slid her fingertips over the tight buds of her nipples and down her water-slick stomach to her lady bits. Zoran had touched her there, firmly exploring the folds at the juncture of her thighs. She dipped a finger in, retracing his path, and discovered to her utter shock a longing buried deep within her, not for pleasure, but for belonging. This was what he offered her along with an ecstasy she'd never felt before: a place where she belonged.

She dropped her hand and stepped out of the shower, puzzling over that need, analyzing it as she would any problem she encountered at work. The CAH had given her a home. Not a literal one, no, but a place of comfort. Friends who loved and supported her. A lively group of peers to expand and challenge her intellect. Productive work she deeply cared about, work that would, one day, cure one of humanity's most enduring problems.

But at the end of the day, she still had to go home to an empty apartment. Her parents had given her one adventure after another, exposing her to the wider world beyond the safety Mia had found at the CAH. Their home during the early years of Mia's life had been each other. They hadn't needed a permanent, physical address.

Then Mia grew up. Her parents guided her toward a good college, where she settled down for the first time in her life. And instead of hopping from place to place as many other college graduates did, Mia had stayed. All her degrees, right through her PhD, had been obtained from schools within a relatively easy drive from her apartment, the same apartment her parents had found for her at the start of her junior year, when she left the dorms.

Oh, God, she thought, stunned. She had needed a stable home.

Mia snagged a towel and hurriedly dried off, shoving down any guilt the realization carried with it. Not that she hadn't loved the globetrotting or spending so much time with her parents. In many ways, her childhood had been ideal. Her parents loved her,

no doubt, and she loved them. She'd gained so much from her time roaming Earth.

But it had been so, so nice to settle down, to find a place she belonged, not just people she belonged with.

The outer door opened. Mia wrapped the towel around her and exited the bathroom, expecting to find Zoran.

Instead, Leona and Kira stood just inside the entrance.

"Sorry to barge in," Kira said. "Zoran asked us to check on you."

Leona shot her a wry look. "That might be what he said, but it wasn't what he meant. I can't believe you're not dressed yet."

Mia shoved her wet hair back and hurried across the room, one hand holding the towel in place. "Sorry. Had to clear my head."

"The old water trick," Kira said sagely, making Leona snicker.

"Oh, shut it, you two." Mia offered them a meek smile to soften her words. "I have to find something to wear."

"The robe," her friends said in near unison.

"The robe," Mia replied slowly. Yes, of course. What better way to demonstrate her, what? Loyalty? Understanding? Support?

Belonging?

Leona marched across the room, guided Mia firmly to the edge of the bed, and

shoved her down. “We’re both wearing ours. See?”

Mia followed her friend’s gaze to the console where two silky robes lay. “Oh. You took the mating mark, too?”

Kira’s dark eyes widened, and her skin went ashen under her natural honey-brown skin tone. “No, not for lack of trying on his part. Did you?”

Mia brushed her fingers across her throat where Zoran had bitten her and found the skin curiously whole, if slightly raised. “Uh. I thought so.”

Leona stood upright from the trunk, where she’d been rooting through Zoran’s clothes. “What does it feel like?”

“Well, it’s like this rightness settles inside you.” Mia placed her fingers to her chest, over her heart. “It feels almost like...home.”

“Oh,” Leona said dreamily. “All that ape barbarian talks about is sex.”

Kira steadied herself against the wall. “Mine hasn’t mentioned sex at all. He just wants to cuddle all the time.”

“Take the cuddles,” Mia said.

“Hell, yes,” Leona agreed.

“But what if he wants more?” Kira glanced between them, a raw starkness etched in her expression. “I don’t think I can.”

“Oh, honey,” Leona murmured, then she rushed across the room and enveloped Kira in a hug.

Mia followed her and leaned her head against Kira's shoulder. "Maybe you should give him a chance."

"Like you're doing with your alien?" Kira scoffed weakly.

"No, like you, in your own way," Mia countered. "We're stuck here for a while. Maybe we should make the best of it."

"I certainly intend to," Leona said as she pulled away.

They all laughed, knowing exactly what she meant. Poor Lorik didn't stand a chance.

Neither, Mia decided, her eyes narrowing dangerously, did Zoran. So what if he'd forced her hand with the whole mating thing? There was absolutely no reason she had to play his game.

"Uh oh," Kira said. "I know that look."

Leona crossed her arms over her chest, her gaze raking Mia from head to toe. "Oh, yes. That's Mia's inner mischief coming out to play. Zoran's in for an interesting week."

Mia grinned at them, not even bothering to hide her glee.

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Zoran marched stiffly down the concourse, Mia at his side. As soon as they'd exited the ship, she'd tucked her hand trustingly into his and allowed him to lead her through his jutji 's spaceport. He held her gently, keenly aware of the delicacy of her bones, the softness of her skin, the drape of his colors across her lush feminine body.

That she wore his colors baffled him as much as the way she held him. What had happened to her anger at being forced , as she put it, to take and receive the mating mark? His jaw clamped down on a vicious snarl. Confusing, infuriating, delectable female.

His mother stood at the end of the concourse at the edge of the crowd gathered there to greet the human females. It was a quiet crowd, respectful in their curiosity. Even the females seemed hopeful, though these humans would supplant some of them, the ones not already bound, as mates.

Zoran nearly stopped midstride. The jealousy and resentment of Xeruvian females had not been a consideration when the Warlord Council considered options for rebuilding. They hadn't the option of emotional indulgence. Had he not set aside his own contempt for the frailty of humans when he'd accepted Mia as his mate?

And his mother had said nothing on this matter, as she should have. If any Xeruvians had such a complaint, they should have stepped forward immediately. Not that their concerns would have stopped the implementation of this last, desperate plan to take human females as mates. But airing such concerns beforehand would have helped them all accept the humans now.

These new females were tiny miracles, each and every one. Hopefully his people

would come to see them in that light.

Zoran drew Mia to a stop before his mother and sketched a respectful bow, only dimly aware of the other warlords shepherding their mates and the unmated human females forward. “Mother, my mate, Mia, late of San Francisco.”

Alara eyed his mate for a brief moment, her piercing gaze measuring the human dispassionately. Her eyes were the same bright green as his own, her skin a shade lighter, her features stern, yet beautiful, the mating marks on her throat proudly displayed. Alara had retained the warrior-like grace of her youth. Her strength had wobbled when her mate and daughter had died. Zoran knew she mourned their loss still, as they all did. And yet her courage had never faltered. His mother’s vocal support had been instrumental in his own success in formulating a plan to find a compatible species. Without her, his people might have been lost.

Mia, for her part, returned his mother’s gaze with the steady curiosity he had come to expect from her. She waited patiently for Alara to speak, her expression openly welcoming.

At last, Alara gently disentangled Mia’s hands from his own and pressed them to her forehead. “Daughter, it is with the greatest pleasure that I welcome you.”

Mia’s smile warmed him to his core. “Thank you. It’s so lovely to meet you. Should I greet you the same way?”

Sly humor sparked in his mother’s eyes, and she slid her gaze to him before answering. “My son has not taught you the traditional greetings?”

“We haven’t had a lot of time to work on that.”

“I see.”

Zoran rumbled a warning. “Have quarters been arranged for the unmated humans?”

A smile lingered on Alara’s mouth, though she had the grace to contain her amusement. “We have set aside a compound for their use, very near the science center.”

Mia cocked her head, her eyes alight with curiosity. “The science center?”

“Our clan’s research facility,” Alara said. “We have made room there for any human who wishes to join our research staff.”

“Me!” Mia said, laughing. “Zoran gave me access to part of your culture’s database on the trip here. I’m very interested in integrating our research with yours to see if we can’t solve problems we both face.”

Alara’s expression softened, and she placed a gentle hand on Zoran’s arm. “Ah, my son. What a beautiful gift you have brought into our clan.”

Mia’s cheeks pinkened as her smile turned shy. Zoran clenched his hands into fists, firmly controlling the emotions sweeping over him. She was not ready for his touch, though he’d tried to gentle her to him, and he would not force her again unless she asked it of him.

“Mother,” he said abruptly, “would you escort Mia to the science center? I have matters to attend to.”

Alara nodded once. Zoran bowed to them both and left, fighting the need to treat Mia as a Xeruvian warlord treated his mate. Something inside him roared a silent fury. Mia was his . How could he leave her there without even a proper farewell?

Yet, he could not bring himself to touch her as he should, to openly claim her so that

no one would ever doubt what she was to him.

And what he, by the will of the Fates, was to her.

Mia watched Zoran stalk away, perplexed by his behavior. He'd insisted on marking her before their arrival, then abandoned her at the first opportunity. Was this some unknown Xeruvian tradition she needed to learn, or was his abandonment going to be business as usual? If she was only a broodmare, why had he bothered claiming her? Why introduce her to his mother or allow her access to their accumulated knowledge or—

“Do not worry, my daughter,” Alara said. “He is ever aware of you.”

Mia almost blurted her questions out then and there, and reluctantly left them unsaid. Questions would have to wait. She didn't know Alara, or Xeruvian culture, well enough to voice her curiosity. Not where Zoran was concerned anyway. She fully intended to question everything else, though, at every opportunity.

“Where's the science center in relation to here?” Mia said instead. “Are we in Clan Kerus's territory?”

Alara thread Mia's arm through hers and led her sedately out of the spaceport. “What do you know of our clan system?”

“Not much,” Mia admitted. “The trip was so short, and I was curious about your scientific advances. There's just so much to learn!”

“You are young yet and have much time for further studies. Perhaps we should ignore my son's wishes and explore your new home.”

“Yes! Thank you. I'd like to see—” Mia broke off, laughing. “Pretty much

everything.”

“We cannot see everything today, child,” Alara replied, her amusement evident in her voice if not her expression. “But we shall see enough.”

Mia happily allowed Zoran’s mother to lead her forward. Mother-in-law? Future mother-in-law?

She grinned as she took in her surroundings. The spaceport was relatively small, nothing like major airports back home. The concourse was a single wide corridor tiled in gray stone, arching overhead into an atrium tall enough to accommodate large, palm-like trees. It felt more like walking through a preserve than away from a spaceship.

Once they broke through the crowd of curious onlookers, the spaceport widened around a bubbling pool in the center, then dipped along a gentle slope into a causeway backed by what looked like dense forest. Heavy rain beat down beyond the spaceport’s walls, startling Mia into stopping.

“The spaceport’s not enclosed?” she said. “You’re not worried about rain coming inside?”

Alara followed her gaze and clicked her tongue in understanding. “There’s a field separating the two. It allows air and people to flow in, yet filters out most strong weather and predatory or pesky creatures. Such technology is not used by your people?”

“Not yet. It’s a little intimidating. I’m used to distinct walls.”

“Then you may have some trouble adjusting. Much of our architecture incorporates these fields. It allows us to invite nature into our homes without compromising our

safety. Come. I secured a conveyance for our use.”

They exited to the side, where an overhang jutted away from the spaceport, protecting people from the weather. It reminded Mia so much of similar structures on Earth that for a moment, longing stole her breath. Would she ever make it back home again?

Wind whipped under the overhang, carrying a spray of warm rain with it.

“Ah,” Alara said wisely. “I see now the advantages of fully enclosing our spaces.”

The wry humor cut through Mia’s homesickness, easing it, and she laughed. “It does have its uses.”

The conveyance turned out to be a private vehicle driven by an elderly Xeruvian male. Or what Mia thought might be an elderly male. Like many of the other Xeruvians she’d seen, this one stood tall and proud, though not quite as tall and muscular as the warlords. His smaller physique hinted at a caste system of some kind.

Mia mentally made a note to investigate, then turned her curiosity on the vehicle. It was similar to a car, tapered at front and back in graceful curves, with three sets of wheels instead of two. Unlike the spaceport, the vehicle was fully enclosed with viewing spaces made out of a clear material. Not glass, she deduced. There was no glimmer to it, as there would be with glass. She put a pin in that, too, as Alara ushered her inside and the driver ferried them away from the spaceport.

Once they were beyond it, the jungle closed around them. Mia nearly pressed her nose to the window to get a better view of the vegetation. Here, the land remained wild, in stark contrast to the obviously cultivated landscape preserved in the spaceport. She caught a flash of white slinking through the grayish brown tree bark and richly colored leaves, and was suddenly very glad to be in an enclosed space.

The vehicle entered the edges of a settlement after only a few minutes' drive. Alara nodded at the passing buildings. "This area is primarily residences, one of several communities dotted through the region. There is a small market here, a larger one closer to the center."

"We are in Clan Kerus's territory, aren't we?"

"Indeed. Many of the clans have built small ports within their lands, according to the people's needs. We are landlocked here and have no seaport, though we do have a landward port near the confluence of our borders with our closest allies."

"Oh. I suppose I should've studied the maps I found a little more closely."

"There is time, daughter." Alara's gaze caught on something to the right. She touched Mia's arm and directed her gaze outward. "Here is a good example of the way those fields are incorporated into our residences. Do you see the balconies?"

Mia leaned forward, duly noting the outward curve of balcony like extrusions along the exterior walls. The homes were various shades of gray, brown, beige, and off-white, depending on the construction materials, most natural. She recognized more of the grayish stone, what looked like stucco, and even massive slabs of stained wood. Each structure seemed uniquely fitted to the land surrounding it. That changed the closer they drew to town, where the land had clearly been adapted to the buildings. Still, it flowed in organic lines, not better than human constructions, just different.

And remarkably the same. While most of the balconies were empty, a few held children and even adults leaning against protective ledges and railings. Watching their vehicle's progress. Mia glanced behind their vehicle and noted the line of other vehicles following them. They hadn't been the first to leave the spaceport, but they also hadn't been the last. Farther back, just visible behind a short line of personal vehicles, Mia caught a glimpse of a larger one swaying down the road. No doubt it

was carrying the unmated females.

Mia turned around on a sharp harumph.

“The scenery is not to your liking?” Alara said.

“It’s beautiful,” Mia replied.

“Yet there is anger in your heart, and sorrow.”

“How could there not be? Zoran kidnapped me and—” Abruptly, Mia remembered who she was talking to. Embarrassed heat flooded her cheeks, and she hunched lower in her seat. “Sorry. I haven’t really had time to...”

When her voice trailed off, Alara suggested gently, “Adjust to being mated to a male from another culture whom you have known only a short while?”

“Yes. Exactly. He just stormed into my work, growled mine , and that was that.”

“You expected something different from a mate?”

The question was asked so tentatively, Mia had to relent. She twisted around in the seat, facing Alara, felt it conform to her new position, and spoke candidly. “Humans tend to have a longer courtship ritual. They sometimes spend months and even years getting to know each other, deciding if the person they’re dating is the right one and whether they want to spend the rest of their lives together. There’s a whole process to it. Granted, some people skip that and go straight for the gusto, but most don’t. Even with arranged marriages, there’s a process.”

Alara couldn’t quite quell her horror. “It sounds quite tedious and uncertain.”

“Oh, it can be. It doesn’t always work, but mostly people have a choice. Both of them, not just one.”

“Your anger stems from not having a choice?”

Mia waved at the mark on her throat, partially healed somehow but still, she assumed, visible. “He didn’t really explain before he gave me this. I didn’t know it would bind us together. Or, I suppose it did anyway.”

“He did not explain. My son, my son,” Alara murmured. “Did you run from him, child?”

“When we first met. Why?”

“That is part of our courtship ritual. When the mating instinct rouses, the female may choose to ignore it and stand her ground, thus denying it, or she may allow her prospective mate to run her down.”

Mia gaped at her. “Running indicates acceptance? That’s so backward from what humans do.”

“And therein lies the crux of the problem. Zoran likely scented your fear, yet did his instinct see your running as a desire to mate with him. Such instinct would have been below the surface.”

“Subconscious,” Mia murmured, her eyes wide. “Things I wish I’d known.”

“Would you truly have rejected him, had you another choice?”

Mia gave the question the consideration it deserved. If she’d been walking down the street and met Zoran, would she have introduced herself? Gone on a date with him?

Wanted to be with him?

The answers made her squirm in her seat. “No. I was attracted to him the moment I saw him.”

“Then it is only the method of his claiming that troubles you.”

“Yes. I wish he hadn’t—”

She swallowed the word forced down, certain now that he’d thought she’d chosen him in some way. It was a cultural conflict, a misunderstanding, and she’d fully participated in that. Why, oh why, hadn’t she spent more time learning about Xeruvian mating rituals and less time absorbed in their research?

“My friends thought I should go with it,” she said instead.

“Go with it?”

“Play along.” She rolled her hand in an I’m trying to find the right term way. “Embrace the relationship.”

“Such would certainly bring Zoran happiness.”

Mia laughed. “I bet.”

“I would be happy as well.” Alara clasped Mia’s hand in her own, gently, as if she were well aware of her greater strength. “If there had been another way, my daughter, we would have chosen it.”

Mia covered Alara’s hand with her free one. “Don’t apologize for trying to save your people. I might’ve done exactly the same thing in a similar situation.”

Alara hesitated for a moment, then said, “May I offer some advice?”

“Um. Sure?”

“Do not forgive my son so easily. He will value your affection more if he must work to win it.”

Mia blinked at her for a moment, letting the words sink in. A slow grin curved her mouth. “Leona is going to love you.”

“Who?” Alara said, cocking her head quizzically.

The vehicle slowed, drawing their attention to the town beyond them, and Mia let the conversation shift naturally to her friends. She would settle matters with Zoran soon enough. Now it was time to explore this beautiful world he’d given her.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:57 am

Zoran settled himself onto a cushion within the circle of warlords gathered for a Council meeting. He was the only mated warlord present among those who had traveled to Earth and back. The others had whisked their mates away to their own territories, leaving him to update the warlords who had remained on Zephyria to protect their people.

He controlled the frown threatening to manifest in his expression. That was not quite true. Aklan Phyrz and his new human mate, Sonja Mathis, would spend only a senna on Zephyria before returning to Earth and negotiations with human governments. And while several warlords who'd made the trip had not found mates among the human females, only one had found a mate and refused to claim her. That female had joined the other unmated humans in the compound Alara had readied for them.

Under other circumstances, the shame would ruin that warlord's family. Given the chain of events, Zoran could not find it in himself to chastise Nyklan any further. Perhaps in time, his sister's mate would heal enough to claim his human. Only Nyklan could mend that breach, though Zoran prayed the unknown female—for Nyklan had refused to name her—would find her own way into Nyklan's heart, healing him of one of the most vicious griefs ever to be visited upon a Xeruvian.

The other warlord sat now in the council circle, brooding. Since he was there, Zoran intended to make full use of his knowledge. Why not? Such would save energy for brooding of his own.

As the final warlord settled into the circle, Zoran straightened, catching every eye in the circle. Though news had likely already spread, he began with a simple truth. "The mating instinct calls us to human females."

Low murmurs raced around the circle, echoing back from the field protecting them from the storm brewing around the open Council Grounds. Zoran had chosen this place, here among the jungles of his jutji , for a reason: let the warlords be reminded of their nature. Xeruvians were predators at heart. They would need those instincts, that fierce tenacity, to save their people.

“My own mate bears my mark,” he continued. “I knew the moment our eyes met that she was mine.”

“What of the others?” someone called out.

“I can only speak for myself. The others will share their stories in their own time.” Zoran nodded at Nyklan. “Brother, what of your impressions of the human females?”

Nyklan answered without hesitation. “They are not as weak as they seem. Fragile, perhaps, certainly more delicate than our own females, but ferocious when cornered. Aklan Phyrz’s mate fought alongside him to escape the grasp of her own people. She came willingly, bearing his mark, and will not be parted from him, by all appearances.”

Kaelan Drexus leveled a shrewd gaze on Nyklan. “And yet, you refuse to claim your own female. Are they so flawed, then, that they can so easily be shunned?”

Nyklan snarled, his eyes flashing hotly. “That is no concern of yours.”

“Such is every warlord’s concern,” Kaelan said flatly. “If the instinct can be repudiated, then another male must be given a chance.”

Nyklan jumped to his feet, his muscles taut as his hands clenched into claw-tipped fists at his side. Zoran rose as well, to keep order if nothing else, and managed not to sigh when Kaelan slowly rose and faced Nyklan.

“Why?” Nyklan growled viciously, the word scarcely recognizable as speech. “You opposed this path. What say have you in the matter?”

“As much say as any other male here,” Kaelan said, “now that the issue has been settled.”

Several other warlords, even those who had supported attempting to mate with other species, voiced agreement.

“Then speak of other females, vyirkolen ,” Nyklan snapped back. “Do not prod me about a female over whom you have no say.”

Kaelan snarled as he attacked, his fangs bared, claws out. The warlords beside him bounded into action, attempting to contain him while Zoran wrapped his arms around Nyklan’s torso and bodily shoved him out of the circle. They landed heavily on the packed earth.

Nyklan grunted once, then let his hands drop to the ground as Zoran slipped to the side, his knee pressing into Nyklan’s chest. “Let me go.”

Behind them, Kaelan clicked his teeth. “Yes, Zoran. Let the gyngi go. He is no threat to me.”

Nyklan’s fury reignited, and he placed a hand against Zoran’s knee, a counter move they’d learned together when they were young and the universe much simpler.

Zoran pushed down hard, his own claws raised in blatant threat. “Enough!” he roared. “We will not devolve into madness and insults when our people need us most. Can we not set aside old grievances and work together in peace?”

Comments came from all sides, dissonant above the wind and rain.

“We must!”

“Our children need us.”

“Mates for every male who wants one!”

“And every female!”

The last brought low chuckles from those assembled. Nyklan dropped his head to the earth, his eyes tightly closed, and Zoran dared ease the pressure from the other warlord’s chest. He stood slowly and turned, facing the council with manufactured humor.

“If an unmated female cannot find a satisfactory mate among her Xeruvian companions,” he said, “then she is free to find one among the humans.”

“So can we all!” his mother cried.

Zoran’s gaze jerked to hers. She stood outside the circle among the few onlookers who’d come to witness the warlords’ debate. He had missed her arrival and now automatically searched for the female he had left in her care. Mia, however, was not among the crowd. His muscles tightened, and he only just stopped himself from stalking away and hunting her down.

His mate must be protected, always. He would accept nothing less than her complete safety.

“If females are allowed to find mates among the humans,” Kaelan said, drawing Zoran’s attention away from his mother, “then so are all males. We, at least, remain fertile. Every unmated male must therefore be allowed to present his suit to the human females now among us and to the ones willing to travel here in the future.”

“No,” Zoran snarled. “Those who opposed the plan to mate with humans will not be allowed a chance at mating with the females we brought back with us. Though I will not stop any male from manning his own expedition to Earth. In fact, I welcome it. Coordinate with Aklan Phyrz. He returns there soon.”

Kaelan stepped closer, shrugging off restraining hands, his gaze determined. “One day, Zoran Kerus, you will realize the error of refusing us our rightful choice.”

He turned and walked out, and after a few startled looks, several other warlords followed.

Zoran resumed his seat as if nothing untoward had happened. “How goes production on the translators? We may need them in the short term while we learn human languages and they learn ours.”

The remaining warlords settled back into the circle. Across the way, Alara stood silently, her gaze glittering brightly.

When the meeting dispersed, Zoran lingered, patiently answering questions and offering reassurances as the other warlords departed. Nyklan had slipped away shortly after Kaelan and his supporters. His absence had left a noticeable gap in the discussions. Nyklan had been responsible for so much of their mission’s successful outcome. Zoran would have preferred having his brother by fate speak for himself on those matters.

But perhaps Nyklan’s leaving had been for the best. The meeting had settled into comfortable routine. There had even been talk of mounting another mission, this one perhaps sanctioned by the humans themselves. They had, after all, seen what the Xeruvians were capable of. And they would soon know that their females were well cared for. What could possibly hamper future arrangements, if the women themselves understood what opportunities awaited them on Zephyria?

Zoran had held his peace during that discussion. Humans, those in government, at least, had proven themselves untrustworthy and intractable. If there was a way around those obstacles, perhaps the Fates would reveal them, when the time was right.

When he could break free, Zoran strode across the circle to his mother and dove straight into his own worries. “Where is she?”

Alara gazed calmly at him, unmoved by the force of his question. “If you refer to your mate, whom you left in my care without a backward glance—”

“Mother,” Zoran growled.

Unruffled, she continued. “Mia is acquainting herself with the science center. I believe she intended to travel afterward to the compound where the unmated humans will live.”

“She will not remain there.”

“That is her decision.” When he growled again, she snuffled out an exasperated rebuke. “She is your mate, Zoran, not your plaything.”

“I do not think of her as such,” he gritted out. “Yet is it my duty to protect her.”

“From what? The rain?” She snuffled again, waving a dismissive hand. “Your frustration stems from not completely claiming her. If you wish to woo her to your side, you must do just that. Woo her, my son. Court her as a human would.”

The frustration bled from him so suddenly, his head spun. “I do not know how.”

“Of course, you do. The instinct will guide you, if you but listen to it.” Her expression softened, and she cupped her palm over his jaw. “I believe she longs for a

substance called chocolate . Perhaps you could start there.”

“ Chocolate ,” Zoran murmured, knowing he mangled the human word. “Do you believe she will love me?”

“How can she not?”

He clicked his teeth once in raw humor. “So says every mother.”

“So this mother knows.” Her hand dropped away, and she stepped back. “Accompany an old woman home, then go find your mate. She awaits your fetching.”

“Fetching?”

“A human thing. I believe it has something to do with pets, though for the life of me I cannot pinpoint the connection.”

Zoran remained baffled as well, though he would go about this fetching if Mia insisted. First thing on the morrow, he would oversee delivery and disbursement of the human supplies they had ferried from one planet to the other. Perhaps among those he could find some of this chocolate his mate coveted.

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Mia hummed happily as she set up her new office. While the town reminded her more of a sleepy rural village than a bustling regional center, the science and research complex was state of the art. She'd been given a tiny, enclosed room located on one side of a large open space dominated by lab equipment and transparent workboards.

The central workspace was shared, but this room was her own. One wall of her office was a series of viewing screens similar, as far as she could tell, to computer monitors, like the one in Zoran's quarters aboard the spaceship. These were joined together in such a way that they could either function individually or as a seamless whole. Another wall held a window overlooking the jungle and a third held the door and a wall-mounted workboard. Additionally, she'd been given a sleek desk and chair, a small tablet, and a bookcase, though what she'd do with the latter remained to be seen. The Xeruvians seemed to rely on digital storage and all her books were back home.

A brief spurt of homesickness swirled through her. She pushed it down, more easily this time. Nothing she could do about that now. Better to focus on what she could change and do than what she couldn't.

She'd just integrated her tablet with the Xeruvians' major scientific database when someone tapped politely on the door. Mia pulled it open. One of the Xeruvian scientists she'd met early stood on the other side, her hands folded politely behind her. When Alara had brought Mia to the science center, she'd introduced her to everyone in such a flurry of names and faces that they'd become a blur.

Mia vaguely remembered this female, a fellow plant scientist. She was taller than Mia by half a foot and sported small, decidedly feminine horns sprouting from above her

temples. Her hair was dark and pulled back in an intricate braid, accentuating her high cheekbones and slender nose. She wore a loose linen tunic and pants, closed-toe sandals, and a single wide, copper-colored bracelet on her left wrist. Mia recognized the bracelet as a smaller version of the one Zoran had worn when he'd abducted her.

For the life of her, Mia couldn't pinpoint the other female's name. She tried out a Xeruvian greeting, certain she was mangling the pronunciation. " Kii-la, nona-il ."

My soul greets yours . Or, more literally, my soul to your soul .

The female's face lit up and she rattled off a string of Xeruvian. Mia shook her head and pointed to her ear. No translator. Alara had explained that they had manufactured enough to fit most of the Xeruvians the humans would come into contact with during their first week. Two human women had already tried using translators geared toward Xeruvian physiology with mixed results. The Xeruvians hadn't wanted to attempt making translators specifically for humans until they had an actual human to work with, beyond the ones who'd already tried. The diplomat and one of her friends, who was still on Earth. Something about their different physiologies? Apparently, those two women had found the process of adapting to the translators rather sharpish.

The female in front of Mia laughed and tapped her ear, too. "My apologies. I forgot for a moment that you have no translator."

