



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

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** When Sonja Mathis interrupted a diplomatic negotiation, she had no idea she'd dropped herself into hot water.

For the meeting was between ambassadors representing select nations and Aklan Phyrz, a massive mountain of an alien from an extrasolar planet.

Aklan knew Sonja was his mate from the moment their eyes met. But how could he convince her, a frail human, to accept him into her heart? Especially when the fate of his entire planet was on the line.

**Total Pages (Source):** 13

# Page 1

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Aklan Phyrz searched for patience as Earth's diplomats chatted among themselves. He and his fellow warlords had contacted the humans three days ago, local time, and had yet to make any headway among them.

How hard could such negotiations be? In exchange for advanced technologies, the Xeruvians had requested access to unmated human females of breeding age, to help them replace a population destroyed by disaster and disease. The proposition was so simple, even these small, backwater klika should understand it. In fact, the human diplomats should be genuflecting at the warlords' feet, considering how advanced some of the proffered technologies were. Instead, they dithered endlessly, their every word couched in the kind of inconsequential dung Aklan despised.

When the plan had first been hatched, before the Xeruvian warlords had boarded the Warlord Council leader's spaceship and traveled across the galaxy, Aklan had favored direct negotiations such as these. The alternative, stealing the women away, seemed barbaric; and while the warlords, with their massive size and horns curling around the sides of their heads, might appear demonic to these lesser creatures, at their hearts they revered peace over war.

Aklan ground his molars. If the situation were not so dire, if these puny klika were not such a good genetic match...

But he had been assured they were. No other species within easy range of their spaceships could offer such a close compatibility. None was strong enough to survive the mating frenzy, a problem even for humans. Certainly, no other nearby race had the same capacity for intelligence as these humans. As small and weak as they seemed, at least their scientists, engineers, and other researchers held great promise.

That was part of the warlords' plan, to bring back fertile females who could also aid the Xeruvians in their recovery, with their intellect if not physically. No warlord expected to find a proper mate among the humans, no matter their genetic and sexual compatibility. But to find a female worthy enough to bear healthy children, to help them rebuild their world? That would be enough, even if it meant sacrificing the sacred mating bond.

On the other side of the wide conference table, the human from the clan China leaned into the human from the clan United States, while the male he'd been talking to, one from the clan Russia, engaged a human from the clan Saudi Arabia in conversation. All in different languages, all using different cultural signals. The only common trait among them, other than their shared species, was the unanimous choice in location: a bland conference room located outside a desert landing strip in a remote area of the United States, buried beneath Earth's surface where no satellite surveillance could detect them.

Aklan bit back an impatient sigh and shut his translator off before the cacophony addled his mind. It had all seemed so simple before they departed Zephyria, their home world. Find a compatible intelligent race, negotiate an exchange, fly home to begin rebuilding their population. Aklan, being the most experienced diplomat among them, had anticipated snags, but not to this degree. He'd never met another species that loved to hear themselves talk as much as these humans did, or that so obviously did not wish to yield any concessions.

Fortunately, the warlords were not such simple creatures. Already, his companions worked on another way for them to meet their objectives, an avenue that would ensure their long journey had not been wasted.

An enticing fragrance drifted to him, cutting through his impatience, and Aklan froze. That scent. He had never smelled its like. What was it? Where did it come from?

His attention snagged on a female as she walked across the room and handed the United States diplomat a thick folder. Once they'd discovered the Xeruvians' needs, the Earthlings had been very careful never to expose the warlords to the physical presence of one of their fertile females. Aklan had yet to meet a human female of any age, though he'd had the pleasure of several video conversations with higher ranking elderly females. Pleasant people, really, those women. Much more interesting to look at than this crop of suited males, anyway.

Aklan eyed this new female covertly, carefully guarding his expression so that none of the males present would sense his interest. This female seemed tall for a human, taller than several of her male compatriots, and had a pleasing figure. Softer than a Xeruvian female, true, but possessing the same athletic grace and determined stride. Her hair was the oddest color, a deep red-brown, and her skin too pale against the severe white of her shirt.

Yet there was something about her, something that compelled further study.

She handed off the folder to her male counterpart, who shot Aklan a wary glance before dismissing the female. As she turned, her gaze darted to Aklan, triggering a reaction he had never expected.

His body tightened and blood roared in his ears, and over the low growl rumbling from deep within his chest, a single thought tolled.

Mine .

The woman arched a beautifully curved eyebrow at him, turned sharply, and exited at an unhurried pace, the delectable curves of her ass twitching enticingly beneath the tight fabric of her black skirt.

Aklan watched her go, his hands clenching and unclenching into fists beneath the

table. The mating instinct thrummed through his blood, centered on the naked desire to claim her now. Only the long-practiced discipline of his vocation checked his impulse to chase her down, to corner her in a secluded room, to sink his teeth into her throat and begin the mating rite.

He wrenched his body under control, cursing the erection pressing against his breeches beneath his tunic and robe. She is human, he reminded himself grimly, a fragile, delicate little klika of a human. She might not survive the mating frenzy. He could never risk unleashing it upon her.

Therefore, he must master the instinct urging him to claim her as he would a Xeruvian female, now while it rode high in his blood.

Yet, he could not tear his gaze away from her retreat, could not bring himself to cut short the bittersweet agony of watching her walk away without his bit upon her throat, and hers upon his.

She disappeared through the conference room's doorway, breaking his thrall, and Aklan remembered the diplomats gathered around him. They had, for once, fallen silent and turned their gazes to him. Some looked horrified, some amused. Mike Nicholson, the United States clan's diplomat, merely looked resigned.

Aklan pinned his gaze on that male. "Who is the female?"

"Not part of our negotiations," Nicholson said flatly.

Aklan allowed his hunger to bleed into his expression. "If you wish to acquire any of our technology, she is very much a part of our negotiations."

"Ambassador Phyrz," the other male began.

Aklan stood abruptly, cutting Nicholson's objections short. "I wish to meet her. You will arrange it."

Nicholson's mouth firmed into a thin line. "And if I don't?"

Aklan smiled coldly, baring sharp fangs. "Arrange it."

He left before another objection could be uttered among the humans.

When Mike Nicholson had selected Sonja Mathis to be part of a secret diplomatic mission, she'd had no idea what to expect. Certainly not first contact with a highly intelligent race of extraterrestrials.

Yet here they were, hunkered down at Area 51 in the middle of a salt flat in Nevada, part of a team negotiating with said extraterrestrials while an alien spacecraft hovered in geosynchronous orbit over the site.

As part of the emergency prep, she and the other members of Mike's hastily gathered team had studied photographs of the aliens, taken from the video of their first message to Earth's leaders. Xeruvians, they called themselves, a culture of loosely allied clans located light years away on a planet they called Zephyria.

Even after being in the same room with an actual Xeruvian, Sonja had a hard time believing they were real.

Maybe it had been stupid of her not to pass the intel Mike had requested to him through a male colleague. But she'd wanted a look at a Xeruvian, an up close, personal look. Pictures could only tell you so much about a person, after all, and as Mike's right-hand man, she'd needed to know what they were up against.

Boy, had she gotten an eyeful.

The Xeruvian was a mountain made flesh, like a living sculpture carved out of basalt. Even sitting, he appeared huge. When he rose to his full height, he had to be least a head and a half taller than Mike, who stood nearly six feet tall in his socked feet. If the Xeruvian had an ounce of fat on him, she hadn't seen it. No, she'd been too busy trying to keep her eyes from plopping out of her head. Her curiosity had gotten the better of her, piqued by the low, rumbling growl the Xeruvian had emitted the moment she'd stepped into the room, and that one quick peek had nearly floored her.

Stupid, stupid . It hadn't hit her how alien he was until their gazes locked for the briefest moment; and in that moment, her heart hiccupped, her breathing hitched, and her knees went wobbly, no man had ever given her before.

No human man anyway.

She'd forced herself to walk at an even pace away from the conference room, though she'd swear she could feel the alien's eyes boring holes into her back. Forced herself to nod coolly at the people she passed in the concrete block corridor, security, soldiers, and other members of the various diplomatic teams gathered hastily in the classified desert facility. With every step, she'd wrested herself back into control, calming her heartbeat and breathing, stiffening her weak limbs, and trying so very hard to ignore the way her nipples had pebbled when he'd flicked a coolly assessing gaze down her body.

Her legs wobbled again just as she finally reached her temporary office. Calmly, as if her entire world hadn't been turned upside down, she closed the door, shutting out her colleagues, and collapsed in the chair behind her desk.

Ok, fact number one: the Xeruvian, alien though he might be, was the hottest male she'd ever laid eyes on.

Hottest. Guy. Ever .

If all the warlords were built like him, human women would line up for days just to spot a glimpse.

Sonja closed her eyes and replayed the brief look she'd gotten in her mind, her lips curving into a faint smile. He wore simple clothing, an off white, sleeveless tunic under a subtly embroidered sleeveless robe the color of the lagoon surrounding the Maldives. Presumably he'd paired those with similar clothing worn on the lower half of his body, inconveniently hidden by the conference table. Broad shoulders. Massive, muscled arms. Hair the color of midnight, styled in a short, messy mop. Keenly intelligent eyes nearly the same color as his robe, a hawkish nose, a strong chin. Very human-like, all in all, except for the horns curling backward from his temples.

Oh, his rock-hewn face was just different enough to mark his alienness, but not so different as to be off putting.

Just remembering the look he'd given her made her heart leap into a rapid patter.

She sighed and moved on before the memory sank its smoking hot hooks into her imagination.

Fact number two: she was attracted to him.

There. She'd acknowledged her own weakness. Like chocolate, she had a feeling this warrior would be addictive. And like chocolate, she planned on avoiding temptation whenever possible, or at least managing it. There was always the possibility that he had no idea of the effect he'd had on her.

She snorted at that. Fat chance. If ever a man knew his effect on women, it was that one.



Even if he did notice, so what? She had a job to do here. So did he. Better to stick to business.

Better, she thought ruefully, to've handed off that damn file to a male colleague.

But she'd wanted a peak, and Mike had needed the file right then. So. What's done was done. Now she'd have to live with the consequences, whatever they might be.

Her eyes flew open at a polite tap on her door. She sat up and affected a cool, composed expression just as her boss poked his head in the door.

Mike Nicholson looked the part he played, a distinguished diplomat with decades of service under his belt. After serving two tours as a Green Beret in Vietnam, he'd finished his degree in political science and earned another in international relations. His expertise in Southeast Asian politics and culture had led to his appointment as an attaché to the United States' embassy in Seoul, where he'd cut his teeth on Cold War era diplomacy. From there, he'd become one of the most well-known diplomats ever to grace the political stage.

Rose, his late wife, had followed him from tour to tour, nurturing talent and diplomacy in equal measure before succumbing to cancer two years ago. Mike had reeled from the loss of his wife and partner. As soon as he could, he retired to their home in Nantucket Bay with his grandchildren and dogs. Sonja never thought he'd accept another assignment, but who could resist first contact?

She waved him in and studied him as he closed the door and took a seat opposite her. His conservatively cut hair had gone completely white after Rose's death, and while she knew he exercised and tried to stay active, the last two years had taken a toll on him. Dark circles shadowed his eyes, and fatigue had leached some color from the tan he'd acquired after retiring. She made a mental note to gently usher him toward a nap before negotiations resumed.

He tapped his hands on the arms of his chair and settled a frank look on her. “Well. That was interesting.”

Sonja reclined in her chair and crossed one leg over the other. “Should I hand in my resignation now?”

He waved that off. “It would’ve happened sooner or later. Better you than a simpering fool.”

Sonja hummed a noncommittal note and zipped her lips shut. She’d expected at least a slap on the wrist, not to have her lapse in judgment, however small, waved off without a reprimand.

Mike flashed a grin at her now. “See? That’s why I like you. You know when to keep quiet. Important skill in our line of work. You made an impression, by the way, and not just on the Xeruvian.”

“You asked for information. I gave it to you. That’s my job.”

“And you’re damned good at it. May I be frank?”

She nodded solemnly. “Always.”

“You gave us an in. Granted, not the in I’d hoped for. I never wanted to throw you or any of the other women here to the wolves.”

“I know why women have been excluded, Mike. It makes sense, considering the Xeruvians’ terms.”

“Broodmares,” he said, his disgust hidden artfully behind the mildly voiced word. “We’ve moved beyond that, in the West, at least.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way.” Sonja waved a hand at her laptop and the intel she’d gathered on the women scientists and researchers at the Center for the Advancement of Humankind. Each woman represented exactly the kind of female the Xeruvians wished to meet: skilled, intelligent, unattached, and young enough to reproduce. In other words, everything a human male wanted in a potential wife. Humankind’s first contact had turned out to have very human needs indeed. The idea amused her no end.

“I’ve worked with some of these women before,” she continued, suppressing her amusement in favor of the professionalism Mike expected. “Many of them would give their right eyetooth to meet a real, live extraterrestrial.”

“Be that as it may, we’d like to ensure the women will be treated well before handing them over wholesale.”

“Wholesale? Surely they’ll have a say in the matter.”

“Yes. The Xeruvians have been very clear there. They’re rather—” A faint smile flicked across his mouth. “—enlightened on that score. Their leader’s mother has assumed his place on their ruling council while he’s away. I take it she wields a not inconsequential amount of power in her own right, apart from any reflected power gained by her son’s position.”

Sonja bit her tongue to contain her curiosity and waited for Mike to make his point.

His smile died on a weary sigh. “He requested a meeting with you. Their diplomat, Aklan Phyrz.”

She rolled the idea around for a moment before answering. “Did he say why?”

“Only that it was nonnegotiable. Of course, you have the final say.”

“But you need an in.”

Mike nodded once. “We need an in, someone who can get close to him, learn what they’re really like. What they really want. And I don’t want to throw my best aide to the wolves.”

“I knew there would be consequences when I walked into that room.”

“Not these consequences. You’re not a broodmare.”

“No one says I have to be. He could have another interest in me.”

Mike looked at her for a long moment, his mouth twitching with humor. “You’re an intelligent, highly talented woman, Sonja, but you’re also incredibly beautiful. From the look he gave you when you entered the conference room, it’s fair to say he noticed.”

Heat flushed her cheeks, and she cursed her lack of control. “Whether he notices or not, I’m here to do a job, not flirt with an oversized ET.”

She’d meant to lighten his concern, maybe even to tickle that wicked sense of humor Mike hid so well.

Instead, his expression held a touch of sadness. “I’m sorry it came down to this.”

“As you said. If it hadn’t been me, it would’ve been someone else. We couldn’t keep them away from women forever.”

“Would that we could. Then we could send them on their way without handing over our best and brightest to virtual strangers. Technological advances be damned. Losing as many scientists as they’ve requested could cripple our own advancement, not to

mention national security.” He shook his head and stood, his diplomat’s mask firmly in place once again. “How much time do you need to make a decision?”

“None,” she said. “Arrange the meeting, the sooner the better.”

“Normally I’d hand that sort of thing off to you, but in this case, I think I’d like to make the arrangements myself.” He shrugged his suit jacket into place, smoothed the buttons down. “Thank you.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “For what, doing my job?”

“For being you. I’ll let you know as soon as the meeting’s arranged.”

He left without waiting for a response.

What could she say anyway? She’d known there’d be consequences. She just hadn’t expected them to be this.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:59 pm*

Aklan retreated to the rooms reserved for him and him alone, wishing he could meet with his fellow warlords in person. When Zoran Kerus, the Warlord Council's leader, had landed his spaceship on Earth the first time, they'd vowed to do so again only when needed. The warlords had agreed unanimously to remain hidden from the majority of Earth's population until negotiations had been resolved.

And, having the spacecraft hovering over this exact spot served as a deterrent. No one would harm Aklan so long as the ship had a weapons lock on this facility, not after he'd explained, patiently and in excruciating detail, how easily Zoran's ship could destroy every major city on Earth.

They weren't here for destruction, but for peace, for trade, for aid from a foreign race. To find suitable breeding partners among the human females.

Females, Aklan now knew, who could possibly become the warlords' mates in every way.

He was as shocked by that discovery as much as anything. How could Xeruvians be so compatible with another race, one not born on their own world, one not of their own culture?

And yet, it must be so, for the knowledge that the human female was his mate had locked into place with the certain surety of the coming night. Just as a planet revolved around its sun, creating predictable intervals of light and darkness, so too did a warlord know his mate. The knowing thrummed through him still an hour later, urging him to seek her out, to claim her, to seal their bonding in the most time-honored ritual of his kind.

But she was human and had human ways, ways so dissimilar from his own they were baffling.

How could a human male not know his own mate on sight?

Yet this was how humans lived, stumbling through life uncertain of their own destiny.

He could not be so uncertain of his. Even now, desire hummed through his blood, an ebullient flame he could feel in every part of his body. His skin felt alive, and he was aware of his surroundings as he had only rarely been before, when battle had demanded it of him. This electric awareness had settled into his cock, hardening it to the point of pain. Delicious pain, a pain welcomed because of what it signified, but pain nonetheless. The erection would fade, given enough time, but the pain would linger until his mate welcomed him to her, soothing his savage need as nothing else could.

As he would, in turn, protect and nurture her. Love her. Cherish her.

Aklan shrugged off his outer robe and laid it across a chair. Though he'd had no hope of finding a suitable partner among the humans, he had nonetheless come prepared to court one. He knelt in front of a large, black satchel placed to one side of his temporary quarters, pressed the pad of his forefinger against the print-lock securing the fastening, and when the lock released, unfastened it and delved inside.

Inside, beneath carefully folded clothing and various sundries, lay the items he'd brought as courting gifts. Reverently, he drew out a robe fashioned in the style common among Xeruvian women of the warrior caste and studied it critically. The fabric's jewel-toned blue shimmered in the room's harsh lighting as he turned it this way and that. Perhaps he should start with a smaller gift, one not quite so rich in detail, cost, or meaning?

Would a human female recognize the gift's significance as a Xeruvian female would? Would she understand that wearing such a gift signaled interest and perhaps acceptance?

A knock rapped sharply against the door, interrupting his contemplation.

He laid the robe aside, secured his stachel, and stood. "Enter."

The door opened, and Mike Nicholson, the United States clan's diplomat, appeared in the doorway. Beyond him, Aklan spotted the two military guards supposedly assigned to his own security. His upper lip curled in a silent snarl. Such diplomatic subterfuge was unnecessary. He knew their job was to contain him should such be necessary. It would not, unless he wished it, but he could appreciate the humans' caution. His own people had endured first contact before. Aklan had spent many years studying those histories and the follies contained within them.

Nicholson stepped fully inside and shut the door behind himself. "You wanted a meeting with my assistant."

Aklan waited a bare moment for the translation to be fed into his ear before replying. "Are you here to arrange such?"

"Depends on what kind of meeting you want."

"The kind where a male is introduced to a female with whom he is unacquainted, one he wishes to woo according to the strictest rules of propriety and custom. Have you come as a stand in for her family?"

An inscrutable expression flashed over the other man's face. "To negotiate on her behalf? No. She'll make her own decisions."



Aklan gestured to one end of the room, where two cushioned chairs, each upholstered in a garish orange fabric, were arranged on opposite sides of a low wooden table. “Then we should make ourselves comfortable while you explain your purpose in being here.”

They seated themselves, Aklan facing the door, his back to the far wall.

The diplomat unbuttoned his suit jacket as he sat, then crossed one ankle over the opposite knee and studied Aklan, much as Aklan had studied the robe. “As a condition of the meeting, I’d like for it to take place in a public area.”

“One where she and I may speak privately, without being overheard?”

“That can be arranged.”

Aklan spread his hands wide, palms up in a gesture of peace. “Then it shall be so.”

Nicholson’s mouth twitched. “No counteroffer?”

“No. As your underling, she is under your protection. I commend you for seeing to her safety and well-being.” He offered the diplomat a tight-lipped smile. “As I said, propriety must be observed.”

“And if I said she doesn’t want to meet with you?”

Aklan considered the possibility, his gaze as cool as the other male’s. While his mating instinct had been aroused, the reverse could not be said for the mate fate had chosen to be his and his alone. As a human, there existed a real chance she would reject his suit.

Such could not happen. He would not allow it, not only for his sake, but for hers and

her people's. Too much was at stake. A rejected mate too often became incapable of feeling anything outside the rage consuming him, right down to his kii , rejecting internal and external controls, like a feral beast. Untamed, uncontrollable, dangerous to himself and everyone around him. For these negotiations to work, for his people to receive the concessions necessary for their very survival, humans could never witness a Xeruvian's devolution into such a creature.

Therefore, his mate must accept him, or all was lost.

Aklan steeped his fingertips together and tilted them toward Nicholson, acknowledging the possibility, and rejecting it. "I would expect you to persuade her."

The diplomat sat forward, leaned his elbows against his thighs, and clasped his hands together between his knees. "Why her? She has to be the first human woman you've met in person."

"Sometimes, Mr. Nicholson, it takes only one."

"The way you say that..." Nicholson shook his head. "You're strangers to us, completely alien in so many ways."

"For now," Aklan acknowledged. "But soon, you will know our mettle, and we shall know yours. Meeting your assistant is only one step along that path."

"I agree."

"Then we are in accord and the meeting can proceed apace."

"Assuming she'll agree to one."

Aklan could not help the triumph coloring his tight smile. "She already has, or you

would not be here assuring yourself of my good intentions.”

The diplomat sat back in his chair, his expression yet again cool and flat. After a moment, he said, “Tonight in the cafeteria, nineteen hundred hours local time.”

“A meal as a first meeting?”

“Coffee.” Nicholson’s mouth twisted into a faint smile. “A popular first date.”

Aklan hadn’t yet acquired a taste for the local beverage, but for his mate, he would make do. “Thank you, Mr. Nicholson. I look forward to seeing both of you there.”

“I’m not her chaperone.”

“Nonetheless, someone must make introductions.”

“Propriety.” Nicholson stood and tugged his suit jacket into place. “Nineteen hundred hours. Come as you are.”

Aklan stood and bowed his head in acknowledgment, then watched as the other male pivoted and left. A former warrior, by his bearing and regard, but that was to be expected. Aklan himself was a skilled warrior, the only reason he’d been willing to negotiate without the company of a formal guard.

That and the weapons pointed on this site.

He allowed his expression to relax into a pleased smile and strode across the room to the robe he’d chosen as his first courting gift. Tonight, he would meet his mate, but first he would relay a message to the warlords waiting patiently in orbit.

Humans could rouse the mating instinct, hinting at the promise of a deeper bond. Of

course, each warlord must test that potential for himself, to make absolutely certain it held true across the species.

But if it did, what promise such matings held, including his own mating with the female he would officially meet that evening.

As soon as Mike relayed the time and place of the meeting, Sonja handed her duties off to a junior attaché and retreated to her quarters to prepare.

She grimaced at the miniscule closet where she'd hung the few clothes she'd brought with her. Clothes for work, clothes to workout. One pair of jeans tucked into a rickety chest of drawers from the 1970s. She'd brought a light sweater, a cardigan, and three dressy t-shirts with her, and one fancier dress for parties. Not a robust selection, though when she'd packed, she'd thought it more than adequate for the assignment.

Of course, she never imagined she'd be invited on a date then either.

Dating on the job was strictly verboten, a personal rule she'd ruthlessly enforced since day one. Work and pleasure did not mix well, especially in her line of work. Blurring those boundaries tended to lead to diplomatic incidents and accusations of sedition. And since ninety five percent of her waking time was spent at work, that left little time for meeting someone outside her sphere of coworkers.

The last time she'd gone on a date was...

She tilted her head, trying to remember. Back in college maybe?

No, the year after graduation, when she'd settled into her first post and started working on her Master's. It took a moment for the memory to swirl to the surface, for the man's face to sharpen in her mind. Ian, a musician several years her senior. Lanky, quirky Ian with his dopey grin and hands that could coax magic out of any

instrument he held.

She mustered a smile at the faint nostalgic happiness the memory stirred. He hadn't gotten a chance to coax magic out of her with those long, slender fingers and soul-piercing brown eyes. Two weeks after they met, Mike had borrowed her from her post for a diplomatic emergency. By the time she returned, Ian had moved on.

Sonja hadn't known him long enough for regrets, and since then hadn't done more than allow herself to be chatted up in bars. Who had time?

Still, five years was a long dry spell for a twenty-eight-year-old woman. A healthy woman who hadn't had regular sex since college. She swore under her breath as she yanked out the cardigan and jeans, and chose a dressy t-shirt at random. After this gig was over, when she returned to her life in the Beltway, she would definitely put more time into dating.

Fifteen minutes later, she'd showered, changed, slashed on mascara and lipstick, and pulled her hair into a jaunty ponytail. She opted for comfortable runners, the only pair of shoes she'd brought that wasn't dress heels, and at five minutes 'til eighteen hundred hours, left her quarters for the cafeteria.

She met Missy Carter coming out of her room down the hallway and hailed her with a casual wave. Missy was petite and blonde, cheerleader cute in a dimpled, cheery sort of way. Her lazy Southern drawl hid one of the sharpest strategic minds Sonja had ever known, a mind honed, if the rumors were true, by a deep experience in cover operations. Mike had borrowed her from one of the alphabet agencies to serve as an intelligence analyst, borrowed her or had her forced on him by her superiors. While Mike and the other diplomats negotiated with their extraterrestrial guest, Missy cuddled up to her computer, collating and analyzing data from the talks to the nth degree.

As soon as Missy saw her, a wicked gleam glinted in her baby blues. She threaded her arm through Sonja's and leaned in. "I heard a certain lucky lady has a date with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Alien after supper."

Sonja shot her an exasperated glare. "What happened to Top Secret?"

"Went out the window the minute somebody said date."

"You can take the office out of the gossip," Sonja muttered.

Missy grinned. "You must be rattled. That doesn't even make sense."

"You try having a coffee date with a guy born several light years away, a guy with horns and claws and..."

"Oh, I've seen the pictures, darlin'. Anytime you want to trade, you just let me know."

Sonja barked out a short laugh. "If only."

Once in the cafeteria, they joined the line and loaded up their trays with that night's special, created by the company Mike had hired to cater the event, not an easy feat considering all the background checks they'd had to push through for the staff. Beef stroganoff, a nod to the Russians, she supposed.

Her stomach shriveled into a queasy mass of nerves, and she sighed. Nothing to do with the food. She was sure it would taste excellent to anyone who didn't have a quasi-date with an alien diplomat in an hour.

Missy guided her to a table at the edge of the dining room, her charming smile luring the rest of their team to settle nearby.

Thank God, Sonja thought as she pushed her fork through the creamy noodles. As a distraction, Missy worked wonders. Not quite like Scarlett O'Hara transforming curtains into a party dress, but close enough. Her coworker's bubbly laughter coaxed Sonja's nerves into remission, where they stayed until the room fell quiet at nineteen hundred hours on the dot.

Sonja had deliberately put her back to the door. When Missy's jaw dropped open midsentence and a hush fell over the diners, Sonja steeled her spine and turned around. There at the entrance stood the alien ambassador, towering over the two Marines flanking him. His nostrils flared, then he turned his head, and his gaze locked onto hers as if he'd known beforehand exactly where she sat.

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach, and her fingers trembled in her lap. That look . . . Ravenous, intense, like he wanted to devour her then and there. No mercy, no concessions, just hot, mind-blowing sex all night long.

Maybe all day long, too.

"Whoo, boy," Missy murmured. "I want me one of them."

The only response Sonja could manage was a strangled grunt. Her body had come alive the minute he'd turned that hot look on her, and she hadn't quite caught her breath yet.

Mike broke away from his table and met the alien at the door. They spoke briefly, then Mike pivoted and headed her way, the alien and his security detail close behind.

Missy scooted her chair back and stood. "Looks like I've worn out my welcome. I'll just get your tray for you. Good luck, darlin'. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Sonja barely heard her over the roar of her pulse. Her cardigan felt like sandpaper on

her skin and a slow, delicious heat had settled at the juncture of her thighs. She hid her visceral reaction to him behind a well-honed mask of cool indifference. Inside, she might be a nervous, horny wreck, but on the outside, she appeared poised and composed.

She hoped so anyway.

As Mike and his motley entourage approached, she checked her peripherals as she stood and walked to the other side. The tables around them had cleared. Sonja swallowed a rueful smile. Abandoned on her first foray into alien territory. What a crew.

Mike reached her then, extending a welcoming hand to the alien. “Aklan of Clan Phyrz, may I introduce Sonja Mathis, my right hand?”

Sonja stood and tilted her head back until her gaze met the alien’s. Up close, he seemed bigger somehow, his broad, muscled shoulders seeming to fill the cavernous cafeteria. His mouth was an uncompromising slash, his eyes a lovely teal color, like the purest ocean waters, and almost human-like in their shape. She forced herself to absorb the details for later debriefing: the silky fabric of his thigh-length robe, the same shimmery teal as the fabric held in his hands; lethal black claws tipping elegant fingers, the fingers of an artist; the glimpse of a device strapped to his left wrist, nearly covered by the robe’s loose sleeve; the gray-brown toughness of his exposed skin; the faint earthy masculinity of his scent; and the way he observed her in return, as if he noticed every detail of her appearance and found it pleasing.

Why had she not taken the time to apply more makeup?



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:59 pm*

She pressed her lips together on a wave of exasperation. What difference did her looks make? She wasn't here to seduce him, or to be seduced by him. Nothing could come of this meeting, nothing serious anyway. It's not like they were setting the stage for a long-term relationship, an impossibility if ever there was one. Her life was here on Earth. His was on a planet far, far away. 'Nuff said.

Unsure whether physical contact was appropriate, even a simple handshake, she settled on a polite nod. "It's an honor to meet you, Ambassador."

"Aklan," he corrected in carefully enunciated English, his voice both gentle and gruff. "Shall we sit?"

She glanced at Mike, caught his nod in the affirmative. "Of course. Coffee? Dessert? There may be some cheesecake left."

"I'll get it," Mike said. He prodded the Marines to retreat beyond the nearest table, then strode toward the buffet line.

Sonja slid around the table and took a seat on the opposite side from her previous position. Thank God Missy had chosen a rectangular four-topper set to one side of the room. Imagine having to sit at one of the round six-toppers sitting in the middle of the floor, on display like goldfish in a clear fishbowl. The smaller table lent a cozy air, giving the illusion of privacy, even though they were in public.

Aklan settled across from her and laid the fabric in the seat beside him. His gaze had turned intense again, burning into her as she grasped for a conversation starter. Normally, this sort of thing came easily to her. Small talk with a stranger in a

diplomatic setting.

This time, she was all too aware of the circumstances, of the people surrounding them, watching her and the ambassador ( Aklan , she thought) without watching them, of his size and strength and alienness.

Of his horns, for God's sake. They were huge, the bases at his temples easily as big around as her wrists, and curved backward in a u-shape as they narrowed into sharp tips near the implacable line of his jaw.

Mike's return saved her. He set a tray laden with two steaming cups of coffee, utensils, sugar and creamer packets, and plates filled with a variety of desserts on the table between them.

"Fifteen minutes," he said. "I'll be nearby."

She heard the promise in his voice and relaxed enough to turn a grateful smile on him. "Thank you."

He nodded and was gone, clearing the Marine escort in a few determined strides.

Aklan eyed the tray, his expression subtly flexing into one she couldn't quite read. "Many human rituals lay beyond my knowing. Is it usual for a supervisor to serve his subordinate?"

It was more complicated than that, but how to explain?

"Mike is acting as host," she said. "For these talks as well as for our meeting. It's more customary among diplomats for servants or underlings to handle such things, but not abnormal for the host to do so."

Aklan's mouth curved into a tight-lipped smile. "We have such customs as well. They are...universal?"

"From species to species?"

"Yes, among many species."

"You've met more than us?" She shook her head, remembered her own hosting duties. "Sorry. Curiosity got the better of me. How do you take your coffee?"

He glanced at the tray again and his upper lip curled into a mild snarl. "I have not yet acquired a taste for it."

"Have you tried it with cream and sugar yet?"

"Only...without additions."

"Black," she confirmed. "Here, allow me."

She chose a mug, picked through the sugar packets until she found real sugar. No telling what artificial sweeteners would do to him. Or coffee either, for that matter. He'd never entered the cafeteria before, apparently preferring to dine in his quarters on food he'd brought with him. If anyone had asked him about his dietary needs, the information had not made it into her data.

Missy probably knew.

Sonja added the sugar packet, stirred the coffee with a spoon, and pushed it toward him. "One sugar."

Gingerly, he wrapped his hand around the mug and lifted it to his lips, sipped a small

amount, and grimaced. “No, not that. Or not only that.”

“Maybe with cream.” She plucked a cream packet off the tray and dumped it into his coffee, stirred again. “One sugar and one cream.”

He sipped again, glanced at her. “Better.”

“But not as good as home. I understand.”

“If I may?”

“You have questions?”

“Many.” He set the coffee aside and leveled that intense stare on her again. “You are acting as my host now?”

She nodded slowly, ignoring the goosebumps raised by the weight of his gaze. “I suppose so, yes.”

“Then you are not serving me because you are female and I am male.”

“Oh. Gender roles. Of course.” Her palms had dampened, despite her intentions to remain calmly neutral during their conversation. She scrubbed them on her thighs as she searched for an answer. “Sometimes, in some cultures and situations, women do serve men. If I cooked a meal for you, for example, I would serve you. Or at my family’s holiday meals, the women cook and serve.”

“Because this is their duty?”

A grin popped out of her before she could rein it in. “Because the men in our family are terrible cooks. We’re more equitable in the West. Many of the traditional gender

roles have softened over time.”

“And in other cultures?”

“Depends on the culture.”

He risked another taste of the coffee, nodded solemnly. “Humans have many cultural groupings.”

“We do. Does your culture?”

“We have clans, but the clans stem from...” He laced his fingers together in front of him, palms toward his chest. “Similar beliefs?”

“Like our states, here in the US.” His expression flexed again, and this time she had no problem reading his curiosity. “One country made up of many smaller political units, each with its own distinct subcultures. We can be very different, but we each share a belief in freedom and the rule of law. Mostly, anyway.”

He paused for a long moment, and she wondered if his English was good enough to grasp her meaning, or if she needed to find another explanation. Before she could ask, he nodded firmly.

“Our two cultures are similar in this way, yes,” he said.

Across the room, Mike stood, catching her eye, and shot her the halfway sign. She waved him off. So far, the conversation had been enjoyable, fun even. Who knew aliens liked cream and sugar in their coffee?

“Have you mated?” Aklan asked.

Her gaze flew back to his, and she struggled to keep her expression neutral at the unexpected question. “Mated?”

“Do you have a male in your life?”

“Oh, you mean a boyfriend or husband. No, not at the moment.” Not in entirely too long, she acknowledged ruefully. “Why?”

“Is this not an appropriate question when one meets a desirable mate?”

When he put it that way...

“I suppose so,” she conceded.

He leaned toward her, holding her gaze with the sudden fire lighting his eyes. “I would prefer that you had no other male in your life, but truthfully, it would not matter.”

Her eyes widened. “Why?”

“When a Xeruvian warrior spots his mate, he does not rest until she is his.”

He smiled then, revealing elongated incisors and canines, sharp and white and dangerous.

A thread of desire shuddered through her. That smile was so male, so predatory. A little frightening, yes, but also sensual. Hungry.

“Is that why you wanted to meet me?” she whispered. “Because you think I’m your mate?”

“You are my mate,” he said slowly. “And I will stop at nothing to have you.”

“Oh.”

“Did Mike Nicholson not explain? I wish to court you in the human way, to demonstrate my worthiness as a mate, to earn your trust and respect, and perhaps even your love.”

Her throat closed on a strangled cough, and she sucked in a harsh breath. “You want to date me? How would that even work?”

“How many dates must humans endure before they mate?”

The bluntly spoken question startled a laugh out of her. “It depends on the couple and their culture.”

“What is appropriate for your culture? Tell me and I shall comply.”

She shuddered again. This whole conversation, the way he’d spoke, as if certain she were already his. In his mind, she clearly was, and she didn’t know how she felt about that. No man had ever made his intentions so clear. None had ever even looked at her the way he did, as if she were the only woman on Earth, the only one he could possibly ever want.

His desire felt inevitable, certain, and her own natural resistance seemed like too thin a barrier against his will.

This must be how a fly felt when it became trapped in a spider’s web, with the spider stealthily approaching for the kill.

Only Aklan didn’t want to kill her. He wanted to date and mate her, whatever that

meant, and it could mean anything. His wife, his sex slave, his servant, maybe all three. She clenched her hands together under the table, dug her fingernails into her palms, and used the pain to subdue the wild desire burning in her, to hang onto her composure.

Which she'd never lost before, not on any diplomatic mission, not with any foreign dignitary or attaché, not ever .

Less than fifteen minutes in, this gigantic, alien male had rattled her so thoroughly, she wasn't sure she could weather one more startling question.

"I don't know," she said, her voice thankfully steady and calm. "I didn't realize..." She sucked in a breath and tried again. "I knew you were here for women, but not women like me."

"Strong, intelligent females? Patient, kind, good? You underestimate your own beauty."

Not beauty, she thought faintly. Attractiveness . Value?

But she wouldn't correct him there, lest the conversation wander down a rabbit hole so deep, she couldn't dig her way out of it.

"We could try another date or two," she conceded, against her rules and her better judgment, against the instinct urging her to flee while she still could.

Perish the thought.

"So long as it doesn't interfere with the negotiations," she said.

A low growl rumbled from his throat. "I have laid out my terms. These diplomats can



discuss them without us. What activity is appropriate for a second date?"

"Movie night?" She shook her head, immediately dismissing that intimacy. "No, something simpler. A walk, maybe, or a meal."

"A walk," he said firmly. "Or exercise of another sort."

"Ok. We can do that. Tomorrow morning?"

His head tilted to the side. "Not tonight?"

"These things are usually spaced out a few days apart, sometimes a week or more."

"I am not sure I like your culture's dating rules," he growled. "If you were Xeruvian, you would already be mine."

She sucked in another breath, and her thighs clenched together reflexively on a fresh spurt of heat. "Really?"

He shoved the tray to one side and leaned over the table, his mouth inches from her ear. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw the Marines step forward, their hands resting on the butts of their holstered firearms. She waved them off under the table, then caught her breath at Aklan's next words.

"If you were Xeruvian, sweet Sonja, you would have fled the moment the mating instinct stirred between us," he murmured, "and I would have chased you gladly unto the ends of time, chased you until I caught you, chased you until you submitted yourself to me in every way. Ah, the chase, little klika . I shall enjoy chasing you."

He stood and pushed back from the table, his eyes blazing. "Several of your compatriots wish to challenge me for breaking human rules of propriety. I accept

these challenges. We shall meet in one hour at a location of your choosing. Dress appropriately, and after I have satisfied their honor and mine, I shall begin teaching you the intricacies of Ky'Lota. This shall be our second date, if you so desire."

Desire? Desire ? God in Heaven, his whispered words had scorched her inside and out, and the man hadn't even touched her. Hadn't even hinted at touching her before she was ready, if she read his intentions correctly. He was going to play her game, a game so foreign to him, she could barely fathom the differences.

I shall enjoy chasing you.

She shuddered on another wave of desire. If his words alone affected her this much, how could she possibly hold onto her control if he touched her?

No, not if. When .

Mike placed a hand on her shoulder, startling her. She hadn't even noticed him approaching, and now that he'd broken the thrall Aklan had held her under, she noticed that everyone in the room seemed to be standing except her. Several of the men and a few of the women were directing glares at Aklan's back.

Not that he noticed.

He turned a cool gaze on Mike and said, in his own language, duly translated by the device on his wrist, "I beg your pardon. It was not my intention to break propriety, given the sensitivities of our current negotiations. I merely wished to convey a private message to Sonja, one intended solely for her. If you would be so kind as to arrange a space for hand-to-hand combat, I would be deeply grateful." His smiled, baring sharp teeth, and his gaze fell to where Mike's hand rested on her shoulder. "Nonlethal, naturally. I have no wish to injure anyone present."

Mike nodded icily. "I'd like to try my hand at taking you down."

"Of course."

Aklan bowed to Mike, murmured milady to Sonja, then he turned and walked away at a steady, unhurried pace, the two Marines following.

He'd left the fabric on the table in front of her, had placed it there without her knowing.

Damn.

Mike squeezed her shoulder. "You can stop this at any time."

"I think it's too late," she said slowly, still addled by the desire lingering in her blood. "He's the most potent man I've ever met."

"Just remember why we're here."

"Yes, sir. I will." Assuming she could keep a clear head.

An image of Aklan catching her popped into her mind, and her nipples pebbled into taut nubs. She forced herself to breathe, pulling her composure over her inner turmoil like a well-fitted mask.

"Debrief?" she said.

"Tomorrow. I'd like to see what he's capable of in person."

She swung her head toward him, leaning slightly away so she could meet his eyes. "You wanted to goad him into a fight?"

“No, not that. But we do need to know what we’re up against. An honor duel is not ideal.”

“We could refuse.”

“No. He’s calling the shots here. We’re all well aware of that.”

“I didn’t mean to start an interplanetary diplomatic incident,” she murmured.