The sound came from the female's bracelet. Mia deduced that it must be connected to her translator, similar to the system Zoran and the other warlords had used aboard their spaceship. And still used now, she thought with some amusement. Otherwise, she wouldn't understand a word of what he was saying.

She stepped back, silently inviting the other woman in. "What was it you said?"

"I was correcting your grammar. Kii-la is correct, though your pronunciation

is...imprecise.”

Mia grinned. “To be fair, I’ve only heard it twice.”

“From one male to another?”

“Now that you mention it, yes.”

The Xeruvian bowed her head solemnly. “Then you did very well.”

“And the rest?”

“ Nona-il is said to a male of higher standing. For females of equal or higher standing, the correct form is novala .”

Mia’s mouth formed a silent oh . “What term did Alara use when she greeted the other females here?”

“ Novala-la ,” the female said promptly.

“Not kii-la, novala-la ?”

“No, simply novala-la . Colloquially, it means your soul is mine to protect .”

“ Novala-la ,” Mia repeated. “No wonder I didn’t recognize it. Leona is going to have a field day studying your language.”

“Who?”

The female’s mannerisms were so similar to Alara’s, Mia had to laugh. “A friend of mine. She and I were taken from the same building.”

“Taken . I see.”

Mia had no doubt that she did. And she didn't want to talk about it any more than she already had. “I know Alara introduced us earlier, but what's your name? There were so many people.”

“Ah. Of course.” The female pressed her palm to her chest. “I am Jyrak of Clan Kael. My brother Thorian developed the translator.”

“Was he one of the warlords that—” Abducted us , Mia thought, then quickly substituted something more polite. “Came to Earth?”

“Indeed! He found a mate as well. Elara Vega?”

“I know her. She's a climate scientist.”

“Thorian is thrilled to have met her. We all are. To know that the mating instinct has not diminished, that we have hope again.” The excitement faded from Jyrak's expression, and her gaze dropped. “Forgive me. I do not mean to offend.”

“Why would I be offended?”

“Because of the way you were... taken .”

Mia bit her lip, hiding a grimace. Had the Xeruvians gone about finding their mates in the best way possible? No. Did she blame them for doing it? She sighed. No. But she did wish they'd found a better way.

Mia took a chance on breaching propriety and touched her fingertips lightly to Jyrak's elbow. “I'm not offended. Elara is a good person. If she has a chance at a good life with Thorian—”

“She will! He is a good male, a strong warlord. Very intelligent.”

In other words, a good prospect. “Then how can I be offended?”

A low rumble sounded from the doorway. Mia glanced around and saw Zoran nearly filling the space. His gaze was steady on her, his eyes a bright glow. Butterflies danced in her stomach, causing all kinds of turmoil, and she sucked in a breath. Odds were, this male knew exactly what effect he had on her, and liked it.

She forced herself to relax against the desk as she greeted him. “Hey. Is it time to go?”

“Yes.”

When he said nothing more, she pulled a face at him. “Have you met Jyrak Kael? We’re going to be working together.”

Jyrak slid Mia a bemused glance, then bowed to Zoran. “ Kii-la, nona-il . It is a pleasure to greet you again.”

Mia grinned at Jyrak. Firsthand demonstrations for the win!

Zoran nodded shortly. “ Novala-la . How is Thorian? Has he returned to your jutji ?”

“He has, my lord. His mate will return here in a few days’ time to become integrated into our scientific community.”

That was news to Mia. She’d have to ask Jyrak about it later, when Zoran wasn’t being all me Tarzan, you Jane .

He and Jyrak chatted a few minutes more, polite small talk about her work here at the

science center and progress on rebuilding Clan Kael's jutji , which Mia interpreted as a territory of some kind.

When they were finished, Zoran turned to Mia and said, "Do you need more time here?"

"No, no. I've done what I can for one day." She held up the tablet and turned to Jyrak. "Can I take this home with me?"

"Indeed, milady. It is your personal interface."

"Thank you. See you tomorrow?"

Jyrak bowed. "I am at your convenience. Peace be unto you."

Mia glanced at Zoran, puzzled. Again, he tilted his head in a bare nod and said, as if he hadn't noticed her hesitation, "And unto you."

When Mia and Zoran were outside, away from prying ears, she said, "Milady?"

He responded without looking down at her. "Jyrak is of a lower rank than you."

"Oh."

She paused as they navigated out of the science center into deteriorating weather, under another overhang. Zoran ushered her through the driving rain into a personal vehicle parked only a few feet away. In the short distance between the two, rain soaked through her clothes and plastered her hair to her scalp. The temperature had dropped as well. Nighttime? The cloud cover was so dense, it was hard to tell what time of day it was. Not full night. Surely that would be darker.

She huddled in the seat beside Zoran as he started the vehicle and steered it away from the science center. Conversation. Maybe that would distract her from the cold until they reached shelter.

“In my country, we don’t stand on such ceremony,” she said. “Or mostly not. People are still polite. Yes, ma’am and all that. But we don’t have the same kind of caste system that you seem to have here. We’re more equal.”

Zoran waited until they were outside the town before responding. “We are not humans, mate, and you are no longer on Earth.”

The reprimand cut her to the bone. She turned her face to the darkened landscape scrolling by outside the window and lapsed into miserable silence.

Zoran stood inside his home, facing the security door covering the entrance. His claws dug into his palms. Mia had lost her natural exuberance on the way here, because of him. His intent had not been to maim when he’d corrected her. Perhaps he had not spoken gently enough. His own pride had been wounded by the conversation she’d shared with Thorian’s sister.

Was he not a good male, a strong warrior? Did Mia find his intelligence lacking in some way? Was that why she hesitated still, why she had not fully accepted him?

He could easily hear her under the storm raging outside and the shower she stood under in the bathing chamber, warming herself. Her energy had revived somewhat when he guided her into their home. It was a simple place, that of an unmated warrior, a one-room space that flowed from the entrance into a sunken living area before rising again toward the screened off sleeping space. Mia had taken one look and proclaimed it a studio apartment, though perhaps that had been an error in translation. This home was a freestanding residence, separated from others by a sluggish river and a broad swath of jungle.

Now he wondered if their home was adequate for her needs, if he had failed her somehow by not having built a larger space to accommodate whatever females did when they were at home.

He would not know. It had been many, many years since he'd resided with a female, and those had been his kin.

The water stopped. Fabric rustled, then soft footsteps padded out of the bathing area.

"Um, Zoran?" Mia said.

He forced himself to turn. She was peeking around one of the screens partitioning off the sleeping chamber. Her hair hung in damp waves past her shoulders, and she had wrapped a flimsy drying sheet around her breasts, baring the gentle curves of her shoulders.

Emotion twisted within him, and he crossed his arms over his chest to hold himself there, even as memory assaulted him. Of his hands on her skin, of the soft, breathy hitches she made when he cleaned her feminine folds. Unbidden, his cock hardened beneath his breeches. He clicked his teeth together, growling at the unwanted intrusion.

Would. Not. Touch.

He tried so very hard to gentle his voice, yet did it snarl and snap when he responded. "Yes, mate?"

Her expression fell, and she sighed. "I don't have any clean clothes. Do you have something I can wear? Just until I can buy some more."

"Choose from among my clothing."

“Oh. Ok. Thanks.”

“You will purchase more on the morrow.”

“Do the local merchants take American money?” A short laugh fluttered out of her. “I mean, how does that even work?”

His control broke so suddenly, he did not realize he had moved until he stood before her, towering over her smaller form. Pressing his body into hers, herding her backward until she bumped against the raised sleeping platform, her eyes wide and uncertain as she dropped onto it.

Carefully, slowly, so that she would see the predator shining in his eyes and know him for what he was, he leaned forward and braced his fists against the bed, one on either side of her luscious hips. From this distance, he could bathe in her scent, drawing it deep into his lungs until it coated him inside and out. Sweet, fresh, feminine. He wanted to bury his face in her throat, nip her skin with his fangs, lick her until she writhed with pleasure and begged him to take her again and again and again.

“I will provide for you,” he growled. “Mate .”

Her gaze had dropped to his mouth and seemed to have stuck there. She nibbled at her lower lip with her teeth and a soft oh left her on a rush of air. Her arousal spiked sharply, spurring his own to the point of pain, and he wanted, so badly, to push her down, to cover her body with his own, to show her, slowly and in great detail, exactly how a warrior provided for his beloved mate.

But she was not ready. Had she not said so herself?

And he would not push.

Before he could regain his control and withdraw, she touched a fingertip to his lower lip. “You have the most amazing mouth.”

He snarled. Now she had the temerity to caress him, with his strength on full display above her?

The smile she gave him held full knowledge of the things that simple touch did to him, how it had branded him as thoroughly as the mating bond they shared. “Let me get dressed and then maybe we can find something to eat.”

She placed one palm against his chest and pushed gently until he retreated, helpless before her, then shooed him off. He turned as he crossed the meager threshold provided by the partitions, just in time to catch the flash of a bare calf before she disappeared from view.

And shuddered under the aching remembrance of her touch.

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Zoran left his mate's bed before she woke, reluctantly disentangling himself from her touch. In her sleep, she had sought comfort from him, and he had not been able to deny her. Mia was his mate, he thought fiercely. Why should he not touch her, soothe her?

Pleasure her.

Shame followed so closely behind that thought, he flinched. She must consciously accept his touch as easily as she did when sleeping.

Yet last night, she had touched him of her own free will.

Even hours later, the imprint of her fingertip on his lip burned. What did that touch mean? Could she be bending to her own desires?

He slipped away without disturbing her slumber, padding quietly onto the balcony overlooking the town below. The sun had not yet shown itself, though its first light had touched the horizon, a liminal glow rending the night in two. With the ease of long practice, he moved into the first Ky'Lota form, disciplining his mind and body in the ancient soul dance anchored firmly in the distant past.

His focus remained elusive for entirely too long, aware as he was of his mate resting peacefully at his back. He drew in a long breath, held it for a moment, flowed into the second form on the exhale. Inhale. Exhale. The tension in his muscles released on another long breath, allowing him to move seamlessly into the next form, and he felt the first pulse of his kii, his soul, surfacing into the dance.

Mind, body, soul, joining as one, bringing harmony to the conflict raging within him.

Mia was his mate.

Fate-given to him alone.

His to cherish.

His to protect, even from himself.

Mia .

She flowed into his soul as easily as the wind slipping through the trees, as eternal as the stars, inextricably woven into the fabric of his being.

By the time the sun crested the horizon, a light sweat coated his skin. He came to rest in the final form, kneeling before the coming day, his head bowed in gratitude for the Fates' guidance.

Fabric whispered behind him, and Mia murmured, "Zoran?"

He turned to her without thought and found himself beside the bed, staring down at her slumbering form. Her hair had dried into ringlets overnight and now covered her face. Careful not to wake her, he slipped a clawed finger beneath the loose strands and swept them away from her face. His heart clenched tightly in his chest. So beautiful. So tempting.

Certainty settled into his soul, guiding him toward the correct path as the Fates had guided him to her. He must unearth this chocolate for his mate, and a comb. Would she allow him to brush the tangles out of her hair, to run his fingers through the silken strands?

Would she do the same for him?

Perhaps these humans had no such customs. If so, he must teach her to love him as he suspected he was coming to love her, each moment a small gift ever to be treasured.

Mia woke alone in Zoran's bed. Sunlight and a light breeze filtered through the protective field into the outer wall's open arch, and the faint buzz of vehicles and whatever life lived in the jungle added a happy cadence to the day. The storm must've dissipated in the night, after she'd fallen, exhausted, into sleep.

She smiled and stretched, starfishing in the middle of the bed. After her shower last night, she'd scrounged through Zoran's clothes and borrowed a sleeveless tunic. Throughout their simple supper—Xeruvian food for him, human food for her—she'd tried drawing him into conversation, telling him about her day, asking about his. His replies had been short and to the point, and that hurt her as much as his earlier cutting remark had. Gone was the Zoran who'd wrapped himself around her and teased her about rutting and mating. The male that had taken his place was withdrawn and borderline rude.

Still, she found hope in the unlikeliest of places. He'd brought her into his home, when he could've dumped her at the compound where the unmated humans would live. He'd introduced her to his mother. That was a plus. And he wanted her as much as he ever had.

A shiver shuddered through her as the memory of him stalking her around the bedroom replayed in her mind. When he'd pinned her to the bed, all glowering threats and adorable snarls, she'd nearly melted on the spot. Mercy, was that man sexy! She'd wanted to boop him on the nose, which might've gotten her fingers nipped.

Mmm. Zoran nipping at her skin? Yes, please!

She'd settled for a single touch, one light fingertip against his lower lip. The look he'd given her, startled and disbelieving and outrageously sexy, had warmed her to her core, easing some of the pain of his withdrawal.

Several of the women were bitter or fearful over being taken from their lives on Earth, some, like Kira, with due cause. Mia couldn't say that she wasn't, to some degree. She simply refused to wallow in either emotion. Better to make the most of her time on Zephyria.

And since she'd bound herself to her sexy alien warlord, however inadvertently, she intended to make the most of that, too. Zoran wanted to withdraw?

Ha. Let him try!

A chiming melody rang through the apartment. Mia glanced at the open wall and the balcony beyond, found it empty, and heaved a sigh of relief. She kept expecting a giant, woman-eating raptor to creep into the bedroom. Or worse, that lithe white animal she'd spotted slinking through the jungle.

She shuddered again and rolled out of bed. Maybe Zoran would compromise by installing an actual door in the wall rather than relying solely on Xeruvian forcefield technology.

The chiming came again, and Mia realized it was a doorbell. Laughing, she rushed into the apartment's living area and swung the door wide. Jyrak stood on the other side, dressed in proper Xeruvian fashion: a colorfully embroidered calf-length robe fastened over a sleeveless tunic, flowing pants, and sandals. Her hands were tucked behind her back, and she cocked her head quizzically at Mia.

“ Kii-la, novala ,” Jyrak said.

Mia grabbed her elbow and prodded her inside. “Never mind that. I need your help.”

Jyrak’s startled look shot embarrassed heat straight to Mia’s cheeks.

“Sorry! Hello, how are you, thanks for coming by,” Mia said all in a rush, then waved at the tunic she wore. “I just remembered that I don’t have any clothes to wear.”

“Your warlord has not provided any for you?” Jyrak clucked her tongue. “That is not like Lord Zoran.”

“No, no. There was no time.” Mia blew out a breath and shoved her hands through her tangled hair. “Let me start over. We were taken from our workplace.”

“This I understand.”

“Yes, so, we were wearing work clothes. And that’s what I have with me. A skirt, a blouse, heels, my lab coat, and a single set of underclothes.” She glanced down at Zoran’s tunic and grimaced. “And this, I suppose. Everything happened so fast, I don’t think Zoran and the others realized that we’d need more clothes than what we had on.”

“Ah. Males have little need for clothing.” Jyrak’s upper lip curled in a clear expression of distaste. “If needs be, they will wander around in the same breeches for days or simply go without.”

Mia laughed. “Yes! Human men are the same way sometimes. Alara took me on a quick tour of the market, but I wasn’t focused on finding clothes.”

“Then we shall remedy that matter this morning.”

“But not like this. Oh, wait! I forgot about the robe Zoran gave me. Where is that?”

Geez, I had it on yesterday...”

She rushed back to the bedroom and found her robe hanging in the set-in closet alongside Zoran’s clothes. Her heart stuttered in her chest. He’d done that, making a place for her among his own things in the spartan apartment that was now their home. Surely that counted for something.

Jyrak’s steps were light on the bare floor behind her. “Is this the same shinsek’uk you wore when we first met?”

“I’m afraid so. Zoran gave it to me after—” Think positive , Mia reminded herself. “It was his first gift to me.”

“And a dear one. These are his colors. The colors of Clan Kerus.”

“Marking me.”

Jyrak gave her a startled look. “I suppose so.”

Mia held the deep red robe to her chest, noting again its length. She’d had to blouse it around her waist yesterday to keep it from dragging the ground.

“Human men do that, too,” she said. “Give women their old t-shirts to wear. Buy them lingerie. Hmm. Now that I think on it, women do the same thing, especially married women. Mated men tend to dress better than unmated ones. On Earth anyway.”

Jyrak hummed deep in her throat. “I think we have more in common than anyone realizes. Perhaps such things are universal. The need to claim the ones we love, to mark them as belonging.”

Zoran's words popped into her head. We are not humans, mate, and you are no longer on Earth.

Mia bit her lip against a wince. "Maybe."

Jyrak's eyes narrowed on the robe. "Tell me. How do you feel about shopping?"

Mia laughed, utterly delighted that Jyrak had sought her out.

Speaking of.

"If you don't mind my asking," Mia said, "why did you drop by?"

"Mother Alara asked me to act as your guide, should you need one."

"Oh, I definitely do. There's so much I don't know. Where to find human food, how to get back to the science center, what research I'm going to focus on while I'm here." The weight of those unknowns pressed down on her, stealing her breath for one raw, vivid moment, and she added, somewhat desperately, "I don't even know how to pay for my own clothing."

Jyrak tentatively touched her fingers to Mia's elbow. "Milady—"

"None of that!" Mia exclaimed sharply.

"Mia," Jyrak corrected, apparently unoffended. "All will be as it should. Let that certainty comfort you as it does my people."

"All will be as it should." Just saying it eased some of the unaccustomed anxiety. "Thank you. I guess I needed that."

“As we all do at times. We shall break our fast, then endeavor to empty Lord Zoran’s treasure store. Our merchants will be most grateful for your generosity on this glorious day!”

Mia laughed so hard, she cried, then had to explain the difference between happy tears and sad tears, which led to Jyrak trying to laugh and cry at the same time. The episode left them both giggling.

And that, Mia thought as she quickly detangled her hair and dressed, was exactly how a good day started.

They bounced between a custom clothes designer and other merchants. Jyrak had no problem spending Zoran’s money in the form of credit granted by the merchants, but Mia was always mindful of the costs of her new wardrobe. It’s necessary , she reminded herself repeatedly as Jyrak enthusiastically whisked her through fittings of one sort or another. Still, by the time they were finished, Mia winced at the number of packages she’d accumulated. Not enough clothes to last a full week, but enough to put a dent in Zoran’s treasure store .

After dropping the packages off at Zoran’s apartment, they walked to the science center along a wide pathway winding alongside the road. There, Mia found Leona, Kira, and many of the other human women hard at work, and nearly cried when she saw them all.

As soon as she could, she ushered her two besties into her office and closed the door on the rest of the crowd. “I thought we wouldn’t see each other for a while!”

Leona perched against the desk, looking stunning in traditional Xeruvian garb. “I put my foot down on that. We were dragged here against our will. If these warlords want us to acclimate, we need to keep in touch with our friends and family.”

Kira had settled into the room's lone chair, her feet curled onto the seat under a pale-yellow Xeruvian robe, the ubiquitous shinsek'uk . "And there's our research. For now, those of us whose mates live nearby are being allowed to work here."

Leona slid a sly look at her. "Allowed? I insisted."

"Not every woman can bend a man to her bidding," Kira muttered. "It's likely I'll only be here a few days a month. There's an observatory to the north. I'd like to spend some time there."

"Then tell your mate you want to," Mia said.

Kira flinched. "I haven't agreed to that."

"Kira, hon." Leona's lips thinned, and she shook her head. "The important thing is that we won't be separated. If we want to spend time together, we can. No one's going to stop us unless something dire happens."

Mia narrowed her eyes at her friend. "How do you know?"

"I asked."

Kira snorted, making Mia laugh.

"So tell me," Leona said, that sly look touching her smile. "Have you bumped uglies with your big, bad warlord yet?"

Color flooded Mia's cheeks and she sputtered. "What? No! He barely touches me."

"Makes you wonder what he's up to, doesn't it?"

Kira shot Leona an exasperated look. “Stop teasing her. We’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

“Ah, yes. The dissent.”

Mia glanced between them. “What are you talking about?”

“You’ll find out,” Leona replied. “In fact, let’s get it over with so we can get down to work.”

She stood abruptly and left the office.

Mia glanced at Kira. “What’s going on?”

“This is something you need to see for yourself.”

They trailed after Leona, who had breezed partway into the central open workspace and stopped with both hands planted on her hips. “Listen up, people. Who’s brave enough to talk shit about humans to my face?”

Mia sucked in a breath the wrong way and nearly choked on it. “Oh, my God. That is not the way to handle this,” she muttered.

“You know Leona,” Kira whispered. “Bull in a china shop.”

“Only when she has to be.”

Every Xeruvian in the place had frozen, their eyes turned on the three humans. Jyrak stood to one side, her arms crossed over her chest, next to a male Mia vaguely remembered meeting the day before. The other Xeruvian women had clustered together in little clumps, two here, three there, while the remaining men were scattered around the room among the human women who’d dropped by that day. Mia

studied them all carefully, her heart sinking. So many of the people she'd interacted with had been kind, if not openly welcoming. Her gaze flicked to Jyrak again. The Xeruvian was staring dispassionately at a cluster of three females standing at a workboard, their expressions ranging from sullen to catty.

God, she hated workplace politics.

One of those women stepped forward, her lips twitching into a humorless smile. "Do you think you can best one of us, human?"

Leona bared her teeth in an equally vicious smile. "Why don't you come over here and find out?"

Kira breathed out what could've been a curse or a prayer. "We're going to get dragged into this."

"No, we're not," Mia said fiercely. She stepped forward, channeled her inner Zoran, and glared at the Xeruvian. "What's your name, female?"

The Xeruvian raked her gaze up and down Mia's body and sneered. "What business is it of yours?"

"Answer your lady," Jyrak said, her voice so cold, it could cut steel.

"She is not my lady," the Xeruvian said. "I refuse to acknowledge this usurper as such."

"Then you will no longer be welcome here," Alara said.

Mia's gaze whipped to the entrance. Zoran's mother filled the doorway, her green eyes hard as emeralds.

“Each of you is here by the grace of my son,” Alara continued, her gaze piercing each Xeruvian in turn. “And by extension, the sufferance of his mate. You will accord her the respect befitting her status.”

Mia waited for an or else and got a boat load of silence.

Most of the Xeruvians watched the interplay as Jyrak did, dispassionately. A few, mostly women, had anger in their eyes. It didn’t mean anything. The anger could come from anywhere; the dispassion could conceal distrust or even hatred.

But Mia silently marked those faces that held the most emotion, knowing they’d be the likeliest sources of trouble.

She braced herself against dismay. Not once had she considered that she might not be welcome here. After all the traveling she’d done with her parents, and all the people they’d met, she should’ve known better. No one was universally liked. Not everyone welcomed outsiders, even those who brought much needed aid.

If humanity and Xeruvians shared a commonality, she wished it had been anything other than this.

Alara’s gaze had fallen on her. Waiting, Mia thought, for a response. She shook her head mutely. What could she say? She was a scientist, not a leader. These people were foolish to look to her when she couldn’t even clothe or feed herself here without help.

Leona answered for her. “Now that that’s settled, we poor humans would like to pair off with our counterparts among you. It’s in everyone’s best interests to cooperate. Anyone who feels put upon can hit the road.”

Mia shot her an exasperated glance. Kira merely shrugged. Oh, well. At least no one

was openly rebelling. Not a single Xeruvian walked away.

Mia took a fortifying breath and squared her shoulders. If she'd learned anything from Zoran, it was that Xeruvians valued strength. She might not be the strongest person physically—even for a human, she was puny—but there were other kinds of strength, and other ways to wield it.

“You, there,” she said, pointing to the Xeruvian who'd tried to draw her into a challenge. “What's your name? What do you do here?”

The Xeruvian said, stiffly, “Raelka Korlis. I am attached to the biology labs.”

Isabella Rossi shifted where she stood, catching Mia's gaze. The evolutionary biologist was classically beautiful with copper colored hair and kind eyes, the kind of woman who attracted men wherever she went, and remained quietly humble. “She's under me, then.”

Mia nodded sharply, then turned her attention back to Raelka. “If you step even a single toe out of line, I will remove you from your position.”

Raelka's eyes widened in enraged horror. “You cannot do such.”

“Try me,” Mia gritted out. “If anyone needs me, I'll be in my office.”

She pivoted sharply and stalked away, her earlier good mood shattered.

Office politics. Who needed 'em anyway?

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Zoran spent his day sorting through and divvying up supplies for the humans with help from the unmated warriors who had accompanied him to Earth. Most of those supplies would be stored at the compound with the unmated females, where they could be easily accessed by any in need. Some would go with the females who had found mates, to keep in their homes. Others would be set aside as mating gifts.

Like the chocolate. Zoran was astounded by the quantity and variety of sweets included in the females' necessary supplies. He discovered chocolate bars, chocolate truffles, chocolate coated candies, and chocolate morsels which, if his scans translated correctly, were used in the baking of special cookies.

Did human females truly consume this many sweet treats from day to day?

Other items baffled him completely. In addition to food, toiletries, and an overly large supply of chocolate, he found paper books, a wide range of technological devices and power cords, an entire crate of seed kernels whose purpose he could not fathom, and several boxes labeled DVDs .

He lifted a silent prayer to the Fates that little clothing had been included, undergarments only. More would have overflowed his ship to the point of rendering it incapable of flight. As it was, the supplies they'd gathered had nearly filled his holds, save the one in which the females had been held during their short journey here, where part of their food and water had been stored.

Zoran was unpacking the technological devices when Aklan of Clan Phyrz approached. The other warlord stood eye to eye with him, an imposing example of Xeruvian strength and cunning. He bore as well the contented air of a well-mated

male, one reeking of the harmony that had thus far eluded Zoran in his own mating.

He greeted Aklan, one warrior to another. “I thought you had taken your mate to visit your jutji .”

Aklan’s expression melted into a rare smile. “Sonja wished to touch base with the other females before our departure.”

Zoran returned the smile. “Human females have a vivid way of expressing themselves.”

“Indeed. An entirely new way of viewing their environment. We have much to learn from them.”

“Let us hope we can give as much in return.”

“I believe we will. Already Sonja has pointed out several ways in which Xeruvian technology and knowledge could expand human capabilities. But first, we must find a way to treat with them, to parlay.”

Zoran grunted. None of the warlords had been satisfied with the human response to their trade requests. Perhaps Aklan and his mate could swing human sentiment to their favor, perhaps not. Either way, Xeruvians would find a way to fulfill their own needs.

But that was no longer his job, Zoran mused. He would remain here, with his mate, working to integrate her and her companions into Xeruvian society. Fighting to change the minds of those who had originally opposed interbreeding with another species.

His grimace must have registered in his expression, for Aklan’s own gaze grew

shrewd.

“I heard of your encounter with Kaelen of Clan Drexus,” Aklan said.

“He was the staunchest opponent to contacting the humans and now wishes to have first choice of the females.”

“He has a point.” At Zoran’s growl, Aklan held up a placating hand. “We must all work together. Has this not been your rallying cry?”

“Using my own words against me?”

“Would you expect anything less from a diplomat?”

Zoran clicked his teeth together in raw humor. “I should expect exactly that.”

“Perhaps opening contact with the females to your opponents would mend the rift between them and you.”

“You speak of bribery and manipulation.”

“Are these not the tools of a warlord bent on peace?”

“I prefer the sword.”

“The sword is but one tool, my friend. The human females are another.”

Zoran’s expression snapped into a scowl. “They are not cattle, to be traded and sold. I will not whore them out.”

“I implied nothing of the sort,” Aklan replied calmly. “Had you not already planned

on introducing them to other warriors?" At Zoran's short nod, Aklan continued. "Then why not expand the selection to include all warlords? Lord Kaelen's status merits his inclusion. If you allow too many lower-ranked males the privilege of contact with the humans, you risk insulting him. You and I both know how poorly he will react if he thinks he is being deliberately excluded."

"He knows he is being deliberately excluded," Zoran growled.

Aklan sighed heavily. "I cannot counsel you on the way you interact with your rivals."

"Is that not exactly what you dare now?"

The other warlord's mouth twitched with humor. "I merely illuminate the benefits of a powerful tool. Only you can decide how to use it."

Zoran dropped his stare to the human technology he had unearthed among the supplies. Aklan's words deserved due consideration, if not on their merit alone, then certainly because of the trust the other male had earned long ago. No matter what angle he considered, however, Zoran encountered a stubborn resistance within himself at the very thought of allowing a male such as Kaelen Drexus to treat with the females.