“This isn’t on you, Sonja.” He patted her shoulder once. “I think there’s a basketball court or something on one level. A rec room?”

He strode away, breaking up the lingering crowd as he went, while Sonja pondered the meaning of the word mate in Xeruvian culture.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:59 pm*

Once back in his quarters, Aklan shed his clothing and donned his skinsuit, the lightweight, tight-fitting armor the Xeruvians had developed to counter many piercing weapons and disperse energy from plasma and laser style weapons. It was nearly indistinguishable from the athletic wear many humans wore, and would thus draw no suspicion unless one of the humans fired a projectile weapon at him.

A wild recklessness thrummed through his veins. The meeting with his mate had gone much better than he expected. He'd watched her relax during the conversation, witnessed the fluttering of her pulse, scented her nascent desire as human males could not. Knowing that she wanted him, that she would willingly meet with him again, had stirred his blood into molten heat.

He could easily have ignored the whispered outrage reaching his ears when he leaned into his mate and described exactly what he wanted to do to her. Instead, he had eagerly seized the opportunity to divert his own desire, to channel it into controlled aggression as he'd learned in his youth, lest it spill onto his mate.

Never would he harm her. Thus must he find another outlet for the arousal heating his blood.

Until their courtship ended. Until she willingly chose him as her mate.

The certainty calmed him enough to allow rational thought to prevail. He tidied the clothes he'd worn and put them away, then fished out a small drone and programmed it to follow him at a discreet distance, recording whatever followed for the benefit of his fellow warlords. Such imagery would be studied, as the humans undoubtedly would study him.

He flipped the drone into the air and observed it flitting above him. Let the humans watch. Perhaps they would then learn how formidable Xeruvian warlords could be.

He shrugged on his robe, leaving it unfastened, and padded barefoot out of his quarters into the sterile corridor. The drone followed at a slight distance, though not so far he couldn't hear its whispering buzz.

By the time he and his guards reached the appointed place, a large room fitted out with exercise equipment along one wall and cushioned mats down the middle, it had filled with more than three dozen humans. He glanced around casually, assessing the crowd, and upped his count by a dozen. Some he recognized as diplomats or their underlings. Some wore mottled fatigues and held themselves as warriors would, female and male alike.

Sonja stood to one side next to the yellow-haired female she'd been seated with when he entered the cafeteria earlier. She wore a black bralette and matching knee-length shorts, similar to her companion's outfit. Her skin had taken on a pale glow. He itched to touch her, to sample her skin with his tongue, to rub his face along her bare midriff until their scents joined and became one.

His instincts purred, a recognition of her connection to him, and he wrestled them into control. A warrior who could not control his impulses deserved no mate.

Control led to trust, trust to respect, respect to love. Was it not so even among humans?

She glanced up, answered his gaze with a shy smile, and satisfied the maelstrom raging within him. He marveled at the ability, stifled another impulse, this one to stride across the room and worship at her feet.

Too soon, he warned himself. She must accept him first, and all that he was.

Still, he could offer her the simple rituals of his people, as she had offered him hers. Humans skirted around him and the soldiers at his back, filtering into the room in twos and threes. When he deemed it nearly full, he allowed himself to approach her, holding her gaze until he stood a respectful distance away.

“Milady,” he said, bowing his head.

“Aklan.” She touched her companion’s shoulder, bringing the other woman closer. “This is Missy.”

Missy gave him a dimpled smile. “Pleased to meet you, Ambassador.”

He proffered a bow to her as well. “Are you here to defend Sonja’s honor?”

Missy threw back her head and laughed, a sweet, pure sound like water rippling over rock. “Good heavens, no. I’m here as her sidekick, to support her through a trying time.”

“Missy,” Sonja hissed. To him, she said, “She’s teasing. Don’t take her too seriously.”

“Such support is to be treasured,” Aklan chided gently. “I believe she expresses her affection for you. Is this not so?”

Missy nodded sharply. “A wise man. If you don’t keep him, I just might.”

“I thought you were engaged?” Sonja said.

“Yup, totally in love. But I’d still be tempted.”

She winked at Aklan, a baffling gesture whose meaning eluded him.

Still, he understood her light flirtation, not as flattery aimed at him, but as the kind of teasing friends indulged in. Not to be taken seriously on the surface. The meaning lay in the undertow.

He sensed Mike Nicholson approaching. Time to begin, before the gathered humans became restless.

He shrugged off his robe, folded it loosely, and offered it to Sonja. “Today, I fight for you, milady.”

She cocked her head to the side, her mouth turned down at one corner. “Another gift?”

“No, milady,” he said, softening his words for her benefit. “In Xeruvian culture, a warrior asks a potential mate to hold his clothing while he engages in a display of physical might. The female may choose to accept or not. If she does, it is seen as an acceptance of the male himself.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

He shrugged the possibility away. “It is a great honor for them both.”

“I see.” She stared at the robe for a long moment, long enough for Nicholson to reach them, then slowly reached out and took it from his hands, clasping it to her chest. “Thank you, Aklan. You honor me.”

A low growl emanated from his chest, pleasure and surprise rolled into one. How had she known what to say? Had her instincts finally roused to match his own, or was she merely being the polite human he sensed her to be?

Missy had sidled away, yet still watched them keenly. When Nicholson cleared his



throat, she snagged Sonja's elbow and gently steered her toward the room's outer edges, though Sonja's gaze remained locked on his.

"Ready?" Nicholson said.

Aklan reluctantly broke Sonja's gaze and stared down at the smaller male. "May I choose my first opponents?"

The other male's eyebrows waggled in an odd way. "I suppose so."

"Then I choose them." He turned and met his escorts' gazes, one after the other. "Do your weapons have safety features on them? A lock to prevent accidental firing?"

The two males glanced at one another, then the shorter one drew his handgun from its holster at his waist and held it up, pointing to a slide on one side. "This is the safety. On or off?"

"On. I wish no harm to come to bystanders." Or his mate. If something should happen to her now, if he should lose her as so many other Xeruvians had lost their mates...

He shuddered. Such was not to be imagined, lest it bring the wrathful touch of the Fates.

He disciplined his mind and focused instead on the matter at hand. "The center of the room should afford enough space to maneuver."

"Both of us?" the other male said.

Aklan stared him down. "Naturally."

"I don't like this," Nicholson said slowly.

“You may not enjoy the results, but I most certainly will. Gentlemen.”

Aklan stalked to the middle of the room and waited for the other men to doff their hats and join him. Once they had, he said, “Weapons up. Attack me simultaneously.”

This time there was no hesitation. The two males, acting in unison, spread out and approached him, each shouting at him to drop down, to raise his hands over his head, to comply and obey, else would they fire upon him. It seemed well-rehearsed to Aklan, a maneuver practiced repeatedly until it could be performed on command, without error. He held still, unfazed by their tactics, his hands loose at his sides, patiently awaiting the right moment.

When they were within striking distance, he leapt for the one on his right, one hand slashing at the firearm, knocking it from the other male’s hand. Simultaneously, he punched his free hand into the male’s gut, a sharp, clawless strike, following it with a rapid series of blows designed to disable the male without inflicting permanent harm. The male’s breath whooshed out even as he tried to counter.

Aklan swept one leg across the back of the male’s legs, knocking him to the ground before the second male had time to react.

Aklan whirled and leapt, disabling the second male’s firearm, countering his every offensive strike. As soon as the human lay groaning on the floor, one hand to his ribs, Aklan stepped back and bowed.

Around the room, murmurs rose among the crowd.

“Holy shit,” a male voice whispered. Another said, “Less than ten seconds, man.” And still another stated that he “ain’t never seen nothing like that.”

Nicholson approached, his expression fixed in a resigned scowl, and knelt beside the

men. “Do you need medical assistance?”

“Naw,” the first male wheezed. “May not be able to walk tomorrow.”

“Think he broke a rib with that last punch,” the second man said, his voice strained.

Aklan stared down at them, his expression hard. “Perhaps I did not account adequately for human frailty.”

“Frailty,” Nicholson said on a harsh bark of laughter. “They never landed a blow.”

“On the contrary. They landed several, simply not hard enough to stop me.”

“Jesus,” the first male said. “You should put a whole squadron on him.”

“It would not be enough,” Aklan assured him. “And more guards would send the wrong message. Is there another among you who was offended by my actions regarding Milady Mathis?”

Nicholson stood and squared off against him. “Me. Let me get these men to the doctor first.”

“As you will.” Aklan stepped back and raised his voice so that all the humans gathered there could hear him. “You have much to learn from my people, as we have much to learn from you. We wish only equal access to the courtship rites enjoyed by human males, the right to meet eligible females and to court the female of our choosing so that we may rebuild our species and thrive once more, as humans do now. In exchange, we offer the gift of our technology, and of our protection should another, more hostile species discover your beautiful planet. It is a fair and good trade, one of benefit to both our peoples.”

Nicholson's expression hardened as Aklan spoke, though he merely nodded at the conclusion of Aklan's impromptu speech. "Back in a few."

Aklan watched them leave, then turned his gaze unerringly on his mate. She watched him warily, her eyes wide in a pale face. Had he alarmed her with his speed and skill? Did she not understand that a warrior honed his abilities precisely so that he might one day protect his mate? That such a display was to assure her of his ability to do so, as much as to signal his desire for her?

Her breasts rose and fell on a heavy sigh, then Missy drew her into conversation, and Aklan turned his attention to the three approaching males.

Sonja held her breath the entire time Aklan fought his guards, only letting it out when Missy elbowed her.

"Did you see that?" her coworker said.

"Hard to miss," Sonja replied faintly. "He didn't even break a sweat."

"Can he sweat?"

"I have no idea."

"Bet you want to find out, though, huh?"

Sonja turned a baleful glare on her. "Do you think about anything other than my sex life?"

"Sure, I do. For instance, the big lug recorded the whole thing."

"What? How?"

Missy leaned in and whispered, “Don’t look, but there’s a tiny drone perched on that basketball goal over there. Saw it fly in behind him when he walked in.”

“I was watching him walk in and didn’t see a thing.”

“You diplomat, me intelligence.”

“What, for covert ops?” Sonja muttered. “I wonder why he recorded it.”

“Could be any number of reasons. I can think of half a dozen just off the top of my head, starting with what he just said.”

“That’s because you’re conniving and nefarious.”

“You got it, darlin’,” Missy said, winking. “Speaking of, that bodysuit isn’t standard active wear. It gives off a weird glint every time he moves.”

Sonja had noticed, but she’d been too distracted to say anything. Distracted by his masculinity, by his long, well-proportioned limbs and miles and miles of muscle, by his quick, flowing movements,

And yes, distracted by the bulge at the juncture of his thighs, not that she’d share that thought with Missy. It did make her wonder about their species’ sexual compatibility. Obviously the Xeruvians thought they’d be compatible, or they wouldn’t have singled out humans as their future...what? Brides? Broodmares? Was that really how Xeruvians saw human females?

She shrugged the thought off and offered her own observation. “He’s pulling his punches. No claws. I bet they’re deadly.”

Missy slid her a sly, side-eyed look. “Admit it. You’re attracted to him.”

“Pfft. I’m doing my job.”

“Since when did your job include dating sexy aliens?”

“Since he wouldn’t take no for an answer, apparently. Since he asked politely?”

“He does have that steadfast, Old World courtesy thing going for him. So. Are you really going to date him, or is this all a charade aimed at achieving a different goal?”

Sonja firmed her lips against her own hesitation. She felt his gaze on her and turned helplessly to meet it. Her pulse fluttered as a newly familiar desire sparked within her. What was she doing? Not toying with him. That wasn’t her way. But could she honestly commit to dating a man so different from her?

They weren’t even the same species!

Yet, they shared eerie similarities, the same bipedal build, the same number of fingers and toes. He was bigger, yes, so much bigger, and faster, too. More advanced technologically, and culturally? Her hands clenched into fists around his robe, entirely too aware of the silky fabric against her skin, of the faint masculine scent clinging to it, and of the raw desire building inside her.

Their cultures were similar, yes, but not the same.

On a personal level, she didn’t know enough about him to make a judgment, but he seemed...honorable. Intelligent. Determined.

And completely focused on her. He hadn’t so much as blinked at Missy. Sonja held no delusions about her looks. She was, at best, pleasantly pretty. Missy, on the other hand, was drop dead gorgeous, everything a man wanted from her flirtatious smile to her Marilyn Monroe figure to the fact that she could outshoot and outdrink nearly

every man she knew.

Yet her charms hadn't so much as fazed Aklan.

Missy touched her elbow. "Earth to Sonja! You still with me?"

"Yes. Sorry. He has a way of distracting me without saying a word."

"Oh, honey. I see the way he looks at you. That's pure lust talking there. Makes me shiver every time I see it."

Sonja wrinkled her nose into a playful grimace. "Oh, stop."

"No, seriously. If I weren't already head over heels in love and certain he'd reject me, I'd make a play for him myself. That man is hotter'n sin and twice as sexy." Missy's gaze turned sly. "Admit it, Sonja. When he looks at you, you look right back, don't you?"

Yes, she thought, and laughed despite the conflicting emotions playing tug of war inside her. "It's not like it can go anywhere."

Missy's gaze sharpened. "Why not?"

"Me human, him Xeruvian. Do you realize how impossible that would be?"

"I can't tell if you're trying to talk yourself into dating him or out of it. Pretend he's human for a minute. Would you go for him?"

Sonja sucked in a ragged breath. Missy was too perceptive by far. Yes, she would go for him, if he was human. Who wouldn't? On the surface, he was everything a woman wanted in a man. Strong, intelligent, wise. And he wanted her. Not Missy or

the other far more attractive women scattered throughout the room. Her .

The butterflies returned in full force, attacking her stomach in a wave of flutters. To have captured such a man's attention, to have it focused on her, to feel desirable and beautiful and wanted. Heady stuff, that. Too bad it would never work between them.

"But he's not human," she said slowly, reluctantly. "And that's the reality I have to work with."

"Oh, honey. Wise up here. The reality is that he's lusty and hot and hung like a bull."

Sonja nearly choked on a laugh, the brief touch of sadness washed away under Missy's gentle teasing. "I had no idea you were so outrageous."

"It's the Southern coming out in me." Missy jerked her chin toward the center of the room. "He just took down three at once. Three of our biggest Marines, mind you. Ain't even breathing heavy."

"He's something else," Sonja agreed, a bit too dreamily for her peace of mind. There was just something about him...

A young Chinese woman replaced the three downed men, at the approval of the Chinese ambassador. Aklan glanced at Sonja, and she read the questions in his expression so easily, it shocked her.

Should he fight a woman? Was that appropriate among humans?

She nodded once, hoping he understood that if he found human men to be frail, then human women would be even more so. To her relief, he defended only, deflecting the woman's blows without once striking her no matter how hard or fast she came at him.



“Wowza,” Missy said sotto voce. “He hasn’t laid a hand on her. Is that a Xeruvian thing?”

“No idea,” Sonja replied. But she wanted to find out. He’d promised to teach her...what had he called it? Ky’Lota? Maybe she would let him, if only to test how far his impressive control went.

So far, it seemed endless. And she was impressed, by his courtesy and grasp of social nuances, by his evident skills as a warrior. Yet, she felt certain she’d seen only the tip of a very large iceberg. She wanted to know more, and perhaps that answered Missy’s question about dating him, and her own.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:59 pm*

Sonja woke early the next morning feeling groggy and out of sorts. Aklan had kept her at the gym going over the most basic forms of Ky'Lota entirely too late. After, despite the rigors of diving into a new martial art, it had taken ages for sleep to find her. Her mind had fixated on one part of the evening after another.

The way he'd easily taken on all comers, including Mike, and won.

His gentle touch guiding her hands and body into the correct poses without ever becoming intimate.

The conversation they'd had when other men and women had wanted to learn the Xeruvian fighting forms, too.

He had glanced over the gathered crowd of potential acolytes, then focused his intense gaze on her. "You wish me to place my hands upon other women?"

Her jaw had very nearly dropped open at the question. "They want you to teach them how to defend themselves. I can't object to that."

"Then I shall gladly do so." He'd leaned down and placed his mouth near her ear, the most intimate gesture he'd made all night. "Do not ask a like courtesy from me. Xeruvian warriors are possessive of our mates. Any male who dares come between the two does so at his own peril."

The warning had caught her as off guard as his initial question.

It had also caused a wave of concern. Humans, male or female, who became

possessive of their significant others tended to be jealous or abusive assholes. She'd watched Aklan carefully after that. Not only had he not gone into a rage when another man talked to her, he hadn't even blinked when Mike clapped her on the shoulder or one of the guys fist-bumped her. And when another man took her down during one-on-one practice, Aklan hadn't so much as grimaced.

Which led her to conclude that Aklan's warning covered the kind of activity also frowned upon in human culture. Say, making a pass at another guy's gal or interfering with the relationship.

Maybe if he hadn't kept his hands to himself, she'd have drawn a different conclusion. But he had kept his hands to himself with every woman there, treating her exactly as he treated Missy and the Chinese ambassador's daughter: with the kind of courtesy and respect she'd come to expect from him.

Then had come the moment at the end of the night when she'd handed him his robe. His gaze had dropped to her lips and her throat, and this wonderful, magical tension had stretched between them, zinging through her blood in a beautiful chorus of desire and need. She'd thought, Oh, he's going to kiss me now, and bitten her lip, already anticipating the touch of his mouth to hers.

His expression had tightened, but all he did was step back, bow respectfully, and leave. No kiss, no hug, not even a pat on the arm or a "Next date, please!"

That lack of contact, of resolution, had left her feeling...bemused. Any other guy would've tried to cop a feel at least once during the evening. Not Aklan. Being so close to him, having his distinctive, masculine scent wash over her every time he drew near, had tickled her senses to the point of arousal. Apparently, her scent had not done the same to him.

Maybe being around her hadn't affected him the same way. Maybe the mate thing

didn't mean what she thought it meant. Or the dating. Or giving her a gorgeous robe. Or those sexy, intense gazes he directed at her...

She really should ask him to clarify exactly what he wanted from her so she could at least lay her mind to rest. And sleep, she thought groggily as she forced herself out of bed. The robe he'd given her lay exactly where she'd left it, atop the rickety chest of drawers opposite the bed. She pulled it on over the t-shirt she'd slept in and padded over to the desk wedged into the corner to brew a cup of coffee.

The coffee had just started percolating when someone knocked on her door. Her heart leapt into a gallop. Aklan!

But no, it couldn't be him. He didn't know where her quarters were located in the labyrinthine complex.

She hurried to answer anyway, realized she was wearing a gift from a visiting dignitary and all the complications that could create.

Screw it. It was too early for propriety.

Besides. She was practically dating the man.

She swung the door open on Missy who, unlike her, looked fresh, bright eyed, and entirely too perky for that time of morning.

"Girl." Missy drew the word out as she sidled past Sonja into her quarters. "You look like you've been brawling with an angry cat."

"Too early for jokes," Sonja muttered as she shut the door. "What's up?"

"Aklan's leading another Ky'Lota session in ten."

“How do you know that and I don’t?”

Missy flipped her blonde ponytail over one shoulder, grinning smugly. “A little birdie told me. Anywho, why aren’t you dressed already? Daylight’s a-wasting.”

Sonja groaned as she flopped down on the end of her bed. “Because I got exactly three hours of sleep.”

“Couldn’t get Mr. Sexy out of your mind, huh?” Missy flopped down beside her and leaned back on her hands. “Did he tell you what Ky’Lota means?”

“Gimme a break, Missy. We’ve barely spoken to each other. Come to think on it, how do you know?”

“Little birdies,” Missy said firmly. “It means soul dance .”

“Wow. That’s—” Sonja’s fog-enshrouded mind refused to supply an appropriate adjective.

“Beautiful? Interesting? Illuminating?”

“All of the above.” The coffee pot finished bubbling. Sonja stumbled toward her desk and lifted the mug of coffee to her nose, breathing it in. “Must. Have. Coffee.”

Missy waved that away. “I get it. You need to wake up first. Don’t worry. I’ll run interference for you with Aklan, keep all the ladies distracted so nobody gets any ideas.”

Sonja let out a strangled sound.

“I’ll just leave you to your coffee,” Missy continued airily. “Nice robe, by the way.

Looks almost as good on you as it does on him. Toodles!"

Sonja closed her eyes as Missy breezed out of the room. What was that even about?

Her cellphone rang before she could muddle through an answer. She picked it up, saw Mike's name displayed, and thumbed into the call. "Hello?"

"Debriefing at oh seven thirty."

Sonja glanced at her bedside clock and winced. "Make it oh eight hundred and I'll swing by the cafeteria and bring pastries."

"Deal."

He hung up, and Sonja reluctantly set her coffee aside. If she wanted to make it to Mike's office on time, she needed to hop in the shower now.