Yet must he find a way to mend the rift between Kerus and Drexus if he had any hope of saving his people.

Slowly, he said, "I shall consider your words."

Aklan bowed his head once in formal acknowledgement of that small concession. "That is all I can expect."

“Does your mate need any of these supplies?”

“We return to Earth on the morrow.”

“So soon? She does not wish to acquaint herself with your people?”

“We both feel a pressing need to mend the rift dividing Earth and Zephyria. And,” Aklan continued, amusement glinting from his eyes, “she has hand selected additional human females to approach. If all goes well, we hope to ferry a like number here in a few weeks, along with additional supplies.”

Zoran nodded decisively. “Until we can determine whether they can digest our food, our humans will need more of their own. Your mate has access to the manifest. Perhaps she can devise another list of needed goods based off that and her own experience.”

“I shall present her with that request on your behalf.” A pause. “And your own mate? Would she not wish to have a say?”

Zoran eyed the boxes scattered around him. “Indeed. Some of these items... What exactly is a DVD? I have yet to figure their value.”

Aklan shrugged. “Females.”

That one word summed up Zoran’s bafflement completely.

The afternoon passed quickly into evening. After Alara left, Mia spent her time studying Xeruvian culture, in between fielding questions from her fellow abductees. Somehow, she had fallen into the role of coordinator, a position to which she had never aspired.

“Lady Kerus,” she grumped. “What will they do next, deify me?”

A polite cough interrupted her. Mia glanced up and saw Emma Mitchell standing in the open doorway. Emma was, like many of the abducted women, roughly Mia’s age. She stood slightly shorter than Mia with a willowy build, and while Emma wasn’t conventionally pretty, her features were arresting, especially when she smiled.

“Is this a bad time?” Emma said.

“No, of course not. Sorry. I was just wondering if you knew my mother. She used to be with the CDC before she and my father shifted into aid work.”

Emma had cut her teeth on fieldwork with the CDC before landing a research position with the CAH. She tilted her head now, her eyes narrowed. “I don’t recall meeting her. Does she still publish?”

“Not in a while.”

Mia rattled off the title of her mother’s last paper, published half a decade before, on the subject of post-epidemic immunity in a rural African village that had been savaged by viral hemorrhagic fever. Admittedly, not a recent publication. Mia had been working on her doctorate at the time and hadn’t had time to read the paper when it was published.

“I remember that one,” Emma said. “Quite interesting. It may be pertinent here.”

“I think any cross knowledge will be useful. That’s what I’m doing now, trying to figure out how to integrate human and Xeruvian research.”

“Could we somehow combine JSTOR with their database?”

“Excellent idea.” Mia automatically reached for a pen and notepad, then glared at her desk. “I really need to find some paper.”

“Ask Jyrak. She’s been an amazing resource. If her specialty was closer to mine, I’d totally steal her from you.”

Mia shook her finger in mock admonishment. “Get your own Xeruvian to pester.”

A shadow crossed Emma’s face.

“What?” Mia said.

Emma’s mouth worked for a brief moment, then she said, “You have to know we have questions.”

“About mating?”

“And other things.” Emma glanced away, her fingers pulling at the seam of her lab coat. “How did you know Zoran was the one?”

“I didn’t,” Mia admitted. “He chose me. Why? Has someone approached you?”

“Something like that.”

“One of the ones who took us?”

Emma shook her head.

Tentatively, Mia said, “Is he your mate?”

“I don’t—” Emma shook her head and overtly shifted her expression to one of polite

professionalism. “That’s not why I dropped by. I’ve been thinking about our food supplies. The plants and pollen we’ve undoubtedly exposed ourselves to. The diseases.”

Alarm rippled through Mia as the implications sank in. “Oh, hell.”

“Precisely. No one’s shown an adverse reaction so far, but I’d like to do allergen tests as soon as possible, particularly for Xeruvian foodstuffs so we don’t have to rely on irregular shipments from home.”

“You are just chock full of ideas. And no,” she added fiercely, “you do not have to ask my permission to do that.”

Emma’s eyebrows rose. “I wasn’t asking permission. More like trying to coordinate efforts so there’s less overlap.”

“And I’m the de facto coordinator.” Suddenly, Mia understood why Zoran snarled all the time. “You know, I didn’t ask for this. I’m not even a particularly good leader.”

“I’m afraid we’re all wearing more than one hat at the moment. Speaking of, I’d love to have an actual course on Xeruvian history. In English with textbooks, if possible. And an English keyboard interface for my tablet.”

Mia reached for paper and pen again to make a note of those requests, and cursed under her breath at the lack of note keeping material. “Would you do me a huge favor? No, never mind. I’ll get her myself, just to keep you from getting any more ideas.”

Emma grinned. “Jyrak?”

“Mine,” Mia snarled in a creditable imitation of Zoran’s deeper growl.

Emma laughed, delighted. “Assimilating already.”

“If that’s what I have to do to keep Jyrak on my side, absolutely.”

When Emma left, Mia turned to her viewscreen wall to dedicate one to textbooks, became absorbed in the Xeruvian database, and forgot all about tracking down Jyrak. Another visitor interrupted her half an hour later, startling her out of a side quest on an extinct culture.

“Var’Kol?” someone said.

Mia whirled around, her eyes wide. A woman stood in the doorway holding a sheaf of paper. She was sharply put together in a way that screamed understated class. Even wearing Xeruvian clothing, it was clear this woman knew how to mingle. She was gorgeous, too, from the top of her auburn hair to the tips of her toes. Had the warlords deliberately selected for beauty, or was that a coincidence?

Mia shook off her thoughts and held out her hand, offering a welcoming smile. “Sorry. I was woolgathering. You must be Sonja Mathis.”

Sonja returned Mia’s smile with one of her own. “Guilty as charged. I’m sorry we didn’t run into each other on the ship.”

“Don’t worry about it. I had my hands full, too.”

“Literally?”

Mia blushed. “Oh, my God. No!”

Sonja laughed. “I’ve got my own warlord. I know how they are.”

Mia just bet she did. “Can I help you with something?”

“You say that like it’s rote. Fielding a lot of questions?”

“More than I’m comfortable handling. Of this kind anyway.” Mia pulled a rueful face. “Administrative things. I’m a lab rat, not a suit. And if you say we all have to wear a lot of hats right now, I may have to hit you. You won’t believe how many people have told me that today.”

Sonja held her hands up, amusement twinkling in her hazel eyes. “I come in peace bearing gifts.”

Mia finally got a good look at the paper Sonja was holding. “You brought me paper? Does it come with a pen?”

“Got those, too. Apparently they don’t bind blank paper into notebooks here or I would’ve brought you a few. Binding happens after the fact, during a compiling process.”

“Like bookbinding?”

“Yes and no. I got a lecture about it from Jyrak. You should get her to explain.”

“I will. She’s apparently become my assistant. It seems like a waste of talent.”

“Then you should see if you can find someone familiar with administrative tasks to free her up for lab work.”

Mia hesitated. “It’s not that I haven’t considered it. I just don’t know what the funding situation is.”

“Your mate will know,” Sonja said easily. She set the off-white paper on the corner of Mia’s desk and turned back to the viewscreens, studying each one in turn, then gestured toward the one displaying an encyclopedic entry for the Var’Kol. “What’s this?”

“An extinct civilization. They used to coexist with the Xeruvians on the fourth planet in this system.”

“Used to?”

“War.”

“Damn,” Sonja murmured. “Wiped them out completely?”

“As far as I can tell. Fairly recently, too, if I’m reading this correctly. Maybe within the past fifty to one hundred years?”

“I thought you were a botanist of some kind.”

“Crop scientist,” Mia corrected promptly. “This is background. The way people move and act and do affects their environment. And not to be rude, but you still haven’t told me why you stopped by. Unless you’re really just dying to know the tediously boring details of my day.”

Sonja laughed, unoffended. “Trust me, I understand. My days used to be filled with exactly that kind of tedium. That’s why I’m here, in a way. We’re going back to Earth.”

Mia’s heart jumped. Very carefully, she said, “We?”

“My mate and I. We’re the official liaisons between humans and Xeruvians.”

“Oh.”

“Is that disappointment I see?”

Mia shook her head. “No. I’m committed to my mate.”

Sonja’s eyes widened. “You’ve bonded with him?”

“Not yet, I don’t think. Well, sort of.” Mia pointed to the mating mark, which she’d finally gotten up the nerve to study the night before. It was a definite bite mark. She hadn’t had the courage to see if the mark she’d bitten into Zoran was still visible. “We made a good start.”

“But you haven’t followed through.”

“No.”

Sonja hesitated for a moment, her expression concerned. “Aklan, my mate, told me that warriors can be dangerous when the instinct rouses, until they’re fully mated. Yours is treating you ok, isn’t he?”

“He’s fine. A bit grumpy. We haven’t done the deed yet.”

“I see.”

“So,” Mia said brightly, ignoring her own blush. “You’re here about details?”

“Sorry. We do keep getting sidetracked.” Sonja waved a hand at the wall. “Do you have any specific requests for aid? Besides an administrative assistant. We’re going to try to recruit more women to join us here.”

“Oh. That sounds...awesome, actually. But I don’t have the foggiest clue what gaps we have here. I don’t even know what the Xeruvians’ specialties are.”

“When you figure it out, let me know. We’ll prioritize those fields. Whatever you need.”

“Well, just off the top of my head, I think we’re going to need a teacher. Someone who can write a textbook or pull together formal courses on Xeruvian history and their sciences at the very least.”

Sonja pulled a tablet out of her robe. “That would take an entire department.”

“Or more. Undoubtedly, we’ll do some of that work here. Some of it can probably be fielded directly from Earth, too. I imagine any number of people would jump at the opportunity to study another culture from the inside out, even if they can’t travel to Zephyria.”

“You’d imagine right. We have to jump the hurdle of letting the entire populace know first. When we left, Xeruvians were on a highly restricted need to know status.”

Mia acknowledged that with a thoughtful hum and finally decided she already had enough monkeys in her circus to worry about. “You should talk to the other women, see if they have any ideas.”

“I will.” Sonja slipped the tablet back into her robe, then tapped a fingertip to the paper. “Would you like to send a message home?”

Mia nearly flung her arms around the other woman’s neck. “Yes! Absolutely. I left a long-term research project hanging, and my parents are probably worried sick.”

“Don’t worry. Tracking down family is at the top of our list.”

“I think I love you.”

Sonja’s expression crinkled into a rueful smile. “Just remember that when you’re stuck coordinating all these projects with Earth.”

“Oh, my God,” Mia groaned. “You had to remind me.”

Jyrak came in a few minutes after Sonja left. “The evening meal hour approaches. Would you like for me to arrange a meal for you?”

Mia set aside the letter she’d been writing and stood. “No, I think I’m done for the day. Unless you’re hungry?”

“Normally, my daughter and I take the evening meal together, but I am at your service for as long as you need me.”

“Nonsense. You need to maintain a routine with her.” Goodness knew those routines had anchored Mia’s own family during her youth. “How old is she?”

“But a toddler.” Jyrak tapped the side of her hand against her thigh roughly halfway down. “This tall already. She will be like her father, a great warrior of immense height and strength.”

“I like the sound of that. Being short has definite drawbacks. Where’s your mate? Is he from this jutji ?”

Jyrak’s expression flickered. “My mate died in the earthquakes some years ago.”

“Oh, Jyrak,” Mia said, horrified at her lack of tact. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“How could you in such a short time?” Jyrak rolled her shoulders in a not-quite-

human shrug. “Rejala, my daughter, she escaped the burning fever. The one that claimed my fertility.”

Mia’s heart twisted at the sorrow underlying Jyrak’s words. “Is there any hope that the infertility can be reversed?”

“None that we have found. I pray to the Fates every morning and evening that my daughter was spared this curse.”

“I hope she was.” But now Mia understood some of the looks the humans had been getting. Zoran had told her what happened. It hadn’t seemed real until she met the people who’d been affected. No wonder Raelka and some of the other females had been so abrasive.

“Come,” Jyrak said. “The sun grows dim. I shall accompany you home.”

“I can walk myself. It’s not that far.”

“No, Mia. Your mate has tasked me with protecting you in his absence. I cannot allow you to skirt the jungle unaccompanied, not until you learn to defend yourself properly.”

“Not on Earth,” Mia murmured.

And even on Earth, it wasn’t always wise to run around alone in an unfamiliar locality, something she’d learned at a very young age. Living in California had made her soft. The worst things she had to deal with back home were traffic and office politics. Just because the road leading from Zoran’s apartment to the science center was lined with walking paths didn’t mean it was safe to walk alone.

“Precisely,” Jyrak said flatly. “I do not mean to frighten you, but even here predators

occasionally wander into settlements.”

The memory of a starkly white creature slinking through the forest flashed into Mia’s mind and she shuddered. “Ok. No more arguments from me.”

Mia slipped her tablet into her robe’s pocket and closed up her office. Several people were still working, including a few humans. She waved to anyone who looked up as they left, then stepped into a clear, humid evening with Jyrak by her side.

As they walked, Mia prodded Jyrak into discussing her education and training. The more Jyrak talked, the more certain Mia became that she’d been right in her assessment: Jyrak’s talents were being wasted. Nothing for it, then. She’d have to find a proper assistant, preferably someone who wouldn’t mind helping her fellow humans, too.

She was searching for a way to approach Jyrak about hiring such a person when a flash of white caught her eye. Her skin broke out in goosebumps as a chill ran down her spine.

Jyrak turned toward the darkened jungle, her eyes intent on the shadowed foliage. “What is it?”

“I thought I saw—” Mia shook her head. Whatever she’d seen, if anything, it was gone now. “Nothing. Just an, I don’t know. On our way from the spaceport yesterday, I thought I saw an animal in the jungle.”

“There are many animals in the jungle, Mia.”

“I’m aware.” Mia shook her head again. “It’s probably nothing. I just thought it was odd that a pure white animal would—”

A dagger appeared in one of Jyrak's hands, and she grabbed Mia's elbow with the other. "You're certain it was white?"

"Positive."

"And you saw it here, now?"

"I saw a flash of white, yes."

Jyrak shoved Mia to the other side and turned them both toward the science center. "Do not run," she whispered. "Do not make any sudden movements."

Mia struggled to match Jyrak's longer steps, and finally settled on an irregular, rapid trot. "What is it?"

"In a moment."

The science center loomed ahead of them against the day's dying light. Laughter and singing drifted to them above the muted engines of conveyances rolling steadily along the causeways, not far from where they walked.

No sound came from the jungle.

Mia broke into a sweat that had nothing to do with their pace. The skin on her nape crawled, and she could nearly feel the gaze of a predator on her back. They weren't going to make it, she thought, then Jyrak was plowing through a crowd of people walking away from town, muttering to them in Xeruvian.

The people all turned around and headed back toward town, brushing past Jyrak and Mia without another word.

Jyrak pulled Mia into the safety of the science center a few moments later. Mia put her back to a solid rock wall and dropped into a crouch against it, panting, her gaze locked on the view showing beyond the transparent doors. Jyrak had pulled out her tablet and now spoke into it in fluid Xeruvian, her dagger held in one hand.

When her conversation concluded, she tucked her tablet away and squatted in front of Mia, her gaze steady and stern. “Tell me about the animal.”

“I don’t know anything,” Mia said, her voice shaky. “It was just a flash of white in the corner of my eye.”

“And that is all? What about yesterday, on your way from the spaceport?”

“An animal slinking along the jungle floor.” Mia shook her head under a wave of fatigue. “It was just an impression. I didn’t see much. What was it? Do you know?”

“Something impossible.” Jyrak placed her free hand over Mia’s and squeezed gently. “What do you know of our history?”

“Not much,” Mia admitted. “I haven’t been studying it long. We’re thinking of creating a series of learning modules on Xeruvian history as background for our research.”

“This is wise. Our history is long and fraught.”

“Isn’t everyone’s?”

Jyrak nodded. “What do you know of the Var’Kol?”

Mia blinked at the other female. “The Var’Kol? Not much, really, just that they’re extinct and lived on another planet.”

“They were our enemies. It is—” Jyrak sighed. “There is no time for a complete lesson. Suffice it to say that we warred constantly. The reasons matter not, only that the Var’Kol had many weapons, including the vyirkolen .”

“The what?”

“A predator domesticated and bred for their viciousness.”

Mia swallowed a lump of fear and felt it settle uneasily in her stomach. “Let me guess. These predators were completely white.”

“Yes. They originally evolved in a land of ice and snow. During the last Var’Kolite war, they were set loose on Zephyria and given specific targets, sometimes a single individual, more often a family or village.”

“But they’re animals! How could they narrow down a target like that with any degree of accuracy?”

“They may have been animals, but they were also highly intelligent trackers. Once they caught the scent of their prey, they did not stop until they claimed it.”

Mia’s eyes widened. “You think one’s been sent after me?”

“I did not say that.”

“So what then?”

“We will know more once our warriors scour the jungle. Now we must get you safely home. I have sent for a conveyance.”

“And that’s it? We just...go home and wait?”

“That is it,” Jyrak agreed solemnly. “Your mate will ensure that if what you saw was a vyirkolen , it will not survive the night.”

Mia sat straight up. “Zoran! Oh, God.”

“He is a fierce warlord, Mia, one of the best fighters among us. Do not fear for your mate’s safety.”

“How can I not?” Mia forced herself upright, locking her knees until her legs steadied and held. “Maybe it was nothing.”

“Perhaps. But Mia, if you ever find yourself face to face with such a creature, remember: no sudden movements, no running. Climb, if you can, and be wary of their strength. Vyirkolen are good jumpers, their bite is fierce and deadly, but they cannot climb. Remember that.”

Mia nodded shakily. Sure, she’d remember that. Not that she intended to come face to face with a predator except the one who’d attached himself to her. She’d gladly sacrifice her highly anticipated daily walks between Zoran’s apartment and the science center if it meant keeping herself in one piece.

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A few days later, Zoran stepped into his home and secured the door behind himself. Wearily, he shrugged out of his robe and raked a hand through his hair, smoothing it behind and around his horns. He'd had parties out combing the surrounding jungle since the night Mia caught a glimpse of something. Parties comprised of his finest warriors, his best trackers. What she'd seen, he couldn't say, as they'd found no trace of the vicious predators that had once preyed upon his people. They'd wiped out the vyirkolen after eliminating the Var'Kol. Native predators with that coloring seldom strayed far from their natural habitats.

Was his mate seeing ghosts among the trees, or had something else caught her eye?

Mia glanced up at him and smiled. She was sitting on a cushion in the sunken area below the kitchen, a bright spot among the paper scattered around her. Her hair hung loose around her shoulders, gleaming richly, and he gritted his teeth against the urge to stalk across the room and bury his face in her throat.

She beckoned him forward. "Come sit with me."

"I have been in the jungle, mate."

"Want me to help you clean up?"

A growl worked its way out of his chest. Would that he could accept her innocent offer. "What are you working on?"

Her eyes glinted knowingly at him as she dropped her hand. "Several things, to be honest. I've got a list."

Her humor drew him forward as surely as a rope fastened firmly around his heart. He found himself yet again standing before her without having a conscious memory of moving. To distract himself from the heat kindling low in his gut, he squatted beside her and picked up one of the papers. It was a hand drawn sketch of a local tree, carefully labeled in her own language.

“We have these diagrams aplenty, Mia,” he chided gently.

“Labeled in Xeruvian,” she responded, seemingly unoffended. “Dissecting plants this way helps me learn. It fixes the information in my mind.”

“If you drew me, would it fix me in your mind?”

She laughed lightly and took the paper from him, setting it aside. “You’re already fixed in my mind. How was your day?”

“My day went well, thank you. And your own?”

“Busy, as usual. There’s a million things to do.” She leaned forward and brushed her fingertips along his jaw. “Are you sure you don’t want to sit with me for a while?”

And taint his mate with the sweat and dirt accumulated during his long day? “I need but a few moments, then I am happy to comply.”

“Good. I waited supper for you.”

He bit back a reprimand, clearly remembering how upset she had been when he suggested that she take the evening meal without him. “Families eat together,” she had stated, as fierce as any warrior he knew. That she considered him family had hit him so hard, his rebuttal had died on his lips.

Once he bathed and pulled on a fresh set of loose trousers, he padded barefoot back to her. She had put away her papers while he showered, pulled together their meal, and set it on the low table in the seating area.

He joined her there, sitting on a cushion beside her. They ate silently for a while, companionably, and he had to admit that she was right. Eating together was far better than the solitary meals he had endured before meeting her. It had been many years since something had drawn him home at night. Their food was different, but that was of no consequence. What mattered was this, sitting beside her, feeling her limbs brush his, eating a meal she had prepared for him with her own hands.

He had not yet provided a meal for her, a lack his mother would scold him over. Was it not his duty to see to his mate's wellbeing? Yet, he knew such could not always be helped and raised a silent prayer to the Fates that Earth bred such self-sufficient women as his mate.

But there were other ways to provide, and this he addressed now. "Are you satisfied with this studio apartment?"

She huffed at his carefully phrased question. "It's fine. Cozy. I love the view."

He hummed an assent. "It is not too small?"

"For us? No. Why?"

"You are my mate. Thus must I please you in all things."

"Are you teasing me?" She leaned in, caught the glimmer in his eyes, and laughed. "I like the apartment, Zoran. It's a little spartan, but it suits you."

He fixed his gaze on his meal, searching for the right words. "It should suit you as

well. If you should want to change anything, perhaps add color or the fripperies females enjoy, then you must feel free to do so, with my blessings.”

“What would you know about fripperies?”

“I have a mother and a sister. Had a sister.”

Her humor drained away and she set down her spoon. “Had?”

“Her life was claimed in the earthquakes. She was working in another jutji —” His throat closed, and he laid his own spoon aside. “She liked colorful things. Feminine things.”

Mia’s hand slid into his, small and warm and comforting. “You miss her.”

“Every day. My father, too.”

She sucked in a breath. “Oh, Zoran. I’m so sorry. Come here.”

Mia held out her arms, and he, in this unexpected sorrow, was helpless to resist her. He drew her against him, there on the cushions, and buried his face in her throat as he had wished to do earlier. She accepted him now, cradling him to her, her touch tender and thrilling and welcome.

They sat like that for a long time, while their meal grew cold and Zephyria’s small moons shone like bright jewels against the sky beyond their home. She stroked his hair, murmuring nonsensical things to him, and gradually, the sorrow and guilt loosened within his chest.

When he could draw himself away, he shifted his hold on her, pulling her across his lap with one arm supporting her back and a hand on her hip. Her eyes were brilliant

and calm, and in them he found a quiet understanding.

“You smell nice,” he said.

A quick smile flashed across her face. “I just washed my hair.”

“Your hair is beautiful.” He skimmed a hand up her side and fingered a strand, letting it slide against his palm over and over again. “Soft. Like midnight.”

She softened against him and pressed her palm flat against his bare chest. “Thank you for the chocolate. And the comb. And the clothes.”

A pleased growl rumbled through him. “The chocolate was good?”

“Chocolate is always good.”

Her hand skimmed down his chest and back up again, and he realized she was petting him, as if he were a wild animal she had caught and sought to tame. How right she was, he thought, inordinately pleased. She was his to claim. He was hers to tame.

“Were you serious about the fripperies? I’ve already spent so much on clothes.”

His upper lip curled in a faint snarl. “Woman, you have barely enough clothing to last a senna.”

“Senna?”

He held up four fingers to show her the duration.

“Four days?” she guessed.

“Yes, mate. And what little you bought is not nearly enough. You will have to work much harder to beggar me.”

Her grin flashed like lightning through him as she curled her hand around his nape and pressed a fleeting kiss to his mouth.

“More,” he growled.

“Come down here and maybe I’ll—oh!”

He caught the exclamation with his mouth, breathing it in as he settled his lips on hers. She relaxed against him, returning his kiss more eagerly than he could have hoped. Was she perhaps softening toward him, forgiving him for forcing the mark on her?

Though that had not been his intent, not entirely.

She scraped her fingernails lightly down his chest. He gentled their kiss and drew away reluctantly, pressing his forehead to hers so that their breaths might mingle a while longer.

“Zoran?”

“Yes, beloved?”

She sucked in a sharp breath, let it out slowly. “Can we spend more time together? I mean, we’ve both been so busy. You must have so many things on your plate, and I—”

He silenced her with a kiss. “Yes, mate. Anything you desire, you have but to ask.”

“Kiss me,” she whispered. “Like you never want to let me go.”

The request sent a tremor through his body. He groaned helplessly and shifted his head, lightly touching his lips to hers. Happy to oblige her simple, beautiful need.

The next morning, Mia woke in a cocoon of warmth. The day was bright. She could tell even without opening her eyes. A pleased smile touched her mouth, and she snuggled into the curve of Zoran’s body. It was the first time since they’d arrived on Zephyria that he hadn’t been gone when she woke up.

His hand slid over her hip, glancing along her waist and shoulder, igniting the most delicious heat wherever it landed, even through the thin tunic she wore. He’d kissed her senseless last night, thoroughly exploring her mouth while holding her hand in the most tender gesture of affection a man had ever given her. And then they’d gone to bed and cuddled into sleep, and it had been perfectly, incandescently beautiful. No pressure to rut, no snarling or growling.

Well, just a few sexy growls when she opened for him or accepted his touch or ventured to explore him the way he explored her. But she liked those growls. They made her feel special and naughty and his .

If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was courting her.

He stiffened behind her and whispered, “Be still, pjora-la .”

Her eyes opened reflexively. There, not a foot from her face, crouched a stocky winged animal no longer than her forearm. It shimmered an iridescent, metallic azure. Its wings were translucent black membranes flaring away from its back, but what caught her attention were the needle-like, blue-black teeth it bared at her.

Zoran’s hand snapped out and captured the creature’s head, sealing its jaws shut. The

thing writhed in his grasp, slashing wings and a prehensile tail in absolute fury. Zoran rolled across her still holding it, then walked casually through the wall's open archway onto the balcony, thrust the creature through the invisible field with an audible pop, and let it go. It plunged back at him, attacking swiftly. The field popped again, stinging the tiny creature, and it reared back, hissing angrily at Zoran.

He watched until it wheeled and flew away, and just as casually turned and slipped back into bed with her, pulling her against him with a startling abruptness. "Mia, be calm. You are safe."

Her gaze was locked on the spot where the creature had squatted. There were holes in the bedding. Not little holes. Holes big enough to poke her pinky through.

Claws , she thought, trembling. It must've been standing there for a while, working up the courage to attack, for its claws to have ripped the bedding that much.

A memory popped into her head. One of her mother's figurative war stories that happened before Mia was born, when her mom was still with the CDC. She'd been in Kenya working an outbreak of the Marburg virus. Somehow, a black mamba had found its way into the relief area. Mom had bent down to retrieve something she'd dropped and come face to face with it. Thankfully, the snake had been taken care of without anyone being struck.

Mia shivered. Mom had relayed the incident more than once, always in a casual, unflappable tone. How could she have spoken so calmly? It was like looking up and finding death watching you, counting the moments until he could claim your soul for his own.

Mia made an inarticulate strangled sound. "What was that?"

Zoran replied with a word that didn't match what came out of his wrist device.

“That,” she said, popping the final tee hard, “was not a dragon.”

“The name is unimportant. What matters is that I would never have allowed it to hurt you.”

“How did it get in?” She couldn’t quite tear her eyes from those holes. It had been so close, just inches away. Well within striking distance for an animal that size.

“Not-dragons are curious creatures, cunning in their own way. Occasionally, one wanders out of the deep jungle and stalks through the protective fields surrounding our open structures in search of prey.”

“I want doors,” she said flatly. “French doors with windows that let in the light and the view. Lockable doors I can seal shut at night because this is not Earth, and I don’t know what the dangers are, and you can’t guard me every hour of every day.”

He growled and, between one breath and the next, pushed her onto her back and covered her body with his own. His eyes glared a hot, bright green at her and he snapped his teeth just above her nose.

“Never,” he said, so distinctly she could clearly understand the Xeruvian phrase above the English translation, “will I allow any harm to befall you.”

“Never?” she repeated back in Xeruvian. “So you’re my shadow now?”

Another growl rumbled out of him. “I do not know whether to be pleased at your attempt to speak my language or irritated that you question the depths of my need to protect you.”

Some of the fear bled out of Mia. “It’s too pretty outside to argue.”