"Soon, my little friend," she told the coffee, then she wandered into her en suite bathroom, stripping as she went.

The shower woke her up. The coffee put her brain in working order. By the time she reached the cafeteria, she'd finished that cup and realized one wasn't going to be enough to get her through the debrief. She snagged some fresh-baked apple fritters, refilled her mug from the cafeteria's drink station, and arrived at Mike's office one minute before oh eight hundred.

Mike was already at his desk, brooding at his laptop. When she knocked and entered, he glanced up and offered her a tight smile. "Thanks for bringing breakfast. I completely forgot."

"Then I'm glad I suggested it." She set the plate of apple fritters on the edge of his

desk, dropped some paper napkins beside it, and sat in the chair across from him. “What did you think about last night?”

“The fact that he’s bigger, faster, and stronger than any trained soldier or Marine on this base, or that he couldn’t keep his eyes off you?”

She held his gaze as she sipped her coffee, refusing to allow even an inkling of discomfort to show. “The first.”

Mike leaned back in his chair and swiveled it to the side, his gaze on the industrial white concrete wall. “I think he’s right. We have a lot to learn from him, and a lot to fear.”

“He didn’t hurt anyone.”

“Not permanently, no, and he was gentle as a lamb with every woman there.”

She hummed against the mug’s rim, sipped again, then set the mug next to the fritters. “You’re wondering whether he’s going to be as gentle with me when no one’s watching.”

Mike held her gaze for several moments, letting the statement stretch between them. Finally, he said. “Aren’t you?”

“No.”

“You didn’t even hesitate.”

“I’ve had time to think about it.” She crossed her legs, clasped her hands together in her lap. “A man that big, one that aggressive who can easily take down two and three trained men at a time? What woman wouldn’t carefully consider being alone with a

man like that?”

Mike’s eyebrows popped up. “But?”

“He had the opportunity to...stray outside the bounds of propriety. Not just with me. With all the women.”

“And he didn’t?”

“Did you see him get handsy with any of us?” she countered.

“You’re defending him.”

“If you’re accusing me of siding with him,” she said flatly, “you’re barking up the wrong tree. The whole point of a debrief is to tell you what I observed as objectively as I can. And I’m telling you flat out that I don’t think he would hurt any woman without just cause.”

“Just cause.” Mike minced the words out through tight lips. “There’s a just cause for hurting a woman?”

“If a woman attacked him. If she tried to hurt other people.” She picked up her coffee, using it to hide the nip of anger his question had stirred. “Would you allow a woman to do that?”

He sighed and closed his eyes, rubbed them with his fingers and thumb. “We’re not talking about me.”

“No, we’re talking about an alien warrior whose code of ethics is so strict, he’s abiding by every rule we set forth. An alien who is, by the way, willing to give us the technology that would offset the absence of the women he and his fellow warriors



want to court. And alien who is teaching deliberately teaching us how to defend ourselves against him.”

“You’re defending him again.”

“I’m telling it like I see it.” She snagged a fritter, bit into it savagely, and forced herself to chew and swallow with the manners her mother had scolded into her as a young child. “Which is what you hired me to do.”

He opened his eyes on another long stare. “You’re prickly this morning.”

“No, I’m telling you something you don’t want to hear.” She cut him off before he could object. “Aklan Phyrz is one of the most honorable people I’ve ever met, which begs the question as to why you’re so hellbent on finding a flaw in him.”

“God, Sonja. You know me so well. Rose would be proud of you, you know.”

At the mention of his late wife, tears pricked Sonja’s eyes. She blinked once, forcing them away. Now was not the time for sentimentality. “You’re evading.”

“Yes,” he said on a sigh. “The higher ups are balking.”

“Higher ups,” she said slowly. “The president?”

“Among others. They want me to negotiate for something else. Technology for resources.”

“Women are resources.”

“Different resources.”

It took her a moment to realize what he meant. “You have no intention of allowing the Xeruvians access to those women, do you?”

“Women are off the table,” he confirmed with a hard stare. “Including you, if I can help it.”

“Then why put me through the turmoil of meeting him? Why allow him to believe he can date me?”

“To stall for time.”

Her eyes went wide as the breath whooshed out of her. “Jesus, Mike. What game are you playing? He’s not the enemy here.”

“But he’s not our friend either.”

“He never will be if you can’t deal honorably with him.”

He leaned forward and stabbed a finger against his desktop, his eyes steely. “We cannot allow the Russians and the Chinese to get their hands on his technology, let alone the Saudis. Think about what a national security nightmare that would create.”

“Then why not use me to get to him?”

“Because you’re not a broodmare!”

She slapped her mug down on his desk, unable to hide her fury. “Fuck’s sake, Mike. That’s a ridiculous excuse. He doesn’t see me that way. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be playing the courtship game. So why don’t you level with me and tell me what you’re really afraid of?”

“I’m afraid of a lot of things,” he shot back. “Including the spaceship the Xeruvians have hovering over this site, weapons hot.”

“You think they’re going to force the issue?”

“They just might, especially if we can’t come up with another solution. It’s not just us, you know. The Chinese government has cracked down on population growth for so long that they’re on the brink of a population collapse. They simply cannot afford to lose any women of childbearing age.”

“And the Russians?”

Mike grimaced. “They’d get in bed with the devil if they thought it would help them defeat us.”

“Then let us be the ones to find a way forward. We’re the Land of the Free, Mike. We can afford to be generous.”

He snorted.

She ignored that and rolled onward. “Seriously, we can. We have the numbers, we have the gumption. God knows any woman in her right mind would jump at the chance to meet a man like Aklan.”

“Would you?”

“I already did,” she said quietly. “Because you asked it of me.”

He flinched as if she’d slapped him. “I knew it was a mistake to bring women here.”

“Pfft. It was me or that idiot Johnson, who can’t tie his shoes without two assistants

and written instructions.”

Mike barked out a laugh, then quickly sobered. “If you want out, say the word. I’ll make it happen and damn the consequences.”

She allowed the idea to roll around in her mind. Quit now while she could. It held some appeal. Aklan was an alien, as she’d reminded herself countless times yesterday, and while he was intriguing, sexy, and more than suitable dating material, even casually dating him dropped her in the middle of a potentially nasty situation.

She could lose her job over this.

Or she could gain the love of her life.

A breath hissed out of her. Wow. Was she really that attracted to him?

The answer came so swiftly, it shocked her. Yes, she was, and for the first time in her life, she wanted to say damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead regardless of the obstacles standing between them.

But it was more than that and she knew it. Her life wasn’t the only one at stake. The fate of his entire culture hung in the balance. She would never be able to live with herself if she didn’t do everything in her power to help the Xeruvians, short of committing treason.

“No, Mike,” she said. “I’m committed to seeing this through. What better way to prove humans are worthy than by reflecting his honor back to him?”

Mike nodded as if he’d known what she was going to say. “I stand by what I said earlier. Rose would be proud of you.”

“Thank you.”

“But, you’re putting me in a helluva spot, Sonja. What happens when Aklan finds out we’re not willing to trade those women’s lives away?”

“We’re not trading their lives, Mike. We’re offering the Xeruvians hope.”

“Christ. You make it sound so reasonable.”

“Because it is. All they want is a chance to meet these women, to court them.”

“And if we can’t allow them to do that?”

Her gaze hardened. “Then we have no choice but to reject their technology.”

“Which risks dropping it into the hands of someone who will cooperate.”

“The solution seems simple to me.”

“Only because you’re not the one being pressured by the president, the Secretary of State, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the—”

She held up a hand. “I get it. All the important people.”

One corner of Mike’s mouth tilted up in a half smile. “Exactly.”

“I can’t help you there. But I can let you debrief me, and I can continue meeting with Aklan.”

“You’d do that, even knowing we can’t negotiate in his favor?”

“I’ll do it despite that. Like I said. He’s an honorable man. He deserves a fair chance.”

Mike toyed with a pen on his desk for a moment, his gaze lowered, before responding. “Ok. Let’s start the debrief.”

Sonja took a sip of her now-cold coffee and allowed her boss to coax information out of her. A strange knot had taken root in her gut, a foreboding. Mike was playing a very delicate game here, and she was caught right in the middle. Maybe she should’ve taken the out when he offered it to her, but she’d never been one to cut and run.

No, she’d stick this out to the bitter end, accepting the good, the bad, and the ugly as they came along.

And something ugly was coming. She could feel it building beneath her skin, and dreaded having to face it when it arrived.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:59 pm*

Aklan strode into the cafeteria in search of Sonja. She had not been at the morning session he'd arranged with her in mind, and he had left abruptly the night before, too wary of losing control to ask for another date.

She had gotten such a gleam in her eyes, he'd been tempted to mark her then and there. Ah, the glorious beauty of her skin! So soft, so supple, so irresistible. More than once, as he'd demonstrated the most basic Ky'Lota forms to her, his mind had strayed instead to the small, glancing touches he'd allowed himself. The adjustment of her posture, of her hands and feet, of slender limbs and delectably curved hips.

A more honorable man, a stronger one, would have refrained from touching her altogether, but that one session had proven how quickly she stole his strength. Was it the sweet curve of her lips that weakened him, the shy flutter of her eyelashes, the tantalizing scent she wore? Or was it her confidence, her intelligence, the honor he sensed lurking at her core?

One thing had become clear as the night wore on: he could not bear their torturously slow human courtship much longer.

But how to quicken the pace without frightening her?

He scanned the cafeteria for her, visually searching each table, and masked the weight of his disappointment. She was not there. Had he perhaps mistaken the hour of the humans' midday repast? Was she ill or otherwise occupied?

Missy rose from one of the tables and waved at him, a bright smile gracing her features. He pivoted toward her, aware of the stares following him as he progressed

across the room, and of the low murmurs as well.

She met him at a relatively human-free spot, her grin never wavering. “You’re looking for Sonja.”

“I wish to speak with her,” he replied. “Has she taken ill?”

“No, I don’t think so. She’s a bit of a workaholic.”

Workaholic . He rolled the word around in his mouth, searching for its meaning. The translator offered no help. Slang befuddled it.

“Works too much?” Missy supplied, her voice kind.

“I see. Perhaps I could find her in her place of work?”

“At her office? Probably. Let me just grab her a snack.”

She whirled away before Aklan could respond, bounding toward the food supply with the same enthusiastic energy she seemed to apply to her every undertaking. He waited but a moment before she bounded back holding a brown bag in her hand.

“This way,” she said as she led him out of the dining area. “Bet you’re getting tired of the stares.”

He followed, shortening his stride to accommodate her quick paces. “It is to be expected. I am the foreigner here.”

“And you took down everybody you faced last night. Hey, we get it, big guy. You’re Superman compared to us.”



“I am a typical Xeruvian warrior.”

“My point exactly. To a human woman, you’re sex on a stick.” She turned down a corridor, her steps light against the dull white floor. “Sonja sure seems to like you.”

Aklan’s steps slowed. “She has said so?”

“Not in so many words.” Missy stopped and turned toward him, her smile gone. “It’s the way she looks at you when she thinks no one is watching. I don’t want her to get hurt.”

“I would not intentionally harm her.”

“What about unintentionally?” She shook her head, making her blonde ponytail swing behind her. “What’s your next move?”

“A third date,” he said promptly. “I wish to arrange it with her as soon as possible.”

“Date number three, huh. Normally that’s...no, not applicable here. I bet you haven’t even kissed her yet.”

“Kissed?”

She cocked one finger at him and wagged it. “That’s what I’m talking about right there. Have you held her hand? Been alone with her without your pesky little guards? Where are the boy wonders anyway?”

“Recovering.”

“I can hear your satisfaction from way over here. Now, how are you going to move things along with Sonja?”

“Aside from asking her to meet with me again, I do not know. Your customs seem...”

“Baffling? Crazy? Completely whacko?”

He had no idea what that last word meant, but the first two he knew well, having been baffled by human behavior on more than one occasion. “Baffling, yes. If she were Xeruvian, the matter would have been settled by now.”

A curious gleam entered her eyes. “Really? Good to know, but not helpful for courting a human. So. Here’s what I suggest. There’s a movie tonight in the commons, after supper. You’ll love it. Lots of blowing things up and shit.”

He wasn’t sure he ever wanted to see feces explode, but perhaps this was yet another human quirk.

“Ask her to go with you,” Missy continued. “Sit next to her. Hold her hand. No grabbing.”

“No grabbing,” he repeated dutifully. Not that he would, if he could help it. At least, not until they were mated. Then there would be plenty of grabbing, on her part and his.

At least, he hoped there would be.

“And then?” he said.

“When it’s over, walk her back to her quarters and try to finagle a kiss out of her.”

“What is a kiss? My translator doesn’t quite know what to make of the word. Something about touching flesh to flesh?”

“I dare you to ask her just like that.” Missy grinned wickedly as she turned and began walking again. “Sex on a stick, brother. Sex. On. A. Stick.”

Sonja sat on a dilapidated couch, squeezed between Aklan on one side and Missy on the other. Someone had had the bright idea to host movie night in the commons, a former conference room roughly twice as big as her temporary quarters. As soon as word got around, people began volunteering their furniture. By the time someone from the catering company delivered bags of popcorn, the room was packed to the gills.

Thankfully, whoever had brought the movie also knew how to rig it up to play via an antiquated projector system. The sound quality was for crap, but the projector’s flickering light reminded her of the drive-in movies her parents had taken her to when she was a kid. The Avengers had never looked so good.

And Aklan had clearly never been so uncomfortable.

He sat stiffly upright, his shoulders hunched in a futile effort not to crowd her. Five minutes in, she couldn’t stand it anymore. She leaned closer and whispered, “Put your arm around my shoulders.”

The look he turned on her held equal measures of heat and curiosity. “Such would not violate propriety?”

“No,” she assured him.

Carefully, he lifted his arm. She leaned forward, scooted in, and curled her legs up, resting them on his thigh so he could relax his legs, too. When he left his arm hovering above her, she reached around and pulled it down, settling it squarely across her shoulders. This close, his scent enveloped her. She turned her face into his chest, unable to resist the lure of spicy musk. Familiar, but not. It was all she could do not to

burrow closer, to sink into his strength and let it renew her own.

He hissed in a breath. “This familiarity is allowed?”

“At this stage, yes, I think so.”

“I would have you closer, if I could.”

She tilted her head up, and her gaze fell to his mouth. They were already so close their faces were nearly kissing distance apart. How much closer could they get and still maintain the propriety that seemed so important to him?

“Closer how?” she asked.

“Sitting upon me.”

An image of her straddling his lap popped into her head and heat suffused her cheeks.

“Ah, no. Not in public.”

“My apologies.”

He faced forward again, seemingly intent on the movie.

“Aklan?”

“Yes, pjora-la ?”

“You don’t have to apologize for wanting to touch me.”

“This is good,” he murmured, “as I would otherwise forever be apologizing.”

A laugh sputtered out of her, drawing an answering smile from him. He glanced down and touched her nose with the tip of a claw, so gently she barely felt it. She wanted to kiss him right then and there. More, she wanted him to take the lead, to wrap his hand around her nape and tilt her face toward his, to gaze into her eyes as he lowered his mouth to hers.

The thought sent a frisson of heat through her. No, that wasn't possible right now, not when they were in public, surrounded by coworkers instead of friends. She'd have to settle for enjoying the weight of his arm against her shoulders, the gentle thud of his heart against her ear, the quiet contentment of being near him. How right it felt to sit with him like this.

After the movie, he asked very solemnly if he could walk her to her quarters, charming her yet again. They wound through the complex, talking softly, him carefully maintaining an appropriate distance.

She kept expecting him to drape his arm around her shoulders again, to take her hand or toy with her hair or something . It finally dawned on her that Aklan didn't know he had permission to do those things. Duh, she thought, and mentally smacked herself in the forehead. He was following her lead. It was up to her to show him where the boundaries lay.

In the middle of his explanation of the origins of Ky'Lota, she tucked her hand into his. He slipped into his native language, flipped back to English, and ended up code switching the rest of the sentence.

His reaction tickled a smile out of her. Warmed her, pleased her that he, a man so unflappable his expression hardly changed, had gotten flustered just because she'd touched him. She tried and failed to quash the bubbly happiness welling up inside her. For Pete's sake, she was a grown woman, not a teenager falling for her first crush. But that's how being around Aklan made her feel.

She tried to rein in the energy buzzing through her blood. They barely knew each other. Yet she was beginning to trust him, to respect him. To want him to take a liberty now and then. Giddy anticipation thrummed through her at the thought.

Damn it, she wanted a kiss!

Her quarters were located at the bottom of a u-shaped hallway randomly jutting off a side corridor. Everything in the Groom Lake complex seemed random, as if it had been built piecemeal when different rooms or structures were needed. She'd caught a glimpse of an underground hangar at one point and had no idea how to find her way back. Just getting from her room to her office required a map.

Living quarters were the worst. They were scattered all over the complex, on various levels, interspersed with conference rooms, public areas, and high security research facilities alike. No two seemed to share a size or layout. Her quarters were barely big enough to turn around in and contained only the bare minimum furniture, while the two guest quarters bracketing hers each had a separate sitting room and efficiency kitchen.

Not that she was complaining, she thought as she and Aklan strolled down one leg of the hallway. Being at the bottom of the u-shaped corridor afforded enough privacy and peace to make up for the room's narrow confines.

Except when she wanted to have a guest over. Then the single room setup wasn't entirely convenient. When they reached her quarters, Aklan's hand still wrapped around hers, she thought seriously about inviting him in for coffee. If her quarters had been something other than a cupboard-sized bedroom dominated by a big, cushy bed, she might've done just that.

Instead, she leaned back against her door, her fingers laced through his, tilting her face toward him as if she were a sunflower and he was her sun.

“What’s on the menu for tomorrow?” she asked.

“The menu?” he said.

Idioms. Damn it. “I meant, what are you doing?”

“A group of humans has asked me to lead them in Ky’Lota each morning during our sojourn here.”

Her mouth twitched in amusement. So formal. “And then?”

“I thought perhaps to see you again, unless the other diplomats call a meeting. I believe the diplomat from the United Kingdom clan—” At her look, he quietly corrected himself. “The United Kingdom country had an emergency this afternoon. The other diplomats wish to move forward without her. I am content to wait until she returns.”

“I thought you wanted to get the negotiations over with.”

His gaze dropped to her throat, and he leaned toward her, a low grow rumbling out of his chest. Her heart tripped into a rapid patter. Now, she thought. He’s going to kiss me now.

He leaned down and rubbed the tip of his horn along her temple, nipped her earlobe. She gasped and closed her eyes, and her fingers tightened against his. Footsteps rang through the hallway. Aklan eased back, his gaze intent on her. Whoever it was said hello as they passed. Several someones, several hellos.

Sonja didn’t give a rat’s ass who as long as they left quickly.

“ Pjora-la ,” Aklan murmured. “I have a gift for you.”

“A gift?” she whispered.

“To help us understand one another better.” He reached into his robe, pulled out a small box, and opened it. Inside, two translucent earbuds rested in fitted cushioning. “So long as you are within range of my wristcom, we may speak to one another in confidence. May I?”

She nodded shakily. He gently grasped her chin and turned her face away, lifted one of the earbuds, and inserted it into her ear.

A sharp prick startled her into a gasp, then the pain faded, and she realized Aklan had stepped back. The box had gone the way it came, hidden away within his robes. Aklan stood military stiff, his hands clasped together behind his back. He uttered a string of sounds she recognized belatedly as his native language just as Mike came sweeping around the corner, his expression thunderous.

“What’s going on?” Mike asked, his words a sharp staccato.

Aklan gazed imperiously at him. “Sonja and I had a movie date this evening. I walked her home. This is customary, yes?”

The words reached her ears as an overlay of English and Xeruvian. She shook her head, touched her ear, and encountered a sticky fluid. She dropped her hand and examined the residue coating her fingertips, rubbing them together. Blood intermixed with a grayish fluid.

Oddly, the sight didn’t scare her. The blood she should’ve expected, given the level of pain. Short, yes, but sharp. And the grayish fluid?

She turned her gaze on Aklan, letting his and Mike’s conversation wash over her without registering any of it. That fluid must have something to do with the earbud.



She'd allowed a foreign actor to implant alien technology into her ear.

And just that morning she'd said she wouldn't stoop to treason.

Immediately, she shook the ridiculous thought away. Mike would be ecstatic over the gift, when she told him about it. If she told him. Assuming it hadn't already compromised her, she thought wryly.

"Sonja!" Mike said.

Her head jerked up. "What?"

"Your ear is bleeding."

She touched her ear again and kept her gaze well away from Aklan. "I've got a little bit of a headache." Which was true. Her head was beginning to ache from having two languages overlapping each other in her brain. "I'm sure it's nothing."

He threw her a sharp look. "Are you sure you don't need a doctor?"

"If it doesn't stop, I'll have it checked. Promise."

"See that you do." He touched her shoulder, nodded to Aklan. "Ambassador."

Aklan returned the nod and watched him walk away. As soon as Mike was out of hearing range, he turned back to Sonja. "I should have warned you about the pain, and the headache."

One language now, thank God, and that helped tremendously. Already, the headache was fading. Maybe it was because both he and Mike had been talking at once.

She straightened abruptly, her fingers touching her ear. “You’re speaking Xeruvian. And I understand you. From here, directly, not through your wrist device.”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Thorian Kael will have to explain the details.”

“Who?”

“Another warlord. He developed the translation program and these devices, so that we could understand your languages.”

“I’m speaking English.” The realization burst out of her so fast, she winced. “Does it sound like English or Xeruvian to you?”

“Xeruvian. Yet do I know you speak English.”

The last filtered into her brain as an unintelligible string of syllables. Xeruvian. But she’d also heard the English translation, without the pain caused by his conversation with her boss.

Because he’d spoken Xeruvian while Mike spoke English, and that’s what had given her the headache: the device trying to translate both at once.

“Remind me not to be in the same room as you and the other diplomats while I’m wearing this,” she said mildly. “You’ve just put all our linguists out of business.”

“Not at all, pjora-la . We have no intention of trading this particular technology. I share it with you to facilitate our mating.”

“About that. What exactly does mating entail?”

His gaze grew heavy lidded, nearly hiding the hot gleam in his eyes. “Mating is...similar to your marital customs, only such a bond can never be broken. Xeruvian mates are tied together on the deepest level. We know our mate upon first sight, through an instinct older than time.”

Despite her attempts to control her expression, her eyes widened in a kind of shocked horror. “And that’s what you want to do to me?”

“I knew you were mine the moment our eyes met.”

“I see,” she said faintly.

“Do you? Perhaps if you felt the mating instinct, too, if you felt the same uncontrollable tug in your blood that I feel.”

“You seem to be controlling it just fine.”

“Only through an enormous exertion of will. The mating instinct is urging me to mark you now, to claim you so thoroughly, no one can question our bond.”

The breath whooshed out of her and her knees went weak. “Claim me?”

“Mark you, bed you,” he snarled, and his fingers twitched into fists. “Just thinking on it tests my control.”

Her nipples pebbled into hard little nubs behind her bra, and she shuddered. “That isn’t our way, not if we want the relationship to last.”

“Thus must my control never waver. However, be warned, pjora-la . Once a Xeruvian

warrior spies his mate, he must claim her. Such a male, if left unmated, can become quite dangerous. Not to his mate, never that, but to the people around her. I have no wish to harm your friends and coworkers.”

She tilted her chin up, her gaze hard. “And I won’t be forced into rushing things.”

“Then I ask only that you do not artificially prolong our courtship.” His expression softened into a hint of a smile. “I would touch you again, if it so pleases you. Once more before we retire for the evening.”

The breath whooshed out of her on a slow roll of heat. “It pleases me.”

He crossed the distance between them in one step and surrounded her with his strength, his palms flat against the door, framing her head. He dipped his head and scraped his teeth across the sensitive skin at her throat, sending a wracking, shuddering flood of desire through her blood. Her eyelids fluttered shut, and she bit her lip to contain a moan, to keep herself there against the door when everything inside her begged her to lean into him, to touch him, to feel his heat. She wanted to tunnel underneath his clothing and test the hard firmness of his body, to rake her fingernails gently across his abs, to tease and torture him all at once.

The need for him was a molten fire in her blood, shocking her with its intensity.

And still, she burned.

“Kiss me, Aklan,” she whispered huskily. “Please.”

“I would do as you ask, pjora-la . Only, what is a kiss?”

Her legs went weak, and a moan escaped. And yet again, footsteps echoed down the hallway, warning of someone’s approach. “I think I’m going to have to show you

when we're alone."

"Now?"

The hope filling his voice made her laugh. "Another time."

He drew back reluctantly, and by the time the walker came into view, Aklan was standing a respectable two feet away from her.

Of course, she was still propped against the door. Thank you, jelly legs. "See you tomorrow?"

"What time?"

Sonja waited until the person passed, another female coworker who was discreet enough not to look too closely at them as she keyed open her room and disappeared into it. "Ky'Lota?"

"And after?"

"Work. Another debriefing." She only just refrained from rolling her eyes. Part of the job. She pointed at his wrist. "What kind of range does that thing have?"

"Enough. Why?"

"Sight distance only?"

"Slightly more."

"Can you hear me if I talk to you when we're not together?"

“Very likely.” He cocked his head, his eyes narrowed. “We have not fully tested it yet.”

“No time like the present. See you tomorrow.”

She slipped into her room before he could respond. Waited a beat with her back pressed against the door. When she was certain he’d walked away, she said, softly, “Aklan?”

“Yes?”

“What does pjora-la mean?”

His laugh was soft and seductive. “You but have to think on it to know.”

She crossed her eyes at the far wall, then closed them. Tried to think about it, but the only thing in her head was him .

“ Pjora-la ,” she whispered, and the meaning hit her at the same time as his growl.

Fate given .

She sucked in a breath as her legs gave way and she slid down the door. Dear lord. She didn’t stand a chance in hell of walking away from him intact, did she?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:59 pm*

Aklan spent the night pacing restlessly around his room, trying to rid himself of the insistent tension boiling through his blood. After leaving Sonja at her door, he had finally given in to temptation and connected his tablet to the human internet. He had to know what this human term kiss meant, now that he'd seen his mate's reaction to it. It had taken a few moments to translate his question into one the humans' primitive technology could answer.

The response had overwhelmed him.

Kissing entailed touching his mouth to his mate's mouth, a practice not engaged in by Xeruvians outside of the initial mating. Their teeth, he thought as he ran his tongue along the back of his own. Too sharp, too likely to cause damage. The mating ritual demanded such a mouth-meeting during the exchange of blood that cemented the mating bond. Beyond that, Xeruvians kept their mouths to less fragile parts of the body during copulation.

Yet his mate wanted such a touch, had demanded it of him in a low, breathy tone, pushing him to the edges of his control. She was not afraid of his teeth. She wasn't afraid of him . Did she realize what a marvelous gift her trust was?

In honor of her trust, he would learn about this kissing and the other mating rituals in which humans engaged. He would learn how to please her, could not think why he and the other warlords had not availed themselves of such information already, when it was freely available on their laughably insecure digital network. Look, there. Several books on the subject. He scrolled through them, selecting promising titles as he discovered them. *The Joy of Sex* . *Red Hot Touch* . *101 Nights of Great Sex* .

Only one hundred and one? Bah.

Another title caught his eye. Position of the Day Playbook . Interesting.

His wristcom pinged, interrupting his search, and Zoran's voice sounded.

"You have new information?" the other warlord said.

Aklan flipped the search closed. "Some. One of the diplomats was called away by a supposed emergency. It has delayed the negotiations."

"Could she be stalling?"

"Possibly. I suspect I am being surveilled by covert intelligence as well. Have you studied the videos I uploaded?"

"Of your honor duels? Yes. As we suspected, the humans are much weaker, perhaps too weak."

"Physically, perhaps. In other ways, I suspect they are as strong as Xeruvians." Aklan dropped into a chair and stretched his legs out, wishing instead for a long run to burn the hunger from his blood. "Sonja continues to surprise me with the strength of her intellect."

"She is well?"

"Yes. I implanted one of the translation devices in her ear last night."

"It works on her?"

"Indeed, with few initial problems. Perhaps more pain than what I experienced, but



she is of a different species. Such discrepancies are to be expected.”

Zoran grunted, his only response.

Aklan continued. “She and I spoke together long after retiring, she in her room, I in mine.”

“Only talk?”

“Their courting rituals are...” Aklan searched for the proper term and settled on, “Tedious. Humans cannot sense their mates, so they must approach appropriate candidates and test them until they find someone suitable.”

“You have learned much of them in your time there.”

“Not enough. Some aspects elude my understanding. Only recently did I learn of their practice of kissing.” Quickly, Aklan outlined what he knew of the custom. “My mate asked me to do this with her.”

Zoran sucked in an audible breath. “The harm your teeth could do!”

“She is not afraid.”

If pride colored his voice at his mate’s strength, so be it. He was proud of her. She was a fine woman, and he was lucky to have found her. So lucky, considering that they had been born on different worlds spaced light years apart, one which had not yet mastered interstellar travel. He dared not think of the consequences of never knowing her. Such a life seemed bleak by comparison, had been bleak even filled with family and friends, with the purpose drawn from rebuilding their species.

Truly, the Fates had blessed him and his clan. All that remained was persuading her

that he and his clan could be a like blessing in her life.

“Would that we all gain such mates,” Zoran said. “Yet, I cannot help thinking of them as klika , scurrying into their hidey holes at the first sign of danger.”

Aklan laughed. Had he not thought the same? “I think you would be surprised by their gumption.”

A knock hit the door, then the knob turned and Missy leaned partway inside, waving a sheaf of papers at him. “Got a minute?”

“Just a moment, Zoran.” He waved Missy in. “For you, of course. How may I help you?”

She shut the door carefully behind her, her gaze darting surreptitiously into every corner of his quarters. One finger touched her ear, then traced an upright circle.

Ah. She was aware of the covert surveillance, too.

“No one can overhear us,” he assured her.

Her shoulders relaxed, and she smiled. “Great. Here’s that list of supplies you asked for.”

He regarded her steadily for a moment. “I asked for no such list.”

“You were going to, and that’s the key thing. Here.”

She handed a sheaf of papers to him. He flipped through them, briefly scanning each page in turn as she walked casually around the room, running her fingers along furniture and lamp fixtures. The first few pages contained, as she’d said, a list of

supplies and quantities. Human food, delicacies, clothing, technology, and other necessities. That was followed by two pages of names and contact information, if he properly understood the items listed.

The final page contained another list of contact information, each headed by the name of an institute. The first entry had a hand-written notation affixed that read, “Start here.” Aklan entered the institute’s name into his wristcom for translation. It spit out Center for the Advancement of Humanity along with a précis indicating its importance as a leading research and development entity.

Missy cleared her throat, drawing his attention to her. She pointed to several spots and bared her teeth in a fierce grin. Her finger touched her ear again, then she held her hand out, palm up, and wiggled her fingers.

Aklan set the papers aside, scrutinizing her intently. She was trying to tell him something, but what?

“Our morning sessions are growing like wildfire,” she said.

“Indeed,” he replied, matching her light tone. “On Xeruvia, we would divide such a group into smaller parts, placing each section under a student-teacher, with a more experienced practitioner supervising the whole.”

“We do that sort of thing here.” Again she pointed to her ear and held her hand out. “There’s enough for three groups, I think. Maybe a dozen students each?”

“Yes. Would you like to lead such a group?”

“It would be my honor. But do you really want to show that kind of favoritism?”

“Ah. You are from the same country-clan as my mate, are you not?” He nodded his

approval. Sonja had made a good choice in taking this female as a friend. She...what was she saying? Ah, yes. She had a good head on her shoulders. "For diplomatic reasons, perhaps it would be wiser to choose others."

"I can get you a list."

"I thank you. Please, sit while we discuss this matter."

She shot a look at him that he couldn't possibly fathom, then crossed the room and dropped into the chair opposite him. "I thought maybe the Chinese ambassador's daughter. She's an Olympiad. Gold medal in gymnastics. One of the best athletes on the planet."

"It shows." And he had finally understood her meaning. He rose and crossed to his satchel, knelt in front of it as he spoke. "She will do very well. And perhaps someone from the United Kingdom country?"

"Russia, or you might inadvertently cause a real diplomatic fuss. But someone from the UK and maybe Germany would also be good. You could rotate through a few people, too."

"Stability is better." He retrieved the other translator, secured the satchel, and resumed his seat. "If the negotiations are delayed long enough, would there be interest in more advanced sessions? Smaller groups, a tighter focus."

"Absolutely. Sign me up!"

He held up the device, eyebrows raised in a way that, to humans, would indicate questioning. "You are certain? We cannot be overheard in this room."

She cocked her head, very like the klika he and Zoran had just spoken of. "You won't

be teaching us in this room.”

He eyed her, pleased by her foresight, yet curious as well. How had she come to know of the translation device? Had Sonja told her?

No, he thought. She would not have mentioned it to anyone other than Nicholson, whom she must tell in order to retain her job.

Missy had therefore learned of it in another way, a clandestine way, for he could not imagine Sonja’s supervisor allowing such a secret to become widely known. It had become clear very early in the negotiations that the various country-clans vied among themselves in a sometimes hostile manner, achieving a rough balance that held each one in check through the weight and regard of the whole. Nicholson would not have easily given over any advantage, however small.

How, then, had Missy come to learn of it? Could he trust her with such technology? Would she use it wisely in his and Sonja’s favor, or would she turn its use against him?

He thought of their interactions, of the way she had voluntarily helped him, without his asking, thought also of her friendship with Sonja, and knew that whatever Missy’s reasons, she was acting to his and his mate’s benefit.

“Very well,” he said. “Be warned that such sessions may inflict greater pain than the more basic classes.”

Her eyes hardened into narrow slits. “I know what I’m getting myself into.”

Did she? He would not wish to bring harm to her, and not only for Sonja’s sake.

Yet he could not protect her from harm she willingly brought on herself.

That decided, he leaned forward and handed the device to her. She pushed it into her ear and winced.

“Some of those forms do pack a punch.” She wrinkled her nose, shook her head. Her fingers came away from her ear bloodied. She looked impassively at the thin red smear, then rubbed the fluid away. “But I think there’s enough interest to move forward.”

“Then I shall speak with the ambassador’s daughter at this evening’s session.”

“Can’t. Some of the guys are holding a pickup game. Basketball. You and Sonja should come. It’ll be a good cultural experience.”

Akkan nodded solemnly. “I look forward to witnessing this basketball. Thank you for the list. It is exactly what I needed.”

Missy smiled brightly. “I thought you’d like it. See you tonight.”

She bounded out of the room with her usual zeal. As soon as the door closed behind her, Akkan said, “Did you understand?”

“Not all,” Zoran admitted. “What is this list she gave you?”

“Supplies needed to feed and care for at least two dozen humans for several weeks, as well as sources for procuring those supplies, among other items.”

Zoran hummed appreciatively. “Why would she willingly hand over such information?”

“I do not know her purpose, only that she has one. If I understand her correctly, this room contains devices intended to gather clandestine information, though they can be

of little use. I set a jammer within as a matter of course.”

“The humans are spying on you?”

“They are trying, yes. Likely several factions, including my mate’s country-clan. Humans are not as united in their purpose as Xeruvians.”

Zoran growled softly. “Xeruvians are not always united either, else we would not have had to fight so hard to win the other warlords to our cause. If this human female offers aid, we should not refuse.”

“Even if we do not understand her intent?”

“Even so. Send the list to me and I shall gather the needed supplies. Offer my felicitations to your mate.”

“I shall. Peace be unto you, old friend.”

“And unto you.”

Sonja entered the debrief prepared. As soon as Mike beckoned her into his office, she placed her resignation on his desk.

He glanced down at the single sheet of paper, his eyebrows furrowed. “What’s this?”

“My resignation.” She inhaled a deep breath, steeling herself for what came next. “I’ve been compromised.”

His head came up. “You had sex with him?”

“God, Mike. No.”

“Then what?”

She pointed to her ear and the tiny device hidden within it. “He gave me a translation device last night, just before you appeared.”

“Ah. The blood.”

“Yes, the blood. You caught me off guard. I wasn’t sure how to handle telling you.”

He flicked his fingers at the resignation. “So you do this?”

“What else could I do? He can hear everything I say, as long as we’re within range of each other.”

“Really?” Mike’s gaze turned speculative. “Interesting.”

“I tell you I have extraterrestrial technology implanted in my ear that can also serve as a bug and you think that’s interesting?”

“Because it is. You’ve clearly gained his trust, exactly the in we need with him. And that device gives us an edge over the other countries he’s negotiating with.”

“And the fact that he sees me as his marital partner doesn’t?” Sonja flipped her hands up, exasperated, then plopped into a chair across from her boss. “Look. You may think this thing is great and all that, but he really can hear everything I say. For all I know, he’s reading my mind. This translating device is amazing . Last night, it was translating both of you at once.”

Mike grinned. “Made your head hurt, huh?”

“Go ahead and laugh. You’re not the one about to lose your job over this.”



“You won’t lose your job, though it may be wise to shuffle your duties around. You know that brief they gave us on their culture?”

She eyed him warily. “What about it?”

“Since you’re working with him anyway, why don’t you take it and see if you can get him to expand on it.”

“You want me to interrogate him?”

“I want you to ask him politely to expound upon it. Whatever he’s willing to share.” He picked up a pen and fiddled with it, swiveling his chair back and forth. “We can hand off your other duties to avoid compromising our security, and you won’t have to resign your post.”

She hadn’t wanted to, not least because doing so would’ve meant losing access to Aklan. “I can live with that.”

“Good, because I wasn’t going to give you a choice. Can he hear you now?”

“If he’s paying attention and within range.” She glanced away and said, “Aklan?”

“Yes, pjora-la ?”

“Mr. Nicholson has questions about the translation device you gave me.”

“He may ask any questions of me, if it pleases you. I will answer him as well as I can, though I cannot divulge all its secrets. I am not its maker.”

She nodded at Mike before continuing. “I thought you didn’t want to share this technology with humans?”

“I only promised to explain, little klika , not share.”

The amusement filling his voice made her melt, just a little, then the device translated klika into English and she sat bolt upright. “Wait a minute. You’ve been calling me a tiny rodent this entire time?”

Mike put a hand over his mouth, not quite hiding a grin.

Aklan, on the other hand, roared with laughter. “Ah, my love. I see that I should not have been so generous in my gifts to you.”

“And I see that I should pay more attention, if you’re going to insult me.”

“Never would I insult you. It is an endearment.”

“Ha! I should challenge you for that endearment.”

“A challenge of honor?”

She grinned, relishing the idea. “Yes. In fact, I think I’m going to have to insist.”

“Then the challenge shall be met. Tomorrow, perhaps. Missy informed me of a pickup game being held this evening.”

“You saw Missy?”

“I shall explain later, when we are alone.”

His voice deepened into a low rumbling growl, and she shivered. Man, that got her every time.

“Sounds good,” she said, ignoring the husky note in her own voice. “Would you mind coming to my office this morning? I have something I want to discuss with you in person.”

“I shall be there shortly. Peace be unto you, pjora-la .”

The customary response popped into her head, dutifully translated into English. “And unto you, Aklan.”

When she turned back to Mike, he was watching her with an odd expression.

“You’re falling in love with him,” he said.

Well. If that didn’t hit the nail on the head.

“I’m letting things develop,” she corrected softly. “He’s hard to resist.”

“Apparently. I haven’t seen you this interested in a man in years. Not since that musician.”

Sonja forced a light laugh out of her throat. “That was a long time ago.”

Mike’s smile faded. “Be careful with the Xeruvian. This could blow up in all our faces, with you smack dab in the middle of the mess. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“If I do, I have no one to blame but myself. I placed myself squarely in his crosshairs, and I take full responsibility for that.”

“Yes, you have.” Mike shook his head and pushed her resignation letter across his desk. “Burn that thing before you get back to work.”

She rose and nodded sharply. “Yes, sir. I’ll keep you informed of my progress on the other matter.”

“I know,” he said, and she couldn’t quite shake the sadness in his voice.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:59 pm*

When Aklan arrived at her office a few minutes later, Sonja had herself well in hand.

Or thought she did until she closed the door behind him and he leveled that hungry stare on the pulse fluttering in her throat. Heat pooled between her thighs. Oh, that look held such promise, days and days of promise.

She crossed her legs under her desk, which only made the throbbing sensation worse, and pasted a professional smile on her mouth. “Hey. Thanks for coming by.”

“I am at your disposal, pjora-la .” His voice held a soft chide and a hint of the hunger bleeding into his gaze. “You wished to see me?”

“I did. Mr. Nicholson asked me to go over the cultural brief you gave us when you arrived.”

Aklan glanced around the room, no doubt taking in the bare concrete block walls, the battered desk, the empty metal bookshelves at her back. Like her quarters, her office was miniscule, barely wide enough to hold the desk, let alone the two chairs and shelving. It was private, though, one of only two such offices made available to Mike’s staff. The others had been consigned to the conference room stretching between her office and Mike’s. Unfortunately, the only entrance to the private offices was through that conference room. Anywhere else, that setup would’ve made zero sense, but in Area 51, it was par for the course.