“What effect does the weather have on our discussion?”

“It’s something we say. Human logic.”

“Is this akin to female logic?”

Laughter bubbled out of her at the raw skepticism in his expression. To distract him, she slid a hand down his side and squeezed his hip. “You’ve got me where you want me. What are you going to do with me?”

Heat of a different kind filled his eyes, and his body went taut against her. “What do you wish me to do?”

“Well, that not-dragon just scared ten years off my life.” He scoffed. She dug her fingernails into his hip through the loose pants he wore as a mild reprimand. “You could kiss the fear away.”

His gaze dropped to her mouth. “A kiss.”

“Or I could—”

He dropped his mouth to hers, silencing her in the best way possible, and drew back only to bury his face in her throat. “Mia,” he moaned. His teeth grazed her skin once, twice, then settled firmly over his first mark, the mating mark, the one he’d taken from her before she fully understood what he wanted.

And he wanted to mark her again, there, in that place where their union had begun.

She shifted her face away from him, baring her throat. Her hand crept to the back of his head, cradling him there, and she tangled her fingers in his hair. Feeling so much. God, how he made her feel.

“Zoran, please.”

Everything happened at once. His legs shifting against hers, a needy groan rumbling from him, his hand cupping her shoulder, the callouses on his palm scrubbing lightly against her arm. His teeth pierced her skin, and she gasped at the sharp pain, moaned when it morphed into a dark, heady pleasure.

“Again,” he demanded, his mouth grazing her cheek.

“Where?”

“ Everywhere .”

She felt his husky promise in every cell of her being and blurted out a helpless plea.

“God, Zoran. What are you doing to me?”

“What I should have done from the beginning, pjora-la , from the first moment of our meeting.”

Claiming her .

His fingers grasped the neck of her tunic and pulled, steadily ripping the fabric away from her chest, baring her to his gaze. He leaned back, studying his handiwork with a satisfied smile. “Do you know the significance of these marks, beloved?”

Her brain couldn't quite focus through the sensual spell he'd so deftly woven around her. “Alara and Jyrak have them.”

“You did not think to ask why?”

“It seems personal.”

“It is.” His hand slid up her ribcage, stopping just under her naked breast, and he glanced up at her, desire etched sharply in his strong features. “Even human skin will heal, given enough time. This is so?”

She nodded against the pillow, wishing fervently that his hand hadn’t stopped there, splayed along her side, that he’d kept going and covered her breast fully. “Why?”

“The mating mark is not permanent. It was never intended to be, not from one mark alone. To imbue permanence, the mark must be renewed continually over the life of the bearer. For that mark to never fade is a symbol of the mating bond’s strength.” His eyelids lowered and he seemed almost shy now. “We find them beautiful, a testament to a love that can only be shared between mates. You are my mate, Mia, and I will never let you go. Thus does my desire to mark you run high in my blood. Yet I find myself reluctant to mar the delicate beauty of your skin.”

A tiny piece of her heart melted for him, falling through the barriers of mistrust and forgiveness into love. She stroked his hair gently and let her fingertips trail down the line of his spine, petting him, taming him to her.

“Where else do you want to mark me?” she said, her voice as tender as her touch.

His thumb brushed across the side of her breast and came to rest against her nipple, and heat spasmed through her. “If it so pleases you.”

“Yes,” she breathed, already anticipating the wet heat of his mouth.

He dipped his head to her throat instead, murmuring so softly, the translator failed to catch his words. His lips traced the column of her throat, sucked gently on the hollow at its base, then trailed along her collarbone. She shrugged restlessly beneath the featherlight caresses as a yearning grew within her for something more, something harder, faster, for all of him everywhere.

But Zoran took his time, lightly flicking the tip of his tongue down the slope of her shoulder, nuzzling the plane of her upper chest, rubbing his chin over her upper arm. Then doing it all again with his claws, scoring her in deliciously sensual, teasing strokes until her legs shifted against his and her hips arched into his abdomen.

His mouth came down on hers, and it was as if he'd heard her silent yearning, for now his kiss was firm and demanding, sharply contrasted against his gentle play. Give to me , this kiss seemed to say. Give me everything .

She whimpered into his mouth, felt him swallow it down, felt the stroke of his thumb across her nipple. Instinctively, she dug her fingernails into his back, and when he rewarded her with one of his lovely, ever so pleasing growls, she grew bold enough to run a firm hand along one of his horns.

He reared back, panting hard, his irises so dark, they were nearly black.

She bit her lip in dismay. "Did I do it wrong?"

"No, my love," he murmured. "Do it again."

And finally, he bent and sucked her nipple into his mouth, pulling hard against the tiny bud, his fangs penetrating her skin above the areola, pushing her over the edge. She gasped as a sharp orgasm rolled through her, swamping her under a tidal wave of emotion and heat, and she felt that small measure of love rise to meet it, rising, rising.

Zoran rasped the flat of his tongue across her nipple, then rose above her, kneeling between her widespread legs. She'd worn no underwear to bed; her single pair from Earth was drying in the bathroom, leaving her fully on display to his wickedly hot gaze.

He raked his palm down her body from breastbone to the feminine mound between

her thighs. “The thought of all the marks we will give each other in the coming years brings me a great deal of pleasure, mate.”

Her gaze snapped to his. “That many?”

“As many as you will allow me,” he rumbled, satisfied. He pushed down the waistband of his pants, freeing his erection, and stroked it once from balls to tip. “Will you trust me, my love?”

She eyed the length of his hardness, uncertain. He was built like a human male, very nearly identical save for the shape of the tip. No mushroom cap, just a broad head tapering straight down to a thick base.

“Why?” she said. “What are you going to do?”

His husky laugh feathered over her as lightly as his mouth had. “My inquisitive little klika . Trust me.”

Before she could say another word, he leaned forward and pressed the tip of his erection against her clit.

She stiffened automatically, one hand flashing down to land atop his free hand where it gripped her thigh.

“Have no worries, Mia. We will not take that path today.”

“No rutting?” she said, her voice so small she wondered that it had come from her. “No penetration?”

“Not with my manhood. My tongue, yes. Perhaps my fingers. Does it please you to know what plans I hold for you?”

She squinched her eyelids closed on a wave of embarrassment. “Oh, my God,” she said, drawing another husky laugh from him, accompanied by the faint click of his teeth. “Ok, alright. I trust you.”

Still, when he slid the head of his cock down and teased her entrance with it, she stiffened again. Immediately, he eased it away and played it over her clit again. Down again and up, spreading moisture along him and her both.

She tore her gaze away from his cock and watched his face instead. He studied her with the same intensity he brought to every task, focusing on whatever pleasure he meant to share with her. His eyes narrowed slightly when he slid his cock down, and she saw him hesitate for the briefest of moments, no more than a second each time he repeated the action.

Amazement bloomed in her as she realized what he was doing. He was trying to accustom her to his touch, to get her used to the feel of him in this most intimate of places, readying her for...what? Not penetration. He really wasn't going to push into her. Not today.

Then her mind replayed what he'd said, and she blinked and whispered, “Oh.”

His tongue. His fingers.

She swallowed to wet a suddenly dry throat and sucked her lower lip into her mouth. “Zoran?”

His gaze remained fixated on his play. “Yes, pjora-la .”

“I think I'd like you to mark me again.”

His eyes flew to hers, and she was relieved to see that some of the color had returned

to their dark depths. A slow smile spread across his face. Before she could answer him in kind, he was flat on the bed below her, chest down, with his teeth buried in her thigh and his cheek pressing hard against her lady bits. Her hips thrust against his face, seeking both pleasure and pain, and he snaked a hand under her other thigh, nestling it in the crook of his arm as he splayed his palm along her lower abdomen and held her still, right where he wanted her.

He took his time with this mark, piercing the flesh once, lapping the sting away with his tongue. Sucking lightly until she moaned and writhed, then digging his fangs in again in the exact same spot. His cheek provided a counterpoint to his movements, brushing against her clit in the best kind of tease until she had to curl her fingers into the bedding to keep herself from begging him.

Harder, faster, more .

With one final lick, he abandoned her thigh and captured her clit in a hard, demanding kiss, sucking her into his mouth as he had her skin, so hard she rolled her hips against him and crested sharply in another orgasm.

“Good girl,” he growled, and she whimpered and panted, and still would not beg.

His tongue slid lower, echoing the path his cock had taken, and pushed gently against the skin around her opening. There was no hesitation this time, however, no patient play as he accustomed her to his touch. One moment his tongue teased the edges of her pussy. The next it pushed deep into her, so deep his fangs grazed her skin.

He drew back long enough to murmur, “Taste so good.” Then his mouth closed over her clit and his finger replaced his tongue, easing slowly into her, filling her. He hummed against her skin, flicked his talented tongue against her clit, and touched a livewire buried deep in her channel. She came apart then, her hands clenched into fists against the bedding, her hips grinding into his mouth, and the plea slipped

unbidden from her mouth.

“Please, Zoran!”

His laugh thrummed through her, strangely sensual and dark, and a second finger joined the first, stretching her so well, she cried, “Good mate.”

The words spurred him into a frenzy. Where before he’d been first gentle and then firm, now he ravaged her like a wolf savaged its prey. His touch didn’t just demand her response; it commanded her to obey him, commanded her to yield, to give herself wholly, to shatter.

And so, she did, shattering into an infinite interplay of light and shadow meant for him and him alone, hanging suspended against him as he wrung every morsel of pleasure from her, swallowing it greedily into himself.

Mia floated for a while in the downdraft, heady on the depth of the high he’d given her. More than once, she thought, amazingly unembarrassed. Her senses returned to her slowly, first the feel of his hard thighs under hers, then the weight of the day’s growing heat, and finally the slick sound of his hand stroking his cock.

She opened her eyes and couldn’t quite hold back a grin. “That was something.”

He rumbled agreement, his gaze firm on hers, his hand almost lazy on his erection.

“You’re not going to, ah.” She cleared her throat and glanced at his cock. “Finish?”

“Are you so eager to wear my seed?”

That did draw a blush. “Wear it?”

“All along the smooth ivory of your stomach, dripping down the pretty flower folds of your pussy.”

“Oh, my God,” she breathed.

He flashed his fangs for her in a dark grin. “One day, I will empty my seed into you and pray it takes root so that I may watch it grow within you into a child born of your blood and mine. This is what I think on now, beloved. The rutting you so feared.”

Images flooded her mind, of Zoran making love to her, of his hand splayed across her gravid midriff, of him cradling their infant tenderly against his chest, his eyes bright above the sharp lines of his cheekbones. The images ignited a longing as deeply rooted as her need for belonging. A child to love and protect. Zoran’s child. The permanence that child represented. How could he have known how much she wanted to belong?

She stretched her hand toward his and glanced her fingertips across his knuckles and the weeping tip of his cock. “Someday,” she said.

“Mia,” he replied as he dropped his head back and his hand moved faster, more urgently, his chest muscles bunching under the movement. A moment later, he gasped and brought his gaze back to hers, and cum splashed in hot ribbons across her stomach, bathing her in his seed. He leaned forward and braced one palm on the mattress beside her, the other hand still holding his cock.

He brushed the tip of his nose against hers, slid a gentle kiss along her mouth, and she understood then the real lesson.

She had nothing to fear from her warlord, and everything to gain by trusting him.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:58 am

Zoran carried Mia into the shower stall and knelt before her, his hands gentle as he scrubbed the evidence of their love from her fragile, human body.

She rested one hand atop his shoulder, staring down at him with the strangest expression. “You don’t have to bathe me.”

“I wish to,” he said gruffly.

“Do I get to bathe you? Like on the ship?”

“If it so pleases you.”

“I think it will.”

He glanced sharply at her face, trying to read her mood. She was ever happy, his *pjora-la*, seldom driven to the shadow emotions even when he pushed her where she did not wish to go. Or, rather, those dark depths never held her long. Her humor remained irrepressible. He had never considered such a trait important until meeting her. Now, he was certain he couldn’t live without it.

Her fingers trailed lightly from his shoulder to his jaw. “You have a nice body.”

Strangely, her words provoked an odd shyness within him, akin to, but not quite, embarrassment. He dropped his gaze to the curves of her body and soaped her midriff, cleansing his seed away.

“Well, you do,” she continued. “All hard muscle and, and manliness.”

“Manliness?”

“Yes, manliness. I like it.”

His cock twitched, heavy between his thighs. If she continued in this manner, he might forget his promise and pin her against the stall with his manliness .

Carefully, he slid his fingers between her thighs, testing her readiness. She hissed in a small breath as his fingers grazed her womanly folds, moaned softly when he cleansed the bruised mark he'd given her, high on her thigh. A private mark, made for them alone. One day, perhaps, he would bear her marks upon his flesh, a measure of her desire for him. A measure of her love.

The thought ripped through him, burning his skin from the inside out, and a keening need rose within him as swiftly and surely as a flock of not-dragons startled out of the jungle canopy. Yes, he wanted her love, every drop she could willingly give him. He wanted her to welcome him openly, to draw him down upon her in their bed and coax him into her body. Wanted her to wrap her hands around his horns and dig her teeth into his throat and wear his marks proudly.

His hands tightened on her hips, and he dipped his head, dragging the tip of his horn along the mark he had bitten into her thigh, an instinctive gesture torn out of soul-deep need. Savagely, he disciplined his desire for her. Their play had left her sore. She was not ready for more, and he would not abuse her in such a manner.

Force the mark on her, yes, for her own safety and his peace of mind, to abate the trilling call of the mating instinct.

Force her to bear his desire? Never . Surely even the mindless mating frenzy could not override this vow.

Quickly, before his body betrayed him, he washed her legs and feet, then stood and turned her into the water, rinsing her. She tipped her head back into the warm spray, smiling sensually as he lathered her hair from the scalp out. The movement stretched the elegant lines of her throat and thrust her breasts forward. With water rolling down the ivory curves of her body, she appeared more goddess than fleshly being.

A possessive growl rolled out of his chest. His goddess, forever to cherish and adore.

“That feels amazing,” she purred. “I swear, we’re never showering alone again.”

“Greedy little klika ,” he said, pleased.

Her laughter filled the stall. “I guess so. I mean, if we’re going to be mates—”

He bared his fangs at her, though her eyes remained closed and she could not possibly see the reprimand. “ If ?”

“Mates do things together.”

“Then you will not be averse to touring our jutji today.”

Her eyes popped open and she gazed happily up at him, her expression so sunny, his heart stuttered. “I would love to! Ok, my turn.”

She guided him around with tiny shoves, pulled on his arms until he knelt before her under the water’s spray. She filled her hands with bathing scrubs and washed his hair, rubbing his scalp in a gentle massage. Her fingers glanced innocently along his horns, sending shuddering heat through him. He wrested himself away from the pleasure, focusing on his breathing to keep the mating instinct from shoving him into a frenzy.

He could feel it building in him. Their morning play had appeased it somewhat,

allowing him to retain control, but if she did not accept him soon, fully accept him, he feared the frenzy would overwhelm him. He knew his own mind, knew he would not force her, but the frenzy would push him anyway, frightening her.

He swallowed hard. No, he could not allow such. He must find a way to win her acceptance.

Her tug on his arm interrupted his thoughts. “Up,” she said firmly.

Silently, he rose, mutely accepting her guidance as she positioned him just so and cleansed his buttocks, legs, and feet.

Then she stood before him, her gaze on his hardening cock.

He took her hands in his and said, gently, “I shall cleanse the remainder.”

“No, I—” She shook her head and tugged her hands free. “I want to.”

Before he could argue, her hands encircled his cock, sliding from base to tip in one smooth, slick caress.

His head fell back on a low groan. “Mia, you must not.”

“Why?”

“Much more and I will lose control.”

Her fingers teased his tip, drawing the first drops of moisture from his cock. “Maybe I want you to lose control. Maybe I want to be the one you lose control with.”

His head dropped forward and his gaze clashed sharply with hers. “If I lose control,

there will be no stopping the rutting.”

A knowing, purely feminine smile played around her soft lips. “I know.”

Before he could do more than gawp at her, her hands slid away and she stepped out of the shower.

“Rinse off,” she said over her shoulder, her eyes a flash of blue under dark lashes. “We’ve got a long day ahead of us.”

He gazed at her as she retrieved a drying cloth and rubbed it over her hair. Was she teasing him, as mates were wont to do? Did she truly feel so comfortable in the trust growing between them?

And if she did, should he not welcome this temptress his mate had become?

He cut the water off and stepped out of the stall behind her, purposefully crowding her in the tiny room. “Mate,” he said, deliberately adding an edgy snarl to his voice, “you dare much.”

Her laughter pealed like the daintiest of bells, and she smiled warmly at him, until he could no longer resist the urge to steal another kiss.

Leona had dragged Mia and Kira to a weekend spa retreat once, not long after they’d met.

That was nothing compared to the way Zoran pampered her. After their shower, he gently rubbed a soothing, citrus-smelling ointment over the punctures and bruises marring her skin, murmuring soft praise to her as he tended each mark. His hands smoothed over her hair, gently untangling it as he brushed it dry, then he rubbed a lightweight conditioner through it and presented her with a small box of human and

Xeruvian toiletries.

She nearly tackled him when she found the deodorant. He seemed bemused by the kisses she peppered across his cheeks.

Together, they changed the bedding. He frowned over the holes he found on her side of the bed and spoke abruptly into his ever-present wrist device. And then he helped her sort through her meager wardrobe and find something suitable to wear for their journey around his jutji , dressing her in one of his robes when she found a smudge of dirt on her own.

On him, the shinsek'uk hit mid-thigh. On her, it fell below her knees, amusing her no end.

And then he herded her into his conveyance and spent the entire journey across his jutji talking with her, sharing details of his childhood when she asked, drawing her into a wide-ranging conversation about her own childhood. She discovered within herself a deep desire to take him there, to show him the places where she and her parents had lived. To introduce him to the people and the cultures of Earth the way he was introducing her to Zephyria.

Mia stood beside him now on a shaded balcony overlooking acre upon acre of cultivated land, leaning her back against his front, his arms wrapped loosely around her. The jungle had been tamed here, trimmed back away from the fields and orchards. She was surprised to see both Xeruvians and machines tending the crops.

Her fingers itched to study the plants closely. Zoran seemed to have anticipated her needs. When she'd drunk her fill of the view, he led her hand in hand through the building that served as both his local base of operations and his on-site residence to a mini science center. There, he introduced her to his agricultural team and indulgently observed the lively conversation she drew them into, clicking his teeth in gentle

humor when she pulled out her tablet and made notes.

She wrinkled her nose at him. “I’m here to help,” she reminded him, earning a fierce kiss.

After, they retreated to the balcony where brunch had been set out for them. Zoran nudged fresh fruit her way. “I should like to feed you this someday.”

“We’re working on it,” she said. “Someone is working on it. Allergen tests. Here.”

She picked up a chunk of fleshy blue fruit and scrubbed it across the inside of her forearm. It smelled a bit like honey and rosemary with a sour undertone. Her arm turned a funky teal color. She reached for her water and a napkin, and swiped the stickiness off her skin, taking most of the teal color with it, then twisted her arm back and forth, examining the area critically.

And sighed. “That one’s probably a no. My skin’s a little itchy there.”

Zoran leaned toward her, his teeth grinding together. “That was foolish.”

She snorted. “Hardly. We’ve already been exposed to the pollen. A little skin test won’t hurt me. Probably. Granted, some plants could kill us if ingested, but the same could be said of you. How many poisonous plants are there on Zephyria?”

“You likely know far better than I,” he gritted out.

That...might actually be true. Zoran came at plants from a practical standpoint, as either food or a barrier to the welfare of his people. She came at it from a very different angle, even though their goals were the same.

Which might explain why he looked as if he wanted to reach across the table and

strangle her.

Just to be safe, she pushed the plate of fruit back to him. “No more testing. Scout’s honor.”

He settled back with a decidedly grumpy, disbelieving snort. “Your curiosity will get the better of you one day.”

“Probably not. I like my skin intact.”

“As do I.”

On cue, the bite mark high on her thigh throbbed. Yup, he definitely liked her skin intact, so he could un-intact it later.

She pressed her lips firmly together, suppressing a smile. “So, this jutji . It’s inherited?”

“Inherited?”

“Passed down in your family. You know.” She waved her granola bar at the fields. “Your parents got it from their parents, and they got it from theirs. Inherited.”

“You have not yet had an opportunity to study our clan system?”

“Everyone keeps asking me that.”

“It is important.”

“Yes, I know, but so is everything else. Knowing what foods I can eat, for example.”

He gave her another grumpy-disbelieving snort. “For someone possessed of such natural ebullience, your remarks can be quite cutting.”

How could she possibly respond to that?

Mia shook her head and pointedly made a note to study the clan system. “Why don’t you give me an overview so I have some context?”

“Very well,” Zoran said, then launched into an abbreviated history of Xeruvian culture.

Some years ago—Mia eventually figured out that he meant centuries or perhaps millennia, long before they gained space flight capabilities—Xeruvians were nomads banded together in small warring tribes. These tribes constantly raided each other for food and pack animals and even for mates.

One day, a certain tribe witnessed a remarkable sight: an object descending from the skies. At first, they believed the gods had come down from the heavens, but the beings that came out of the object were different enough from the Xeruvians to disabuse them of that notion. The beings attempted trade, and when they found nothing among the Xeruvians worth trading for, they departed.

Out of this time there arose a great philosopher chief, a warrior of some renown who understood the threat these visitors posed. He approached other chiefs with his concerns and managed to persuade some to his cause. Others mocked him and turned away, but the ones who allied with him worked together to fortify themselves against another encroachment. They created the first jutji , built stone and timber walls around their dwellings and fields, and trained for the day of the not-gods’ return.

The philosopher chief was vindicated when the beings returned and warred against the other tribes, stealing their children and warriors as slaves. But when the beings

tried to war against the chief and his allies, they were turned away despite their greater power and weaponry. Once the beings retreated, the philosopher chief disbursed his allies, commanding them to spread across Zephyria, create their own jutjil, and train their warriors to protect the people.

“And that was the start of the clan system?” Mia said.

“It was,” Zoran replied. “Soon after, the sacred warrior-art of Ky’Lota was formalized.”

“Warrior-art. Martial arts?”

“Yes.”

“Can I learn?”

“If you so desire, then I shall happily become your kii-ba’il .”

Mia blinked at the untranslated Xeruvian word. “My what?”

“Your teacher. The person who guides you through the soul dance to help you master the forms and discipline as well as the underlying philosophy.”

“Oh! My sensei.”

Zoran stared into space for a moment, clearly pondering the word. “Yes, I believe so.”

She beamed at him. “So, this philosopher chief, the one who united the proto-Xeruvians and founded the clan system. Was his name passed down through time, or is that an etiological myth?”

The look he gave her held enough pride and arrogance to float a navy. “His name was Kerus. He became the first warlord.”

Oh , she thought. That explained so much. “So the town where you live—”

“Arkkukari,” he said, rather pointedly. “Where we live.”

Mia only just refrained from sticking her tongue out at him. “Yes, Arkkukari. Is it built on the site of the town Warlord Kerus built?”

“No. That place was a fortified area only, never a true town as we think of them now. Once the Var’Kol had been driven back—”

“Wait, your whole clan system, your whole culture, came about because of the Var’Kol?”

At his stiff nod, her shoulders slumped. How ironic was it that the Xeruvians’ leapt forward, culturally and technologically, because of their enemy? Just like on Earth. War always fueled change, good, bad, or ugly.

“We really need a learning module on Xeruvian culture,” Mia murmured. “So, once the Var’Kol were driven back?”

“Kerus allowed the people he and his warriors protected to expand their dwellings beyond the fortified walls. Under Kerus’s peaceful reign, and with the help of the other clans, Xeruvian technology soon advanced to the point where the old forts became outdated. Rather than rebuilding them, they left the walls standing as a monument to their unification. If you can abandon your love of Xeruvian flora long enough, we have time to visit the ruins.”

She did stick out her tongue then, drawing a smirk from him. “I’d love to. But I’m a

little puzzled by something. When they first came here, the Var'Kol had to have been technologically superior. How did Kerus and the other chieftains manage to fight them off?"

"Their flight capabilities were greater. Their weapons were not much more advanced, and we had the advantage of being a warrior society defending our home territory."

"Your military strategy was better."

"And our training. The deciding advantage, however, was our familiarity with the terrain and our ability to use it to our advantage."

"Guerilla warfare?"

After a moment, Zoran nodded. "Did not such wars resolve in this same manner among humans?"

Mia frowned down at her waterglass for a long moment, gathering her thoughts. "Sometimes, yes. Many of our cultures were warlike. Are warlike. We fight among ourselves all the time and have since our earliest civilizations. The Mongols overran southeast Asia in their day. I think the military technologies were similar between them and the peoples they conquered, though the Mongols had better strategies, obviously. There are a lot of examples like that, and also examples of less-developed cultures pushing back against more developed cultures. The Celts and the Romans, for instance. Or was it the Picts?" She wrinkled her nose as she prodded her memory, then shook her head. "Anyway, Rome built a wall to keep out the barbarous, less technologically advanced northern tribes and eventually gave up the British Isles because of the resistance there. And, of course, there are plenty of examples of people with advanced technologies wiping out less-advanced cultures. Sorry. I'm not much of a history buff."

“Yet do you possess a broad understanding of such history.” He nodded approvingly. “I should like to study these histories myself, particularly the military aspects.”

“Human men like military history, too.”

“We are not so different, are we?”

“Sometimes we’re not,” she admitted. “And sometimes I wonder if our differences will always drive a wedge between us.”

“Not between you and I,” he said firmly. “Eat now, little klika . The distance between here and the old fort is great.”

Mia dug into her food, more to give herself time to think than out of obedience. Maybe Xeruvians had more to give humanity than technology. Maybe humans could learn something from the peace Zoran’s people had forged when faced with a common enemy.

Despite her best intentions, Mia dozed off while Zoran navigated the jungle-lined roads between his jutji ’s agricultural center and the old fort. It was a beautiful day, the temperature pleasant, the humidity surprisingly low. The vehicle’s rumble was lower and quieter than most human cars, but still loud enough to soothe her into drifting.

She woke when the vehicle came to an abrupt stop.

“Be still,” Zoran commanded in a low voice.

Mia froze in the middle of straightening. Her eyes blinked open, scanning what she could see of the surrounding area, which admittedly wasn’t much. She’d listed against the door while sleeping and could only make out the underside of the canopy

of trees stretching across the road.

“What is it?” she whispered.

“ Vyirkolen .”

Mia’s heart tripped into a thready hammering and her breath froze in her lungs. “Oh, my God. I thought I was seeing things.”

“Would that you had, for your own safety.” Zoran reached behind the seat and extracted a long gun of some kind, as lethal looking as any heavy rifle Mia had ever seen, then reached back again and withdrew a wickedly sharp sword. His gaze never left the road ahead of them. With both weapons in one hand, he grasped her shoulder and pushed her into the floorboard. “Stay there, Mia. Do not make a sound. Do not satisfy your curiosity. Do not exit the conveyance no matter what you hear.”

She nodded once, the most she could manage, and watched mutely as he climbed out of the vehicle and locked her into it, alone.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:58 am

Mia huddled awkwardly in the cramped space between her seat and the dash, her eyes pinned to the canopy visible beyond the driver's side window.

Why hadn't she asked Zoran to stay with her, to turn the conveyance around and come back with more warriors? Why hadn't she asked him to be careful?

She wrapped her arms around her knees, stiff and uncomfortable and terrified of the predator Zoran was facing. A cry pierced the air, the cry of someone in pain. Mia jerked, startled, and cracked the back of her head against her door. Not a woman, couldn't be a woman. They were miles from anywhere, stuck somewhere between the farm and the fort.

Fear wound through her, a dark miasma whispering of pain and death and things that go bump in the night, and Mia began to tremble. Something hit the vehicle, rocking it. She gasped, then slapped her hands over her mouth to silence the whimpers mewling from her throat. Another hit, the slice of metal through metal. A zzzt-pow rang out, and that eerie human-like cry came again.

A white head filled the window across from her, and Mia froze, too terrified to scream. The creature looked almost like an overgrown, furry salamander: wide, flat head, mouth stretching nearly from one pointy ear to the other, larger, rounder nostrils than a salamander. The nostrils of a hunter. Its pale blue eyes were mounted above its snout, and they were pinned on her.

The vyirkolen inhaled deeply, its nostrils flaring, then it placed a huge, talon-tipped paw against the window and pushed. Mia forced herself to sway with the vehicle's rocking as the vyirkolen snarled, revealing the two rows of sharp, pointed teeth lining

the roof of its mouth.

Another zzzt-pow . The vyirkolen jerked around, whining, and fell away from the vehicle. Zoran strode into view, his sword swiping down once, twice, and an oily black fluid sprayed through the air. He stood there for a moment staring down at the road, then opened the door and leaned in.

That dark fluid flecked his sternly shaped face and a stench like rotting fish wafted into the cab.

“The vyirkolen is dead,” he said flatly. “Can you find the conveyance’s medical kit?” When she didn’t respond, he snapped, “Mia! I need you.”

That jolted her into action. She unwound and awkwardly pushed herself out of her cubbyhole into the seat she’d vacated. “Where is it?”

“Behind the seat.”

He withdrew as she twisted around and started digging behind his seat for a first aid kit, cursing herself the entire time. Why hadn’t she taken the time to familiarize herself with the vehicle the way she would’ve done on Earth?

The answer popped immediately into her mind: because she trusted Zoran with her life.

Pure foolishness, she thought as she dug through the weapons and other items behind the seat. Hadn’t she herself observed that he couldn’t shadow her around forever? Wasn’t she an independent woman, capable of taking care of herself? Or, at least, on knowing that Zoran had stashed a first aid kit in his car before he needed one?

She found a box that, when opened, contained the Xeruvian analogues of bandages

and emergency ointments. Zoran grunted, and the vehicle rocked again. Mia scrambled out onto the road and caught another glimpse of the vyirkolen . Zoran had hoisted it up and strapped it down to what would be the trunk of a human car. Its head and front legs draped over the vehicle's side, nearly dragging the ground.

Horror froze her in place. Xeruvian cars were larger than human ones, taller and wider. If the vyirkolen 's front paws could reach the ground, then it must be massive.

Bile coated her throat and her stomach lurched. Salty saliva filled her mouth. Mia spat, swallowed, and spat again. She would not disgrace herself by vomiting her lunch onto the road. Would. Not. Do. It.

Hadn't she seen worse when she was a kid, traveling the world while her parents tried to save one impoverished village after another? Kids with bellies distended from hunger and malnutrition. Bloodied corpses mutilated beyond recognition by junta machine guns. And much, much worse.

She spat again and forced herself to straighten. If Zoran could find the courage to face a monster, the least she could do was stiffen her spine.

"Mia, the antivenom."

She whirled around and found him leaning both blood-coated hands against the conveyance's trunk. The brown undertones had leached from his skin, leaving it a sickly granite-like gray. Three gashes in his arm leaked merlot-colored blood.

"In the car," she said. "You'll have to find the medicine. I can't read Xeruvian."

He snorted weakly, staggered, and nearly fell. When she reached forward to brace him, he waved her off, felt his way around the vehicle, and dropped into the passenger seat.

His eyelids fluttered over dull, leaf-green eyes and his head lolled against the seat.

Mia bit back a curse as she fumbled the kit open and held it in front of him. “Which one is the antivenom?”

He slid one unsteady hand into the box, brushed aside bandages, and retrieved a white cylinder with a silvery cap. “Open. Press against...neck. Mark.”

Quickly, she flipped the cap open, pressed the cylinder’s end against his throat above his mating mark, and flung a hasty prayer to his gods and hers.

“Please let this work,” she whispered, then depressed the button on the cylinder’s opposite end. It punched against him, ricocheted lightly against her palm, and Zoran grunted.

“Anything else?” she said.

He slumped against the seat, unconscious.

Panic flooded her. They were in the middle of nowhere. Literally. She had no clue where except that one way led to the fort and the other back to the farm. Zoran had been badly hurt, she had no idea how to drive the vehicle or signal for help.

She and her fellow abductees had barely figured out how to message each other through their tablets, let alone communicate with anyone else.

Her mind settled, and she chastised herself for the momentary lapse as she yanked bandages out of the first aid kit and wrapped them tightly around the cuts scoring Zoran’s arm, then quickly searched for and tended any other wounds. Scrapes on one shoulder, more claw marks down his thigh. His clothes had been shredded in places and his skin was clammy under her hands.

Nothing she could do more than that, since she couldn't read Xeruvian , for heaven's sake, something she intended to remedy as soon as possible. At the very least, these kits needed secondary labels in English.

Furious now, she sealed the kit, tossed it into the back, and pulled out her tablet. Quickly, she sent a message to Jyrak and another to Alara on the scant hope that their technology worked this far from civilization. She didn't know how it worked, because she was human and Zoran had thrown her headfirst into his culture, and she didn't know anything, not the language or the customs, not how to procure clothing or pay her own way, not how to defend herself or patch up Zoran or read.

Fuck's sake, when was the last time she'd been in a country where absolutely no one else spoke English?

Her head swam under the weight of it all. She dropped to her knees, squinching her eyes closed against the tears welling up in them, and tried to breathe around the overwhelm.

Zoran groaned, and that saved them both, jarring her out of the panic attack threatening to engulf her.

She forced herself upright, cursed her wobbly legs, and carefully maneuvered Zoran into the passenger seat, not an easy task. He was heavy and a deadweight, and no, she was not going to worry that he was completely out of it until she could do something about it. If the worry gained a toehold, she'd panic, again , and that might cause another delay, one Zoran couldn't afford.

Once she'd shut him inside the vehicle, she rounded the back and stopped dead in her tracks. The vyirkolen was still dead, thank God, though no less intimidating. It really was massive, easily larger than a Bengal tiger, and leanly muscled, like a Greyhound. No tail, she noticed faintly, and the stench. She gagged again and touched a hand to

her nose. Zoran had nearly sliced off its head and there was a gaping, cauterized hole in its chest cavity surrounded by drying black blood.

It had done so much damage to him before he killed it.

Mia shook off the reflexive fear and scurried around the car and into the driver's seat.

And stared blankly at the controls as the seat automatically adjusted beneath her.

She sucked a deep breath into her lungs, reaching for calm. Ok, she could do this. She'd watched Zoran drive, and while she hadn't paid close attention, she knew roughly how to maneuver them around. Stop and go were relatively easy; she couldn't read Xeruvian, but she knew which buttons braked and which accelerated. The engine was still running, something that had completely slipped by her in her panic.

Tentatively, Mia touched the acceleration paddle. The vehicle jerked forward, lurched to a halt mere inches from the edge of the road. Once more, she decided, mustering her courage, and tried again. Eventually, she managed to maneuver the vehicle around, wincing every time it jerked or rattled or ground, and pointed them back the way they'd come, one eye on Zoran, the other on the long, lonely road stretching ahead of her.

Something tightened on Zoran's hand, waking him. He slitted his eyes just enough to take in his surroundings, surprised by how blurry his vision had become. Not so blurry he couldn't recognize a healer's room when he saw one, or understand that he was flat on his back and someone had to have carried him there. His body ached and he shuddered under a light fever, and slowly, memory returned.

Mia laughing under the sunlight. The jungle curving overhead. A vyirkolen standing in the roadway as if awaiting their arrival.

As if it had known exactly where they would be.

Low voices drifted to him, and he placed them one by one. His mother. Jyrak. Malev Dravos, the clan's healer. His mate remained oddly silent, her fingers alternately gripping and stroking his hand.

Then Mia rose above him, and his vision cleared. Dark circles marred the skin beneath her eyes and her hair had become disheveled. A speck of vyirkolen blood dotted her cheek. He tried to lift his free hand and wipe it off, and discovered to his shame that he was too weak to care for her.

She trailed a cool cloth over his forehead. "How do you feel?"

He grunted. "My wellbeing is unimportant. Are you injured?"

"No." Her voice held none of her usual effervescence. So flat was its tone, he wondered what had drained her happiness away during his lapse into unconsciousness. "That was the most foolish, pigheaded, jerk faced risk I've ever seen anyone take."

Ah. Her fear had turned toward anger. This he could understand. "There was no risk, Mia. Have I not said that I would never allow harm to befall you?"

She yanked her hand away from his and slapped the cloth down on the stand beside him. "But you never said anything about harming yourself. How could you, Zoran? That thing could've killed you. Jyrak told me it normally takes at least two warriors to down one, and you went out there alone. You could've died."

"And leave you defenseless?"

"Stop it!" she said, her voice breaking on a raw sob. "Don't you understand? I

could've lost you."

"Mia. My love." He caught her hand, clamping down when she tried to wiggle away, though his hands shook and his muscles ached. "Look at me."

Stubbornly, she shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut. "You can't talk your way out of this one, Zoran."

"Then I will do what I must to assuage your hurt, whether you look upon me or not." Careful of her fragility and his own weakness, he tugged her forward. "You cannot lose what refuses to leave, pjora-la ."

Her eyes flew open, huge and tear-filled and raw in her grief, then she flung herself upon his chest and buried her face in his throat. He wrapped trembling arms around her, pulling strength from a well running deep within him, holding her as she shuddered against him.

"Don't ever do that again," she murmured.

He could not make that promise, refused to lie to her in the doing. Given the same circumstances, he would act exactly as he had, and would ever and always willingly place his own life between her and whatever sought to do her harm.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:58 am

Mia paced in her office, rubbing the headache burgeoning in her temples. After a mere three days of rest, Zoran had returned to work, citing unavoidable duty. Though she'd gone back to work the same day, it had taken her another two days to shake free of the memories of him unconscious and bleeding before she could concentrate. In her absence, the mated humans had retreated to their new jutjil , where they'd likely be more effective anyway.

It's not like she was getting anything done.

She dropped her tablet on her desk and glared at the paper scattered across it. Requests for help littered her local inbox. People dropped by her office at all hours, human and Xeruvian alike, seeking her advice. Her own work had been completely abandoned, both the research interrupted by her kidnapping and the work she was attempting to do here. The work she wanted to do. She was being pulled in too many directions to be effective at any one.

Jyrak knocked on the door and let herself in, her gaze taking in Mia's pinched expression, the mess on her desk, and the hole Mia was wearing in the flooring. "You asked to see me?"

Mia flopped down in her chair, scowling. "I'm drowning here."

"There is water?"

"Oh, my God," Mia groaned. "No. It's a figure of—never mind. I need help, desperately. This," she waved her hands helplessly, "is not my forte. I'm a glorified botanist, not an administrator. My research is suffering. We need to organize pretty

much everything. I need an assistant or, no. I need someone to take all of this over so I can focus on something besides answering emails.”

Jyrak slipped all the way into the office and silently closed the door. “You wish to abdicate your duty to the clan?”

“Not when you put it like that,” Mia muttered, frowning.

“What other way is there to put it?”

“I don’t know what I can say other than what I already have. I’m a scientist. We need an administrator. I know this falls to me because Zoran’s a warlord—”

“If I may,” Jyrak said. “Lord Zoran is but one warlord. Such rank, like the rank of warrior, is earned through devoted practice and skill in the sacred art of Ky’Lota. I am a warrior, not because of my husband’s skill and rank, but because of my own. Thus is Lord Zoran a warlord, a rank beyond warrior that takes many years and devotion to completing difficult tasks to earn. Many warlords live within this jutji , though none is as skilled and ferocious as your mate.”

“Then why me?”

“Because he is the clan warlord .” When Mia continued to stare helplessly at her, Jyrak added, “The clan’s protector, a direct descendant of its founder. Our leader. Through him, this duty falls to you, this and others.”

“And others.” Mia dropped her face into her palms. “Don’t you get it? I’m not cut out for this. I have no training. Isn’t there anyone else who can do the admin work? Someone who can oversee the science, coordinate the research, something? Whoever did it before I came along.”

“You wish to return these duties to Mother Alara?”

Mia ignored the careful way Jyrak worded her question. “Yes! Absolutely. Do you think she’d be willing to take over the administration again and teach me how to do it?”

“Ah. You wish for a sensei .”

“And an assistant. One or two assistants who’d be willing to help all of us handle some of the administrative tasks.” Mia leaned forward and selected a list she’d been compiling. “Like this. I need someone who can figure out how to set up communications with Earth—”

“Such was done during the voyage to your home planet.”

“Really? I had no idea. How do I even—” Mia held up a hand, forestalling her own question. “Do you see now why I need help? Just look at this list.”

Jyrak glanced down at it and frowned. “I cannot understand your written language.”

“Exactly! Imagine having to save your mate when you can’t read the labels on the medicine he needs.”

“Yet did you show courage and ingenuity in saving him.”

Ha. Mia was wise to that trick. Zoran used it on her all the time.

“I will relay a request to my brother,” Jyrak continued, “asking him to connect our devices to the communications relay so as to facilitate contact between humans and Earth.”

“Not just humans,” Mia corrected. “You Xeruvians, too. I want my mother to look at the research your people did into the virus that claimed your fertility. She used to study these things. I think her input might be helpful.”

“But the virus was natural! What could your mother determine that we could not?”

“I don’t know, to be honest. I just have this feeling that there’s more to the story than what I’ve read. And I want to stop leaning on you so heavily.”

Jyrak stiffened into an almost militaristic stance. “Have I served you so poorly?”

“You’ve been a godsend, which is exactly why I want you to help me find an assistant who isn’t also a full-blown researcher. I want you to be able to focus on your own research again.”

“I see.”

“Good. Then you’ll stop making me feel guilty about shoving all the admin work onto more capable shoulders.” Jyrak snorted, and Mia grinned. “Can you set up a meeting for me? I’d like to discuss a few things with the other humans, all of them, as well as the Xeruvian scientists who work in this jutji . Call them all in. Make it as soon as possible, ok? We have a lot of work to do.”

Jyrak bowed her head, then turned to leave. She had her hand on the door when she said, “You are not as incapable as you believe. Even with the mating instinct riding him, Lord Zoran would not have placed you in positions of power if he could not trust you to honor our people.”

Mia had no idea how to respond to that. Jyrak didn’t give her a chance to anyway. The other woman slipped out of the office as quietly as she’d entered, leaving Mia to her lists and scattered thoughts.

Zoran knocked politely on the underground biology lab where specimens were stored for later study. Ryven Korlis opened it immediately, stepping back with a respectful nod for Zoran to enter.

Zoran studied the young warlord surreptitiously. Ryven was perhaps a decade younger, not quite grown into his full height and breadth, but already a respected warrior in his own right, by fang and claw. He had earned the warlord rank just prior to the Council finalizing plans to approach the humans, and thus also earned a permanent position within the jutji 's security forces as well as a berth on their first mission to Earth. Who better to make such journeys than their brightest future?

Who better to search out the truth of the vyirkolen attack?

Ryven's younger sister lounged in the corner of the chilly room, her impudent gaze bold on him.

Zoran ignored her. Raelka might possess some small talent in the sciences, but she remained a child, barely of an age to conduct the work Alara had assigned to her. An impudent, unruly child. Perhaps Mia could mold Ryven's sister into an adult worthy of the clan.

To Ryven, Zoran said, "The vyirkolen ?"

Ryven strode to a table where the creature lay prone. "We have not been able to ascertain whether it was brought here recently or if it was part of a pack that eluded our warriors after the final Var'Kolite war."

Zoran's hand tightened into a fist at his side as he stared dispassionately at the predator. "Was there a tracking device? Any sign someone directed it from afar?"

"No, my lord. The search continues for its mate, if indeed it has one."

“They always traveled in pairs,” Zoran murmured.

“Then we shall be doubly cautious.”

“I commend your zeal, as does my mate.”

Raelka’s teeth gritted together.

Zoran ignored her. “Tell me what you have discovered of this vyirkolen .”

Ryven launched into a detailed summary of the creature’s wounds, its size, the strength of its venom.

“You were lucky to survive that scratch,” Ryven said grimly. “If your mate had acted any slower, if she had not been so prompt to inject you with the antivenom, the consequences could have been dire. Thank the Fates we still carry it in our medical kits.”

“Thank the Fates my mate’s curiosity drove her to study the conveyance’s controls, else we might still be stranded on the old fort road.”

Ryven touched the middle fingers of his right hand to his forehead, mouth, and chest, then lifted his hand to the heavens. “The Fates bestowed a great blessing upon you when they led you to her.”

Raelka jumped to her feet. “It is no great blessing to be saddled with a weak little human who can’t even tie her shinsek’uk properly.”

Zoran stiffened and stared down at the female as Ryven rounded on his sister and hissed a warning to her.

Raelka sniffed and flounced back, her arms once again crossed over her chest.

Ryven bowed low to Zoran. “Apologies, my lord. Raelka stopped by to deliver a message from our parents. I should have dismissed her prior to our meeting.”

“The apology is not yours to make,” Zoran said coldly. “Since Raelka is young and has only just now come of age, I will allow her this one outburst. However, should she speak of my mate or the other humans in such a tone again, I shall have no recourse but to banish her.”

“No!” Raelka gasped.

Ryven’s jaw worked as his teeth ground together. “Perhaps it would be wise to remove her from the science center now, my lord, before she stirs trouble among her betters.”

“Perhaps,” Zoran agreed. “But that decision lies solely with my mate. If Raelka can humble herself before the humans, perhaps Lady Kerus will allow her to remain in her current position.”

Ryven bowed again. “Yes, my lord.”

“Peace be unto you, Ryven.”

“And unto you.”

Zoran pivoted away before his irritation prodded him to render punishment to Ryven’s sister in his mate’s stead.

As the door closed slowly behind him, he heard Ryven hissing another warning at his sister.

“I escaped the burning fever,” Raelka responded savagely. “I may still be fertile. He should have looked first to me for his mate, as should the unmated warriors who betrayed our females by sniffing among the humans for their mates.”

The blunt statement infuriated Zoran. Quietly, he slipped to the side and pressed a hand against the door, holding it slightly open.

“Do not be stupid, brat,” Ryven replied, as coldly as Zoran had earlier. “If you were meant for him or any of the others, you would be mated now. No male’s mating instinct rose for you, Raelka, and none will so long as you behave as a child.”

“But it is not fair! She is a filthy, mewling human , unworthy to be mated to a Xeruvian.” A slap cracked against flesh, and the girl whimpered, “It should have been me.”

“Foolish girl,” Ryven hissed. “You are no more than a grain of sand in Lady Kerus’s shoe. Never shame our family again with your petty hatred.”

Zoran gently closed the door and stalked away. So. The girl had aligned her voice with his opposition. No doubt Mia had already observed the girl’s recalcitrant behavior and taken measures to correct it. He was tempted to interfere, but no. This was his mate’s domain. If Raelka’s behavior became intrusive, he would step in. Until then, Mia must handle the child as she saw fit.

With that decision made, he strode up the stairs to the science center’s main level and sought out his mate among the researchers diligently tackling the many problems his people faced.

Zoran found Mia in her office, discussing various matters with his mother and Jyrak Kael. The entrance remained open. Loath to disturb her, curious as to the work she had chosen to undertake, he hovered just beyond the threshold, listening.

“Your reasoning is clear, my daughter,” Alara said. “Perhaps we should discard our assumptions and reinvestigate the earthquakes and the infertility plague.”

Zoran stiffened, surprised. Mia had chosen to reopen the investigation into the disasters that had ultimately led to their mating? For what purpose?

Mia hummed under her breath. “I can’t speak to the earthquakes, but the way the pathogen spread seems weird to me. Its focus was too specific. Most natural pathogens don’t work that way, from my understanding.”

“Such is our experience as well,” Jyrak said, then bit off a rare curse. “Why did we not question this when we first investigated the matter?”

“Shock?” Mia said. “Grief?”

“Indeed.” A pause, then Alara sighed. “Have you spoken to Thorian about direct communications with Earth? I should like to discuss this matter with Mia’s mother, given her experience with such pathogens.”

Zoran’s surprise gave way to the first stirring of anger. He had specifically cautioned Thorian against allowing the human females to contact their Earth families. The women must be given adequate time to come to terms with their new status as citizens of Zephyria, to understand that they could never return to their former homes.

He would never let Mia go. Had he not explained this to her? Did she even now dare to defy him?

Had she been using her fellow scientists to help her escape?

Jyrak grunted. “He says it is a simple request, yet does he delay the doing.”

“Men,” Mia said sagely, drawing mild humor from her companions.

“It will be done,” Alara assured her. “Your mother is a valuable resource. I welcome the opportunity to speak with her, one scientist to another.”

“She’ll be ecstatic to hear from you.” Mia hesitated a moment. “Are you sure you don’t mind stepping back into an administrative role here?”

Zoran’s temper broke, washing over him in a wave of furious rage. He stepped into the room and snarled, “What is this?”

Mia startled and whirled around, her expression bright and welcoming. “Zoran! We didn’t see you standing there.”

Alara and Jyrak exchanged a concerned glance, then Alara said, “Jyrak, would you contact the organizer of the upcoming festival in my stead and assure that it progresses well?”

Jyrak immediately dropped her head in a sharp, respectful bow. “Yes, milady.” She shot an unreadable look at Mia as she hurried out.

Mia’s smile had faded. “Is something wrong? Did you get bad news about the vyirkolen?”

Before Zoran could snap at her, Alara clasped her hands behind her back. “All will be as it should, my daughter.”

“Ok,” Mia said, drawing the word out slowly.

Alara pivoted toward Zoran, her expression hard. “Do not assume, my son, when you have not all the answers.”

She marched away, closing the door quietly behind herself.

Zoran reached over and locked it, ensuring privacy. None would dare interrupt his next actions, on pain of facing his wrath.

Mia glanced at the door, her lips pressed into a thin line. “Ok, now you’re scaring me. What’s wrong, Zoran?”

“What is wrong?” His voice was deceptively quiet as he stalked toward her. “My mate plots against me, then asks what is wrong?”

“N-no,” Mia said, shaking her head as she stepped away from him. “Where did you get a crazy idea like that?”

“You wish to contact Earth, though I have expressly forbidden it. You wish to return there when I have declared Zephyria to be your home. You have abdicated a position afforded you because you are my mate and responsible for the wellbeing of our clan!”

The final words came out in a roar. Mia flinched and held out a hand, as if to placate him. “You’ve got it all wrong, Zoran. If you’d let me explain—”

“Enough!” he growled. “Sit down.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Her quiet words snapped whatever tenuous control remained within him. He leapt forward, crowding her until she dropped into her chair, and leaned into her, his face nearly touching hers.

“Lift your tunic,” he commanded, his voice a sharp whip.

She flinched again, then jerked her head to the side in the human equivalent of a negative. “Not when you’re like this.”

“When I am like what, mate? Explain to me what I am.”

“Angry.”

A low laugh rumbled out of him, and for the first time he saw true fear in her gaze.

Good. She understood him well now.

Casually, he reached down and flicked a claw through the waistband of her breeches, ripping the cloth away from her womanly folds. She wore human underwear, the same pair she had worn the day he found her, and that infuriated him all the more.

Did she cling to her past so fiercely then?

Without a thought for the consequences, he shredded it, leaving her skin unmarked and whole despite his fury. A part of him whispered, Protect her .

And he would, always, even with the mating frenzy riding him so hard, it was all he could do not to claim her then and there.

Yet now must he impart a different lesson, one of a warrior to his defiant mate.

She trembled, though she did not cover herself, and the warm scent of her burgeoning arousal teased his nostrils. “What are you doing?”

“Whatever I wish, mate .” He met her gaze then, let her see the turmoil raging within him, the turmoil she had created with her defiance. “Do not cry out.”

He fell upon her then, lashing his tongue across the sweet bud between her thighs, driving her into a swift orgasm. Her thighs trembled against his face, and she held one hand to her mouth, stifling her gasps.

He rumbled his pleasure at her compliance as he ran his fangs along her unmarked thigh. Soon , he assured himself, then tested her readiness with one finger, careful even in his frenzy not to cut her fragile skin. Her tight little channel dripped for him, and he nearly purred at finding her so.

“Good girl,” he whispered hoarsely.

A strangled groan issued from her throat, pleasing him all the more. Such restraint his mate demonstrated.

He added a second finger to the first and delved within her, seeking her inner pleasure zone, stretching her until she shook and squirmed under his touch. Her second orgasm pulsed unexpectedly against his fingers, surprising him in its intensity. With his fingers still buried deep in her pussy, he shoved his fangs into her thigh. She jerked against him, then moaned helplessly, quietly as he had commanded her. And when he had marked her satisfactorily, he sucked her clit into his mouth and drove her into a third frantic orgasm.

Before it had completely faded, he withdrew from her, unfastened his shinsek’uk , and shoved his breeches down, baring the hard, demanding length of his erection.

Her eyes widened as she took it in, though she remained silent and quivering, still gripped by the ecstasy he had given her.

He leaned forward and pressed the tip of his cock to her opening. “Do you trust me?”

She nodded once.

“What am I to you?” he demanded harshly.

Her hand slowly dropped to her lap, trembling against her torn clothing. “My mate.”

He slid his hand under her hair and clasped her slender nape, drawing her forward until their noses touched and he could draw her breath into his mouth, and give her his in return. “I will never let you go, Mia. Not even death will loosen my hold on you.”

“I know,” she whispered.

The mating frenzy abated abruptly, though he ached to bury himself in her, to feel her hands on his skin, to have her love him as he was coming to love her.

Was his wish so impossible?

He released her, stood, and tidied his clothing, then walked out of her office, closing the door quietly behind him to preserve her dignity.

The outer room had been deserted. Zoran stalked through it and outside without encountering a single soul.

His mother stood beside his conveyance, her sword drawn, her posture ready.

“How dare you!” she said, furiously. “How dare you attack your mate in such a manner!”

He scoffed. “There was no attack, mother. Mia remains unharmed save for one additional mating mark.”

“Given in punishment. You defile your mating bond out of your own fear.”

“I defile nothing!” he roared. “She is my mate, mine , given to me by the Fates, and she dares plot her escape?”

“She dares nothing, child. If you had but listened—”

“I heard enough.”

“You heard nothing!” she shouted. “Mia has pledged her loyalty to you. She has openly claimed you as her mate. What more can you demand of her?”

“She has not accepted me fully. Until she has, I cannot allow her—”

It was her turn to scoff. “ Allow . As if you have any say in what she does! My son, my son. Have I not taught you better? Do you not understand that you force her at your own folly?”

He glanced away, suddenly ashamed of his behavior, of losing control of his own baser instincts and allowing the frenzy to overtake him. “I used no force.”

“Did you not?” Sighing, she relaxed her stance and sheathed her sword at her back. “Perhaps you should ask your mate to relay the conversation she held with me and Jyrak before passing judgment upon her.”

Zoran nodded tightly. “If you so wish it.”

“I wish many things, my son, yet do the Fates deny me. In this, at least, I hope they find favor.”

She stalked away without waiting for his rejoinder.

Zoran stared after her long after she’d disappeared.

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Mia curled up in her chair, staring at nothing. What had just happened? One minute, she was having a lively discussion with Alara and Jyrak. The next Zoran stormed into the room and ravished her, shredding her underwear beyond repair, pushing her relentlessly into so much pleasure, her body still trembled from his touch.

And her emotions!

God, what could she even say about the confused mess roiling around inside her?

At a quiet tap on the door, Mia pulled her robe over her lap and called, "Come in."

A moment later, Jyrak stepped inside and closed the door firmly behind her. "Milady, may I bring you a refreshment?"

Mia shook her head.

Jyrak edged closer, her hands carefully folded behind her back. "Perhaps some chilled water?"

"Where was this concern when I was locked in here with...?" Mia shook her head. She wasn't even sure how to finish that question. Zoran had fallen on her like a mad man, but his actions had been coldly precise, designed to push her to her sensual limits in what had clearly been a punishment, if the pleasure he'd given her could be called that. Which it couldn't, she thought, stifling a spurt of amusement. The only mark he'd left on her was one she wanted, a secret testament to his desire.

"It is unwise to step between two mates," Jyrak explained carefully, "lest one or the

other is provoked to defend their mating bond against the outsider. Rarely do mating frenzies result in unwanted damage, else would Mother Alara and I have interfered despite such prohibitions.”

The new mark on Mia’s thigh pulsed, and Mia could no longer conceal her humor. “Relax, Jyrak. It’s a no harm, no foul situation.”

“A what?”

“Never mind. He didn’t hurt me.”