Aklan’s gaze settled on her again. “Very well. Shall we begin?”

“Of course. Have a seat, please.” She gestured to the chair across from her, waited for

him to sit, then opened the file containing a paper copy of the document the Xeruvians had given them along with other pertinent items. “Do you have a picture of your planet? We’ve not been able to capture close-up images of an extrasolar planet yet.”

“If it pleases you, we can add an exchange of astronomical data to the negotiations.”

“That would be wonderful. Thank you.”

“As for Zephyria, if I may?” He lifted his left hand and rolled it over, displaying the device on his wrist.

Her expression softened into a smile. “You don’t have to ask permission to approach me, Aklan. I thought we cleared that up.”

“My understanding of human culture is that personal time and work time remain separate.”

Observant bugger, wasn’t he?

She gestured him over to her side of the desk and swiveled her chair toward him. He rose and slid between the wall and her desk, then knelt beside her, his right arm draped over her shoulders, his left wrist hovering in front of her. His scent and warmth hit her at once, nearly overwhelming her. She was acutely aware of his fingers splayed across her shoulder, of his thigh brushing her shin, of the lethal tip of one horn positioned only inches from her temple. Even kneeling, he towered over her, making her feel petite by comparison. He surrounded her, curving around her protectively, sheltering her from...what? Her office’s industrial blandness? The barely audible chatter of her colleagues in the outer room?

Amused, she turned a smile on him, only to find his face inches from her own. The

world faded until it included only this. His touch, his strength, the desire swirling between them.

“Pjora-la,” he said, his voice a breathy growl. “I have dreamed of having you here.”

“Aklan,” she responded, her own voice a bare whisper.

Unable to resist, she traced her fingers across the strong line of his jaw. His skin was smooth under her fingertips, tougher than a human’s, yet remarkably warm and silky. He turned his face into her hand, flicked the tip of his tongue along her palm, sparking the most delicious feeling inside her.

“What does it feel like?” she murmured. “The mating thing.”

“The mating instinct?”

“Yes.”

“It is...everything. When our eyes met for the first time, I knew you were meant for me, and I for you, with a certainty born in my soul.” He nuzzled her palm, his eyes still closed, as if he were savoring her touch. “Instinct is the beginning, the catalyst. Instinct guides us to the one best suited for us, the one who will give our children the best chance of survival.”

When he said children, a low heat throbbed through her, and for a moment she felt him moving above her, moving in her. Filling her with his seed.

Growing heavy with child, his hand cupping her rounded stomach gently, protectively.

“You feel it, too.”

His voice startled her out of the reverie, and her gaze flew to his. His eyes were open now, assessing her with that feral heat. Tell me true , that look said, and she was helpless to deny him.

“I feel something,” she admitted.

“Then you must know what the instinct demands of us.”

She shook her head. “Only what you’ve told me.”

“Say it,” he demanded roughly. “Say what must be done.”

“R-run,” she stuttered. “Let you chase me.”

“Until you are mine. Say it!”

She gasped. “Aklan!”

His hands tugged her against him, one at her waist, the other pressing insistently against her back. “Say it, pjora-la ! Give me this much.”

“Until I’m—” She swallowed hard, afraid to speak the words. Afraid that if she said them out loud, she would be lost to him, forever, when she already felt so much. “I can’t.”

“ Pjora-la ,” he crooned, his forehead touching hers. “Do you know why I could not accept your challenge?”

She shook her head once.

“If I had faced you there, in an honor duel, it would have been the same as chasing



you. When I defeated you, and I would conquer you,” he growled fiercely, “I would have marked you as a mate marks his beloved, and forced you to do the same to me. I would have taken you then and there, fallen upon you as an animal would, stripped you of every hesitation, every doubt. I need this, pjora-la . My beloved. I need to touch you, to feel you moving under me, to bring you into my home, to worship and protect you.

“And yet even now, I find myself unwilling to bend you to my will. It is not our way, pjora-la . You must believe me. Our mates must come first. Male or female, warrior or wife, such makes no difference. We are driven to place our mate’s needs above our own. I need you, pjora-la , more than I have ever needed anyone, but you—you are human. Your needs remain a mystery to me. And so, I must master the instinct urging me to claim you now in every way possible, so that you may have time to come to me in your own way, for only when you find certainty may my own soul be fulfilled.”

“Aklan,” she breathed, blinking back the tears pricking her eyes. “What doubts can I have when you say things like that?”

“As many as humans can imagine, I daresay.”

She laughed at the wry rejoinder, laughed because he made her feel dizzy and safe and cherished. He had spoken so eloquently of needs and respect that she could find no words to share what was in her heart, to tell him that humans had the same needs: to love and to be loved, to respect their partner and be respected in turn, to find that precarious balance between two halves of the greater whole.

Humans and Xeruvians were not so different after all.

The words lodged in her throat, refusing to be spoken, and so she found a way to show him instead.

“Kiss me,” she said, and didn’t wait for him to comply, simply tilted her head and crossed the few inches remaining between them. His lips were warm against hers, pliant, the touch so electric, she felt it in every cell of her being. She flicked her tongue against the seam of his mouth, then he opened for her and took control, devouring her, demanding. Conquering.

If this is heaven , she thought dimly, I never want it to end .

Akkan broke the kiss abruptly and touched his forehead to hers, his breaths surprisingly even. “Someone is coming.”

The door opened, startling Sonja so much she would’ve fallen off the edge of her chair if not for Akkan’s firm grip. She turned wide eyes on Missy, who stood framed in the doorway, glancing between the two of them.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Missy said.

Sonja managed a weak disbelieving snort and muttered, “I doubt it.”

“You wished to speak to Sonja?” Akkan said, no trace of desire or need or conquering in his voice.

“Yes, but it can wait. Catch me when you’re done.”

Missy winked coyly and left.

As soon as the door shut behind her, Sonja sagged against Akkan. “She’s going to tease me mercilessly about getting caught with my hand in the cookie jar.”

His brow furrowed. “If your hand were in the cookie jar, I would not have been able to stop.”

Sonja's eyes widened and she choked on her next breath. "I don't even know what to do with that."

"Do not fret. I have read many books on the subject of human sexuality and will gladly direct you."

She reared back long enough to study his expression, caught the mischief in his gaze, and grinned. He was making a joke. By golly, he'd finally gotten the hang of human humor.

"You ," she breathed, then dissolved into post-kissing giggles. "I don't know what to do with you."

"Yes, you do, beloved."

Then he kissed her again and proved himself right.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:59 pm*

Aklan parted from Sonja only after regaining control of his body. She had teased him to the point of madness with only a kiss and the glancing graze of her fingers along his clothed chest. And while it had been a test of his willpower, he had begun to find some small measure of charm in human mating rituals, particularly the one called foreplay .

Sonja stepped out of her office behind him, then slid away with a murmured, “See you after supper.”

They had a date that night, attending the pickup game Missy had suggested. Aklan had determined to bring Sonja another gift to commemorate the occasion, yet had not decided which would be most appropriate. None of the gifts he’d brought seemed adequate now compared to her innate beauty and goodness.

She was his gift, he mused, one he’d traveled the galaxy to find. Did she understand the lengths he would travel to keep her?

Across the room, Mike Nicholson beckoned Aklan forward, likely for further diplomatic nonsensicalities. No word had yet arrived from the UK country-clan’s diplomat. Such remained beyond Aklan’s control. So long as he courted Sonja, his patience would hold. When she acquiesced, he would reassess his options. Until then, he must play this game well enough to fool the other diplomats into complacency.

Resigned, Aklan crossed the room, politely greeting Sonja’s coworkers along the way. Mike waved him into an office space nearly identical to Sonja’s, then urged Aklan to sit as he found his own chair.

Aklan leveled a neutral gaze on the other male. "You wished to speak with me?"

Nicholson's gaze was equally unyielding. "The president has asked me to express his gratitude to you for your patience."

"There is nothing to be done," Aklan acknowledged with a polite nod. "Truthfully, I find human dithering to be quite tedious. The UK diplomat's absence has relieved me of enduring it. I hope you and your fellow diplomats use the time well."

"We are, I assure you. Several countries have agreed to allow larger nations to negotiate on their behalf."

"Favorably to all, I should hope."

Nicholson rolled his shoulders. "Many are reluctant to offer their women up to an alien race, even those whose cultures devalue women."

Aklan bared his teeth in a predatory smile. "We value them, sir, and will happily court them with the full honor and respect they deserve."

"The same way you're courting Sonja?"

"Has she any complaints regarding my treatment of her?"

"To the contrary. She speaks highly of you." A smile played around the other male's mouth. "You've quite won her over."

"Such is as it should be when one woos a mate. Force would never work on her."

"It wouldn't work on many human women."

“Nor on Xeruvian females. Unless they wished it.”

“Sonja keeps telling me our species have more in common than not.”

“She speaks the truth. I have always found diplomacy to work better when each side understands the commonalities.”

“Indeed,” Nicholson murmured. His gaze drifted to his desk and he swiveled his chair to the side and back. “Would you be willing to entertain a counteroffer that does not include human women?”

“We would not,” Aklan said flatly, “as we made clear from the beginning. This seems to be a sticking point for every human culture.”

“For good reason. It smacks too much of slavery.”

“Slavery? Bah. We have no wish to enslave humanity. A warrior’s mate is his equal, free to do as she pleases so long as she honors the mating bond. Xeruvians make possessive mates, Mr. Nicholson. Protective ones. But we are not slavers.”

“Still. Will you consider nothing else in trade? Unique delicacies? Raw materials?”

A spurt of irritation pushed Aklan to his feet. “Such things are easily obtainable from within our own solar system, as you well know. Do you intend to delay until such time as we give up, or will you acquiesce?”

Mike remained seated, his gaze guarded. “You’re asking me to show my hand.”

“I’m asking you to honor the promise you have already made. We gave you technology as a show of goodwill, and now you say you have no intentions of honoring that implicit agreement?”

“I’m saying no such thing, Ambassador Phyrz, merely that we would like to explore all options before agreeing to anything further.”

Aklan huffed out a raw breath. “You dither surprisingly close to prevarication.”

“Such is the diplomat’s life.”

“Then you will not agree to our terms even to benefit your own subordinate?”

“It’s not my call. I’ve been given a negotiation path to follow and told not to deviate from it without permission.”

Aklan stared down at the other male, his expression carefully controlled, revealing no clue to his inner thoughts. “Gain permission to deviate, Mr. Nicholson.”

He turned and walked out, his stride even and purposeful, speaking to no one unless they spoke first. His guards fell into step behind him as he left the US country-clan’s offices, and he tolerated their presence until reaching his own rooms.

And felt a good deal of satisfaction at shutting them out.

Once inside, he turned off his translator and signaled Zoran. When the other warlord answered, Aklan said, “Have you located suitable candidates?”

“We have,” Zoran said. “And within three days’ time, we shall have a hold full of supplies for their care.”

“Good. Be ready to retrieve me at my request.”

“And what of your mate?”

Aklan's mouth slid into the smile of a mate on the hunt. "Prepare for her as well. Peace be unto you."

"And unto you."

Aklan closed down the signal and strode to his satchel in search of another gift for his mate.

That evening, Sonja stood with her hand tucked into the crook of Aklan's arm, bracketed between him and Missy. The pickup game had expanded to include the full court. Everyone had joined in on the fun, including many of the supporting staff for non-American diplomats.

She fingered the necklace Aklan had given her earlier, a sunburst crafted from silver filagree and stone native to his home region on Zephyria. The delicate jewelry was the most beautiful she'd ever owned, and for one brief, shining moment, his gift had touched her as deeply as his words had. He'd carried this gift across who knew how many lightyears, just for the mate he'd hoped to find here.

Lightyears .

How many millions of miles stretched between Earth and Zephyria? Between her life here and his life there?

He might think of her as his mate, but was she really? Could she ever fulfill that role in his life when their worlds were literally lightyears apart? How would that even work? Would he move here? Would she move there?

When she thought of giving up her life and moving to a completely alien world, her stomach sank like a rock. What place could she possibly have on Zephyria?



God, why had she ever let things get this far?

Missy leaned in and spoke, her gaze following the competitive game taking place in front of them. “I can hear your thoughts whirring from over here. What gives?”

“It’s nothing,” Sonja murmured.

Nothing she wanted overheard, anyway. She and Aklan had been on the receiving end of a few mutinous glares, directed at them foremost by the Russians. Mike’s in had caused some resentment among the other countries participating in the talks. She’d expected some negative reactions when she’d first jumped into meeting Aklan.

She hadn’t expected those reactions to hold any sway with her. Maybe if she’d anticipated developing feelings for him, she would’ve thought further ahead. At the time, she’d fully intended to do her duty merely to placate him, to buy Mike some time.

Not once had she seriously considered that she might fall in love with Aklan.

Her heart was still her own, barely. Hanging onto that cliff by its fingernails. How much longer could she hold out before she took that last, fatal tumble into love?

Missy patted her shoulder. “Don’t worry, Sonja. Everything’s going to be ok.”

Sonja snorted at that. “Easy for you to say.”

“Trust me.”

Missy slipped away before Sonja could respond.

Aklan crossed his arms and placed his hand over Sonja’s fingers, still tucked into the

crook of his arm. He'd positioned them near center court with his back to the concrete block wall.

If she never saw another concrete block in her life, it would be too soon.

On the other hand, that was a plus on the Zephyria side. She'd bet next month's pay they didn't have a single concrete block wall anywhere on the planet.

A group of Ky'Lota devotees hovered near Aklan, questioning him about forms and style. He assured everyone who asked that he intended to resume twice-daily sessions "on the morrow." While he chatted with the others, Sonja let his strength warm her. His bicep was like sculpted rock under her fingers, his hand a firm promise.

He'd protect her no matter what. Of that she had no doubt. But would his protection be enough?

The thought startled her. She shifted her gaze to his face, only to find him gazing down at her.

"Something troubles you, pjora-la?"

Should she share the doubts filling her heart? Should she tell him of her uncertainties?

She shook her head. No. Better not to worry him. He already had enough on his plate.

"It's nothing," she said.

"It is something, for it fills your eyes with grief and sadness."

She forced her mouth to twist into a credible approximation of a smile. "That's

boredom, or maybe the dust.”

He grunted. “You must learn to trust me, Sonja.”

“Trust takes time.”

“As do many things.” His gaze probed hers a moment longer before it dropped to her throat. “Tonight, will you kiss me again?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Think hard, female.”

The blunt growl held as much promise as command.

Later, after he walked her to her quarters, she did kiss him. Not the passionate kisses they’d shared that afternoon, but a light brush of her lips across his. The simple touch seemed to satisfy him, for he grazed his fangs along her throat and wished her a good sleep in that formal way of his.

Doubts dogged her sleep, haunting her dreams.

When her alarm went off the next morning, she pushed herself upright and dragged tired hands over her face. For the first time ever, she considered calling in sick. It wasn’t the lack of sleep. She’d done without plenty of times before.

No, it was having to face Aklan and her coworkers knowing she couldn’t string him along a single minute more. Knowing she should’ve nipped the whole thing in the bud, right after meeting him that first time. Everything after that had acted as encouragement to him, prodding him to believe she’d eventually accept him, when she knew, in her heart, they were incompatible to the bone.

Tears pricked her eyes, and she scrubbed them away.

“I’m just tired,” she told the wobbly chest of drawers, and turned away from the robe he’d given her, carefully folded at the end of her bed.

She dragged herself into and out of a shower. Stared at the coffee pot, pondering whether she wanted to bother making any.

Three raps hit her door, and the doorknob jiggled. “Sonja, you awake?” Missy called through the metal door.

What now , Sonja thought. Couldn’t she even procrastinate in peace?

She heaved a sigh and opened the door. Missy breezed in wearing a baggy sweatshirt over her exercise clothes, a backpack slung over one shoulder.

Right. Ky’Lota. It had completely slipped her mind. When she’d gotten out of the shower, her hands had reached automatically for the shimmery soft robe Aklan had given her that first day. She sniffed back another spate of tears and slumped onto the end of the bed, her arms crossed over her chest.

Missy dropped the backpack on the bed and dug out a paperback novel. “Nunh-unh, girl. Get up and change, or we’ll miss the morning session.”

“I can’t make it today.”

“Yes, you can, Miss Grumps. Just because you look like hell—”

Sonja giggle-snorted. “Thanks. You sure know how to cheer a gal up.”

“What’re friends for? Say, do you mind if I make some coffee? I could use a caffeine

hit.”

Without waiting for Sonja’s reply, Missy dropped the novel onto the backpack, went to the coffee pot, and efficiently set coffee to brew. Once done, she ran her hands along the back of the appliance, then along the edges of the desk where it met the wall.

“What are you—” Sonja said.

Missy interrupted with a bright, “So! I was thinking we could have another movie night.”

“Ooooookay.”

“Aklan’s only seen the one, right? I mean, you two haven’t been sneaking around watching movies without me, have you?”

Missy held her hand out, palm up, displaying two tiny metal discs. Sonja stared at them with growing horror. Someone had bugged her room? When? Why?

She winced. No, she knew why. Who and when were the problems.

“So, what do you think?” Missy continued. “Do you think Aklan would be up for another movie night?”

“Y—” The reply stuck in Sonja’s throat. She swallowed twice before speech would clear her mouth. “Yes. He seemed to like The Avengers .”

“It did make for some interesting discussions. How about Independence Day ? We can show humans kicking alien ass for once. He sure kicks our butts often enough.”

Sonja forced out a laugh. By then, Missy had worked her way around the room, lifting covert listening devices from behind the headboard, under the chest of drawers, and even her lone suitcase. The coffee finished brewing just then. Missy calmly pulled the one-cup pot out and dumped the handful of bugs into the piping hot liquid, then held one finger to her mouth.

Right. She probably hadn't found all of them.

Sonja rubbed her eyes, surprised to find tears seeping beneath her lashes. She should be angry about this, so pissed off she marched from her room and gave Mike an earful for him to pass along to whoever the hell was in charge of their team's security.

Missy, she thought miserably. That's who was in charge, and she was already on the ball.

Still, how long had those devices been hidden in her room? Had they caught the one-sided, late-night conversations she'd held with Aklan? Were her own words being used against him even now?

A long sigh shuddered out of her. She should've anticipated this.

"I think," she said slowly, "Independence Day might give him the wrong idea."

Missy picked up the novel and showed the cover to her, then opened it and pointed inside. "Could be worse. Like, Men in Black worse."

Sonja studied the paperback, a trashy romance. The cover featured a man in a flowing, unbuttoned shirt dipping a woman wearing an old-fashioned gown. Why was Missy showing her that?

She pursed her lips. “I don’t know. Do we really want him to think humans are always that aggressive?”

“Humans are aggressive. Not half as aggressive as aliens. In fact, I’m positive there are bigger threats out there than the Xeruvians.”

Sonja pondered that for a moment, startled by Missy’s certainty. Unsure how to reply. Finally, she settled on, “Does your fiancé like movies as much as you do?”

Again, Missy pointed to the novel, then the interior, her blue eyes wide and unblinking. “Yeah. He’s a total geek.”

Sonja picked her next words carefully. “He sounds adorable. Where did you meet again?”

Cover, interior. “At a gaming convention. I was security, he was a panelist. We bumped into each other one day. Literally. Poor thing bowled me over. I spilled coffee all over my best suit.”

Her meaning hit Sonja like a Mack truck barreling into a retaining wall. Not cover, interior. Cover story. Missy worked for one of the alphabet agencies. Mike had never said which one, and Sonja hadn’t asked. There’d been too many other things going on. In the back of her mind, she’d thought maybe DHS or the CIA, given the circumstances.

But now she had to wonder who Missy really worked for, and why she was really there.

Sonja’s breath caught in her throat. No, wait. Missy had already told her. She just hadn’t understood.

“Well, that’s not quite the meet-cute I was imagining,” Sonja improvised.

Missy beamed at her and dropped the book, then turned to the chest of drawers and pulled the top one out. “Nothing like your meet-cute anyway. Say, what are you going to wear later? I think we’re doing a formal dinner tonight?”

Sonja watched the other woman pull out a handful of her underwear, bemused. “God, I hope not. I only brought one dress. Forgot my pantyhose, too.”

“Nobody cares about that anymore.”

Missy stuffed the panties in the backpack, then held it out to Sonja, eyeing her meaningfully. Her other hand dipped into her athletic short’s lone pocket and retrieved an index card folded into fourths. Sonja took it, unfolded it, and squinted at three lines of miniscule handwriting.

Trust me.

Not everyone agrees with the powers that be.

Don’t let anyone separate you.

She glanced questioningly at Missy, one eyebrow raised. Missy exchanged the backpack for the index card, tore the latter into tiny pieces, and flushed it down the toilet.