Jyrak nodded, not at all relaxed. “The mating frenzy did not overwhelm you?”

“The what?”

“When a male is pushed—” Jyrak softly snapped her fingers together against her thigh. “When he fears his mating?”

A scornful laugh rose in Mia’s throat. “I’m the least frightening thing on Zephyria.”

“No, milady, you misunderstand.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“I do not wish to intrude.”

“Intrude, please. As it is...” Mia closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the chair. “I’m not sure what happened. Or why, which is just as important.”

Because she wanted him to do it again, and maybe do it to him in return. Oh, the possibilities.

“I cannot say what drove him, precisely,” Jyrak said, “or what catalyst pushed him into the frenzy. Yet there must be something.” A pause. “Have you given him cause to doubt your affections?”

Emotion welled up so sharply in Mia, it clogged her throat. “No.”

“You love him?”

“I don’t know.” Mia shook her head. “He knows I’ve accepted his claim on me, even given the unfortunate circumstances.”

“And he accepts this fully? Is there no fear between you?”

The truth hit Mia so hard, she groaned. How many times had he told her that he wouldn’t let her go? Not even death will loosen my hold on you , he’d said, so fiercely the words had indelibly etched themselves into her bones.

“He’s afraid I’m going to leave him,” she whispered, gutted by the realization.

“Ah. There you have it. Fear drives a male to many stupid ends.”

Mia snorted out a laugh through the tears gathering in her eyes. “He really didn’t hurt me.”

Unless she counted the new bite mark on her thigh, which she definitely did not. And nope, she was not talking about that with anyone except Zoran.

“I would be surprised if he had. Rigid self-discipline is embedded in our culture. We can be fierce warriors.” Jyrak raised a clawed hand, rotating it in mute demonstration. “Yet must I ascertain your wellbeing for myself, as your friend. A warrior in the heat of the mating frenzy may lose control of his discipline. It is why we never push our

mates beyond what they can endure.”

“I’m not worried about pushing him.” At Jyrak’s skeptical look, Mia added, “No, really. He takes discipline to a whole new level. What I’m worried about is the lack of trust.”

“You do not trust him?”

“I trust him with my life. Have trusted him with my life,” she said as memories of the vyirkolen attack surfaced. “He doesn’t trust me, and I don’t know how to change that.”

“Your frustration is understandable. Would that I could aid you in finding a solution.”

“I think it’s just going to take some time.” Her thighs rubbed together as she shifted, and another frisson of pleasure shuddered through her. “How can I be so mad at him for giving me three amazing orgasms?”

Jyrak let out a strangled cry deep in her throat, then coughed discreetly into her fist.

“Three? In that short a time?”

Mia felt a blush crawl into her cheeks. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

“No, no. Tell me more.” Jyrak blinked once, her eyes impossibly wide. “Are you certain you did not miscount?”

Mia laughed until a sob caught her by surprise. Jyrak, being a wise friend, merely held her hand until the emotional storm passed and Mia could find some calm.

She waited until she’d sorted through her emotions before returning home, which took some time. Jyrak had scrounged up a needle and thread so Mia could repair her

breeches well enough to last through the day. Her shredded panties were unsalvageable. There Mia would not budge: Zoran could damn well replace those himself. She'd make sure of it.

Mia was surprised by the number of people who discretely stopped by to check on her. She finally shrugged off her robe, leaving her arms bare so everyone could see for themselves that she was fine.

Perfectly fine. Ecstatic even. Her mate had given her three orgasms, so why was she so pissed at him?

By the time Jyrak saw her home, Mia had her anger under control. She'd approach this rationally, she decided. She and Zoran could sit down together over the evening meal and talk through whatever problems they faced. Why not? It worked for her parents. Surely it would work for her and Zoran, too.

Then she walked in and saw the boxes of supplies sitting in the kitchen and her temper sparked so high, she nearly screamed. She stalked through the apartment and found Zoran standing on the balcony watching the day fade into night.

"You can't buy my affections," she snapped.

He turned slowly, folded his hands behind his back, and stared coolly at her. "Of what do you speak, mate?"

She pointed a quivering finger at the living area. "Those boxes. What are they?"

"DVDs," he enunciated carefully in English. "I intended giving them to you on the evening of our tour of the jutji , to distribute among the humans."

"Ha! A likely story."

“Such is the only story, as it is the truth.”

She ground her teeth together in frustration. Maddening male! “Why should I believe you?”

“Why should you not?”

“Ooo,” she huffed. “Fine. I’m taking a shower and putting on clothes I didn’t have to sew back together because my mate is an inconsiderate lout. Don’t even try to follow me.”

“You could not stop me if you tried.”

Tears filled her eyes so suddenly, she stalked forward and jabbed him in the stomach with her finger. “Just watch me, mister.”

His expression fell. Slowly, hesitantly, he smoothed a hand over her hair. “Tell me what you were discussing with my mother and Jyrak.”

She sniffed back a sob. “Why should I?”

“Because I ask it of you.”

“You aren’t exactly asking.”

“Then I do so now,” he huffed.

“Fine. We were—” She waved a hand, then swiped a stray tear from her cheek and quickly explained her suspicions about the infertility virus, her mother’s experience with disease, and Jyrak’s offer to open communication channels for further investigation.

“I see,” Zoran said slowly. “And reducing yourself to a mere researcher. How do you explain this?”

“What?” She shook her head, even more confused than before. “No. I asked Mother Alara to shoulder some of her previous responsibilities until I could settle in, get my own research under control, and learn how to be an administrator. She agreed to be my, my sensei , for lack of a better term.”

“As I agreed to be your sensei in the soul dance.”

His words were so soft, she barely caught them. “Exactly. I don’t understand why you were upset about that. It was my call. I mean, what use am I when I don’t even know what I’m doing? And, you know, your mom really wasn’t ready to give everything up. She wants to feel useful, too.”

“She has other responsibilities.”

Mia groaned. “God, don’t say that. I already feel guilty about having to ask her to cover for me.”

“Mia.” He dipped his head, aiming for a kiss, and she turned her head away.

“No,” she said, backing out of his hold. “You can’t wiggle your way out of this one.”

“Mate.”

She ignored his warning growl and tilted her chin at a stubborn angle. “I’m serious, Zoran. You should’ve asked what was going on before getting pissed at me. Don’t expect me to forgive you for scaring my friends.”

He drew himself up and stared down his nose at her. “You speak only of your

friends' fear. What of your own?"

She waved that away. "I trust you not to hurt me. But I don't forgive you for the way you acted. And I'm sleeping in the living room tonight. Can't very well kick you out of your own bed."

"I forbid it," he snarled. "Your place is beside me."

"No, Zoran. My place is exactly where I think it should be. Tonight, that's in the living room."

Mia walked away before he could respond, slipping out of her clothes and into the shower with the door firmly closed between them.

Later, after supper and a quiet evening spent studying a report sent to her by the jutji's agricultural team, Mia grabbed her pillow, found a spare blanket, and arranged the living room cushions into a makeshift bed.

Zoran watched her quietly, his eyes hooded and dark. "You truly mean to separate yourself from me?"

"What separation?" she demanded, beyond exasperated with him. "You're sleeping less than fifteen feet away."

"What if a not-dragon enters our home?"

"Then I guess you'll regret not installing those doors I asked for."

His stare bloomed into a full-blown brood. "Is there nothing I can do to sway you?"

"Not a thing," she said cheerfully. "Dim the lights on your way to bed, please."

She curled up on her designated cushions, stuffed the pillow under her head, and closed her eyes, pointedly ignoring him. Fabric swished. The lights dimmed. His footsteps receded.

Great , she thought. Now I can get some sleep .

Something trilled in the jungle, startling her. The image of a not-dragon popped into her head, and fear ran an insidious finger down her spine. She rubbed her eyes, shifted on the cushions. They made great seats. Not such a great bed.

The report she'd studied that evening popped into her mind. She grabbed onto it with a relief born of desperation, reiterating the details to herself in the hopes of boring herself to sleep.

It must've worked. She woke in the darkness, pressed against a warm chest as Zoran gathered her into his arms and lifted her high.

At her dismayed groan, he gently murmured, "There is plenty enough time for anger on the morrow, pjora-la ."

He snuggled into bed with her, and she drifted off again, smiling.

When the day was little more than a glimmer along the horizon, Zoran petted Mia awake with his hand between her thighs and his fangs buried in her shoulder.

She moaned and arched against him. "I'm still mad at you," she murmured sleepily.

Gently, he disengaged his fangs and lapped his tongue along the bite mark. "Then I shall not-mad you."

Her laughter kissed his skin in a sensual caress. "That translator needs work."

Zoran grunted. Such was immaterial at the moment. Touch had proven itself to be their most valuable communication tool. What need had they for words when a kiss conveyed so much more?

She twisted around, facing him, and hooked a finger in the waistband of his pants. “These displease me, mate. I command you to take them off.”

“Command?”

“Yes, command,” she said haughtily, not quite hiding the spark of humor in her expressive eyes. “Off.”

“If it so pleases you.”

He rolled off the sleeping pallet, stripped the loose pants off, and folded them across the chest where he stored his weapons and armor. When he turned back to her, she was kneeling on the bed, her gaze drifting over his nude body, her tunic pooled across her thighs. His tunic, the one he’d lent her the night she discovered her lack of clothing. The one he had ripped off her so that he might mark her again. Her clever fingers had sewn the front closed with an even hand, in a folded seam that would not irritate her sensitive skin during sleep.

Perhaps he should have insisted on her nudity as she had insisted upon his.

“Do you remember the day we met?” she said, her voice soft and uninflected.

The memory rose within him, dragging heat along with it, and his body hardened. This frail little klika standing with her friends, her midnight blue eyes wide as she stared warily at him. His gaze had passed over her the first time, then flicked back as if drawn by a magnet. The mating instinct had roared to life within him and, like a good mate, the best mate he could have wished for, his sweet human had fled,

inviting him to chase her.

Pleasure rumbled in his chest. “How could I not, mate? That moment is burned forever into my mind.”

“You terrified me,” she murmured. “This huge, outrageously attractive male snarling at me like he wanted to gobble me up.”

“You find me attractive?”

Humor bled into her expression. She bit her lower lip, taming her humor, and patted the bed. “On your back.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “What game is this, mate?”

“My game. The forgiveness game.”

“Very well.” He lowered himself onto the bed and rolled on his back, surprised when she straddled his abdomen, settling her hot core directly against his skin. “What would you have me do?”

“Whatever I wish.”

“You turn my words against me?”

“Is that really what you think I’m doing?”

No. Such malice did not exist within her. Still, he wondered.

She placed her palms flat against his abdomen and rubbed them upward, exploring the curves and slabs of muscles it had taken him years to build and hone. “Hands

behind your head, mate.”

Dutifully, he tucked his hands safely away, where they could not hinder her exploration. “Better?”

“You have no idea. Wow. Your biceps really are as big as my thighs.”

He flexed them, grinning widely when lust glazed her expression. “The better to protect my mate.”

“Yeah,” she sighed softly. “Yeah. Ok, um. Roll your head to the side.”

He knew which way without her having to ask. As soon as he had complied, she scooted forward and placed her teeth against the faint mark she had previously bitten into his throat. Leaned back, measured the distance critically, and tried again. Her teeth hit the original mark that second time and dug in hard, piercing the skin with a bruising pleasure-pain. Heat shot through him, and he arched his hips off the bed, nearly unseating her.

“Easy there, beloved,” she murmured against his throat, then her tongue rasped across the mark and another wave of heat washed over him.

His eyelids slid shut of their own accord and he moaned her name.

“Again?” she said.

“Anything you desire. I give myself unto you.”

Her laughter hummed against his skin. “Oh, I like the sound of that.”

She explored him as he preferred exploring her, slowly, with her lips and fingers and

tongue. Her tiny claws raked against his skin, teasing him to the point of madness. He wanted to grasp her hips and push her down against his hard length, to roll her over and bury himself so deep inside her she forgot she had not always been his.

“You’re so beautiful,” she whispered, such delicate awe in her voice, he could scarcely restrain himself.

No . He would not yield to such temptation. He clasped his hands together beneath his head, forcibly leashing himself, though he ached to touch her in return. This was Mia’s game. Let her play it as she would.

Her tongue trailed down the center of his abdomen, then flicked along the tip of his cock.

His hips rolled up, ignoring his command, and her name burst from his mouth on a low moan. “Take care, pjora-la . You play with fire.”

Without another word, she sucked his cock into her mouth, taking as much of him as she could.

A helpless jumble of words fell from his lips, nearly shorting the translator, to her whispered amusement. Up and down her mouth slid, alternately sucking him deep and popping him out, again and again until he could no longer still his hips. His fingers went numb from his tight grip on himself and his muscles strained toward her.

Desire rose so sharply, he feared spilling his seed in her luscious mouth.

“Stop, Mia,” he rasped out. “I beg you.”

Her laughter hummed against the sensitive head of his cock. She popped him out of her mouth and said a single word in response.

“No.”

Her sucking redoubled, joined by one hand tightening around the base of his cock. The claws of her free hand dug into his thigh, bruising him deliciously, and his hands broke free, curse them. One settled on the back of her head, gently encouraging her sweet mouth to milk him. The other clasped her hand around his cock and guided her into stroking him while her lips and tongue wreaked havoc above.

And then he could no longer think about whose game they were playing or the rules laid down between them. He surged into her mouth, driven by a need to possess her, to claim her, to mark her so surely she knew only him, needed only him. Loved only him.

“Beloved,” he gasped, then roared out his release, emptying himself into her mouth as dizzying emotion swept through him. Their bond pinged gently, settling onto a deeper plane, and when he could give no more, when his seed dribbled out of her mouth and her hands stilled upon his body, he hauled her up, wrapped himself around her, and buried his face in her hair, shocked as much by the way she had moved him as by the clarity her touch provided.

He loved her so much. It was a quiet ache against his heart.

She sighed happily and stroked him into quiescence, and together they fell once more into sleep.

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After seeing Mia safely to the science center, Zoran took his place among the early morning Ky'Lota practitioners, seeking solace in the disciplined company of his fellow aspirants along the path.

His mother led the forms from the center of the Council Grounds, surrounded by concentric circles of warriors and civilians alike. Zoran was surprised to see a few humans there as well, dotted among the more experienced Xeruvians as was their custom. His nephew Nem stood near the back, the top of his head no higher than the hips of the two warriors flanking him.

Zoran stepped into place behind Nem, dividing his attention equally between perfecting his own forms and analyzing the forms of his nephew. For a youngling of but five years, Nem exhibited extraordinary control and focus, far more than was usual for that age. Zoran's heart ached for the boy. Here before him stood the consequences of the disasters that had befallen their people: a motherless child whose light had dimmed under the weight of such grievous loss.

The morning bloomed around them, unfurling heat and light in equal measure. By the time Alara guided the group through the final form, a light sweat coated Zoran's skin. The group disbursed, with experienced warriors doling out praise and advice alike, some lingering to chat while others left to tend to family and duty.

Nem turned around and bowed formally to his uncle. “ Kii-la, nona-il , Uncle Zoran.”

That odd, achy feeling throbbed in Zoran's chest once more. Nem favored his mother, Zoran's younger sister. Kygana had possessed an uncommon beauty, her features graceful and even. On her son, those same features spoke of a future filled with many

conquests and broken hearts.

Ah, Nyklan , Zoran thought. I can see why your son's presence would prick the scar of a broken mating bond, but I cannot forgive you for holding this precious youngling at arm's length over a matter in which he had no hand .

Zoran scooped up the youngling and held him to his chest, suppressing his humor behind a solemn mask. “ Nona-il'la , Nephew Nem. Have you come to stand at my side while I negotiate a treaty with the dreaded northern clans?”

The first hint of laughter brightened Nem's expression. “Do you think Mother Alara will let me this time?”

“I think she will likely say young warriors must first learn their clan's history before attempting to parlay with such a fierce opponent.”

“I am fierce, Uncle!” Nem scrunched his face into a ferocious growl, then ruined the effect with a pleased smile. “See?”

“Very fierce,” Zoran agreed solemnly. “Must I fear meeting you soon in the challenge circle?”

Nem laughed and threw his arms around Zoran's neck. “No, no! Not until I am very old like you.”

Alara watched them with veiled amusement as she approached. “If my son is very old, I must be ancient.”

Nem shook his head, though he did not relinquish his hold on his uncle.

Zoran shifted his grip and met his mother's level gaze. “Mia fares well.”

“Of that, I had no doubt,” Alara replied. “Love tames even the most ferocious beast.”

Hope sent Zoran’s heart into a wild leap that ended in a tumble toward despair. “She does not love me.”

“I was not speaking of her love, my son.”

“I love you,” Nem whispered, saving Zoran from his mother’s astute observation.

“I love you as well, nephew,” Zoran said. “Perhaps you would like to visit my mate this evening.”

“Is she nice?”

“Quite.”

“Does she like younglings?”

The tremor in Nem’s young voice nearly drove a sword through Zoran’s chest, and he vowed then and there to find a way to ease the tension between father and son. Now, before Nem grew to believe that Nykklan had forgotten how to love him.

The love remained. Zoran was certain of that. It had merely been buried beneath unrelenting grief and sorrow.

Would he fare any better should the Fates ferry Mia into the beyond?

Zoran shoved the thought away before it could take root. No, it was as he said: not even death could separate them.

“I believe she does,” Zoran said at last. “Have you not yet met her?”

At his nephew's mumbled no , Zoran shot an inquiring gaze at his mother.

“I thought it best to wait an introduction on Lord Kerus's pleasure.”

Zoran curled his upper lip into a snarl at his mother's mild rebuke. “Tonight, then, or soon thereafter. A family meal?”

“The meal may have to wait. Mia sent a group message earlier proclaiming tonight movie night .”

Zoran shared a baffled look with his mother. Ah, well. Mia would explain. “I shall message her myself and gain permission for youngling nephews to attend this movie night.”

With that, he handed Nem over to more capable hands and retreated to his office in the jutji 's administrative building, located on the town side of the Council Grounds. Once there, he changed his mind about messaging Mia and initiated a call instead. A moment later, she answered, her smiling visage filling the viewscreen.

“Long time, no see,” she said, grinning.

Zoran found himself at a loss for words. “Is this a common greeting among humans?”

“Among my culture, yes. It's a greeting used when you've recently seen someone.”

“That is as baffling as most other human speech.”

Mia giggled so hard, her body rocked away from her viewscreen. “You should try being on this end of Xeruvian. Is there a problem?”

“Can I not call my mate whenever it pleases me?”

“Of course, Lord Kerus .”

He snarled in the back of his throat, drawing another laugh from her.

“You’re so cute when you do that. So, oh!” she exclaimed, then glanced down. “Hold on. I just got a text from your mom. You want to bring your nephew to movie night? I didn’t know you had a nephew.”

“He is the son of my deceased sister and spends much time with our family.”

“That’s what Alara said, sort of. Definitely in more detail.” Mia’s face flashed through emotions faster than he could read them before settling into a careful smile. “Of course, he’s welcome. You are, too. It’s going to be a real shindig. Popcorn, snacks, the works. We’re inviting mates to come along and, of course, any unmated warriors who want to drop by.”

“This sounds expansive.”

“You say that like we’re inviting the entire jutji . It’s just people who work here, their mates, and any of the unmated warriors who came along on your little adventure to Earth.”

Zoran grunted. “A party, then?”

“Sort of. It’s—wait. Do you know what a movie night is?”

“A party,” he said firmly.

She snickered. “Oh, this is going to be fun. We’re setting it up at the compound. There’s a room there that can hold everyone, I think. We’ve already got someone over there setting up a power conversion system.”

“Should I ask why you need a power conversion system?”

“DVDs,” she said, enunciating each syllable. “Whoops! Jyrak needs me. Meet me at the compound after work? We’re going to have a communal evening meal there.”

“If it so pleases you.”

“Oh, it pleases me very much. Peace be unto you, beloved.”

She ended the call before her parting word could settle fully into his understanding.

Zoran placed a hand to his heart as his legs went weak. “Beloved,” he murmured. Was Mia coming to love him as he loved her, or had the word been a meaningless endearment?

He pondered the difference and decided that it mattered little. His mate was softening toward him, accepting him. Including him in her life. That was enough, for the moment.

Regretfully, he tucked his musings away and initiated a call with Kaelen of Clan Drexus, to extend the hand of peace to his long-time rival. Aklan of Clan Phyrz had made a good point. Zoran needed to find a way to bring his opponents to heel.

Kaelen accepted the call and appeared on the viewscreen bare from the chest up. The other warlord was one of the more massive clan leaders on Zephyria, as tall as Zoran though bulkier, possessed of the cold-eyed stare that had brought more than one enemy to his knees. The lynchpin of the northern clans, Kaelen’s ancestors had built Clan Drexus’s jutji out of the rugged, evergreen-strewn mountains ranging northward into the tundra. The current Lord Drexus had spent his youth cutting and hauling timber out of the great mountain ranges to trade with his clan’s neighbors, and bore the scars to prove it.

Kaelen turned that hard stare on the viewscreen, his expression as unyielding as one of his mountains. “Kerus.”

“Drexus,” Zoran replied, foregoing, as Kaelen had, the traditional greeting and nod of respect. “I hope my call did not interrupt your morning Ky’Lota practice.”

Kaelen grunted. “If it had, we would not now be speaking. What do you want?”

Zoran suppressed his kneejerk irritation and strained for calm. “Clan Kerus is holding a Day of Remembrance in Arkkukari to honor the Pjorii and our dead. As the human females will be in attendance, all unmated males of the warrior and warlord ranks are also welcome to attend.”

Kaelen made a show of swiping sweat off his forehead and chest with a drying cloth, then drawing on a thin sweater before replying. “What concessions must my clan’s warriors make in return for this honor?”

“No concessions save your attendance. If your warriors require accommodations—”

“We shall make do. Is that all?”

A muscle in Zoran’s jaw jumped. Was the invitation not enough? “A vyirkolen was killed near the original fort.”

Kaelen’s eyes narrowed. “Are you leveling an accusation against me and mine?”

“Only if you and yours are responsible.”

“We are not. What was the target?”

“My mate.”

The other warlord hissed in a breath. “She is well?”

“It rendered her no harm. We have found no trace of additional vyirkolen , yet must we all remain wary.”

Kaelen remained quiet for a moment, his eyes fixed on Zoran. “Indeed. If that is all?”

“Until the next Council meeting, yes.”

“Render my regards to Lady Kerus. I look forward to meeting her and her companions on the Day of Remembrance.”

“Peace be unto you,” Zoran gritted out.

Kaelen grunted and cut the call.

Zoran rubbed the base of one horn where an inauspicious pain throbbed. Why had he not reversed the order of the calls and spoken with his beloved mate after dealing with Drexus? Then, at least, he would now be calm and at peace instead of frustrated at the other warlord’s blatant lack of regard.

The DVDs were a huge hit. Mia shouldn’t have been surprised by how popular this small taste of home was among her fellow abductees, or how curious the Xeruvians were about entertainment, Earth style.

It hadn’t taken long for one of the engineers to sort out the power issue, for others to sort through the DVDs and pull out the ones most likely to be suitable for group viewing, and for the Xeruvians themselves to organize a pre-showing meal.

Mia just hoped the movie studios would forgive any copyright infringement for a group viewing.

Later that evening, after two meetings with Alara and a satisfying dive into her own research, Mia settled onto a cushion in the compound's dining room for the evening meal. Leona and Kira had flown in with their mates, though the males had retreated to another table, giving the women time together. Mia and her friends were joined by Jyrak and her daughter, Rejala, and by Isabella Rossi.

Zoran, Alara, and a little boy entered after the meal had begun. Mia waved them over and stood as they approached.

"Hey," she said, taking them all in with her smile. "I was afraid you wouldn't make it."

"And miss the exciting new Earth DVD?" Alara replied. "We would never!"

Mia and the other women sitting at her table laughed.

"Come sit with us," Mia said. "We'll make room."

Zoran caught her fingertips in his. "I shall sit with the other males, allowing you females to gossip about us to your heart's content."

"Oh, we have been," she said. "Trust me."

He leaned closer and whispered, for her alone, "Must I punish you again when we return home?"

"I wouldn't call that punishment." Especially since her body remembered all too well what he'd done to her. She drew away from him and smiled down at the boy standing calm and watchful beside Alara. "Hello. My name's Mia."

The boy looked from Alara to Zoran before turning to Mia and nodding solemnly. "I

am Nem, son of Nyklan of Clan Zikri.”

A fork clattered to the table. Mia glanced around as Isabella murmured, “Sorry.” The other woman casually picked up her fork, her attention so focused on her meal that it pricked Mia’s curiosity.

“My nephew,” Zoran said. To Nem, he added, “Would you prefer to sit with the warriors or the scientists?”

With another look around, Nem dropped his grandmother’s hand and tentatively placed it in Mia’s, shocking her.

“Oh!” she said. “I’d enjoy the company.”

“Someone must protect the women,” Nem responded, so seriously Mia had to bite her lip to stifle a laugh.

Even Zoran’s lips twitched with amusement. He knelt beside Nem and murmured something too low for Mia to catch, then pressed an encouraging hand to the boy’s shoulder and rose.

Mia touched his elbow before he could leave. “You’ll sit with us during the movie?”

“I shall never wander far, beloved.”

She nearly melted into a puddle where she stood, and was saved from complete ignominy by Leona’s snort.

Alara turned a speculative look on Mia, but all she said was, “I shall retrieve portions for myself and Nem, if you would make a place for us at your table.”

“Of course,” Mia said, and tugged Nem forward to do just that.

The meal hour sped past. Nem sat between her and Isabella while Alara chose a seat between Leona and Kira, drawing them into a conversation about their lives on Earth. Mia got the feeling the older woman would jump at the chance to visit.

For her part, Mia enjoyed a conversation with Jyrak and her precociously charming daughter. Nem sat silently beside her, his hand never far from hers. Isabella withdrew so far into herself, Mia wondered if she should do more to encourage the other woman to speak.

Finally, the time came for the meal to be cleared away and the movie to start. Everyone helped with cleanup and moving tables out of the way, as the dining room was the one room meant to fit everyone at once. The cushions were rearranged. Mara Sullivan fiddled with the projector and the DVD player. When she was done, someone hit the lights and the movie began playing against a large wall.

Zoran settled beside Mia and pulled Nem into his lap. “I was uncertain what to expect from these DVDs.”

“You’re going to love them,” Mia whispered. “Trust me.”

She snuggled against him, content, and quickly became engrossed in the movie. They’d debated all day which one to show. Some had wanted to go with an animated adventure, like *Cars* or *Finding Nemo*, to keep it kid friendly. Finally, though, they’d narrowed it down to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *The Princess Bride* so the adult males in attendance wouldn’t get bored. Mia had had the deciding vote, and it had been a tough one. She’d ended up closing her eyes and choosing at random. As Indiana raced across the screen, she thought it was a good choice.

The Xeruvians in the audience were all receiving a translation directly into their

earpieces. Mia hoped they could understand most of the film's context. The action, at least, was sure to keep everyone engaged.

Or so she thought until she caught Raelka Korlis sneering at her. Mia lifted her chin and stared the young woman down. Zoran had chosen her. Raelka would just have to learn to accept that.

Nem crawled into her lap and yawned, and Mia put Raelka and her ilk firmly out of her mind.

“What is it, baby?” she whispered.

He whispered something in Xeruvian, then buried his head against her shoulder. She cuddled him close, rocking him gently as his body went limp against her. A fierce protectiveness washed over her. How many children like Nem had she encountered over the years? Children whose parents had died or abandoned them, children who desperately needed someone to shelter them from the cruelties life inevitably heaped on their young shoulders. She'd had to sit helplessly on the sidelines for entirely too long, unable to save those children, but this child, she thought fiercely. This child she could help.

This child she could love.

Zoran draped an arm around her shoulders and brushed his lips across her ear. “Would that you carried our child within you.”

Soon, she thought. She wouldn't be able to resist him for much longer, and wasn't sure, in that moment, why she shouldn't give in now.

Her gaze fell on her friends, seated nearby. Lorik brushed Leona's hair back, then pressed a kiss to her shoulder. Kira leaned into Ryrda, who was looking at his mate as

if she were the most precious woman in the universe. Jyrak's brother Thorian had brought his mate, Elara Vega, and held her hand tenderly.

Mia sighed and leaned into Zoran's touch. This mating thing wasn't so bad, if it meant finding a deep and abiding love.

And she did love him, though she couldn't quite pinpoint the moment when she'd fallen. Despite his fierce possessiveness, despite his demands, she'd drifted into loving him, like a leaf gliding slowly along a gentle breeze. He was a good man, a proud one, not without his faults. But those faults she could forgive if he could find it in himself to look beyond the mating instinct and see her for who she was, warts and all.

His hand stroked over her hair, drawing her gaze to his. "What troubles you, beloved?"

Her heart clinched at the endearment. He said it so casually she wondered if he meant it or if it was simply what mates called each other.

"Nothing, my love," she whispered.

His gaze warmed, then he pressed a tender kiss to her forehead and tucked her against his side.

Later, after the movie ended and people started clearing up or drifting home, Mother Alara collected Nem from Mia.

"I see my grandson has claimed you as well," she said, amused.

Mia unwound Nem's arms from her neck and passed him to Alara. Her arms ached from holding him. For such a small child, Nem was surprisingly heavy. "I was

surprised he accepted me so easily.”

“Yet how could he not, when his uncle worships you as a goddess?”

Mia flushed. “He does not.”

“My daughter, my daughter,” Alara said in the same singsong tone she used when she chastised her son. “Have you not eyes to see? Has your heart not found him good and wise?”

“He’s a good man.”

“And a worthy one, else I would not entrust you to him. Do not make him wait too long, Mia, for his love can only control his instincts for so long.”

Mia sucked in a gasp and whispered, “He loves me?”

“Have I not said so? Has he not demonstrated his love on every occasion?” Alara shook her head, clicking her teeth in disapproval. “We will speak more of this on the morrow. I must return Nem to his father soon. Peace be unto you, my daughter.”

“And unto you, my mother.”

Alara flashed a pleased smile as she carried Nem away, leaving Mia deep in thought.

Zoran collected her much as Alara had collected Nem, by swinging her into his arms and carrying her to his conveyance for the ride home. She rested her hand on his heart, letting its solid thump soothe her.

When they’d locked themselves inside their small home, Mia whirled on Zoran and placed a hand flat on his chest, halting him just inside the entrance.

He stared down at her, his head cocked in curiosity. “Yes, my love?”

Love .

The word pierced her to her core. Was it true, then? Did he really love her as she’d come to love him?

She inhaled a slow breath, gathering her courage into a resolute knot in her chest. “If I run from you, would you chase me?”

His nostrils flared and the color leached from his eyes. “You wish to engage in the mating dance?”

“Yes.”

“If you run, I will not be able to control what happens when I catch you.”

When , not if.

She grinned, embracing the untamed recklessness boiling in her blood. For him , she realized. Only for him could she throw caution to the wind. Zoran would always catch her. He would always be her haven in the storm.

Slowly, she stepped back, locking her gaze with his as she kicked off her sandals, untied her shinsek’uk , and let it drop to the floor. She’d worn a loose skirt to movie night, a pale yellow to offset the robe’s deep red. That too fell to the floor, then she peeled off the matching tunic and underwear and stood before him nude, unashamed, letting him look his fill.

His eyes held hers for a long moment, burning her with the intensity of his gaze. Slowly, he took in her shoulders and the flutter of her heart between her breasts, the

soft curves of her stomach and hips and thighs, the length of her legs, her bare feet. He stripped off his weapons, unfastened his shinsek'uk and shrugged it off, and kicked off his shoes, his gaze never leaving her body.

She took a half step back, and a savage rumble began low in his chest.

“Mia?” he snarled.

“Yes, my love?”

“Run .”

She whirled around and fled toward the bedroom, her heart beating so wildly, it drowned out any noise he might've made. But she felt him at her back, felt his eyes on her, felt his heat drawing near.

She'd just scrambled up the short flight of stairs leading to the bedroom when his fingers grazed down her spine. She shrieked out a laugh and leapt for the bed, and he caught her, tumbling them onto it in a flurry of growls and muffled laughter and flailing limbs.

All too soon, he pinned her to the bed with his massive body, holding her arms above her head with one hand at her wrists.

His gaze locked onto hers, nearly feral with his need, and he snarled, “ Mine .”

“Always,” she whispered.

He claimed her mouth in a brutal kiss, grazing his fangs over her lips, sucking her tongue into his mouth, savaging her where before he'd always been so careful. Even when he'd locked them in her office and driven her to three swift orgasms, he'd been

gentle.

Now, he was all warrior, claiming his mate in an eons old dance she'd only just begun to understand.

He broke off the kiss with a fierce curse and buried his face in her throat. His fangs pierced her skin so sharply she gasped and arched against him, and gasped again when he rolled onto his back, carrying her with him. She landed sprawling across him with her legs to either side of his hips and his erection trapped between them, heavy and hard and oh so tempting.

“Accept me,” he demanded, his eyes a hot glow above the blood coating his lips. “Love me.”

She cupped his cheek gently. “I do, pjoril .”

His pupils constricted to pinpoints in his now-white irises. “Mia,” he groaned.

And she could make him wait no more.

Carefully, she guided his erection to her core and twisted her hips, pushing down until the broad tip slid into her.

“More,” he demanded. “Take all of me.”

“You’re so big.”

His mouth quirked into a smug smile, then he lifted his hips, pushed down on hers, and filled her in one smooth glide, stretching her painfully. Tears popped into her eyes. Holy cow, he really was huge, and it had been a long, long time for her. So long since she'd trusted another man.

Though she'd never trusted one as much as she did her mate. Even though he'd taken her away from everything she knew. Even though he'd bound them together without explaining it first. Against all reason, she trusted him, and that made the temporary pain of their first joining ease away into nothing.

Zoran flicked his thumb along her clit and curled his upper body toward her, sucking her nipple into his mouth, his fangs sharp as he marked her again. Mia dug her fingernails into his shoulders and let her own instincts take over, rocking her hips against his, encouraging him to take from her, to lose his tenuous grasp on his control.

She wanted to know what that felt like, wanted to know the depths of his own wild heart so she could find the depths of hers.

Her first orgasm took her by surprise, shuddering through her so sharp and quick, she nearly screamed.

"Again," Zoran growled as he rolled her onto her back, still seated deep within her.

His hips drew back and he thrust into her hard, his hips pistoning against hers in an unforgiving pace. Her limbs were so weak from her orgasm, she could barely hang on. She dug her fingernails into his back, arching her hips against his as her teeth scraped across his chest.

He uttered a string of untranslatable Xeruvian curses, but she got the gist. Her mate liked it when she marked him.

God, was she going to mark him tonight.

He stiffened above her on a low groan, and she felt his cock throb inside her, triggering another flutter from her pussy. Without a word, he withdrew and flipped

her onto her stomach, pushed her knees under her, and stroked a possessive hand along her bottom.

The slap on her butt cheek took her by surprise. She buried her face in the bed linens, biting her lip to contain a plea for more.

Zoran rumbled out a low, pleased laugh, then his finger pushed into her core. “Your pretty little pussy looks good coated in my seed.”

She groaned into the sheets, already so hot for him again, her hips rocked back of their own accord.

“Worry not, lover,” he growled. “We have only just begun.”

Quickly he drove her to another orgasm, then buried himself inside her, pushing her higher and higher with every desperate thrust of his hips, until she shattered completely beneath him, and found peace in his furious drive to claim her.

Zoran loved her so thoroughly and for so long that Mia lost track of time. They fell into an exhausted sleep, only for him to rouse a short while later and drag her into his sensual spell again. He could’ve loved her for days, and she wouldn’t have known it. And wouldn’t have cared if he had.

She drifted slowly out of sleep, rising gently into the faint glow of the emerging day. Her arm flopped onto the empty space beside her, and her muscles protested the slightest movement. Not just the muscles in her thighs and core; all of them. Light pain of another kind flared in the bite marks he’d given her. She measured them one by one, smiling smugly with her eyes closed, wallowing in the afterglow of their lovemaking.

The bed shifted beside her, and a warm cloth stroked her throat. “Is the pain very

great, pjora-la ?”

Mia popped one eye open and squinted at Zoran. His eyes were hidden beneath lowered eyelids and his mouth had tightened into a grim slash. Scratches scored his chest and thighs where she’d clawed him in her desperation, and little bruises bloomed along his throat and chest where she’d dug her teeth into him, marking him the way he’d marked her.

She nearly purred with the satisfaction of it. If that jealous little witch Raelka could see Zoran now, she’d know once and for all who he belonged with. Not that she’d let another woman anywhere near him, Mia thought, grinning. What’s good for the goose and all that.

The cloth hit a particularly fresh bite, and Mia flinched.

Zoran’s hand paused and he lowered his head. “I must apologize, beloved, yet can find no words to express the depths of my sorrow.”

Mia shifted her head along the bed. “What have you done that needs an apology?”

“This.” He rose suddenly and stalked away, then turned around and walked right back, stopping at the edge of the bed. When he spoke again, a dark emotion strangled his voice. “What I have done to you is unforgiveable.”

She glanced down at her body, stifled a wince at the bruises and wounds decorating it, not to mention the dried semen. “Oh.”

“Oh?” he exclaimed. “Such is all you can say? Have I robbed you of words as well as your dignity? Your safety?” He dropped to his knees and pressed his forehead into her hand. “There is no excuse. Even in the midst of the mating frenzy, I should never have lost control.”

“Zoran.” When he didn’t move, she rolled cautiously onto her side, careful of stiff muscles. “My love, look at me. Please.”

He raised his head slowly, and in his eyes she saw a grief and agony so vast, it nearly broke her heart.

“I wanted you to lose control,” she confessed. “I wanted all of you last night, wanted you to have all of me. Do you understand what I’m saying, Zoran? I love you and I wanted to give you everything. I wanted you to be free so you could give me everything, too.”

His gaze drifted down her body and landed on a particularly deep bite mark on her hip. “You are not angry?”

“No.”

“You do not wish...to leave me?”

“Absolutely not,” she said firmly. “Where would you get an idea like that?”

Honestly. He was so stubborn sometimes, so blind to the way she felt about him. Fear had done that to him. One day, maybe, her love would rid him of it forever.

She stroked a finger down his arm over one of the bruises she’d given him. “Besides, I marked you, too. Do you want to leave me now over a few love marks?”

“It is not the same,” he grumbled. “I am a warlord, born and bred for pain. You are soft and feminine and lovely.”

She snorted. “Tasty, too, apparently.”

“This as well, yes.” He lifted the cloth and rubbed it gently over another bruise, one above her breast. “You are truly not angry?”

“I wanted this,” she reminded him gently. “How could I not? I love you.”

“Love.” He groaned and dropped his head again. “If my cock could rise to the occasion, I would bury myself within you again. Perhaps this time, I would not allow even one space along your skin to go unmarked.”

Amazingly, warmth flooded through her, as softly as the breeze sliding through the jungle around them. “That sounds like a plan to me.”

“Ah, Mia, my love. You captured my heart with your first smile. Surely no other male could love his mate as much as I love you.”

He stood and lifted her into his arms, carried her into the shower, and together, they tended each other with tender kisses and the love blooming so newly between them.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:58 am

A few days later, Mia watched as warrior after warrior was presented to her and the other humans. It was the Day of Remembrance, a festival of the Fates to mourn those who had passed into the beyond and to celebrate the life they had all been given. It seemed to Mia as if every Xeruvian on the planet was there. She'd certainly met enough of them in the past few hours.

The humans had been given their own space, though Mia had argued against it. "We're not cattle, to be bought and sold among you for breeding," she'd said.

Zoran had soothed her with a gentle hug. "We do not see you as cattle, pjora-la , as you well know. If it were possible, I would allow the women to wander freely so long as they were accompanied by trusted warriors. Yet must we remain cautious, as too many unknown warriors are in attendance. I will not allow harm to befall your friends any more than I would allow harm to befall you."

She hated that he'd been so reasonable about it, and so right. The open-sided pavilion had been set up in a central location, where the women could watch the festivities and remembrances. Merchants hawked wares, albeit quietly out of respect for those who had lost loved ones in the terrible disasters whose aftermath had ultimately carried humanity to Zephyria. A stage had been set up across the way, offering a series of plays and musical groups. Mia watched these with interest, wondering if any of the plays had been recorded for posterity, then made a note to ask Sonja about bringing a film crew here so that Earth could get a taste of Xeruvian culture.

Zoran stood beside her, his dispassionate gaze a warning to every male who entered the pavilion in hopes of finding a mate. Some had, to the delight and, sometimes, dismay of the women. Mia had come to know many of them quite well since their

mass abduction and could nearly predict which ones were open to Xeruvian traditions and which ones would balk. They'd shared their stories with her, after all, and prodded her and the other mated humans for details of the process, satisfying their innate curiosity in this as they did in their work.

Zoran had set up a way for the males who found mates among the humans to court them. No one was allowed to carry their prospective mate away, as would normally happen. For those claiming a mate, Zoran first examined the warriors privately, then questioned the chosen females. If he was satisfied with their suitability, he allowed the couple to leave accompanied by one of his mated warriors as a chaperone, so that the women could enjoy the festival and remember their own dead. The women were to be returned to Mother Alara's care by the day's end. Anyone who violated the curfew risked forfeiting the right to court their mate, a punishment so severe a few of the warriors protested.

Until Zoran pulled them aside and offered to meet them in challenge. Even the prickliest warrior subsided after that.

Still, Zoran seemed pleased with the way things were progressing.

"It is my hope," Zoran confided to her, "that every human will be claimed today, so that we may move forward together as one people united in a common cause."

He'd moved off to examine a warrior in private when Mia felt a presence at her side. She looked up and up at the warrior towering over her, noting the sheer bulk of him and the scar running from the corner of his eye down his cheek. He had to be as tall as Zoran. Certainly, this warlord—for she was sure, by the arrogance stamped into his harsh features, that this male was a warlord and maybe even a clan leader—outmassed her mate. His shinsek'uk was a shimmery ice blue in color, reminiscent of glaciers and the frozen tundra, a close match for his hooded eyes.

The warlord bowed respectfully. “ Kii-la, novala , Lady Kerus.”

“Hello,” Mia said. “No disrespect intended, but who are you?”

“Kaelen of Clan Drexus, milady.”

“Lord Drexus?”

One corner of his mouth curved into a smirk. “Indeed.”

“Then I welcome you.”

“You are as gracious as rumor paints you.”

She snorted at that. “For a human?”

“For anyone. Zoran’s instincts chose well.” His gaze drifted to the women gathered near the center of the pavilion. “I confess, milady, that I stood in opposition to your mate on this matter.”

“What, bringing humans here?”

“And mating them. Intermingling our blood, perhaps weakening our species.”

“I think even the people who supported the measure were concerned about that,” Mia said, picking her words as carefully as she could.

Look at her, playing diplomat. Her parents, at least, would be proud.

“Yet must we follow the Fates to our destinies.” Kaelen touched the middle two fingers of his right hand to his forehead, mouth, and chest, then lifted his hand to the

sky, palm up. “Humans may appear weak, but they are not. To hear others tell it, you singlehandedly battled a vyirkolen in defense of your mate, then pulled him to safety through the wilderness on a stretcher made of rope and saplings felled by a single bite of your human teeth.”

She blinked at him blankly for a moment, then doubled over, laughing so hard tears rolled down her cheeks. Some of the women looked askance at her. Kaelen merely stared, his head cocked curiously as she’d seen so many other Xeruvians do, watching as her laughter spent itself and she dried her eyes.

“No,” she said, when she could catch her breath. “That’s not even remotely true.”

“I have the truth of it, and it was no mean feat. One day, perhaps, I shall win a mate as fierce and devoted as you.”

“So you’re here to find a mate?”

His gaze drifted over the women again. Mia followed his gaze, wondering if his mating instinct had risen for one of her friends, wondering if he’d abide by Zoran’s strict courtship rules or simply steal his human mate away like warriors of old. None of the women looked their way, though they had to be curious.

As a reply, Kaelen dropped to his knees in front of her and clasped his hands in hers, bringing her fingers to his forehead in a shocking act of supplication. “I have come to beg for your intercession on behalf of the northern clans.”

“Intercession?” she said slowly.

“Zoran’s hatred of me is well-known. He and I have clashed on more than one occasion, and now I fear that he will deliberately thwart any affiliated warrior from claiming his human mate.”

“Oh. I see.”

He remained as he was, kneeling before her, his hands clasping hers so gently, she barely felt the pressure of his touch. After a moment, he added, “What would you ask of me in return?”

“Nothing,” she said, appalled at the very idea. “I won’t stand between these women and a chance at happiness.”

“Yet you will not soften your mate to our plight.”

“I don’t think he’ll listen to me.”

“Then we are lost.”

His quiet confession made her heart ache. She tightened her grip on his fingers and was about to speak when a warrior’s roar ripped through the air behind her. Zoran , she thought, her heart tripping again. The women gave startled screams and scrambled aside as Zoran’s arms wrapped around her and lifted her bodily away from Lord Drexus.

Zoran drew his sword and roared, “How dare you touch my mate!”

Kaelen laughed and drew his own sword. “I will dare as much as needs must, Lord Zoran.”

Mia groaned. For a guy who wanted Zoran’s help, Kaelen sure knew how to push her mate’s buttons.

Hard hands wrapped around Mia’s arm and yanked her backward, and Mother Alara said, “Run, my daughter.”

“I’m not afraid of him.” Though a shiver of that very emotion ran down her spine.

“This is not the mating frenzy, child. It is pure rage. He cannot temper himself so long as he believes you to be in danger. Run, now.”

“Where?” Mia breathed, but Alara was already turning away, placing herself between the dueling men and the humans, her own sword drawn.

Mia caught a glimpse of Zoran’s eyes and inhaled sharply. White hot fury gleamed in his face, matched only by the deceptively calm eagerness in Kaelen’s eyes.

“Oh, my God,” she breathed. “They’re going to kill each other.”

“Mia,” someone hissed, and with that, Mia turned and fled.

Zoran faced Kaelen, bitter rage twisting inside him. He’d tolerated the other warlord’s insolence for far too long, both before the disasters and after. That Drexus now wanted contact with the human women, after so viciously opposing Zoran in the Warlord Council, was bad enough. But now to approach a mated female?

To touch his female?

And to have Mia accept that touch meekly, to bestow her beautiful smile upon that wretched northern claw?

Zoran’s vision narrowed to the warlord who had thwarted him at every turn. “I shall kill you for looking upon my mate.”

Kaelen smirked, his sword held at his side. “Will you then kill every male here as well? For surely all who have met your beloved have admired her grace and charm.”

“She is not a work of art for the masses to admire.”

“I know too well what she is, Zoran. How human she is.” Kaelen rotated his wrist, swinging his sword in a neat and deadly circle of glinting steel. “I grow weary of talk. Attack me or run after your little klikla .”

The insult hit Zoran exactly as Kaelen had intended it to, breaking Zoran’s control over his fury. He whipped his sword in an arc, swiping the sharpened tip at Kaelen’s midriff.

Kaelen leaned back, narrowly avoiding evisceration, and laughed. “The Southern clans must have forgotten their discipline, for yours to break so easily.”

“A warrior of the southern clans would never insult another mate’s pjora-la .”

“What insult did I proffer upon your exquisite mate? If she were mine, I would never allow her to escape my bed.”

In some dim part of his mind, Zoran knew the other warlord was baiting him, and knew, too, that it was working. Now was the time to pull back, to regain the rigid discipline that had allowed him to rise to the warlord rank in the first place. The discipline that had given him the necessary control to woo his mate when the temptation to simply claim her had ridden him so hard.

Perhaps if the male challenging him were any other, Zoran could have embraced his control. Yet was Kaelen Drexus the male to challenge him, and such challenge must be answered.

Dimly, Zoran remained aware of their surroundings, of the crowd quietening and stepping out of the way. Of his mother placing herself firmly between them and the most vulnerable among them.

And he was aware also of the sneer on Kaelen's face and of the many, many times the Drexus warlord had thwarted Zoran's purpose. From the time of their childhoods, when they first entered the clan-wide Ky'Lota trials, Kaelen had set himself against Zoran, for no other reason than that he could.

Then to bring Mia into their feud?

Enough!

With fury adding strength to his blood, Zoran attacked, pressing a hard offensive that few other warlords could hope to match, his sword a merciless harbinger of the Fates' bidding. Kaelen parried every slash and thrust, eagerly matching Zoran's zeal as they danced around the pavilion.

They had made a full round when Kaelen made his first offensive move. His sword hacked down, aiming to cleave Zoran's face in two. Zoran easily blocked the downswing, and the two warlords' swords slipped along the blades, locking at the guards.

An inhuman scream split the air, sending the first glide of fear along Zoran's skin.

"Vyirkolen," Kaelen growled.

Zoran snarled, "Did your Var'Kolite blood urge you to send it to harry my clan?"

"When will you forget the taint of my great-grandmother's blood?" Kaelen snapped. "Think what you will of me, Zoran, but even I would not risk the future of our race by setting a monster upon the human females."

Alara snapped her sword flat against one of the pavilion's posts. "Enough foolishness for one day. We must—"

A woman's shrill scream pierced Zoran to his soul.

"Mia!" he roared.

Kaelen danced back and fell into a defensive stance. "Go! Find your mate. We shall track the vyirkolen while you protect her."

His fury forgotten, Zoran left without acknowledging the other warlord again. He had vowed never to allow harm to befall his mate, and now, because he had indulged his fury, she was alone without his protection. Cursing his foolish pride, he raced through town in the direction Mia's scream had come from, praying for the Fates' intercession with every step.

The first thing Mia thought of as she ran away from the pavilion was the science center. Several other women, human and Xeruvian alike, were running with her, goaded into action by Jyrak and another mated female warrior.

The second thing was home.

But home lay on the other side of a long stretch of road exposed to the jungle. If she'd learned anything in her time on Zephyria, it was to avoid the open jungle.

So, she veered toward the science center instead. Her office was as good a place as any to wait out Zoran's wrath and the fight between him and Kaelen. When Zoran calmed down, there'd be plenty of time to lecture him about losing his temper over a perfectly innocent conversation.

They were also going to have a long, long conversation about trust. As in, he'd better start trusting her. No or else to it.

Her legs burned after no more than a block and a half of running. Mia slowed,

panting, and placed a hand to her side. She really did need to find a good walking path or exercise to help her stay in shape.

Ahead of her, Jyrak turned and jogged back. “You must get inside, Mia. The breeze will carry your scent to Lord Zoran, and he will never calm so long as he believes you to be in danger.”

“I know, I know,” Mia panted. She waved a hand toward the science center, which was still out of sight. “Just...go. Keep the other women safe. I’ll be right behind you.”

Jyrak’s lips tilted into a frown. “I should not leave you to fend for yourself.”

Mia snorted. “It’s not like I’m alone. Look around. Everybody on the planet’s here today, and no male will try to make off with a woman who’s openly flouting her mate’s bites.”

“He did mark you rather heavily.”

“You should see what I did to him.”

Jyrak rolled her eyes, a habit she’d picked up from her human peers. “Head straight to the center, yes?”

“I will, promise.”

Jyrak turned and jogged after the other women, lengthening her strides until she reached them.

Mia caught her breath and set out at a much slower pace. The festival really was crowded. Vendors lined the streets, waving to her as she passed. Attendees walked

past her, quietly chatting among themselves, some relaying the news that Lord Zoran had challenged Lord Drexus.

By the excitement in their voices, Mia guessed that was a rare sight.

It was her first time wandering Arkkukari alone. She wished she had time to poke and putter.

One of the humans approached, escorted by the warlord who'd just claimed her as his mate, with another warrior as an escort.

Quickly, Mia explained what had happened and asked the group to turn away from the pavilion until the fight had petered out. Their escort suggested retracing their steps to the Council Grounds where sanctioned Ky'Lota trials were being fought.

Mia walked with them for a while, then split off when the science center came in view. The crowd had lessened here, concentrated as it was deeper into the town center or at one of the other venues. She went to the front entrance, punched in her door code, and presented her biometrics.

The door remained locked.

Mia frowned. How odd! It had never refused her before. Maybe she'd punched in the wrong code?

She tried again, with the same results.

Great , she thought, huffing out a laugh. The back entrance it was, even though the building's rear faced the jungle. It was just a small stretch of jungle, though, nothing like the long walk home.

Mia walked around the side wishing for a glass of water, air conditioning, and a snack, not necessarily in that order. When she reached the back entrance, she saw Raelka Korlis standing just inside the door. Like the front entrance, the back one was fronted by a durable, see-through substance much tougher than glass. Mia gritted her teeth and waved at the young woman, then entered her code and scanned her biometrics. The door's lock refused to disengage.

Mia pointed at the handle and yelled, "Can you release the lock from the inside? I'm stuck out here."

Raelka's gaze had drifted away from Mia. Fear flashed over her face, then she bared her teeth in an ugly, ugly smile.

The hairs on the back of Mia's neck prickled. Slowly, she turned around. There, at the edge of the jungle, stood a massive vyirkolen , its razor-sharp fangs on full display.

The animal screamed at her, sending terror down Mia's spine.

She backed into the door, clawing at the handle, trying to open it. "Let me in, Raelka," she hissed, then risked glancing over her shoulder.

The foyer visible through the barrier was empty.

And Mia was trapped between death and a tightly locked door.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:58 am

Mia's mind blanked and she went absolutely still, horrified by the giant predator stalking leisurely toward her.

Did it know it had her boxed in? Could it smell the terror pinning her in place against the useless door?

A muted roar drifted to her, followed by a swift certainty: Zoran would come for her. All she had to do was hold on until he got there.

The knowledge gave her the courage to move. She glanced around, careful to keep her movements small and slow, though her heart fluttered wildly in her chest and her hands shook so badly, she had to clench them into hard fists against the door at her back.

The rear entrance had been designed primarily as an emergency exit. Nearly all foot traffic entered from the street on the other side of the building. Whoever had designed the science center had made this entrance smaller, though no less beautiful. An overhang curved above the rock-tiled patio stretching from the door to a graceful railing delineating the narrow, grassy verge lining the jungle. To either side, a ledge-like slope fronted the building, adding a gentle upward swoop for the eye to follow toward the roof over the entrance.

Jyrak's words came to her then. Vyirkolen were good jumpers, but they couldn't climb. If Mia could make it onto the ledge, which was hopefully too narrow for the vyirkolen to navigate, she had a shot at reaching the roof before the predator could swat her off with one of its massive, claw-tipped paws.

Her feet felt rooted to the rock.

Mia inhaled slowly, willing her rapid heartbeat to calm. But no, she could do this. She had to, if she wanted to live, and she had so, so many reasons to live, many of them beginning and ending with Zoran.

They'd just found each other, just discovered the kind of love she'd dreamed of having for so long. How could she leave him now, when they'd barely started their journey together?

That thought gave her the impetus to move. She inched her right foot to the side, toward the walkway and town and Zoran.

The vyirkolen yawned and shook its sleek head, then leaped toward her, landing just on the other side of the railing, not fifteen feet away, startling Mia. She screamed shrilly and dashed toward the ledge. Two heavy thumps sounded behind her, claws clicked against rock. She'd just reached the start of the ledge when something hit her back, knocking her off her feet. A heavy paw came down between her shoulder blades, pinning her to the ground, pressing the breath out of her lungs, and the vyirkolen let out its eerily human cry.

Oh, my God , she thought, oh god oh god oh god .

Teeth snapped closed above her, and the creature nuzzled her head with its snout. Mia whimpered as it batted at her, toying with her.

Playing with its food.

She flung one fist backward, connected with something hard, not even jarring the damn thing. It snarled and snapped, drawing another scream from her raw throat when its teeth grazed her upper back, snagging on her hair and clothing. Fire burned

in its wake, and she knew that its teeth had pierced her skin. Knew that its venom had already entered her bloodstream.

Feet pounded on the walkway. She raised her head and saw a familiar set of boots followed by half a dozen others. Claws pressed into her back, puncturing her skin. She inhaled sharply as the boots reached her and the weight lifted off her back, and slid helplessly into a dark fever dream as the venom worked its ill and Zoran battled the thing that had done this to her.