“Oh, look at the time!” she said as she walked back into the bedroom. “I’ll just pop on ahead of you, make sure Aklan knows you’re running a little late. Thanks for the coffee!”

“You’re—” Sonja said as Missy all but bounced out the door. “—welcome.”



She glanced at the backpack, then at the novel, not quite understanding why Missy had left either behind. Too early, Sonja thought, and not enough sleep or caffeine. But the visit had at least jogged her out of the morose mood she'd woken to.

Doubts swirled to the surface again, and she stiff-armed them away. She didn't have to make a decision about Aklan right away, didn't have to figure out all the logistics. Those bugs were a more pressing concern anyway. Mike needed to be warned about them so someone could figure out who'd planted them.

Unless Missy already had. She seemed to be one step ahead of everyone.

Had a Men in Black style agency really embedded her in Mike's team?

Sonja shook that off as she slid off the bed. More pressing matters, she reminded herself. On a whim, she emptied the rest of her clean clothes out of the chest of drawers into the backpack, just in case Missy knew something she didn't.

Which she probably did. Sonja suspected, now that her brain had cleared and she could process their conversation, that Missy knew far, far more than she let on.

The Xeruvians weren't the worst threats out there.

Someone was spying on her.

Not everyone believed the Xeruvians should walk away empty handed.

It was all tied together. And maybe, she thought as she locked the backpack in her suitcase, maybe they were running out of time.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:59 pm*

Over the next two days, Zoran sent Aklan near hourly updates on their progress.

Aklan spent his time gently nudging the diplomats into, as Nicholson put it, quietly showing their hands. What he discovered disquieted him. The humans he'd interacted with did not seem to be disingenuous by nature. Yet, their leaders, the ones negotiating with him for Xeruvian technology, were each attempting to subvert the original terms.

All wanted the proffered technology. None wished to bow to Xeruvian needs to gain it.

He had anticipated such a reaction, but placed it at such a low likelihood prior to meeting the humans that he hadn't given it serious thought. Primarily, he mused, because their rejection of this one demand ensured the worst outcome for future negotiations.

On this, the Warlord Council had agreed: if humans would not bow to their demands, then the warlord team would take what they needed.

Aklan walked away from the final meeting with the lowest status country-clan, pondering closed doors and lost opportunities. He longed to discuss these outcomes with his mate, to gain her perspective on the situation.

Sonja, however, had withdrawn behind the same politely neutral facade she'd worn at their first meeting. Since their passionate embrace, in fact. Had he overwhelmed her with his explanations, with the strength of his need? Or was she merely being human?

His need for her remained a tight, dangerous coil in his gut, stirring restlessly as the days passed and she remained unclaimed. He had spoken truly when he'd told her that a warrior must always place the needs of his mate above his own. Yet, perhaps he had not emphasized the dangers of an uncemented mating enough.

It mattered little. Now that he knew the human diplomats would not accede to his request, now that they had made it clear, in their own obfuscating ways, that they would not allow Xeruvians to meet and court human women...

Now that this had come to pass, his time on Earth had come to an end. He would not share further Xeruvian technology with humans. When Nicholson and the other diplomats learned of this, they would, at the very least, attempt to detain him, despite Xeruvian might. Aklan snapped his teeth. Foolish humans. They thwarted him at their own peril.

And if they dared stand between him and his mate?

His snarl morphed into a fang-baring smile. Then he would gladly unleash the mating instinct and claim Sonja as he should have done from the first.

Sonja fidgeted on the sofa between Aklan and Missy. It had been a long week. Mike had developed a worried furrow between his brows and bags under his eyes. Missy's friendliness held a thread of quiet tension each time they spoke, and Aklan...

Sonja swallowed nervously. Aklan had begun turning his predatory smile on her.

He held her hand now, seemingly intent on the movie they watched.

Men in Black . Missy had won that argument through a Ky'Lota challenge.

After the evening session of the Xeruvian martial art, Aklan had followed Sonja to

her room and waited outside while she cleaned up and threw on jeans and her lone sweatshirt over her workout clothes. He seemed more protective now, his gaze hungry and possessive. Something had changed after that morning in her office two days back. Not what had happened there—dear heavens, he could kiss—but something else. He hadn't said a word about it to her, which only intensified her own doubts.

If he didn't trust her enough to talk to her...

She shook the thought away. No, she couldn't apply human relationship standards here. It wasn't fair to Aklan. How could she push him to trust her when she knew they could never have a real relationship?

Which begged the question as to why she continued to play along.

A wave of guilt hit her, and she shifted against him, drawing his gaze. He leaned toward her and placed his mouth close to her ear. "We do not have to linger here, pjora-la."

He'd cut off the speakerphone aspect of his wrist device, so that only she heard his words.

"The movie's fine," she whispered.

"You seem restless."

"I have a lot on my mind."

He cupped her face with one massive palm, his touch so gentle, she nearly wept. "As do I."

I don't know what to do .

The desperate thought nearly burst out of her. Mike was right. She'd fallen for Aklan, knowing she couldn't keep him. Knowing it wouldn't work.

Aklan brushed his thumb across her cheek, his teal-blue eyes nearly glowing. "Tonight, you will come to me and we shall speak of these things, yes?"

She pulled back, startled. "What, come to your room?"

"Indeed," he agreed solemnly. "We have much to discuss, mate. Bring the bag Missy gave you."

"How do you...?"

The slow smile he gave her was answer enough.

Sonja faced forward, not really seeing the movie playing out on the wall in front of her. Aklan and Missy were in cahoots, was that it? And he wanted to see her alone in his room later.

He'd called her his mate, as if it were a foregone conclusion.

A frighteningly delicious shudder rippled through her. From what she knew of him and his culture, it was. He'd known the moment they met. If only she shared his certainty.

Later, when the movie neared its conclusion, Sonja slipped away, pleading a headache as an excuse. The hallways were quiet as she wound through them. Eerily empty.

She yanked off her sweatshirt as she entered her quarters, then stopped at the foot of the bed. The robe Aklan had given her lay draped across the back of the room's lone chair, butted up against the desk. She'd made the bed before she left, tidied her toiletries in the adjacent bathroom. Neat as a pin, just like her office.

Nothing like the turmoil consuming her from the inside out.

She tossed the sweatshirt aside, toed off her shoes, and finished stripping as she walked toward the shower. Ten minutes later, she yanked clean clothes on over her freshly washed skin. Unlocked her suitcase and tugged out the backpack, jerked clothes off hangers and stuffed them into the backpack with her casual clothes.

A dim voice in her mind wondered what she was doing, packing this way.

The rest of her moved on automatic. No, on instinct. Aklan had told her to bring the backpack. He hadn't told her to pack it first.

But she knew what he'd needed from her, just knew, as if when he'd told her about his mating instinct he'd also shared a small thread of it with her. It burned in her gut, urging her to comply, to run toward him instead of away, as the rest of her, the human in her, demanded.

And it confused her to be torn that way, to have the need for self-preservation pitted against the, the...

Pissed off now, she snapped, "Just say it, Sonja. Just admit that you love him."

She sucked in a harsh breath and slammed the closet open. Damn those snooping spies and their bugs. And damn Aklan, too. He'd probably heard every word of that confession.

Three minutes later, she stared at the zipped backpack resting innocuously on her bed, breathing as if she'd just finished a timed sprint. She'd left her heels and most of her business clothes in the closet, jammed the robe he'd given her into the last few inches of space. Heels she could do without. That robe she could never leave behind.

Slowly, she wrapped herself in the composure she'd worked so hard to build. No one could suspect her true thoughts when she walked to Aklan's quarters. No one could doubt her motives, lest they suspect her true purpose.

What that purpose was, she hadn't quite figured out yet. Not just talk, as Aklan had said. Probably not what she'd instinctively prepared for by packing most of her clothes in that backpack, clean and dirty alike.

God, everything was so impossible right now.

She blew out a final breath and scrubbed her hands down her jean-clad thighs. No time like the present. She tucked the necklace he'd given her under her t-shirt, slung the tightly packed backpack over one shoulder, and left her quarters, wondering if she'd ever see it again.

Sonja passed a few people on her way to Aklan's quarters. When anyone raised an eyebrow at the backpack, she smiled serenely and said, "Laundry."

She had to ask Aklan for directions twice, once when she got turned around, and then when she neared his quarters. She'd expected his security detail to be stationed outside his room, but the hallway was empty and unnervingly quiet.

The door opened as she approached. Aklan drew her inside and closed it behind her, took the backpack from her and dropped it beside a large black duffel on the far side of the room, beyond a small sitting area containing two upholstered chairs and a round coffee table. His quarters were three times the size of her own, but just as

sparsely furnished. A queen-sized bed, a nightstand, and an armoire rounded out the room. Nothing of his was scattered around the room, except for the duffel. It looked like he hadn't been in the room five minutes, let alone more than a week.

He stood, drawing her attention. Since she'd last seen him not half an hour before, he'd stripped down to loose, off white pants slung low on his hips, baring the taut, rippling lines of muscle stretched across his torso. Jagged scars interrupted the smooth skin over his ribs. Four scars, each running roughly parallel to the other across his side

A chill shivered down her spine. Those looked like claw marks. Judging by the distance between each scar, whatever had given them to him had to've been huge .

“You are well, pjora-la ?” he said with his back still to her.

His voice held a rough growl. She stilled abruptly, her eyes wide as he turned toward her. His own eyes held a bright wildness, almost glowing like fireflies against the night. When he'd opened the door, she'd had a brief impression of sculpted muscle, a narrow waist, and the flash of a tattoo along one pectoral. Now, her breath caught on the heavy perfection of his form. His bare body was like a rock hewn away until it revealed its core strength, a strength that could easily crush her with the slightest movement.

In that moment, he was a predator contemplating his prey. She fought the urge to shrink into herself, to run from him or hide. Useless , she thought. She could never hide from him.

“I'm here,” she said, surprised when her voice came out sounding almost normal. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Many things,” he purred. “How long have you known that the human diplomats



intend to deny Xeruvians access to fertile females?”

A startled breath whistled out of her. “Long enough.”

“You did not think to tell me?”

“And betray my own people?”

“What of me, your mate?”

Well. Didn’t that put a fine point on it.

She lifted her chin and stared him down. “Don’t make me choose sides, Aklan. That’s not fair.”

His teeth snapped shut in a savage snarl. “Is it fair to deny a dying people their salvation? Is it fair to trick and connive when met with an honorable proposition?”

“I argued against that,” she said.

“Yet did your words find no purchase.” His balance shifted, then he stalked slowly toward her, each step measured and calculated. Predatory. “And what of us, mate? Think you that I would allow you to retreat from me?”

His third step placed him within easy arm’s reach of her. Instinctively, she skittered back, one hand up as if she had any hope of fending him off. “You said I could have time.”

“What time is left to us, mate?”

He leapt toward her with the shocking grace and speed he’d demonstrated so

effectively during that first beautiful display of his strength. Startled, she yelped and swung around, trying to run, to reach the door and whatever brief escape it offered. His hands latched onto her waist, one arm snaked around her chest, and he lifted her easily, his rough laugh a dark prickle in her blood. She kicked back at him, twisting in his hold, her breaths coming in short, sharp gasps as wet heat pooled between her thighs.

No! She couldn't give in. If she did, he'd devour her one sensual bite at a time, consuming every doubt, every hesitation. Bending her to his will.

Let him win , that insidious instinct whispered, and she was tempted. God, was she tempted.

“Good mate,” he purred. “If we had time, I would give chase. Ah, little klika , how beautiful it would be.”

“Aklan!” she gasped.

“Mate,” he corrected. “Do you wish to challenge me now? Shall we play that game?”

“Please, Aklan. We can't do this.”

“It is already done.”

His words held a flat finality. Abruptly, he twisted around and dropped her face down onto his bed, crushing her beneath his weight. She struggled to break free, infuriated when he laughed again.

“Good mate,” he rumbled in her ear. “Fight me. Show me your worth.”

“Let me up, you cretin!”

In response, he wedged his face into the crook of her neck and scraped his fangs along her throat.

She stilled and became abruptly aware of the hard length of his arousal pressed against her ass. “Don’t hurt me.”

“ Pjora-la ,” he breathed. “I could never bring you harm. But this must be done. You know it as well as I.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?” she panted.

He rolled with her and sat up, his feet planted firmly against the floor, her legs draped over his thighs, one arm around her middle. “Take off your blouse.”

She shook her head frantically. “I’m not having sex with you.”

“Perhaps not tonight,” he agreed mildly. “Time is short, beloved.”

“Why do you call me that?”

“Beloved?”

“Yes.”

“Ah,” he said, amusement filtering through the simple word. “Because this is what you are to me. Fate given. Mate. Beloved . I have known from the moment we met that I could love you.”

Questions pressed against her mind, tumbling into a jumbled mess. Before she could sort them out, Aklan continued.

“Your blouse, Sonja.”

With trembling fingers, she plucked her t-shirt off, wadding it into a ball in her lap. He brushed a warm kiss along her cheek, then traced the edges of her bra with the sharp tip of one claw.

“Beautiful,” he breathed.

His claw slid into the fabric and pulled it down, baring the tight peak of her nipple. He flicked the tip of his claw gently against her nipple, sparking a rush of heat within her.

“I thought you said no sex,” she whispered.

“This is not sex, pjora-la . It is foreplay.”

Her resistance melted away on another flood of heat. “Oh, God,” she moaned.

“Give me your hand.”

Without waiting for her to comply, he lifted her fingers to his mouth, his other hand devoted to a thorough, mind-melting study of her breast. He sucked on each finger in turn, then pressed one against the sharp point of his fang. She gasped at the tight thrill of pain, soon lost under his gentle suckling. A moment later, his thumb pressed against her lips. She opened for him, tasted the spicy bitterness of his blood.

Something zinged inside her, a certainty she’d never felt before hovering just out of reach. A knowing, she thought dimly, then his mouth found hers and their blood mingled within the savage beauty of his kiss, and that knowing snapped sharply into place inside her. His hand skimmed down her stomach and delved beneath the waistband of her jeans, his fingers plucked the little nub hidden there, and one slid

into her core, filling her unexpectedly. She gasped and arched into him, silently begging him to finish what he'd started, pleading with her lips and shy touches for him to make her his in every way possible.

And he did, driving her relentlessly toward ecstasy with every grind of his palm against her clitoris, with every slow slide of his finger inside her, with every flick of his tongue against hers. She raced breathlessly toward a cliff, balanced on the edge for one bright moment, then he shoved his face into her throat and said her name in that rough, beautiful growl of his, and she came apart under him, shuddering while the world burst around them and reformed.

“Pjora-la,” he murmured. “We are at last whole.”

She tangled her hand in his hair and tugged until he lifted his head and met her gaze. The wildness in his eyes had softened to a peaceful, satisfied glow. Amazingly enough, her doubts had faded. Most of them, anyway, and she wondered if her expression held any of the serenity so evident in his.

It wasn't his off-hand declaration of love. He'd couched it too vaguely for her peace of mind.

It wasn't the sex either. Or the foreplay, she thought, amused.

But something had changed between them, erasing the uncertainty that had plagued her off and on since meeting him.

Everything would be alright. How she knew that, she couldn't say. She just knew that it would, a bone deep certainty she'd swear by. She'd wondered before how they could possibly make things work between them. The obstacles had seemed insurmountable at the time, mounting higher and higher until they threatened to demolish the relationship altogether.

Now, she wondered how she'd missed something that seemed so obvious in retrospect: love wasn't about facing those obstacles alone; it was trusting that through the love they shared, they could conquer anything they faced.

How could she ever have doubted that? How could she ever have doubted him ?

"I changed my mind," she said solemnly. "We should definitely have sex now."

Aklan groaned and dropped his forehead to hers. "Sonja, pjora-la . Truly, we have little time."

"Then let's make the most of it." She scooted around until she straddled his lap and cupped the rough lines of his face with her hands. "What's the word for fate given, from a female to her mate?"

" Pjoril . Do you truly feel this way?"

Instead of answering, she scraped her fingernails down his abdomen, reveling in the heat flaring in his bright eyes, in the way his muscles clenched tight at her touch. "I need you, pjoril . Be with me."

"My love, my love," he whispered. "How can I deny you?"

"Don't even think about it," she said, her mouth tipping into a coy smile. "Show me what you need."

He growled and rolled her over, his hands stripped them both of their clothes, discarding them as his mouth found her nipple and suckled it. She tangled her hands in his curls, arching into the slow, drawling pleasure of his kiss. Her hands slipped as he moved. One fell to the curve of his horns, glancing off the narrow tip.

Aklan growled against her skin and let go of her nipple to probe her core with one finger. He glanced up, his gaze clashing with hers, as a second finger joined the first, twisting inside her. “Small.”

“Human,” she reminded him, and glanced her fingertips across his horn again.

Need blazed from his eyes and taunted his face. He rose above her, more mountain than man in that moment, and replaced his fingers with his erection, sliding into her in one strong push.

She gasped as he filled her, stretching her to the point of pain. “Don’t stop!”

“I cannot,” he confessed, his voice filled with a quiet apology, then he drove into her again and again. Abruptly, a warm, heady pleasure soothed the pain, erasing it so thoroughly, Sonja forgot it had ever been. She wrapped her legs around his waist, tilted her hips into his unsteady thrusts. He rewarded her with softly spoken stream of endearments in a rough mix of languages she’d never heard before, each dutifully translated by his second gift.

He spoke of how beautiful she was to him, how when he looked into her eyes, he fell out of time into paradise. How perfectly they fit together, sweet Sonja, fate given mate, beloved heart.

And when he drove her perilously close to another orgasm and held her there on the fraught edge of release, she dug her fingernails into his back and begged him to let her come. He reached between them and strummed her clit, and she writhed beneath him, tightening her muscles around his breadth until he lost control and dug his fangs into her throat, shoving her into a sharp, trembling release, and they tumbled together into a sweet paradise of their own making.

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:59 pm*

Someone pounded on the door, waking Aklan from a light sleep only a moment before his alarm sounded. Sonja lay curled against him, one arm flung across his chest. They had made love three times after he claimed her, each different from the last. Rough and quick, soft and slow, touching each other as they talked quietly, waiting for the pieces of his and Zoran's plan to fall into place around them.

In this bed, they had found a moment of refuge, a space apart from time and the obligations of duty. They would find that place again, he vowed, but now, time had intruded once more, dragging them along in its eddying wake. No longer could he postpone the inevitable. Today, he would take his mate home. The warlords would regroup and execute an alternate plan. And humans would pay a costly price for their dishonor.

"Open up!" Missy shouted.

Aklan glanced down at his mate. Her eyes were wide and clear, her hands reaching for her discarded clothes.

Already, he regretted the loss of her touch.

"It is time," he said gruffly, and checked his wristcom. Zoran's last message, sent just a moment prior, relayed that their spaceship was entering the atmosphere. The remainder of their plans were also in place. Now it was up to Aklan to ensure that he and Sonja made the rendezvous point at the appropriate time.

Sonja found her shirt and undergarments as the door opened and Missy stepped inside. The smaller female stumbled to a halt just inside the door, her blue eyes wide



as they landed on his bare chest

“Wowza,” she said, then turned a questioning look on Sonja. “You sure I can’t have him?”

“Mine,” Sonja retorted mildly.

Satisfaction welled within Aklan, filling him until he thought he might burst from the pleasure of hearing her claim him as her own.

Missy shrugged as she swung her gaze back to Aklan and closed the door. “You don’t have to look so smug about it, big guy.”

Aklan slid into his loose Ky-Lota pants beneath the sheet. “What news have you brought?”

“Nicholson knows something’s going down, and he’s not the only one. But since he’s essentially in charge, he’s the one rallying the troops. Have you arranged for an extraction?”

“It is done. Even now, our spaceship is only minutes away from landing.”

“They’d better get a move on. Looks like you might have to fight your way out.”

Sonja tugged her blouse into place as her eyebrows snapped into a frown. “What about you?”

Missy grinned. “I can take care of myself. Now, here’s the plan.”

Aklan snagged his skinsuit and disappeared into the bathroom, leaving the door open a hands width. He could easily hear the females’ conversation regardless, yet could

not bring himself to completely shut his mate out.

She had taken so well to the mating bond. As soon as he'd sipped her blood, it had snapped into place, filling him with the most beautiful sensation he had ever felt. The world seemed sharper now, more focused, his place within it well-defined. So long as he drew breath, he would fight for her, protect her. Love her.

The bond was not yet as solid and strong as he would like; that would take time. But it was enough, for now. It was enough to feel the nascent thread stretching between them, enough to have her scent on his hands and her taste in his mouth.

He shimmied into the skinsuit, fastening it deftly, and glanced around the tiny room. He'd already cleaned out his belongings and stored them safely in his satchel, ready to leave at a moment's notice.