Zoran raced to where his mate was pinned beneath the weight of a monster. His heart roared in his ears, blocking the sounds of the other warriors running behind him and coming toward him from the other side of the science center. He ignored them all.

A vyirkolen 's venomous teeth were a mere handspan from Mia's delicate flesh. The creature opened its maw and closed them on her back, catching Mia's hair and clothes between its wicked teeth.

Zoran screamed. "Mia!"

Then he was there, slashing his sword, slicing just under the vyirkolen 's jawline, severing the connection between his mate and the thing trying to slay her. It reared back, taking a mouthful of hair and cloth with it, sidling away from Mia as she drooped to the ground, unconscious.

Kaelen, running toward them from the far side of the building, dropped his sword, drew his dagger from its sheath, and leapt. He landed on the vyirkolen 's back and wrested it away, stabbing his dagger quickly into the monster's chest.

Zoran had eyes only for his beloved. He dropped to his knees beside her and saw the true damage done: the beast's teeth had scraped across her back, piercing the flesh. An icy chill froze him where he knelt and his breath came in shallow pants.

No. Not Mia. The venom would...it would destroy her. When she had only just come into his life. When she had only just learned to love him.

He threw back his head and roared to the heavens. “ Reja-la, reja-la .”

My heart, my heart .

Firm hands pulled him away, then Jyrak was there, shoving an antivenom injection into Mia’s thigh. Others bore a simple stretcher and a flat board toward her.

Zoran tried to shove them away. “No! She is my mate. I must carry her!”

Jyrak caught his sleeve and yanked. “She may have suffered other injuries, my lord. We must allow the medics to tend to her until they have assessed the damage.”

One part of his mind understood her logic.

Another part, the primitive instinct that had led him across the galaxy to his beloved, struggled viciously to reach her.

Strong arms wrapped around his chest from behind and hauled him backward. “You must allow them to work, Zoran. Control the fear. Let them help her.”

His mother knelt in front of him, blocking Mia from view, and placed her hand on his shoulder. “Listen to Lord Drexus, my son. Mia’s luck will hold. The medics believe the antivenom was injected in time. Now we must wait.”

His soul cried out for her, and as his people carried her away, he begged the Fates to save Mia from the terrible monster they had sent to prey upon her.

They gathered in the lobby of the healing center, what Mia’s human friends called a

hospital .

Zoran could not bear the smell of the place, not when his beloved mate's life yet hung in the balance. The vyirkolen 's claws had pierced her spinal cord. There existed some possibility that the nerve damage would render her unable to control her lower body.

Xeruvian medical advancements had rendered all but the most severe nerve damage fully treatable. The question now became whether such techniques could be used to save Mia.

Assuming her body recovered from the vyirkolen 's venom. She had received only the slightest dose; yet were humans more susceptible to such toxins. And as she was smaller and more fragile, the venom had worked much faster on her than on a Xeruvian. She lay now in a coma while the medics frantically strove to save her.

To lessen the distraction he presented, Zoran retreated to the outer gardens surrounding the building and contacted Aklan Phyrz asking the other warlord to bring Mia's parents to Zephyria. He had only just disconnected the call when Kaelen Drexus joined him.

Without preamble, Kaelen said, "The vyirkolen carried the marking of the Var'Kol tattooed onto its inner lip."

Zoran stiffened. "The Var'Kol are dead. We wiped them from existence. Did not our fathers and grandfathers relay such stories to us? How then could they have marked a vyirkolen , when the last Var'Kol died so long ago?"

"We decimated their population. Such is true. But they finished the task, murdering their own women and children to keep them from falling victim to our warriors. Who can say that a few did not survive the knives of their kin?"

Was such possible? Had pockets of Var’Kol survived beyond the end of the last war?

A terrible memory filled Zoran’s mind, of the day the earthquakes came. He and his father had been touring the southernmost area of their jutji , plotting out areas for potential expansion of farmland. The ground had rumbled ominously, then a great rift had cleaved it in two, opening up a maw more terrifying and deadly than any vyirkolen yet born. His father had stumbled once. Looked up and given Zoran a strained smile. The land beneath his feet crumbled away into the rift. Zoran dove for his father, snatched at his father’s hand.

And missed. His father had slipped away. The last Zoran saw of the male who had been his rock, his taskmaster, his mentor, was his body falling into the black void, lost beyond retrieval.

Then the burning fever had come, a plague that had killed many Xeruvian females or rendered them sterile, a nearly fatal blow to his people’s survival.

Mia had insisted on reopening the investigation into its origins.

Had someone targeted her? Was there a Var’Kol spy living among them, covering up an alternative truth about those disasters?

But to what purpose? The Var’Kol were gone. Even if a few had survived, as Kaelen postulated, surely their numbers were not so great. After all this time, surely their enemy had faded into history.

There were other implications to Kaelen’s words, other possibilities Zoran and the other warlords must consider.

“If this becomes known,” Zoran said slowly, “if the old suspicions rise again, anyone with Var’Kol blood will become a target.”

“Do you think one of your people betrayed you?”

“A very few might have.”

“Do you believe I had a hand in this?”

Zoran considered the other warlord, the bad blood lying between them, the opposition and arguments, the trouble that seemed to cling to every conversation and deed. And considered, as well, the fact that Kaelen had risked his own life to save the life of another warrior's mate, one of the human females whose presence he had so vehemently opposed, the beloved of a warlord with whom he had carried on the bitterest rivalry.

Kaelen's expression had gone hard and cold. Without another word, he turned and stalked away.

Before he had gone far, Zoran said, “She will ask for you. Mia. She will want to thank you for saving her. You are welcome to visit, should she recover enough for visitors.”

“She will,” Kaelen said with a certainty Zoran envied. “Lady Kerus is no weakling.”

“Then you will be welcome among us.”

Kaelen swept his gaze over the garden, then nodded once. “Peace be unto you, Zoran, and unto your beloved mate.”

Zoran bowed respectfully. “And unto you, Kaelen, Lord of Clan Drexus, honored warrior of our people.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:58 am

Mia woke from the strangest dream. Brilliant green eyes. The echo of a bone-chilling, animalistic scream. A dark, insidious pain. It lingered in the clammy sweat coating her skin, in the hoarse dryness of her throat, and in the pins and needles prickling up and down her legs.

Her eyes opened to a blurry, unfamiliar room, clearly part of a clinic or hospital, and she caught the scent of woodsmoke and jasmine lingering in the air.

“Darling,” her mother said.

Mia tried to focus on the woman approaching her through the kaleidoscope of light prisms her vision. “Damn hallucinations. You’re on Earth.”

The vision snorted out a laugh. “At least you know where you are, a decided improvement.”

“No idea where I’m at, but it’s pretty,” Mia confessed. She turned her head to take in her surroundings and felt twin waves of dizziness and nausea roll over her. “Gah.”

“Zephyria,” the hallucinated facsimile of her mother said. “Do you remember now?”

“Like I could ever forget being kidnapped by a giant, horned alien.” And a horny one, too.

“By the sappy grin on your face, I’d say you remember that quite well.”

“We’re going to make babies.” Mia’s eyes fluttered closed and she smiled again.

“He’s really good at that.”

The dream woman choked on a laugh. “Well, the drugs haven’t worn off yet, I’m sorry to say. Rest now, love. I’ll go get your horned alien.”

“Yeah,” Mia said dreamily, then drifted back into much more pleasant dreams.

A stabbing pain woke Mia what felt like days later. Her eyes went wide as she inhaled and tried to sit up.

Zoran’s hand pressed against her chest, pinning her down, then his face appeared above her. “Easy, mate. The medics are conducting a nerve test.”

“I can tell,” she croaked out. “Water?”

“A moment more.”

One moment turned into dozens. Finally, after a small eternity of uncomfortable bursts of pain, the medics wheeled away their torture devices and Zoran helped her sip water.

“Your mother and father will return shortly,” he said.

Mia peered at him through squinted eyes. The room was still a little bright. At least the psychedelic auras had disappeared. “I thought I dreamed that.”

“You dreamed, but not of this.” He set the water aside and took her hand, gently stroking her fingers. “I sent for them when...”

Her fingers tightened on his. Even in her current state, it was easy to see that whatever had happened to her had hit him hard. His eyes were hollow, and he looked

as if he'd lost weight. There was a desperate air to him, as if something terrible had happened, a lonely, agonizing brand of grief and heartache.

"Shh," she said. "I'm ok now. At least, I feel ok."

"The damage was not quite as extensive as I feared." His eyes slid shut and he swallowed hard. "You must undergo physical therapy ."

He said the last two words in carefully enunciated English.

"Then I will." She brushed her fingertips along his jawline, then let her hand drop, surprised by how weak she was. "What happened to the vyirkolen ?"

"Kaelen Drexus slayed it."

"Dang. Well, now I guess I'll have to help him out."

Zoran's eyes narrowed. "Help him out?"

"That's between me and him," she said firmly.

"Mate," Zoran growled. "You will not keep secrets from me, particularly secrets shared with another male."

"Who said it was a secret? Besides, you'll figure it out soon enough. Trust me."

"I do."

"Good. Then that's settled." The pins and needles sensation roared through her, and she bit her lip to stifle a gasp. "Mom's really here?"

“And your father as well. I believe they linger at the science center discussing viruses.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Rest now. If you behave, I shall draw you a bath and wash you thoroughly.”

Prickles of another kind washed over her. “That sounds promising.”

“Indeed. We must begin making these grandchildren you pledged to give your mother.”

His smug tone made her laugh. “Well, now that I’ve promised, I suppose it’s a sure thing. There’s just one problem.”

“Yes, my mate?”

“I could really use some cuddles right now.”

“If it so pleases you, such will ever be my honor to oblige.”

Zoran crawled into the narrow hospital bed with her and held her gently against his chest until she fell into a deep sleep, safe and secure beside her beloved mate.

Over the next few days, Mia became intimately acquainted with her doctors’ torture devices, the machines they used to gauge the damage done to her spinal cord. She felt fine. Better than fine, really, at least physically. As hard as she tried to put it behind her, the memory of the vyirkolen haunted her, that and the fact that one of her own people had locked her outside with that monster.

When Zoran asked her what she remembered, Mia forced down her rancor as she told him about the locked doors and pleading with Raelka Korlis.

His eyes had gone from green to white between one breath and the next. “She will be

dealt with.”

Mia hadn’t asked how. Raelka had been given more than one opportunity to demonstrate her loyalty and had failed repeatedly. Now she would pay the price.

Mia’s parents settled into a spare bedroom in Alara’s house while Mia’s mother consulted with Emma Mitchell and her peers, both Xeruvian and human, on the nature of the virus that had so devastated Xeruvian females. Their stay was temporary. As soon as the ship dropped them off in Arkkukari, it returned to Earth, where Sonja Mathis and her mate Aklan Phyrz worked to reopen a dialogue with Earth’s many governments. The Reynolds would go back when the next ship traveled that way.

Until then, Mia welcomed their time together. She was happy to putter with her research around doctor’s appointments, physical therapy, and mentoring sessions with Zoran’s mother. Happy to let her friends drag her to movie night, and very, very happy when her doctors cleared her to resume intimate relations with her mate, as they put it.

Though Zoran still treated her as if she were made of glass.

A week after the attack, Zoran presided over an emergency session of the Warlord Council, flanked on one side by Mia and on the other by his mother.

While the warlords discussed the implications of the two vyirkolen attacks, Mia studied those in attendance. Because of the nature of the meeting, it had been opened to the public. The warlords who had a voice in the proceedings sat in a circle in the center of the open space. Whoever could squeeze in sat or stood around them, well back so that the warlords could move freely.

Mia recognized several among the crowd. The warlords who had trained beside her

mate during those early days aboard his ship, as well as those she'd met since their arrival. Her friends and colleagues from the science center. A few local merchants.

Her parents stood beside Jyrak on the outer edges, their curiosity so obvious Mia was sure even the Xeruvians could spot it.

Near the end of the session, a young, handsome warrior Mia vaguely recognized dragged Raelka into the empty space in the middle of the inner circle. The female's hands were bound behind her and her eyes were wild with a desperate, defiant fear.

When the two stopped, Zoran addressed the assembly. "You have heard the tale of the vyirkolen's attacks. Now hear the deeds of this female in relation to that attack."

Mia had been warned that she'd be expected to testify. Carefully, she outlined the events of that day, beginning with the conflict between Zoran and Lord Kaelen and ending with the last thing she remembered before she passed out: the weight of the vyirkolen on her back and the pain it inflicted before its venom seeped into her bloodstream.

She let no emotion color her voice, not even the anger and frustration and bitterness she'd felt when she'd realized Raelka had deliberately locked her out. Zoran's warriors had found evidence of her tampering with the security system, and others had seen her in the hallways near the science center's rear exit around the time of the attack.

There was no question as to the young woman's guilt. Her punishment, however...

Mia hardened her heart. Raelka Korlis represented a clear threat not just to her, but to the other humans and to the work her fellow scientists were conducting. She was a snake in the grass, though not a very clever one. Regardless of any other punishment, Mia had already decided that Raelka's time at the science center was at an end.

When Mia was finished, Zoran leveled an emotionless gaze on the young woman. “Did you set loose the vyirkolen upon my mate?”

“No!” Raelka shouted. “I had nothing to do with that.”

“Yet did you know to delete Lady Kerus’s passcode and biometrics from the science center’s security system beforehand. This suggests foreknowledge of the attack. Do you deny this as well?”

“I didn’t do it! Can’t you see what that, that filthy klika is doing to our people?”

Zoran rose to a stand in one powerful move. “You dare insult my mate?”

The young warrior holding Raelka upright shook her hard. “Tell them the truth of it, that I might call you sister one last time.”

Mia’s heart sank . Oh, God , she thought. That poor man. Were his and Raelka’s parents in the crowd, too? Were they watching as their daughter brought shame and dishonor on their family?

Not that she would judge them, but the Xeruvians might. As much as Mia hated what Raelka had done to her, she hated more what the young woman had done to her own family.

Raelka collapsed sobbing. “I had to get rid of her,” she whispered. “Had to get rid of the human taint. Don’t you see? I was doing it for you, Zoran.”

“ Lord Kerus ,” Zoran corrected coldly. “Who released the vyirkolen on my mate?”

Raelka shook her head, her gaze firmly on the ground.

“Very well. Until such time as you can speak the names of your conspirators, I hold you solely responsible for the attacks on your lord and his mate.”

“No!” Raelka cried. “I had nothing to do with the vyirkolen .”

Mia glanced around the crowd, judging the reactions of those present. No one looked kindly upon the young woman. Kaelen Drexus caught her eye and nodded. Mia returned his nod with one of her own. He had saved her. She would never forget that.

“Raelka Korlis,” Zoran said. “You are stripped of your family name and affiliation with the clan of your birth and branded a clanless traitor of the lowest order. From now to the end of your days, you are forbidden to set foot within the Kerus jutji . Furthermore, until such time as you release the names of those who aided you, you will serve as a drone in the quarries of Clan Drexus. No mate shall you have. No child shall you bear. No succor shall you find upon the land.”

“Mercy,” Raelka whispered.

Mia leaned forward and laid her hand on Zoran’s calf. “What mercy did you have for me?”

A low murmur ran through the crowd. Everyone present knew exactly how little mercy Raelka had given to Mia.

The young man holding Raelka’s arm let her go and stepped away from her. “You are no sister of mine, nameless one.”

He turned his back on her. A couple directly across the circle from Mia turned around as well, nudging a prepubescent girl to turn with them. One by one, the people standing around the warlords averted their faces until only her parents were left.

Paulina nodded once, her mouth pressed into a firm line, then she and Anthony pivoted until they faced away from the woman once known as Raelka Korlis.

The warlords rose and did the same, then Zoran, and finally, Mia levered herself upright using the cane she was forced to rely on until she fully healed. She stared down at the woman who'd inflicted so much damage on the people around her, and could find only pity in her heart.

“There are worse things than death,” she said softly.

The whip of a breeze carried the words over the assemblage as Mia turned slowly around and completed the symbolic death to which Zoran had sentenced her rival.

The pall of the day's events lifted once the Council meeting was completed. Mia allowed Zoran to carry her from the Council Grounds to his conveyance and pack her inside as if she were a child in need of tending.

The tending, she'd gladly take. The child part, not so much.

Mia begged off movie night with her friends, even though both Leona and Kira had journeyed from their jutjil for the meeting. The day had drained her. All she wanted to do was go home, go to bed, and cuddle with her mate.

A smile played over her mouth. And maybe do a little more than cuddle.

When they arrived, Zoran insisted on carrying her inside as well. He stopped just inside the door and gazed down at her, his eyes filled with affection and a gentle humor. “I have a gift for you, pjora-la .”

“Zoran, you can't keep giving me—”

He silenced her protests with a scorching hot kiss, muddling Mia's thoughts so much, she forgot what she was saying.

Zoran eased the kiss and nipped her lower lip with one fang. "Are you not curious as to the gift's nature?"

She laid her head on his shoulder, smiling. "Ok, I'll bite. What's this mysterious gift you got me?"

"Something very precious," he rumbled. "Something you greatly desire."

"You?"

He threw back his head and laughed so hard, he jiggled her in his grasp. "That as well, beloved. No, this gift must be seen. Look."

Zoran placed her carefully on her feet and steadied her as she glanced around their home. Everything looked exactly as it had when they'd left that morning. Cushions piled neatly on the floor, awaiting their leisure. The kitchen counters shone clean and empty. No breeze filtered through the apartment, which struck her as odd. A breeze was always blowing through those damnable open arches, unhindered by the forcefields—

Her eyes went round on a gasp. "You got me doors! Oh, oh! Just look at them! When? How?"

"I ordered them the morning of the not-dragon's not-attack."

She snickered. "As I recall, something else attacked me that day."

"Indeed," he said solemnly. "A mate attack."

Mia leaned into him, sighing happily. “And a wonderful mate attack it was. Zoran?”

“Yes, my love?”

“Attack me again.”

“If you so desire, I shall spend the entire night doing so.”

He lifted her against his chest and strode through their home, placed her gently on their bed, and stood looking down at her for a long, long moment.

Mia held a hand out to him, beckoning him forward. “What’s wrong?”

“When I saw the vyirkolen atop you—” He shuddered and dropped his head forward, closing his eyes against the memory. “I thought only of you, of the things that must be done to heal you. If you had been paralyzed, my love would not have diminished, though it meant forsaking the children I so longed to make with you.”

“Zoran,” she murmured. “You can’t dwell on what might have been.”

“I beg you, Mia. Allow me to finish.” His jaw worked for a moment before he continued. “When first we conceived the plan to mate with humans, we did not consider the lives those women would forsake. The life you forsook. We thought only of our people’s great need. And yet, when I met you and claimed you for my own—when I discovered the beauty residing within you—I could not bring myself to let you go. So great was my fear, that I challenged another warlord over an innocent touch, placing you in such grave danger, you could have died. I can never forgive myself for allowing this harm to befall you, after swearing that I would protect you with my life. Yet it was Kaelen Drexus who bore the risk, Kaelen Drexus who slayed the vyirkolen, while the near loss of you drove me to my knees.

“I cannot live without you, Mia Reynolds, borne of Earth, now of Clan Kerus. If you should decide that the price you have paid to be with me is too great, then I shall find a way to return you to your home, even at the cost of my own happiness.”

“My love, no,” she said, stricken. “Don’t say that.”

“It must be said, pjora-la . Beloved mate. My heart, my life. My soul.” He clutched her hand in his, his eyes blazing with love and grief and hope. “Yet must I also ask you to live by my side wherever you go. Here or on Earth, it makes no difference to me. I will follow where you lead, gladly, if you but ask it of me.”

“I’m happy here,” she said gently. “I’m happy you found me.”

He touched the middle two fingers of his right hand to his forehead, mouth, and chest, then lifted his hand to the heavens. “By the will and blessing of the Fates, my love.”

She tugged on his hand until he crawled across the bed and carefully lowered himself onto her. “There’s just one thing missing.”

“Name it and I shall endeavor to fulfill the lack.”

Her smile carried all of the love in her heart. “Let’s make a baby.”

“From your mouth to the Fates’ loom,” he whispered, then she drew him into a kiss, and they forgot about the world outside their doors until the dawn’s light blessed the union of their souls in a dance as eternal as time.

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A week later, Zoran slipped away from his beloved mate and journeyed across the solar system to the fourth planet from their star, home of the extinguished Var'Kol civilization. Three warlords traveled with him: Nyklan Zikri, the mate of Zoran's deceased sister; Lorik Voss, mate to one of Mia's good friends; and Kaelen Drexus, representing the fractious northern clans.

Their shuttle touched down first near the ruins of the largest city, on the spaceport's broken landing pad. To the best of Zoran's knowledge, no Xeruvian had set foot on the planet since the last Var'Kolite War ended, when Zoran's father was himself a newly ranked warrior.

Years before his own birth, Zoran mused, for his father had been well into adulthood before the Fates directed him to his mate.

The four warriors spread out, searching the vast ruins for an impossibility: signs of an extinction magically reversed.

But the spaceport was empty, its machinery ravaged by time and the might of the Xeruvian armies. They found nothing to indicate anyone had recently visited, let alone the revival of an entire civilization.

Zoran wandered among the ruins, surveying what was left of their ancient enemy. Vegetation encroached upon the ruins, consuming the devastation as if to erase a great blight. He had expected to smell death upon the winds, yet the only scent filling his nostrils was that of the planet itself, the scent of life moving ever forward, with or without the people that had once dwelt here.

It was an eerie smell, that green emptiness. Zoran raised his hands to the Fates in thanks for sparing his own people from the universe's implacable grind.

The planet's two other spaceports were as hollow of life as the first. Nyklan suggested flying over the cities and running infrared and other scans. Zoran acted as pilot, going wherever the others thought best as his thoughts roamed freely. Had the vyirkolen attacks been a mere coincidence? Did they now search for life among a land occupied by ghosts?

Nyklan grunted.

Lorik twisted around in the co-pilot's seat, facing the other warlord. "You found something?"

"I found the possibility of something, though perhaps not the something we seek." Nyklan rattled off a set of coordinates. "Set us down there."

Zoran input the coordinates and guided the shuttle toward the planet's surface. Once on the ground, the four warlords ranged out, their backs to the shuttle. Nyklan had directed them to a barren wasteland, where even the wind feared to blow. The sun shone small and bright overhead, its light too weak to impart true warmth to the atmosphere.

Zoran was glad for his skinsuit and sturdy boots. Though the atmosphere was breathable—barely—the air held a briskness that chilled his horns and numbed his lips.

Kaelen's gaze slowly scanned the horizon. "What are we looking for?"

Nyklan paced away from the shuttle, his own gaze fixed on the sensor in his hand. He stopped two shuttle lengths away, scuffed his boots in the hardpack, then circled

around and tried again. His boot hit something with a dull thud.

Nyklan knelt beside it, using his gloved hand to push back the bone-dry dust. “This,” he said. “A live cable.”

“Live?” Lorik asked.

“Power runs through it. It could be nothing. The Var’Kol possessed some self-maintaining technology.”

Nyklan stood, brushed his hand off against his thigh, and set off. Presently, he stopped again and kicked his toe into the ground. Another clang rang out. The warlords crouched around the object he’d uncovered, a square metal plate set flush with the ground save for the hinges along one side and an inset handle on the opposite.

“What is it?” Zoran said.

“Access to—” Nyklan cocked his head and ran his scanner over the metal plate. “It appears to be an access point for a power relay. There may be a tunnel beneath it.”

Lorik shifted his balance and ran gloved fingers over the handle. “Should we investigate?”

“It is dead,” Nyklan said flatly. “Nothing is down there.”

Zoran exchanged a glance with Lorik. “Still. We are here.”

“I would volunteer to explore this dead space,” Kaelen said, smirking, “but for the Var’Kol blood running through my veins.”

Lorik rolled his eyes in a very human way. “I shall go, oh mighty Lord of the North. Fates forbid someone accuse you of tampering with our investigation, such as it is.”

Zoran curled his fingers under the handle and heaved it up with a grunt. “Rusty,” he muttered.

The four of them peered down into the darkness. Nyklan held his scanner over the void and switched it to emit a downward light.

“Hold it there,” Lorik said, then he scampered over the edge and climbed down the metal rungs disappearing into the darkness. His feet made an audible thump when he landed and a light swept around the space below. “Nyklan had the right of it. The room is empty.”

“What kind of room is it?” Zoran called.

“Utility control?” The light wavered as Lorik moved around. A moment later, he added, “If a tunnel lies beneath this room, I can find no access point.”

Zoran glanced at Nyklan. “What say you?”

“Only what I know,” his brother by fate replied. “Live power runs from that cable into this point. There may be a tunnel beneath it. Otherwise, I cannot say.”

“Would that we had a clearer sign,” Kaelen grumbled.

“Would that the Fates had not consigned this lot to us,” Zoran replied. “Then we would not now be in a position to decide whether and what action to take.”

“Should any chance exist that the Var’Kol survived—” Nyklan shook his head. “It hardly seems possible.”

“Yet must the possibility be considered.” Zoran clapped his hands to his thighs and stood. “Once more around the planet, then we shall journey home and debate this at the next Council meeting.”

“Where nothing will be decided,” Lorik grumbled as he climbed out of the underground room.

“Something will be decided, even if it is only between the four of us.”

Zoran turned to walk away when some instinct drew his eye to an odd flow of the landscape. He pivoted toward it, approaching it carefully, trying to discern what had caught his eye, then sucked in a sharp breath.

Lorik appeared on his right. “Is that what I think it is?”

Kaelen flowed silently into the space to Zoran’s left. “Shuttlecraft landing marks.”

“Yes,” Nyklan said as he knelt beside the disturbance. “Fairly recent as well.”

“Could it be the Var’Kol?” Lorik said.

“These could have been made by anyone,” Nyklan responded flatly. “Another warlord bringing his clan warriors here to practice maneuvers. A passing trader curious as to what lies within this accursed place.”

“Indeed,” Zoran said. “We shall approach the Warlord Council and investigate further.”

Yet as they walked away, he could not help rubbing his hand across his prickling nape. Something lay amiss in the land of the dead. Only time would tell what form that wrongness took.

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All will be as it should . Part of the Xeruvians' acceptance of and belief in fate. (See: Pjorii).

By fang and claw . Wholeheartedly, particularly in a dicey or militant situation.

By the ashes of [deceased person] . The preface to a vow of solemn intent.

Gyngi . A derogatory insult that likens someone to an emasculated male or hairless chested boy or one without testicles; one so weak, he cannot sire children.

Jutji . A province, region, or state, depending on the context. Often used to mean a clan's territory. The plural is jutjil .

Kii . A Xeruvian's essence, comprised of not just their soul, but their mind and body and more.

Kii-ba'il . Soul teacher. Sensai. The person who mentors someone through their early years in the discipline of Ky'Lota.

Kii-la, nona-il . My soul greets yours (or more literally, my soul to your soul). A traditional Xeruvian greeting said to a male of equal or higher standing. Kii-la, novala is said from one female to another of equal or higher standing, or to a female from a man of equal standing. When a person of high status is speaking to a male or female of lower status, they would say Nona-il'la (to a male) or Novala-la (to a female), which means roughly your soul is mine (to protect) .

Klika . A small, burrowing rodent that lives on Zephyria. Often used pejoratively to

describe weakness and/or timidity.

Ky'Lota . Literally, soul dance . A martial arts discipline used to help young warriors (male and female) control their emotions and channel their strength toward good.

Peace be unto you . A customary farewell. The reply is, "And unto you."

Pjora-la . Essentially, "my fated love." More literally, "the one the Fates gave to me" or "fate given." Said by a male to a female mate. The masculine equivalent (said by a female to her male mate) is pgoril .

Pjorii . the Fates.

Reja-la . My heart. Also used as a name.

Senna . Four days, Zephyrian time.

Shinsek'uk . The Xeruvians' traditional outer robe, styled depending on the traditions and colors of each clan. Usually embroidered.

Skinsuit . Formfitting armor that resembles a wetsuit.

Var'Kol. An extinct enemy civilization.

Vyirkolen . A vicious predator often tamed as a pet by the Var'Kol. Also, an insult meaning something like Var'Kol scum or sympathizer (Var'Kol pet).

Wristcom . A multi-function wrist computer slash communicator that also assists implants with translations. Roughly the size of an oversized watch, from a human perspective.