Now, he carried his discarded pants into the outer room, shoved them into the satchel, and retrieved his boots. The women spoke quietly, their heads nearly touching. He kept one ear on their conversation as he pulled on his boots.

"Are you sure about this?" Missy said.

"I'm sure. If I don't leave now, I may never see him again. They'll throw the book at me anyway."

Missy made a disbelieving sound. "I'd like to see them try."

"I don't have your connections," Sonja said wryly. "Are you sure you don't want to come with us?"

"I'm needed here. Somebody's got to pave the way for the future."

“Why do I have a feeling you already have?”

Missy affected an innocent expression, one Aklan knew as false. She might be small compared to a Xeruvian female, but she packed a big punch. Because of her and Sonja, he had stopped seeing humans as frightened, inferior little klika, too weak and fragile to be considered equals.

His gaze drifted to his mate and a sense of rightness settled over him. He and the other warlords had wondered whether humans would be strong enough to survive the challenge of rebuilding their civilization. His mate had shown him how strong humans could be. He could see why Nicholson had not wanted to let her go. If all females were as honorable as her and Missy, human males were lucky indeed.

Zoran signaled him with a brief nod. Aklan stood, drawing the females' gazes, one light and cunning, the other darkly satisfied. Already, he could feel the rumble of the spaceship's landing vibrating through the earth.

“It is time,” he said.

Missy patted Sonja's shoulder. “That's my cue. Be careful. Don't forget to write!”

Sonja wrinkled her nose. “You act like I'm leaving for a whole other solar system or something.”

Missy laughed, then slipped out the door and was gone. A moment later, a blaring alarm sounded, and the room's lights flickered.

Sonja held out her hand to him and smiled when he clasped it gently in his. “I guess we're going to have to make a run for it.”

“Do not fear, pjora-la. I shall protect you with my life.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

He kissed her soundly, hoping to erase the fear she had tried so valiantly to hide. Fear was better than confidence in moments such as these. It would keep her wary and alert, ready for whatever situation they faced.

He could wish it were otherwise, but such was the journey placed before them. Better to meet it head on than slink away from the fight ahead.

Sonja tried to familiarize herself with the stun weapon Aklan handed her—a flat, round device that fit perfectly against the palm of her hand—while he communicated with his spaceship. No one had bothered to shut the alarm off, possibly because of the steady rumble vibrating through the soles of her feet. Apparently, the Xeruvians’ spaceship was landing. Its engines must be incredibly powerful to shake the complex even here, two stories beneath the surface.

She blew out a nervous breath and checked the straps and ties of her borrowed backpack, making sure it was fastened securely against her back. Aklan hadn’t shared his plan. Fight their way out? Let him whisk her away to his planet?

Nerves jangled in her stomach. Could she really leave everything behind for him, her job, her home, her friends?

Yes , she could, absolutely. And was probably about to.

Aklan hefted his satchel onto his back. He’d done something to it after Missy left, vacuum sealed it or something, reducing it to roughly one-third of its original size. Now, it sealed to his skinsuit, providing a rough sort of armor at his back.

She knew a lot of soldiers who’d love to get their hands on that technology. And to think, it could’ve been Earth’s, too.

Bitter much?, she thought, and shrugged it off. One day, maybe Earth's politicians would wise up to what the Xeruvians could offer them. Until then, she had to get Aklan out of this place. No one would carve him up in the name of pseudo-scientific research, but somebody might get the bright idea to try to detain him.

Try being the operative word.

He pushed her behind him, then cracked the door open. The corridor sounded chaotic. Aklan's quarters lay much closer to Area 51's central hub than hers, which was both good and bad. Good because they didn't have far to go to reach the exit. Bad because...more people.

Aklan snagged her hand and pulled her behind him as he stepped into the chaos. Oddly enough, people were running away from the exit. Civilians, Sonja noted as she trotted along behind Aklan. Had his people already infiltrated the complex?

As they approached the exit—a round room holding two elevator shafts bracketed by two staircases, all leading directly to the surface—the crowd grew denser. More people milled toward the cafeteria, ducking into its relative safety as the few soldiers among them trotted toward their assigned posts.

She and Aklan met no resistance, shocking her to her core. Had Missy's distraction been that effective, or had the soldiers on duty been rerouted to the surface?

He guided her into a stairwell, pushing her firmly into the lead. Up she went, taking the stairs at an even pace with him hard on her heels. Here, the alarms were accompanied by flashing red emergency lights. The overheads flickered on and off, and the few people they met going in the opposite direction paid them no attention whatsoever.

They had just reached the next landing when a door squeaked open below them and

Mike's voice drifted up.

"As soon as you've cleared the stairwell, let me take the lead," he said.

"Yes, sir," a male voice barked.

Sonja's stomach sank like a stone. "They're onto us," she whispered.

Aklan patted her butt, urging her to hurry.

Just one more flight and they'd reach the surface.

She pushed herself then, taking the stairs two at a time, and burst into the innocuous lobby not knowing what she'd find. Her steps slowed as she faced the room's other occupant, a towering Xeruvian dressed in a skinsuit, holding an Uzi-like stun gun at his side.

"Uh, hello," she said.

Aklan skirted her, giving her a look as he passed. Yes, her carefully cultivated perfect diplomatic attaché expression had failed her. So sue me, she thought grumpily. It'd been a long week.

Aklan and the other Xeruvian clasped each other's wrists in an apparently universal handshake.

"Zoran," he said. "My apologies for the delay."

Zoran's bright green eyes flicked to her and back. "If my mate were as beautiful, I would not be able to tear myself away either."

“May you find yours soon. Have you met much resistance?”

“None. We merely distract them now, firing low-energy pulses into the ground to keep them at bay.”

“At least one squad of Marines is behind us,” Sonja said. “Aklan said we’re on a schedule?”

Zoran bowed his head. “Indeed, Sonja Mathis of Clan Phyrz. Shall we?”

A thrill ran down her spine. Clan Phyrz . How easily he’d accepted her as Aklan’s mate. If things worked out and the Xeruvians could, somehow, meet other human women, would they all be as accepting as Zoran?

Would Aklan’s family accept her?

She had no time to ponder that. The elevator doors opened behind her, and Missy popped out, the Chinese ambassador’s daughter in tow.

“Go!” Missy yelled. “They’re almost here!”

At that moment, Marines spilled out of the stairwells on both sides of the elevators. Missy shared a hard look with the ambassador’s daughter, then they sprang into action, each one attacking the Marines closest to them.

Shit, Sonja thought. They’ll never survive.

But the Marines weren’t firing on the women, just trying to get past them, a feat made harder by the mixed martial arts mojo Missy and the other woman threw at them. Sonja recognized some well-practiced Ky-Lota moves before Aklan snagged her arm and hissed, “Move!”

Mike pushed into the lobby then and shouted, “Sonja, stop!”

Aklan was already dragging her away. She glanced helplessly at Mike, wanting both to yell at him to let her go and reassure him that she was fine.

“I can’t,” she yelled back. “We’re about to take off.”

“Please, Sonja. I’m trying to—”

The rest of his words were lost in a volley of earth-shaking thuds. Aklan picked her up and flung her over one shoulder. The breath whooshed out of her, stealing the reassurances lodged in her throat. She reared up long enough to wave at Mike, then they were outside and things got loud . She caught a glimpse of nearly a dozen Xeruvians spread out to either side, forming a barrier between the building and the ship, which she could hear but not see. Dust swirled along the ground, lit by floodlights and a golden, early morning glow.

Aklan ran up a ramp, Zoran shouted to the other warlords, who backed into the ship still firing. The ramp closed when the last one made it inside, then Aklan let her slide down his body until her feet touched metal and tucked her between his body and a wall as the ship took off and a hard hand pressed her downward.

A few minutes later, the pressure eased. Aklan drew away from her, and her hands started to shake. Adrenaline , she thought dimly. That’s all this is .

But a small part of her wondered if she’d ever see Earth again, if she’d ever stand on the green grass of home surrounded by family and friends.

Aklan wrapped his arms around her, one hand tangled in her hair. “Do not fear, pjoralla . All will be as it should.”



She let the words soothe her, let him lead her deeper into the ship as her world fell away beneath them.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:59 pm*

Aklan led Sonja through the ship toward his quarters. She followed meekly, stumbling from time to time without uttering a word. Shock, he guessed, or perhaps fatigue. It was his unfortunate duty to leave her soon, yet could he first see to her needs in the time between now and then.

Once in his quarters, he shrugged off his satchel and took her backpack from her, stashing both in the footlocker near the room's lone bed. Her eyes met his, and he saw not shock but a mute acceptance tinged with sorrow.

He brushed his thumb along her lower lip, smoothed her tangled hair away from the delicate line of her jaw. "What is it, beloved?"

"I—" Her mouth firmed, and she shook her head. "This isn't the end, is it? What do you intend to do now?"

"Now, we travel to the Center for the Advancement of Humankind where we will claim the women denied us by your diplomats."

"Will they be treated well?"

"Have I not treated you well?" he countered.

A tremulous smile touched her mouth. "Maybe too well. I'm still a little sore."

"Ah, but you have had the pleasure of my... What do humans call it? A nightstick?"

She giggled. "I've never heard it called that before."

“Hmm. I shall have to find a better word.”

He kissed her then, unable to resist the lure of her touch. She leaned into him, returning his kiss with a passionate fervor that threatened to sweep away his discipline. Already, he weakened, he thought ruefully, and firmly ended the kiss and stepped out of temptation's path.

“Come, beloved. Allow me to introduce you to the ship's functions.”

As quickly as he could, he showed her how to use the sink, toilet, and shower in the attached head. At her request, he unlocked the viewscreen in his quarters and walked her through the security features so she could login to the ship's computer without his aid.

“I'm going to have to contact him,” she said, her gaze lingering on the viewscreen. “Mike. I don't want him to worry, even if he does fire me on the spot.”

“I think perhaps he needs you more than he realizes. You are his liaison to my people, are you not?”

“I suppose so.”

Aklan's wristcom chimed an alert. He flicked it off with one claw and knelt beside where she sat, on the stool before the viewscreen.

“I must leave now,” he said. “Promise you will not contact anyone until I return.”

“I won't. Even if I could figure out how, it's better to wait.” She sighed heavily and bumped her forehead to his. “Promise me you'll be gentle with those women.”

“We would never deliberately bring them harm.”

It was a vow made as much to himself as her. Now that he'd come to know his mate, he understood how fragile humans could be, and how strong. He could not protect the other females as he did Sonja, but he could treat them with the courtesy and respect they deserved, as much as possible.

She pressed a soft kiss to his mouth, then drew back. "Go before I change my mind and drag you back to bed."

"When I return," he growled, and left before he could do the dragging.

Sonja toyed with the computer until fatigue settled around her shoulders like a heavy blanket. She stripped to her skin, leaving her clothes where they lay, and stumbled into the shower stall for a quick scrub. After, she towed her hair dry, then crawled into Aklan's bed, not bothering with a night shirt or the dim light Aklan had turned on when they entered.

And laid there staring at the room's ceiling, her heart racing as her mind tripped over what Aklan was doing. Stealing those women away, taking them from the safety of their workplaces. She flopped over and punched the bed's lone pillow. So unnecessary. Mike would get an earful when she finally reached out to him.

Of course, he'd probably give her an earful in return.

She measured the passing time by the pressure of the ship's rise and fall through Earth's atmosphere, allowing it to lull her into a fitful sleep. Her dreams were empty, her mind fogged until the hatch opened and a light footfall alerted her to Aklan's presence.

He stood at the edge of the bed, staring down at her, his expression shadowed.

She held a hand out to him, inviting him closer. "What is it, love?"

“We have secured the females,” he said.

“How many?”

“Nearly three dozen. They rest in the cargo hold, should you care to see them.”

“I will. At some point, I’ll need to send a report back to Earth so their families know they’re safe. Do they need anything?”

He grunted as he unfastened his skinsuit and shucked it and his boots. “We have supplied them as well as we could. The hold is colder than we would like, but they have thermal blankets and plenty of food and water.”

“Good. I’ll check on them later.” She pushed up on one elbow, allowing the thin sheet to slide down her body, baring her breasts. “Come to bed.”

His teal-colored eyes glowed as he reached for her, and they lost themselves once again to the passion spiraling between them.

Later, she showered again, this time with Aklan, at his insistence. Once they were dressed again, he led her to the cargo hold so that she could personally check on the women’s wellbeing. They were here because of her. Making sure they understood what had happened was the least she could do for them.

They had to go through what Aklan called a transition, something to do with the way they were traveling. Outside of popular SciFi movies, she’d never been interested in space travel, and so took him at his word when he advised her to try to sleep through them.

After, though, she could no longer delay the inevitable. With Aklan’s help, she contacted Mike through the communications satellite one of the warlords had

dropped into Earth orbit. Unfortunately, it was voice only, but it would do until they could make other arrangements.

She hoped they could make other arrangements.

The contact went through as a regular phone call, right to Mike's cellphone. He answered with a terse, "Hello?"

"Mike?" she said. "It's Sonja."

"Oh, thank God. I've been worried sick about you since that Xeruvian bastard kidnapped you."

She bit back a laugh, sternly reminding herself that she was acting as a diplomatic liaison and must act accordingly. "The Xeruvian bastard is standing beside me, and he didn't kidnap me. I went voluntarily."

Mike was silent for a moment. The line crackled once. Aklan murmured, "Ion particles."

Another thing she took on his word.

Finally, Mike said, "Are you ok?"

"Right as rain," she assured him. "Did anyone get hurt down there when we left?"

"One of the diplomats sprained an ankle." He sounded disgusted more than anything, which put her mind at ease as little else could have. "Mostly wounded pride on all our parts. It was a flawless strike. Please commend the Xeruvians for it on my behalf."

"Now, Mike. What did you expect? They needed to retrieve Aklan."

“And you,” he gritted out. “And the thirty-two women they took from the CAH.”

“You knew that was coming,” she reminded him gently. “It could easily have been handled a better way, without the Xeruvians having to resort to kidnapping.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were defending them.”

“I’m not defending them. But I understand why they did what they did. I understand, too, that we’ve lost a lot by denying them the opportunity to court those women at their leisure. You were worried about losing ground technologically. Well, now not only have humans lost technological ground, they’ve also lost a potential ally in the Xeruvians.”

“I know,” he said on a heavy sigh. “I know. You warned me. I warned my superiors. They just didn’t see the situation clearly.”

“Some of them did,” she corrected. “The ones who sent people to help us escape. Which, by the way, I didn’t appreciate having to do.”

“Yet you accomplished it marvelously.”

Yes, she thought, biting back a laugh. She’d made quite the sight when Aklan threw her over his shoulder. Her dignity might never recover the ignominy.

“Still. It was unnecessary.” She glanced up at Aklan, caught his stoic nod, and suppressed a sigh. Back to work. “I’ve been authorized by the Xeruvians to lay the ground for further negotiations. They will not give the women back. That’s non-negotiable, so don’t even ask. But in time, they would like to reapproach the bargaining table. Aklan has assured me that this sector of the galaxy is a dangerous place. That Earth hasn’t been discovered by a hostile alien race is purely luck. The Xeruvians are willing to overlook this incident in favor of an alliance, if humans are

willing to do the same.”

Again, Mike fell silent, then emitted a soft laugh. “You’ve landed on your feet, Sonja. I’m proud of you.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat and absolutely, positively refused to let fall the tears pricking her eyes. “You’re trying to butter me up. It won’t work.”

His laugh came easier then, heartier. “Don’t worry. I know better. I’ll pass along the message. Hopefully, we can come to a better accord in the future. I expect regular updates. You’re still on the payroll, you know.”

“I appreciate that,” she said softly. “We’ll be in touch.”

She cut the call on Mike’s goodbye, then swiveled toward Aklan. “Well? What do you think? Are humans still worth negotiating with, or will you guys going to keep kidnapping helpless Earth women?”

He grimaced at her. “Helpless? You have stolen my heart, female. I shall never be the same again.”

She grinned and pulled him down to her. “That’s what you get when you tangle with your mate. Still happy you met me?”

“It was the best surprise a warrior could ever hope for,” he said, then he kissed her until the universe faded away, leaving only their love behind.



Zephyria

A few days later

Sonja stood at the edge of the crowd, watching Xeruvian warlords escort human women through the spaceport. Zoran had docked his spaceship at the hub near the top of Zephyria's space elevator, a marvel that had fascinated several of the human scientists.

From there, they and their supplies had zipped toward the planet in a car large enough to hold nearly the entire human contingent. The view had been amazing, like riding a roller coaster through the atmosphere. As they approached the planet, individual features had sharpened into focus, giving the humans their first taste of their new home.

It was a bittersweet experience for Sonja. On the one hand, she loved being here with Aklan and was excited to start this phase of her life.

On the other hand, she hadn't even gotten to say goodbye to her family. Oh, Mike had likely passed along news about her, though how he'd explained it, she couldn't guess. How exactly did one go about telling parents that their daughter had zipped across the galaxy to live with her new mate?

That was one conversation she'd purposefully delayed, partly because first contact still wasn't widely known. Video of the ship landing at CAH had been captured and shared on YouTube, but most people were calling it a hoax or a conspiracy theory. Eventually, the major players on Earth would have to spill the beans. Yes, aliens did

exist. And yes, they had visited Earth and kidnapped a few women.

It sounded like the lead story in every trashy tabloid ever published.

Thankfully, that wasn't her problem. She'd agreed to act as one of the liaisons between Earth and the Xeruvians, though Aklan would be doing the heavy lifting there. He was the seasoned diplomat, after all, and no one knew his people better than him.

In the meantime, she was excited to see his home and a little nervous to meet his family. They'd had plenty of time to talk on the ship, around making love every chance they got. She couldn't keep her hands off him, and he had a hard time letting her go. Their time onboard had served as an impromptu honeymoon. She'd loved every minute.

The crowd thinned as the women were led away, some with the lucky Xeruvians who'd recognized them as mates, others to a complex where they would live until other arrangements could be made. Aklan had shared his private hope that all the human females would find mates among the Xeruvians, a hope she suspected the other warlords shared.

Now, he wrapped his hand around hers and tugged her toward a clutch of Xeruvians speaking quietly to one another near a set of glass-fronted offices. One male detached from the group and turned toward them, and Sonja's eyes widened on a gasp.

The male looked exactly like Aklan, from the stone-like set of his broad shoulders to the bright gleam of his teal-colored eyes.

"That's your brother?" she said.

"Is it not obvious?" he replied.

“Yes, but you didn’t tell me he was your identical twin. How am I supposed to tell you apart?”

But she knew the answer to that question before Aklan’s brother had crossed the spaceport’s lobby. With Aklan, she’d felt that zing of knowing right from the start. The mating instinct, he called it, what humans might call love at first sight.

Sonja pressed her lips firmly together, containing a grin. Definitely lust at first sight anyway.

But with his brother, she felt nothing. No pull, no zing, definitely no lust, just curiosity and a kind of reflected affection because of his role in her mate’s life.

When his brother stopped a few feet from them, Aklan introduced them in formal tones. She clasped his hand in greeting and offered him a cautious smile. “Aklan tells me you currently lead Clan Phyrz.”

Jalak nodded solemnly, reminding her eerily of his elder brother. “Indeed, milady. Would that I had been able to journey to Earth at my brother’s side. Alas, duties held my attention during his absence.”

“Maybe you can make the next trip. The women will need supplies.”

“I should like that. Very much.”

His gaze held a faint and familiar longing, one she recognized from her first meeting with Aklan. His eyes had held the same look, however briefly. He’d recognized her as his mate so quickly, it was a wonder she remembered the longing at all.

She threaded her arm through Jalak’s and guided him toward the exit, despite the low growl Aklan turned on her. This was important and she intended to do it right. After all, she had a debt to repay.

“You’re going to love Earth,” she told Jalak. “It’s very like Zephyria in some ways. And human women will love you.”

“Truly?” he said, his voice holding a touch of disbelief. “They will not think me monstrous?”

“Trust me, Jalak. You won’t have any worries there.” She slid a sly smile to Aklan. “I have a friend I want you to meet. Her name is Missy, and I think you two will hit it off.”

Aklan draped his arm around her shoulders, his eyes smiling down at her, and together, the three of them headed toward the place she now called home.

Up next...

After the twin horrors of natural disaster and plague nearly wiped out the Xeruvians' fertile females, warrior Zoran Kerus is faced with two choices: allow his people to die, or exchange advanced technology for a selection of Earth's unmated females. He doesn't count on finding his fated mate in human research scientist Mia Reynolds, or on the lengths he'll go to keep her.

The Alien Warlord’s Fated Mate

(The Warlords of Zephyria, Book 1)